Panem et Circenses

by littleblackfox, WyvernQuill
Chapter Summary

“Oh, it’s food!” Crowley shouts.

Chapter Notes

The banner and beautiful art of Aziraphale's cake in this chapter are by the spectacularly talented Wyvernquill!
Do yourself a favour and follow them on Tumblr
A thousand thank yous to Zee for beta reading, any mistakes are my own
Neil Gaiman never gave us a name for the Immigration officer, so I have gone for the actress who plays her: Jedi hand waves: this is fine. Check out Ramanna Banger's Instagram Here
Somewhere in another universe there is a version of Good Omens starring Sue Perkins and Mel Geidroyc Fite me.
You can find me on tumblr, if that's your thing

“Mr… err.” The assistant looks down at her clipboard and frowns. “Mr Crowlee?”
“Crowley.”
The reception area is all tastefully twee wallpaper and modern furniture that looks comfortable until you park your arse on it, and Crowley has been waiting an hour while first an intern, then a coordinator, and finally someone too important to wear an I.D. card, run around in a panic over missing paperwork. Or at least paperwork that never existed until Crowley realised he wouldn’t get anywhere until it did.
“Yes, Mr Crowley.” The assistant gives him a bright, slightly desperate smile. “I’m so sorry about the delay. If you’d like to follow me?” Crowley obliges, sauntering after her as she leads the way through a side door and down the side of the manor house. Despite being the crack of dawn the sun insists on being up and beaming, but at least he doesn’t look like a pillock in his sunglasses. He can get away with them on a warm morning in May, but he looks like an utter berk in November.

“The other contestants are waiting to be called into the baking tent,” the assistant calls over her shoulder. “You missed the introductory dinner last night, I’m afraid, but they’re all very nice people. I’m sure you’ll…” she gives him another uncertain look. “I’m sure you’ll fit right in.” While Crowley didn’t invent television, he is rather proud of coming up with so many things associated with it. Ad breaks and unpaid internships were some of his more off-the-cuff ideas that he hadn’t expected to take off so dramatically. He’s pretty sure assistants weren’t one of his, but he has been busy in the last hundred years, lost ground to make up and all that. On the other hand there was stuff like Mary Whitehouse and Songs of Praise, so it was all swings and roundabouts really.

The girl squints at her clipboard as the text wriggles and squirms and tries its best to look accurate while not knowing what accurate was. She sighs, tucking the clipboard under her arm and out of sight, and pulls open a side door.

“Wait here, Mr Crowley,” she says, ushering him in. “We’ll come and get you all when the cameras are set up.”

Crowley is unceremoniously shoved into another reception area of uncomfortable furnishings in tasteful shades of grey and teal, but this time it also contains half a dozen people and, tucked away in a discreet corner, tea and coffee making facilities. The other contestants, at least that’s what he supposes they must be, are scattered around the room, drinking tea from slightly-too-small cups and avoiding the complimentary breakfast laid out. Well, most of them are, one bloke seems set on working his way through a plate of Danishes and lamenting the lamination. Something about him tugs at Crowley, something he can’t quite put a finger on.

Crowley squeezes between two women making nervous small talk over biscuits, one with an American accent but trying not to make a fuss about it. They smile at him as he passes, and Crowley grimaces back in a friendly way. The next obstacle in his path is a brassy woman wearing a wig the shade of a Tuscan sunset, something very lovely when painting the sky over vinyards and classical architecture, but maybe less so when hovering over thickly painted blue eyeshadow and false lashes. Across from her is a terrified young man who tries to telegraph a message of help me to Crowley by way of profuse sweating and a white-knuckled grip on his tea cup. Crowley slinks right past him into the path of the pastry-mangler, who is nodding distractedly along the chatter of the woman he is sat with and peeling apart the layers of a croissant like the pages of an old, damp book.

“-didn’t even mean to enter the competition, my friend Mary got the forms from the website and filled them in herself,” the woman says over her cup of cooling, untouched tea. “I didn’t have a clue until I got the phone call!” The patisserie pugilist hums encouragingly, carefully separating two lacy sheets of pastry and studying the crumb with a critical eye. He is the most ridiculous… person… human… thing Crowley has ever seen, dressed in clothes that haven’t been in style for a hundred years. For heaven’s sake the man is wearing a bowtie, and to literally top it all off, his hair is a ridiculous confection of ash blond curls. He looks like a dandelion clock.

“-I mean I thought it was all a bit of a disaster, but here I am and-” She stops, noticing Crowley at last. “Oh! Hello.”

The French fancy turns around, looking up at Crowley with a bright smile. “Oh, here you are at last, our missing party.” He drops the dissected pastry onto his plate and wipes his hands with a
handkerchief the man owns a handkerchief and rises to his feet, holding out his hand to shake. “You must be Lester, how do you do?” “‘Fraid not.” Crowley smiles, all teeth as he takes the fancy’s hand. His skin is very soft, and his nails carefully manicured. “Crowley, Anthony J.” “I didn’t see you at any of the auditions,” the fancy says slowly, looking a little put out. “What does the J stand for?” Good question. “Mngnaar,” Crowley replies, not very helpfully, and retrieves his hand before it gets too comfortable in the soft embrace of… wait, what was his name? “And you are?” “Fell.” The fancy beams at him, blue eyes almost disappearing as his face creases up like a well-used duvet. “Mr Fell, if you please.” “Alright,” Crowley mutters, feeling a little uncomfortable in the full glare of so much happiness.

The talkative one Fell had been enduring doesn’t seem to notice the oddly weighted silence that descends between them like the sudden drop in air pressure that precedes a thunderstorm. Crowley swallows, his tongue feeling too-large in his mouth, and has to stop himself from coughing up something ridiculous like *Have we met?* There is a tug at the sleeve of Crowley’s jacket, and he feels his jaw tense, a hiss tucking into the inside of his cheek.

“Have a seat,” the woman says with a wide, guileless smile. “I’d offer you a coffee but no one can get the machine to work.” Coffee. Yes. He likes coffee. He likes big, gleaming machines made of polished steel and black plastic that spit out little trickles of bitter liquid that make your teeth want to shake out of their sockets. And if he’s drinking coffee he doesn’t have to keep staring at Fell and his big brown eyes.

Crowley frowns, making a show of walking over to the coffee machine. There is a little wire basket of foil pods filled with coffee grounds, and he makes a show of picking through them. Spectacularly bad for the environment, coffee pods, and brilliantly evil. Take something as simple as a bean, then throw in an unnecessarily intensive manufacturing process and a boatload (several, milling around on the Atlantic) of plastic and you’ve got yourself an environmental time bomb. Shame it was a human who came up with it, really.

He slots a pod into the machine, tucks a miniscule cup under the spout, and makes a show of pressing buttons while quietly detailing just what he will do to the machine if it doesn’t behave. It obliges with a spill of decent arabica with a pleasing bass note of anxiety and overheated metal.

“Oh, well done you!” the woman says proudly as Crowley takes a seat, thimbleful of coffee grasped carelessly in one hand. “We were trying to get that thing working for ages, weren’t we Mr Fell?” “I can’t say I care much for coffee myself,” Fell remarks, taking up his own teacup, somewhat larger than the others and gilt-edged. “So, ah, Anthony?” “Crowley.” “Crowley, very good. Mary and I were just discussing our bakes for the auditions. What did you make?” “Mnuur,” Crowley pretends to sip at his coffee, buying a little time. “Yes. The technical challenge. A bit of a breeze, I thought.” “Really?” Fell looks un convinced, and Crowley scowls at him. It’s not that unreasonable, is it? He could make a… a… whatever it is they’re making. Technical, that’s like computers and stuff. He’s good with computers and stuff.

“My first challenge was macarons,” Mary offers. “I was so scared, I dropped a whole tray of pistachio and rose!”
Plants? Maybe it’s plants? Well, even better, Crowley is really good with plants. “Oh my dear, how frightful!” Fell gasps. “You must have been beside yourself!” “Oh, I was,” Mary agrees. “But luckily I had enough time to make more. It was very close though.” “You did very well to persevere through such adversity,” Fell tells her, leaning over to pat her hand. “I was quite overcome during the second round, all those cinematographs everywhere, it was quite frightful. I could hardly concentrate on my florentines.” “Oh, it’s food!” Crowley shouts, and both Fell and Mary turn to stare at him. “Quite,” Fell says archly, turning back to Mary. “Of course, looking back I would have done it quite differently, but I had these divine little…”

Crowley slumps in his seat, Fell’s chatter about dark chocolate and ginger washing over him like waves on a beach, soothing but for the gritty bits that get into your shoes.

He glowers at his teaspoon of coffee swilling about in the bottom of his cup. Food, is it? Well, so much for an easy job. It’s not that he doesn’t like food, it’s just it’s not very important to him, or necessary. Even back in the old days when he could just unhinge his jaw, swallow something that didn’t put up a fight and nap in the sun for a week to digest, it wasn’t worth the effort really. Plus what goes in has to come out somewhere and how humans don’t go stark raving mad over the whole business is beyond him.

The door opens, and another harried-looking assistant leans in. “We’re all ready for you,” she calls, and everyone in the room startles, the clatter of cups on tables and shoes on laminate flooring a cacophony in Crowley’s ears. “Well then.” Fell sets his cup down gently in its saucer. Where did he get a saucer? “Good luck everyone!”

They follow the assistant out of the Manor and across the well-maintained grounds. Crowley casts a critical eye over the azaleas and the herbaceous borders, pretty enough but too much blossom and not enough leaf.

There is a cameraman standing outside a large white marquee, filming them as they all file across an ornamental bridge, and Crowley touches a finger to the bridge of his sunglasses, checking they’re in place.

There are more cameras inside the marquee, that despite being the size of a residential cottage people still refer to as a tent, and they are kept waiting at the entrance as each contestant is shown to their baking station for the day.

Another assistant, this one referred to as a ‘runner’ lives up to her title, scuttling back and forth as she herds everyone into position like a fretful, underpaid sheepdog. The sides of the marquee are lined with unbearably twee Welsh dressers, with mugs and baking tools artfully arranged for the cameras. There are also several large fridge freezers in pastel shades that make Crowley feel slightly ill. Or maybe that’s the nerves.

He is left until last, and the runner takes him over to his baking station, one of eight counters arranged in a grid in the center of the marquee. Crowley can at least recognise the oven, and he’s pretty sure the flat thing in a pot on the counter is called a spatula. He doesn’t much care for the big electrical thing squatting at one side, in yet another pastel shade. He keeps a wary distance from it, and lifts the edge of a large teatowel covering several Kilner jars in the middle of the counter.

“No peeking!” someone sing-songs, and a woman pokes him in the ribs.

Crowley turns on them with a hiss, and finds himself glaring at… well… himself. Or at least himself if he were much shorter and had black hair instead of red.

Instead of cowering at his mighty and fearful hiss, his own personal mini-me gives him a look that says aren’t you adorable? and walks off. She sights the terrified man from the waiting room, now no longer in the company of the brassy woman, and goes over to make his already bad day a little bit worse.
Crowley stares after her, brow furrowed. There was that whole business with the Nephilim, of course, so it’s not unreasonable that a few humans would have traces of celestial or demonic influence about them. Take that Blessed fellow, the one who keeps climbing mountains and punching polar bears. One day he’ll bound away from the mortal coil and one of the great pantheons will have to own up to having a hand in that one, he can’t be of earthly creation. Crowley prods his side, making sure all his ribs are where they should be. He would have noticed some sort of progeny, wouldn’t he? And besides, that was all during the business in Canaan while he was don’t think about it otherwise engaged.

Another human comes into the tent, and if the black-haired one is his tiny doppelganger then this one must belong to Fell, she has the same unbearably cheerful disposition and apple cheeks. Does everyone get one?

Another human comes into the tent. Ah, no, must be a coincidence, this one has far too much gel in his hair and is stuffed into a pair of jeans like an excess of uncooked dough. Yikes.

While Crowley pokes at the pot of utensils and tries to look competent, or at least busy, several of the other contestants cluster around the newcomer. The brassy woman introduces herself to him as Madam Tracy and slips him a business card, while the younger women play at their hair and blush. To her credit Mary gives him only a brief hello before going back to her oven and fiddling with the dials. To his credit Fell affords the man the briefest glance, mouth pursed, and manages to make ‘delighted to meet you’ sound like ‘Go away. Go away now, go away fast’.

The baking tent is starting to feel a little crowded, with contestants and camera crew and people who mill around the camera crew looking approachable, but that is still not the end of it. One more human comes into the tent, and from the way people react God herself might as well be among them. Crowley would swear that Fell starts glowing, just a little bit. The woman looks old enough to pass for God, but carries it in a tiny, sprightly way, like the white dwarfs he burnt his hands on before he was Crowley. Her spine has a twist to it, and Crowley finds his own spine knotting in mimicry, the fingers of his left hand clenching. “Funny, that,” he mutters to himself, shaking his hand out.

She must overhear him, as she walks over to the table to introduce herself, another Mary do they have to rub it in? And Crowley gives her a quick smile as he shakes her hand. Her skin feels like old manuscripts, the kind made of calfskin, and the years have left marks on her in a language far too human and strange. What’s it like? Crowley wants to ask. What’s it like getting old?

Fell comes scurrying over, taking Mary’s hand in both of his, and starts gushing. Crowley grimaces, skulking over to the far end of his counter to peek under the tea towel there while no one is looking.

Prissy little thing. He watches as Fell leads Mary to his own counter, pulling her into a conversation about someone called Victoria and her sponges. Tiresome. “Stop looking at him then,” he tells himself, and goes over to the clear plastic sheet that makes one wall of the tent. He scowls at the grounds, focusing his ire on a hydrangea until it straightens up a little, and then guiltily changes its blossoms from white to pink, which will upset the head gardener no end.

There is a lot of fuss that Crowley pays little attention to, and then the camera crew start moving around and one of the harried looking women who seem to crop up out of nowhere announces that they are ready to start. There is a brief speech where everyone is reminded that this is being filmed for the BBC and to behave accordingly, and Crowley rolls his eyes as the list of things that can’t be said on camera (naughty words, brand names, political opinions and crass language, the last directed at Crowley’s doppelganger, who grins and shouts ‘titties!’), and finally steps to the side so the cameras can focus on Mary the elder and Mutton dressed as lamb… well… goat.

“Welcome, bakers,” says the Fell-ish one. “To the Great British Bake Off! This year we’re starting off with Cake week.”
“And I cannot wait to eat all of them,” agrees the Crowley-ish one. “For the Signature challenge Paul and Mary want you to make twelve identical cupcakes.”

“Now, you can make twelve of a single variety,” adds Fell-ish. “Or six each of two varieties. They must be evenly baked and risen, and topped with buttercream.”

“So on your marks,” Crowley-ish continues. “Get set.”

“Bake!” they shout in unison, and the bakers scramble into action.

Crowley pulls back the tea towel and stares at the mismatched assortments of jars on his counter. They contain various powders and liquids, though he couldn’t really say what each one was. He’s not even sure what a cupcake even is. Do you cook it in a cup? Do you grind up cups and put them into the cake? There’s no pestle and mortar on the table, and no one else is smashing up crockery, so probably not.

The girl at the counter opposite him tips a lump of something greasy and yellow into a metal bowl and shoves it under the electrical thing. She pulls the top down and taps at it until it makes a low grinding noise, and the wooden spoon in Crowley’s hand snaps in two. At the counter in front of him Mary the Younger is weighing out one of the powders, chatting to an assistant and smiling nervously at the camera pointed at her.

She tips her powder into the machine, and it sends up a little puff of dust when it’s turned on. Crowley thinks of long strings of gristle and spokes turning, and has to lean against the counter and feel dizzy for a minute.

“You alright, there?” He looks up and sees the mini-Fell lean against the counter, looking sympathetic.

“Hng,” Crowley says succinctly.

“Let’s get you a nice cup of tea, shall we?” she says, all soothing and unbearably nice. Crowley nods, she’ll at least go away and whatever she brings he’ll miracle into gin. Lots of gin.

“Um.” The nervous lad pipes up. “I think my oven’s broken?”

Fell, who seems to have put half the contents of his counter into a single bowl and is attacking it with a wooden spoon, looks up.

“Oh, let me take a look,” he says, setting the bowl down and wiping his hands on a tea towel tucked into his waistband. “I’m very good with this sort of thing, you know.”

While Fell bustles over to interfere Crowley sidles over to the abandoned counter and takes a look around. The vile machine sits untouched on the far end, and he is managing perfectly well with a bowl and spoon. Reassured, Crowley skulks back to his own counter and rummages around for a bowl of his own.

“There, Newton,” Fell announces. “See, all working perfectly, you just needed to turn the dial like so.”

“I thought I did,” Newton mumbles to himself, before saying “Thank you, Mr Fell.” in the same tone he has probably said ‘yes, Mum’ for the last two decades.

Right then. Crowley slams a bowl on the counter. Cake.

If it isn’t sufferance enough to make pointlessly tiny cakes in front of cameras, the blasted humans keep coming over and talking to him about it. At first it was one of the harried looking women that rove around the room with the cameras, asking everyone dull little questions about what they were making and how they think it’s all going, then the two old humans start ambling from counter to counter too.

His doppelganger brings him a cup of tea as promised, leaving it on the edge of the counter without comment before passing another cup to Newton, who is sitting on the floor in front of his oven, face pressed to the glass-fronted door.

“And what are you making for us today, Anthony?” Crowley looks up from the jar of what he’s pretty sure is icing sugar, even in the eighties he never saw this much coke lying around, let alone at a BBC production. Mary the elder smiles back at him. Behind her Paul makes a vested attempt at looming.
“NgCake,” he says, shoving his shades up his nose and smearing sugar over one lens. “No surprise there,” Paul smirks at his own joke. “What are your flavours for this bake?” “Flavours?” Crowley stares at him blankly. “Well it’s… cake. It’s cake flavoured.” “Vanilla,” Mary says decisively. “A nice, classic flavour. People often forget, in all the rush to make new and interesting bakes, that the classics are there for a reason.” “Nowhere to hide,” Paul adds pointlessly. Crowley bares his teeth and lets out a low hiss, which Mary is civil enough to not notice. “I’m looking forward to trying the results,” she says, and leads Paul over to the next counter, where a young woman is fretting over pistachio nuts.

The thing is. Crowley crouches on the floor in front of his oven, nose pressed to the tinted glass, sunglasses shoved onto the top of his head. In the stupid contraption twelve paper cases of batter take their bastard shitting time rising. The thing is, it doesn’t matter if they taste any good. It doesn’t matter if they don’t rise, or they don’t brown evenly or even if he used salt instead of sugar and arsenic instead of flour. He’ll just snap his fingers, pull up a little miracle and there will be twelve perfectly iced cupcakes that look and taste exactly how the judges expect them to (which means Paul will find something disappointing about them, because some people will always look on the face of the miraculous and mutter ‘a bit dry’ as they wipe crumbs from their lip). “Cock,” Crowley mutters under his breath. The thing is, he could not bother with the whole mess with bowls and avian ovaries and chemistry and just make the damn things happen, but there are film cameras watching him, and assistants milling around waiting for someone to do something bloody stupid, and if he doesn’t do something to fill the two hours they’ve been given it’s going to look suspicious. And yes, he could miracle all the film cameras to record some pinny-wearing numpty slaving over a bowl, and the assistants and the other contestants and the doppelgangers and the… well, it seems easier to just try and make the damn cakes, and do a sneaky bit of magic at the end.

When the doppelgangers call time, Crowley is quick to snap his fingers and turn his dozen, crumbling, lopsided little bakes into identical cakes topped with a swirled crown of buttercream. He’s proud of himself for all of five minutes before it becomes apparent that nothing is ever quick or easy when a film crew is involved, and shots need to be taken of each contestant with their bake. ‘Madam’ Tracy flutters her lashes at the camera, her cakes topped in a vivid swirl of pink and green, while Newton fidgets with his apron and stares at the floor like it’s the one thing that won’t judge him. Of all of them, Fell is the most unbearably smug, perched on a stool beside a display of perfect little cakes topped with snowy white icing and white chocolate decorations that look like little dove wings.

When it comes to Crowley’s turn he is already bored. Bored of sticky, eggy batter and cameras and the whole damn business. He waits, arms crossed, as an assistant moves his stool around, getting it positioned just right in front of the frothy pink rhododendron outside. If that wasn’t already unbearable, Paul comes over to irritate him. “Still wearing those?” He reaches for Crowley’s glasses. Crowley snaps his head back, teeth bared, and raises a hand, fingers crooked and ready to snap. He’ll send the prick to the south pole, let him get eaten by Polar bears. Or is it penguins? “Photosensitive,” a voice says from behind him, and Crowley’s doppelganger slides between them, waving her hand around. “All the studio lights, sets off his migraines.” She winks at him. Crowley would raze cities for her, mortal or not. Just say the word and he’d wipe Swindon off the face of the earth, roundabout and everything. “Mnak,” Crowley agrees. “Dreadful. Migraines. Yes.” “He throws up everywhere,” the fall of Swindon adds. “Nasty business.” “Projectile,” Crowley adds, adjusting his sunglasses. “Very nasty.”
Paul makes a show of being unbothered as he sidles away, and Crowley is instructed to sit on the stool and be filmed.

“Penguins!” he shouts to the camera.

Once the shots are done, they’re left to wait at their counters while Mary and Paul walk around the tent, passing judgement on each effort. Crowley kicks his heels impatiently, watching as the judges, the doppelgangers, and a cluster of cameramen and boom operators move from contestant to contestant. He can’t make out anything that’s being said, not that he’s listening, but it’s easy to tell who has done well and who has done badly. Newton shrinks a little at something Paul says, and then reinflates when Mary follows with her own remark. Fell looks so pleased he’s practically glowing with delight when it’s his turn.

When they finally descend upon him Crowley scowls at Paul from behind his sunglasses, but Paul’s too busy hacking up the perfect cakes with a knife.

“A bit plain,” he says finally, wiping crumbs from his beard. “I would have liked to see a bit more creativity, and some effort in the decorating.”

“How disappointing for you,” Crowley mutters. They were perfect for Satan’s sake.

“I think they’re delicious,” Mary says with a warm smile. “And you were so nervous at first, weren’t you?” That’s putting it mildly. “You should be very proud of yourself.”

Mary reaches out and pats the back of his hand. “Gnk,” Crowley tells her.

When the judges have finished their circuit of the room, they give no indication as to who made the best cakes, or the worst, just take a minute to thank the contestants for all their efforts and announce that they will be breaking for lunch before the afternoon challenge.

“What?” Crowley mutters as everyone starts getting ready to go, eyeing their cakes as they are taken somewhere for more filming. “There’s more?”

“Yes!” Mary the younger takes hold of his arm, leading him out of the tent. “This afternoon is the technical challenge, and tomorrow is the showstopper.”

“We’re doing this tomorrow as well?” Crowley asks weakly.

“Of course we are.” Mary isn’t really listening. Humans rarely do. “I wonder what the technical challenge is going to be. I hope it’s one of Mary’s, or something really interesting. I imagine we’ll be sick to the back teeth of cake by the end of the weekend.”

“I won’t!” Crowley’s doppelganger shouts as she scurries past, a cake made by Fell in one hand and one by Tracy in the other. Crowley is pretty sure there’s the remnants of one of his wedged between her teeth.

“Oh, I do like Sue, she’s funny isn’t she?” Mary says, watching as the other one, cradling half a dozen cupcakes of her own, rushes after her partner in crime. “And Mel, of course.”

“Sue?” Crowley is a little disappointed, she deserves a proper demonic name, like Abigor or Malphas. Something to instill fear, or at least a mild stomach ache, in all who cower before her.

It’s a little mean of him to snap his fingers and make Mary briefly forget he ever existed, but the thought of sitting through lunch with everyone is unbearable. Also, he’s a Demon, he’s supposed to be a little mean. Well, very mean.

Crowley takes a walk around the grounds, giving a few stern words to the Alyssum to straighten up or he’ll burn it to a crisp. He pauses at a clump of Crocosmia, drawing a finger along a deep green, sword shaped leaf before calling it shabby-looking and moving on.

The walk is cut short when he finds a bloody church of all things, sitting on the far side of the grounds. Like all old churches it’s hidden behind a ring of yew trees; prickly, gnarled old things that mess with Crowley’s senses, and he doesn’t realise what’s up until his feet start to itch. The whole area has a vague sense of holiness about it, but nothing potent enough to cause harm. It’s more of a mild irritation, like a nettle rash that’s a few days old, easily forgotten until you brush against it and get an odd tingling sensation.

Crowley circles around the trees, catching glimpses of the church itself, it’s spire rounded instead
of squared, and gravestones jutting out of the tended lawn like rotten teeth.
“Hmn.” Crowley scowls at the old building, there’s not even a Potter’s field he can lurk about in.
He turns his back to the church and slouches over to the grounds around the tent, looking for some
delphiniums that need to buck up their act.

One of the assistants that crop up around the place like dandelions finds him picking through a
flower border, and summons him back to the tent for the next challenge. Crowley leaves the
Dahlias trembling and follows her back to the marquee, where everyone is being shuffled around in
a slightly anxious game of chess.
Crowley waits at the back rather than get himself involved in the scrum, and watches as Fell takes
off his fussy old jacket and hangs it up on a coat stand in a corner of the tent, then goes about
laboriously rolling the sleeves of his duck egg blue shirt. Crowley is absolutely not staring as one
by one forarms are revealed like the worlds least risque striptease, nor is he annoyed when one of
the contestants comes over to join him.
“It’s all a bit chaotic, isn’t it?” she says with a nervous smile. Crowley hums noncommittally, but
she doesn’t go away. “It’s Anthony, isn’t it? I’m Deirdre.”
“Hmn,” Crowley says, but she still doesn’t leave.
“We missed you at lunch, but your bake was very good,” she adds, watching as Newton tries to
engage the American girl in conversation and knocks over a ceramic cake stand. “They brought a
big basket of everyone's cakes over after lunch, so we got to try a few.”
“Really?” Crowley almost wishes he’d gone to lunch after all, seen how good Fell’s cakes really
were.
“I don’t really get the chance to make plain cakes at home,” Deirdre continues as someone brings
in a first aid kit and puts an ice pack on Newton’s head. “My son Adam likes chocolate, but you
know what boys are like. He was the one who made me enter, said I could win on my lemon
drizzle. He’s such a sweet boy.”
Crowley isn’t really listening, and when Newton is back on his feet they are both called over to
their counters for filming to start.

As before, there is an assortment of jars, but there is also a sheet of paper, turned over so the blank
side is facing up.
At the front of the tent Sue introduces the next challenge, the technical one that everyone has been
getting worked up about, and Mel announces that they will be making a chocolate roulade. Then
Mary offers an odd little bit of advice about rolling before rolling, and Paul says something or
other that Crowley dismisses as no doubt utterly pointless. The pair are sent off somewhere as the
challenge is judged blind, leaving the contestants in Mel and Sue’s dubious care. They are given
one hour, which sends a little ripple of alarm around the room, and are told to get baking.
Crowley had managed the last round well enough by playing along, making up something in a
bowl and then fixing it up with a last minute miracle, and plans to keep on doing that until the
whole stupid business is over and won. On the counter next to his the woman whose name he has
so far failed to notice turns over her sheet of paper and starts reading. Oh, so there’s instructions,
that’s something.
Crowley flips over his sheet of paper and scowls, his sunglasses sliding down his nose. “Roul-
aid?”
The instructions for the Roulade are maddeningly unhelpful. It’s just a list of ingredients and
weights. He glances around again, and sees a few people busily breaking pieces of chocolate into a
bowl, and figures that’s as good a place as any to start.

Time, like most things, has a habit of stretching out and snapping back when you apply pressure to
it. The time it should take to whisk up egg whites seems to be ten thousand years, or at least that’s
how it feels to Crowley’s wrist. Most other contestants are using the blasted electronic torture
device, but Crowley isn’t touching the damn thing, and will whisk his fucking eggs by hand thank
you. His right arm aches enough that he’s pretty sure it’s going to drop off or something, stupid fragile bodies.

Newton is also whisking his eggs by hand, as when he tried to use his machine it started billowing out clouds of black smoke and had to be taken out to the grounds to be doused. Madam Tracy, who seems to have taken a shine to Newton, hovers around him like a well-intentioned bee, her own eggs whizzing away in her perfectly functioning mixer. She measures out the vanilla extract for his melted chocolate and passes it over with a very loud “And that’s the only vanilla you’ll see me involved in, love!”

Newton closes his eyes and waits for the sweet release of death.

Crowley takes another sneaky glance at the girl at the next counter as she mixes together her chocolate and eggs before stirring in cocoa powder. He does the same, copying her actions as best as he can. The resulting batter looks marbled and lumpy, and he refuses to feel disappointed.

He pours it into a baking tray, then scrapes it out again when he realises everyone else has lined their trays with paper. Then remembers he can make the damn cake unstick with magic and pours it back in again. He puts it in the oven, which is still dark and cold because he didn’t preheat it, and turns the knob to a random setting before going off for a sulk.

Stupid humans, how is this supposed to be fun?

It is some comfort at least that most of the other contestants seem to be having a terrible time of it. Newton seesaws between resigned to his fate and determined to see things to the end, depending on whether or not the American girl is watching him. Crowley joins the crowd of well wishers/car crash enthusiasts that have gathered around his counter to watch him make his roulade, mostly to see what the finished thing is not supposed to look like. Even Mary the younger falls silent as he smears the last of the whipped cream over the cake and picks up the end of the tea towel it’s resting on.

“Here we go,” Newton whispers to himself, and pulls on the cloth. The top of the cake folds over, cracking apart not unlike it’s baker ten minutes from now. “Oh dear,” Newton whimpers.

“Keep going, love!” Tracy tells him, before nodding to the American girl. “Anathema, give him a hand, poor lad.”

Anathema quickly intervenes, guiding Newton into rolling up the rest of the cake. It slumps into something very un-roll-like, and Newton goes off in the corner to have a quiet little cry. He is closely followed by a camera, and a moment later Mel, who starts cursing in a very cheerful and creative manner. Extremely creative.

“Oh,” Crowley mutters within earshot of Mary the younger. “I thought we weren't allowed to—”

“We’re not,” Mary leans in to whisper. “They can’t use the footage if there’s swearing or that sort of thing. Isn’t that odd, though? I mean going over there and saying all that, and honestly I don’t think you could even do that with a rolling pin, could you? Or at least you wouldn't want to use it afterwards.”

“Clever,” Crowley mutters as Newton comes back, Mel’s arm around his shoulder. She whispers something in his ear and he picks up a sieve. “Very clever.”

Roulades are clearly one of Heaven’s ideas, there’s no way Hell could come up with something so fucking evil.

Crowley slathers whipped cream over his bake, a litany of foul words spilling from his forked tongue and blistering the edge of the countertop. He’s done this three times now. Three fucking times, and it’s still not right. Oh sure, the cake he can miracle back to its original unrolled state and the cream back into the bowl instead of all over the bubbling, peeling laminate, but then he has to start all over again. This time. This time it will behave, or he will throw it into the sun, followed by himself.

“You alright there?” whatever her name is at the next counter asks.

“Bastard… cock-munching… useless… fucking…” Crowley finally runs out of breath, stupid lungs always needing air to make words. “Cake!”
“That good, eh?” She smiles, because humans are fine with curse words now, aren’t they? Nothing shocks them. The angel Raphael could descend from heaven in a flaming chariot, all wheels and wings and celestial wankery, and the humans would just take photos for their Instagrams.

Crowley rolls up the roulade. The cream squirts out the sides, the cake cracking into pieces instead of curving into a smooth, even cylinder. Fell’s cake had rolled perfectly. So had Anathema’s. And yes, he can miracle it right, but that’s not the point.

Crowley tries to mash the cake together, pulling in the sides only to have it disintegrate further. “Bollocks,” he sighs, and with a swipe of his cream-spattered hands brings the roulade into shape. It feels like cheating, which shouldn’t be a bad thing, he’s a Demon and Demons love cheating. He picks up his sieve and scatters cocoa powder over the evidence.

He’s surrounded by humans stressing and primping and covering the worst cracks with cream, and it feels like cheating.

Time is called while Crowley is still waving his sieve about, and he drops it on the counter and backs away from his perfectly decent looking cake.

They are given time to clean up before the cakes in question are taken to the front of the tent to be judged, or in Newt’s case go and have another little panic in the corner. Crowley clicks his fingers, all smears of cream and chocolate vanishing from his corporation, and scowls at the edge of the counter where the laminate is peeling away.

“Well, that was quite a challenge.”

Crowley doesn’t need to look up to know it’s Fell speaking, he’d recognise those plummy vowels anywhere.

“Mmn,” he offers, glaring at a wayward splodge of cream.

“You fared well, I see?”

Crowley glances up, and there is Fell. The fuzzy old jacket is back on now the challenge is over, neatly buttoned over his ample waist. “Well enough,” Crowley admits. “Yours looks perfect.”

Fell goes an unexpected shade of pink, gaze fluttering away and returning as he fidgets, not quite clasping his hands together. Happy but uncertain of showing it.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, and with that scuttles off, as if avoiding admonishment. Crowley turns to watch him go, head down as if he could make himself less of a target.

“Well, that was weird,” Crowley mutters, and with a pass of his hand the counter is restored.

Once the counters are cleaned down, some tables covered in red checked cloth are arranged at the front of the tent, and the contestants are told to bring their roulades and roulalmosts up to be judged, putting each one in front of a corresponding photograph of the contestant, turned away so the judges can’t see them. After that comes the mortifying ordeal of being judged.

Eight bar stools are arranged at the front of the tent, and each contestant is directed to their stool with a few firm words that they may not move around or sit elsewhere, this is their stool from now on. On Crowley’s right sits Deirdre while on his left is Mary the younger. Newton is sat next to the American girl and almost swallows his tongue when she says hello. Fell, looking as prissy and plumped as a peacock, is perched at the far end, not that Crowley is looking for him.

The judges go through the cakes one by one, Paul relishing in his task of hacking them apart with a knife. Each time he makes a disparaging remark Mary the elder goes to great pains to say something positive. It’s obvious when they get to Fell’s bake, because Paul goes quiet, leaving Mary to say all the nice things. The girl at the counter Crowley had been copying fares very badly, her roulade a sad, flat thing with warm cream oozing over the serving plate. It looks like Crowley’s effort pre miracle.

The bakes are ranked from worst to best, with each baker having to admit which one was theirs. Crowley’s unlucky neighbour, who it turns out is called Ramanna, is rated the worst, followed by Newt and then Mary. Crowley sits at the halfway mark alongside Tracy, who flutters her lashes and murmurs about being such a bad girl until Paul stammers into silence, leaving Mary to call her bake a good effort. Deirdre is next, followed by Anathema, and to no ones surprise Fell wins with
the best roulade. He gets extremely flustered at Mary’s praise, covering his face with his hands while Anathema beside him gives him a one-armed hug.

With the day’s challenges done, they’re sent off while the assistants clean everything and get ready for the next day. Crowley trails along at the back of the group, half-listening as they all chatter about how things went. He isn’t really paying attention to where they’re going, and finds himself getting into a minibus, Mary taking the seat next to him as it crunches down the gravel driveway and away from the manor house.

“Where are we going?” he asks, looking out the window.

“To the hotel, of course,” Mary tells him. “You’ll not skip out on dinner will you? You’re already skin and bones, and you’ll need to keep your strength up with all these challenges.” Crowley gently encourages her to forget that he’s there for a little while, and stares out the window at the countryside while she takes up a conversation with Ramanna instead.

The drive doesn’t take long, even with the driver insisting on keeping below the speed limit, and they are deposited in front of an inoffensive hotel. One of the interchangeable assistants that follow them everywhere leads them into the reception area. Since everyone else has already spent the night here, they just pick up their keys from the reception desk and toddle up to their rooms, but Crowley still needs to be checked in. He finds himself a comfortable chair and a dull magazine to flick through, and waits it out.

“Mr Crawley?”

“Crowley.” Crowley looks up from a well thumbed copy of *The Lady* with mild irritation, mostly because he wasn’t around in the 1920’s and missed out on the evening dresses. The assistant looks back at him. Nervously.

“Yes, Mr Crowley.” She smiles, it looks painful. “I am so terribly sorry, but we seem to have misplaced your bags.”

Bags? If Crowley had brought luggage it would still be on the back seat of the Bentley, which is still parked in front of the manor house, not that anyone would touch it. He’d driven it up from London with every intention of dealing with this competition business as quickly as possible and then driving off, preferably away from some sort of flaming devastation while he did the cool movie thing of not paying attention while it did so. He has no intention of telling her that.

“What?” he asks instead. “Bags?”

“The bags,” she repeats slowly. “You brought bags, didn’t you? For your stay at the hotel.”

“Nope.” Crowley returns his attention to the beaded dresses. Why are there so many tassels? “Nope?” The assistant, Crowley vaguely thinks of them all as Eric, sees a light at the end of the tunnel that might not be an oncoming train. “So… they’re not lost?”

“Can’t lose what never existed,” Crowley says, turning the page. Well done, Eric. You’re not about to be fired.

“Oh.” Eric gives him a worried once over. “Well. Good. If you need a… er… toothbrush or something then call reception and they can probably-”

“A tooth what?” Crowley asks, flicking to another page.

Eric opens her mouth, then closes it again. “Here are your keys, and do enjoy your stay,” she says with an air of finality. “Dinner is at eight.”

The room is nice enough, not that Crowley plans to do anything other than sleep in it. The phone by the bed rings at five minutes to eight, and Crowley dutifully slinks down to the dining room, where he is sat with the rest of the contestants and subjected to that most woeful of things, hotel food.

The American girl, Athanema or whatever, perches on the far side of the table with her nose in a book. Tracy, sat at her side and looking a little aggrieved at her inattention, insists on swapping places with Newton so he gets to sit next to her instead. The boy has enough common sense to ask her for help instead of for a drink later, much to the quiet disappointment of the other contestants.
Crowley ends seated beside his tent neighbour and fellow roulade abuser, Ramanna. But he is also right opposite Fell, because God is still laughing at him apparently. Before the food arrives, Fell keeps busy reassuring Newton that everything will be fine, and once there is a plate in front of him, he seems to care for little else but a thorough dissection and examination of his meal. Crowley picks at a bowl of risotto and makes appropriate noises while Ramanna makes a dent in the complimentary wine. She gives him a very human look, like two soldiers making eye contact on a battlefield, and tips half a bottle of red into his empty wine glass.

When the meal is finished the conversation turns to the next days challenge, surprise cakes. Crowley is a little disappointed that in this context surprise means ‘the hollowed out center is filled with smarties’ and not ‘the hollowed out center is filled with bees’. Bees would be a lot more surprising.

There is a gentle click of cutlery against porcelain as Fell finally chases the last crumbs of his dessert across his plate and sets down the fork. He dabs at his mouth with a folded handkerchief before turning to Crowley, lips stained pink with raspberry coulis. The sight sends an odd jangling under Crowley’s ribs, a sensation he crushes mercilessly. Mayfly creatures, humans. Here one moment and gone the next, minds too friable and bodies to fragile.

“And what are you making, my dear?” Fell sounds coaxing, almost coquettish. No good can come of it.

“Dunno,” Crowley mumbles. “See what happens on the day.”

“Oh, my dear fellow, whatever do you mean?” Fell leans towards him, hand pressed on the table between them. “Surely you submitted your recipe last week, so they could provide you with the ingredients?”

“Mngl,” Crowley says, picking up his wine glass. Damn thing is empty again.

Fell sits back again, expression shrewd. “I think this is all just a ruse.” He waves a hand, vaguely encompassing Crowley as a whole. “All this being aloof and indifferent is merely a ploy, I’m sure of it. You are playing your cards close to your chest, and when we least expect it you will reveal yourself to be a master of your craft, whatever that craft may be.”

“Or,” Crowley says, and it feels like he’s exposing a little too much of himself. “I’m winging it.”

Crowley is woken up by a courtesy call. He hisses at the phone squatting on the bedside table and rolls over with every intention of going back to sleep. Five minutes later it rings again and he throws it to the floor. Half an hour later there is a knock at the door.

“Mr Crowley?” one of the Erics calls. “The bus leaves at six.”

“Fine,” Crowley hisses, throwing back the covers and sitting up. He scrubs his hands over his face before reaching for his sunglasses. They’re not on the bedside table, and after a minute of searching he finds them crushed under the phone. “Bollocks.”

The shades reform under his hands, and he hauls himself to his feet. In the two strides it takes to reach the door he is dressed, the tangle of his red hair now looking artful rather than sticking up on one side.

He doesn’t bother with breakfast, but skulks downstairs in search of a cup of tea and is only slightly relieved to find the dining room empty, everyone no doubt back in their rooms and getting ready for the day.

Crowley refuses to feel lonely while he stands at the window and sips at his stewed cup of tea, and definitely doesn’t feel lonely when he is herded onto the bus with the rest of them at such an ungodly hour. Even Mary is on the quiet side, and takes an empty seat opposite rather than join him again.

Crowley presses his cheek to the cold window, feeling the engine catch and turn through the vibrations in the glass. Just today to get through, then he can get back to London and not have to think about cake ever again.
The drive to the Manor is uneventful, and even the birds in the hedges seem half asleep. When they arrive the contestants follow another Eric across the grounds to the tent like a row of ducks, Crowley trailing at the rear. The tent has been set up much like the previous day, but there are no cloths covering the bottles and jars on the counters. They take their places, and Crowley scowls at the jars laid out on his counter. What the hell is he going to make?
Most of the contestants are quick to get ready, packing away their belongings in the cupboards provided and going through their supplies. Crowley watches Fell prepare without really meaning to, the daft git just happens to be in the way of his vacant stare. Or at least that’s the reasoning Crowley gives to himself as he tracks the fussy old sod around the tent, hanging up his coat on a hatstand in the corner. Fell rolls up his sleeves, making sure the cuffs are tucked in just so, and tugs down the front of his velvet waistcoat before putting on his apron. The waistcoat is old and threadbare, the nap worn away completely at the hem and around the buttons from years of careful use.
Crowley tilts his head to one side, frowning at the thread of something he can’t quite grasp. Something important, or so it seems until the moment passes.

Mel and Sue arrive next, taking a few minutes to chat to each of the contestants. Sue skirts around Crowley’s counter long enough to give him a wink, and keeps on going. He wrinkles his nose at her in an amicable way before convincing a passing Eric to bring him tea.

The judges finally arrive, Mary wearing a bright pink floral jacket that catches Crowley’s eye. Good on her, he thinks, followed quickly by Does it come in black?
After a fair amount of fuss over lighting and camera positions, things finally get a move on. Mel and Sue introduce the day’s challenge, which they insist on calling a ‘Showstopper’. In Crowley’s experience showstoppers tend to involve assassinations or incendiary devices of one form or another, and have very little to do with cakes. Unless the assassin is hiding inside the cake. Like a really big cake, or a really small assassin.
“The filling must be a surprise.” Mary’s voice enters his train of thought like an announcement for the next stop on the PA system. “And the cake iced and decorated.”
“Bees would be a surprise,” Crowley mumbles into his mug of tea.
“You have three hours,” Mel announces, and the pair do that get-set-bake thing again.
The other contestants get down to work. Crowley gives the bastard machine at the edge of the counter a sideways look, picks up a wooden spoon, and slowly pushes it over and into the bin beside the counter. It lands with a satisfying crash, making everyone turn and stare like very tall meerkats. An Eric hurries over and rescues the machine, carrying it away.

“Cake,” Crowley mutters, brandishing his wooden spoon like a sword.
The thing is, Crowley has something other demons lack; an imagination. He throws ingredients together haphazardly, eggshells crunching as he drops them whole into the bowl and whacks them with his spoon until they break. It doesn’t matter that he doesn’t know what baking powder is for or how cocoa is made, what matters is he can imagine what the cake will look like. Black as night and sweet as sin, rich with cocoa and finished with glossy dark chocolate. Crowley is sorely tempted to fill the damned thing with bees, just to see Paul’s face when he cuts into the cake and they come pouring out. Thousands and thousands of bees, all swarming over him. It would be fantastic.
Crowley picks up a jar of cocoa powder and empties the contents into his bowl. No, it wouldn’t be fair on the bees, but the cake will have a sting of its own.

Once the cakes are in the oven, each contestant has their own coping mechanism for the stress. Some, like Tracy and Anathema, get on with the rest of the things on their to-do list, like making decorations and fillings. Others a little less well equipped with coping strategies, such as Newt and Ramanna, sit in front of their ovens and openly beg the contents to work. Fell, smug bastard, gets on with making a batch of snowy white fondant icing. Crowley obtains another cup of tea and
scowls at the squirrels bounding around outside. Little shits with their teeth and their-
“So, who’s the one to look out for?”
“Garh!” Crowley damn near leaps out of his skin (which used to be a much easier thing to do. 
Almost pleasant) and wheels around to glare at Sue, who had snuck up on him. “Wot?”
“The other contestants,” Sue explains. “Which one do you reckon will win?”
“Oh.” Crowley glances around, making sure there’s no cameras pointed their way. “Well between 
you and me, my money is on Fell.”
“He’s very good, isn’t he,” Sue agrees. “Very precise.”
“What kind of a name is Fell anyway?” The word rankles, bad memories, or some kind of vague slight.
Tracy, who can’t bear to see gossip and not be a part of it, comes sidling over in a way that makes 
Crowley almost proud. “He told me his name was Ezra the other night,” she confides. “Ezra Fell. 
Then he got all flustered and said to call him Mr Fell. Very odd, I thought.”
“John,” Sue says with a puzzled look. “I’m pretty sure on the application form it said John.”
Crowley glances over at Fell, busy adding drops of dye to more cake batter. “He doesn’t look like a 
John.”
“Oh, sweetheart,” Tracy elbows him lightly. “They’re all Johns.”
“Ngk,” Crowley offers, and gulps down the rest of his tea.

As time ticks on, some of the other contestants start to fray a little around the edges. Mary’s 
constant, low level chatter that the cameras can’t seem to get enough of ticks up into something 
much more fraught. A pair of cameramen shuffle closer, trying to catch the moment she starts 
crying. The poor woman looks like a wounded doe surrounded by vultures, waiting for her dying breath.
Crowley raises his hand, fingers ready to snap something unfortunate into existence. Cameras must have batteries, right? Batteries can explode.
“Sit on my face, and tell me that you love me!” Mel starts singing loudly, skipping over to Mary’s side. “I’ll sit on your face and tell you I love you too-ooo.”
The cameramen stop what they’re doing, skulking off in search of other things to film while Mel keeps chirping away about things going on between her thighs.
Crowley sniggers, but with the cameras gone he doesn’t miss the way Mel rubs Mary’s back and 
talks through how to fix her problem. Or how Mary snuffles appreciatively.
When Crowley looks around the room, he sees Mel isn’t the only one watching out for trouble. 
Tracy is hovering at the edge of Newt’s counter, reassuring him in a soft tone as he transfers his chocolate cake to a serving dish. Anathema is at Ramanna’s counter, showing her how to pipe 
flower designs with buttercream. Even Fell has wandered away from his own counter, where slices 
of cake in various colours are laid out, waiting for him to come back from covering for Anathema.

Who does that leave? Crowley takes another look around, and sees Diedre, silently fretting over a 
pan of boiling sugar. From what he remembers of last nights conversations, she is working on a 
lemon cake filled with sherbet lemons, and planned on making the sherbets herself. Why she didn’t just get some out of a packet is beyond Crowley, but he watches her gamely stir a pan the temperature of a third degree burn. She pours the mix onto a prepared tray and pokes at it with the spoon, torn between kneading it as per her instructions and not searing off her fingers.
Crowley checks that no one is watching and saunters over to join her. Fire can’t hurt him, and he has no trouble nudging her aside and getting his hands in the tacky mixture. Deirdre gets the rest of her things together, a litany of ‘thank you’ and ‘you’re so kind’ and ‘are you okay?’ rolling over Crowley’s sporadically grumbled ‘it’s fine’. He consoles himself with the argument that millions of people will watch them on TV and try it themselves, getting horrifically burned in the process. 
The mix need working quickly, according to the sheet of paper propped up on her counter, and Crowley dutifully kneads it before pinching off equal sized pieces and rolling them into lozenges. Deirdre presses a greased chopstick onto each one, sprinkling a pinch of sherbet into the hollow
formed, and Crowley seals them up, adding a little heat of his own when they get too cold and brittle.

He hears a low wail from Newt behind him and glances over his shoulder to look. The lad is fretting over his chocolate cake, trying to spread a white chocolate ganache over it. But the ganache keeps picking up cake crumbs, and the whole thing is turning a gritty brown.

“Thank you,” Deirdre says again as the last sherbet is made, and the whole lot rolled in cornflour and icing sugar.

“Shut it,” Crowley mumbles. “You’ll get me into trouble.”

He wanders back to his counter, looking over to see how Newt is getting on. His cake looks much better than the last time he checked, covered in a smooth white fondant icing, and Newton is fretting over how to decorate it. Tracy offers him some of her vivid pink buttercream, and the boy has enough sense to say no, thank you.

Crowley looks at his own bake, and it dutifully transforms into an elegant looking chocolate cake, the stuff on top that Tracy keeps calling ganache swirled perfectly. Crowley nods, approving, and goes off to see how Mary is getting on.

He could badger an Eric for more tea, or go glare at the perennials in the herbaceous borders, but he finds he’d rather see how the others are getting on.

The thing is. When you’re surrounded by humans all trying to do the same thing, and quietly helping each other along, you could start to get. Well. Invested.

Time is called, much to the distress of some contestants. They are told to step away from their bakes, and sent off to get a cup of tea and a bite to eat while the tent is cleaned down and set up for the judging.

No one feels like eating, not even Fell, who picks away at a pastry but doesn’t actually put any of it to his mouth, not that Crowley is looking.

When they are called back in for judging the tables and stools have been set up at the front again, but their cakes are still on their counters. They are sent to their stools, and Mary sits next to Crowley again. She grasps his hand tightly and he gives the back of her hand an awkward pat as the judges make their appearance.

They each take turns bringing their cakes to the table to be judged, and no council of Heaven or pit of Hell can compare to the way Mary gives each of them a sympathetic you tried your best smile, or the obvious relish with which Paul sinks his knife into each cake. Git.

Tracy is first, carrying a large, bright pink cake. When cut open it reveals a filling of strawberries macerated in gin. Paul coughs when he tastes it, and declares the gin flavour much too strong.

Mary however thinks it’s a perfect amount of gin, and goes back for seconds.

Ramanna and Mary follow after, their cakes well-made but Paul doesn’t find them very impressive. He notes that they both had help in the challenge, and will be marked accordingly.

Newt is next, and the judges are pleased with his cake, Pauls knife slicing through the snowy white fondant to reveal a dark chocolate cake underneath. Anathema follows with a stylish looking cake simply iced and decorated with fondant chess pieces. When cut open it reveals a chessboard effect that Mary is delighted by, and compliments profusely.

Crowley is called up, and carries his cake to the table, plonking it down in front of Paul with a cold stare.

“It’s a bit plain,” Paul says, poking at the ganache with his knife.

“Understated,” Mary adds. “Very elegant.”

Crowley gives her a quick smile before stepping back, and Paul sinks the knife in. After a minute he shoves it in again, slicing the cake up into pieces.

“Where’s the surprise?” he says irritably.

“Taste it.” Crowley smirks, picking up a piece from the edge and handing it to Mary.

“Oooh!” she says with a wide, wrinkly smile. “I can taste the rum!”
Crowley picks a piece from the very center, thumb and middle finger brushing together, and holds it out to Paul. “Rum?” he says, tossing the piece into his mouth. “That’s not - Aaaaack!” He doubles over, coughing violently, his face turning red, and Mary pats him on the back while the camera crew zoom in closer. “Naga viper,” Crowley says, picking up a piece of cake and eating it. “One of the hottest chillies in the world.” Paul wheezes, tears streaming down his face, and Sue snags a piece from the middle of the cake. She makes a show of licking ganache off her fingers. “Mmm. Spicy.” “Well, that is a surprise,” Mel says, digging into the cake until she finds the rum. Crowley takes the cake back to his counter while Paul gulps down a glass of milk, and after a few minutes with the on-site make up artists to cover the blotchiness he’s ready to go back on camera.

Deirdre is called up next, and places her lemon drizzle cake down in front of the judges. Paul cuts into it, a little less gleefully than before, and pulls the cake apart. Lemon sherbets clatter across the counter, and several find their way into Mel’s pocket. “Nice,” Paul concludes. “What made you pick lemon sherbets?” “They’re my son’s favourite,” Deirdre enthuses, and Paul smacks one with the flat of his knife, making it shatter. “Well, I’m sure he’d be very proud of you,” Mary says warmly. “I hope you saved some to take home.” Deirdre holds up a wrap of greaseproof paper, filled to bursting with the sweets. “Just a couple.” Fell is called up last, and carries his cake over to the judges, setting it down carefully and backing away. He doesn’t look anywhere near as inflated as Crowley would have expected at this point in the challenge, and steps back, his hands folded demurely in front of him. It’s only when he looks at the cake Crowley realises why he looks so sombre. The cake is half-finished. Where there should be a thick layer of snowy fondant there is only a thin skim of buttercream, as though there hadn’t been enough to do it properly, and a few green carnations arranged artfully on the top. “Oh dear,” Paul says, and Crowley resists the urge to set fire to his hair. With all that product it would go up like a rocket. “I rather like it,” Mary says. “It looks very modern.” “What?” Paul snorts. “Shabby chic?” He cuts into the cake, pulling it apart to reveal the surprise, and the room falls silent. In the center of the cake is a perfect rainbow coloured heart made from pieces of cake dyed in different colours. “Oh, isn’t that delightful!” Mary says. Paul hacks at a corner with his knife, and grudgingly admits that it’s a good bake. “Beautiful,” Mary says between bites, and Fell ducks his head, a faint blush staining his cheeks.
While the judges deliberate the contestants are sent off to have lunch, and this time Crowley tags along. No one really feels like talking, at least not until dessert comes along in the form of their cakes. There aren’t many takers for Crowley’s chilli chocolate cake, but Tracy’s goes down well, as does Anathemas. Crowley picks a slice of Fell’s cake in some odd attempt at solidarity, or something. He can’t put words to it.
The cake is so light it practically melts in his mouth, leaving a lingering taste of lemon zest and something leafy and green. Crowley puts down his fork after the first bite and doesn’t pick it up again, stomach twisting into knots.
They are called back to the tent for the results. Crowley takes his place on his bloody stupid stool and lets Mary grip his hand. *Soon be over.*
They all get thanked for their efforts, and the doppelgangers make a few jokes here and there before getting on with things. They make a bit of a fuss about announcing the star baker, and then Anathema’s name is called. Everyone within reach gives her a pat on the arm and a well done, even Fell who manages to hide his disappointment.
“Now for the sad part,” Mel continues. “One of you will not be joining us next week.”
“Next week?” Crowley hisses. “We have to do this again?”
“Yes, of course,” Mary whispers in his ear. “Every week until the last three contestants in the final.”
“Oh for G-” Crowley stops himself. “Balls.”
Sue announces that Ramanna will not be joining them, and then goes over to give her a conciliatory hug. She nods a lot, mumbling about her roulade, and a few minutes later the cameras stop rolling.

After all the fuss of the last two days it feels strange for it to be over. An Eric pushes a sheet of paper into Crowley’s hand listing next week’s challenges - chocolate. He screws up the sheet and throws it into the nearest bin.

The contestants all collect their things, putting on coats and gathering bags, and Crowley, who has brought nothing with him, slips outside. He has half a mind to go terrorise some Dahlias before getting in the Bentley and going back to Mayfair, but finds Fell over by the stream that runs through the grounds, looking thoughtfully into the water, and goes over to join him.

“That was very mean,” Fell says, and it takes a moment for Crowley to realise what he’s on about. “Oh, the chillies? Yeah, but it was funny.” Fell huffs, but there’s no real bite to it. “Sorry you didn’t win.”

Fell bristles, like a bird ruffling its feathers, and settles again. “Well, there’s always next week.” Crowley gives him a slower, more considering look, something niggling in the back of his mind. “You had fondant,” he says, more to himself than anything. “I saw it. White as anything. You drop it or something?”

Fell mumbles something that sounds like ‘gave’ ‘it’ and ‘away’.

“You what?” Crowley laughs.

“I gave it away!” Fell whines, looking distraught. “You saw how the poor boy was struggling! And he was such a nice young man.”

“Ramanna was nice,” Crowley points out. “She’s gone.”

“Yes, well.” Fell looks even more upset. “I didn’t think of that. Still.” He holds up his hands, and Crowley gets the feeling Fell is giving himself a stern talking to, no one else. “Got to get used to it, there can be only one winner and all that.”

“Yeah, well.” Crowley glances up at the manor house, where the car is parked and waiting. The sooner he’s gone and all that. “Next week, then. See ya.”

“Mind how you go,” Fell calls after him.

Crowley gives a half-arsed wave, not looking back. “Chocolate,” he mutters to himself, climbing into the car and turning on the engine. “How hard can it be?”
Chapter Summary

Fell refuses to be daunted. “But that’s not the point. The point is to make something that has the… the wow factor.”
Crowley snorts. “The wow factor?”
“Yes!”
“Well, it’s easy to make people go wow. Just set it on fire, or fill it with rats. Well, that’s more of an argh than a wow.” Crowley finishes his coffee. “Just because people go wow doesn’t mean it’s good.”
Fell picks at imaginary crumbs on his threadbare-looking trousers, looking irritated that Crowley might have a point. “Quite,” he says softly.

Chapter Notes

The gorgeous art of Crowley and Aziraphale in this chapter are by the amazing Wyvernquill!
Are you following them on Tumblr yet?

The Bentley roars up the drive of the estate, sending up a spray of gravel as it screeches to a halt in front of the Manor house entrance. Crowley opens the door and tips himself out of the driver’s seat, slamming the door shut behind him.
It’s too fucking early. It’s too early and cooking is stupid and why can’t humans just eat leaves or something. Why do they have to get chemistry involved. It’s bad enough having bodies drawing in one gas and emitting another without getting bogged down in amino groups and reactive carbonyls. Crowley opens the Bentley door and slams it again, because if he has to get up at four bloody am to drive here then everyone else in a two mile radius had better be awake with him.
A squirrel pokes its head out of a nearby tree. Crowley scowls at it and clicks his fingers, the little grey bastard vanishing with a muffled pop.
The door to the main entrance opens, and a harried looking Eric peeks out. Several expressions race across her features like panicked rabbits, before settling into a bland smile.
“Mr Crowley,” Eric says, coming down to meet him. “You were supposed to be here yesterday.”
“Yeah. Uh.” Crowley shrugs. “Stuff to do.”
Eric keeps her smile fixed firmly in place. “Right this way, Mr Crowley.”

Like the previous week, Eric leads him around the side of the building to the room where the rest of the contestants are waiting to be called to the tent. Crowley keeps his head up, taking in the surroundings, and sees the tall spire of the old church poking up from behind a distant row of trees.
He’d done a little reading up on the estate over the week, which is a rather grand way of saying he typed the place name into google and read the extremely short wikipedia article that came up. The whole site had been a monastery at some point in the past, which explains why some areas give Crowley itchy feet and the whole blasted place has a faintly heavenly wiff about it. Not enough to weaken him, so long as he stays away from the church, it’s more like Angelic grace if it had been mothballed for a thousand years in a shoebox at the bottom of a wardrobe.
Crowley sniffs, giving the distant spire a dutiful sneer as Eric holds the door open for him, and saunters into the waiting room.

There it is again, that vague sense of grace. The other contestants, sitting around with their cups of tea, turn to look his way. Some of them are even managing to eat complementary pastries this time. “There he is!” Mary the younger says, looking pleased. “I told you he’d come. Didn’t I say he’d show up fashionably late?” She turns to Fell, preoccupied with extracting the chocolate chips from his muffin. “Didn’t I tell you he’d be here?”

Fell looks up, and the smile that blooms there at the sight of Crowley in the doorway is like a bleeding dawn chorus. “Mr Crowley,” he beams. “You had us so worried.”

“Yeah, well.” Crowley skulks around the edge of the room, giving Newt and Tracy a little nod as he passes on his way to the coffee maker. Tracy is wearing a long blonde wig this time, no doubt for Paul’s benefit. “Work. You know how it is.”

Anathema gives him a hopeful little look as he puts a pod in the coffee maker, and Crowley gives her an exasperated little nod, shoving a tiny cup under the spout and waiting for coffee to dribble out. He hands the cup over to the girl before starting again with a fresh cup, and Anathema drinks it as is, no messing about with the little tubs of white nonsense that claims to be milk.

“Thank you,” Anathema says, tilting her head to one side as Crowley prods the machine into action. “So what line of work are you in?”

“Mngk,” Crowley says, ripping open a little tube of sugar and dumping it into his cup. What kind of measurement is a tube, anyway? Is it a teaspoon? It doesn’t look like a teaspoon. “I work in the city.”

Crowley has no idea what it means, he overheard it brayed in a bar sometime in the eighties. He’d hated the person yelling it, who’s evening ended with him hiding in the wine bar loo with soiled underwear, but the humans seem to accept it as a perfectly reasonable answer and leave well alone. It certainly puts Anathema off further conversation.

Crowley takes his coffee to one of those uncomfortable chairs next to wossername - Deirdre - and takes a sip from his tiny cup. He gets left alone for five blissful seconds before Fell wipes muffin crumbs from his fingers and leans over to get his attention.

“Are we ready for weekend?” Fell asks, looking absolutely delighted by the thought of two days devoted to chocolate, and refusing to be swayed by Crowley’s indifferent shrug. “I’ll bet you’ve got something spectacular planned for the Showstopper.”

“Mnm,” Crowley says between sips, then lowers his cup. “Why is it called a showstopper? I mean isn’t it a bad thing, stopping a show? And anyway it’s not a show, it’s cake.”

“So, you’re making a cake?” Fell asks, before settling in. There is a lecture coming, Crowley can feel it in his dank, squishy parts. “Well the term originates from the theatre, my dear. When a song, or a performance is so remarkable, so sublime, that the entire audience is compelled to applaud for so long that the entire performance is interrupted.”

“Oh.” Crowley frowns at his cup. “That sounds really annoying.”

Fell looks put out. “But it’s a celebration! A feat so impressive that everything must stop so that it can be properly lauded.”

“And then the audience end up missing the last bus home because the show overran?” Crowley says, taking a smidge of pleasure in seeing Fell’s little thespian bubble burst.

“Well, there’s always the tube,” Fell says, refusing to be daunted. “But that’s not the point. The point is to make something that has the… the wow factor.”

Crowley snorts. “The wow factor?”

“Yes!”

“Well, it’s easy to make people go wow. Just set it on fire, or fill it with rats. Well, that’s more of an argh than a wow.” Crowley finishes his coffee. “Just because people go wow doesn’t mean it’s good.”

Fell picks at imaginary crumbs on his threadbare-looking trousers, looking irritated that Crowley
might have a point. “Quite,” he says softly.

Before Fell can come up with a counter argument (and that is exactly what he’s doing, Crowley can see the little cogs of his mind clack-clacking away) the door opens and another Eric appears to take them to the baking tent. Everyone quickly collects up their belongings and follows her out onto the estate, and Crowley’s attempts at trailing behind are thwarted by Mary, who falls into step beside him.

“Excited?” she asks as they cross a small bridge.

“Hmn?” Crowley is distracted by a peacock strutting around on the grounds a short distance away, and takes a minute or two to catch on. “Oh yeah. Thrilled.”

“I wonder what the technical challenge is,” Mary continues. My friend Mary thinks it’ll be a Sachertorte, but my other friend Maria says-”

“Hang on.” Crowley stops, letting the rest of the group walk on ahead. “Are all your friends called Mary?”

“No, of course not, silly!” Mary laughs. “I also know a Theresa.”

“Satan give me strength,” Crowley mutters, catching up with the others as they reach the tent.

They are each directed to their counters, the same as the previous week. Crowley gets placed at the back again, beside the empty counter of Ramanna, who was eliminated last week. It is a rather grim memento mori, a warning of what happens to those who fail. Crowley shakes himself. The girl isn’t dead, or confined to hell. She works in an airport, which now that Crowley thinks about it isn’t that far off the mark, even if Hell hasn’t got any Costas. While the humans put away their coats and bags, Crowley skulks around his counter, looking for a wooden spoon that’s long enough. He picks one up and sidles over to the electrical bastard sitting on the end of his counter, ready to thwack it into oblivion or the nearest bin. He raises the spoon, ready to strike, but Tracy gets there first.

“How about I just put this over here, Mr C?” She unplugs the bastard contraption and moves it over to the empty counter. “There, now that’s out the way.”

Crowley glares at the machine, and the narrow melamine countertop it is now sitting on, stripped of chopping boards and jars of sugar. Long enough to lie down on, even with your arms pulled up so tight your shoulders dislocate.

Tracy drapes a spare tea towel over the machine. “That better?”

There is no pity in her tone, because for all her appearance the woman radiates pragmatism from her kitten heels to her atomic blonde wig, so Crowley doesn’t raze the entirety of Berkshire from the map in a fiery hellstorm.

“Mnyuh,” he says slowly. “Thanks.”

“Anytime, love.”

After a few minutes of the camera crew roaming the tent, getting shots of everyone being anxious, the doppelgangers arrive. Sue swings past Crowley’s counter long enough to give him a wink and Crowley pulls a face, making her snort. Making a human laugh is a slightly odd sensation, and Crowley has a suspicion he likes it more than making them scream. Except Paul, obviously.

At the other counters the humans are busying themselves, chatting with the Erics and each other. Aside from Crowley, Fell seems to be the only one keeping to himself, fussing with the sleeves of his duck egg blue shirt and smoothing down his apron. Crowley tilts his head to one side, frowning as he watches the old duffer getting ready.

“You wore that last week,” Crowley murmurs. He can hardly point fingers. but Fell looks like he’s been wearing the same waistcoat since 1880.

“So what if he is.” Crowley sniffs, looking for something else to distract himself. “None of my business.”

The other doppelganger, Mel, if Crowley remembers rightly, sidles over to him.

“Talking to yourself, eh?” she gives him an apple-cheeked grin. “First sign of madness, that is.”
“I thought that was hairy palms?” Crowley frowns.
“Oh, I think that means something else entirely,” Mel says with a music hall wink, the kind that requires a full head twist and a click of the tongue. All that’s missing is the trombone.
“Wossisname,” Crowley nods to where Fell is checking his jars of ingredients. “What does he do?”
“Runs a bookshop.” Mel gives him a significant look, one that should also come with a trombone.
“In Soho.”
“Well then,” Crowley flicks out his tongue absently. “It’s always the quiet ones.”

The judges arrive, and there is a frisson of tension as they walk around the tent, greeting the contestants. Crowley mumbles incoherently to Mary as she wishes him luck with the challenges, and gives Paul a death stare when he makes some remark or other. Unfortunately the sunglasses tend to take the edge off the demonic glower, so the worst he’ll get is a mild headache later that he’ll put down to the studio lights.

The judges and the hosts convene briefly with a couple of the senior Erics, and move over to the front of the tent to get ready. Another Eric calls for their attention as the cameras are swivelled around, and the humans all look up expectantly. One of the cameramen focuses on Crowley leaning insouciantly against his counter instead, and Crowley adjusts his pose a little for a more flattering angle.

“Welcome to the second week in the Bake Off tent,” Mel announces. “This week is all about chocolate.”

“For your Signature challenge,” Sue continues smoothly. “Paul and Mary would like you to make a chocolate tart. The base must be pastry, but it can be any kind you like. Shortcrust, puff, anything at all. The filling, obviously, must be mainly chocolate.”

She turns to Mary expectantly, who has her own little scripted piece to say. “We expect to see pastry cases that are crisp and even, no soggy bottoms please -” there is a titter from several of the humans. Why is that so funny? “- and of course the filling must be set.”

Mary gives Paul a very motherly look, the kind that brandishes a wooden spoon emphatically. “Good luck,” he says grudgingly, and Mel takes over before he can say anything else.

“You have two and a half hours, so get set -”
“- bake!” they chorus, and the humans rush to get cooking.

Like last week, Crowley has every intention of miracling something up last minute, but needs to look busy first. A few days before he had picked up a tie-in book for the series, full of borderline twee photos of slightly rustic looking pies and cakes printed on pleasingly grainy paper. A book that felt like a cosy sweater, one that looked nice but would fall apart in the first wash and was probably made by underaged and underpaid women in a far off country. Baking is easy it promised with its blocky fonts and co-ordinated colour palettes. Look at how endearingly clumsy these tastefully presented bakes are, the book soothed, with its asymmetrically iced cakes and photos of previous contestants with flour daubed aprons.

Crowley had skimmed it once, looked at a recipe for a scone and decided it was too much of a faff. Then he put the book away on a shelf and never touched it again. He switched to watching heavily edited baking videos on Facebook, where everything takes twenty seconds or less. He still has no idea how to cook, but he has seen a gramophone be made out of chocolate, which was very impressive. He has also seen far too many recipes that start with ‘one box of chocolate cake mix’, which was not.

Not for the first time, Crowley marvels at how humans are far better at creating hellish things; delusions and torments that no Duke of Hell could possibly dream of, if Dukes of Hell ever took up dreaming.

“Right.” He opens a Kilner jar filled with the exact amount of flour he needs. “Get on with it, I guess.”

Crowley has a peaceful half hour of being left to his own devices, half an eye on Tracy at the
counter in front to see when to put his pastry thingy in the oven. He even gets a cup of tea from one of the Erics, and nibbles on the squares of plain chocolate left on his counter while he figures out what he’s making.

His peace is short-lived, as Paul and Mary come over to see what he’s doing. “No chillies this week?” Paul asks, and Crowley is briefly tempted to fill the bloody tart with bhut jolokia. No, been there, done that.

“Soon find out,” Crowley tells him instead, shoving his sunglasses up his nose. “I’m sure it will taste delicious,” Mary reassures him.

Crowley clears his throat loudly, his ears scorching. “Mnargle,” he says, and she pats his hand before walking away. He waits until the cameras are definitely pointed elsewhere before prodding at his ears, making sure they aren’t actually ablaze. Everything seems to be ambient temperature, so he goes back to glaring at his pastry and waiting for Tracy to get on with it. She finally opens her oven door, a waft of hot air stirring the loose strands of her wig, and puts her pastry case in the oven to cook. Crowley watches furtively, she isn’t going to get very far, is she? Not with all those ceramic balls in her pan. Crowley throws his own pastry in the oven, and after a minute of staring at it blankly, turns it on. Food needs to be hot, right? Makes all those chemical things happen.

With nothing else to do until Tracy takes her pastry out again, Crowley wanders around the tent a little, seeing what the humans are up to. Newt is sitting on the floor, staring sadly at his oven while Mel pats his back in a comforting way. That girl Anathema is boiling cream and chopping her chocolate into neat little squares. The judges are with Fell, who is simpering over everything Mary has to say. Of course his pastry case is already out of the oven and looking perfect. Git.

Sue appears at his side, munching her way through a handful of the chocolate chips Diedre had given her to make her go away. “Nervous?” she asks, and offers Crowley a chocolate.

“Me? Nah,” Crowley says, flicking the bitter little nugget in his mouth and chewing once before swallowing. “Give us another.”

Sue smirks, holding out her hand. “97% cocoa. Good, aren’t they?”

“So it’s basically cocoa powder,” Crowley says derisively, but still eats another one.

“Still good,” Sue says, her mouth full. “What about you? Only using pure Venezuelan carenero cacao, preferably hand picked by orphaned children?”

She’s grinning as she speaks, and Crowley had forgotten how easy it was to get fond of these ridiculous creatures.

“There’s nothing…” Crowley hesitates. “Demonic in your family, is there? No great uncle Barbatos or second cousin Vual?”

Sue makes a show of thinking it over. “No. But I am from Croydon.”

“Oh right.” Crowley snags another chocolate chip. “That’ll be it.”

Tracy opens her oven door, and Crowley heads back over to his counter, pulling out his own pastry case with bare hands. The dough is warm but still spongy, and he sees why Tracy filled her case with little ceramic balls now. The middle of the pastry case has puffed up like a little volcano of butter and flour and hot air. Crowley stabs it with a knife until it deflates again, and drops it on the counter.

Everyone else seems to be combining chocolate and cream for their fillings, so Crowley dutifully dumps a random amount of both in a bowl and glares at it until the chocolate melts. He gives the whole thing a mix and tips it into the pastry case, lumpy bits and all.

Tracy puts her own bake in the fridge, presumably for more chemistry reasons, and Crowley follows suit. Job done, time for a cup of tea. He tracks down an Eric and puts the idea in her head that tea is needed, and as an afterthought makes sure everyone else gets one too.

Over the next ten minutes, while Crowley sips at his tea and glowers out at the herbaceous borders through the clear plastic side of the tent, the last stragglers finish up their bakes and put them in their fridges. Newt, obviously, is last, and nearly drops his tart trying to make space for it in the
crowded fridge. Luckily Fell intervenes, rescuing the bake before it tips over completely and keeping hold of it while Newt makes space. It must be Crowley’s imagination, but the pastry case looks a little bit neater when it’s slid onto the shelf between the others, the filling a little silkier.

With an hour (less in Newt’s case) to kill, most of the humans settle into groups of twos and threes to fret over their efforts. One of the Erics has set up some tables and chairs outside the tent for them to sit at, and Crowley makes his excuses when Mary waves him over to join her and Diedre at one. Fell takes his seat instead, leaving Newt to the mercy of Tracy and her obvious efforts to get Anathema to notice him.

Funny how humans are so hardwired to pairbond. Get two of roughly opposing appearances of more or less the same age in a room and before you know it they’ve spawned, and even more humans are stumbling around on the earth.

Crowley wanders over to look at some shrubs instead. The planting is a little dull and traditional for his liking, all blowsy pink flowers and low maintenance, but there are a few promising specimens. He rubs a deep green leaf between his fingers, waxy and smooth. It must be nice, he ponders, thoughts skating over the thin ice spanning a much darker, colder place where he dare not go, having someone. Someone to talk to and cosy up with and be yourself around, not have to pretend. He feels the ice beneath him start to crack, and skitters away from the subject entirely. Besides, the whole thing is based on shared life experiences, isn’t it? And humans don’t even remember the first Crystal Palace, the real one, let alone the birth of the universe.

A pale pink flower blossoms on the shrub he’s holding.

“Yes, yes,” Crowley mutters, giving the leaf a little stroke before letting go. “Don’t get carried away.”

The humans start drifting back to the tent, and when Tracy gets up, leaving Newt and Anathema to stare awkwardly into space, Crowley follows her inside.

His chocolate tart hasn’t set. The filling is still wobbly, and the crust has gone soggy in the fridge. Crowley keeps his back to the nearest camera, shielding the pathetic excuse for a dessert from view, and gently blows over its surface. The pastry crisps up, and the filling turns dark and firm. Crowley grins, spinning around on his heel and taking it back to his counter, letting the fridge door swing closed behind him.

All around him the humans are fretting over their own bakes, Mary’s low chatter rising to a frenetic panic as her tart refuses to pop free of its tin and the pastry begins to crumble. A couple of cameras close in on her, one aimed at the tart, waiting for the moment it cracks, the other on her face, waiting for the same thing.

Crowley scowls, his good mood evaporating, and clicks his fingers. The tin drops away cleanly, and Mary lets out a great gasp of relief. The cameras pull away and wander off in search of drama elsewhere, and Mary arranges her tart on a plate, murmuring little reassurances to herself.

Crowley looks down at his own tart, and notices it’s still in the tin. He snaps his fingers again and the tin vanishes completely.

“Bakers!” Mel calls out. “Time’s up! Step away from your bakes, that means you, Newton!”

The challenge is over, and Crowley brushes a stray crumb from his sleeve. There’s no way he can lose.

Like the previous week, they wait around while the tent is cleaned up and shots are taken of each of them with their bakes, then the judging begins.

Crowley leans against his counter, ignoring the precarious-looking stool left out for him, and fidgets impatiently while the judges go around the tent, tasting each bake.

Anathema has made a salted chocolate tart, which Mel seems quite taken with, sneaking her spoon into the filling again and again while the judges confer over the amount of salt used. They move on, pleased and quietly impressed, to where Fell is waiting.

“What have we here?” Mary asks curiously, and Crowley has to crane his neck to see. The tart is
pale, almost white, and decorated with strands of crystallised lemon peel.
“I thought I would try something a little different,” Fell says, radiating smugness. “White chocolate and lemon.”

Paul brandishes his knife and makes an ugly looking cut through the tart. He slices into it again, knocking the artful curls of peel aside, and uses the blade to lever out the slice of tart and flip it onto its side. He scrapes the point along the base, searching for any sign of sogginess, and when his efforts are thwarted he flips it right side up and picks up a spoon to taste.

“Mm,” he says gnomically.

“Oh,” Mary says softly. “It’s a little on the sweet side for me.”

“Much too sweet,” Paul says loudly. “White chocolate is quite a bland flavour, it’s just cocoa butter. It needs much more lemon to counterbalance that fattiness.”

Crowley should be delighted to see the perfect Mr Fell isn’t so perfect anymore. But he looks so crestfallen, nodding silently, lips pursed, as Paul witters on about where he went wrong.

“I think it’s delicious,” Sue says loudly, scooping up a large spoonful of filling and cramming it into her mouth.

“Thank you, my dear,” Fell murmurs, but his heart isn’t in it.

The judges move on to the next human, Mary, and Crowley barely hears what is said over her chocolate orange cake. The judges smile a lot, and Mary blushes sweetly, and then they move on to Newt. His chocolate hazelnut tart is a little overbaked, the filling a little soft, but the flavour is good. Newt gives them a wobbly little smile, and they move on to Tracy.

“Here we are,” she says, nudging the plate towards Paul. “I bet you like a cheeky little tart, don’t you Paul?”

He coughs, picking up a fresh knife, and moves towards the tart. “Not that little, is it?”

“And what have you made for us today?” Mary asks, looking delighted by the colour on Paul’s bristled cheeks.

“Chocolate strawberry,” Tracy tells her before turning back to Paul, cutting through the bake and dislodging the chocolate covered strawberries decorating the top. “Go on, love. A good tart can handle a bit of rough treatment.”

Paul wheezes, turning away from the camera, and Mel breaks first, covering her mouth to stifle the giggles.

“It looks lovely and decadent,” Mary says brightly, playing along to Paul’s distress. “I can’t wait for a little nibble.”

Paul glares at the pair of them, then cuts a wedge of tart, flipping it over and tapping the base.

“Oh, he does like a little smack on the bottom, doesn’t he,” Tracy stage whispers, and Sue has to go walk around outside for a minute.

Paul takes one bite of the tart, declaring it ‘decent’, and quickly moves things along.

Deirdre waits patiently for the judges to come to her, and offers up her chocolate malt tart for tasting.

“It looks like a fun family treat, do you make this for your son?” Mary asks, and Deirdre’s nervous smile brightens up a little.

“Yes,” she enthuses. “Well, you know boys and chocolate.”

The tart is decorated with Maltesers, which Paul is a little dismissive of, flicking them aside to cut into the tart underneath. There are Maltesers mixed into the filling too, and his knife crunches through them as he carves a slice. The judges chew silently for a minute, while Sue attempts to eat as much tart as possible without being noticed.

“That’s very clever,” Mary says as Paul opens his mouth. “I love the way the chocolate coating stops them –” she points to a Malteaser, carefully avoiding the brand name “~ getting soggy.”

“Thank you.” Deirdre smiles brightly. “They work really well in ice-cream too.”

“I’ll have to try that!” Mary says, looking pleased.

“Shame you didn’t make your own malted milk pieces,” Paul says, but no one is really listening to
him. The judges move over to Crowley last, Mary smiling while Paul frowns. There’s no preamble, and Paul sets to work slicing up the tart.

“Beautiful pastry,” Mary offers when Paul says nothing. “Looks lovely and crisp.” Paul grunts, digging his fork into the dense chocolate filling, and takes a bite, refusing to look intimidated. He lets out a garbled yelp and spits it back out again. “What the -” Mary, her own forkful halfway to her mouth, gives him a concerned look. He doesn’t tell her not to eat it, so she slips the morsel of tart into her mouth.

“Mmm,” she says as both Mel and Sue dig into the tart, curious as to what the fuss is about. “That is delicious!” “Gosh,” Mel agrees. “That’s very boozy.” Sue nods along, her mouth full, and instead of offering her opinion digs her fork back into the tart for more.

“Oh, I could just eat the whole thing up,” Mary beams, going back for another bite. “Rum and chocolate go so well together.” “Too strong,” Paul says, edging away from the counter. “Overpowers the flavour of -” He coughs again, probably because the mouthful he ate was flavoured with methylated spirits.

“Some people are just lightweights,” Crowley murmurs, and Mary tells him to be nice.

The judging completed, the contestants are sent off to lunch. One of the Erics has snagged a cameraman, and is going around looking for people to interview about how the first challenge has gone, so Crowley makes himself scarce. He wanders around the grounds for an hour or so, keeping his back to the church as much as possible, until an Eric shepherds him back to the tent. The other contestants are already at their stations, and glance over at the entrance to the tent as Crowley skulks in. They all look away when they realise it’s Crowley, not a judge. All but one. Fell watches him pensively, gaze flitting away when Crowley notices something has been left on his counter, a bundle wrapped in a paper napkin. He pulls at one corner, revealing a cheese roll that must have been swiped from the lunchtime buffet. Crowley looks up at Fell, but he has his back to Crowley, and is busying himself with his apron strings.

“Huh,” Crowley mutters, and with nothing better to do with it he eats the sandwich, scrunching up the napkin and dropping it in the bin.

Crowley is still wiping his hands when the judges arrive, Mary taking time to say hello to a few contestants while Paul actively avoids Tracy. They position themselves at the front of the tent where they are joined by Mel and Sue, and when the cameras are in position, they start the announcements.

“It’s time for the thing we know you all fear,” Sue announces with glee. “The Technical Challenge. You will be given ingredients and the most basic instructions for a recipe, and it’s up to your own technical know-how to make the dish.” “This week’s Technical is a hotly contested bake,” Mel continues. “Is it a cake? Is it a biscuit? Whatever it is, you have an hour and a half to make twelve Jaffa Cakes.” There is a ripple of interest around the tent, and Mary speaks up.

“Now we want twelve identical Jaffa Cakes, each with a sponge base, orange jelly filling and chocolate topping.” “The chocolate must be tempered properly,” Paul continues. “We want that chocolate to snap when you bite into it.” With the orders given Mel and Sue do their customary ‘Get set bake!’ and the humans start panicking.

Every Technical Challenge comes with a sheet of paper with the most basic instructions printed on it. The humans read through the list, fretting loudly over the lack of information. Crowley picks up his own copy and frowns at what’s written there, lifting up his sunglasses to squint at the page.
“Make orange jelly,” he reads out. “Well that’s unhelpful.”

There is a bowl on the counter containing a slab of something jiggly in the ugliest shade of red imaginable. Crowley picks it up and gives it a squeeze, and it sticks to his fingers. It smells of orange in the way that Parisian sewers smell of croissants, and he drops it back in the bowl, or at least tries to. It puts up some resistance.

On the counter in front, Tracy is pouring boiling water over her slab of slime. Crowley has no idea how it’s supposed to help, but he’s in favour of scalding the bloody stuff, so dumps it in a larger bowl and adds water from the tap. He swears at it until it starts steaming, fat bubbles of air rising up from the bottom and roiling over the surface. The slime dissolves, turning the water bright orange.

Tracy puts her orange slime in a tray and puts it in the fridge, so Crowley does the same. By the time he comes back to his counter she is already busy making cake batter. After the previous week Crowley is pretty sure he must be an expert on cake by now, and throws a bunch of things from jars into a bowl and beats it with a wooden spoon. The mix is lumpy and a distressing shade of grey, and he is finished before Tracy, who has been needlessly complicated with her own batter, separating her eggs and whisking them and whatnot. Crowley rummages around for a cake tray and tries to look busy while he waits for her to do something else. She adds a spoonful of cake mix to each round inset in her tray before putting it in the oven. Crowley does the same, dropping globs of batter here and there. Despite using the same spoon for each portion no two look the same. Some have batter wobbling over the top while others have just a smear of gunk on the bottom. Crowley sniffs, and chucks the whole thing in the oven. He even remembers to turn it on.

With nothing else to do for however long tiny cakes take to make, he wanders off in search of trouble.

Trouble has already finished his cakes, smug git, and is carefully levering them out of their tray and setting them on a wire rack to cool. Across from Fell, Newt is having a quiet breakdown over his first batch of cakes, which have come out thin and rubbery.

“How are you getting along?” Fell asks Crowley, deftly sliding a little spatula around the edge of a cake and lifting it out.

“Fine.” I have no idea what I’m doing. “Yeah. Fine.”

Crowley reaches out to snag one of the cakes and gets his knuckles rapped with the spatula.

“Thou shalt not steal,” Fell says lightly, which is odd even for him. Crowley rubs at his knuckles, and gets given a square of chocolate to soothe the sting. He pops it in his mouth and chews, leaning against the counter to watch Fell melt the rest of the chocolate. It’s oddly soothing, being ensconced in a little bubble of serenity, so of course Crowley wants to prod it until it goes pop.

“So you run a dirty bookshop I hear.” Crowley’s grin shows a lot of teeth.

“Honestly!” Fell bristles. “My dear fellow, just because they’re antiques doesn’t mean that they’re badly kept or in poor condition.” He digs his spatula into the edge of another cake, his irritation showing as it somersaults out of the tray and lands on the counter. “I take extremely good care of my literature,” he adds, rescuing the cake and putting it on the rack with the others before brandishing his spatula in Crowley’s general direction. “And I restore and rebind books myself, I’ll have you know.”

“Gnuh,” Crowley says. The remark was supposed to make Fell squirm, not fall as flat as Newt’s cakes. “Right.”

At the back end of the tent Tracy pulls her tray of cakes from her oven.

“So. Er. Thanks,” Crowley says, straightening up. “For the. Uh. Sandwich.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Fell says quietly, setting down his spatula and going over to Newt to offer some much-needed help.

Crowley taps on the counter for a minute, watching him scurry off. He picks up one of the cakes from the rack, warm and soft. After a moment he carefully puts the cake back, and returns to his own oven and far more disappointing cakes.
While the cakes, ugly and misshapen and nothing like perfect blasted Fell and his perfect blasted cakes, cool on the counter, Crowley goes to the fridge to poke at his jelly. It still hasn’t set, so he hisses a few threats under his breath, giving up when the stuff gets even more runny, and goes off to see what Mary is up to.

The cameras seem to love Mary, or at least the showrunners do. She has an endless supply of inane chatter to offer, and isn’t prone to random outbreaks of TV-inappropriate swearing like Crowley is. There must be a whole wing of the BBC archives being set aside now for all the footage of her, so there goes another series of Dr Who.

“Oh, there you are Mr Crowley,” Mary says brightly. “Can you hold this?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer, depositing a large bowl of melted chocolate in Crowley’s hands. “I just need to figure out how to…” Mary picks up one of her cakes, and carefully places a thin disc of orange jelly on top. So that’s what it’s for. “Get the chocolate on.”

Mary frowns at the chocolate, then at the orange-topped cake, then carefully flops it orange side down into the chocolate. She lifts it out again, getting melted chocolate on her fingers, and the cake comes out but the orange disc remains, sinking into the chocolate.

“Oh,” Mary says softly. “Oh dear.”

One of the cameramen, drawn to the sound of distress like a shark to blood, hurries over to film it, and Crowley utters a sharp little curse that makes everyone in hearing range shudder, and the memory card in the camera turn into a slice of orange peel. The faint whiff of hot citrus oil goes unnoticed in a tent full of amateur bakers, and the cameraman sticks a finger in his ear and wiggles it around.

Mary fishes out the lost jelly with a fork, and tries valiantly to put the pieces back together, then daubs more chocolate over the top.

“Maybe use a spoon?” Crowley suggests.

“Spoon,” Mary agrees, undaunted.

Mel calls out that there are ten minutes left just as Mary is running her fork over her last Jaffa Cake, and everyone starts to panic. Crowley skulks back to his counter and fetches his jelly from the fridge. It sloshes around unhappily in its tray, and Crowley clicks his fingers, vanishing the unfortunate mess away. Watching Mary means he knows what the cakes are supposed to look like, and passes his hand over the sad grey discs, transforming them into neat little chocolate-topped treats. He arranges them on a plate, and even cheating he only just gets done in time.

At the other end of the tent Mel gently pulls Newt away from his sticky-looking pile of cakes. For all the fuss and clamour that will be shown on TV later, in reality it is unspeakably dull once time has been called. The set is cleaned down, and slow tracking shots are taken of each contestant and their bakes, before a handful are taken outside for an interview on how the day is going so far. It’s a pain, but at least it gives all that chocolate time to set.

Two tables are set at the front of the tent, a photo of each contestant positioned facing away from where the judges will be standing, and they all take turns to place their Jaffa cakes with their picture.

They sit on the row of stools provided in the same lineup as last week, though Ramanna is absent this time. Mary grips Crowley’s hand tightly and gives him a nervous smile, and it’s only mildly irritating.

The judges arrive, Mary smiling at them all lined up, and the torture begins.

Paul sucks air between his teeth like a builder about to list the failings of his predecessor, and slumps over to the first bake like it pains him to eat any of it. It’s Newt’s, so maybe he’s worried about food poisoning.

He slices a cake in half and shakes his head. “Flat,” he says. “They didn’t whisk the egg white and fold it into the mixture.”

“The jelly is good,” Mary adds, nibbling at her own piece. “Very zesty.”

“I like it,” Mel adds, licking a smear of chocolate off her thumb.
They move on to the next bake, Deidre’s by the look of it. Paul pokes his thumb through a cake viciously, and complains that it’s too thick and the chocolate hasn’t been tempered. Mary’s bake is next, and she squeezes Crowley’s hand hard enough to make his knuckles creak. Paul grudgingly calls it a decent bake.

Crowley comes next, and he finds himself sitting up a little straighter as Mary takes a healthy bite from one of his cakes. Mary gives his arm a comforting pat, and he forces himself back into a slouch. I don’t care what they think. The chocolate snaps audibly, and Mary lets out a pleased little sound.

The next bake Paul is willing to admit is well made, but looks wrong. The chocolate has a decent snap, but the cakes are too large. He declares it ‘a shame’ before he moves on, slicing a perfect looking Jaffa cake and shoving it in his mouth.

“Dry,” he announces, then picks up another perfect little cake and crushes it between his fingers, raining crumbs over the table. “Look at that. Overbaked, what a disaster.”

Paul doesn’t look particularly crestfallen, but when Crowley glances across at the other contestants, it’s Fell who looks like his heart has been crumbled up too.

The last bake must be Tracy’s, and though Paul mutters darkly about how hastily the chocolate has been applied, he admits the cake is well-baked and light. Sue stuffs two into her mouth in quick succession, and spends a couple of minutes saying things like mlarfl and gnum.

The judges deliberate for a few minutes, and then list the Jaffa cakes from worst to best. Newt, understandably, comes last, and Tracy pats his hand and says the kind of reassuring, sensible things that seem to come so easily to her while he nods miserably. Diedre is next, which seems a little harsh. She takes the news on the chin, nodding along to Paul’s criticisms.

Fell is called next. He doesn’t make a sound, gaze unable to settle in one place while Paul lists his failings. Crowley hisses softly, tongue pressing against his bared teeth, and Paul lets out a sudden loud ‘FUCK’ mid-sentence, though when asked what’s wrong he has no recollection of doing so.

One of the Erics reminds them all that there must be no swearing on camera and the footage is useless with it. They have Paul speak his piece again, but he is a little bit thrown by what’s just happened, and mutters something about the cake being overbaked before moving on. All the other stuff he said won’t make it to television, but from the way Fell keeps wringing his hands together the damage has been done. Crowley doesn’t notice Paul asking about the owner of his bake until Tracy gently elbows him in the ribs.

“Wot?” he snaps.

“It’s a very good bake,” Mary says with the kind of smile that makes him feel bad about snapping, then pointedly not feel bad because he’s a Demon for G- for Satan’s sake.


It takes him a minute to work out that he’s won.

There are more interviews to be done, so with the Technical Challenge complete everyone mills around, drinking tea and hashing over what just happened while waiting for their turn.

An Eric passes Crowley a mug of tea, and he finds himself in conversation with Anathema, like there is some sort of unspoken winner’s circle that the lowest-ranking humans can’t get near. Bad luck for Newt if he does harbour thoughts about the American lass.

“The problem is I don’t think I’ve ever eaten a Jaffa cake,” Anathema says, looking irritated. “I mean you expect a cake to look-”

“Where’s Fell?” Crowley says suddenly. That’s why the girl is talking to him, right? Usually it’s Fell she gossips with, but now he’s out of the winners gang she’s making do with Crowley.

Anathema gives him a blank look while Crowley snags Tracy, who is busy consoling Newt. “Oi, harridan! Where’s Fell?”

“Cheeky little devil,” Tracy giggles demurely. “I think he popped out, love.”

Crowley sets his mug down on the nearest counter. “Back in a minute,” he says to no one in particular.
It’s probably nothing, Crowley figures as he walks across the grounds. The old goat is having a bit of a sulk because they didn’t like his cakes, and making a fuss over nothing. He’s not on the bridge that crosses the little stream or in the walled garden, and Crowley throws back his head and lets out a loud groan, because he suddenly knows exactly where Fell is. There’s a simply delightful example of an old church on the grounds, and the idiot is probably admiring all the Christian nonsense going on there. Crowley grits his teeth and stalks towards the distant spire poking up from behind the trees.

Fell is there, his back to the rounded stone tower of the steeple, but he’s not alone. There are two others with him, not contestants or Erics. Something about them makes Crowley’s teeth itch, makes his jaw ache. Stupid consecrated ground.

The two strangers are speaking softly to Fell. The short, thickset one clasps his hands behind his back while the tall, slender one speaks. It would look like three people having a perfectly nice chat if it weren’t for the way Fell is behaving. He is hunched up, his shoulders around his ears, gaze darting between the pair, wide and brown as a rabbits.

As Crowley starts walking towards them the tall one strikes out, fast as a whip, punching Fell in the gut and hauling him upright when he doubles over with a muffled gasp.

“Oi!” Crowley yells, picking up the pace when the tall one slams Fell against the tower. The short one glances at him, but doesn’t move away as Crowley stamps across the grass. “Let him go!”

Fell turns at the sound of Crowley’s voice, but he doesn’t look relieved that someone is intervening, if anything he looks more upset.

“No, no,” he says frantically, struggling to speak as the tall one’s hand grips a fistful of his shirt, pinning him in place. “It’s perfectly alright.”

“Perfectly alright?” Crowley shrieks. The tall one has flakes of gold patterning their temples, dusting along their jaw, and now he is close he can smell the grace on them. They reek of it. Angels.

Fucking Hell, Fell, what have you gotten yourself mixed up in?

Crowley grabs Fell by the collar, hauling him away from the Angels, who only watch in amusement.

“No, really,” Fell struggles in Crowley’s grip, like he’s trying to go back to the bastards.

“They’re… they’re colleagues of mine.”

There is a tension headache starting to pulse behind Crowley’s eyes as he staggers backwards, a dull thud like a tiny pickaxe striking inside his skull. He drags Fell with him like a squirming kitten, and the Angels follow, gliding forth shoulder to shoulder as Crowley stumbles over the uneven ground. Fuck fuck fuck.

With one hand Crowley spins Fell around and gives him a shove, making him stumble. With the other he calls up a plume of hellfire, cupping it to his chest where Fell can’t see it.

“You know what this is,” he hisses to the pair. The short one’s eyes widen briefly. “You know what it’ll do to you.” He has to be quick, if Fell sees it then his cover is blown and… and silly, well-meaning old goats don’t like Demons. “So Fuck Off!” Crowley snarls.

The two Angels share a furtive glance before clicking their fingers and vanishing.

Crowley closes his hand, snuffing out the Hellfire, and lets out a soft, shuddering gasp.
“You didn’t have to do that,” Fell says quietly, and Crowley bites down on several creative curses because humans are so fucking ungrateful. “I had everything under control.” Crowley straightens up, the pickaxe in his head apparently replaced with a sledgehammer, and rubs at his forehead.

“What the Hell were you thinking?” he snaps, sore and irritable. “Getting mixed up with Angels?” Fell looks alarmed. “You know about… about Angels?”

“Yes,” Crowley grumbles. “And they’re a bunch of wankers, you stay away from them.”
The church isn’t helping with the headache, and Crowley starts walking across the grass in the vague direction of the tent. After a moment Fell follows, quickly catching up as Crowley isn’t exactly walking a straight line.

“Are you alright?” he asks, voice soft with concern. “You look rather peaky.”

“Fine,” Crowley mutters. “What did they want with you anyway?”

Fell doesn’t say anything, hands back to their wringing and fretting, and they walk in silence for a few uncomfortable minutes.

“Look, forget I asked,” Crowley says at last. “Just. Just be careful, alright? They’re all-”

“They want me to win the competition,” Fell blurs out. He clamps his mouth shut again, looking shocked at himself.

“Right,” Crowley sighs. Of course. Can’t sully themselves with mortal things, so get some kindly, easily manipulated human to do the dirty work for you. “Got it.”

There is nothing more to be said, so they don’t say it. When they get back to the tent Crowley excuses himself with a migraine, and goes back to the hotel to sleep it off.

*

Guilt has never sat well with Crowley. Okay, so the whole point of guilt is that it’s unpleasant to experience, but he’s a Demon, he should be doing terrible things all the bloody time. But apparently yelling at one idiot baker for getting tangled in Angel business is enough to make his atrophied conscience twitch and grumble.

At least that explains the whiff of Grace about him, and why doing badly on the first day of challenges got him all miserable. Poor sod.

Crowley bristles, pacing back and forth in his hotel room instead of going downstairs to eat breakfast. The last thing he wants is food. No, the last thing he wants is to be dealing with smug-faced bastard Angels.

There is a light tap on the door, and Crowley spins on his heel. “What?”

On the other side of the door one of the Erics clears her throat politely. “Mr Crawley? It’s time to go, everyone’s already in the minibus.”

“Right,” Crowley sighs. He snaps his fingers, transporting himself to the back seat of the minibus.

Ten minutes later, having gotten a spare key from reception and finding no Crowley in the hotel room, the flustered Eric climbs onto the bus, excuses at the ready, and glares at him lounging across the seats.

“Off we go then,” she says with a brittle smile, and takes a seat at the front.

The engine revs, and the bus trundles down the road. There is a steady buzz of chatter on the way to the Manor, Mary and Tracy discussing their plans for the day’s bake. Fell keeps to himself for once, hands folded in his lap. The skin under his eyes is shaded grey, and he looks tired. Tired and afraid.

The bus pulls up at the Manor house, and the contestants climb out one by one, Crowley last to sidle past the still-annoyed Eric with a wide smile. Another Eric is waiting for them, and leads them to the tent out back. There is no dawdling over cups of tea in reception, and they are hustled to their counters, already laden with Kilner jars of various flours and packages of chocolate with the branded labels removed. Crowley can’t remember what the challenge is supposed to be, but one of the assistants has left a pile of chocolate and some basic cake ingredients on his counter. Human brains are clever like that, in the absence of information they just go and make something up. There isn’t a colour between red and violet in the light spectrum? Invent magenta. There’s a blank space on your paperwork where a contestants list of ingredients should be? Give them stuff for chocolate cake.

He picks up a bar of chocolate and breaks off a corner, turning to look over his shoulder as Mel and Sue enter the tent. Sue veers towards him, sighting free chocolate, and Crowley hands over the piece before snapping off another bit.
“All set?” Sue asks, eyeing the rest of the bar.
“Yeah. Great.” Crowley snaps off another piece and hands it over, nodding over to where Fell is hanging up his coat. “You think he’ll win?”
Sue looks over to see who Crowley is referring to, and shrugs. “Hard to say at this point. Bad day yesterday, but he’s a solid baker.” She gives him a sideways look. “Checking on the competition, are we?”
“Nah.” Crowley shrugs. “Just wondering.” What will happen to him if he loses? What happens to them all if he wins?
“What are we making today?”
“A chocolate sculpture.” Sue gives him a mock-stern look over the top of her glasses. “Keep up.”
Crowley pokes his tongue out at her, and she ambles off in search of more ingredients to steal.

By the time the judges arrive Crowley has managed to convince an Eric into bringing him tea. He could miracle one up, but it wouldn’t taste the same. Mary the elder graces him with a warm smile, and Crowley stutters something vaguely inappropriate that she laughs off. He watches her walk around the tent, checking in with each contestant. Fell gives her a small, genuine smile when she visits his counter, and maybe she lingers a little longer there than she does with the others.
Crowley stares at the ingredients laid out before him, and wonders what the Hell to make. He could make Hell? Or the Pit? He shudders, turning away from the counter and looking out at the herbaceous border outside the tent.

“Bakers!” Mel shouts, and Crowley turns back to see that proceedings have already begun. “It’s day two of the Bake Off, and time for you to show us your skills with the Showstopper Challenge.”

“Today,” Sue follows smoothly. “We want you to make a sculptural centerpiece using tempered chocolate.”
Mary the elder is next to speak up. “We want to see something really impressive, worthy of the window of a fine chocolatier.”
“The chocolate must be tempered,” Paul continues. “We want to hear it snap.”
The man is fixated. Crowley rolls his eyes. Maybe he should make a life sized chocolate crocodile and it can snap his blotchy face off.
“You have three hours. On your marks!” Mel shouts. “Get. Set.”
“Bake!” They chorus, and the contestants leap into action.

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Crowley pokes around his counter and, since it’s the only thing he has a rough idea about, he starts making a cake. As he’s cracking eggs into a mixing bowl a cameraman comes over to film him.

“Go away,” Crowley says, tossing egg shells in their general direction. The cameraman scoots off, going over to film Tracy making chocolate truffles instead.

For once the batter looks almost decent when Crowley pours it into a square tin. There are a few lumps here and there, but it’s not like anyone is going to eat it. He feels oddly proud of the mess, and puts it in the oven before figuring out what to do next.

“Oi, virago!” he shouts over to Tracy, who looks over her shoulder with a mock glare.

“How do you do that.” Crowley twirls his fingers at the bowl of rich and glossy melted chocolate on the end of her counter. “-the tempering thing.”

She purses her painted lips. “What kind of chocolate are you using?”
Crowley picks up a random bar from the counter. “This kind.”
Tracy looks unimpressed. “And what are you making with it?”

“Mnyur,” Crowley says. “Still figuring that bit out.”

She makes a point of sighing, but passes him a cooking thermometer. “Break your chocolate up into little pieces, I’ll be over in a minute.”
Crowley gives her a toothy grin, and gets tutted at, so he picks out a chopping board from the pile and hacks one of the bars of chocolate into pieces, and then after a minute miracles out the bits of silver foil he’d left it wrapped up in.
Tracy comes over just as he’s done hacking up a second bar of chocolate, the foil wrapper from this one scrunched up and in the bin. She clicks her tongue at his technique and puts a pan of water on to boil.

The next ten minutes of Crowley’s infernal existence are spent heating up and cooling down and mixing mixing mixing. It is possibly the most stupid, pointless thing in the universe.

“There.” Tracy says with far too much cheer. “All ready for…” She gives him a sideways look. “Whatever you have planned.”

There is a clatter of pans and a soft sound of distress, and Tracy goes off to see what Newt has broken this time. Crowley picks up the bowl, an idea in mind, and quickly sets to work.

Before. Before the Fall, and the Pit, and the weasels and the windlass, Crowley had been a Maker. He had a different name back then, one lost with his white wings and his Grace. But he remembers the way stars formed in his cupped hands, the spark and flare of stardust as he weaved gas and light into nebulae. His hands remember the shape of creation as he draws a knife through tempered chocolate, shaping it to his design. He forgets the nature of time, the ticking clock slicing days into bite-sized portions, and loses himself in the making. He carves into the thin sheets of tempered chocolate, curling rounded ends around the bowl of a spoon and gluing them together with dabs of melting chocolate. Flowers. Flowers and leaves that man has not seen since he left the Garden, full-bloomed camellias and delicate lotus flowers and tiny primroses. With the last of the chocolate he makes a lily; not an attention-seeking, blowsy stargazer but a daylily, demure flower but no less lovely.

“Thirty minutes, bakers!” Mel shouts from the front of the tent, and Crowley straightens up, blinking at the stage lighting and the clamour of bakers around him. He looks down at the flowers covering his counter, made in every shade of chocolate from the darkest cacao to ruby to white, and turns the brittle stem of the daylily around in his hand.

“Huh,” he mutters to himself, then remembers the cake he put in the oven over two hours ago. “Oh, bollocks.”

A quick snap of his fingers and the carbonated bake is a rich, dense fudge cake. He brings it out onto the counter, and it comes out of the tin and onto a platter easily. Another click of the fingers and the cake is slathered with a whipped bitter chocolate ganache. Crowley takes his time arranging the tempered chocolate flowers, the largest blossoms at the back, interspersed with sword-shaped chocolate leaves, in a broad crescent on the outer edge of the cake. The smallest flowers he scatters artfully down the sides, leaving the rest of the top bare, but the daylily doesn’t belong anywhere in the display. Crowley picks it up again, humming to himself, and then puts it where it belongs.

The last ten minutes of a Showstopper challenge tends towards bedlam, no matter how well-planned your bake is. Newt is sitting on the floor next to his fridge while Sue pats his back and surreptitiously eats a handful of chocolate buttons. Anathema is frantically trying to make white chocolate truffles that have been rolled in dried, powdered berries stick to a chocolate tree. Diedre is putting orange food colouring on a bulbous-looking cat with a paintbrush. Fell is carefully writing on a curved sheet of white chocolate with what looks like a gold pen.

“Alright?” Crowley asks when Fell lifts the pen away from the page, careful of smudging. He glances up at Crowley with a tight, nervous smile.

“Tickety-boo,” he says, his voice brittle and bright as his chocolate.

“Yeah. Well.” Crowley watches as Fell lifts the sheet of white chocolate with tweezers and carefully places it on the rest of his Showstopper - an open book with gilt-edged leaves. There are a few white chocolate pages already in place, with text elegantly written in the same gold pen. “Thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth,” Crowley reads out, and Fell drops his tweezers with a clatter.

“Oscar Wilde,” he says, a slight tremor in his voice. “Salome,” Crowley hums. “Always liked her.”
Fell says nothing, picking up the tweezers again and carefully pushing the page into place. Crowley suddenly feels very unwelcome.

“Look,” he says quietly. “About the other day.”

“I’m sure there is nothing to discuss,” Fell says crisply, picking up a thin chocolate bookmark, carefully rippled to look like a ribbon, and places it on the open page.

“Right,” Crowley mutters. The daylily stem is starting to melt, leaving a smudge of chocolate on his fingers. He carefully places the flower on the edge of the counter where it won’t get knocked, and skulks off. Newt is still whimpering by the fridge, and Crowley flicks his fingers at is he passes.

“One minute to go,” Sue calls out, and Crowley takes a last look at his piece. If Paul hates it he will turn into a snake and swallow the bloody human whole, cameras be damned.

Newt pulls his creation out of the fridge, a large dragon with chocolate buttons for scales. It’s slumped a bit in places, looking more of a cuddly cartoon creature than something fearsome. Newt pokes at it, letting out a warbling little cry of relief when he realises that it’s set, and carefully carries it over to his counter.

Sue calls time for the bakers, and they all step away from their creations. A few contestants walk over to other people’s counters, murmuring reassurances or fretful little comments, and Crowley goes over to Tracy to give her a quick hug and thank her for her help.

“Away with you,” she scolds affectionately when he kisses her cheek. “I’m a married woman!” Crowley gives her one more kiss for luck before ducking away, avoiding a clip round the ear. He wanders around the tent while the Erics discuss what to film next, and takes a look at the other pieces. Mary has made a big seashell of some kind, with little chocolate truffles spilling out of the open end. Tracy has made a trinket box; the box itself made in dark chocolate and dusted with gold. Inside there is a buttercream lining coated in dried powdered berries to make it look like velvet. Clever humans, give them the same building blocks and they’ll make so many different things. More than you could imagine.

After a tea break and more shots of nervous looking bakers and their creations, they are called in for judging. Each contestant stands at their counter and waits to be called forward, while the judges along with Mel and Sue stand at a table at the front of the tent. Crowley settles in for a long wait, but he is called up first. He picks up his display and carries it up to the table.

“Oh, this is absolutely beautiful!” Mary enthuses.

“But does it taste good,” Paul interjects. He picks up a knife and slices right through a camellia. Mary tuts softly, but digs her fork into the cake and takes a bite while Paul snaps a leaf in two.

“Chocolate is tempered,” he mutters. Sue snags a lotus petal, the crack of it breaking on her tongue audible.

“Wonderful chocolate work,” Mary declares.

“The cake is dry,” Paul adds, and Crowley takes his bake back to his table.

Mary is called up next, and she carries her cornucopia over to the judges. Mary admires the shell while Paul hacks several truffles into pieces and complains that they all taste too similar. Mary doesn’t let it dampen her enthusiasm, and carries the display back to her table with a confident smile.

Diedre is called up next, and carefully places her chocolate cat before the judges.

“So tell me,” Mary asks as Paul brandishes his knife. “What’s the story behind this?”

“It’s our cat,” Diedre says, flinching when Paul slices the cake in two, revealing a sticky gingerbread filling. “Well, it’s my son’s cat really.”

“How lovely.” Mary picks up a morsel of gingerbread. “It looks like he’s a big ginger tomcat.”

“He is. His name’s Cat,” Diedre says, nerves making her chatter. “He’s a big softy, really. Though last year there was this big stray dog in the village that got into our garden, and Cat whacked him on the nose and he ran off howling.”

“Underbaked,” Paul says, squeezing a fistful of cake. “Look at that. You just squeeze it and it goes
“Back to being dough.”
“The flavours are good,” Mary adds. “I think it’s very fun.”
Diedre thanks them both and takes her mangled ginger cat back to her counter.

Anathema is called up and Newt, trying to be helpful, offers her a hand with her tree. The pair of them shuffle awkwardly, trying not to let their hands touch as they grip the base, and finally manage to set it down before Mary and Paul.

Mary picks one of the glossy red truffles from the branches of the tree, marvelling at how clever the design is. When she bites into the truffle she lets out a happy little sound, there is a cherry soaked in kirsch inside. Sue plucks an orange truffle and finds it filled with orange liqueur.

“Bloody delicious!” she announces, and starts rummaging around the tree for more.

Paul snaps a leaf in two, crumbling it up and letting the pieces fall. “That’s pretty decent,” he says, and plucks another leaf to eat. “Nice, silky mouthfeel.”

Anathema quickly takes her piece away before they can change their minds, and Newt is called up next. Mel helps him carry the chocolate dragon to the table for judging. Paul gives the dragon a derisive look, and Mel pats it on the snout and calls it a handsome chap.

“So what’s the story behind this?” Mary asks.
“It’s, uh.” Newt goes pink around the ears. “Have you ever heard of Dungeons and Dragons?”
“There’s only one dragon,” Paul points out.
“Maybe it’s pregnant,” Sue suggests, gesturing to the saggy parts. “Look, it’s got swollen ankles.”
Paul cuts through the chocolate button scales, revealing a surprisingly light cake center. He takes a bite of cake before moving on to the buttons.

“Nice and moist,” Mary says approvingly.
“Yeah,” Paul agrees, looking surprised. “That’s a good bake.”

Once Newt has hefted his dismembered dragon back to his counter Fell is called up. He carefully picks up his chocolate book and carries it over to the judges.

Fell gives him a nervous smile, hands fluttering while he tries to decide between folded to his chest and clasped behind his back. Paul cuts into the book, severing the pages covered in Fell’s elegant handwriting, revealing a cake studded with raspberries. Sue picks up a fragment of page, reads the inscription and eats it.

“Lovely moist cake,” Mary says. “I love the zing of fresh raspberry, it compliments the white chocolate so nicely.”

“Good snap,” Paul says, picking up another fragment of page. “You need to be careful adding fresh fruit to cake, they release so much moisture. But this is good.”
Fell murmurs a thank you as he picks up his cake and carries it back to his counter. He looks relieved, but isn’t glowing with praise like he was the previous week.

Paul sucks in a breath, steeling himself, and calls Tracy to the table.

“Oh, how pretty!” Mary says as the trinket box is placed before them. Paul keeps his mouth shut and picks up a knife. He cuts through the box, and Tracy murmurs something that won’t make it to air, and Mel stifles a shrill little laugh.

Mary samples a piece of lid, staying well away from the box. “Very good,” she says, her tone carefully neutral.

“The chocolate is a bit thick,” Paul says. “It’s hard work eating it.”

“Well, none of us are getting any younger, love,” Tracy says with a flutter of false eyelashes, and Sue considers the chuck of red velvet lining she had been about to taste, shrugs, and shoves it in her mouth.

“Thank you,” Paul says firmly, and Tracy takes her bake back to her counter.

While the judges deliberate there is tea to be drunk, though no one is in the mood for any of the chocolate on offer. Crowley ambles over to Mary’s counter so it doesn’t look like he’s walking the
whole length of the tent just to see Fell, and snags one of her truffles before continuing to his destination.

“That went well I thought,” he says, leaning against the counter. Fell, who is tidying up in the absent-minded way that just makes it harder to find things later, nods. “I was happy to see Newton do so well.”

“They liked yours,” Crowley says, as subtle as a housebrick. “And yours, I notice,” Fell answers. His fingers something hidden under the fold of a tea towel, then gives Crowley a genuine, if slightly strained smile. “Well, we’ll soon find out.”

He’s right, it’s not long after that the judges return, and the contestants take their places again.

“Firstly,” Sue begins. “I have the pleasure of announcing this week's Star Baker. He’s a dab hand with a Jaffa cake, and made the most delicious perennial that I’ve ever eaten. It’s Anthony.”

It takes a minute for Crowley to work out why people are patting him on the back. Oh yeah. Anthony. If they’ve made him Star Baker that means he won’t get eliminated, so his arse is essentially in the clear for another week. Luckily he doesn’t have to say anything, and Mel continues with the announcements.

“And I have the misfortune of telling you who’s leaving.” She turns to Diedre, looking genuinely upset. “I’m so sorry, Deidre. I loved your ginger cat.”

Diedre nods and smiles, wiping at her eyes as both Mel and Sue come over to give her a hug. Mary wraps an arm around her waist, and she lets out an embarrassed little laugh.

“I had fun,” she says. “But I miss spending the weekend with my family, and I can’t wait to get back to cooking without all the pressure!”

There is a polite smattering of laughter, and a few more words to the camera, but the day of filming isn’t over. The contestants are each given a sheet of next week’s challenges and sent outside for interviews and more filming. Crowley glances briefly at his sheet long enough to catch the word ‘bread’, and throws it on the nearest counter. Bugger that.

He ambles outside, passing Fell and Tracy, who are already talking about what to make for their Signature challenge. Maybe it’s because they’ve managed another week and he’s feeling a little bit pleased with himself, but he stops, retracing his steps to join them.

“Sneaking off are we?” Tracy says with a smirk.


“Oh.” Fell looks surprised, but it quickly turns to disappointment. “Ah. My bags, they’re still at the hotel. And I would need to, ah, check out and so on.”

“Maybe next time, eh?” Crowley says. In Fell’s hands is a small chocolate lily, carefully wrapped in cellophane. Crowley walks off before anyone can see him grinning. He gives them both a wave over his shoulder. “Ciao.”

“Mind how you go,” Fell calls after him as he ambles across the grounds to where the Bentley is parked.
**Bread**

Chapter Summary

“Channel 4?” Aziraphale says, and takes a long drink of wine. “But they’ll have *advertisements.*”
He says ‘advertisements’ the same way other people would say ‘war crimes’.

Chapter Notes

Have I mentioned lately how wonderful the art of Wyvernquill is? Because this chapter is illuminated (literally) by a gorgeous comic of theirs! Go follow them on Tumblr and tell them how much you love their work!
LISTEN. I have very strong feelings about the Great British Bake Off moving to Channel 4 back in 2017. My feelings are mostly that it was a terrible, awful, cruel thing to do. I love Sandi Toksvig and Noel Fielding as much as the next bread-obsessive queer, but without Mary, Mel and Sue, there is no Bake Off, Just Paul and Prue setting even more impossible challenges and amateur bakers crying into their kek lapis Sarawak

Before anything else is said, it is worth stating that this is in no way Crowley’s fault. He’d had every intention of arriving at Welford Park in time. Really. He’d set an alarm and everything. He had even planned on going the evening before, doing the whole hotel and breakfast thing with the other contestants, but then he got hit with a last minute assignment and now he’s sat behind the wheel of the Bentley and glaring at the overturned lorry blocking the M4 Westbound. Well, the lorry is being dealt with, it’s the contents that have spilled out that are blocking the motorway.
A rat scrambles up the outside of the car and scratches at the window, and Crowley rolls it down. “What the bloody hell are you playing at, Roland?” Crowley snaps. “I said Eastbound.” The rat squeaks loudly and at length, and Crowley shakes his head. “East. *East.* Where the sun rises from.” He points behind him at the queue of traffic, and describes an arc over his head, ending on the road ahead, where some well meaning firefighters have turned their hoses on the mounds of white powder spread across the tarmac. Unfortunately the lorry was carrying a shipment of instant mash, and the effects are instantaneous.
The rat lets out an excited squeak, like every dream of Christmas dinner it has ever had has suddenly come to starchy life, and Crowley’s phone starts to ring again.
“Yes, fine,” Crowley sighs, waving at the rat. “Knock yourself out.”
The rat squeaks with delight, leaping down to the road and racing over to the rising tide of mashed potatoes with one goal in its tiny mind. *Eat it all.*
“Yeah?” Crowley says, answering the phone. A fretful Eric witters down the line. “Yeah, incident on the M4, shouldn’t be more than an hour.” More rats leap into the fluffy white mounds. “Two at most.”
He hangs up, tosses the phone on the empty seat beside him, and lets out a quiet sigh. The rats roll about in the mash, getting buffeted by hoses and letting out happy little *Eee-ee-ee’s.*
“Mr Crawley-”
“Crowley.” Crowley slams the Bentley door shut behind him.
“Crowley,” the Eric corrects herself. “You’re late.”
“Yeah, sorry.” Crowley starts walking in the direction of the tent, the Eric at his heels like a yappy little dog. “Traffic, you know how it is.”
“Yes, but Mr-”
Crowley snaps his fingers, and she forgets that she is talking to him entirely, her face going slack for a moment. Crowley starts to walk away, and then slowly comes back.
“Everything is fine,” he says, looking around to make sure no one can see him being nice. “Now go on about your business, and don’t take any shit from Paul Hollywood.”
The Eric smiles suddenly “Constructive criticism my arse,” she whispers, striding off and out of sight.
Crowley saunters over to the tent and pokes his head through the doorway. The humans are already there, as are Mel and Sue. Everyone is clustered together in little groups or setting up their counters the way they like it. Tracy has already moved the electric bastard from Crowley’s own counter and covered it with a tea towel. No sign of the judges yet, so as far as Crowley is concerned he’s not that late.

Fell is the first to notice his arrival, face lighting up like a christmas tree.
“Mr Crowley,” he enthuses, abandoning his conflab with Anathema and Mel to come over. “Oh, we were so worried! Not about last night, of course, I know your work keeps you from our little Friday night dinners, but you always join us for the walk to the tent.”
“Traffic,” Crowley mumbles as Fell stops short of reaching him, hands drawing back as if he had intended to do something so debauched as a handshake or a pat on the arm. “Mashed potatoes on the M4.”
Fell doesn’t respond for a moment, and Crowley can practically hear the gears of his mind seizing up.
“Well, you’re here now,” Fell placates, though exactly who Crowley isn’t sure. “Have you eaten?”
“I’ll grab something at lunch,” Crowley mumbles, snagging a passing assistant. “Oi, Eric?”
She gives him an impatient look. “Erica.”
“Oh, yes,” Fell adds before she can tell him to get stuffed. “He has come an awful long way, and there’s a whole day of challenges-”
“Yes, yes, coffee,” Erica sighs. “Coming right up.”
Fell beams after her before turning back to Crowley. “Well, I should let you get back to your… ah…” He gestures to the counter.
“Oh. Yeah. Baking,” Crowley agrees. “Because we’re making…”
He waits, and Fell doesn’t leave him hanging. “Bread.” He gives Crowley a long-suffering look.
“The Signature Challenge is breadsticks, remember?”

The judges arrive a few minutes later, and they quickly set up for the first challenge of the day.
“Welcome, bakers,” Mel begins. “It’s bread week here in the Bake Off tent, and we can’t wait to get our hands on your baps.”
Newt lets out a nervous titter. A cameraman catches him, and he mouths ‘sorry, Mum’.
“We begin with the Signature Challenge,” Sue continues. “Your chance to show off your skills. Of course bread is the preserve of the mighty Paul Hollywood, so you’ll have to work extra hard to impress this week.”
The pair of them turn to Mary expectantly.
“Today we would like you to make eighteen breadsticks,” she announces. “They can be any flavour you want, sweet or savoury, but they must be the same size.”
“I’m looking for perfect proving and a decent rise,” Paul continues. “And they must be crisp and
“perfectly baked.”
“You have an hour and a half to finish the challenge,” Mel adds. “Get. Set.”
“Bake!” the pair shout, pitching their voices up.

Crowley stares at the bottles and jars on his counter. How in Heaven do you make bread? Bread isn’t a thing you make, it’s just... there. On the counter in front Tracy starts weighing flour into a large bowl, and Crowley follows suit.

Half an hour later Crowley is convinced that bread is just the worst. The dough is tacky, and sticks to everything it touches; the counter, his jacket, his fingers, his hair. There’s even bits of it smeared into the bristly office-flooring carpet the tent is decked out in. It’s also unpleasantly lumpy, like cellulite or that foul stuff the Romans were so fond of.

“Frumenty,” Crowley mutters, smearing the tacky mass across his counter and scraping it up with his nails. At least he’s not the only one having a dreadful time of it, Tracy’s dough is refusing to behave, and with her long acrylic nails she can’t even beat it into submission. Of course Fell has bustled over to help her, shirtsleeves rolled to the elbows and face smeared with flour. Crowley has been furtively copying Fell as he works Tracy’s disastrous mess into a smooth, silky dough. Luckily he has been offering instructions in a loud, clear voice, and angled himself across the counter so Crowley can see what he’s doing. All by sheer coincidence, of course.

“Thank you, love,” Tracy says as Fell finishes up. “I can’t do a thing with these on.” She holds up her hands, displaying the vivid green of her nails. They contrast sharply with her curly ginger wig, and the cameras are avoiding her, struggling between getting a decent shot and having an aneurysm.

“No trouble at all,” Fell reassures her. “I rather enjoy it.”

Crowley swears vehemently at his dough, threatening it with horrors far worse than an oven at 180°C. The dough reluctantly comes together, and Crowley dumps it into a bowl. Before he can miracle the mess off his clothes a cameraman sidles over, no doubt delighted to catch him a rare not-spotless state.

“Piss off,” Crowley hisses, shoving his sunglasses up his nose and getting a smear of sticky paste on one of the lenses. The camera doesn’t piss off, so Crowley has to carry on with grubby clothes. If he miracles it all away now it’ll raise questions. He starts cursing, low and fervent, so at least they won’t be able to use much of the footage.

When in doubt, copy Tracy, even with the verdigris talons she’s sporting. She rolls out her dough into a rectangle and slices it into eighteen strips. She picks up the first one and rolls it into a long, thin pencil shape. Crowley dumps some more flour on his counter and tries to do the same. The dough sticks and rips and snaps back, even when he growls at it to behave, but after several fraught minutes he has two baking trays laid with sad, anemic looking dough-worms. The sight of them, all flaccid and lumpy and grey, brings back memories he’d rather not dwell on, gristy strands wound around a windlass, and he goes off in search of someone to annoy.

Ordinarily Fell would be his first choice, but Crowley looks a state, with his dough-smeared clothes and lumps in his hair and. Well. It’s not that he cares what Fell thinks of him liar it’s just hard to wind someone up when you look pathetic. He goes over to see what Newt is up to.

“Hello, Mr Crowley,” Newt mumbles when he’s recovered from Crowley sneaking up behind him. The kid has eighteen perfect-looking breadsticks, and he’s rolling each one in a mix of black and white sesame seeds.

“Alright?” Crowley mutters, glaring at the well-behaved dough the kid is working. “They look good.”

“Do they?” He lifts another textbook example of breadstickery from the tray of seeds and lays it out with the others. “It was bread that got me into baking in the first place, really. I tried to use my Mum’s bread machine and it… sort of… melted. I had all the ingredients already. So I just mixed it up and put it in the oven after Mum switched it on and…” He gives Crowley a small, ridiculously proud smile. “- and I had bread.”
The kid talks like he had mastered some kind of magic trick. He chatters about bread rolls, throwing the odd glance towards Anathema’s counter where she is shaping breads that look far larger than anyone else’s.

While Newt witters on Crowley keeps an eye on Tracy, waiting for the cue to do something. When she moves to put her tray in the oven he makes his excuses and heads back to his counter, wishing Newt luck even though he doesn’t need it.

Crowley shoves his trays in the oven, before leaning against the counter and having a quiet little fret. The other bakers are busily working around him, and the judges are doing that irritating thing of going to each counter to see how things are going. They tend to avoid Crowley’s counter, mostly due to the thick cloud of go away that surrounds him when he’s not mithering other contestants. It has no effect on Sue, who sees him fretting and comes over to annoy him.

“Alright there?” she murmurs, leaning against the counter next to him. Her black jacket doesn’t have a smudge on it, damn her.

“Nope. Fine.” In the absence of a brave face, Crowley puts on an indifferent one.

“But I can’t do any of this” she adds. “Funny one, bread week,” she adds. “Trips up a lot of good bakers, then there’s the ones who have been muddling through, holding out for the thing they’re really good at.”

Crowley sniffs. She’s trying to make him feel better, damn her. Or bless her. Which way round is it supposed to go? “So what?” he says, voice low so no mikes can pick it up. “Just try not to be the most shit at bread and make it to next week?”

“Pretty much,” Sue says with a shrug.

“Right.” Crowley nods once, pulling the spirally threads of himself back in a tangled little bundle.

Sue gives him a pat on the shoulder, even though it’s sticky, and goes off to see how Mary is getting along.

Tracy takes her bakes out of her oven, and Crowley does the same. His bakes are sad, misshapen little things, puffy in places and burnt in others. He snap his fingers and they transform into uniform little breadsticks, pale gold in colour, the exact match of the ones he’d crumbled up in boredom at a little ivy-clad Italian restaurant in Shoreditch. He can’t remember taking a bite of the food, but the wine had been good.

Mel calls out that there are ten minutes to go, and Crowley moves the breads to a wire rack. He blows on them, and they cool and crisp up obediently.

A couple of the other contestants have brought along their own things to display their bake in; Anathema a rustic-looking basket, Fell an unbearably twee Toby Jug. Crowley miracles up a terracotta pot and drops his breadsticks in it. A couple snap in half and he has to put them back together.

“Time’s up! Step away from the sticks, that means you, Tracy.” Sue shouts out. Tracy giggles demurely, giving her display one last primp before backing off.

The humans all take a minute to look over their bakes before looking to each others, trying to guess who will win and who is at risk of elimination. They cluster together in groups of twos and threes, offering reassurances and compliments, and Crowley watches as Fell rests a hand on Mary’s shoulder.

He doesn’t join them, picking at the drying lumps of dough stuck to his jacket, and when he’s sure no camera is pointing his way he miracles the smudges off his glasses.

They are sent outside for tea and biscuits on the grass, the usual tables and chairs set out for them while the tent is cleaned down, and Crowley wanders back and forth, turning down the offer of a rich tea to go with his cuppa.

Finally they are called back in for judging, and take their places at the counters.

Paul and Mary go from counter to counter, trying each bake and being maddeningly vague about
how well people have done. Mary seems in favour of Fell’s cheese twists, and Paul is visibly irritated by how much he likes Newt’s sesame ones.

They arrive at Crowley’s counter, and Paul takes a long look at the state of his jacket, but whatever comment he’s about to make is lost in a spontaneous coughing fit. What a shame. Once he’s recovered they try the breadsticks, Mary nibbling thoughtfully while Paul scowls.

“Bland,” he announces. “Much too dry.”

“Of course they’re bland and dry,” Crowley mutters. “They’re breadsticks.”

“You bakes so far have been very style over substance,” Paul remarks, crumbling up a breadstick in his fist. “You need to work on your flavours to get any further in the competition.”

“They are lovely and crisp,” Mary adds kindly. “Very nice with some dip.”

Crowley mumbles something, nodding his head, and the two move on to Tracy’s counter.

Shit shit shit. Crowley rubs at his nose. There’s a crust of dried dough along his thumb. “Shit,” he tells himself, letting out a soft, frustrated breath.

The judges move along to Anathema’s counter, and Paul picks up one of her bakes.

“What’s this?” he snorts. “It looks more like a baguette than a breadstick.”

Anathema looks nervous. “You said breadstick, this is a breadstick.”

“It’s a baguette,” Paul repeats.

“Well, this is what breadsticks are like in America.”

“Well, you’re not in America now,” Paul sneers. “Breadsticks are Italian - grissini - they should be pencil thin and crisp.”

Mary persuades Paul to try one anyway, and he concedes that they’re well made, even if they’re completely wrong. She thinks they’d be nice with a bowl of soup.

With the challenge over the contestants are sent off to get cleaned up and have lunch. Crowley can’t stomach the thought of food, or people, or anything, and finds a quiet spot by the walled garden where no one will see him definitely not have a breakdown. He miracles away the mess on his jacket, before getting on with a nervous little pacing session alongside the espaliered pear trees outside the walled garden.

It’s fine, it’s all fine. One bad bake doesn’t mean you’re out. You just need to pull things back before Ha-

“Mr Crowley, there you are!” Crowley looks up to see an Eric beckoning him over. “You’ll miss lunch.”

“Not hungry thanks,” Crowley calls back.

The Eric doesn’t bugger off. “Well, maybe we can get a quick interview then?”

Crowley debates miracling her away, but maybe to a nice beach in Cancun rather than the Antarctic. Instead he grumbles quietly, following her over to where a camera is already in position against a backdrop of bucolic-looking trees.

Crowley lets himself be shuffled around by the Eric until they’re satisfied, then gives clumsy, mumbling answers to her questions.

“I don’t know,” he says at the very end. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

She says that’s enough, and lets him go. He has just enough time to wrangle a cup of tea from one of the other Erics before the bakers return for the next challenge.

To Crowley’s surprise Anathema is talking to Newt when they come back into the tent. He looks as shocked as anyone, though Tracy is watching them with an air of smug pride. Crowley overhears her asking about flapjacks, and looking surprised when Newt mentions oats, so he doubts that love or anything other than necessary intel is in the air.

They take their places at their respective counters, melamine surfaces scrubbed clean and the supplies for the next challenge put in place along with an overturned sheet of instructions. The judges join them a few minutes later, and once the cameras are ready they make their announcements.

“Bakers,” Sue calls out. “It’s the Technical Challenge, your chance to show your technical
prowess.”
“Today’s challenge is one of Paul’s recipes, Focaccia,” Mel adds. “Paul, any advice for the bakers?”
Paul smirks. “Read the instructions carefully,” he says, grinning at the frisson of concern that fills the tent.
“Good luck everyone,” Mary adds.
“Of course this is a blind judging,” Sue reminds them. “So Paul and Mary, off to your lair you go.”
Mary chuckles, and the judges leave the tent. “You have two and a half hours, so on your marks,” Sue continues. “Get. Set.”
“Bake,” they trill, and everyone turns over the list of instructions.

Every Technical Challenge has an infuriatingly unhelpful list of instructions, and Paul takes great pleasure in being vague. This week it’s a list of weights and ingredients, no cooking times, no oven temperatures, nothing.
“Git,” Crowley mutters, and puts the list to one side.
The first round went badly enough that he actually gets out a set of scales and measures everything; flour, salt, oil and water going into a bowl, followed by a sachet of something that claims to be yeast. Crowley picks up a spoon and tries to bring everything together, but it’s far too wet and unbearably sticky. His arm starts to ache, and the spoon keeps getting stuck.
On a counter ahead Mary sighs, looking perturbed, and pours her gloopy mess into a large mixing bowl. She fits an evil looking twist of metal to her electrical bastard before slotting the bowl under it and turning it on, a low hum filling the air. A minute or so later another hum joins the first as Tracy turns to technology for help too.
Over on his counter Fell seems to be frustratingly content, doing that whole smearing dough across his counter and scraping it back up with a palette knife thing. Crowley looks at the contents of his bowl, a Dali-esque nightmare of dough, and decides against it.
“I’m going to add more flour,” Mary announces to the silent room. “I can’t work with this.”
No one says a word to dissuade her, and Crowley shakes the last of his flour into the bowl. He picks up the spoon and gives it a stir, sending a white cloud over himself.
“Bollocks!” he snarls, and the dough seizes up altogether, becoming so stiff he can barely yank the spoon free.
At least a stiff dough is one he can work, and he tips the mess onto the counter, getting his hands in there with a grimace, and tries to work it into a dough. It’s all chemistry again, isn’t it? Building up strands of gluten and so on.
Dough sticks to his hands. Dough clings to his sleeves and spatters on the floor and gets stuck to the soles of his boots. He wipes a hand across his brow and dough plasters his hair to his forehead.
Misery loves company, and there are a lot of miserable people in the tent. The camera crew however are not miserable, they are having a great time filming people getting covered in gloop and loudly panicking. Even Newt, who seems to know what he’s doing for once, gently suggests that this isn’t one of Paul’s best recipes. He gives the nearest camera a furtive look, like the hammer of God, or rather Paul, might crash down on him at any moment.
Mary lifts her firm, well-kneaded dough into an oiled pan and starts pressing it down, working the pliant mass into the corners, while Fell practically pours his into his own greased dish. Crowley glares at his own attempt, stiff and lumpy and refusing to move.
“Pleassse,” he hisses, trying to force the stuff to flatten out. Fucking up once is bad news, but fucking up twice will get him into serious trouble, the kind he can’t talk his way out of.
The dough refuses to budge, so he grabs a rolling pin and forces it into shape. There’s some satisfaction to be had by battering it into a rectangle, and he’s pretty sure at least one of the cameras has footage of him red-faced and sticky, battering his ball of dough as it bounces across the counter like he’s playing a round of Splat-the-Rat.
Crowley finally slides the dough into a tray, where the excess of oil he’s spilled makes it slither
around alarmingly. He shoves it in the proving drawer under the oven and goes outside, where some of the other contestants are making the most of some sunshine while their own bakes prove. The only person more coated in flour is Newt, and he looks thrilled about it.

Crowley skulks back when everyone else does, and pulls his bread out of the proving drawer. After half an hour it looks exactly the same as before, but Crowley tries to poke holes in it with his finger as per the limited instructions. The dough resists being prodded, so he uses the handle of a wooden spoon, and takes a fair amount of pleasure in stabbing the bastard. He adds oil and rock salt, because Paul Hollywood wants everyone to die young, and shoves it in the oven. With nothing else to do for the next twenty minutes he goes out to swear at the perennials for a bit, and finds a sad little corner of a flower bed that needs a stiff talking to.

“They’re not that bad, Mr C,” a gentle voice murmurs in his ear as Crowley snarls at a clump of Salvia.

Crowley’s gaze flicks to Tracy as she joins him by the flower beds, taking a minute to admire the tall spikes of red flowers that are standing a little straighter than they were five minutes ago.

“No, but they could be better,” Crowley mutters, and Tracy gives him the fond sort of smile that he can’t abide.

“I’m going back inside,” Tracy says carefully. “And taking my focaccia out of the oven now. Just thought you’d like to know.”

She gives Crowley a knowing look, and he doesn’t try to argue. “Yeah. Thanks.”

She wafts back into the tent, and after a minute Crowley follows.

The focaccia, when it comes out of the oven, doesn’t look too bad. Crowley frowns at it, trying to work out where he’s gone wrong. The crust is a light, golden hue, and when poked with an irritable finger it springs back, so it’s not underbaked. He looks up at Tracy, watching him fret over the oven, and holds up the pan. She gives him a nod, and he puts it aside to cool. A minute or two later he realises he never bothered with oven gloves when taking it out of the oven.

Sue shouts that there are five minutes to go, and Crowley levers the bread out of his tray and onto a plate. He reads through the instructions once more and sees there’s a mention of drizzling oil over the top at the end. The bread is already pretty oily, but he shakes the bottle over the top one last time and shoves the focaccia to the edge of his counter just as Mel calls time.

Before the judges are called in the camera crew takes shots of everyone sitting by their bakes, and Crowley is painfully aware of the state he’s in. He manages to miracle away the lumpy bits in his hair and on his face, but his jacket is ruined. He leans against the counter, trying to look unruffled, for as long as it takes to get a five second tracking shot and not a moment longer.

They are then filmed taking their bakes up to a table at the front of the tent and placing them behind a photograph of themselves, turned away from where the judges will be standing, and take their place at the stools lined up before the table.

Mary grabs Crowley’s hand as soon as he sits, her fingernails digging into his skin.

“Alright,” he mumbles, giving her hand an awkward pat. “It’s alright.”

The judges are called back to the tent, and Paul looks at the row of focaccia with barely restrained glee.

“Let’s crack on,” he says, clapping his hands together.

The first bake is Anathema’s. At first Crowley thinks she’s in trouble, when Paul cuts into the bread it’s full of holes, but apparently it’s supposed to look like that. He quibbles a bit about the crust before moving on to the next bake. Mary’s grip on Crowley’s hand tightens painfully, and Paul slices her bread in half.

“Someone didn’t read the recipe.” Paul doesn’t even pretend to sound disappointed. “They added more flour. It’s much too dense, and look, there’s no air bubbles.”

“It tastes good,” says Mary gamely, and they move on.

Tracy is next, and Paul pokes at an imaginary line somewhere along the base and claims that the
bread is underproved because of it.

“Cheek,” Tracy whispers, and Fell pats her hand in sympathy, getting distracted when his bake comes up next.

“Good,” is all Paul will say on it, and quickly moves on to Newts. He cuts the focaccia in two, revealing large, uneven air bubbles trapped in oil-soaked bread.

“Now this is what we want to see,” Paul says, hacking off a wedge and picking it up. “Good crumb, good crust. Perfectly baked. Well done to whoever made this.”

Newt lets out a muffled little squeak, and gets a hug from Tracy.

Paul moves on to the last bake, shaking his head. “This is terrible.” He cuts it in two. “Too much flour added, look at how heavy it is.”

Mary nibbles on an edge before putting her piece back on the table. “A good effort,” she says kindly.

Mary’s grip on Crowley’s hand tightens, but he doesn’t feel it. He doesn’t feel anything.

Paul ranks the breads from worst to best. Crowley’s is the worst, followed by Mary. There is some comfort to be had in the look on Paul’s face when he realises that Newt made the best focaccia, but not enough.

While no one is watching, busy congratulating Newt on doing so well, Crowley slips outside, and stalks off across the grounds.

_Fuck fuck fuck._

“Fuck, fuck fuck!” Crowley shouts at the trees and the Rhododendrons and the flaking orange bricks of the walled garden. “Fuck!” he shouts again, in case he didn’t make his point the first half dozen times.

The gate to the walled garden is locked, but that has never stopped him before. He waves his hand and it flies open, frame slamming into the wall as he enters the small courtyard.

He stamps around the vegetable beds, glaring at the plant labels marking out rows of brassicas and carrots, and scowls at the clumps of rhubarb. There is a greenhouse at the far end of the walled garden, a stuffy place filled with succulents and stone fruits, and maybe time spent amongst green and prickly things will make him feel less prickly and green.

He’s almost at the door when Hell finally catches up with him. A grimy, mud-streaked hand presses against the glass-fronted door as Crowley reaches for the door handle, holding it shut.

…

Fuck.

“Hastur!” Crowley plasters a fake smile on his face, turning to face the Demon.

Hastur, Duke of Hell, corpse-pale and emaciated, his Demonic form barely covered by a trenchcoat and an ugly wig. He’s not alone, there’s another Demon lurking behind him. “And Ligur. Found the Antichrist yet?”

Ligur snarls, and the chameleon perched on his head turns a venal shade. “You’re in the shit now, snake,” he sneers.

“No luck then?” Crowley grins stretches a little wider. “What a shame.”

Hastur looms over him. He’s a Demon, looming is what he’s good at. “You’re losing,” he rasps. “You were told to win.”

“Just a minor setback,” Crowley waves a hand airily. “Nothing to worry about.”

“What happened last time?” Hastur snarls, black eyes shining. “What happened the last time you failed our Master?”

Crowley swallows. “Technically speaking, that was all a misun-”

“Refresh my memory,” Hastur sidles closer. “What did they do to you for the apple?”


“Oh yes, I remember.” Hastur smiles, and it is an awful thing to see. “Ligur has a turn on the windlass, didn’t you.”
Ligur grins. “We stuffed your belly full of weasels and sewed it shut.”
Crowley swallows. “Well, they soon gnawed their way out.”
“And what,” Hastur grabs Crowley by the front of his t-shirt and cocks his head to one side. “Do you think we’ll do to you when you fail this time?”
“Uh,” is all Crowley can manage before some idiot walks in on them.

“Ah. Excuse me?” a far too familiar voice calls out, plummy as a damson and just as unwelcome. “Hello there?”
Damn. Damn, damn, fuck, and bollocks.
Hastur only has eyes for Crowley, so Ligur turns to see who dares to interrupt their menacing.
“Go away, Mr Fell,” Crowley says loudly, trying to sound calm. The idiot keeps walking towards them, picking a path between the rows of vegetables, hands held up nervously. He’ll be a scorch mark on the cabbages if Ligur gets hold of him.
“Yeah, piss off!” Ligur snarls, and Fell lets out a little shocked sound.

Their disguises are terrible, and even a blithering idiot like Fell can see right through them.
“Demons!” he gasps.
Hastur strikes, grabbing Crowley by the throat, and Crowley braces himself to do something really stupid, but Fell gets there first.

There is a flash of light, and where Fell had stood a moment before is something so blindingly white that it makes Crowley’s eyes burn to look at. He turns away, faint afterimages of feathers in gold and ivory dancing across his vision. Ligur howls in pain, and Hastur’s grip on Crowley’s throat tightens.

“Let go of him!” the thing that might be Fell shouts, and the words seem to spring from a thousand lips, echoing around them.

“An Angel!” Ligur wails, grasping hold of Hastur’s arm and trying to break the grip he has on Crowley’s neck. Air is something of an optional extra in this corporation, so it’s not like it’s going to kill Crowley, but it fucking well hurts. He knees Hastur in the gut, and the Demon staggers back, swinging hands clawing the glasses off, his panicked feet trampling them into the dirt. It gives Crowley a few spare seconds to back away, with no plan beyond grab the idiot baker and run as far and as fast as he can.

“Fell?” Crowley stumbles towards the light. “Run!”

The light vanishes, like the flick of a switch, and in its place stands Fell, brandishing a sword.

“Huh?” Crowley stumbles, and Fell twitches his wrist, the blade bursting into white flames. “Oh bollocks.”

Fell waves his free hand, and Ligur lets out a strangled cry before burning up on the spot, leaving nothing but a sticky patch on the paving. Hastur abandons all plans of murder and takes a dive towards the vegetable bed, burrowing into the earth and dislodging the rows of Early Nantes. Fell turns to Crowley, his wide eyes bright as molten gold, and raises his sword.

“No wait!” Crowley yells, raising his hands to protect himself, but the sword comes crashing down, the shockwave sending him somersaulting backwards and into the rhubarb patch.
An Angel. Faint wisps of smoke rise up from where rhubarb leaves are flattened under Crowley’s backside. He groans softly. Of course there’s an Angel here, Mary Berry probably has a whole platoon of the feathery morons simpering over her every word. Crowley tries to move, and pain sings through his body so he stops trying, letting earth and smouldering leaf cradle him as he stares up at the sun shining its bastardy way across the buggaring sky.

Slow, cautious steps echo on the path, coming towards him. But there is no heavenly choir come to end him, just one French fancies prat.

“You’re a Demon,” Fell says warily.

“Yeah,” Crowley wheezes. Smoke wisps out of his mouth when he opens it, and his tongue tastes slightly charred. “You’re’nangel.”
“I am.” Fell doesn’t sound too happy to say it. “Aziraphale, Principality and Angel of the Eastern Gate.”


The flames licking along the blade of the sword falter and die. “Really?” Fell asks. “You mean you’ve been going around all this time using your real name?”

Crowley starts to shake his head, but that makes everything ache so he stops. “Used t’be Crawley.”

Fell, no, Aziraphale, kneels down beside Crowley, gently taking hold of his elbow with one hand while sliding the other behind his back. The sword has vanished, gone back wherever it came from. Good. “Come on,” he says, chivvying firmly. “Up we pop.”

Crowley manages to sit up, clutching his head while it spins and wobbles and complains, and tries not to notice the way Fell… Aziraphale… stares at his yellow eyes.

“I don’t think they can be salvaged, I’m afraid.”

Something cold and plastic touches Crowley’s nose, and he flinches away, falling still when he realises that F- that Aziraphale is sliding a new pair of sunglasses over his eyes. Thick plastic, like the cheapest the NHS has to offer but for the red tartan frames, they dull the bright colours of the world enough to make Crowley feel stupidly grateful. Not that he would dare show it.

“Tartan?” he mutters, adjusting the way they sit on his features.

“It’s stylish,” Aziraphale insists. He still has one hand on Crowley’s back, warmth seeping from his fingers, and seems content enough to keep them there until the world stops spinning.

The scorch mark that used to be Ligur smokes gently, and Crowley frowns, even though it makes his whole face hurt. He should be a smouldering patch on the dirt too, but despite the smell of char emanating from him, he isn’t.

“What?” Crowley asks. It’s not terribly clear or particularly eloquent. He stares at Formerly-Ligur and tries to put what the fuck just happened into words. “The fuck?” Oh, that’ll do it.

“Well,” Aziraphale looks uncomfortable. “You missed out on breakfast and didn’t join us for lunch,” he begins. “And with the day going so badly for you and you just disappearing—”

“I don’t mean why did you come looking for me.” Crowley cuts him off. “I mean why…?”

He gestures vaguely to Formerly-Ligur and then himself, not quite ready to draw attention to the hand still on his back or the ugly glasses on his nose.

“Oh.” Aziraphale moves away, folding his hands in his lap, and Crowley suppresses a shiver from the loss of him. “Well. You see. The thing is.” Aziraphale stops, looking down at his hands as if he doesn’t know what to do with them now. “You were always so nice. Not to everyone, and to be quite frank, there are certain people in that tent who deserve—” Aziraphale catches himself before he goes off on a rant, and takes a breath. “You have never seemed… irredeemably bad.”

“And that’s what you think Demons are?” Crowley asks quietly. “Irredeemably bad?”

“Well.” Aziraphale twists his fingers together, looking uncomfortable. “I can’t very well say I’ve met all that many. And the ones I have seemed more like your, ah, colleagues.” He bites his lip. “They wouldn’t intervene if they saw someone being…”

“Roughhoused by a couple of wankers?” Crowley suggests, and Aziraphale practically squeaks with indignation.

“Crowley!” he gasps. “You can’t say that about Angels!”

Despite the aching and the aftertaste of carbon in his mouth, Crowley grins. “They are a pair of wankers though, right?”

Aziraphale blushes, the tips of his ears turning pink. His eyes are very blue. “That’s one way to put it.”

Crowley is pretty sure he can get up now, and maybe even walk without falling over. Only one way to find out.

“Come on,” he says, hauling himself up. “I need a drink.”

Aziraphale barely hesitates before joining him, pausing only to miracle the flattened rhubarb into
health.
“I do believe there is a pub not far from the hotel,” he says hopefully.

*

True to the Angel’s word there is a pub in the next village, a charming little place with low ceilings strung with dried hop plants, and horse brasses pinned to any available surface. There is also a bar stocked with hand pumps labelled with names like Old Peculiar and Farmer’s Glory. Aziraphale doesn’t strike Crowley as the kind of person who’d go in for a pint of Best, so it’s no surprise when he returns to the table they’d picked in the snug with a few bottles of Jacob’s Creek. What comes out of the bottle is definitely not an Australian Shiraz. Crowley had miracled himself clean before entering the pub, but there’s still an aftertaste of burnt matches every time he swallows.

“Oh, it hardly counts as a miracle,” Aziraphale pouts, dividing up the first of several bottles between them.

“Making it drinkable?” Crowley knows bugger all about wine, but he knows quality when he tastes it. “I don’t think that counts, no.”

Reassured, Aziraphale settles back in his seat, wriggling until he’s comfortable. “Well, cheers,” he says, raising his glass before taking a gulp. Crowley sips at his own wine, and tries not to stare at the Angel sitting opposite him. It’s slightly embarrassing, not picking up on it sooner, but then Aziraphale didn’t realise what he was either, and clearly the two wankers who’d been shoving him around last week didn’t warn him about there being a Demon skulking around, which is the sort of thing you would tell a colleague.

“Why are you here?” Crowley asks when Aziraphale comes back with a second bottle and a packet of scampi fries.

“Wh-” Aziraphale looks over his shoulder. “Was I supposed to-”

“No,” Crowley holds out his glass for refilling, an edge of irritation to his voice. “I mean here, making-bread here. Why are you in the competition?”

“Oh.” Aziraphale sits down and unscrews the cap on the bottle. What he pours out doesn’t taste like the kind of wine that comes in a screw top bottle. “Well, I’m hardly going to tell you, you’re a Demon.”

Crowley sniffs, watching Aziraphale fill his own glass. “They didn’t tell you, eh? Me neither, just said get up there and win.” He suppresses a shiver, and downs half his glass in one go. If any of the weasels got left in there they deserve a drink too.

Aziraphale rips open the scampi fries and munches on one forlornly. He isn’t the kind of person to be sad in the presence of fried food, so Crowley can only assume his comment wasn’t far off the mark.

“How long have you been here?” Crowley asks instead. “Here on earth?”

“Since the beginning,” Aziraphale holds out the open bag, and Crowley takes a fry. “About six thousand years. What about you? Been here long?”

“About three weeks,” Crowley admits. “Not my first time topside, I was up here at the beginning. Then I kind of…” The lemon flavour sticks in his throat, and he has to wash it down with some wine. “Got my wrists slapped, kind of. Then three weeks ago they released me from the Pit and said go win the baking thing.”

Aziraphale looks shocked. “And that’s all they said to you?”

No. There was plenty about what would happen if I failed.

“Pretty much.”

Crowley reaches for the bottle, but it’s empty. Aziraphale makes to get up, but he waves a hand. “No, no. My shout,” he says, and shambles his way to the bar.

French wine is all well and good, but the two bottles Crowley thunks on the table are a little more strident. He unscrews the cap and pours for Aziraphale first, and maybe enjoys the little wheeze of distress he makes at the first mouthful.
“No more of your Châteauneuf-du-Pape,” Crowley snorts, taking his seat. “It’s very robust,” Aziraphale says, warming to the wine as it kills off the more reluctant tastebuds. “Exactly,” Crowley says, raising his glass. “To your very good health.”

The glasses clatter rather than clink, and Crowley settles in for more drinking. “I have been wondering,” Aziraphale says, rummaging around the bag for more fries and coming up empty. “Why our respective… departments would go to so much trouble.”

“Mnn?”

“At first I assumed it was Mary.” Aziraphale’s expression softens, clearly thinking of Mary the judge and not Mary the contestant. “That at some opportune moment I would be performing a Blessing, or maybe I was sent to aid her in some sort of crisis.” His wistful expression evaporates. “You weren’t sent to harm her, were you?”

“No!” Crowley recoils at the idea. “Bloody Hell, no.”

Aziraphale’s expression turns, and there’s no better word for it, devious. “Or Paul?”

“I swear there is a circle of Hell being built for that git,” Crowley spits, then calms down. “But no, nothing to do with him.” He lowers his glass and leans across the table. “I have been doing some digging.”

“Digging?”

“Digging.” Crowley leans in a little closer, Aziraphale drawn towards him. “Reading emails, listening in on phone calls. A lot of messages back and forth with the production company and the BBC.”

Aziraphale has completely forgotten the wine glass in his hand, leaning closer and closer until there is barely an inch between them, hazel eyes wide and rapt. “And?”

“They want more money,” Crowley whispers, glancing around to make sure no one is listening. “For the show. And the BBC say they can’t afford it, so the contract is up for sale.”

Aziraphale pulls back a little, looking troubled. “Well that’s just… No, that’s impossible! The Bake Off belongs to the BBC!”

“It belongs to a production company,” Crowley hisses. “And they’ve found another buyer.”

“What?”

Crowley sits back. “Channel 4.”

Aziraphale is motionless for a long minute, then sits back in his seat, looking deflated. “Channel 4?” he says, and takes a long drink of wine. “But they’ll have advertisements.”

He says ‘advertisements’ the same way other people would say ‘war crimes’.

“I’ve seen the paperwork.”

“Channel 4?” Aziraphale says again. “But they… they have those dreadful reality shows.” He pales. “They have Celebrity Big Brother.” He shakes his head frantically, reaching out for Crowley’s hand and grasping it tightly. “Oh no. Oh no this is terrible news. Can’t you stop it?”

“I don’t know.” Crowley shakes his head. “Right now it’s up to the BBC to make a better offer, but-”

“Well Mary certainly won’t go to Channel 4,” Aziraphale scoffs. “And nor will those two nice young ladies.”

“Paul will,” Crowley says, cracking open another bottle of wine. Aziraphale gives his empty glass a dour look. It doesn’t improve upon being refilled. “And you say there is a circle of Hell for…”

“Yup.”

Aziraphale picks up the glass. “Well,” he mutters. “Good.”

*  

Despite all the assurances that God loves her children, Crowley can’t help but think that if she really did love everyone so bloody much she wouldn’t have come up with hangovers. He cradles his aching head and glares at the cup of coffee in front of him, which thus far has
refused to soothe his ills. The coffee was obtained from a machine sitting on the end of the breakfast bar, the kind of thing designed for the very very stupid. It has lots of buttons marked with pictures of different hot drinks, from cappuccino to espresso, and ending in ‘hot’ water that might as well have come out of a tap for all the good it does to a teabag. Apparently it wasn’t entirely idiot proof as Newt had attempted to extract a small Americano from its spout and now the contraption was smoking lightly and emitting jets of hot chocolate.

“Well, fancy seeing you here Mr C,” Tracy says, pulling up a chair opposite him and setting down her breakfast; something that claimed to be bircher muesli, and a little pot of yoghurt. “I was starting to think you lived on air.” She spoons yoghurt over her muesli. “Or cocaine.”

“Mnrr,” Crowley says, rubbing his temples. He’s only here because Aziraphale asked. Well, not so much asked as batted his lashes and said I do hope you’ll join us for breakfast. So here he is with a cup of coffee and an aching head that might not be so aching with an extra half hour in bed.

The coffee machine expires loudly, and Newt pours himself a glass of orange juice instead.

“So to what do we owe the pleasure?” Tracy asks, mixing up her breakfast until it resembles lumpy cement, or Crowley’s last attempt at bread.

Crowley shoves his sunglasses, which have no hint of red or tartan about them, up his nose and nods to the door, where Aziraphale is peeking hopefully into the room. His face lights up at the sight of Crowley, and he wafts over to join them, only staying long enough to wish a good morning to Tracy and claim a chair before fluttering off to the breakfast bar.

“Oh.” Tracy gives Crowley a very specific look. “Like that, is it?”

“Huh?”

Tracy doesn’t go into detail, turning her attention to Aziraphale as he returns to the table with a plate overflowing with dainty little pastries, and a cup of tea obtained from somewhere Newt doesn’t know about.

“Here,” he says, sitting down. On top of his plate of pastries is balanced a much smaller plate, and on that sits a Danish pastry, which he places in front of Crowley. “Eat up.”

“I’m not hu-”

“Eat up,” Aziraphale says, a little more loudly. “There’s a good man.”

“I am neither of those things,” Crowley mutters, but takes a bite out one corner. It’s filled with cherry jam, and tastes nicer than you’d expect for a hotel breakfast.

Tracy looks at the pair of them like they’re the most adorable thing she’s ever seen, and Crowley pokes a jam-smeared tongue out at her.

After breakfast they are given ten minutes to freshen up before meeting out front. The Eric assigned to them today looks relieved to see Crowley milling around in sight of the minibus, and gets everyone on board in no time. Crowley makes a point of taking the seat behind Aziraphale, and stares out of the window while he chatters with Anathema across the aisle about the day’s challenge. More bread.

Crowley shudders. Yesterday had been a close call, he needs to do better. He rests his cheek against the window, the hedgerows rushing past, and listens to the pair chatter about bread wreaths as the sun creeps past the trees.

They arrive at the Manor, and dutifully file out of the minivan. It’s still far too early, but being this close to midsummer means that the sun insists on being up and the birds are singing. To the average human their song might seem merry but to Crowley, who knows a little of the tongue, it’s all so much territorial shouting and advising local females that they can get it here. The contestants are sent to the waiting area, where coffee and tea and individually wrapped biscuits are available, and wait to be called up to the tent.

In the open, far from clandestine places like the back rooms of pubs or the basement of hotels, Aziraphale is carefully distant, aware that there are cameras and beings both ethereal and infernal watching their every move. Crowley refuses to be upset about it. Quite the opposite.

They are collected by an Eric, and dutifully make the short walk to the baking tent where the
cameras are already set up for the day. Crowley sidles over to where Aziraphale is waiting at the entrance to be called in and taps his cheek, just alongside the tattoo.

“Kiss for luck?” he asks with a smirk, and as predicted Aziraphale turns crimson.

“No!” The Angel yelps after several seconds of stuttering, before flouncing into the tent. Crowley wanders in after him, grin wide and wicked.

The counters are set up for the day with various jars and bottles for whatever each contestant is making. Crowley picks through the sparse collection laid out before him, nothing compared to the clutter on Anathema’s counter or the numerous miniature bottles of gin on Tracy’s. Newt looks suspiciously like he’s making a Full English Breakfast.

The hosts arrive shortly after they’re set up, and Sue comes straight over to Crowley’s counter.

“All set?” she asks lightly.

Crowley picks up a Kilner jar of flour, shaking it absently. “Oranges,” he says, more to himself than anything. “I need oranges.”

He had intended on miracling some up, but Sue sends an Eric off to the kitchen to get some before the thought has fully formed.

“Anything else?”

Crowley turns to her. “What goes with orange?”

“Uh.” She shoves her glasses up her nose in a way oddly similar to him. “Mango. Apricot. Uh. Cinnamon. Ginger…”

“Ginger!” Crowley shakes the jar triumphantly. “Yes. Ginger.”

“You’re in a good mood.” Sue’s grin turns sly. “I heard you and Mr Fell were out late last night.”

Her eyebrows go up and down a few times, and Crowley ignores her. He absolutely doesn’t blush, or stammer, or say things like *Ngk!*

“Ginger,” Sue says, giving Crowley a brief, reassuring pat on the arm. “Coming right up.”

The judges finally arrive, taking a few minutes to speak to the contestants. Aziraphale stops gossiping with Mel long enough to greet Mary warmly, and now that Crowley is looking for it he sees Grace in the way the Angel cradles her hands in his, the ache of time and an old sickness easing a little. Soft old thing.

Paul swings by Crowley’s counter long enough to ask if he’s up for the challenge, and Crowley gives him a sneering little smile until he goes away.

After a brief conference with a couple of the Erics, the judges and hosts assemble at the front of the tent, and everyone stands to attention as the show begins.

“Welcome to day two of Bread Week,” Sue begins. “Today is the Showstopper Challenge, your chance to impress the judges with your skills at baking.”

“Paul and Mary would like you to make a bread wreath centerpiece,” Mel continues, and again it strikes Crowley as weird to be telling them what to do as if they hadn’t had the assignment a week ago. “Now this can be sweet or savoury, but it must be perfectly baked and decorated. You have three hours.”

“I want to see strong flavours,” Paul continues, and he can’t prove it but that remark feels directed right at Crowley. “And of course it must be perfectly baked.”

“Good luck!” Mary adds, and the hosts do their whole ‘Get. Set. Bake!’ thing before everyone scrambles into action.

Crowley refuses to be taken down by bread of all things, and sets to work, picking out a large mixing bowl and combining ingredients the way Aziraphale had described to him the night before. It had been at the end of their fifth bottle of wine, and his words had been a little slurred, but Crowley… Crowley trusts him. Even when he had gone off on a tangent about sponges and wild fermentations. Brr.

*Wet into dry,* the Angel had said, and then glared when Crowley had sniggered uncontrollably. He dumps a jar full of flour into the bowl, followed by a shake of sugar and a pinch of salt. He doesn’t
bother with the whole keep the salt and yeast separate nonsense Aziraphale had advised, because he’s going to be spending the next ten minutes bashing everything together and it sounds stupid. Next he fills a jug with warm water, adds a lump of butter that melts into globules on the surface, and squeezes the juice of one of the oranges in too. It’s only when a camera hoves in on him that it occurs that ripping an orange in two with your bare hands and crushing both halves to a pulp might look excessive. He chuck the mangled orange bits into the bin and slowly pours the liquid into the flour, working it with a wooden spoon until it’s suitably doughy. Last of all he cracks in an egg, and gets his hands into the mix, working it all together.

Aziraphale in his cups had extolled at great length the pleasures of working with bread. For Crowley, who’s idea of pleasures lie within the narrow spectrum of laughing at tossers getting their comeuppance and cracking open the seal on a bottle of something 14 - 45% proof, it sounds like bollocks. Okay, so there are some other earthly pleasures he’s starting to harbour - not just harbour but put into dry-dock and give the keel a fresh coat of paint - an interest in, and a lump of sticky dough is not really the kind of thing he wants to get his hands on. But after a few minutes of gamely stretching and pulling and gathering in, he can start to see the appeal. There is something almost meditative in the repetitive action, of feeling something transform under your hands. Stars are just dust and gas gathered up and squeezed until they burn. Bread can’t be harder than that, can it?

“Mr Crowley?” Crowley looks up to see Paul and Mary have come over to his bench, cameras trailing after them. Mary gives him a winning smile. “Good to see you’re not letting yesterday slow you down.”

Crowley smiles at her, because it’s hard to feel nihilistic when you can point at something and go There. I made that.

“I have wrought change upon the universe,” he says.

“Yes, you have,” Mary agrees. She’s spent fifty years dealing with the British public and has yet to be shaken. “And you’re using oranges.”

“I am,” Crowley agrees. “And I don’t have to hit it with a comet, it just goes in the oven.”

“How wonderful,” Mary agrees, and gently leads Paul away.

With the dough needing an hour’s rest, Crowley washes his hands and goes looking for something to occupy his time. Aziraphale would be his first port of call, but the Angel has been gossiping with Mel for the last half hour. She keeps throwing glances Crowley’s way, looking unconvinced, and Crowley is pretty sure he saw her mouth really? once or twice. He swings by Mary’s counter, where she is fretting over her dough and there is a cluster of cameras around her. Crowley snaps his fingers, and the batteries on all three run out at once, making the crew mutter in frustration before going off to get replacements. A reprieve, but not much of one, so Crowley catches Mel’s eye and nods towards Mary. She catches the hint, leaving Aziraphale to go offer moral support, and Crowley quickly takes her spot at his side.

“Alright, Angel?” Crowley murmurs, snagging a stray piece of chocolate.

“Shh!” Aziraphale blushes furiously, and gives him that annoyed-but-secretly-endere look, the one Crowley can see right through. “We’re supposed to be working undercover, remember?”

“No one will know.” Crowley dismisses his concerns with a wave of his hand, and resolves to call him Angel every chance he gets. “Need a hand with that?”

The silly old goat has taken it upon himself to make a wreath with three kinds of bread, which means he’s still busy making dough.

“Thank you, but no. I have it all under control” The Angel will not be distracted from his concerns. “We need to be careful. It’s not just the humans we need to watch out for, there’s also our…” he hesitates. “Respective departments.”

“Respective departments?” Crowley can barely keep a straight face.

“Yes.” Aziraphale lifts his dough into a bowl and puts it in the proving drawer with the others. “The fact is Heaven will not take kindly to my consorting with a Demon.”
“Consorting?” Crowley’s tongue darts out to wet his lip. “Is that what we’re doing? I thought you had to take your clothes off first.”

Aziraphale lets out an exasperated little noise. “I doubt Hell would look to kindly on it either.”

“Alright,” Crowley says softly. “You’ve made your point. No skipping through the bluebells hand in hand.”

Aziraphale pauses in his wiping down of the counter. “It’s the wrong season for bluebells,” he says, and it’s probably Crowley’s imagination but he almost sounds disappointed.

There is still bread to be made, so Crowley swaggers back to his counter and gets on with his bake. The dough has risen, though not quite doubled in size, and he tips it onto the counter, giving it a bit of a knead before cutting it into four. Each piece he flattens out into a circle, making sure they’re all roughly the same size. He lays the first one on a large baking tray, and spreads it with a little beaten egg before scattering sugar and ginger over it, leaving the edge bare like you would a pizza. He digs out a grater from one of the cupboards and zests some orange over it before carefully placing the next disc of dough on top. He repeats the process with the rest of the dough, creating layer upon layer of egg and sugar and citrus, pretending not to notice as one of the cameramen come creeping over to film him. Crowley flashes them a grin before picking up a knife, and cuts the bread into quarters, making sure to leave the middle intact. He slices each quarter in two, then each piece in two again, still leaving the center whole, until the bread resembles some kind of doughy cartwheel. Shifting around so the camera can pick it up, he twists each spoke of the wheel around, revealing the cut layers of dough and filling, before pairing up the twists and pinching them together at the ends to make the petals of a flower.

The rest of the egg gets swiped over the top with a pastry brush, and he carefully slides the bread into his oven, giving the door a light pat as he closes it.

“Well, that was fun,” he tells the camera, and goes off in search of a cup of tea.

By the time Crowley comes back to his oven, mug of tea in hand, the bread is starting to rise. He peers through the glass, satisfied with what he can see, and goes over to see what Tracy is up to.

“Oi, virago,” he says amiably, and gets swatted with a tea towel. “You’re making a glaze, right?”

Tracy balls up the towel and drops it on the counter. “That’s right, love.”

“How does that work?”

She nods to her hob, where a little pan of sugar and gin is simmering away, and a list of ingredients on notepaper decorated with glittery pink stars. There are still some unopened gin miniatures on her counter next to her recipes.

“What are the rest of these for?” Crowley asks, making a quick note of her recipe.

Tracy picks one up and cracks it open, pouring the contents into a glass at her side. “Me.”

Crowley chuckles, raising his mug to her as she picks up the glass, and goes back to his counter to make a glaze. Orange juice, sugar, ginger, heat it all up until it gets sticky.

Okay, so the whole baking thing is actually kind of… fun? He can see why the humans are so fond of it.

Mel calls out that there are ten minutes to go, and Crowley whips his bread out of the oven. It’s a few shades darker on one side than the other, but otherwise looks good. He checks up at Tracy, painting gin syrup over her own bake; a raspberry wreath of split and twisted dough that has puffed up into a golden crown. Crowley grabs a clean pastry brush and slaps orange syrup over his own bread, working the bristles into the gaps as quickly as he can.

“One minute to go!” Sue shouts, and he lifts up the pan and slides the bread onto the only chopping board big enough to hold it. Some of the pinched ends have split apart, but it doesn’t detract from the overall effect - a sunflower of sweet, sticky-topped bread.

“And that’s time up!” Mel shouts. “Step away from your bakes, and Tracy stop hogging the gin.”

Crowley backs away from his counter, still reeling from the fact that he made something. He didn’t pull a disaster out of the oven and miracle it better at the last second. *He made it.*
He looks over at Aziraphale, who is wiping his forehead with a tea towel. They share a pleased, proud look with the only other being on earth who could possibly understand, and then Aziraphale is called away by an Eric to get some tracking shots done. For once Crowley doesn’t grumble about being filmed with his finished bake.

Baking competition or not, they’re still in Britain and that means tea and biscuits out on the lawn. The humans sit together in little groups, offering reassurances and praise over each other’s bakes, and Crowley wanders around the flowerbeds, in too good a mood to yell at the Dahlias for taking their time flowering. He shouldn’t be. Yesterday went badly, and he could still get thrown out of the competition. Not to mention after what happened to Ligur Hastur will be desperate to get their own back. Crowley’s smile slips a notch. They are called back to the tent, and take their places, waiting for their turn to carry their bakes to the judges at the front of the tent.

Anathema is called first, bearing a cinnamon bun wreath, the rolled dough made into a circle before being cut. In the hollow center is a bowl of cream cheese frosting. “Oh, this looks festive,” Mary says. Mel and Sue are both clearly fans of cinnamon rolls, and don’t hesitate in tearing off pieces for themselves. “I like what you’ve done with the topping.” “I heard you don’t really go for the thick frosting here.” She glances over at Newt, who gives her a clumsy little wave. “So I-” “It overwhelms the flavours,” Paul interrupts, waving a piece of bun dunked in frosting at her. “Too sweet, you can’t taste the bread.” “Then don’t eat so much of it,” Anathema retorts with a brittle little smile. Paul hums, licking his thumb. No one draws attention to Mel sticking her finger in the frosting and shoving it in her mouth.

Mary is called up next, and delivers a pretty looking cheese and pesto wreath to the table. Paul slices into it, shaking his head almost straight away. “Too wet,” he says, peeling apart the layers of dough, and yes the whole thing does look a bit soggy. “You used fresh mozzarella, didn’t you?” Mary says, seeking out a crusty edge to sample. “That can be risky, it adds so much water to the dough.” Mary takes her bake away, looking chastened, and Aziraphale is called up next. Would it be bad form to snap his fingers, fix up anything that might look wrong with the bread? Crowley shakes his head, if the Angel found out he’d messed with it he’d never hear the end of it. Aziraphale’s bake is simple, but has a certain elegance, a plaited wreath made with strands of three different doughs - chocolate, hazelnut and vanilla. Mary makes appreciative noises at her slice, while Paul pulls his apart, looking for something bad to say about it. Sue carefully extracts a length of hazelnut dough from the bake, and takes it over to Mel. They look like a pair of squirrels nibbling away at it, albeit ones in contrasting blazers. “Delightful,” Mary says at last. “And beautifully made too, you should be very proud.” Aziraphale’s face does something complicated and squishy, and Crowley pays close attention to his shoes until someone else is called up.

“Mr Crowley?” Mary calls, and his head snaps up Oh fuck already. “Let’s see what you have for us.” Crowley picks up the board and carries it up to the judges table, placing it before Mary. “Oh, that does look impressive,” Mary beams, and there are definitely a few weasels wriggling around in his guts. No other explanation for it. “Yes, your bakes always look good,” Paul says, wielding his knife. “But it’s the taste that matters.” Crowley has to stop himself from listing all the times Paul had complained about how someone’s bake tasted good but looked scruffy, and keeps his mouth shut.
“It’s a little underproved,” Paul says.
“The orange really comes through,” Mary adds. It’s all maddeningly vague.
Sue picks up a slice and bites into. “That is really good,” she says with her mouth full. “Mnf.”
Crowley whisks his bake back to his table, and tries to look relaxed so long as he’s being filmed.
Tracy is called up next, impressively stable considering all the gin. The raspberry wreath, whole
berries studded through the dough and a crust sticky with syrup, looks suitably impressive.
“Ooh.” Mary looks delighted. “I can taste the gin!”
“Too strong,” Paul says.
“Nonsense,” Mary picks up another piece. “It really compliments the raspberries.”
Mel, who can put away hazelnut bread like it’s a log going into a sawmill, snags a bite to try, and
hums in pleasure.
Tracy, pink-cheeked from praise and gin, carries her bake back to her counter, and fans herself with
an oven mitt.

Newt is called up last, and he carries his bake up to the judges. It’s simple but looks impressive,
circles of dough spread with mustard and filled with ham and cheese, folded into half moons and
arranged in a ring. Before baking it had looked like a doughy circle of tacos, but now the bread is
baked it looks crusty and delicious. There is a bowl of chunky home-made pickle in the middle.
Paul, for the first time in history it seems, doesn’t bother with his knife, and tears off a piece before
dipping it into the chutney. He takes a bite and lets out a startled little giggle. “That is delicious.”
“Really?” Newt asks, looking dumbstruck.
Mary is a lot more delicate with her eating, but no less enthusiastic. Paul reaches across the table
and offers a greasy, mustard-smeared hand for Newt to shake.
“A Hollywood Handshake!” Mel gasps, and Newt takes the mustardy mitt and lets Paul give him a
single shake before letting go and getting back to eating.
After all four of them have definitely eaten enough, Newt picks up what’s left of his bake and
carries it back to his counter, looking flustered but thrilled.

The judges retire for their deliberations, and the contestants immediately start buzzing around the
room, most of them determined to try Newt’s bread. Crowley wanders over to Aziraphale’s empty
counter and picks up a scrap of the hazelnut bread. It’s sweet and earthy, something he would go
back for a second bite of. He leaves a slice of his own bake, golden as a marigold petal, in
exchange, and goes outside to bask in the sun.
He finds Mary by the stream, unusually quiet, throwing scraps of her failed pesto wreath at some
disinterested ducks.
“Alright?” Crowley murmurs, twitching his fingers in the duck’s direction, and a couple of them
dutifully come over to peck at the sinking lumps of bread.
“No,” Mary says. “Yes.” She shakes her head. “It’s all been a bit of a day really.”
Crowley watches her fret, plucking bits of sticky dough from the lump in her hands, oil smearing
her fingers. Really, what’s one little miracle, in the great scheme of things?
He reaches out to take her hand, pressing something into her skin. Vague, unformed, a thread of
potential, to be made into whatever she chooses.
“Well, I’ll go back to work on monday, same as always,” she says with a sigh. “And I’ll keep
making cakes.”
“And you’ll have your weekends free again,” Crowley adds.
“I will.” She sniffs, straightening her shoulders and pulling her head up. “I’m going to go try some
of Newt’s bread,” she says decisively. “And Tracy’s gin.”
Crowley watches her walk back to the tent. Clever humans. Clever, stubborn, relentless humans.

After a lunch that everyone is too full of bread to do more than pick at they are summoned back to
the tent. They take their places on the row of stools placed before the judges. Crowley is between
Tracy and Mary again, and holds out his hand for Mary to clasp without being asked. She grabs it
gratefully, and sets to work grinding his knuckles to powder.
As the hosts, Mel and Sue take a few minutes to thank everyone for all their hard work, making a
few jokes to ease the nerves of the fretful contestants. Crowley glances around the back of Tracy’s
puffy ginger wig and catches Aziraphale’s eye, but the Angel makes a pointed gesture at him to
pay attention.
The Star Baker is announced, and Newt nearly falls off his chair when it’s him. Anathema reaches
out to grab him just in time, and that ends up in a clumsy hug that seems to involve too many limbs.
When the person being eliminated is announced, Mary is halfway to her feet before the words are
out of Sue’s mouth, and a second later she is enveloped in what is referred to as a Mel-and-Sue
Sandwich.
Filming kind of breaks down after that, with the sheets for next week’s challenges being handed
out and people gathering up their things, ready to go home.
Crowley finds Aziraphale outside the tent, scanning his own list for next week. He doesn’t look
worried, the cogs are already grinding away, thinking up flavours and textures and all that kind of
thing. Crowley might even do a little thinking himself.
“What have we got next week, then?” he asks, paying no regard to any thoughts of personal space
and leaning on the Angel’s shoulder to read his list. Someone gave him a copy at some point, and
he left it on a counter.
“Biscuits,” says Aziraphale, not seeming to mind the bony chin digging into his shoulder. “Oh
look, an architectural biscuit display. That seems very much your sort of thing.”
“Yeah?” It had never occurred to Crowley that he had a thing, let alone other people might notice
what it was.
“Well, yes.” Aziraphale folds up the sheet of paper, creasing it neatly between finger and thumb.
“The chocolate flowers, and the one today, that was very impressive.”
“Gnrk,” Crowley mutters, before something occurs to him. “Did you ever eat that lily?”
Aziraphale’s ears turn pink. “No,” he says slowly.
Oh
“Right then,” Crowley straightens up. “Well I’m off then.” He nods to the Manor house, where the
Bentley is still parked. “You. Uh. You want a lift?”
Aziraphale carefully folds his paper in half again, eyes fixed on something Crowley can’t see. “I
don’t think my side would like that very much.”
It’s not a No, it’s more of an I can’t and Crowley doesn’t push.
“Well,” he kicks his heels. “See you next week then?”
“Yes.” Aziraphale gives him a brief smile that is more I’m sorry than Thank you. “Mind how you
go.”
Crowley sets off along the grass, giving what might pass for an indifferent wave over his shoulder.
If you weren’t paying close attention.
Any disappointment that might be squirming its way between his ribs is soon forgotten, a whole
week’s reprieve from destruction laid out before him. He whistles, hands tucked into his pockets,
because somewhere in Soho there is a chocolate lily with his fingerprints all over it.
Chapter Summary

“Shh, I’m making a point.” Crowley waves a finger roughly in his direction. “If I wass gonna impart a truth that renti... that rippled back through your life an’ changed ev’ryfink, it’d be a fig, not an apple.” Aziraphale sits up, waving his hand as if Crowley’s comment was a bird that could be caught on the wing. “Wait. Why a fig?” “Because the whole point is that knowledge corrupts the innocent pleasures of existence, right? An’ when you know about figs they’re ruined, like, forever.” “What about figs?”

Chapter Notes

I would like to apologise to all the fig-lovers out there, for what I am about to do...

There is an Eric waiting for him when Crowley pulls up in front of the Manor house. She is tapping a pen on her clipboard impatiently. Crowley plasters a smile on his face and climbs out the Bentley, slamming the door shut and leaning against it. He does his best to radiate lazy charm, but it comes out as smug indifference, but then it’s been a long night. “You’re determined to be late every weekend aren’t you Mr Crowley?” Crowley spreads out his hands. “Got held up at work. You know how it is.” He had tried. He got in the car yesterday afternoon with every intention of arriving on time (and it had nothing to do with the thought of another evening in a cozy little snug with a few bottles of wine and an Angel). But then Dagon had shown up and dragged him down to Hell for a progress report. Fortunately he’d had enough time to gently guide the Bentley into a hedge instead of leaving it to careen into oncoming traffic on the A40. Progress reports are no fun at the best of times, and it had taken all Crowley’s skill at charm and lying through his teeth to get out of there again. When he returned topside the car was relatively unscathed, a few scratches that he’d snapped away and a squirrel that had taken up residence under a wheel arch. There was also a scorched patch on the grass from where some idiot had taken a larcenous interest in the car, and she hadn’t taken too kindly to it. “Hmm.” The Eric taps her clipboard. “You’re a bad influence, Mr Fell hasn’t arrived yet either.” “He what?” Crowley snaps to attention. Aziraphale hasn’t shown up either? It’s Biscuit Week, and from the way the Angel attacks the biscuit tin during afternoon tea, Hellhounds wouldn’t keep him away from a whole weekend of biscuitry. “Where the bloody Hell is he?” The Eric points with her pen to the driveway, where a Taxi is rumbling towards them. “Hopefully in there.”

The Taxi pulls up alongside the Bentley, and Aziraphale climbs out. He looks like he’s trying hard not to seem flustered, and after a moment of patting down his coat seems to realise that the days of hansom cab drivers carting about your luggage might actually be over.
It’s not that Crowley takes pity on him or anything, it’s more expediting the situation. The moon would probably crash into the earth long before it occurs to the Angel to collect his own luggage. Crowley pops the boot and lifts out a small wheeled suitcase, from the weight of it the damn thing must be full of books, and trundles it across the gravel drive to the Angel. “Oh. Yes.” Aziraphale gives him a breathless little smile. “Thank you.” Crowley wheels it right past his outstretched hand and up to the Eric. “You’ll get this where it needs to be, won’t you?”

The Eric looks caught between No I bloody won’t and At least you’re both here, and finally lands on a taut little smile and an “Of course I will Mr Crowley.” “Great. Thanks.” Crowley returns a toothy grin of his own. “We’ll just scoot off to the tent now.” He hooks a hand through Aziraphale’s elbow, who manages one last, longing look at his suitcase before following Crowley across the grass and towards the baking tent.

“Everything alright?” Crowley murmurs once they are out of sight from prying eyes. Aziraphale tugs on the sleeves of his coat, looking put out. “I was summoned,” he says, sounding aghast. “For a progress report.” “Mn-hmn?” That’s all it takes, all the prodding the Angel needs for a little tirade about his bosses. “There are certain protocols, Crowley!” he whines. “There is a way of doing things and that’s how it’s always been done. You don’t just drag someone off the street because you want to know what’s happening right now.” He pauses for breath, looking vexed. “And everything is written up in my weekly report, they only have to read—”

“Everything?” Crowley interrupts. “Oh, nothing about you.” Aziraphale reassures him quickly. “We’d both be in hot water if they knew about you being here.” Okay, so that’s less reassuring. “As far as they’re concerned you’re just some banker from Mayfair who’s blagged his way onto the show.” Okay, that’s just rude. “So you lied.” Aziraphale pulls up short, giving Crowley a scandalised look. It’s fantastic.

“I did not lie!” he insists. “I simply… omitted certain details that were not relevant at the time.” “Omitted certain details?” Crowley grins. “Really?” Aziraphale seems to finally realise that he’s being teased, and his roused feathers, metaphorically speaking, settle. “Yes, well. To be quite honest my reports are wasted on them. Gabriel wouldn’t know a Chateaubriand from a Paris Brest.” “Really?” Crowley raises an eyebrow. “Are you a Brest man then, Angel?” Aziraphale’s cheeks stain a charming shade of pink. “If you must know, I much prefer an eclair.” Crowley lets out a loud cackle, and the Angel picks up his feet, in a sudden hurry to arrive at the tent first.

Mel and Sue are already in the tent, tucked away in a corner and whispering. They separate as soon as Crowley enters the tent, Mel trotting over to Aziraphale’s counter to chatter while he takes off his coat and gets ready for the day. Sue comes over to mither Crowley, sidling over to his side like a slinky black cat. “Late, eh?” she asks, throwing a pointed look towards her co-host. Aziraphale is fastidiously rolling up his sleeves, and no doubt answering a similar line of questioning. “Yeees,” Crowley drawls, picking through the jars on his counter. The electrical bastard has been moved to Mary’s now empty counter and covered with a cloth again, and an Eric has left a lot of dried fruit and nothing in the way of flour, which seems unusual. He picks up a foil-wrapped slab of chocolate and snaps it in half, breaking off pieces of dark chocolate for them both. “Meetings, that sort of thing.” “And Mr Fell running late too,” she says, taking the chocolate and biting into it. “Did you…” she pauses. “Come together?” Crowley stops mid-chew. “Wot?”
Sue’s grin widens. “Come on,” she practically purrs, and again he wonders if there’s not something Demonic slithering around the roots of her family tree. “You seriously telling me there’s nothing going on between you two?”

Crowley swallows the half-chewed chocolate. “You’re thinking of Newt and the American girl, not me.”

Sue looks back over at where Aziraphale has finally rolled his sleeves to his satisfaction, and is carefully tying his apron. “So there’s nothing…”

“Nope.”

That thin, thin ice he skates across lets out a loud crack.

“Huh.” Sue frowns, before giving him a light punch to the arm. “Shame. You look good together.”

“Ow!” Crowley rubs his arm a good three inches from where she hit it. “No we do not!”

That damned grin is back. “You’re very alike,” she adds, ambling off again.

“No we are not!” Crowley shouts after her, but it’s much too late. Stupid pairbonding humans.

The judges arrive, and Crowley still has no idea what they’re making. He can’t go and ask Aziraphale now, not after all that nonsense from the hosts, so maybe Tracy can help.

The harridan is wearing a wig of rusty-looking ringlets this week, her nails painted the same flame-red as her lips. Crowley makes a show of swaggering over and leaning against the counter, waiting as she reads through a sequined pink notebook with little unicorns on the bottom corner of each page.

“Er. Thanks,” Crowley says, twitching his head to where the electrical bastard sits. “For moving the. Uh. Thing.”

Tracy glances up, the sight of the empty counter making her smile slip a little. “A real shame, isn’t it? I thought I’d be out long before she was, and she was such a sweet girl.”

“You’ll outlast us all, you harlot,” Crowley says softly, and she tuts at him sweetly.

“Less of that, cheeky little bugger! Now stop wasting my time and tell me what you’re looking for.”

“What are we making?”

She gives him a reproachful look, but turns over her notepad. Crowley scans the page quickly, getting a rough idea of what they’re making.

“Hardly a biscuit, is it?” he murmurs, pushing the notepad back and giving her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Give over, cheeky devil,” she murmurs, pushing him away.

Crowley is halfway to his counter, idea for what to make half-formed, when she calls after him.

“Is it just stand mixers you don’t like, or…”

She’s nice to him, and maybe that’s why Crowley answers. “You know what a windlass is?”

She nods, looking slightly baffled, and the judges call for everyone’s attention before he can offer anything further, not that he would.

“Welcome, bakers,” Mel begins. “To biscuit week. We start with the Technical Challenge, your chance to show off your confectionary skills and impress the judges—”

“And support the continuing expansion of my backside,” Sue continues, like she isn’t a slip of a creature. “This week you will be tantalising our taste buds and terrorising our dentures with that Italian classic, the Florentine.”

Oh, right, Crowley thinks to himself. Well that explains it. He tried a cannoli once and still hasn’t gotten over the disappointment. That and macarons, which look very pretty but still taste like vaguely almondly cardboard. He glances over at where Aziraphale is paying close attention, like he hasn’t been practicing all week. He probably loves macarons.

“We want eighteen each of two kinds of Florentine.” Mary interrupts his meandering thoughts.

“That is thirty six Florentines in total.”

“They must be identical in size and shape,” Paul continues, ever the stickler. “No making five big ones and then a dozen tiny ones as you run out of mix.”
Crowley bares his teeth, letting out an absent-minded little hiss. He’d put aside a lot of differences with Hastur just to share a short list of things to be done to that git once he’s in Hell. Like dice him up and fold him into boiling caramel, see how he likes it.

“Bakers, you have one hour and ten minutes,” Sue reminds them. It doesn’t sound anywhere near long enough. “Get. Set.”

“Bake!” the hosts chorus, and the challenge begins.

Crowley grabs a pan from the cupboard and clanks it onto the hob. Butter, sugar and golden syrup, Tracy’s notes had said. He hadn’t really paid attention to how much, so goes for a heaped spoonful of each and figures he can add more of something later if it looks wrong. He menaces the contents of the pan until it froths up into a greasy, sugary mass, then whips it off the heat before it boils over completely. He’s supposed to add fruit and nuts at this point, and when he looks up he sees a couple of the other bakers have carefully measured out their ingredients and put them into bowls. It looks like a tremendous faff, so he opens the nearest Kilner jar and grabs a handful of slivered almonds. Into the mix they go, and he stops to think about what he actually wants the damn thing to look like. He scrapes out half the almonds with a spoon and dumps them on the side, before adding a fistful of dried cranberries and the same again of dried cherries and giving the whole thing a mix.

Crap, he needs baking sheets. Crowley puts the pan down on the counter, opening a cupboard to grab one of the cookie sheets stacked in there, and smells burning plastic.

Oh yeah. Hot pan, melamine counter. He picks up the pan, and a few tacky strands of melted counter come away with it.

“Nargh,” Crowley snarls between gritted teeth, and puts the pan on the hob, where melted plastic spreads around on the hot surface. “Bollocks.”

One of the cameramen has heard him swearing, and has started sidling his way, drawn towards the cries of frustration like a crow to fresh roadkill. Acrid smoke is starting to gather around Crowley, and he dumps the tray on the counter before miracling away the burning plastic and restoring the melting countertop. The smell lingers, because the pervasive odour of burning plastic is beyond the reach of Heaven or Hell.

“Eighteen,” Crowley mutters to himself. Eighteen greasy little bastard Florentines, then eighteen other greasy bastard Florentines. He dollops a spoonful of fruity gloop on the tray, three rows of six should do it, right? That’s eighteen isn’t it? He pauses to count on his fingers, suddenly doubtful of his grasp of basic maths, then dollops out a dozen more. He stops at that point because he’s run out of mixture.

“Gnaaarh,” Crowley snarls, and throws a blood-freezing glare at the camera that turns his way. The cameraman skitters away, stomach roiling, and regrets ordering scampi in a basket from the hotel restaurant the night before.

Crowley digs his spoon, fragments of cranberry and broken bits of almond starting to weld to the pan as the mix cools, into the first Florentine, trying to scavenge some of the mix to make more. He gets some, but leaves a crescent shaped Florentine behind, which he pokes back into shape with his finger. He does the same with the next five, and ends up with eighteen (he counts them twice, no longer trusting numbers as a concept) misshapen Florentines in various sizes.

Fuck it, it will have to do. Into the oven they go, and Crowley throws the pan and spoon into the sink, and starts all over again.

At the counter in front of him Tracy is undaunted, carefully spooning out her Florentines between three parchment-covered trays. Crowley wrinkles his nose, because it all looks like a fuss, and gets on with his second lot.

A scoop each of butter and sugar goes into a fresh pan, and Crowley grimaces at the wide-necked jar of golden syrup, which has a fair bit of butter swimming around in it from the first time he used it. He scrapes out more, despite its resistance, and adds it to the pan. He has no idea how, but he
gets syrup on his sleeve, which gets it onto his wrist, which gets it onto everything he has touched in the last month or will touch in the next week.

“Ugh.” Crowley flicks his fingers, too sticky to click, and has to resort to washing his hands like a human. He forgets to wash the spoon, so as soon as he picks it up the whole mess starts over again. “Argh.”

He throws the whole lot in the sink, which is getting quite full now, and starts again. This time he ignores the golden syrup altogether, and goes for a spoonful of black treacle instead, a vague idea in mind.

One of the jars contains candied peel, and Crowley picks out some lemon, chopping it finely and adding it to the pan. There’s crystallised ginger in another jar, so he chops that up and throws it in the pan too, and because it needs bulking out a bit he lastly adds some dried apple. He gives the whole thing a mix and fetches another baking tray, being a lot more sparing with doling out this time. The thinner mixture spreads out a bit, and needs a few stern words to get itself in order.

At her counter Tracy takes her first tray out of the oven, making a pleased little ‘Oooh, I say’ at the neat rows of not-really-biscuits.

Crowley lifts his first tray out of the oven and lets out a whine of frustration. The Florentines have baked, yeah, but they have spread out during the cooking, forming a single sheet of lumpy, fruity caramel.

“You little shits,” he seethes, dropping the tray on the hob. The black treacle versions still need to cook, so he slides them into the oven. Maybe there’s enough time to make the first lot a-

“Twenty minutes remaining!” Sue shouts, and if Crowley wasn’t so fond of her she’d be a patch of smoking plastic on the tent floor.

“Alright.” Crowley slams the oven door. “Think of something.”

He tries snapping his fingers, and the caramel dutifully forms into eighteen identical discs. Crowley lets out a little wheeze of relief, and sets about melting some chocolate. It’s easy enough, just break the pieces of dark chocolate into a bowl and threaten it until it melts. The chocolate liquifies obediently, and Crowley fetches another knife.

Right. Chocolate on not-a-biscuit, not-a-biscuit on plate. Job done. He reaches for one of the Florentines. It’s cool enough to smear chocolate over, but also cold enough that it’s welded itself to the baking tray.

“Oh, come on!” Crowley snarls, and jabs his knife under the florentine. It comes up reluctantly, sticky and flaccid, but he manages to lever it up and carry it over to the bowl of chocolate. He smears melted chocolate over the Florentine, his wrist, and the sleeve of his jacket, and puts it carefully down on the counter. At least it looks fairly neat.

The ones that follow? Less so.

“Oh,” Tracy says softly, her voice sounding a little… damper than usual.

Crowley glowers at eighteen chocolate-smeared florentines. They tuck in their sprawling edges obediently as he takes the other tray out of the oven.

The second lot of Florentines have bled together as well, so that explains why Tracy spread them over so many trays. Crowley bares his teeth and the dark, treacly mass reforms into eighteen perfect circles. Only then does he notice the soft, wet noises coming from. Well. From Tracy.

“Oh, harlot!” Crowley calls, and doesn’t get reprimanded. He puts down his knife and stalks over to her counter. “I said—”

Crowley stops short. Tracy has a beautiful looking Florentine in her hand, and is carefully trying to peel the baking parchment welded to the base of it off. It comes away in little shreds, paper sticking to her bright red nails.

Tracy lets out a single loud sniff, and the cameraman idling over by Newt, who is always good for a disaster, swings around.

“Fuck off!” Crowley snaps as he starts towards them, and the cameraman surprises himself, and his colleagues, by spinning on his heel and walking right out of the tent. He’ll be found several
hours later, walking along the A34 to Winchester, camera still on his shoulder.

“Alright, let’s sit you down for a minute,” Crowley says quietly, grabbing a stool and maneuvering Tracy onto it. He takes the not-a-biscuit out of her hand and puts it back on the tray. “I’ll take care of it.” He touches a finger to her chin, his voice softening. “Less of that, or you’ll ruin your make up.”

Her mascara has run, but the smears vanish under Crowley’s attention. Tracy lets out another loud sniff. “And Paul will never ravish you round the back of the tent, will he?”

“Oh, you!” Tracy scolds, dabbing at the corner of her eye with the bottom edge of her apron. “I’m a married woman.”

“And he’s a lucky bastard,” Crowley says, turning back to the tray of Florentines. They tremble before him, each coming away from the paper easily. “What is he, an underwear model? A pole dancer at weekends?”

“Oh, shush!” Tracy blushes. “He’s nothing like that at all.” Crowley snorts. “You’re not married to a Chippendale? I’m shocked. Shocked and appalled, woman.”

“No, no.” Her expression turns fond. “My Mr S. was a locksmith in his younger days. Wasn’t a door he couldn’t get past, even in the dark.” There is a little spark of something in her eyes. “Of course he’s retired now. All these new security systems are run by computers now, and you can’t bypass them with a tension and a rake.”

The penny teeters for a minute before dropping. “Oh,” Crowley murmurs as it lands squarely in the Venn diagram of illegal and fun. “Oh! You must have been quite the pair.”

“Oh, love,” Tracy gets to her feet, demurely smoothing down the front of her apron. “The stories I could tell.” Crowley gives her a wide grin, moving out of the way so she can get to her Florentines. She turns them over, looking relieved, and seems to remember where she is. She takes a moment to breathe before turning to face Crowley.

“How do I look?” she asks, fingers brushing the corners of her eyes, checking her makeup. “Like trouble,” Crowley teases, and gets a light thump on the arm.

Crowley fumbles around the counter until he finds some white chocolate, and breaks it into a bowl. A few choice words soon has it melted, though he can’t find any food colouring lying around, so just wills the chocolate into turning cherry red. His black treacle Florentines wouldn’t dare stick to the baking tray, and Crowley levered the first one up as Mel sails past shouting that there are ten minutes left. Tracy lets out a shrill little sound of panic, and Crowley quickly scrapes a knife through his melted chocolate, slathering it over the Florentine.

Time is an absolute bastard, leaking through his fingers like sand as he quickly covers each not-a-biscuit. There’s not enough time left for the chocolate to set, so he performs a quick and slipshod miracle, and frantically arranges all the Florentines on a large plate.

The hosts start counting down from thirty seconds, and he’s pretty sure he can hear Newt howling in despair. When Crowley glances up he sees Anathema piling Newt’s Florentines onto a plate while he frantically smears chocolate on the last few with a spoon. Even Aziraphale looks ruffled, clutching a piping bag to his chest and looking about himself like he’s forgotten something. He hasn’t, Crowley would bet his primary feathers on it, but there’s something about being a tent full of panicked humans and burnt sugar that makes even the ethereal doubt themselves.

Sue calls time, and allows Newt an extra second to drop the last of his bakes on the tray before motioning him away, and everyone finally stops to catch their breath. They all look at each other, smeared in melted chocolate and caramelised sugar, and exchange giddy little Thank fuck that’s over smiles.

When Crowley looks over Aziraphale is looking back at him, eyebrows raised Alright? Crowley shrugs, throwing his arms up Soon find out.
After a break for tea and a clean down of the counters, the judges are ready to do their bit. The order of contestants seen is different each time, and Crowley finds himself first to be judged for once.

“And what do you have for us today?” Mary asks, folding her hands on the counter. “They look very tempting!”

“Red and black,” Crowley says, gesturing to the first batch of red fruits and dark chocolate. “Black and red.” He nods to the black treacle ones with their red-stained white chocolate.

“They may look tempting,” Paul says. “Let’s see if they taste as good as they look.”

The judges start with the red fruit Florentines, falling silent as they chew. The silence drags on, far longer than you might expect, and Crowley begins to fidget.

“It’s like eating toffee,” Paul says at last, shaking his head. “It’s actually gluing my teeth together.”

“If only,” Crowley mutters as Sue picks up a Florentine to try. She tries to snap it in half, but it doesn’t break cleanly, drawing apart in a stringy mess.

“You forgot to add flour,” Mary says when she can finally speak. “That’s why it’s so chewy. But it’s a lovely flavour.”

“Let’s try the others,” Paul says, picking up a treacle one and making a show of trying to eat it.

“The apple and ginger is a nice combination,” Mary says kindly, only nibbling on the smallest fragment of one.


Fuck

The judges move on to Anathema and her perfect Florentines, and Crowley stops paying attention. This is not a problem, he tells himself. It’s one bad round, he can come back from this.

When no one is looking his way, all eyes on Newt as Paul crumbles up a Florentine and calls it burnt, Crowley dumps the whole lot in the bin. Stupid things aren’t really biscuits anyway.

Aziraphale is next to be judged. Of course he can’t give up the whole shades of pale theme, and both his Florentines are white chocolate, one with macadamia and the other lemon peel. Mary likes them very much, delicate and lacy edged, Paul thinks they are too sweet.

Tracy is next, and Crowley leans against his counter, watching intently as the judges approach her.

“What have we here, Tracy?” Mary asks, the sly grin that crops up whenever Tracy is around making a welcome appearance.

“A few cheeky little nibbles,” Tracy says. “I know traditionally they’re a mix of fruit and nut but, what can I say?” She waits for Paul to pick up a milk chocolate and hazelnut Florentine. “I like getting my mouth around some nuts.”

Paul chokes, and Mary demurely picks up a Florentine to try while Mel and Sue split one to share.

“Ooh, that’s good,” Mel says.

“I’ve never been a fan of nuts,” Sue says with a smirk. “But these are lovely.”

“Try the other ones,” Tracy says, sliding a cheery, almond and white chocolate Florentine to Paul.

He ignores it, picking out another one from the pile. “Oh, you are keen to pop that cherry, aren’t you?”

Paul manages to keep his mouth clamped shut, and carefully chews before swallowing.

Newt is last, and Crowley takes no comfort in there being someone in the tent worse at Florentines than he is.

One of the Erics announces lunch, and the other contestants start to gather up their things. Crowley has no interest in eating, now or ever, and of course when he doesn’t follow the others out Aziraphale comes over to him, shoulders hunched and hands pulled up to his chest like a damn squirrel.

“Well, that was a bit of a disaster,” he says, brittle-bright and nervous. Crowley wheels around to glare at him, but the old fool isn’t talking about anyone else’s bakes, he really thinks he’s done badly.

“They were fine,” he says. He can’t help it. “It’s just Paul being a dick.”
“Oh.” The Angel, all crumpled in on himself, seems to swell a little, the creases and cares starting to smooth away. “Do you really think so?”
“You’re an Angel,” Crowley shrugs. “I don’t think you can be bad at anything.” Aziraphale flashes a nervous little smile. “You’ve never heard me play the lyre.” Crowley sniggers, leaning in to whisper a secret in his ear. “I can’t play the fiddle.” He mimes pulling a bow across imaginary strings. “Awful.” Aziraphale seems to relax a little more, looking around the counter expectantly. “Where are your Florentines then?”

“Oh.” The Angel looks disappointed. “I wanted to try one.”

“Didn’t you hear Paul?” Crowley’s tone comes out harsher than intended. “They were terrible, too chewy and all that.” Crowley scowls into the place where Paul had been standing. “Prick.”

“Even so,” Aziraphale says, far too sweetly. “I would have tried one.” Crowley stares at him. “You’re ridiculous, he wants to say. Stupid, kind, thoughtful, idiot… Angel. Well, you can’t he snaps,” feeling out of sorts.

“Oh.” It is absolutely vile how accustomed Aziraphale is to being snapped at, how desperately he tries to soothe. “Another time, then. Will you be joining us for lunch?” Crowley shakes his head, and the Angel leaves him to sulk, hurrying off to join the others.

Crowley’s mood has not improved by the time everyone gets back from lunch. The next challenge is the Technical, where even competent cooks will struggle to complete the recipe they’re given, and Crowley is pretty much fucked from the get-go. They are given no time to idle, and once everyone is in their aprons and at their stations the judges arrive, standing at the front of the tent with Mel and Sue, ready to give the next challenge.

“Welcome, bakers,” Sue begins. “To the Technical Challenge. This is your chance to show your knowledge and baking know-how to the judges when presented with a fiendishly delicious challenge.”

“Yes, and I am happy to tell you that this is a Mary Berry recipe you will be making,” Mel continues. Tracy lets out a little sound of relief, at least Mary’s recipes work. “This afternoon we would like you to make fifteen Custard Creams.”

The hosts pause for a minute, letting people mumble a little. Crowley wrinkles his nose. Custard Creams? The ones left at the bottom of the biscuit tin? Aren’t they supposed to make things people want to eat?

“The biscuits must be crisp and evenly baked,” Paul continues. “And sandwiched together with a rich custard buttercream.”

“And most importantly,” Mary continues. “The biscuits must have some kind of embossing or decoration to mimic the classic custard cream.” Five blank stares meet this announcement. “This can be something as simple as dotted perforations or as detailed as you can manage, but all the biscuits must be decorated the same.”

“Now since the challenge is judged blind,” Mel takes over. “Paul and Mary, please retire to the judges enclaves.” She gestures to the judges to bugger off, and they wish the contestants good luck before retiring to wherever they go in these things.

“You have one hour to make fifteen custard creams for the judges,” Sue continues. “If I don’t get to them first. So get. Set.”

“Bake!” the hosts chorus, looking far too gleeful at the promise of seventy five biscuits of varying quality in their immediate future.

It takes less than a minute before Anathema is at Newt’s counter, asking with wild eyes what the Hell kind of biscuits they were supposed to be making. Newt describes a custard cream with the naive enthusiasm of the terribly English, while her expression slackens.

“You mean a cookie?”

“No, no, no. It’s crunchy, like it’s actually been cooked and not left near a lightbulb.” Newt’s
enthusiasm quickly morphs into fear. “Not that I don’t like cookies.”

“Biscuits should be fluffy,” Anathema says firmly. “They should be served with sausages and gravy.”

Newt pales, and British pride in baked goods finally outweighs any urge to get lucky with a pretty girl way out of his league. “You mean a scone? God, no! You don’t put gravy on a scone, that would be horrible!”

Anathema snatches up her recipe with a scowl and stalks back to her counter, determined to make do without him.

Tracy, who has been creaming sugar and butter while watching the drama unfold, turns to Crowley with lowered eyebrows. “Gravy on a scone, aren’t they odd?”

“You should see how wound up they get over lemonade,” Crowley mutters, carefully copying her with his own ingredients.

After five minutes of frantic mixing, Anathema returns to Newt’s counter, holding her bowl. “So it’s like shortbread?” she says, looking frustrated. This must be the closest she’s ever come to apologising and she doesn’t seem to like it.

Newt nods, and doesn’t flinch when she reaches past him to grab his tub of custard powder, the brand name carefully covered over with a strip of duct tape. “And why is this called custard powder, there aren’t any eggs in it?”

“That’s a funny story actually,” Newt says, clearing a space on his counter for her to put down her bowl, and spreading enough flour for the both of them. “There was this chemist in Birmingham, and his wife was allergic to eggs. But she loved custard, so he invented this substitute for her, so she could keep eating it.”

He tips his dough onto the counter and starts to roll it out, and after a moment Anathema follows suit.

“That’s… actually quite sweet,” she says slowly.

“And they gave some to their friends, who liked it more than real custard. It’s much quicker to make, and lasts for ages.” Newt gives her a nervous little smile. “I don’t think we ever had real custard in my house as a kid. My mum always used this.”

Anathema has enough common sense not to question his mother’s cooking, and quietly gets on with rolling out her dough while Newt tries to describe what the finished biscuits look like.

Crowley has a clear idea of what the biscuits are supposed to look like, it’s actually getting them to that point that he’s struggling with. He measured out the butter and sugar and battered it about in the bowl until it looked mushy, then added the egg and mixed until it looked all curdled and wrong. Adding the flour and custard powder seems to have brought it back, but the whole thing is still not a dough, and Mary’s recipe is vague about how much milk to add. He tries a splash, but that makes everything a bit too sloppy and he adds more flour to compensate, overdoing it and ending up right where he started.

“Gnah!” Crowley tells the dough, and it softens up obediently. Right. Next thing.

Both Aziraphale and Tracy wrap their dough in clingfilm and put it in their fridges. There must be a good reason for that, right? But then Anathema hasn’t. But she’s copying Newt and what does he know?

Crowley wraps the dough in clingfilm and puts it in the fridge.

He wipes down the counter and moves the stuff he doesn’t need anymore to one side, and it’s only five minutes or so later that Tracy and the Angel retrieve their dough, having put it in to chill earlier, but Crowley doesn’t dare wait around any longer.

A Demon should be better at rolling the dough out, I mean replace the wooden rolling pin with something spiky or on fire and it’s basically what you do to humans in Hell, right? It’s a good thing Crowley never worked in Hellish Torments, because he is useless at it. The dough clings to the rolling pin, it welds to the counter, it rolls out too thin in some places and too thick in others and
frankly he is starting to see why the Demons in HT are so irritable. He gathers up the dough and rolls it out again, and this time the overfloured bits refuse to meld with the underfloured bits and he accidentally makes laminated biscuit dough.

“Stop it!” Crowley hisses to the dough, and it quickly consolidates into an even layer under his glare. He picks up a rectangular biscuit cutter and chops the dough into thirty shapes, then a couple more because something is bound to go wrong. He moves them to the baking trays and shoves them in the oven, slamming the door shut with a sigh of relief. Now for the cream bit. At least that is a little bit easier, just put everything in a bowl and hit it until it’s combined.

The little timer on Tracy’s counter beeps, and she takes her tray out of the oven. Thirty little biscuits, all perfectly golden and decorated with a criss-cross pattern. Crowley swears under his breath, and the square of carpet under his feet turns into a wriggling pile of snakes. Fortunately they aren’t very fast moving, and he quickly changes them back into carpet. There is a dull hiss from under the counter that suggests one might have escaped. Crowley chucks a scrap of leftover dough down for it to snack on.

He pulls his tray out of the oven, and why is nothing ever evenly baked for him? A snap of his fingers and the biscuits are a uniform light brown and decorated with little swirls. He sweeps them on to a cooling rack before rummaging around for a knife to apply the cream.

The first biscuit cracks in two when he tries to sandwich the pieces together, and then quickly reforms under Crowley’s snarl. Mel drifts past, calling that there are five minutes to go while on the lookout for unguarded biscuits to munch. Crowley lets out an anguished little noise and keeps pasting biscuits together. Why don’t they get enough time for this shit? Why are there always cameras on him so he can’t just miracle this crap together?

He drops the last biscuit on the plate a second before Sue calls time, and quickly tries to neaten up the pile while the others are distracted by Newt and his deadline panic.

“Away from your plate!” Mel shouts, shooing him away. Damn, he didn’t spot her coming. “Go on, scoot!” Crowley reluctantly scoots, giving her a dirty look. Aziraphale must be giving her Demon-thwarting lessons on the sly because she doesn’t even flinch. Damn it.

After the cameras get shots of them sitting with their bakes, which takes a little longer than usual because one of the crew is still missing, they are sent out for tea and biscuits while the tent is cleaned down. Luckily none of them are subjected to custard creams, but there are some of the Florentines from the morning’s challenge. Crowley manages to snag one of Aziraphale’s Florentines, and has to admit it tastes pretty good. He doesn’t tell anyone that, of course. Especially not any crumple-faced and easily flustered Angels. A few people get called away to be interviewed, but Crowley doesn’t much feel like talking, so makes the Eric sent to look for him think the interview has already been done, and gets left alone.

They are called back inside, and have to go through the whole routine of carrying their bakes to a table set at the front of the tent and placing them behind their photos. Newt stumbles when carrying his tray and has to go back to his counter and start again.

Once the biscuits are set in place they have to sit on one of the stools lined before the table, and with Mary gone Crowley finds himself on the far end, the right side of him empty. His fingers twitch, as if remembering the way she gripped his hand so tightly during the judging, and misses their warmth. Tracy must catch him staring at the empty space where she had been, and takes his other hand in hers, her grip gentle despite the acrylic nails.

There should be someone at his right. There should be, but there isn’t, and it feels wrong in a fundamental way he can’t put into something so base as words.

The judges arrive, and without preamble get started on the biscuits. Aziraphale’s are first, and of course his biscuits are perfect, golden and crunchy and decorated with elegant little swirls that Mary admires loudly. Crowley can practically feel the waves of joy flowing out from the Angel,
and everyone in a three feet radius of him feels a little bit better about themselves. Even Newt, who
doesn’t break down into snivelling when his bakes are next to be tasted.
“Cardboard,” Paul says, trying to crumble one in his hand, but it only bends sadly.
“But the cream filling is very good,” Mary adds.
“I like them,” Mel insists, and eats a second one.
Crowley is next, and whatever ire Paul held back on Newt’s bakes he spends on Crowley’s.
“Bland,” he announces. “The dough has been overworked, the biscuits should be crisp, but they’re
far too tough.”
“They are very pretty, though,” Mary adds, giving Sue a sympathetic look as she chews her way
through one. “I like the pattern.”
Anathema’s are next, and Paul shakes his head when she bites into one. Anathema, sat next to
Aziraphale, lets out a wounded little sound.
Tracy is last, and Mary is quick to say how much she likes the decoration before Paul can complain
about something.
“Not bad,” Paul concludes, and Crowley gives Tracy’s hand a little squeeze.
The torment continues as Paul ranks the bakes from worst to best. Newt comes last, and takes the
news with good grace. Crowley is next, followed by Anathema, who makes a point of explaining
that biscuits are different in America.
“Yeah, but you’re not in America,” Paul says, and carries on with the ranking.
Aziraphale comes in second, and Tracy takes first place. Crowley is the first to give her a hug and a
kiss on the cheek, he would have been out on his arse a long time ago if it hadn’t been for her after
all.

With the day’s challenge over there are a last few interviews to get done, which means hanging
around for a bit until the minibus takes them back to the hotel. Newt, still coddling in Aziraphale’s
radiant joy, asks Anathema out to dinner. To everyone’s surprise she says yes. Crowley watches
the pair of them take a walk around the herbaceous border, away from the prying cameras, and
maybe encourages a few late season tulips to bloom in their path before turning away, and walking
right into Aziraphale.
The two manage not to bump into each other, recoiling at the last second, which somehow manages
to make everything worse.
“Oh!” Aziraphale skitters back, looking all pink-cheeked and flummoxed. “Sorry!”
“No, no,” Crowley reaches out to help steady the Angel, but he already looks fairly buoyant, so
ends up just flapping his hands a little before putting them back down by his sides. “Alright,
Angel?”
“Yes. Yes, I was just-” Aziraphale stops at the sound of Anathema’s voice, letting out a delighted
cry at the sight of so many flowers. He looks at Crowley, putting two and two together.
“I’m not being nice,” Crowley says before he can utter a Blessed word. “They’re clearly ill-suited
for each other, and… and when he gets eliminated they’ll fall out of touch and…”
“That was very kind of you,” Aziraphale says carefully.
“Shut up,” Crowley mutters, but he can’t summon up any real ire. “Just the three of us for dinner
tonight then.”
Aziraphale’s ears turn pink, and since they’re not tiny things to begin with Crowley can’t help but
be impressed by their commitment to the colour. “Tracy is having an early night, she says.” Pink.
Pink from the helix to the lobe. “So it’s…”
“Just the two of us, eh?” Crowley grins, nodding to where the Bentley is parked. “No sense in
waiting around then, is there?”

Crowley has little interest in enduring hotel food, so once they are in the car he suggests the pub
they went to last weekend. Aziraphale is all in favour, of the location at least, he complains about
Crowley’s driving the whole way.
"It’s fine," Crowley drawls, snagging a decent parking spot outside the pub entrance. "It is not fine," Aziraphale counters. "Ninety miles an hour down country lanes? It’s positively barbaric."

"It’s not like there was anything else on the road." Crowley holds the passenger door open while Aziraphale climbs out.

"And what if there had been?" The Angel fusses with his jacket before moving out of the way and letting Crowley slam the door shut. "We would both have been discorporated."

"We would have been fine," Crowley says, walking up to the door and hauling it open. A wave of warm air and pub chatter wafts out to greet them. "I wouldn’t have let anything happen to you, Angel." Crowley stops, breathing in the scent of old ale and older carpet, before realising Aziraphale is lagging behind, blocking the doorway with a dumb look on his face. "Come on, before you set down roots or something."

Aziraphale picks up his heels, as if Crowley meant it literally, and slips through the door, giving him a brief, awkward smile before going off to reclaim the snug. By the time Crowley joins him, bottle of Jacob’s Creek and glasses in hand, the previous occupants have remembered they need to be elsewhere, and Aziraphale is already looking through the pub menu. They’re in the kind of place that has a charming little stand at each table, with a cruet set at the front and a fox-edged assortment of menus stacked behind them.

Crowley sets down both glasses and unscrews the cap, pouring out a nice little Bordeaux.

"The seabass looks very nice," Aziraphale muses. "Oh, or the Gressingham duck." He pauses, looking concerned. "I don’t think I could bear to eat a duck, such dear little creatures."

"I’ll eat it," Crowley says, taking the seat across from him. "Do they serve weasel?"

"Don’t be ridiculous, dear."

After much deliberation, and a second bottle of Bordeaux, the Angel settles on the salmon. When the meal is brought out he eats with such gusto, stopping short of licking the butter from the empty plate, and Crowley has never seen anyone take such pleasure in food. As soon as he is finished Aziraphale keeps throwing glances at Crowley’s untouched plate, a confit leg of duck, and Crowley has no idea what a confit is, only that in ordering it there is one less blasted duck on earth.

"Finish that for me, will you?" Crowley murmurs, sliding the plate towards him. "No sense in things going to waste."

He chose his words well, framing the offer as a good deed rather than a bad one, and the Angel takes him up with a coy "If you insist."

Few things would taste as good to Crowley as they do to the Angel, and he finds watching him eat a far more pleasurable experience. Besides, there’s wine to be drunk.

With his second plate scraped clean Aziraphale dabs at his lips with a napkin, a sturdy linen number, not one of the paper ones provided by the pub. "That was delicious," he sighs, and shakes his head when Crowley offers him the dessert menu. "Goodness me, no. I’ve had quite enough of sweet things today."

Crowley tucks the cardboard menu back in the stand, and debates getting another bottle from the bar. Probably best to ask first. "What d’you want to do now?"

Aziraphale dabs at his lips again, though there is not a speck of grease to be seen. "Another drink, perhaps?"

Crowley starts to rise, and Aziraphale does the same, a button on his waistcoat catching his plate and making the cutlery rattle. They both sit down again.

"Go ahead-"

"No, really. I insist-"

"It’s fine." Crowley stops, sucking in a sharp little breath. "Back to the hotel?"

Aziraphale nods once, carefully smoothing down the front of his waistcoat before making another attempt at standing.

Crowley isn’t entirely sure how, but once back at the hotel he finds himself following Aziraphale
up the stairs to his room. Well, rooms. The Angel fumbles with the key a minute, but when the
door opens it doesn’t lead into a poky little room like Crowley’s, but a rather plush little apartment.
There is a drawing room, or receiving room, Crowley could never keep up with the terminology,
and from there are two doorways, one leading to a bathroom, where Crowley can see one claw foot
of a freestanding bathtub. The other door must lead to a bedroom. Or library. There is an awful lot
of chintz.

“Huh,” Crowley says, bottle of wine from the hotel bar tucked under his arm. “Nice. This your
place?”

“Hmm?” Aziraphale glances at him, before opening a small cabinet and retrieving two wine glasses.
“Oh this? No, goodness me. It’s a little place I stayed in in France, back in seventeen…” He trails
off. “Oh six? You know I really can’t remember. They served a quite delicious Pâté en Croûte, but
it’s a terrible shame what they did to those little birds.”

“Birds?” Crowley asks, handing over the wine bottle.

“Yes, quite dreadful.” Aziraphale opens the bottle and pours. “Ortolans. Drowned them in cognac,
then ate them whole.”

“Sounds like a waste of brandy,” Crowley mutters, taking the glass of wine offered to him. “Did
they taste any good?”

“Wouldn’t know.” Aziraphale mumbles around his glass, and Crowley grins.

“You brought yours back to life, didn’t you?”

Aziraphale says nothing, listing from side to side like a ship in a storm, and Crowley picks
a promising-looking little couch to sprawl on. After a minute the Angel takes a chair opposite.
Between them is an occasional table and Aziraphale places the wine bottle in the center like a man
planting a flag. Crowley takes off his sunglasses and throws them onto the table with it, rubbing
his eyes and letting out a soft groan of relief.

After the first bottle is quickly consumed, Aziraphale breaks into his personal stash which, much
like the decor, is persistently French. Crowley would point out that wine is grown in other
countries, but it hardly seems worth the hassle, not when there is so much of it to hand. The little
table between them slowly fills with bottles as the conversation meanders from one thing to
another, and when there is no room left on the table they start accumulating on the floor.
Crowley does his best not to kick any over, especially when it’s getting so hard to keep track of the
current bottle. The room is drifting around them gently, and things are getting a little fuzzy around
the edges. He had been making a point, hadn’t he?

“So,” Crowley says, interrupting Aziraphale’s meandering thoughts about macarons. “You sstill
think you’re here for Mary?” He suppresses a hiccup, patting his chest.

“I cn’t think’v any ov’r reason.” Aziraphale rubs his face, and tries the sentence again. It doesn’t
come out any better the second time, not helped by him slouching in his chair, sitting on the base of
his spine with a half-empty wine glass resting on his stomach. “Why’re y’here? Why iz any of us?”
Crowley shakes his head, but it makes the room spin so he stops. He stares at his wine glass, the
contents almost purple in the low light. “I’m out next, aren’t I?” he says, voice soft.

“Noo, nono. No, you’ll be fine.” Stupid Angel’s with their whispered-prayer hearing. “Y’just
having a bad week, happens to ev’yone, I had a bad week an’ I’m shtill here.”

“Yeah, but.” Crowley pauses, frowning in concentration. “If y’get elimni… Eminat… kicked off,
what’ll they do t’you upstairs? Slap yr wrists or summat.” Crowley shrugs, spilling wine. “They’re
not gonna hurt you, you’re n’Angel.”

“They won’t give me a note,” Crowley mumbles disconsolately. “Holy water if I’m lucky, or an
eternity in the pit.” He swallows. “I’ll never see the sky again.”

Aziraphale picks up the bottle, holding it out to him. “You’re not gonna be ‘liminated,” he says,
refilling Crowley’s glass. “The boy, with the name?”
Crowley takes a hefty gulp of wine. “Newt?”

“Yes!” Aziraphale refills his own glass, looking put-out when the bottle is empty. “He’s doing terribly. He’ll be out this week. Not you.”

Crowley wrinkles his nose doubtfully, then something occurs to him. “Flamin’ sword?” he says. “But you didn’t lose that, I saw it. It was all.” He wiggles his fingers. “Flamy.”

Aziraphale, despite being slumped so low in his chair that his chin is at the same level as his stomach, manages a sheepish smile. “F I don’ ave it, they can’ make me use it.”

Aziraphale lurches up and fumbles around the bottles clustered on the table between them, finding one still half-full, and clumsily tries to change the subject. “So if ’m not here f’r Mary an’ y’r not here for…” He fills his glass up, spitting out the next word. “Paul…?”

Crowley swirls the wine around in his glass. “I’m here ’cos I fucked up the apple thing, thass why,” he frowns, probing at the old wound. “If God really, really din’t want humans eating ’em, why put ’em in the Garden anyway? Why not Jupiter or, or, the Moon. Like, really, really…” he trails off.

“Really f’r ‘way?” Aziraphale suggests, and Crowley nearly falls off his couch in agreement. “Yess!” He waves a finger, missing Aziraphale by a few meters. “Not right in front of the humans with a, with a picnic blanket an’ a tub of husmus… houmou…” He stops. “The stuff w’ the chickpeas? But nah. ‘S almost like She wanted them to…” He stops, hiccuping again, and pours more wine.

Aziraphale gives him an odd look, head tilted to one side like he’s staring at a Magic Eye picture and waiting for the neon squiggles to turn into a dolphin. “Tha’ was you?”

“I mean what’s so bad about knowing the diff’ence between good an’ evil anyways?” Crowley doesn’t hear the Angel speak, the diatribe train already trundling along a familiar track. “An’ why an apple? I mean if it, if it were me, an’ I wanted to like, drop a knowlitch, a nowledge… a truth bomb on the humans-”

The Angel finally looks into Crowley’s eyes. “You’re the serpent of Eden?”

“Shh, I’m making a point.” Crowley waves a finger roughly in his direction. “If I wass gonna impart a truth that renti… that renti… that rippled back through your life an’ changed ev’ryfink, it’d be a fig, not an apple.”

“But you’ve got legs, Crowley.” Aziraphale sits up, waving his hand as if Crowley’s comment was a bird that could be caught on the wing. “Wait. Wait. Why a fig?”

“Because the whole point is that knowledge corrupts the innocent pleasures of existence, right? An’ when you know about figs they’re ruined, like, forever.”

“What about figs?”

“Ah. Y’see.” Crowley puts down his glass, spreading out his hands. “So a fig iss like an inside out flower, right? And flowerss need polli… polli… fertilizing. An’ for that you need fig wasps. They crawl inside the fig, looking for someplace to lay eggs, spreading about pollen and stuff, yeah?”

Aziraphale nods. “Thing is, once they’re in, they can’t get out. They starve to death, inside the fruit, which wouldn’t have been polli… pollin… wouldn’t be made without them.” Crowley sits back triumphantly. “So ev’ry fig has a dead wasp in it, an’ that is why it should’ve been a fig ‘n not a apple.”

After a long silence, Aziraphale drains his glass. “Oh dear,” he whispers. “I rather liked figs.”

Crowley wakes with an aching head and a mouthful of quilt. He squirms, but that only makes the headache worse, and pulls the embroidered fabric from between his teeth. He’s curled up, quite literally - legs folded and knees to his chest - on Aziraphale’s little French couch, a quilt tucked around him. He sits up slowly, and stares at the fleur-de-lys patterns picked out on the quilt in gold thread until his head stops spinning. There is no sign of the Angel, either in the room or any of the adjacent ones. Crowley peeks into
the bedroom, hand covering his eyes in case... well, you never know your luck, but no disgruntled Angel's yell at him to go away. When he uncovers his eyes there is a four-poster bed, the covers neatly folded back, and no Angel. He washes his face in the bathroom, cold water clearing his head, and miracles his clothes clean and wrinkle-free before grabbing his sunglasses from the table.

Behind the brocaded curtains the sun is rising over manicured gardens, and Crowley checks his watch. Too bloody early, but everyone must be at breakfast. Breakfast means coffee, so he opens the door and steps into the hallway of a little hotel in Southern England. A moment later the door opposite opens, and Tracy pokes her head out.

“Mr Fell, are you-” She stops, gaze raking up and down Crowley’s still slightly rumpled form. “Well good morning, Mr C.”

“Vixen,” Crowley mumbles, but she isn’t thrown off by his charms. “You seen Fell anywhere? He’s not answering the door.”

“Probably because you didn’t knock,” Tracy says with a smirk. Damn her. “He’ll be at breakfast, love. You know men have their... appetites.”

“Gnah,” Crowley says, along with “Muh,” “Abvr,” and the rarely witnessed “Skzt.”

While he’s stuttering and wheezing Tracy fetches her bag and shuts the door, holding out her arm.

“I was just heading down there myself.”

“Hnk,” Crowley says, taking her arm and leading her to the stairs.

Aziraphale is, of course, in the hotel dining room dissecting an unfortunate croissant and smearing the shreds in butter and jam. Crowley had every intention of grabbing coffee and making a quick exit, but of course Tracy leads them over to the table, taking a seat and asking for a cup of tea in a manner that won’t be questioned. Crowley, hissing half-hearted complaints, fetches a tea for her and a coffee for himself, along with the last jar of strawberry jam for the Angel, since the way his knife rattles around in the very empty jar he already has is too tragic to bear. At least the pair of them are so busy talking about the day’s bake that he can drink his coffee in peace.

Across the room Anathema and Newt are sitting together, so last night’s dinner must have gone well. Crowley thinks back to what Aziraphale said the night before, about Newt going out next. Good for Crowley, if only to kick the can of total obliviation down the road another week, not so good for those two. He listens to them chatter about caramel and royal icing, and wonders what the Hell he’s going to make.

Before long they are called to the minivan to make the half hour journey to the Manor, and all the lively chatter over breakfast is replaced by tense silence. When they arrive at the tent, everyone is in a hurry to get ready, dashing off to their counters to check their supplies. Crowley lingers outside, still trying to come up with something.

“You’ll be fine,” Aziraphale murmurs as he passes, and gives Crowley a light touch on the arm. “Yeah?” Crowley flashes him a quick smile. “Give me a kiss for luck?”

Crowley taps his cheek, just by the tattoo that snakes past his ear, and Aziraphale lets out an indignant little squeak. “Absolutely not, you… you serpent!”

He scuttles into the tent, and Crowley suddenly knows what to make for the challenge.

They don’t have to wait around long for the hosts to arrive, and Mel quickly scurries over to Aziraphale’s counter while Sue lingers at Crowley’s.

“So,” she says, leaning against the counter. “How was dinner?”

“Hm?” Crowley has scared an Eric into getting cocoa powder for him, and is watching her carefully cover the brand name with tape. “Oh. Yeah. Had the duck.”

“Is that what we’re calling him?” she asks with a grin, nodding to Aziraphale and Mel, heads together.

“What?” Crowley glares at her. “No. It was a leg. In confit. Whatever that is.”

“Cooked in fat,” Sue says, making eyes at Mel and gesturing.
“What, like a chip?” Crowley watches the two hosts mime back and forth. He’s pretty sure Sue is mouthing the word ‘useless’ repeatedly. “Well that doesn’t make much sense.”
The pair end their discussion with a round of shrugs, and Sue raps her knuckles on the counter. “So d’you know what you’re making?”
“Yup.”
“Good man.” She leaves him in peace, going off to bother Tracy who immediately pulls her away from the cameras and starts whispering something in her ear. Crowley ignores them, and a few minutes later the judges arrive. Mary takes a few minutes to greet everyone, full of nice things to say and good wishes, and it’s a relief when they are called to order. The cameraman from yesterday has been found and, after a long talk with management and a realisation that there’s no one else available at short notice on a Sunday, been given his job back.
“Welcome to day two of Biscuit week,” Sue begins. “And the Showstopper challenge. Now this week Paul and Mary would like you to make an animal themed biscuit sculpture.”
“Now this can be any animal you like,” Mel continues. “And any kind of biscuit you want, but it must be three dimensional and freestanding. You have three hours to create your biscuit beasts.”
“The biscuits must be perfectly baked,” Paul continues. “I will be asking what texture and consistency you’re aiming for in your biscuit. If you say it’s going to be crisp, I will expect it to be crisp.”
“Good luck everyone,” Mary finishes. “I can’t wait to see what you come up with.”
“On your marks,” Sue shouts. “Get. Set.”
“Bake!” the hosts chorus, and Crowley reaches for a bowl.

Tracy, a font of wisdom in a copper wig, provides Crowley with a recipe for something called shortbread, reassuring him that yes it’s a biscuit and no there’s no such thing as ‘longbread’. Crowley has no idea how many biscuits he needs, so just assumes the recipe will provide him with enough. He can always miracle up some more if it doesn’t. He has no intention of cutting them all up by hand, so fashions a little diamond-shaped cutter from the ether and puts it to one side for when he’s rolled out the dough.
“Good morning Anthony.” Crowley looks up from his mixing bowl to see Mary beaming up at him. “And what are you making for us today?”
“Uh.” Crowley still isn’t used to the whole first name lark, and shoves his glasses up his nose.
“Chocolate. Shortbread.”
“Oh, I do like a nice piece of shortbread,” Mary says.
“Yeah, but what animal are you making?” Paul asks.
“It’s. Uh.” Crowley wrinkles his nose. “It’s a surprise.”
Paul looks unconvinced, but Mary wishes him luck before moving on to see Tracy. Crowley grabs a rolling pin, and pictures Paul’s face as he batter the dough flat. He pictures it as he chops the dough into dozens of little diamond shapes, and really the Eternal Torment department lost out, not having him among them. He would have given the Damned daly feedback surveys, asking them to rate the various tortures from 0 to 10.
Tch.

Thirty minutes into the challenge and Crowley has his first few trays of biscuits in the oven. The cocoa powder hasn’t made them dark enough, but he’s not planning on adding charcoal or any of that nonsense, and will just give them a stiff talking to when the time comes. Meanwhile he’s making the same recipe again, only this time adding red food colouring to the dough until it is a rich, deep burgundy under his hands. He’s used so much dye that a section of his counter looks like a crime scene, as do his fingers. He’s half tempted to go find the Angel and put a few handprints on his crisp blue shirt. Or the seat of his trousers.
Crowley grins at the thought, but there’s biscuits to be made, and Sue has already called out that thirty minutes have passed.
The first tray of biscuits comes out of the oven, and being brown Crowley has no idea if they’re
cooked or not. He tries eating one, tilting his head to one side in surprise. “That’s not bad.” He frowns, and yells over at Sue, who is coaxing Newt out of a breakdown. “Oi! Mini me!”

She comes over, and Crowley waves the tray at her. As she reaches for a biscuit remembers that she’s not actually a Demon capable of eating burning coals and miracles the tray cold. “Mfp!” she says, hand over her mouth to stop the spray of crumbs. “Yesh. Good.”

“Right?” Crowley tips the biscuits onto the counter. “It’s not that hard, this whole cooking business. Don’t see what the fuss is about.”

Sue snags another biscuit, and doesn’t call him an idiot. At least not out loud.

With the biscuits made and stacked in two piles, Crowley finds himself stuck. He has his idea, but he’s not sure how to get it from theory to practice. He can’t ask Aziraphale, because it’s supposed to be a surprise, and Tracy already has her hands (and wig) full with glitter. There is a blast radius of purple shimmer around her counter and Crowley isn’t going anywhere near it. Some things you can’t miracle away.

He’s pretty sure Aziraphale mentioned sticking things together with royal icing, which is a bloody stupid name for icing, it’s not like there’s peasant icing. “Well, that would be no icing at all, wouldn’t it?” he mutters.

Crowley picks up two biscuits, and tells them to stick. They do. Only another hundred or so to go. Mel calls for one hour remaining, and comes over to see what Crowley is doing. A biscuit snaps in his hand as he’s trying to make the shape form a coil, and he hands it over to her. Much like her counterpart, she is easily quieted with a biscuit or two.

“So,” Mel says when the biscuit has gone. “A little bird told me you went out on a date last night.” Crowley scowls at her. “Look, if you’re going to bother me, at least hold the tail up? And there weren’t any dates, there was greasy duck and potatoes.”

Mel holds up the tail while Crowley fastens red shortbread to the underside. “So you wouldn’t be opposed to doing it again?”

“What? Eating duck?” Crowley gestures for her to lower the tail and moves over to the neck. “Up. Thank you. And yeah, why not? I mean it’s one less duck in the world.”

“And Mr Fell?”

“Nah, wouldn’t eat him.” Crowley nudges another biscuit in place. “Stick with chips if it’s all the same.”

When he looks up Mel is grinning like an idiot, and as soon as he’s done needing her help scurries off.

“ Weird girl,” Crowley mutters, and sets to work on the apple.

“Bakers, you have ten minutes to go,” Sue shouts, and Newt drops a tray. Crowley glances up, but Anathema is already helping him pick up the pieces. Her bake is finished and waiting at the edge of her counter. Across from her Aziraphale is fussing over a bag of green icing, frowning at the nozzle. Crowley clicks his fingers and a blob of icing squirts out, hitting the Angel on the chin. He miracles it away with a flick of his finger, not before giving Crowley an unimpressed look.

Crowley sniggers, and slots the last biscuit in place, a large round of shortbread covered in red icing, with a peppermint leaf pressed just so at the top to resemble a leaf on an apple stem. He takes a step back, admiring the glossy scales and sinuous curves, and thinks maybe he’ll scrape through this week after all.

Sue counts down the last ten seconds, one arm around Newt’s shoulders, but there’s still the judging before it’s over. They’re sent out for lunch while the tent gets cleaned down and made ready for the afternoons filming, and Crowley finds a quiet patch by the walled garden to soak up the early summer sunshine and not think about biscuits for a little while. He must have dozed off at some point because he opens his eyes to an Eric leaning over him.

“I will lowjack you, Mr Crowley,” she warns, and Crowley hauls himself to his feet.
The stools are out again in the tent, five of them in a line in front of the table where the judges are waiting. Soon it will be four. It’s a far too depressing thought to linger on, so Crowley perches on the end, and again it feels odd to not have someone on his right. Tracy is at his left still, and grips his hand, looking nervous.

Aziraphale is called up first, and Crowley sits up, curious to see what he’s made. At first glance it’s a blur of green and blue and flashes of white, until he rotates the base and Crowley can see what it is, a grass-encircled pond with a cluster of little ducks floating on it.

“How charming!” Mary enthuses. “What are they, macaroons? I haven’t had a macaroon for years.”

Aziraphale practically glows with the praise. “Yes, I do rather miss the old coconut macaroons, and one of my favourite pastimes is feeding the ducks at St James Park, so—”

“And the pond,” Paul reaches over to destroy the pastoral scene, cracking a piece of pond to reveal biscuit covered in glossy, crisp icing. “What’s that made with?”

“Almond biscuit,” Aziraphale explains, ignoring him in favour of Mary. “Do try a macaroon.”

Mary nibbles at a duckling, commenting on the almond coming through. Mel snags the largest duck and splits it with Sue.

“Not bad,” Paul says, maddeningly vague.

“Lovely,” Mary adds.

Newt is called up next, and carries his… well, Crowley isn’t sure what it is. A sheep? A rabbit?

“It’s my mum’s dog,” Newt says, and Crowley hopes it’s not an accurate depiction, Newt’s mums dog looks like a sausage that’s rolled across the floor of a barbershop. “There were supposed to be more biscuits but I… I dropped them.”

“What a shame,” Mary says kindly, breaking off a piece of ear, possibly.

“Underbaked,” Paul says, before snapping off the dogs nose. “And this is overbaked.”

“Oh, hardly,” Mary chides gently.

“Underbaked, overbaked, wombling free,” Newt says with a nervous laugh, before taking the bake away.

Crowley is called up next, and carries his tray over to the judges, setting it down with a flourish before Mary.

“Oh goodness!” Mary gasps. “Look at that! Well, I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Before them sits a serpent, red-bellied and dark-bodied, it’s biscuit scales coiled in an elegant sprawl. It’s eyes are golden glace cherries, and nested in the coils is a shortbread apple. Over his shoulder Crowley hears Aziraphale let out a theatrical little gasp.

“Mary,” Crowley leans in a little. “You must try the apple.”

A second, louder gasp.

Mary obliges, taking a dainty bite from the apple before moving on to the scales.

“The presentation is excellent,” Paul says, smug in a way that warns Crowley of what’s coming. “But the biscuits themselves are a little bland.” He tuts, shaking his head. “Style over substance again.”

“But the substance is pretty good,” Sue interrupts, biting into the apple. Crowley whisks the display away, pausing long enough to offer Aziraphale a bite of apple. He looks scandalised at the suggestion, and doubly so when Crowley tosses it to Tracy instead. She is called up next, and slips the biscuit into her apron pocket for later before fetching her bake.

“This is…” Paul says slowly.


“I’m going to be pooping glitter for a week,” Mel whispers.

Sue shakes her head. “You don’t have to—”

“No, no.” She holds a hand up to stop her co-host. “I do. I owe it to myself.”

Tracy has created a unicorn. The horn itself is impressive, a thin strip of dough stained rainbow colours and twisted round a metal cone for baking. The rest of it is sheets of gingerbread, glued together by royal icing to create a rather boxy horse, and the tail and mane are a rainbow of
buttercream. Plus all the glitter.
Paul takes a perfunctory bite of gingerbread before making vaguely critical remarks and taking a step back, letting the women have at it. Mary seems very in favour.

Last to be called up is Anathema, who brings a small biscuit box up to the judges. It is iced to look like a christmas shortbread box, the kind with bucolic images of Scottie dogs and snow.
“Oh, this is very clever,” Mary says, lifting the lid with glittery fingers.
“But it’s not an animal,” Paul points out. “The brief was - oh!”
Inside the biscuit box, nestled among the neat little shortbread rounds, are little white and brown mice.
“The mice are Pfeffernüsse,” Anathema explains.
“Bless you.”
“Yes.” She gives Mel a strained smile. “It’s a spiced gingerbread.”
The whole display is clever and charming, and Mary can hardly bear to eat one of the mice. Paul pops a whole one in his mouth, icing whiskers and all.
“Delicious,” he says, because what else could he say. “And very clever.” He holds out his hand, chest puffed out like he’s paying Anathema a great compliment. She gives his hand a dubious look but takes it, giving a perfunctory bounce up and down before quickly letting go, then trying to be unobtrusive about wiping her hand on her apron.
“It’s perfect,” Mary enthuses. “You should be very proud. Such a wonderful idea.”
Anathema smiles, and quickly takes the bake away before they say anything else nice about it.

With deliberations still to be done, they are sent out for tea and biscuits, and one of the Erics portions out a little of everyone’s bakes to try out on the lawn. Crowley spots Tracy sharing pieces of her apple, and the irony isn’t lost on him.

Anathema’s bake is perfect, though Crowley doesn’t try the mice, or even Aziraphale’s ducks. It sets off an odd little sense-memory in his throat, and it’s hard enough having limbs as it is. They are called back into the tent, and take their places on the stools.
“Thank you all for the crunchiest, munchiest,” Sue pauses. “And sparkliest biscuit week we’ve ever had. This week I’m the lucky one, and get to announce the Star Baker. Anathema, well done!”
Newt is the first to give Anathema a hug, looking proud.
“Unfortunately you can’t all come with us to next week’s challenges, and we have to say goodbye to one of you.” Mel turns to Newt, looking distraught. “Newt, I’m so sorry.”
The lad takes it well, nodding his head and letting Anathema hug him back. Mel and Sue hurry over to join in, pulling him off his stool as they embrace him. It’s probably the most attention he’s gotten from women in his life.
“It’s fine,” he says, half laughing, half sniffing. “I thought I’d go out in the first week, but I got to meet some wonderful people.” He gives Anathema a hopeful little smile, and she grips his hand.
“Really wonderful people.”

Crowley’s heart, which seemed to have forgotten it’s job for a few minutes there, starts thumping again, loud and insistent enough that he feels it in his throat. That was close. He breathes in and out a few times, waiting for his idiot flesh to catch on it’s fine and grips the edge of his stool you’re fine.

Breathing is useless, so he slips down from his perch and heads outside, maybe fresh air will settle his nerves, not that they need settling or anything because he is Fine. He manages about one breath of warm, summer air before Aziraphale comes over to join him.
“Wily old serpent,” the Angel murmurs. It sounds fond.
“That’s me,” Crowley says, grin coming easily but not sticking around. “Poor kid.”
“Oh, he’ll be fine,” Aziraphale says dismissively. “Got out of the house, broadened his horizons, all that sort of thing.”
“Got a girlfriend,” Crowley adds, something jabbing under his ribs like a thorn. If he didn’t know
Another week on Earth lies ahead of him, plenty of time to figure out his next move.

“Quite,” Aziraphale glances over at an Eric approaching with a sheaf of papers.

“So,” Crowley casts around for something else to say. “You like feeding ducks, eh?”

“Yes, I - Thank you, my dear - I rather like St James. Not far from the bookshop.”

Crowley doesn’t answer, looking at the schedule for next weekend. His idiot heart starts hammering again, his grip so tight that his thumb punches through the page.

What the fuck? What the fuck is a Petit Fours? What the fuck is a Daquoise?

“Oh, it’s French week!” Aziraphale says, looking delighted.

“Ssshit!” Crowley hisses. He isn’t just out of his depth here, he’s in the middle of a hungry Orca sanctuary dressed as an injured and delicious seal.

Aziraphale glances at him, rosy cheeks paling at the look on Crowley’s face. “What? What’s wrong?”

“I’m fucked,” Crowley whispers, screwing up his sheet and throwing it into the rhododendrons.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” Aziraphale says lightly.

Crowley shakes his head, tucking his hands in his pockets. All his cunning and plans replaced by an inner monologue of ohfuckerohfuckerohfucker.

“No. No, this is it,” he says. It’s almost a relief, in a terrible sort of way. That’s what it means when your knees start to give out, doesn’t it? You’re relieved. He can stop scheming now. It’s all over.

“Ah well” He gives Aziraphale a wounded little smile. It doesn’t have to be the Pit. He can leave, he can run away, go to one of the nebulae, maybe a binary star system, somewhere really far away where Hell can’t find him. But he needs to go now. “It’s been nice knowing you.”

Crowley walks off, with little thought beyond put as much distance between himself and Earth as possible, and maybe come back in a few billion years when things die down.

“Wait!” Aziraphale calls, and Crowley falters, looking over his shoulder.

“What?” Crowley has a sudden, ridiculous urge to ask the Angel to come with him. He’d say no, of course he’d say no.

“I’ll…” Aziraphale hesitates. “I’ll teach you. Alright? We both live in London, don’t we? So I’ll show you how to make a Daquoise.”

“You’d give me lessons?” Crowley says, not quite believing him.

Aziraphale is an accomplished baker, and with his guidance Crowley could claw back a little more time, another week. And after that? Well, anything is possible.

“A lesson, yes.” Aziraphale fidgets, as if drawing up courage from some hidden well. “But you owe me dinner.”

“Anything.” Crowley retraces his steps, arms spread wide. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. The Savoy? The Criterion? The Ritz?”

Aziraphale flushes, pink from the tips of his ears to his rounded cheeks. “The Ritz does sound nice.”
Crowley adjusts the statue on its plinth again and frowns. However he positions it, something isn’t right. He created the bloody thing, so why won’t it behave?

This way, you can see the full extent of the spread wings, the white primary feathers dipping over the lip of the plinth in a pleasing counterpoint to the Angel’s lofty status, albeit currently theoretical as he’s pinned down by a russet-winged Demon. The Demon’s wings are raised aloft, making a mockery of the whole concept of Above and Below, but for some blasted reason his foot doesn’t rest on the plinth, hovering an inch or so above it, and it throws the whole composition out of alignment. Crowley rotates the piece, so the Angel’s braced hand and the Demon’s foot can both fit on the plinth, but the Angel’s wing keeps them from lying flush to the surface. Crowley could miracle up a new plinth, but in what shape? Maybe a round surface? He could do some subtle etching to denote the continents, suggesting their battle for dominance taking place of Earth. The doorbell rings, and Crowley lets out a frustrated little noise, moving the statue back to the previous position. He’ll fix it later, or not, it’s probably fine. The whole thing is there to get Aziraphale flustered, not to give Crowley anxiety over interior design.

He grabs his sunglasses and skulks over to the door, ready to yell at whoever wants to bother him on a Saturday morning. If it’s those pricks touting copies of The Watchtower again, he’ll melt their faces off.

“What?” Crowley snaps, yanking open the door. In the hall stands Aziraphale, a Waitrose bag for life in one hand and a couple of books tucked under his free arm.

“Well!” he says, looking deeply offended. “Is that any way to welcome a guest?”

“Sorry,” Crowley mumbles, “Thought you were those prats in the polyester suits and pamphlets.” Aziraphale’s ill-humour vanishes instantly. “Oh, those Latter-Day Saints people? I cannot abide them. You know, they came into my bookshop once and -”

Crowley steps back, holding the door wide. “Come on, Angel,” he says, motioning for Aziraphale to come through. “Wasn’t expecting you ‘till this afternoon.”

“Well, yes.” Aziraphale holds up his bag, a punnet of raspberries threatening to spill from the top. “The early bird catches the worm, they say.”

“We’re cooking worms?”

Aziraphale fixes him with an unimpressed look. “Are you going to give me the tour, or must I find my way around myself?”

“Oh. Yeah. Right.” Crowley shuts the door with a bang. “This way.”

Crowley leads Aziraphale to his office first, though it’s an unsuitable term for the large space, empty but for the massive table and single chair. The only other features of note are the window overlooking the Thames and a large flatscreen TV on the wall.

“Well, this is...” Aziraphale hesitates, trying to find something to say other than ‘bleak’, or ‘grim’, or worst of all ‘lonely’. Crowley is aware of how cold the poured concrete floors and walls are, how loudly it speaks of isolation that there is only one chair at the excessively large table.

“Spacious.”

“Yeah. Well.” Crowley takes off his sunglasses and throws them on the table. “Keeps the rain off.”

Aziraphale lifts his bag onto the table, setting it down next to the antique answerphone, and takes a long hard look at the chair. “Well, the decor is... strident, I would say.”

“It’s not decor, it’s a chair,” Crowley sniffs.

“It’s a throne.”

Crowley gives the chair an objective assessment. Yes, the gold might be a bit much. And the red velvet padding. And the engravings and crest might be a bit ostentatious too, while we’re at it.
“You don’t like it?”
“It’s so gaudy, it’s hideous.” Aziraphale grins, his face puffing up like an eccles cake. “I love it.”
“Huh.” Crowley waves, in a vague sort of way. “Kitchen’s this way.”
Aziraphale doesn’t comment, attention on the far wall. “What… what is the matter with that wall?” he asks, pointing at where the solid concrete wall seems to have been cut into, like a hot knife slicing into butter, or if you’re feeling less temperate, a chainsaw into a block of ice.
“Oh, that?” Crowley’s mouth twists up. The statue is on the other side of that door, at the end of the hall. Maybe putting it there wasn’t such a great idea. “That’s a door. Spins round.”
Before he can warn the Angel away, Aziraphale is at the door. He gives it a cautious little push, and it turns smoothly, revealing a profusion of greenery.
“Oh, Crowley!” Aziraphale gasps, drifting through the doorway as if entranced.
The slanted light filtering through the window, sliced by a set of blinds left half-open, falls upon a dense urban jungle. Palms loom overhead while narrow-leaved Dracaena and Yucca fill the space below. Nestled in between them, in little plastic pots tucked here and there, are smaller, glossy-leaved Alocasia and Bird of Paradise and Aspidistra.
“Oh, my goodness,” Aziraphale breathes, reaching out to touch the waxy leaves of a Ficus. “Aren’t you beautiful?”
The plants all seem to lean towards him, drawn by his Grace, and Crowley growls at them, making them tremble from root to stem.
“Don’t,” Crowley warns. “You’ll make them soft.”
“Crowley,” Aziraphale chides gently. “Every living thing needs kindness to flourish.” He cups his palm against the underside of a broad-leaved Monstera. “He takes good care of you, I can tell.”
The leaf trembles, and he soothes it with a gentle sweep of his thumb.
“I said stop it,” Crowley grumbles, a little less forcefully. He could swear the Yucca looks a little taller, a little greener. “There’ll be no living with them after this,” he sighs.
“Oh shush,” Aziraphale says, but there’s no bite behind the words as he reaches out for a fern.
“Now, you all must know it’s all just hot air. His bark is much worse than his bite, I promise.”
“Shut up, Angel,” Crowley mumbles, but the battle is already lost.

“Oh.” Aziraphale looks up from undoing all Crowley’s hard work. “What’s down there?”
He nods to the hallway, and the plinth at the end.
“Bedroom,” Crowley mutters, mind on how to get his plants back in line. “Bathroom.”
Aziraphale wanders off down the hall, and why is he so at home in Crowley’s flat? No one should feel welcome here. Hell, even Crowley doesn’t feel welcome, and it’s his bloody place. “Well, this is…” Aziraphale says, approaching the plinth at the end of the hall. His words fade as he gets closer. “An interesting piece,” he says at last.
“It’s good and evil wrestling,” Crowley says, watching the Angel’s ears for any sign of pink.
“With evil triumphing.”
Nothing. Not a whine of despair or a splutter of outrage. Aziraphale cocks his head to one side, studying the red-headed figure’s face. “Wrestling?”
“Yup.”
“Are you quite sure?”
Crowley lets out a startled little snort. “Come on, Angel. Kitchen’s this way.”

Aziraphale might have been vocal in his admiration of the plants, and even Crowley’s taste in statuary, but he regards the kitchen with a critical eye. Slate grey units topped with black marble, polished to a high shine. A single, glass-topped coffee table. An oven embedded in one wall, only distinguishable by the chrome handle and glass front. Aziraphale opens the oven door, regarding the sparkling clean inside with barely repressed scorn.
It is not the kitchen of a cook. There is a set of Japanese knives stuck to the wall on a magnetic strip, but Crowley has never used them. The cupboards are empty but for a few bottles of wine, and
the drawers empty but for a few teaspoons and a corkscrew. Crowley doesn’t even recall buying the teaspoons.

“It’s a bit cold,” Aziraphale says at last.

“Oh. Right.” Crowley stands in the corner, shoulders up to his ears, and feels Judged. He didn’t care for it in Heaven and he doesn’t care for it in Mayfair. “I’ll turn up the heating.”

“Oh, no. I don’t mean that I’m cold. Just that…” Aziraphale gestures to the counters. “Well, it’s all a bit impersonal.”

“Good.” Crowley sniffs. “I like impersonal. Big fan of impersonal.”

“Yes, but it’s not very homey is it?”

The Angel probably has a cozy little flat above his bookshop, with wall to wall chintz and overstuffed sofas and lamps fringed with little tassels. He probably has doilies.

“Right. Well.” Crowley sucks in a breath and puffs it out again, barely giving the oxygen he’s moving around time to get into his bloodstream. “Where would you rather do this? You want me to miracle us into Raymond Blanc’s kitchen or something?”

Aziraphale’s mouth twitches in distaste. “Goodness me, no. This will do, I suppose.”

“You’re too kind,” Crowley sneers, but the Angel has already gone to fetch his bag.

Aziraphale returns a minute later, coat removed and bag in hand. Crowley will probably find he owns a coat rack next time he goes into his office. Aziraphale puts his books on the coffee table and the bag down on the marble counter and rummages around, pulling out a fold of cloth from its depths.

“Do you have your own apron?” he asks, shaking out the cloth to reveal a pattern of pink roses but thankfully no frilly lace.

“Mmmnah,” Crowley shrugs. “‘S fine.”

“Oh, don’t be silly.” Aziraphale rummages in the bag again and pulls out a second apron, holding it out. “Here, I brought a spare.”

Crowley snatches it, glaring at the Angel who is far too busy putting on his rosey little number to notice. Aziraphale ties the little cord around his waist in a bow, and nods to Crowley to get on with it. Crowley frowns as he unfolds the apron. It’s green. It has little red apples all over it.

“You bastard,” Crowley whispers, and there is that blush he had worked so hard for.

He puts on the apron, leaning against the counter while Aziraphale unpacks the shopping.

Hazelnuts, sugar, cornflour, eggs, cream. Box after box, packet after packet, is pulled out of the Mary Poppins carpet bag-for-life and set on the counter, until they are in danger of running out of space. Another box of eggs, a slab of dark chocolate, a lemon, milk…

“Bloody Hell, Angel?” Crowley pushes the packets of hazelnuts away from the edge of the counter where they threaten to spill over. “How much stuff are we making?”

“Just the Dacquoise,” Aziraphale says primly, pulling a book out from the very bottom of the pile on the table. It has a picture of Mary on the cover.

“All this is for one cake?” Crowley picks up a bag of sugar, hefting it in his hand. “That seems a bit much.”

“Some things are worth the effort,” Aziraphale takes the sugar out of his hand and puts it back on the counter. “Now where are your baking trays?”

“My what?”

Aziraphale lets out a loud, put upon sigh, and miracles up a baking tray. “Here.” He holds it out to Crowley. “I take it you don’t have a food processor.” Crowley looks at him blankly. “Oh Lord, give me strength. Put two hundred and fifty grams of hazelnuts on this tray, and put it in the oven. Set it to one-eighty.”

Crowley looks between the tray and Aziraphale, and quietly accepts that this will be his life for the next few hours.

Aziraphale could click his fingers and miracle the mound of lightly toasted hazelnuts into powder, but apparently that isn’t ‘sporting’. He does bring a sturdy looking food processor into existence.
It’s a functional piece of toughened glass and plastic that looks out of place in Crowley’s kitchen, but he still has to tip all the nuts into it and jab at the pulse button until they’re reduced to a sticky mound of crumbs.

While Crowley dutifully blends the nuts, Aziraphale magics up even more supplies. Jovial-looking spatulas and whisks in bright colours fill the sink. Earthenware bowls that weigh half a ton when empty take up space on the counter. That the Angel looks right at home is the most unsettling part. Sugar and cornflour are weighed on a ridiculous cast iron set of scales, the kind that has tiny little brass weights that are arranged on the flat pan on one side while the ingredient to be weighed goes into the bowl on the other side. They get stirred into the nuts while Aziraphale separates egg whites from their yolks.

“Here.” Crowley finds a bowl of phlegmy egg whites shoved into his hands. “Beat them until they’re stiff.” Crowley raises an eyebrow, and Aziraphale huffs impatiently, handing him a pink plastic whisk. “Oh, do behave.”

After five minutes of constant whisking, Crowley starts to see the appeal of those electric bastards they keep in the tent. He’s pretty sure another minute and his arm is going to drop off at the elbow.

“Angel,” he whines for the third or fourth time, at this point no one is counting. “They must be done by now!”

Aziraphale barely glances at the bowl. “Keep going.”

Another few minutes and Crowley’s arm is definitely on fire. He can’t see the flames yet but he can feel them. “Augh!”

Aziraphale has no sympathy, and adds a spoonful of sugar to the mix with a cheery. “Keep going!”

Spoon after spoon of sugar is added to the bowl, and Crowley can grudgingly admit that the egg whites, formerly slimy and viscous, now look like the glossy little peaks of snowy mountains.

“Huh,” he says as the last of the sugar gets sprinkled over the eggs. “Look at that.”

“Yes, it looks perfect,” Aziraphale says, face crinkling in pleasure. “Now we fold in those hazelnuts.”

He takes Crowley’s whisk, replacing it with a turquoise spatula, and lifts up the bowl of ground nuts.

“What’s this ‘we’ business?” Crowley mutters. “I’m doing all the work.”

“Well, hard labour is it’s own reward.”

“No it bloody isn’t.”

Aziraphale pauses, exasperated. It’s wonderful how easy it is to get him riled. “Just. Fold them in carefully. You don’t want to lose all the air.”

“Got it.” Crowley smirks. “I’ll be gentle with your nuts.”

Aziraphale doesn’t rise to the bait this time, just shakes the hazelnuts into the bowl.

“I will be tender and loving when handling your nuts.”

Aziraphale puts the bowl on the counter, and takes a roll of baking paper out of his bag.

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Aziraphale puts the bowl on the counter, and takes a roll of baking paper out of his bag.

“Get them nice and coated in sticky white-”

“Crowley!”

The eggy nut mix gets spooned into a piping bag, probably the only thing in Aziraphale’s kitchen arsenal that is plain white, and under the Angel’s guidance Crowley pipes out a disc each on three baking trays. Aziraphale slides them into the oven, setting a little timer shaped like an apple to one hour and putting it where Crowley can see it.

“So that’s a Dacquoise is it?” Crowley claps his hands together. “Well, that was fun, how about we go out for an early lunch? I know a-”

“My dear fellow, we’re not done.” Aziraphale titters to himself. “There’s still the ganache and filling to make. Oh, and I thought a praline might be nice, you know, to finish it off.”

Crowley wishes he was wearing his sunglasses, so Aziraphale couldn’t see his blank expression.

“Yeah. Sounds great.”

Ganache he’s made before; cream and chocolate and creative cursing until it becomes a steaming
puddle.  
“Well, that’s certainly one way of doing it,” Aziraphale remarks before handing Crowley the dreaded whisk. Crowley whines loudly, but whisks the ganache until it is stiff and pale and his entire body hates him.  
“There,” Aziraphale says, covering the bowl and putting it in the fridge. “That’s all the whisking for now.”  
Crowley lets out a soft groan of relief, and pretends not to notice the Angel surreptitiously lick ganache from the whisk before dropping it in the sink. He’ll work out there’s a smudge on his nose eventually.

At some insistence on Crowley’s part, which was in no way whining or childish, no matter what certain Angel’s might say, they take a break for a cup of tea. Crowley has neither cups, teabags or kettle in his flat, just a sleek, black and deeply cantankerous coffee machine. The first time he used it he dutifully inserted an environmentally unsound pod into the appropriate slot, and black, bitter coffee spilled out of the little spout at the front. It never occurred to him to replace the pod, or even add water to the reservoir. He’s not even sure if he ever remembered to plug it in, but if you poke a button coffee comes out, and that suits him fine.  
Aziraphale, however, has other opinions.

Crowley, grumbling loudly, leaves the Angel to his books and heads out the flat to the Costa down the street. The Starbucks is closer, but the Angel won’t touch their tea, something about the water not being hot enough. Ugh.

He comes back ten minutes later with two paper cups of tea and a wedge of rocky road brownie, elbowing the door open and yelling. “Oi, Angel!”

In Crowley’s absence Aziraphale has made himself at home in the office, though he has carefully avoided Crowley’s golden throne, miracling himself up an armchair by the window. The summer sunlight streaming through the window brings the creases and folds of his clothes into sharp relief. It catches the pale of his hair, making it shine like a halo.

Crowley stops in the doorway, fixing the image in his memory. Something to hold onto when things get really bad. His pulse flutters in his throat, and dreadful, terrible thoughts creep from his mind to his tongue.

“I.” Crowley clears his throat, swallowing down every stupid hopeful one. They can dissolve in stomach acid for all the good they’ll do him. “I thought you might be hungry.”

Aziraphale looks delighted. “Oh, yes. Thank you, my dear.”

Crowley holds the paper bag out at arms length, dropping it into his outstretched hand. An instant later the brownie is sitting on a plate, a linen napkin tucked between the Angel’s fingers. His paper cup becomes a delicate china cup and saucer, decorated with apple blossoms, and he is not letting that go, is he?

There is nowhere for Aziraphale to put down his cup, until there is.

“You could at least stick with the theme,” Crowley mutters, eyeing the elegant little side table that has appeared.

“Well, to do that I’d have to miracle up a block of concrete, wouldn’t I?” Aziraphale murmurs, flicking his fingers and making a tiny silver fork appear.

*What a bastard,* Crowley thinks. Another thought rises up from the depths, swimming up from the benthic abyss to the light, and he drowns it before it can speak. He drops onto his throne, throwing his legs over one arm and using the other as a backrest, and slurps his tea noisily.

When the tea is drunk and Aziraphale bustles back to the kitchen, the armchair and table don’t vanish. They remain right where the Angel left them, jarring and out of place. There are a few more books on the table too, and at this rate Crowley half expects a bookcase to appear. Not a sleek, clean-edged number that is designed to hold one *objet d’art* and maybe one of those huge coffee table books people buy to look clever and have never cracked the spine of. It wouldn’t even be something functional and stylish from IKEA either. It would be made of wood, *named wood,*
and have a faint smell of beeswax. And it would be full of books; paperbacks and hardbacks, fiction and cookery and travel and horticulture. It would be hideous. Crowley stares at the empty wall, and wishes it was already there.

By the time Crowley returns to the kitchen Aziraphale is already starting on the next stage. “Creme patissiere,” he trills, stirring milk in a little saucepan he got from somewhere. “You’ll need your whisk.”

“Oh, G-” Crowley stops himself. “Balls,” he says instead. “You said we were done whisking.” “I said ‘for now’,” Aziraphale says primly. “This is later, where there is more whisking to be done.” “Augh.”

“A hundred and twenty five grams of sugar, if you please.” The Angel is in a deplorably good mood. It must be the chocolate. “Into the bowl with the egg yolks, and whisk!” Crowley does as he’s told, and then - horrors - has to add some nasty-looking coffee extract that he’s pretty sure has never seen a coffee bean. After that he has to whisk in some cornflour, which makes everything go lumpy.

“Keep whisking, my dear,” Aziraphale says, removing his pan from the heat. He adds the hot milk to Crowley’s bowl in a steady, steaming trickle, and Crowley dutifully mixes it all together. The whole mess goes back into the pan, and Crowley is sent to the cooker with it with instructions not to let it catch or curdle. He doesn’t say what it’s not supposed to be catching.

“You know I can just miracle this?” Crowley wipes his brow with his sleeve. “None of all this messing about.”

“Yes, but it wouldn’t be fun,” Aziraphale insists, which sounds like utter bollocks.

Once the creme whatever is in the fridge cooling, Aziraphale sets Crowley to work on the praline. It mostly involves staring at a pan of sugar as it does nothing on the hob, waiting for the moment it starts to burn. Once it looks like golden syrup they add hazelnuts and lemon juice. A quick stir and Crowley has to spoon out the nuts again, putting them in little clusters on the baking sheet. Once that is done Aziraphale, worthless traitor and utter bastard, pours cream into another bowl and hands Crowley the whisk again.

“Soft peaks, if you please.” Crowley snatches the whisk with a growl, and Aziraphale smirks at him, ambling over to the sink to wash the dishes. He even finds a pair of marigold gloves for the job.

“I can take care of that,” Crowley says, and gets tutted at.


Dishes washed and stacked, Aziraphale combines the cream and the creme stuff, chattering away at how it’s not really ‘creme pat’, but a variation. Crowley sits on the edge of the counter, heels knocking against the slate coloured cabinets, and watches him toast a packet of chopped nuts in a pan.

“So this is supposed to be the Signature Challenge thing, right?” he asks as Aziraphale tips the nuts into a bowl. “So what, we’re all making the same thing this time?”

“No, of course not.” Aziraphale starts making space for the Great Assembly of the Cake. “This is the classic Dacquoise. I will be making a Marjolaine, which is very similar, but has almonds. There are many variations on the theme, as it were.”

“Huh.” Crowley tries to think of a different way the damn thing could be made. “Like, with pistachio or something?”

“Yes, exactly.” The cleared space is quickly filled with bowls from the fridge, and the cold discs of meringue. “Or you could add fruit, like raspberry or lemon.” “Apricot,” Crowley says suddenly. “Apricot and almond.” “Oh, that sounds scrummy!”
Crowley puffs up a little, feeling oddly proud. “Yeah, it does.”

Assembly is pretty simple, and doesn’t involve whisking anything. Start with a meringue disc, spread it with the creme stuff, repeat, put the last disc on top. Aziraphale shows him how to spread the last of the goo around the sides of the cake, but getting the toasted nuts to stick to it is the absolute worst. There are nuts all over the counter, and sticking to the soles of Crowley’s boots, but barely anything sticking to the actual cake. He ends up grabbing handfuls and mashing them to the sides while Aziraphale tuts and sweeps up the mess.

Then there is the ganache, which Crowley has a go at piping it out in little swirls. That bit is actually kind of alright, pretty easy to do and looks like someone halfway competent was wielding the icing bag. The hazelnut praline goes on top of the ganache, twelve little clusters on twelve little blobs of chocolate goo, like the numbers on a clock face. And with the cake finally done Crowley can take off his bloody apron.

“There,” Aziraphale says proudly. “Look at what you’ve made. No miracles, no tricks, just decent labour and the honest sweat of—”

“Yeah, but can we eat it?” Crowley interrupts.

Aziraphale’s face crumples up with glee. “I suppose a slice would be a just reward,” he says primly, and fetches a knife.

The cake is pretty good, Crowley has to admit. The meringue is crisp on the outside and chewy in the center, and the creme is rich and smooth. If it is lacking in coffee flavour, it is made up for with cups of coffee from Crowley’s machine. To his surprise Aziraphale doesn’t favour coffee drowned in steamed milk and syrup, and is happy to drink it as it comes, burnt and bitter and scalding.

They eat in their respective seats, looking out the window at the tourists gawping up at the Houses of Parliament, huddled together in the brief showers of rain that blight London summers. Crowley watches one tourist struggle with their rucksack, pulling out a bright plastic mac. By the time it’s unravelled and they’ve put it on the rain will have passed, and by the time they have it packed away again it will start again.

Aziraphale lets out a wistful little sigh.

“Something on your mind, Angel?” Crowley murmurs, pushing the last bite of Dacquoise around his plate.

“Hm? Oh, nothing really.” Aziraphale had savoured every last mouthful of his own slice of cake, and his gaze keeps flitting to the piece uneaten on Crowley’s plate. “I was just thinking of when I first settled in London, back in, oh, 1600 I seem to recall?” He glances at Crowley for confirmation, but only gets a shrug.

“No idea,” Crowley says. “Pit, remember?”

“Oh. Yes.” Aziraphale pales a little, and Crowley offers him the last of his cake. He lets out a soft exclamation of thanks, as if there wasn’t a whole bloody cake sat on the kitchen counter waiting for someone to eat it.

Crowley stares as the Angel scrapes his fork across the china, chin resting on his balled fist. “What was it like?”

Aziraphale looks up, a smear of creme on his upper lip that he licks away with a pink tongue.

“London?” His face lights up. “Oh, London was wonderful! I had been around much of Europe in the preceding years, spent a lovely time in Lindisfarne until those gentlemen with the beards showed up.” He frowns to himself. “I didn’t open the shop until 1800, and it took some time to find the right property. I had considered something on the waterfront, but I couldn’t risk water damage to my books and…” He puts his plate down on the table, scraped clean. “Standards of hygiene were rather limited back then. Never mind the winter frosts, in midsummer you could practically walk across the Thames.” He smiles, eyes on a place far away and long ago. “It was a working river back then, you know. Cargo ships from all over the known world, bringing goods for trade.
They would line up along the docks three or four abreast, and the deckhands would have to carry their loads across the deck of each other’s ships to reach the shore. And the postmen travelled by river too, in little boats, rowing up to the waterman’s stairs to deliver their letters.” He smiles to himself. “And you couldn’t move for rats, and had to put a few drops of attar of roses on your handkerchief, hold it up to you nose.” He gestures vaguely to his face. “The smell, you see.”

“You must miss it,” Crowley says softly.

“Yes, some things,” Aziraphale admits. “The food was appalling, you had to go to France for decent brioche.” He stops, mouth working as if chewing on his own words. “And I was very lonely.” He must see something in Crowley's expression, an echo of his own. "Oh, it wasn't so bad. I had my books, of course. And the theater. I never lacked for things to do, just… no one to do them with.”

“Well then,” Crowley murmurs. “It’s not so bad now, then.”

“No.” Aziraphale sighs. “It’s not.”

Time passes, quiet as a mouse on soft paws, wary of disturbing the calm. Crowley collects up the cups and plates that are now presumably his to care for, and Aziraphale fills the sink with soapy water. He washes and Crowley dries, filling the empty cupboards. There is sugar and eggs and milk leftover from the baking, and Crowley finds places for them too, along with the baking trays and saucepans. The cake takes up the entire shelf in the fridge, and it takes some persuading, and maybe a little bit of temptation, to make Aziraphale agree to take half home with him. He miracles up a tupperware box, cream coloured with a pattern of roses along the side, and Crowley can see a conversation about plastics in his future. That will go down like a lead balloon.

Aziraphale fidgets and fusses, looking for something useful to do and finding it all done. The time to depart, box tucked into his bag-for-life and cookery books under his arm, comes and goes, and still he remains in Crowley’s flat, watching the world pass by the window.

“Dinner,” Crowley says suddenly. “That was the arrangement, right? You show me how to make a dac-thingy, and I buy you dinner.”

“Oh, yes.” Aziraphale practically starts glowing at the thought. “I do believe there’s a table for two available at the Ritz, if we hurry.”

Crowley grabs Aziraphale’s coat, thankfully left folded on the table, and not hanging from a ghastly hook of some kind, and makes a show of holding it open for him. The Angel looks utterly charmed, reversing into the open coat and slipping his arms into the sleeves. Crowley slides it over his shoulders, smoothing out an imaginary crease. He grabs his sunglasses, and miracles away any creases and stains from baking on the both of them with a click of his fingers.

Aziraphale looks down at his newly pressed shirt and gives Crowley another of those furtive, happy smiles.

It’s less than ten minutes to walk from the flat to the restaurant, but they cut through Berkley square, passing office workers making the most of the sporadic sun. It has never failed to surprise Crowley just how green London is. You’d think something so full of humans and cars and buildings would be choking on its own dust, but there are parks and trees everywhere, if you know where to look. The Angel’s beloved St James is one, a huge swath of river and greenery in the shadow of the palace, but everywhere there are little parks and squares and gardens. Places for people to sit on their lunch breaks, or walk through when their souls need the touch of green grass.

“Ah, here we are,” Aziraphale announces, and Crowley looks up. His thoughts have been ambling one way while his feet have been walking another, and he finds himself before the vast frontage of the hotel. Aziraphale opens the door, moving with familiar ease to where a concierge is waiting. “It’s all very French,” Crowley mutters as they are led to a table in the rather cluttered dining room. The effect isn’t soothed by the mirrored wall, which only makes the place seem even more cramped.
“Yes, it’s based on the style of Louis XVI,” Aziraphale says happily, snagging a waiter and rattling off a wine order.

“French,” Crowley says again, and settles into his seat. “So what made you choose London? I’d have thought you’d be settled in Paris or something. Run a little patisserie in Montmartre.”

“Ah, Yes.” Aziraphale carefully folds and refolds his napkin, as if his ears haven’t turned red. “There was a bit of a misunderstanding. During the Revolution. Never went back after that.”

We should go. Crowley clamps his teeth together with an audible click before the words spill out. He swallows, careful, and shifts in his seat. “That’s a shame,” he says instead.

“It is rather.”

The menus, when they arrive, might as well have been written entirely in French for all Crowley understands them. And why does everything have *avec*? Is it like salt or something?

“Psst!” Crowley peers at Aziraphale over the top of his menu. “What’s a ballotine?”

Aziraphale twitches, trying to ignore him.

“Tornado of beef?” Crowley risks lifting his glasses up to check. “Oh. Tournedos. Which is a…” Aziraphale clears his throat, and a nearby waiter tops up his wine glass.

“Right. Well.” Crowley turns a page. “I’ll have the… Giovanni Ferlito? That’s pasta, right?”

“It’s the sommelier,” Aziraphale says tightly.

“So what, it’s a soup?”

Aziraphale lowers the menu, and the scowl he’s wearing drops away when he realises Crowley isn’t taking the piss. “A ballotine is chicken or duck thigh, deboned and stuffed. Tournedos is a type of French steak. Giovanni is over there, serving *Coulée-de-Serrant* to that Russian diplomat.”

“That sounds nice, I’ll have a plate of that,” Crowley grins, and Aziraphale ducks behind his menu again.

“You’re terrible,” he mutters.

“That’s the idea.”

After letting Aziraphale sulk for a few minutes, Crowley orders the pithivier, mostly because he likes saying it, and the salmon. Apparently half hour waits for the food is to be expected, so he settles into another glass of wine, soothing the Angel’s ruffled feathers.

“You really are awful,” Aziraphale murmurs, but there’s no sting to it. He is in a nice restaurant with good company, or at least someone to listen to him talk.

“Extremely,” Crowley agrees.

Aziraphale pauses, regarding Crowley with the exaggerated care of someone with half a bottle of wine sloshing around in an empty stomach. “But you’re not… evil.”

“Pssh,” Crowley shrugs. “What is evil?”

“Well…” Aziraphale swirls his wine around in the glass. “The current government seems like a classic example-”

“Nothing to do with me.”

“Nothing to do with the rainforest for financial gain? The continued presence of Nigel Farage on *Newsnight*?”

“The Spanish inquisition.” Crowley takes a quick gulp of wine. “That was your lot, wasn’t it?”

Aziraphale says nothing for a minute, sitting back to look at their surroundings.

“Look,” Crowley says slowly. “You know what they told me downstairs the first time I was sent up to Earth? Aziraphale shakes his head. “Make trouble. And nothing, and I mean nothing I could do would even come close to what the humans are capable of doing to themselves. The French Revolution? The Conquistadors? My side had nothing to do with them, I can guarantee you that. They’re all still stuck on piddling shit like tempting priests and bribing politicians. Fake news? Anti-vaxxers? They’re not creative enough to come up with any of that.” He stops, wetting his tongue with wine. “And I’m guessing your lot aren’t that sharp either.”

Aziraphale is silent for so long, not even touching his wine, that Crowley is pretty sure he’s fucked
“I’m sorry,” he sighs, rubbing at his eyes under his glasses. “I’ll get out of your hair.”

He rises to his feet, pushing the chair back, and reaches into his back pocket for a credit card of dubious origin. At least he can cover the meal, as promised.

“Do you know what the last assignment I received was?” Aziraphale says slowly.

Crowley stops, hand on the back of his chair. “Before the baking thing?”

“Yes.” Aziraphale keeps his eyes on the table. “1803. Gabriel himself came to my bookshop. He walked around for a few minutes, commented on my… appearance, and said ‘As you were’. And that was it. Those were the last orders I received.”

Crowley sits down again. “There must have been something.”

“Nothing.” Aziraphale shakes his head, lower lip trembling. “No Blessings, nothing. Last year I offered to help locate that missing Antichrist child. You know, the one that was supposed to come into his power and bring about the End of Days, only he didn’t. And a third of the seas didn’t turn to blood and the Four Horsemen had to go back to what they were doing before, and the Armies of Heaven and Hell didn’t ride out.”

“Yeah, that rings a bell.”

“Michael told me to go away!” He lets out a frustrated huff. “I swear they only remember I’m here to reprimand me for performing too many miracles. I once got a citation for stopping a baby carriage from rolling into traffic! I thought they had forgotten about me completely until this whole baking show.”

“What a bunch of pricks,” Crowley says.

“The biggest!”

They sit in silence for a minute, and a waiter, sensing their dire need for alcohol, brings them a fresh bottle.

“So,” Crowley says, twisting the stem of his glass in his fingers. “You’re not considered much of an Angel.”

“And you’re not regarded as much of a Demon.”

“Have you ever…” Crowley pauses. “Have you ever thought about quitting?”

To his credit Aziraphale doesn’t immediately start shrieking. A belly full of wine tends to either sharpen or soften indignation, and his ire is focused elsewhere.

“Well, I wouldn’t…” He stops, looking troubled. “I wouldn’t think that sort of thing was possible.”

Crowley falters, uncertain of how hard to push, how easily the Angel’s anger might snap like taxed elastic away from Heaven and right toward him.

“Well someone must have done it before,” he points out. “Look at Lillith, didn’t she just go I’m having none of that and just… went off and did her own thing?”

“Yes, but she was a Demon.”

“Never saw her Downstairs,” Crowley says, more to himself than anyone. “Wasn’t she made out of the same clay as Adam?”

A waiter arrives with their meals, and there is little point in trying to get Aziraphale’s attention when there is Salmon in dill sauce within reach.

“Oh,” Crowley says as the pithivier is placed before him. “It’s a pie.”

While Aziraphale rhapsodises about his salmon, Crowley pushes the fancy pasty around his plate. It’s filled with potato, which is nice enough, but it’s a lot of starch on a stomach that’s already full of cream in its various forms.

“Here,” Crowley says, pushing the plate over when Aziraphale has scraped his own dish clean.

“You finish it.”

“Oh, but you’ve barely touched it!”

“Mnnur.” Crowley shrugs, eyeballing the waiter until he brings more wine. The waiter either can’t see past his sunglasses or refuses to acknowledge Crowley’s existence for wearing them, so Aziraphale does that polite little thing with his fingers that summons assistance without being so
crass as to start clicking.

Polite words are exchanged, and their glasses are refilled. Aziraphale sets to work on the pithivier with renewed enthusiasm.

“What about whatshername?” Crowley says suddenly. “Geraldine? Gomer? Oh no, she was the naughty one. Gertrude? You must know her, she wrote the books about being married to that Jesus kid.”

“Gertrude of Helfta?” Aziraphale pauses, fork halfway to his mouth, and lowers it again. “Oh, yes. I have a copy of her book *Legatus Memorialis Abundantiae Divinae Pietatis*, in very good condition.”

“Cracking read, is it?”

“It’s a work of its time and place,” Aziraphale says delicately.

“Didn’t she say everytime someone said her prayer she’d release, like, a thousand souls from Purgatory?”

Aziraphale puts down the fork completely. “I seem to recall words to that effect, but they were never endorsed by Heaven. And besides, humans came up with the whole idea of Purgatory themselves. I mean really? A waiting room in the afterlife?”

“Well, they do a lot of queuing,” Crowley muses. “Hang on, what about that saint? You know the one, the fellow with the beard? Big staff, very angry? Goes down to Hell once a year and picks one of the damned to be saved?” Aziraphale looks blankly at him. “No? You don’t know him? I figured he was one of your lot.”

“I hardly think Gabriel would be that industrious,” Aziraphale murmurs, taking up his fork and spearing a piece of pithivier. “Or compassionate.”

Crowley’s hand slips, sloshing wine on the tablecloth. Aziraphale, still chewing, gives him a concerned look. Then his ears catch up with what his tongue has been up to, and he stops mid-chew.

“Oh,” he says softly. “Oh, well what I mean to say is—”

“You’re not wrong,” Crowley quickly says before he can backpedal, because ‘I didn’t mean to say that’ can quickly become an overreaction, leading to ideas about how Angels don’t do many things, including bake cakes and dine with Demons. “He doesn’t care. They don’t care who’s in Hell, or in Heaven. The humans have never mattered to them.” Aziraphale stares at him with rabbit-eyes, large and brown, and Crowley reaches over, putting his hand on the spread of white tablecloth between them. “You care. You care about Mary, about Newt and Anathema, about Mel.”

Aziraphale looks at the table, those few inches between them, as if there were landmines hidden beneath the white linen. “You care about Tracy, even though you know she has to lose.”

“She doesn’t have to lose,” Crowley says quickly. “She has just as much of a chance as the rest of them.”

Aziraphale flinches, looking aghast “But you want to win,” he says. “You were sent by Hell to win, just as I was sent by Heaven.”

“I don’t want to win,” Crowley bares his teeth, a low sibilant drawn like a breath. “Hell kept me in the Pit six thousand years, Aziraphale. I owe them nothing. Nothing!”

“But if you don’t they’ll destroy you,” Aziraphale whispers, eyes wide.

“And if you don’t win?” Crowley asks. “What will they do to you?”

Aziraphale puts a hand to his mouth, breath coming in sharp little gasps at the thought of being punished.

“This isn’t ours to win,” Crowley says, trying to make him understand. “It’s the humans. They were given the whole of creation, and look at what they’ve done with it. Look at what they’ve made! Baroque and Hamlet and heritage potato pithivier. And what have we done?”

Aziraphale swallows, eyes closed, and takes a deep breath. “I would like to go home now, if you please.”
“Alright, Angel,” Crowley says softly, backing down. “We can do that.”
Crowley settles the bill and helps Aziraphale with his coat, and they walk in silence through the foyer and onto the street.
“Would it help if I said I was sorry?” Crowley asks as Aziraphale hesitates outside the door. One way will take him to Mayfair and the other to Soho.
“No, that won’t be necessary,” he says, smoothing his hands down the front of his coat, checking everything is in place.
“You left your bag at my place,” Crowley points out, gesturing with his thumb the way they had come from. “But I can bring it to the shop, if you like? It’s no trouble.”
It’s a chance for Aziraphale to excuse himself, to get away from Crowley quickly and quietly, and he doesn’t take it.
“No, a walk would be good,” he says with a wary smile. “Fresh air and exercise, as they say.”
“Come on, then,” Crowley says, and they start walking.
Berkley Square is empty but for an urban fox trotting along. It pauses in its route to watch an Angel and a Demon pass by, before continuing on its way.
Before too long Aziraphale has settled down enough to complain about how many branches of Starbucks they have passed so far. Crowley points out the amount of Prets there are too, and they keep a running total for the last few streets, calling out when they see one.

“Angel,” Crowley announces, shouldering open his door. “I don’t care how nice the salads are, kale does not belong in macaroni cheese.”
“But you haven’t even tried it, Crowley! How can you dismiss something without even tasting it first? The iron tang of brassica against—”
“I haven’t tried having an iron spike hammered through my testicles,” Crowley laughs, holding the door open. “I don’t need to try it to know it’ll be bad.”
“It’s hardly the same thing.”
“It is! Eating kale.” Crowley holds up one hand. “Iron nail through testicle.” He holds up the other hand and makes a show of examining them both. “Can’t tell the difference.”
“Now you’re being ridiculous.”
“Yes, thank you for noticing.”
Aziraphale tries to scowl at him, but then seems to decide it’s not worth the effort. Crowley fetches the tupperware box of cake from the fridge and puts it in the bag-for-life before handing it over.
“Here we are,” he says. “Thanks. Y’know, for all the cake stuff.”
Aziraphale smiles, his face all sweet and pudgy. “It was my pleasure.”
“Yeah, well.” Crowley tucks his tongue in his cheek, fairly sure the next thing he says will go badly. “Don’t be a stranger, alright?”
“Well, the same sentiment in whatever term you find least offensive,” Crowley says instead.
“Thank you.” Aziraphale doesn’t return the offer. Maybe he thinks Crowley is like a vampire and has to be invited into places? “And I will see you Friday evening, yes?”
There is a little bite there, a warning. Behind it lies a plea. Please come.
“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Angel,” Crowley assures him. Reassured, Aziraphale takes his leave, and if Crowley watches him from the window, no one but the plants would know.

* 

“Oi!” Crowley takes a step further into the alley, a narrow snicket that leads from street to river, a shoulder-scrapping path that ends in steep steps down to the water. “Roland!”
There is a wet, skittering sound, and a curious little Eee?
“Here.” Crowley sets the plate down on the cobbles, and the scurry of paws nearby increases tenfold.
Eh-Eee?
“Nah,” Crowley shrugs. “There’s no job. Just… thought you’d like to try a bit.”
He retreats slowly, step by shambling step, and the sound of paws is soon replaced by the sound of delighted and numerous little mouths chewing and little whiskers twitching.
“I mean,” Crowley says to no one. “I wasn’t going to eat it all myself, was I?”
He tucks his hands in his pockets and turn left onto Wapping Wall, whistling as he heads West across the city.
Wyvernquill has again blessed us all with beautiful art!
Go yell at them on Tumblr

Announcing your plans is a surefire way to make God laugh, and by 6am on Saturday Crowley is regretting every thoughtless, well-intentioned word he has ever uttered in his entire existence. To be fair, most of them have only been uttered in the last month or so. Funny that.

I will see you Friday evening, yes? The Angel had said, all wide-eyed and hopeful, still wanting to see him after Crowley had almost fucked things up with all his talk and his questions.

Why does he do this shit? Why does he keep poking and needling? Why is he always asking so many bloody questions?

“Just so you know,” Crowley informs the tan ceiling of the Bentley. “I blame you for all this.”

God does not answer. God hasn’t answered for Eons, and a smarter Demon would stop calling. He takes the second exit at the roundabout, the route familiar by now, and drums his fingers on the steering wheel. Stupid, fragile corporations and all the chemicals fizzing around in them. He’s fine, everything is fine, but adrenaline is still coursing through his idiot body, making his muscles twitch with the urge to dive under the nearest hedge and either make himself look very big and toothy or very small and hidden. If it could just pick one he could work with it, but no such luck. If he let himself he’d probably transform into a ten foot tall stick insect, desperately trying to camouflage itself against the black leather of the Bentley seat. Then he would crash into a tree because stick insects can’t drive, and that wouldn’t be fair on the car.

“It’s fine,” he hisses through gritted teeth as he takes the right turn to Welford Park. “Everything is fine.”

He pulls up outside the Manor house, climbing out and slamming the door shut behind him. The noise summons an Eric, who hurries over with a clipboard and a pinched expression.

“No!” Crowley snaps, and her expression turns blank. The clipboard slips in her grip, and she sways back a little in her unsuitable shoes.

“Gnah!” Crowley bares his teeth, pushing finger and thumb under his glasses so he can pinch the bridge of his nose. She hasn’t done anything wrong, and if he sets her on fire or something he’ll… feel bad about it.

“Everything is fine,” he says, a little calmer to her than he did to himself. “I have been reprimanded, and have sworn to never let it happen again.”

He clicks his fingers and she straightens up a little, grip on clipboard firming.

“Well. Good,” she says, slowly gaining confidence. “The others are already at the tent. There was going to be no elimination of you hadn’t shown up, so you might not be very popular.”

“I’ll live,” Crowley mutters, and stalks across the grounds to the tent.

Aziraphale is waiting outside the entrance, alternating between fidgeting and pacing back and forth. He stops as soon as he sees Crowley stamping across the grass, coming over to meet him.

“There you are!” he says crossly. “You said you would be here Friday, Crowley. You gave your word!” Aziraphale doesn’t wait for him to reply, and Crowley has to remind himself that it’s just because the Angel is concerned and bad at expressing it. “We were so worried! I was absolutely beside myself thinking that you had gotten into trouble or something.” Aziraphale hesitates, long enough to check that no one is listening. “Or that you had been dragged down to Hell or-”
“I was dragged down to Hell,” Crowley says, and isn’t that a log dropped in the fast-flowing river of words from Aziraphale. He sputters, making a fair amount of noise but no actual sentences, and it would be sweet if Crowley wasn’t so rattled.

“Oh, it’s fine,” he says, waving a hand absently. “Nothing I couldn’t talk my way out of.” Aziraphale doesn’t look reassured. “What did they want?”

There is no way in Earth, Hell or Heaven that Crowley is telling him that.

“The usual,” he says instead. “Win, or else.”

“Or else what?” Aziraphale asks, eyes pale and glassy.

Crowley shrugs. “I think it’s just a generic ‘or else’.” He reaches out to turn Aziraphale back to the tent with a light hand on his shoulder. “It’s fine, Angel. They’re just throwing their weight around as usual.”

Aziraphale lets himself be turned. “If you’re sure?”

“Course I am.” Crowley gives him a bright, easy smile. “Come on, its Dacquoise time.”

The judges are already in the tent, along with Mel and Sue who look up when Aziraphale comes inside. Despite what the Eric said, they look relieved to see him.

“Hi guys,” Crowley waves a hand. “Sorry I’m late.”

Paul starts spouting off, of course, with some nonsense about time management and respect. Mary lets him say his piece before offering a calm smile and patting him on the arm. Sue is the first to come over to Crowley, though Mel toddles after, reaching out to offer Aziraphale a comforting pat on the arm.

“You alright?” Sue murmurs, low enough to be missed by the cameras. “Trouble at work?”

She knows him better than to ask ‘trouble at home’. When did that happen?

“Something like that,” Crowley admits, because fuck it, he has to talk to someone. “Because you’re doing this?” Sue asks. “Are you going to get fired?”

“Yes.” Out of a cannon, aimed at the sun.

Sue swears quietly. It’s a really awful swear and Crowley is stupidly proud of her. “Fuck ‘em,” he whispers. “Fuck the lot of ‘em, I hate my job.”

She gives him a proud little smile. “Well, after this you’ll be able to get a decent job somewhere, won’t you?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fine,” Crowley nods. Unless someone is in the market for a sooty stain on the hall carpet, probably not.

“Good man.” Sue pats him on the back. “Go get ‘em, ti- ah - you lanky ginger bastard.”

Someone, most likely Tracy again, has moved the electrical bastard off his counter, and Crowley checks through his various Kilner jars to make sure he has everything he needs. He picks up a jar of ground nuts and gives it a shake. Aziraphale will whine about how much better it tastes when you toast and grind them yourself, but honestly, life is too short.

“Too bloody short,” Crowley murmurs.

“Alright, love?” Crowley glances up to see Tracy looking over at him. Todays wig is sleek, coal black bouffant paired with a sweater a shade of blue not found in nature but probably in a packet of smarties.

“Yeah.” Crowley sniffs. “You?”

“Bit nervous, to be honest,” she says. “It’s all a bit fancy, isn’t it?”

Crowley wrinkles his nose. It is all a bit fancy. Before he can say anything Paul clears his throat loudly, calling them to attention.

“Welcome, Bakers,” Mel begins. “To French Week. We will be filet-ing your mignons and croque-ing your bouches.”

Mary lets out a startled little giggle.

“We start with the Signature Challenge,” Sue continues. “Your chance to display your skills with flavours and technical skills. Today the judges would like you to make a Dacquoise. Now, if you didn’t already know, and frankly you should by now, a Dacquoise is a cake made with layers of
hazelnut meringue and creamy filling.”

“The filling can be anything from creme patissiere to chocolate ganache,” Mary continues. “But we want to see clear, even layers when we cut into the cake.”

“The meringue must be crisp on the outside,” Paul continues, because he has to say something.

“And the Dacquoise must be finished and decorated.”

“You have three hours,” Mel adds. “Get. Set.”

“Bake!” they trill, and the contestants get to work.

If you were to suggest that Crowley has decided on almond and apricot Dacquoise just because Aziraphale seemed so taken with the idea, out loud, in front of witnesses, you would get a smack in the teeth for it.

But you would also be right.

Crowley starts with the meringue, whisking up egg whites to stiff peaks. The ground nuts need toasting, but instead of doing the whole business of baking trays and oven temperatures Crowley shakes the jar and swears at the contents until they turn a light golden shade. They get folded into the egg whites along with sugar and cornflour, then put to one side because unlike nuts meringues do need baking trays.

Where Ariraphale had piped his discs of meringue, Crowley decides to go a bit more freeform, spreading the mixture out onto three trays into circles, equally sized but a little rough-edged and peaked.

They go into the oven, which is smaller than the ridiculously expensive one Crowley has in his flat and only has two shelves, so he offers a few stern words about what happens to metal boxes full of heat that get all uppity and burn things, and puts the third tray on the bottom. He shuts the door and sets a timer, and since he has a little time to spare while it bakes, he checks on the other contestants.

Anathema is busy with her own meringues, but she pauses every so often to look behind her at the empty counter where Newt once stood. You don’t notice it at first, not with the cameras and Erics walking around, but the tent looks... emptier. There is the place where Mary had been, chattering away to the cameras. Here is where Dierdre, who only came because her son insisted, had made sherbert lemons. And over there that other girl, Ramanna? She’d gone out the first week.

Crowley shakes himself off, glancing over at Aziraphale. He’s talking to Mary, hands fluttering through the air like pale doves, eyes bright and blue with enthusiasm. Idiot.

Ganache is something he’s made a few times now, and Crowley does it again with ease. Chocolate in bowl, add cream, swear until it goes all melty. Job done, and just in time for company.

“Anthony,” Mary says, coming over to his counter. “So good to see you.”

“Alright, Mary?” Crowley says, grabbing a fresh whisk from a pot of utensils. Bloody whisking, no wonder people keep using those electrical bastards.

“And what are you making for us?”

“Apricot and almond Dacquoise,” Crowley says, puffing up a little bit.

“Oh, that sounds delicious! Have you made it before?”


“You’re old fashioned I see,” Mary remarks, nodding to his bowl. “You like to do it by hand.”

“It’s the best way,” Paul interrupts, coming over to join them, despite Crowley’s best fuck off glare.

“You can really get a feel for the texture of the mix, know the exact moment it’s ready.”

“Well, not everyone is able to whisk by hand,” Mary says, pointedly folding her hands on the table. Polio, Crowley had read her bio on Wikipedia. Nothing he could do about it without it being obvious, but she seems to manage well enough without his interference.

“How very ableist of you, Paul,” Crowley says, teeth bared in something that could pass for a smile. “I’m sure Mary and her mixer could put your whisking to shame.”

“Sure,” Paul says, backpedalling. “Of course she could.”

“I look forward to tasting the results,” Mary says, kindness incarnate, and pulls Paul away before
he can say anything else.

Crowley turns off the oven and cracks the door open, letting the meringues take their time cooling. He could check that they’re cooked through and unburnt, but he’s been working with the oven long enough to instill a healthy amount of fear into it, and it knows better than to let things burn. With that done he goes back to whisking the ganache, and there’s nothing like chocolate to bring sticky-fingered doppelgangers over in search of things to steal. Crowley doesn’t need much ganache anyway, so he sticks a spoon into the mix and holds it out behind him. “Go on, then. If it’ll keep you quiet.” It’s snatched from his grasp, and Sue ambles into view, spoon shoved firmly in mouth. “Good?”

“D’licious!” Sue pulls the spoon out with a pop. “You’re not covered in flour or swearing at butter, so things must be going well.”

“Yeah, well.” Crowley whisks the ganache for a minute until his arm gets tired. So much bloody whisking. “Easy once you know how.”

“You make a lot of Dacquoise in your spare time?”

Crowley opens his mouth to ask why she’s here and not trying to turn Anathema to Sapphism, and then it hits him. She’s worried. About him. He showed up late and clearly rattled and she’s… checking up on him.

“Just the once,” Crowley says, holding out the whisk for her to lick. “Az - Mr Fell came over to show me how to make one.”

Sue stops, tongue poking between the tines of the whisk. “H’thwa?”

“Fell.” Crowley nods over to where Aziraphale is whisking his creme patissiere. “Came over. Made Daquoise. Had dinner.”

“You had dinner?” Sue parrots. “Was this like pasta at your flat made from whatever was in the fridge dinner, or did you go out somewhere?”

“We ate out,” Crowley says, realising his mistake much too late. “Went to the Ritz.”

“Bloody hell,” Sue mutters. “You don’t mess about.”

Crowley scrunches up his face, hissing irritably because bloody humans and their bloody ideas, and Sue hands the whisk back to him, every last smear of chocolate licked clean. Any irritation is quickly lost to surprise.

“How the bloody hell did you manage that?” he says, holding the whisk up to the light. Not a scrap of chocolate, not even in the overlappy bits.

“I have a very happy girlfriend,” Sue says with a smirk, and dashes off to find Mel.

Crowley glares after her, but there’s not much to be done about it, so he gets on with making the cream.

Creme patisserie is probably the single most ridiculous substance on Earth. Crowley scowls at his pan, arm aching as he whisks at the persistently liquid concoction, waiting for it to thicken up. The world already has custard, and only half the people actually want it, so why do we have to have thicker custard too? He glances over at Tracy, who is whipping up cream for her own filling. No doubt she’ll have a few things to say to Paul about it.

The creme finally starts to thicken up, but he must have had the heat too high or not made sure to scrape the whisk across the bottom of the pan, because it suddenly goes lumpy.

“Gah!” Crowley grinds his teeth, whisking faster, and the lumps only break into smaller lumps. “Bollocks.”

He swears at the creme a little more, before taking it off the heat and tossing the whisk into the sink.

“How do you get lumps out of things?” he mutters, stalking back and forth, pan in hand. He has a vague memory of Aziraphale, wittering on about some pastry or other, mentioning putting the creme through a sieve. Sieves get lumps out of things, don’t they?

He levers open a cupboard with his foot and, because he’s expecting to find them, a bowl and sieve
are sitting on the shelf. He smacks them on the counter, pours the blasted creme into the sieve and
chucks the pan in the sink. If it’s still lumpy he’ll miracle it smooth, and hopefully Aziraphale
won’t notice and give him those sad puppydog but-that’s-cheating look.

While the blasted creme cools Crowley goes outside to get some air. There’s plenty of air in the
tent, but he’d overheard Anathema say it last week and it made the Erics leave her alone for a good
ten minutes, so Crowley barks it at the first Eric to approach him and she scuttles away, leaving
him to his indistinguishable from the inside but apparently better outside air.
When he finally skulks back inside, feeling no more rested or refreshed by air that smells slightly
greener, he checks on Aziraphale, who is busy making praline. Show off.

“Alright, Angel?”
Aziraphale gives him a sharp look, then realises that, although Mel has scampered off to fetch Sue,
no one is near enough to listen in on them. “Tickety boo.”

“Tickety boo?” Crowley repeats, loud and incredulous
Aziraphale ignores him in favour of stabbing a hazelnut with a cocktail stick and dipping it into a
pan of caramel. He lifts the nut up, dripping a quickly setting strand of caramel that the Angel
snips with a pair of scissors and sets the nut on a plate with half a dozen others.
“Oh, can I try one?” Crowley reaches over to grab one, only to get the back of his hand jabbed with
a cocktail stick. “Ow!” He rubs his hand, grinning at Aziraphale. “You stabbed me, you bastard.”
The Angel blushes, as though ‘Bastard’ was the sweetest endearment ever spoken, and skewers
another hazelnut. “I’ve already had to fend off the combined efforts of Mel and Sue,” he says,
dipping the nut and snipping the caramel strand. Then he rather misses his point and offers
Crowley one that he made earlier.
The caramel offers just enough resistance before shattering satisfyingly under Crowley’s teeth,
filling his mouth with sugar and crunchy, creamy nut.

“Nice,” Crowley says.
“How effusive of you.”
“Bloody delicious,” Crowley offers.
“Better.” Dip. Snip. “And how is your Dacquoise coming along?”
“S’fine,” Crowley shrugs. “Just waiting for stuff to cool.”

“Then you should be working on your praline,” Aziraphale points out. He’s irritating in that way.

“Time waits for no man, after all.”
“We aren’t men.”
“Well, time doesn’t wait for us, either.”
Crowley thinks back to right at the start of the competition, when he’d stopped time for a few
minutes, giving himself the chance to complete the challenge in time. Seems like the kind of thing
to keep to yourself. Shame he’s an idiot. “Does for me.”
Aziraphale looks confused, and Crowley mimes clicking his fingers. His expression clears, and
then quickly darkens again, no doubt putting two and two together to make a cheating sod. “You
devious serpent.”
He sounds impressed, under all the Angelic scorn, and Crowley takes that as a win.

At least praline doesn’t need a whisk. Crowley heats up sugar in a pan, adds the almond slices and
tips the whole lot onto a baking tray. Once it’s cooled, he breaks it up into bits, saving a few nice
looking shards for decoration, and puts the rest of it in a plastic bag. Then he imagines the bag is
Hastur’s face and whacks it with a rolling pin until the contents are a fine, golden powder.
He’s pretty sure there is camera footage of him yelling incoherently about toads while battering an
innocent bag senseless, but he’s not too worried about it.

“Right.” Crowley tips the pulverised praline into a bowl. “Put it all together.”
The meringues aren’t quite cold, but he blows on them and they quickly chill and crisp up. The
first one he lays on a serving plate, then covers with a third of the creme. Thinly sliced apricots are
scattered on top, followed by the next meringue disc. More creme, more apricots, and then the last
disc, sandwiched on top. He spreads the last of the creme around the sides, making no effort to make it smooth, and then picks up the bowl of praline. He needs to cover the creme with it, but isn’t entirely sure how without defying the laws of gravity and physics, and they’re tricky buggers to keep track of as it is. When Aziraphale was showing him how to make Dacquoise he’d resorted to pressing handfuls of ground nuts to the creme, and that stuff got everywhere.

“Fuck it,” Crowley mutters, and clicks his fingers. The praline covers the creme outside of the cake, smooth and even, and does not fall off in sad little clumps no matter how much it would like to.

Crowley finishes the cake with an artful little arrangement of praline shards and apricot slivers, and declares the Daquoise finished. Then he notices the untouched bowl of ganache on the counter.

“Oh, for the love of-”

“Oi, harlot?” Crowley leans on the end of Tracy’s counter, waiting for her to tell him off, but she doesn’t seem to notice him, whisk in hand on frown of concentration marring her brow. “Tracy?” Crowley tries again.

This time she looks up from her pan of creme patisserie. “Yes, love?”

Crowley tilts his head to one side, studying her expression. She looks distracted. She looks tired. “I, uh…” He’s pretty sure if he asked if she was alright he’d get a breezy ‘fine’, and they would both quietly pretend it wasn’t a lie. “I made some ganache, but I don’t need it after all.” He holds up the bowl. “You want it? Sue hasn’t stuck her fingers in it, I promise.”

Tracy looks at the bowl, uncertain. “I haven’t made mine yet.”

Crowley moves the bowl towards her. “Well, now you don’t need to.”

He doesn’t push, he would never be so crass. But there’s maybe a little more persuasion in his words than he would use normally, a little more coaxing.

“Well… Alright,” Tracy says at last. “If it’ll only go to waste otherwise.” She reaches out for the bowl with hesitant fingers, pulling it closer before going back to whisking her creme, and Crowley finally notices how much stuff she still has to get done. Her meringues are still cooling and her creme patisserie hasn’t thickened, and there’s no praline to be seen.

“Right.” Crowley slaps his hands on the counter. “What can I do?”

“Oh no,” Tracy says quickly. “It’s fine, love. Really.”

“No, no. My thing’s all finished, I need something to do.” It’s true, in a way. He had planned on bothering Aziraphale some more, but there’s no way in Hell Tracy will be done in time without a little help, Demonic or otherwise. “C’mon, give me a job.”

“Well,” Tracy says, all wide-eyed and hopeful. “You could whip some cream?”

“Nargh,” Crowley says, and grabs another whisk.

Mel calls out that there are ten minutes left, and things become a bit of a blur after that. Between them they get Tracy’s meringues off their baking trays, and with a little nudge from Crowley they stay in one piece while doing so. She smears the bottom disc with the ganache and creme patissiere, adding a handful of raspberries and spreading them around with shaking fingers before Crowley puts the next disc on top. By the time the final layer is in place she’s shaking so hard she can barely add her decorations, and when no one is looking Crowley nudges things around a little, hovering over her as she moves the finished bake to the edge of the counter.

For the last ten seconds of the countdown she rests her head on the sharp jut of Crowley’s shoulder, and he pats her back in a way he hopes is soothing.

They are given a short break while the tent is set up for judging, and Crowley sits Tracy down on a lawn chair in the sun and hisses at an Eric to fetch her some tea. The Eric would have brought tea anyway, and Tracy tells him off for scaring the girl, which makes him feel a little better.

After spending several minutes in conversation with Anathema, Aziraphale works his way over to where Crowley is skulking, over by the herbaceous border with a cup of tea in hand.

“How’s the Dacquoise?” the Angel murmurs, making a show of studying the flowers instead of looking directly at Crowley.
“I doubt the Host of Heaven is watching us, you can relax,” Crowley says. “They only care about the judgement.” He snorts to himself. “I’m surprised they’ve not set themselves up as judges, they love that sort of thing.”

Aziraphale’s mouth twists in a way that means you’re right but do you have to say it? But he relaxes a little. “Yes, I suppose not. I mean they certainly haven’t noticed that you’re a Demon yet.”

Crowley frowns, thinking of the handful of Hellfire he’d waved in those two Angels faces. “They haven’t?”

“Well, if they have, no one’s mentioned it to me.” He looks briefly put out, as if suddenly realising that Crowley presence is exactly the kind of thing they wouldn’t bother mentioning to him.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Angel,” Crowley says, keeping his tone light as he glances back at the tent and sees an Eric waving for them. “C’mon, they’re ready. Get this over with, shall we?”

Back in the tent they are directed to their counters, and wait beside their bakes for the judges.

Crowley’s Dacquoise is still standing, which must be a good sign, though his attention is elsewhere, as the judges approach Aziraphale’s counter first. His Dacquoise is a thing of elegance, decorated with the caramel hazelnuts that Crowley had seen being made earlier. Mary makes appreciative little sighs as she bites into a piece, murmuring something Crowley can’t catch from his end of the tent. The Angel blushes prettily, so it can’t be bad. Paul tastes next, and says something that gets him a sour look, but no amount of criticism from Paul can outweigh Mary’s praise, and he’s soon beaming again.

Tracy is next, fussing at the ends of her wig as the judges approach.

“And what do we have here, Tracy?” Mary asks.

“Chocolate espresso Dacquoise,” Tracy replies.

“Espresso?” Paul says, picking up a knife and slicing into the cake. It’s decorated with chocolate covered coffee beans that Crowley has every intention of pocketing when he gets the chance.

“That’s a bit strong. Aren’t you worried it’ll overwhelm the flavour of the hazelnut?”

“Oh, you know how it is,” Tracy gives Paul a knowing smile. “At our age you need a bit of help getting up.”

Paul says nothing, jabbing his fork into the Dacquoise while Mary is more delicate in her savouring.

“The coffee and hazelnut go very well together,” Mary says pointedly. “And the ganache balances it beautifully.”

“But you didn’t make the ganache yourself,” Paul adds, glancing over at Crowley. “So we can’t judge that.”

“What?” Crowley says out loud. “Since when?”

“It’s a shame,” Paul continues, ignoring Crowley. “Because it definitely makes a difference to the overall flavour.”

They put down their cutlery, and move on to Crowley.

“What have we here?” Mary asks.

“Apricot and almond,” Crowley says. “Though I didn’t grow the hazelnuts or lay the eggs myself, so I don’t know if you can judge it or not.” He wrinkles his nose at Paul, and briefly considers manifesting a pair of fangs. Then spitting venom into Paul’s eyes.

“It looks lovely,” Mary says in the patient, motherly tone born of several decades of Christmas dinners and family gatherings. “I can’t wait to try it.”

Paul cuts into the cake, pretending not to notice the sustained, low hiss coming from Crowley, and takes a single bite before stepping away. “Not bad,” is all he’ll say.

“Beautifully balanced,” Mary offers, moving to the side so Mel and Sue can try a bit. Sue, her mouth still full of chocolate covered coffee beans, drops a couple into Crowley’s hand on the sly. It feels like praise, even though they make Crowley’s teeth feel like they’re trying to vibrate out of his jaw.

Anathema is last with her classic Dacquoise, which seems to go down well with both judges.
Crowley stares vacantly as Paul picks apart the layers and Anathema looks genuinely interested in what he’s saying, only so she can tear it apart on the internet later, and wonders vaguely why she shouldn’t be the one to win.

With the judging over they are sent off to lunch, though Crowley doesn’t much feel like eating. There’s still the afternoon’s challenge to get through, and the whole business of petit fours to deal with tomorrow. Also too many chocolate covered coffee beans is rough on the stomach. He pulls another from his pocket and shoves it in his mouth, crunching as he wanders down to bridge that spans the river.

He figures he has the best part of an hour to kick his heels and grind his teeth, but after ten minutes he hears footsteps on the grass behind him. He looks over to see Aziraphale, wearing his stupid outdoor coat despite the heat, and carrying two plates. On one is a slice of Crowley’s Dacquoise, on the other Aziraphale’s.

“What’s all this, then?” Crowley asks as Aziraphale hands him both plates. They look a lot nicer than the basic white china the catering team provide, and there are sterling stamps on the handles of the forks. Aziraphale miracles up a tartan blanket, and spreads it out on the grass beside the stream.

“It’s a…” Aziraphale tugs at the knees of his trousers before sitting down. “A picnic.”

“Oh.” Crowley stares down at the expanse of tartan waiting for him to sit. “Alright then.”

He puts down both plates before sitting down, stretching his legs out and making the most of the space available, the serpentine urge to bask hard to resist.

Once he’s comfortable, Aziraphale hands him a plate. It’s not his own Dacquoise he’s offered but the Angel’s. Crowley doesn’t say a thing, just picks up the fork. Reassured, Aziraphale quickly takes up his own plate, sinking his fork into Crowley’s Dacquoise and slipping the morsel into his mouth.

Seeing the Angel put Crowley’s Dacquoise, the thing that he made, with his bare hands (and a whisk), into his mouth does something very odd to Crowley’s stomach. It feels very much like he could never stomach food again, and simultaneously like he is starving. He tugs at his collar, suddenly warm, and looks down at his plate.

The Dacquoise is an elegant little thing, layers of textures and snow white frosting, ruffled like the soft white down of a swan feather.

Crowley jabs his fork into Aziraphale’s cake, and if he thinks about that he might as well just throw down the fork and roll right into the stream. The blasted thing would probably boil away, and the ducks would be mad at him.

He sticks the fork in his mouth, pulling the tines out through his clenched teeth, and for a moment the cake sits on his tongue in a fatty, sugary lump. Then the meringue melts, filling his mouth with sugar, which quickly fades into the delicate flavour of almonds. The creme patisserie soothes, it cossets and comforts as it slips down his throat, and his hand moves of their own volition, sinking the fork into the Dacquoise again. The layers of crisp meringue resist him at first, before yielding sweetly to the fork, cleaved apart almost wantonly, begging to be tasted. And taste he does, scraping the layers of light, brittle meringue and sweet, indulgent cream into his mouth, letting them tremble on his tongue a moment before he swallows.

It isn’t bliss, it’s not even close. Bliss would be to push his face into the crook of neck and shoulder, seeking out the scent of vanilla. It would be his mouth on the creamy skin of inner thigh, tasting salt and musk beneath the honey.

Crowley drops his fork with a clatter. The plate is empty, a few smears of cream remaining. “Right,” he says, loud and jarring. “Nice. That was nice.” He nods to himself a couple of times, just to be sure.

Aziraphale looks up from his own plate. The remains of Crowley’s Dacquoise have been neatly dissected, creme separated from meringue and consumed, and the Angel is slowly savouring the
fragments of hazelnut meringue in a way Crowley is definitely not memorising for study later.

“It is?” Aziraphale thinks he’s talking about the bloody cake, and practically glows with delight.

“Oh, I’m so glad you liked it. Gosh, you must have done, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you clear a plate before.”

“Mmmgur,” Crowley says, shrugging. Maybe he should go lie down in the stream for a while.

“This is absolutely scrumptious,” Aziraphale adds, pointing to his plate. “The apricot is a lovely touch.”

Crowley opens his mouth, but no sound comes out, so he pushes his empty plate to one side and lies down.

Aziraphale, damn and blast, shifts over to give him a little more room, his knee pressing against Crowley’s hip. After a long, fraught minute, Crowley carefully places his hand on his stomach, listening to the occasional clink of fork on plate. A minute later and he lets his hand drift sideways, until the side of his little finger touches fabric, and warm skin underneath.

He holds his breath, eyes closed, and slides his hand a little further, cupping his palm against Aziraphale’s knee. It’s an odd thing to hold, lumpy and bumpy, but his hand fits nicely over it, and his heart stops trying to kick its way out of his chest.

Clink. Scrape. Clink. And then the plate is carefully set down on the grass. A fingertip, worn rough with centuries of handling books and scrolls, traces lightly along the edge of Crowley’s thumb. It tickles, enough to make Crowley’s mouth twitch, fingernail tracing down his wrist.

“Mr Fell? Mr Crowley?” An Eric shouts their names across the grass. “It’s time for the Technical Challenge.”

Crowley says a Very Bad Word, and gets a smack on the wrist.

On the return to the tent, Aziraphale is quick to scamper away, giving Crowley a blinding smile before rushing off to fret about the next challenge. Crowley should be fretting too, he’s always been rubbish at the technical stuff. Style over substance, isn’t that what Paul is always saying? At least he has style.

The judges take their places at the front of the tent, cameras positioned around them, and once they are joined by Mel and Sue the filming begins.

“Bakers,” Sue calls out, even though everyone is already paying attention. “Steel yourselves, because it is the Technical Challenge, your chance to show your baking skills when faced with the most basic instructions.”

“Today,” Mel continues. “The judges would like you to make a Gâteau mille-crêpes.”

Crowley wrinkles his nose. A what?

“As this challenge is judged blind,” Sue continues. “Paul and Mary? You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here. Go on, allez-vous en.”

The judges make a show of leaving, and Sue turns back to the contestants once they’re gone. “You have three hours. Get. Set.”

“Bake!”

Crowley reaches for the instruction sheet that comes with every Technical Challenge, and reads out the title. “Gat-oh milly-crapes?” He frowns. “Oh, it’s pancakes!”

Pancakes are easy, aren’t they? The kind of things little kids make for breakfast?

He reads through the recipe, well, list of ingredients. Some stuff is obviously some kind of white chocolate ganache, and the rest of it is pancake batter, which must be like cake batter but runnier.

“Right then,” Crowley mutters, reaching for the slab of white chocolate. “Gat-oh milly-crapes.”

White chocolate and cream go into a bowl, and Crowley curses under his breath until the chocolate melts. There’s also a tub of some kind of gloop that’s neither cream nor cheese, and Tracy says its called Mask-a-pony, which is a bloody stupid name for a dairy product. They’re made from cows, not horses for a start. And the instructions mention something called mascarpone which he can’t find anywhere.

He shoves the ganache in the fridge, filed firmly under Deal With Later, and gets on with making
the pancake batter. Everything goes into a bowl, a whisk is applied, and when the whisk doesn’t get the lumps out a few threatening words deal with them instead.

When he checks on Tracy, she’s working on her ganache, her pancake batter resting to one side. Do pancakes need to rest? Do they get tired? After the whole debacle over his ganache in the previous round he leaves her to it, though it doesn’t sit well with him doing so. He puts it from his mind and grabs a weird-looking frying pan with no raised edge, and gets on with making the pancakes.

Pancakes, it turns out, are not easy. Why the bloody hell do people think that children can make these things?

“Bollocks.” Crowley sighs, and picks up a spatula, scraping the sad, doughy lump off his weird frying pan and flipping it into the bin. He puts the pan back on the hob, maybe it wasn’t hot enough, or the batter is too thick. Or thin.

“Just fucking cook, will you?” he tells the batter, and hears a familiar snigger behind him. “Don’t you start.”

Sue leans against the counter, and watches as Crowley adds a smear of butter to the pan, then once it’s started sizzling a dollop of batter. When he’d watched Aziraphale do it, the butter had slid across the pan in an elegant, foaming glide. The batter had formed a perfect circle with a deft twist of his wrist. After a few seconds of cooking, tiny bubbles had formed on the surface, and Aziraphale had sliced his spatula under the pancake, flipping it over to cook on the other side. The bastard had made it look easy.

It’s not easy.

Crowley’s batter sits in a sullen lump at one edge of the pan, and when Crowley tries to flip it the damn thing sticks to the spatula. What he presents to Sue is burnt on one side and raw in the middle, and she wisely flicks it into the bin to lie with its fallen comrades.

“I hear you went for a picnic,” she says, wiping her fingers on her jeans.


“With Mr Fell over there.” Sue nods to Aziraphale and his pile of perfect pancakes.


“Tell me what happened and I’ll tell you where you’re going wrong.”


Sue checks her watch. “Well, don’t say I didn’t offer,” she says, making as if to walk away from the counter.

Crowley slams down the pan and glares at her. “Gah! Fine. What am I doing wrong?”

“How was the picnic?”

Crowley wheels around to her, ready to fight, but she’s smiling. Not a smug sneer or a malicious grin, and Crowley can deal with mean, he can handle petty shit with his eyes shut, but she looks so fucking fond of him argh.

“It was… nice. Yeah, it was nice,” he says weakly.

“Something you’d do again?”

“Yes.” Okay, so that came out too fast. “I mean sure, yeah. Whatever.”

Sue’s smile widens, and she points to the bowl of batter. “That’s too thick, it needs to be like single cream, not cake batter. Come on, I’ll show you.”

She gathers together some more ingredients, and hands him a clean bowl.

“What?” Crowley says, picking up a fresh whisk. “Is that allowed?”

“Birds Eye potato waffles!” Sue shouts, and the nearest cameraman lets out a frustrated whine, going off in search of something else to film. “No it fucking isn’t,” Sue grins. “Dry ingredients first. Come on, chop chop!”

The second batch of batter looks much thinner, and the first pancake Crowley makes with it is a disaster, but Sue insists that he keep going with it.

The second pancake is better. Not perfect, but better. While Sue eats it with a smear of white chocolate ganache Crowley makes a third, then a fourth. By the sixth she wanders off, looking for
trouble elsewhere, and before long Crowley has a stack of eighteen decent looking pancakes. He
fetches the ganache from the fridge, and looks around the counter for the missing mascarpone.
With none in sight, just the pointless tub of Mask-a-pony, he goes off to bother Aziraphale.
“Oi, Angel,” Crowley says, dumping the bowl on his counter. “How’s this look?”
Aziraphale has a neat stack of pancakes to his right, and is slowly piling them up on a serving dish,
applying a thick layer of ganache, light and creamy and sickeningly perfect, to each layer as it goes
on.
Aziraphale puts down his spatula and studies the bowl critically. “It looks a bit thin. Did you add
the Mask-a-pony?”
Crowley scowls. “No, I need some mas-carp-one.”
“Mas… one…” Aziraphale lets out a sudden sigh, reaching over to retrieve an empty tub from his
bin. “This, my dear. This is mascarpone.” He runs his finger along the instructions. “Mask-a-
pony.”
“Oh.” Crowley retrieves his bowl. That’s a stupid bloody way of writing things down. “Well, this
is embarrassing.”
“It’s Italian,” Aziraphale corrects, which doesn’t help much. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it. I’ve
done far worse.”
“Yeah?” Crowley asks, curious. He’s probably fretted over how to pronounce Shrewsbury, but
since the people of Shrewsbury can’t agree on that one it hardly counts.
“I got terribly embarrassed once in Penistone,” Aziraphale says quietly.
“Oh.” Crowley shrugs, grin twitching his lips. “Well, never go to Scunthorpe then.”
There is a moment of confused silence as Crowley walks away, but the sudden splutter of shock
and outrage as he reaches his counter is worth the wait.

With the mascarpone (and Crowley still thinks it’s a bloody stupid way to write it) folded into the
ganache and the whole thing whisked up, it looks much more like Aziraphale’s did, and Crowley
sets about assembling his cake.
The instructions say ‘layers’ and that’s all they say, so Crowley spreads an amount of filling that
seems reasonable on the first crepe on his serving dish. He plops a crepe on top of the filling, and
does it again.
Fourteen to sixteen layers, the instructions say. They don’t say how much filling goes in each layer,
and he doesn’t want to run out, so he’s a little on the sparing side. He ends up with a distressing
amount of filling left in the bowl and no pancakes, so fashions a piping bag out of baking paper and
tries to sneak a bit more between the layers until he gets fed up, and chucks the rest in the bin.
The whole thing looks… well… dull, really. The Dacquoise looked more impressive. Crowley half
suspects that’s the idea, and Paul is making a point over the style vs substance thing again, and
there’s not much you can do to a stack of crepes and cream. He puts the thing in the fridge to chill,
and goes outside for a stomp around on the grass.
Anathema is already outside, wearing a circle in the lawn. They stand side by side for a few
minutes, neither coming up with anything to say. When Crowley finally works his way up to
asking how Newt is doing Mel calls out that there are five minutes left, and Anathema scurries
back inside.
After counting to sixty, because he’ll run for no one, Crowley follows.

The milly-crepes cake comes out of the fridge, and Crowley gives it a quick sprinkle of icing
sugar. It could do with a bit of colour, maybe a few raspberries or something, but there are none to
hand so it’ll have to do. He pushes it to the end of his counter, craning his neck to see how Tracy’s
cake looks. It’s a bit lopsided, so he twitches his fingers when her back is turned, and the cake
straightens up a little.
Sue starts counting down the last ten seconds remaining, but everyone looks done. They all cast
nervous, hopeful glances towards each other, relieved that the cooking part is done, nervous of the
judging still to come.
Once the time is up they are sent back out for tea and biscuits while the tent is cleaned down, though nobody is inclined to eat. Anathema and Tracy are taken aside for interviews, and Aziraphale shuns the plate of shortbread shaped like little Scottie dogs. For some reason that bothers Crowley more than anything, and he picks up the plate and takes it over. “Come on,” Crowley coaxes softly. “It’ll help you feel better.” Aziraphale gives the plate a longing look. “I shouldn’t,” he says quietly. “I mean look at their little faces.” “What?” Crowley picks one up. “You never bitten the head off a jelly baby?” He bites the head off and holds it out to Aziraphale, who hesitates before taking it and popping it in his mouth. The biscuit. The biscuit that Crowley’s teeth had touched. “Crowley?” Aziraphale says sharply, and Crowley comes back to his senses. “Oh. Yeah.” He holds out the plate, and this time the Angel is quick to take a biscuit. “Just, y’know, nervous.” “Oh, I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Aziraphale says warmly, reaching out to touch Crowley’s arm. “Your Dacquoise this morning was splendid.” The strangled little noise Crowley makes is drowned by the Eric calling them back into the tent for judging.

The row of stools is back, but this time there’s only four of them. They take turns carrying their cakes up to the table at the front of the tent, setting them down behind their photos and taking their seat. Crowley sits on the end, next to Tracy, and offers his hand for grasping. She takes it silently, acrylic nails digging into his skin.

The judges return, Mary smiling at them all in her kind way while Paul checks out the bakes. After a shuffle around of hosts and crew, they begin with the judging. Paul picks up his knife and slices into the first cake, Aziraphale’s by the look of it, and starts pulling the layers apart while Mary tries a piece. “Lovely,” she announces, and Crowley can practically feel the waves of happiness emanating from the Angel on the other end of the row of stools. “Not bad,” Paul says, jabbing at the crepes with his fork. “Needs more lemon zest to cut through the richness.” They move on to the next bake, and Crowley sits up a little straighter. He doesn’t care that it’s his cake they’re tasting, it’s just the bloody stool is uncomfortable is all. “Oh, that is delicious,” Mary says. Sue, wielding a forkful of crepe, gives Crowley a knowing look, but keeps her mouth shut. Paul mutters something about the layers being uneven, and moves on to the next bake. This time it’s Tracy who stiffens, grip on Crowley tightening. “Oh, how lovely,” Mary announces. “Well balanced, and not too sweet.” Paul hums, pulling apart the layers in search of something to criticise, then grudgingly calling it “Decent, yeah.” and moving on.

Anathema’s bake is next, and Paul cuts into it, letting out a pleased little “Ah!” when he sees something wrong. “These crepes are much to thick,” he says, fishing one out with his fork and holding it up for the camera. “It’s almost like a scotch pancake, it’s so thick.” Crowley snorts loudly, the crepe is nothing like as thick as he’s making out, and Paul drops it back on the plate, giving him a sour look. “It tastes good,” Mary says, and Mel agrees loudly, though her exact words are muffled by crepe and cream.

With the tasting done, the judges confer briefly before announcing the results. “Starting from the bottom,” Paul begins, and points to Anathema’s cake. “Who made this one?” Anathema raises her hand, and Paul looks surprised. “The crepes are too thick,” he says, recovering
quickly. “And that makes the whole thing much heavier.”
Anathema nods, as if agreeing with him might make him shut up faster. It does, and Paul moves on to Crowley’s bake. “And this one?”
“Yeah, that’s me,” Crowley calls out.
Paul had clearly thought Crowley had made Anathema’s cake, and looks slightly irritated. “Yeah. Not bad,” he says, and moves on to Tracy’s bake.
“It was a tough decision between the last two,” he says. “They were both of such high quality, but this one is second.” Tracy raises a demure hand. “An excellent bake, well done,” Paul tells her.
“Which leaves us with this one,” Mary finishes, gesturing to Aziraphale’s cake. “Absolutely splendid, I can’t fault it.”
“Oh,” Aziraphale says, his hand to his mouth, cheeks redder than any teasing from Crowley could ever turn them. “Oh thank you.”

With the judging done, there are still some shots to get done and interviews with the judges and contestants. Crowley would rather have his fingernails pulled out with pliers (again) than go through that, so sneaks outside to make the most of the good weather.
He dodges a rogue Eric waving a clipboard and walks over to the walled garden, checking on the espaliered pears and apple trees. They have shed their early summer blossoms, and the first swell of green fruits are starting to appear. Crowley runs his fingers along a lichen-crusted branch, green smudging his fingers, and hears someone clear their throat before speaking.
“I would have thought you’d had quite enough of apples.”
Crowley turns to see Aziraphale on the path behind him and grins, letting go of the branch. “Not the apple’s fault.”
Aziraphale doesn’t have an answer for that, instead walking over to join him in admiring the garden. They walk between the rows of carrots and cauliflowers, and Aziraphale points to a sparse patch of ground dotted with dark green ferns.
“What on earth are ferns doing in a vegetable garden, I wonder?” he says, bending down to touch a lacy frond. “Is it some kind of herb?”
Crowley snorts. “It’s asparagus, Angel.”
Aziraphale straightens up abruptly. “What?”
Crowley points to the ferns. “Asparagus, that’s what it looks like if you don’t pick it. You need to leave some to grow every year or it won’t come back next season.”
Aziraphale scowls at Crowley. “You’re making fun of me.”
“No,” Crowley laughs. “It’s asparagus, look.”
Aziraphale crouches down to take another look at the ferns, and there on the edge of the bed is a copper label that reads Asparagus: Gijnlim.
“Well I never,” Aziraphale murmurs, standing up again. “It is very pretty, though I’d much prefer some with a nice hollandaise.”
Crowley laughs. “You’re ridiculous.”
“Well you’re…” Aziraphale’s indignation at being called ridiculous gentles and fades, and he gives Crowley a fond look. “You’re actually rather lovely.”

A moment of madness, that’s the only possible explanation. Far too much time among the humans, that would also go a ways to explaining what Crowley does then. Because Aziraphale is in the late afternoon sun with icing sugar clinging to his hair and he is looking at Crowley with such fondness and.
And Crowley stops. Stops as though his feet have taken root in the gravel path, and when Aziraphale tries to ask whatever is the matter Crowley leans over and kisses him.
As first kisses go it is terrible, a bruising crash of teeth and lips, far too damp and where are the noses supposed to go and for Satan’s sake is it supposed to be so loud and then they are stumbling apart again, repelled like magnets when they should be
As first kisses go it is fantastic, stumbling feet and grasping hands and the inside of Aziraphale’s
mouth tastes bright with sugar and cream and saltwater, and then only of himself, and then as quickly as they connect they separate, because stupid corporations need oxygen and Crowley’s heart is beating so fast that he can feel it in his ears.

“I…” Aziraphale makes an oddly pitched sound, neither mortal nor ethereal, and if Crowley could just catch his breath it would all make sense. He wipes his hand over his mouth and it comes away wet, and he has a sudden urge to cram it back between his teeth, taste the salt and sweetness of something not of him. Instead he wipes his hand on his jeans, and stares at Aziraphale. He hasn’t run away, or drawn a flaming sword, so that’s something. Crowley moves towards him again, and he doesn’t flinch.

Atoms vibrate, it’s what atoms do, but you’re not supposed to feel it. So why does Crowley feel every cell of his worthless form tremble as Aziraphale moves in turn, hand resting carefully on Crowley’s shoulder?
As second kisses go things fair better. Eyes open, hands clenched, and a tilt of the head deals with the whole nose issue. Mouth closed, at first, unclench your jaw and let fingers worn rough from turning pages guide you, and *oh*
As second kisses go things fair worse, because who could stop at two? At five? At a thousand? And when does one end and another start? Is it at the drawing of breath, because he can feel the light gusts as Aziraphale exhales against his lips, and he’s fairly sure that his lungs have locked and he will never breathe again.
Crowley’s hands unclench, drawn towards the solid presence of Aziraphale, skimming the
threadbare hem of his coat and then the rucked cotton where his shirt tucks into his trousers. It seems deeply unfair that cotton should have all the fun, and with a little bit of wriggling Crowley’s fingers find their way in too, splaying out over the hidden expanse of warm skin. Bastard trousers, hoarding such treasures, Crowley will burn them the first chance he gets, he’ll put a frame around the scorch mark on the bedroom floor—

“Crowley,” Aziraphale whines, and he must be doing something wrong if Aziraphale is still capable of speech. “Yess,” Crowley hisses, teeth finding the tender lobe of Aziraphale’s ear and biting down. “Angel—”

The hand clinging to the nape of Crowley’s neck, keeping him from straying too far, is suddenly hard against his chest, the palm flat to his breastbone and pushing. There is nothing teasing about it, the sudden rejection as clear and ringing as a slap to the cheek, and Crowley snaps back like elastic, stumbling on the gravel path.

Aziraphale flings himself backwards, hand to his mouth, and Crowley catches the briefest glimpse of pale blue eyes before they darken to grey.

“Wh…” Crowley reels, disoriented. “What…”

“Oh, don’t you say ‘what’ to me,” Aziraphale snarls. “You treacherous serpent!” Crowley opens his mouth to ask ‘what?’ again, and what little of his brain that hasn’t emigrated south forces his mouth shut. He has seen Aziraphale scared. He’s seen him worried, frustrated, even happy, but he’s never seen him angry before. Not like this.

“Who else was in on this?” Aziraphale demands. “Did you get to Mel? What did you say to her?” He stops, shaking his head. “No. No, she’s a sweet girl, she would never…” Crowley moves towards him, slow and careful, hands out to show that he’s unarmed.

“Aziraphale—”

“Don’t!” Aziraphale snaps. “Don’t you try your… your *wiles* on me, they won’t work, not anymore. Oh, this would have been quite a coup for you, wouldn’t it? Tempting an Angel?” Oh. Oh fuck.

“Aziraphale,” Crowley stops trying to get any closer. “Aziraphale listen to me.” The Angel stills, turning slate eyes on him, and Crowley’s heart stops pounding. “I didn’t…” he tries. “I wasn’t…” No, that’s not right either. “It wasn’t a trick.” “Oh, spare me the lies,” Aziraphale snaps. “I’m not lying,” Crowley insists. “You’ve seen the bastards I have to work for, why would I do anything for them?”

It doesn’t take long for Aziraphale to come up with an answer. “To save your scaly hide,” he says, slow and horrified. “You can’t win this competition, so what can you do instead? Tempt an Angel, enough to make him F—” “No!” Crowley yells. “Just… fucking no, alright. I would never.” He stops, pulling off his glasses and rubbing at his eyes. What the fuck did he do, how did he mess everything up so badly?


“Look, I’m sorry,” Crowley says, and he means it. He means it. “But it wasn’t a trick, and whatever is going on with Mel and Sue, it’s nothing to do with me.” Aziraphale won’t look him in the eye, but seems a little mollified. “You didn’t…” he says, far too quietly. “You didn’t drag them into this?” “Into what?” Crowley says, moving closer until Aziraphale is within arm’s reach. “There’s nothing to drag them into. This isn’t part of some big plan, or trick or… or something. I just…” he stops, reaching out for Aziraphale’s arm. “I just wanted to kiss you.” The wool of Aziraphale’s coat is warm and rough under his fingers, and Aziraphale stands very still as Crowley rubs his fingers over the worn seam, as though soothing a cat. “That’s all I wanted
since the first time I met you.”

For a long, awful moment Crowley thinks that everything is okay. That Aziraphale believes him, and they can put this whole, horrible fight behind them.

“Unhand me, Demon,” Aziraphale whispers.

“Aziraphale.”

“I said let me go!” Aziraphale shouts, and Crowley flinches, hands raised to ward off a strike. Nothing happens, and when he lowers his hands Aziraphale is standing there, looking at him with eyes the colour of rainclouds.

“I’m… I’m not going to hurt you, Crowley,” Aziraphale says, like the words don’t cut. Like Crowley’s heart isn’t already a crumpled, useless thing. “I… this is wrong, it was a mistake. We should never have…” he screws his eyes shut, looking pained. “You’re a Demon. We’re enemies. I should never have trusted you, and I should never have agreed to work with you.”

What do you say to that? What do you say to the truth?

Let me go, the Angel had said, and Crowley has never fought when he can run.

“Right,” he says briskly, and turns away.

“Crowley?” Aziraphale calls as he starts walking down the path, gravel crunching under his boots. “Crowley, where are you going?”

“Leaving,” Crowley shouts over his shoulder, because fuck the baking and fuck Hell and fuck one Angel in particular.

“What?” Aziraphale starts to follow him, out of the walled garden and onto the lawn. “You can’t just leave, Crowley.”

“Watch me.”

“That isn’t fair!” Aziraphale shouts after him. “What am I supposed to do? Risk Heaven’s wrath or never speak to you again, are those the only choices I have?”

Crowley turns on his heel, sliding his glasses on, and pretends to look Aziraphale in the eyes. “You don’t have to choose anything.”

He turns again, and stalks across the grass, the sound of his name getting fainter until he can barely hear it at all.

He walks to the next village, finds the nearest pub, and proceeds to drink the damned place dry.

***

“There you are,” Sue sighs, walking across the grass towards him. “Where the bloody hell have you been?”

Crowley blinks several times, because eyelids are still a weird thing. Like legs. Also weird. They must have taken him left when he meant to go right, which is why he’s stumbling across Welford Park and not through the entrance to another pub.

“Ishnufnk,” he says, and Sue grimaces.

“What!” she hisses, and Crowley grins at her, displaying teeth. “Fuck me, you are.”

She shepherds him across the grounds, keeping an eye out for any wandering Erics.

“I m’rly had a f’w aless,” Crowley slurs, glasses slipping down his nose.

“Jesus!” Sue yelps, and shoves the glasses back up. “Oh. Ergh. No wonder you wear those. Come on, cover them up, you’ll frighten the horses.”

“H’reses?” Crowley looks around, and Sue punches him in the ribs. “Oof!”

“Come on, let’s get you some coffee,” Sue sighs, towing him across the grass to the on site catering. “Get you sobered up.”

One cup of coffee and a surreptitious miracle later, Sue gives him a prod and declares him fit for duty. She seems convinced that he’s going to run off at the first chance, so takes him by the sleeve and drags him to the baking tent herself.

“Here he is!” she shouts, shoving Crowley through the doorway. “Fashionably late again.”

The other contestants are already there, as are the judges and the cameras. Aziraphale doesn’t look
up from his counter, his sleeves rolled up and his apron on. Crowley adjusts the collar of his jacket, moving out of Sue’s hold. “Yeah, sorry guys,” he says lightly, and staggers over to his counter.

There is a whispered conference between the judges, Mel and Sue, and a couple of Erics. After several minutes of bickering, Sue’s voice rising above the other and then dropping to a whisper, they all agree that they’re ready to begin. Everyone moves to their places, looking unsteady and concerned, and Mel gives the first announcement of the day.

“Welcome, Bakers, to the Showstopper Challenge. This is your opportunity to wow the judges with your skills and create a masterpiece with a certain *je ne sais quoi*.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Sue adds.

“No one does,” Mel agrees. “Today you will be making petit fours, bite sized confections to delight the senses.”

“Paul and Mary would like eight each of three types of petit four,” Sue continues. “That’s twenty four petit fours. One variety must be cake, one must be biscuit, and one must be pastry.”

“Judges,” Mel says as she turns to Paul and Mary. “Any advice?”

“They must be bite-sized,” Mary says. “And we want to see your decorating skills at work here.” Mel nods along before turning back to the bakers. “You have four hours. Get. Set.”

“Bake!” While the other contestants start frantically tipping ingredients into bowls, Crowley stands motionless, because why bother? He can miracle something up with a click of his fingers, so why should he waste his time?

“Fuck it,” he hisses under his breath. “Fuck the baking and the judging and the whole fucking lot of it.” A nearby cameraman turns his way, and Crowley hisses at him, tongue flicking between his teeth. The cameraman elects to go outside and film some trees instead.

Crowley grabs a bowl, going through the motions of baking but paying no attention to what he’s doing. The second this challenge is over he’s gone, off to Mars or Makemake or Nova fucking Scotia, somewhere Hell can never find him. Somewhere no one can ever find him.

* Anthony,” Mary says, resting her hands on the edge of his counter. “What are you making?”

“A mess,” Crowley says without thinking, then notices the camera and gives her a big, fake smile. “Of everything.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not the case,” she soothes, ignoring the tray next to him where a lemon cake has sunk in the middle in a puddle of barely cooked batter. “You always make such beautiful bakes.”

Paul is lurking behind her, but has enough sense to keep his trap shut. Not enough sense to stop poking, and when he reaches over to touch the sunken cake Crowley picks up a wooden spoon and uses it to push his hand away.

“Yeah, well,” he says stiffly. “Lots to do. Off you go.” he makes a shooing gesture with the spoon, and they retreat, Mary throwing him a concerned look.

It doesn’t matter that the cake has sunk, or that his little squares of puff pastry are rubbery and grey. It doesn’t matter that he doesn’t know the first thing about mille feuille. He just needs something for the cameras, and a bit of last minute trickery.

There are still biscuits to do, and he remembers enough from Biscuit week to be able to rustle up something, and really the whole thing is so much easier when you don’t care.

Sue announces that there is one hour to go, and Crowley goes outside for a little air. But when he sees the Angel standing by the stream, cold cup of tea clasped in both hands, eyes fixed on the middle distance, Crowley turns on his heel and heads right back into the tent. There’s cakes to be decorated and chocolate to temper and other bollocks to deal with, he can’t go wandering off.
A furtive click of his fingers and the sunken lemon cake is a perfectly baked chocolate cake, cut into neat 4cm squares. Crowley makes a ganache, because that’s something he’s pretty good at anyway, and sets about covering each cake in glossy chocolate. Cake crumbs keep falling into the ganache, making it lumpy and ruining the finish, but he scowls at them until they smarten up. Dark chocolate, melted and drizzled over the top with a spoon, is an elegant little finish, but Crowley still isn’t satisfied, so he clicks his fingers again, and the center of each cake is a kirsch-soaked cherry. Yes, much better.

The rest of the dark chocolate takes care of the biscuits, each flaccid, underbaked disc crisping up as Crowley dips one half in chocolate, and then lays them out to set. As an afterthought he sprinkles a few almond flakes over the top. All that’s left is the pastry.

The squares are not pleasing to look at, so he miracles them into rectangles, but that’s boring, so he tries circles, hexagons, polygons and triangles; first equilateral and then settling on isosceles. Crowley refuses to whip anything ever again, so miracles the cream into stiff peaks, and then into a piping bag. He dots blobs of cream around the pastry triangles, and then alternates them with raspberries before stacking one piece on top of another, and finishing with a third piece of pastry. It looks pretty good, so he does the rest like that, and is debating a final dusting of icing sugar when there is a loud crash from Tracy’s counter.

By the time Crowley looks up, Tracy has run off, but it’s easy to see what has happened. On the edge of her counter are two trays, one covered in pink cake pops, the other little pastry cases filled with berries. The third tray is on the floor, a blast radius of chocolate and cream spattered across the floor.

Crowley’s limbs move before his eyes are done taking in the scene. He drops his piping bag on the counter and runs outside.

“Tracy?” he shouts, but there’s no sign of her. “Tracy!” Where the bloody hell is she, she was wearing clothes dyed in colours not found in nature, how can someone dressed like a big blue smartie disappear?

Crowley sets across the grounds, and he’s not running because he doesn’t run, he’s just walking very fast. She’s not by the flowerbeds or the bluebell woods or the stream, which means she’s either in the church *fuck don’t be in the church* or the walled garden *fuck please be in the church*. Crowley finds her in the walled garden, sitting on a bench by the rhubarb, her head in her hands.

“Tracy, there you are,” Crowley calls, and Tracy sits up but doesn’t, and he panics until his idiot brain supplies the word *wig*.

“Oh, Mr Cr-” Tracy’s shoulders shake, and she lets out a dry, wretched gasp, the kind of heaving sob that has gone past the amelioration of tears, and only howling your throat raw and shaking until your body aches will satisfy it. Crowley sits on the bench beside her, and risks a gentle pat on the back. “It’s alright. We can fix it.”

She lets out another desperate sob, shaking her wig in her hands. Underneath the polyester her hair is ash blonde, trimmed neatly to the shoulder, and Crowley reaches out to tuck a loose strand behind her ear. “I can fix it,” he promises.

“I don’t want to fix it!” she gasps, and covers her face with her wig.

There are footsteps on the path, and Crowley looks up to see Anathema, hovering awkwardly. “Is everything…” she stops, looking at Tracy sobbing and Crowley patting her back. “Okay?”

“Yes, love,” Tracy says, her face hidden. She sounds remarkably composed. “Can you fetch my purse?”

“Uh. Sure.” Anathema looks relieved, and hurries away.

Crowley braces himself for another round of sobbing, but instead Tracy just lets out a sigh.

“I don’t want to fix it,” she says again. “I don’t want to… to beat anyone, I don’t want to make the best macarons or the… the crepes or… whatever they think is the best. I want to make the things I like making!” She straightens up. One of her false eyelashes has come loose, and she plucks it off
with her acrylic nails. “I like making steak and kidney pie. I like making jam tarts, and I like rainbow icing, and I shouldn’t be laughed at for it.” She turns to Crowley. “I don’t want to spend all week trying to make bleeding Dacquoise and petit fours, I’m sick of eating them, and I…” she sniffs. “I want to go home, Mr C.”

“Well,” Crowley says, and it’s that simple. “Alright.”

He hears the sound of someone approaching and looks up, expecting to see Anathema, but it’s Aziraphale holding Tracy’s bag. For a moment neither of them speak, and Crowley can only stare at him, at the pale of his eyes and the icing sugar clinging to his fingers, and it hurts but he can’t stop himself. And then Aziraphale looks away, turning his attention to Tracy.

“Oh, my dear,” he says gently. “Let’s get you cleaned up, shall we?”

The pack of wipes in the bag might belong to Tracy, or they might have been miracled there, who can say. She wipes her eyes and blows her nose while Aziraphale picks through her supplies, and then with delicate fingers he pulls away the other false eyelash and applies a little mascara to her real lashes.

“There we are,” he says, finding a mirror in the purse and holding it up. It’s shaped like a unicorn, so probably hers. Tracy gives herself a critical once over, and picks out a tube of lipstick. While she is applying it, Crowley risks leaning over and whispering in Aziraphale’s ear. “Where d’you learn that?”

Aziraphale starts packing up Tracy’s bag, and Crowley sits back again. Worth a shot.

“The Regency period,” Aziraphale mutters, so soft Crowley almost misses it, and then much louder. “Ready to face the world, my dear?”

“Yes,” Tracy says, rising to her feet, the wig forgotten on the bench beside her. “Yes. I’m ready.”

“That’s the spirit,” Aziraphale says warmly, and offers her his arm. She takes it, and Crowley can see the miracle in the way he touches her. She stands a little taller, laughs a little easier, and they walk back to the tent. After a few minutes, Crowley follows.

The spilled cakes have been cleaned up, and Tracy is at her counter, tempering chocolate while Anathema picks through a punnet of strawberries. She hands one over, and Tracy dips it in chocolate and lays it on a tray. Sue is leaning against the counter, watching intently, while Mel is over at Aziraphale’s counter, talking softly to the Angel as he finishes his decorating. Paul and Mary are nowhere to be seen.

Crowley goes over to Tracy’s side and picks out a serving plate, moving each strawberry onto it, the chocolate hardening as soon as he touches it. When the last strawberry is dipped and placed on the plate, Sue calls over a cameraman. “Ten seconds to go,” she announces, and counts down. It would be very dramatic if everyone wasn’t already finished.

The second she calls that time’s up, Tracy lets out a quiet little sound, and Crowley wraps an arm around her, holding her close.

“All done,” he says, squeezing far too much but she doesn’t tell him to stop.

They are sent out while the tent is cleaned up and prepared for judging, and Crowley convinces an Eric to bring Tracy a G&T. With a glass in hand she looks a lot more like herself, and Crowley worries a little less.

When they are finally called back into the tent the stools are arranged in a line at the front of the tent, and they all take their seats. Tracy takes Crowley’s hand in hers, and he already misses the bite of her acrylic nails.

The judges take their places, Mel and Sue alongside them, and the final round of judging begins.

After Mel gives a quick round up of the weekend Paul and Mary ask Crowley to bring his petit fours up for judging. He almost says no, but Tracy gives him a gentle nudge, and he skulks over to his counter to collect his plates, and deposits them in front of Paul and Mary.

“Oh, these look beautiful,” Mary enthuses. “Your presentation is always excellent, and today is no
exception.”
“And what do we have?” Paul asks.
Crowley doesn’t much feel like going into detail, so points to each dish in turn. “Chocolate cherry, raspberry, almond biscuits.”
He steps back before they can ask any more questions, and Mary picks up a biscuit.
They say several nice things, and Sue works her way through three chocolate cakes. But none of it matters. Everything was miracled up, and they’re supposed to think it’s all the most delicious thing they’ve ever eaten. It’s not real. The dacquoise was real, his wrist still aches from making it, and Crowley carries the plates away feeling empty when he should be smug. There’s no way he’s going out this week, so why does the victory feel so hollow?
You know why
“Shut up,” Crowley mutters, and goes back to his stool.

Anathema is called up next, and brings a selection of tiny American desserts to the table. Tiny little dark chocolate sandwich biscuits that she calls ‘whoopie pies’ (stupid name), doll sized apple pies, and dainty little squares of blueberry cheesecake. Mary adores them, of course, marveling at how much work has gone into them and how good they taste. Paul seems to care more about them looking professional, and to him the highest praise seems to be ‘you could put them in a baker’s window’.

Anathema carries her plates away, pausing long enough to let Mel get another little cheesecake, and the next to be called up is Tracy.

Crowley is on his feet before she can open her mouth, and fetches the three plates from her counter. She takes them from him one at a time, placing them before the judges.
“So,” Mary begins. “You had a bit of an accident.”
“I did,” Tracy agrees. “Wasn’t looking where I was going and. Whoops.”
“But you’ve managed to make something at the last minute,” Mary adds. “Which shows how resourceful you are.”

Tracy takes a step back, and the judges pick up one of the fruit tarts each. Mary calls it delicious, and they move on to the cake pops, which Paul eyes dubiously.
“Oh, these are rather fun!” Mary says, biting into one. “Is that popping candy?”
“Just a little bit,” Tracy says, holding finger and thumb apart.

The chocolate strawberries are sampled last, and despite Paul’s muttering about how it’s not really part of the brief of cake, pastry or biscuit, he doesn’t make too much of a fuss.

Crowley takes Tracy’s plates back to her counter, and the judges call up Aziraphale.

“Oh, Mr Fell,” Mary says, looking delighted. “These look wonderful.”
Crowley cranes his neck to see what’s gotten her so excited, and nearly tips off his stool. Luckily Tracy is still holding his hand, and yanks him back upright.

It’s not the tiny little frasier cakes that nearly has him crash face-first to the floor, or the lemon meringues sitting on crisp little biscuits. It’s the swans.

Four perfect choux pastry swans filled with whipped cream sit in a line, their pastry bodies made snowy white with a liberal dusting of icing sugar. Opposite them, pastry beak to pastry beak, are four swans made from chocolate pastry so dark it’s almost black. They are filled with whipped chocolate ganache, and dusted with dried powdered raspberries.

“How beautiful,” Mary says, picking up a white swan. “It seems a shame to eat it.”

For once Aziraphale keeps his mouth shut, his hands clasped before him as the judges try each bake. They love them, of course they do, and when Aziraphale takes his plates back to his counter, he lingers for a few minutes there while the judges confer over the bakes.

It’s no surprise that there is little time spent in conference, and after a few minutes they are all called together for the results. No one is shocked that Aziraphale is announced Star Baker, or when Tracy is eliminated.
Crowley has no interest in sticking around for the fallout, for tearful words about what an experience it has been and how much has been learned. He gives Tracy a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and leaves before anyone can stop him, not even an Eric with the list of next week's challenges.

Crowley stamps across the lawn, making his way to the Manor house. The sooner he is out of this stupid-

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake!” Crowley snaps. Leaning against the door of the Bentley is Hastur.

“Hastur!” Crowley shouts with false cheer, walking over to the car and quickly checking it for dents or scratches. If he’s left a single mark-

“Crowley,” Hastur seethes. He’s not even trying to disguise himself, toad squatting on his head in open view.

“Come crawling back, have we?” Crowley hasn’t forgotten the way he dived into the dirt, leaving Ligur to his fate.

“Laugh all you want,” Hastur sneers. “Make the most of it.”

“It’s a promise,” Hastur lurches towards him, but Crowley stands his ground. “For what you did to Ligur.”

Oh, that doesn’t sound good. “I didn’t do anything to him.”

“You set your pet Angel on him,” Hastur snarls. “You killed one of your own kind.”

“I did no such thing.”

“When this is over, and you lose,” Hastur continues as if Crowley hadn’t spoken. “Because you will lose, because that’s the only thing you’re good at, there’s a cosy little corner of the pit just for you.” Hastur grins. “Oh wait. Not just for you. That Angel of yours, he’ll be down there with you.” The grin vanishes, replaced with something far worse. “And you’ll do everything I say. To him.”

Crowley pulls back his lips, baring his teeth in a low, threatening hiss. “Bullshit,” he sneers. “An Angel in Hell? Never going to happen, and he’ll never Fall-”

“Oh, Crawley,” Hastur tuts. “Always one step behind. The deal is done.”

Crowley’s jaw slackens. “What?”

“The Angel,” Hastur starts laughing. “Will be ours a week from now whatever happens. And you-” He lunges for Crowley’s throat, but Crowley is faster, shifting sideways out of his reach. “I won’t touch him,” he snarls. “You can’t make me! I won’t harm a single fucking feather-”

Hasturs form shifts, and suddenly Crowley is facing himself. “Thought you might say that.”

Crowley’s voice, Crowley’s smirk. “But don’t worry.” Crowley’s wide, feral grin. “You’ll still get to watch.”

Crowley, the real Crowley, lets out a roar of anger, swiping at the deception, and Hastur returns to his true form.

“He’ll know!” Crowley shouts. “He’ll know it’s not me!”

“What does that matter?” Hastur asks, retreating from Crowley’s reach. “He’ll still be dead. Eventually. After a thousand years of torment.”

“Fuck you!” Crowley screams, but Hastur is already gone. “Fuck the lot of you!”

He pulls the door handle on the Bentley and drops into the driver’s seat. On the dashboard, carefully packaged in a clear plastic box, is a pastry swan, the cream starting to melt in the afternoon sun.
On a back street in the Barri Gòtic, Barcelona, stands Caelum (Latin for Heaven). There is a charming little cafe in there, with the best hot chocolate I have ever tasted, and the shelves are filled with little boxes of almond biscuits. The biscuits are made by Nuns. The shop is run by Nuns. There are white robed old ladies wearing crucifixes in every direction. Of course that's where Crowley would go to buy a really effective box of apology biscuits.

It’s not something that Crowley has ever noticed before, but Soho is full of bookshops. Absolutely lousy with them, Soho is.

The first one he tried turned out to be a sex shop. The owner was nice enough, if a little fond of neon signage, but wasn’t who he was looking for. Foyles and Waterstones were definitely not what he was looking for either, neither was the place that sold comics and little plastic figures with disproportionately large, wobbling heads. As much as Crowley admired the artwork on display, the Guanghwa bookshop wasn’t the right place either.

By the time Crowley grabs the door handle of the last stop on his unreasonably long list, he has already admitted defeat. The Angel must have put a ward on the place or something to repel Demons, and he must have already walked past it a dozen times, blind to its existence. Crowley doesn’t even take in the name painted over the door or the handwritten sign in the window, he tucks the box he’s carried around London all morning under his arm, and tries to close the door behind him without jangling the bell too much.

“Bloody Hell,” Crowley murmurs, taking a long look around him. He might be in the right place.

Modern bookshops have many notable features lacking in the classic antiquarian and second hand bookshops. Cafes, for one. Toilets are another. Basic standards of environmental health, and signs indicating where different genres can be found are also popular. This bookshop has none of that. There is a central room, almost an amphitheatre, and if he looks up he can see a second floor above him, with a circular balcony and even more books. On the ground floor there are open doorways leading off to different areas of the shop, but no sign of stairs, or come to think of it people. Every surface, be it shelf, table or chair, is piled with books, and there is no discernable system or order to the stacks. A first edition Waugh sits on top of well-thumbed copies of Asimov’s Foundation series, which in turn is obscured by an encyclopedia of squash and cucurbits, and on top of that is a pulp novel about WW1 bomber pilots.

Crowley picks up a book at random. “*The Once and Future King*?” he reads aloud, and puts the book down again. Someone in an adjacent room must hear him, because there is a scuffle of papers and a familiar voice.

“Hello?” Aziraphale calls out. “Can I help you?” Crowley grasps the box like a shield, and answers. “Yeah. Uh. It’s me.”

There is a sound exactly like a teacup shattering on a floor, and Aziraphale appears in one of the doorways.

He doesn’t look happy, but he also isn’t bearing a flaming sword.
“Oh,” Aziraphale says quietly. “Um. Hello.” He fidgets a little, gaze flitting around the room until it finally rests on Crowley’s face. “Oh, good Lord! What happened to you?” Before Crowley can answer, Aziraphale hurries over to him, one hand raised as if to touch the vivid red mark on his cheek. He doesn’t, of course. He flinches back just in time, his hand hovering uselessly in the air between them. “Oh, yeah it’s nothing,” Crowley says, shoving the box into Aziraphale’s floundering hand. “HereIgotyouthis.” Aziraphale doesn’t say anything for a long moment, staring down at the box. It’s not a very special looking box, white cardboard with a little window cut into the top so you can see the squares wrapped in waxed paper inside. Aziraphale opens the box and takes one out, putting the box down on a nearby stack of books so he can unwrap the slippery waxed paper. The air fills with the scent of sugar and almonds. “Biscuits,” Crowley explains. “There’s this little place in Barcelona, in the old town. Well, a Nunnery. And these nuns, they make biscuits.” He shrugs, since there’s not much more he wants to say about it. They make biscuits and they don’t much care for Demons. “Thought you’d like some.” Aziraphale doesn’t eat the biscuit, instead he carefully wraps it back up in the paper and puts it back in the box. “Well,” he says, putting the lid on with care. “Thank you.” “Aren’t you going to try one?” Crowley asks. He got slapped by a Mother Superior just to get those bloody things, the least Aziraphale can do is eat one. “Well,” Aziraphale says, and though his hands don’t move to adjust his bowtie there is an air of… straightening himself up a little, as though his soul needed to stand up straight and tuck its shirt in. “I think a cup of tea would be in order first.” He gives Crowley a wary, hesitant look. “Would you… would you like tea?” “Yeah. Sure.” No, he wouldn’t. “Tea sounds great. Yeah. Great.” “Good.” Aziraphale picks up the box again, holding it to his chest. “I’ll just. I’ll go. Make tea then.” He turns and scarpers, disappearing through a doorway, and Crowley half expects to hear a window somewhere being forced open, or the sounds of London traffic as a back door is opened and closed. He doesn’t expect the merry whistling of a kettle.

While he waits for the world’s most awkward tea party to get underway, Crowley walks around a little bit, picking up books and putting them down again. He finds a thick seam of cookery books, including one the approximate size and weight of a breeze block. Unsurprisingly, it’s French - Larousse Gastronomique - and Crowley doesn’t even try to browse through it, he’d snap both his wrists handling the stupid thing. There’s one about a fellow from Leeds with a French sounding name that’s more rock star biography than cookbook. Crowley flicks through the moody black and white photos, all of some lanky, curly haired poser smoking fags and waving around massive knives while bellowing at other chefs. “Oh, you found the Marco Pierre White.” Crowley turns to see Aziraphale come into the room, carrying a tea tray, and quickly shuts the book. Can’t be seen reading after all. “I rather thought he’d be your style.” “Eh,” Crowley shrugs. “Could never pull off the vertical stripes.” “Yes, those aprons are rather ghastly.” Aziraphale suddenly remembers that they’re supposed to be acting awkward around each other, and takes the tray over to an occasional table in a corner of the room. Clearly on the occasions it’s not a table it’s a bookshelf, and Crowley quickly removes the books piled on it so Aziraphale can
put the tray down. He moves to put them on the sofa next to the table, but it’s already pretty full, as is the floor under the table, so he just puts them on the floor, along with enough of the sofa books to make space for himself to sit.
Instead of sitting beside him, Aziraphale pulls over a threadbare looking armchair, turving out a biography of an aviatrix lost at sea and an anthology of fairy tales.

“Right,” Aziraphale says, picking up a teaspoon. “Shall I be mother?”
Crowley grimaces. “Don’t much like where this is going.”
Aziraphale lowers the spoon, giving him an exasperated look. “I meant shall I pour the tea?”
“What’s that got to do with mothers?” Crowley asks, bemused. “Do you need a uterus to manage a teapot?”
Aziraphale looks unimpressed, and pours the tea anyway. Unimpressed is better than awkward, so Crowley considers it a win.
“You have a terrible way of breaking the ice,” the Angel murmurs. “Milk and sugar?”
“It worked, didn’t it?” So much for subterfuge. “Yes, one of each.”
“One of…” Aziraphale adds a splash of milk and a sugar lump, giving it a cursory stir before handing the cup over. The sugar lumps are the fancy kind, all knobbly and various sizes, and Crowley snags a brown one as he takes the tea, popping it in his mouth and crunching it between his teeth.
Aziraphale busies himself with his own cup, milk but no sugar. Funny, Crowley had him down as one of those whipped cream and flavoured syrups types when ordering coffee, and tea with three sugars.
The box of biscuits sits at one end of the tray, and once Aziraphale has his tea to his liking he opens it again. He takes a minute selecting a paper-wrapped biscuit before sitting back in his seat and unwrapping it.
It’s hard not to stare as the Angel takes the first bite, features slack with pleasure. Or when he makes breathless little sighs of pleasure. Crowley tries not to squirm in his seat, and in four dainty little bites and the biscuit is gone. Aziraphale picks up his teacup and takes a sip.
It occurs to Crowley that he would make a point of not having sugar in his tea, just to appreciate the biscuit a little more.

When Aziraphale has eaten two biscuits in leisurely fashion he reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper.
“Here it is,” he says, putting it on the table. “If anyone asks you didn’t get it from me, understood?”
Crowley stares blankly at the fold of paper. Aziraphale didn’t hand it to him, but put it within his reach, so he must want Crowley to have it, but also doesn’t want to actually give it to him.
“You what?” Crowley says at last.
“Crowley, there’s no need for a performance.” Aziraphale refills his teacup. “It’s what you came here for.”
The so take it and leave isn’t spoken out loud, but the shape of the words still hang in the air.
Crowley reaches for the paper, frown still wrinkling his brow, and unfolds the sheet. There are several words written in the Angel’s looping copperplate script, and it takes him a minute to work out what it says, what with all the frills and twiddly bits.
“Danish… party?”
“Pastry.”
Crowley rotates the page 45° but nothing is any clearer. “Is this a list of demands or something?”
“It’s the weekend’s challenges,” Aziraphale says, looking irritated. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? You left before they were handed out and you want to know what we’re supposed to be making.”
Crowley pushes up his sunglasses onto his forehead and has another go at reading the list. There’s something at the bottom with too many curly V’s to be a real word.
He hadn’t even thought about the challenges, or the competition. Aziraphale seems to realise this, eyes widening.
“You’re not here for the competition,” he says, almost to himself.
“Bugger the competition,” Crowley says absently, dropping the sheet back on the table. “I was never going to win.”
“But…” Aziraphale stutters. “But you said…”
“You’ll win,” Crowley says, and it sticks in his throat. Not because he doesn’t think Aziraphale should win, but what will happen afterwards. “Heaven will win.”

The news should at least have made him happy, but Aziraphale looks crestfallen. “You’re not even going to try?”
“What’s the point?” Crowley rubs at his eyes. Just say it, get the whole bloody thing over with.
“But they’ll destroy you,” Aziraphale says, looking wretched. “You said if you failed they would send you back to the pit.”
“And what did they say to you?” Crowley snaps. “What did they promise you if you won?”
Aziraphale opens his mouth, then closes it again, and Crowley would laugh if it wasn’t so awful.
“They didn’t offer you anything, did they? Just gave you the assignment and told you to be a good little Angel and get on with it.”

Aziraphale clutches his cup close to his chest, fear and indignation at war on his face. He’s an Angel, indignation comes naturally to his sort, so why hasn’t he cast Crowley out already?
“Well.” Tea sloshes around in the cup, and he grips it tighter. “A good deed is its own reward.”
“Not this one,” Crowley fixes Aziraphale with a stare you have to believe me “This one will see you burn.”
“What? What do you mean?” Aziraphale regards him with wide brown eyes. “Are you trying to threaten me?”
“Threaten you, I’m trying to warn you!” Crowley leans in closer, eyes wide and unblinking. “They sold you out, Aziraphale. Heaven sold you out. When this is over there’s no reward for you, only the Pit.”
He doesn’t bring up the other thing. If he has a say in the matter it will never come to that.
“No. No, I don’t believe you.” Aziraphale shakes his head, and Crowley bites down on a snarl of exasperation.
“It’s the truth, Angel.”
“According to who?” Aziraphale puffs up, feathers ruffled, and there’s that righteous indignation rising up again. “Who told you all this?”
“Hastur,” Crowley says, and when Aziraphale looks blankly he clarifies. “Remember the Demons who were harassing me? You had a sword. Hastur is the one you didn’t…”
He doesn’t say kill because words like ‘Aziraphale’ ‘kill’ and ‘Demon’ don’t sit comfortably in his chest.
“Oh.” Clearly they don’t sit comfortably with Aziraphale either. “Well, that explains it. He was obviously lying.”
“He wasn’t lying.”
“Of course he was.” Crowley can practically see Aziraphale settling into the comfortable little fantasy he’s building, where everything is fine and no one is going to get cut open and filled with angry weasels.
“He’s not lying,” Crowley snaps. “He’s not clever enough to lie.”
“No, but you are.”

As soon as the words leave Aziraphale’s mouth he seems to hear them for what they actually are, and the colour drains from his face.
Crowley, with the most care he can manage without flat out discorporating on the spot, rises to his feet and places his teacup on the tray. The cup wobbles, tea spilling, and he resists the urge to smash the damn thing on the floor.
That had hurt. It hangs in the air between them, something sour and sharp that can’t be unmade with a click of the fingers like a broken teacup. He tried. That counts, doesn’t it? He tried and he failed, and he should walk away while he still can. There’s a whole universe out there, infinite worlds with no baking shows or oxygen or smug, idiot Angels. He can put this whole sorry mess behind him, spend the rest of eternity walking among the stars.

No. Maybe a month ago he could, but not now.

“Crowley,” Aziraphale begins, and Crowley can’t bear to hear him say sorry. “I’m not lying,” Crowley says quietly. “I never have. Not to you, not when it mattered.” “But I’ve done nothing wrong,” Aziraphale insists, and Crowley would laugh if it weren’t so awful. “No, this is all clearly a misunderstanding. I will speak to my superiors, I’m sure this is just a silly mix up that can be sorted out.” Crowley stares at him, mouth opening and closing a couple of times with the sheer… idiocy of him. “How can you be so stupid?”

“Stupid!” Aziraphale yelps. “I’ll have you know I-”

“All these books, and you’ve probably read every single one of them.” Crowley waves his hands around at the stacks. “You’re the smartest being I’ve ever met and you’re still…” He stops, rubbing at his prickling eyes. What the Hell is he supposed to say? What is he supposed to do now?

“Crowley,” Aziraphale says gently. “I understand that you… that your intentions here are good.” “Don’t!” Crowley hisses, covering his eyes. He’s already in the shit, he doesn’t need an Angel calling him good, that’s just fucking suicidal. “Just… shut up, alright? Shut up and come with me, we can run off together, there’s lots of planets in the Kuiper Belt, there’s gotta be one that’ll suit us.”

“Crowley,” Aziraphale murmurs, and how can a rejection sound so gentle and sweet? “Okay so maybe not Haumea, that would be like sitting on a Merry-go-round, but Makemake sounds alright, doesn’t it?”

“Crowley,” Aziraphale says again, and rests his hand on Crowley’s arm. “I know you mean well, but I’m not going anywhere. I’m sure this can all be resolved, just you wait and see. I just need to speak with-”

Crowley stops listening, and lets Aziraphale keep talking, formulating a plan that will get him nowhere. Maybe when it all blows up or falls apart, maybe then he’ll see sense. Crowley just needs to wait it out, give him a chance to catch up. Then, when there’s no other options left, he’ll be willing to listen.

“Look,” Aziraphale says, brimming with naive confidence. “I know my little kitchen isn’t anywhere near as impressive as yours, but it’s served me well. How about I close up shop for a while and we work on your Signature Challenge? Won’t that make you feel better?” Crowley shakes his head. “No. You’ll win. You’ll do everything Heaven asks and they’ll still turn you over to Hell.”

To his credit Aziraphale doesn’t lose his temper. “That’s rather a defeatist attitude.” “Heaven, Hell, they’re all the same,” Crowley sighs. “Petty and desperate.” “Well, at least have a look through some recipes,” Aziraphale coaxes, and Crowley wriggles out of the grip on his arm. “No!” he snaps, then falters at the wounded look on Aziraphale’s face. “I’m done playing their games.”

“Well, then at least keep me company?” Aziraphale cajoles. “I still can’t decide between a Cherry Danish and a Spandauer.” Crowley immediately starts thinking of that dreadful song ‘Gold’, and suppresses a shudder. Aziraphale takes it as an assent and bustles over to the door, turning the sign from Open to Closed before coming back.
“This way,” he says, and Crowley lets himself be led to a back room and a set of stairs.

Any sensible person would call the space upstairs ‘a flat’, but Aziraphale insists on referring to them as ‘rooms’. They are, like their name and everything else about the Angel, a little antiquated, as though lagging fifty years behind the rest of London. The poky little kitchen has barely enough room to stand in, a Welsh dresser taking up half the available space and a wooden table occupying the rest. The oven is a rather excessive thing too, twice the size of a regular one, complete with five burners and a proving drawer. Crowley suspects that, beyond making cakes and pastries, it’s only used for heating up the cast iron kettle squatting on the back burner.

“Sit down, make yourself comfortable,” Aziraphale says, fetching the kettle and refilling it at the sink, because the first step in any task is to make a cup of tea.

Crowley plonks down on a chair, watching as Aziraphale goes through the routine of making tea. There is something very human about it, the way he moves without thinking, tea caddy on the counter, teapot by the sink, cups arranged on the dresser, teaspoons in the drawer. Crowley is presented with tea in a cup decorated with roses. Awful, blowsy things, but he wraps his hands around them, warming his fingers against the china.

Aziraphale starts piling things onto the table; a large earthenware bowl, glazed brown on the outside and white inside. A large pot in the same dull shade, with the word ‘flour’ written on the side in neat letters. A butter dish with a blobby looking cow-shaped handle on the top. And of course he doesn’t have digital scales, but a massive brass and enamel thing with a collection of little brass weights.

Crowley rests his chin on one tea-warmed hand and watches the Angel turn on a bakelite radio on the dresser, turning down the volume on some well-intentioned serial on Radio 4. While voice actors talk intently about the state of the back field, he washes his hands and fetches an apron, tying it around his ample waist and knotting it with a bow. Then he weighs out butter and flour and tips them into the bowl. He sets to work on making the pastry, rubbing together the ingredients with nimble fingers until they resemble fine breadcrumbs.

It’s oddly soothing, watching the Angel at work, pausing now and then for sips of tea, and Crowley wonders if this is why there are so many cookery shows on TV. The radio show about trouble with the back field ends, and some sort of play for the day begins. Crowley quickly loses interest in the play, and picks up one of the cookbooks Aziraphale has stacked on the table. He flicks through the pages, looking at the pictures more than anything; elegant little cakes and frou-frou desserts. There are a lot of pictures.

“Why do you do all this?” Crowley asks suddenly. Aziraphale is wrapping up his dough, and makes a questioning noise as he takes it over to the fridge. “All this baking and everything? You can just pay other people to do it for you, like everything else.”

Crowley would put money on Aziraphale not even knowing how to cook anything that didn’t involve butter and sugar. There are no grease marks near the oven or dirty plates in the sink. Angels and Demons don’t need to eat, but Crowley has spent enough meals with Aziraphale to know he enjoys the experience. “You can miracle stuff up.”

“But that’s not as much fun,” Aziraphale says, wiping his hands on a tea towel. “And it doesn’t taste as good.”

Crowley snorts. “There’s no difference between food you’ve made and food you’ve miracled. It’s all made out of base matter.”

“My dear, there is a world of difference!” Aziraphale checks the teapot and goes about refilling it. “Why there is the honest labour involved. When you have sweated and strived, have worked hard to create something. And yes, it may not be perfect, but you are not just feeding your body, you are feeding your soul, your spirit, and to do that—”

Crowley turns a page, stopping at a picture of a pavlova; meringue, thick cream and strawberries all piled together in a decadent tower, and it occurs to him that it’s not about daily bread at all, not
“And you get to lick the spoon,” he says, interrupting Aziraphale’s speech. Aziraphale blushes, all talk of honest work forgotten. “Well, that’s the whole point.”

Time passes, in the way it always does when unobserved, quickly and peacefully. While Crowley warms his hands on cups of sweet tea, Aziraphale rolls and rerolls his pastry, chattering away about the different methods of lamination. The only lamination Crowley knows is the kind where you stick bits of paper in plastic and put them through a machine, usually to appeal to fellow office workers not to steal from the communal fridge. Aziraphale’s version involves an awful lot of rolling out dough and making more tea while it has a rest in the fridge, and all the while Crowley sits and watches him.

You would think an Angel would find it unnerving, being under the close scrutiny of a Demon, but if anything, Aziraphale seems to thrive under the attention.

By the time the dough has gone beyond rested and well into slovenly, Aziraphale rolls it out one last time into a rectangle, and cuts it into six squares.

“Would you mind doing the cutting and folding, my dear?” Aziraphale asks, giving Crowley the most unbearably hopeful look. “You’re always so much better at that sort of thing.”

“Huh?” Crowley says.

“You know,” Aziraphale says, gesturing vaguely towards the table. “You’re always so creative. I need to see something in a book to be able to make it, and even then I need instruction, but you’re bakes are always so imaginative.”

Crowley shrinks in his seat, ears burning. “Alright, alright, no need to lay it on so thick,” he says, irritable and embarrassed at the praise. He slips out of his seat and ambles over to the pastry squares, with a little more swagger than necessary. Aziraphale gives him space, rummaging around in a cupboard for a fancy little jar of cherry jam, and after a minute or two of consideration Crowley makes a little V shaped cut in each corner of the first square. He brings each cut corner into the center, pressing down to make it stick.

“Oh, how clever!” Aziraphale exclaims, peeking over his shoulder, and Crowley shrugs dismissively.

“S’alright, I guess.” He moves over so Aziraphale can put a blob of cherry jam in each corner, and tries to think of something for the next square.

Six Cherry Danishes, all cut and folded in different ways, go into the oven, and Aziraphale sets a little timer shaped like an apple next to the oven before putting the kettle on one last time. After fifteen minutes of baking they come out puffed up and golden brown, but Crowley isn’t allowed anywhere near them until they have been painted with apricot jam, giving them a glossy, sticky finish. Aziraphale slides the pastry shaped like a flower onto Crowley’s plate, and puts one with a lattice work top on his own.

They eat in comfortable silence, fingers sticky and lips dusted with pastry flakes. The pastry is perfect, light and buttery and it shatters against the teeth. Of course it’s perfect.

Aziraphale sighs in satisfaction, and Crowley brushes the last few crumbs from his mouth with his sleeve and gets to his feet. There is no way he can win the final round. Aziraphale will win. Heaven will win. No more Hell, no more Demons, no more Crowley.

“Are you going?” Aziraphale asks, looking disappointed.

“Yeah. Uh.” Crowley makes a show of patting his pockets, even though there’s nothing in them.

“Stuff to do.”

“Oh.” Aziraphale makes a bad job of hiding his disappointment, but still remembers his manners.

“Well, thank you for coming. Oh, and for the biscuits.” He looks down at the four uneaten pastries. “Would you like me to box up a couple of these for you to take with you?”

“Uh. Nah.” Crowley shakes his head. He’d rather eat them here, sat at Aziraphale’s ridiculous farmhouse table while listening to Radio 4. “Couldn’t eat another bite.”
They walk down the stairs to the shop, and Crowley hesitates, checking for his phone, his sunglasses, anything to delay his departure, while his feet keep forcing him to the door. “I really should go,” Crowley says, because he is an idiot.

“Of course,” Aziraphale says, following him. “But I will see you Friday, won’t I?” He blinks, big blue eyes framed by dark lashes, which is just unfair.

“Sure,” Crowley nods, smiling like everything is fine, because what else can he do?

“Good.” Aziraphale hesitates, then reaches up to brush the back of his fingers to the mark on Crowley’s cheek. The dull burning sensation cools immediately, only to be replaced with a ruddy flush as Crowley’s blood panics over where to flow.

“It will all be fine, my dear,” Aziraphale says softly.

“Hnarh,” Crowley replies, bloodflow finally in accord and rushing to parts south. “See you Friday.”

Reckless, impulsive, and full of sugar, Crowley leans forward and presses his lips to Aziraphale’s cheek. The Angel doesn’t sputter or scold, and Crowley holds his position a moment too long to be appropriate, hands lightly brushing Aziraphale’s hips.

Then he bolts, which sounds better than ‘runs away’, a thing he absolutely does not do.
A thousand thanks you's and a flock of ducklings to the wonderful Wyvernquill, who has made so many gorgeous pieces of art for this fic, and was devious enough to suggest the gâteaux mille crêpes technical challenge. You can find all the arts for this fic on Tumblr as well as the CUTEST snek!Crowley cross stitch pattern! Thank you also to Apollo for the adorable ART inspired by the fic!

Special thanks to the lovely Zee, who managed to beta read this behemoth in record time. I can only apologise for my flagrant misuse of commas. You can find me on tumblr, if that's your thing.
The Bentley pulls up outside the hotel on Friday evening, and Crowley drums his fingers on the wheel, listening to the engine idling for several minutes before getting out. Arriving somewhere on time, not fashionably/inconveniently late, seems a little bit desperate and embarrassing, but sitting
behind the wheel waiting for a less respectable amount of time to roll past sounds worse. He hauls himself out of the driver’s seat, boots crunching on the gravel, and saunters up to the main entrance, trying to look like he’s arrived on accident rather than by design. The truth is now that he’s in Hell’s bad books this place is the closest thing he has to neutral territory; a human event with an Angel and a Demon in attendance. Surely no one will try anything here.

The Eric manning the reception desk looks surprised to see him, but hands over the keys and tells him that dinner will be served at eight. Crowley thanks her, taking the keys and heading up the stairs to his room. He pauses on the landing, wondering where Aziraphale’s room is, and whether or not to knock on the door and make a nuisance of himself.

Is that a good idea? His cheek still tingles a little where the Angel touched it, but Crowley has always been one to push his luck until it breaks. Maybe just this once he could give Aziraphale a little space and trust that he won’t run for the hills the first chance he gets.

Crowley throws himself face-first onto the bed, and lets himself relax for the first time in a week.

The phone beside the bed rings once, jarring and shrill, and Crowley lurches to his feet, dragging half a patchwork quilt with him.

“Gnaaar,” He tells the room in general, followed by a softer “Ugh” as he comes to his senses, twisting his fingers into hair that sticks up on one side and lies flat on the other. He hadn’t been asleep, shut up, he had just been resting his eyes. The phone sits, quiet and innocent, and Crowley glares at it. “What was that for?”

The phone doesn’t answer, and he remembers he’s in a hotel. They do that annoying courtesy call thing, don’t they? Like taxis that call your phone when they’re about to arrive and hang up as soon as you answer. “Oh. Dinner.” Crowley slumps across the room, and in the time it takes to reach the door his wrinkled clothes are clean and pressed, and his hair styled into something less like a house on fire.

He takes the stairs, mostly because he doesn’t want to be the first person to show up for dinner, and then have to sit alone at the table while people with more interesting things to do with their evenings fail to show up.

When he pokes his head around the door he is vindicated in his decision, as Anathema is alone at the table, nose buried in a book and pasta twist going cold on the end of her fork.

“Evening,” Crowley says, taking a seat across from her. They are the only people in the dining room, sat at a table laid out for three. “Where’s Fell?”

Anathema glances up, eyes narrowing in recognition before returning to her book. There are no cosily arranged photos of cakes on any of the pages, just dense text and the occasional diagram. “He went back to his room for a book,” she says, turning a page. The because it’s the final and some of us want to win is unspoken, but as loud as the ringing of a bell.

“Oh.” If Aziraphale has gone off to his bookshop then there’ll be no sign of him ‘till morning. Crowley rests his chin on his hand, already bored. “Right then.”

A waitress comes over to take his order, and Crowley asks for a black coffee. He has to ask in several ways, with repeated insistence that no, he won’t be eating and yes, he really means it before she goes away again, and five minutes later he has his coffee. Anathema still hasn’t touched her food, and Crowley resists the urge to carefully extract her fork from her limp hand and put it down before gravity gets the better of it.

“How’s Newton?” he asks instead. Anathema glances at him again, only this time she blushes. “Fine.” The word is as neatly clipped as a topiary hedge and just as pointless.

“You two still…” Crowley raises his eyebrows meaningfully.

“Yes.”

Crowley slumps in his seat, and misses the Angel. He’s insufferable but at least Crowley doesn’t have to sit in silence.

Anathema gives him an odd, guarded look before putting down her fork (at last) and giving Crowley her full attention. “Are you and Mr Fell…”
Crowley gives her a blank look. “Wot?”
“I mean,” she says, picking her words. “Are you two… y’know?” Crowley wrinkles his nose, and she looks almost crestfallen. “Oh. Sorry.”

There must be something in the coffee. Or the stress. Nothing else could explain what comes out of Crowley’s mouth. “Not for want of trying, mind.” He slumps a little further into his seat, a balloon slowly deflating. “His. Uh. His family. Don’t approve.”

They sit in silence for a minute, Anathema making quiet little noises of awkwardness, and Crowley has never been much good at holding his tongue.

“Mine don’t exactly approve either, but I couldn’t give a toss what they think.” The Crowley balloon deflates a little more. “But there it is.”

They silence stretches out between them, Anathema moving her cold pasta around on her plate like a sticky little game of Jenga. Does Hellish Torments do long, awkward silences? They should, it’s unbearable.

Anathema puts the fork down with a sharp clank.

“Why do they do that?” she asks suddenly. Crowley makes a little ‘gnuh?’ noise but the question is clearly rhetorical. “Families? Why can’t you go out into the world, do the thing you’re good at, and not the thing you were supposedly born for? Why can’t they support you, tell you they’re proud of you, even if they don’t really get what you’re doing and why. Why can’t they just be happy for you?”

She snatches up her fork, stabbing a pasta twist and shoving it into her mouth. She chews once, then very carefully spits the twist out onto her fork and returns it to the plate.

“They don’t like cake, I take it?”

Anathema shakes her head, picking up a napkin and discreetly wiping her tongue.

“Newt says I should be my own person, not someone else’s.” She pauses, folding and refolding her napkin.

“Yeah, he’s a good kid,” Crowley murmurs.

“He says I could move to France,” she adds, fearful and hopeful in equal measure. “Study at Le Cordon Bleu.”

“They have one of those in London,” Crowley points out. “If you wanted to stay here.”

Anathema lays her napkin on the table, as careful and precise as everything else she does. “I think I’m going to turn in,” she says. “Early start tomorrow.”

Crowley nods, tamping down on a smile. “Say hello to the lad for me.”

She doesn’t deny that she’s going off to her room to call her boyfriend. She doesn’t confirm it either, just picks up her book and wishes him goodnight.

Crowley finishes his coffee, thinking about how, of the three finalists, she’s the only human.

The bastard phone trills at stupid o’clock in the morning, and Crowley swears loudly, setting the pillow wrapped around his head aflame. He pats the tendrils of Hellfire out, smoothing over the cotton until the scorch marks are all gone, and hauls himself out of bed. He checks his watch, waiting for the numbers to ratchet their way across the face, and concludes that it is too bloody early. Breakfast must already be underway downstairs, but he’s in no mood to exchange pleasantries over patisseries, and skulks to the bathroom for a shower instead.

It takes a little bit of creative threats and intimidation to get the water running hot enough, and the showerhead is in danger of melting so Crowley doesn’t linger. He has never bothered with the fuss over drying off and dressing, a snap of the fingers doing the work for him, and he gives himself a onceover in the mirror before heading downstairs. The minivan is parked outside, engine idling, and Crowley climbs on board. Anathema is already sat at the front, leafing through the book that had kept her so occupied at dinner. Crowley takes the back bench, legs sprawling, and does his best to find a position to nap in. He hears rather than sees Aziraphale alight and take a seat across from Anathema.

It would sting, the Angel choosing not to sit with him, but the pair strike up a conversation about
the difference between phyllo and yufka pastry, which is so boring he ends up falling asleep anyway.

Crowley lurches awake half an hour later as the minibus pulls up in front of the Manor house, arms flailing as he rights himself. He smooths down the front of his jacket, primping like a cat that fell off a table and hoped no one saw, and hauls himself to his feet. They file out of the minivan and wait for an Eric to come collect them, Anathema looking mildly alarmed as Aziraphale describes a pastry dish he ate once (but at least doesn’t refer to which century it was) with a name that sounds suspiciously like placenta. Hopefully it’s just a quirk of language, but then again the Romans would eat anything.

They are collected after a few minutes by an Eric, who leads them straight to the baking tent. No milling about in the waiting room eating croissants today, it’s straight to work. Anathema walks into the tent without any hesitation, ready to get on with it. Crowley hangs back a little, scouting around the grounds outside to see if there’s any troublemakers lurking around. Other than him, of course.

“Crowley?” Aziraphale comes pootling after him, frowning as the Demon kicks a likely-looking Azalea. “Good Heavens, you’re not still worried about all that… nonsense from the other day, are you?”

Crowley looks over at him, one foot still raised. Nonsense? He opens his mouth to reiterate his points from earlier in the week, and then shuts it again. He might as well yell at a cloud, for all the good - evil - whatever - it would do, the damn thing would just scuttle on its merry way regardless.

“No.” Crowley lowers his foot. “No, this is just… percussive horticulture.”

The Angel hums, unimpressed, and gestures to the tent. “If you’re quite finished?”

Some fights are not worth the effort, but others are, and when the reach the entrance Crowley gives Aziraphale an innocent smile and offers his cheek. “For luck?” he asks, tapping the tattoo that curls its way down in front of his ear.

“You don’t need luck, you wiley old serpent,” Aziraphale says primly, then leans over and presses his lips to Crowley’s cheek. The kiss is brief and hard, like a butterfly wielding a brick, and by the time Crowley has processed it, cheek and nether regions tingling joyfully, the Angel has gone. Crowley ambles into the tent after him, a spring in his step that wasn’t there before.

There are six counters laid out in a neat grid in the tent, and at first Crowley thinks that it’s a bit depressing to have a reminder of the contestants from previous weekends, but then Anathema starts moving wire racks over to the empty counter across from her and he realises that it’s extra space. Oh. That’s good, isn’t it?

He walks over to his counter to see what jars have been left out for him, and jerks to a halt. One of those electrical contraptions is squatting on the edge of his counter. There is no Tracy in the tent anymore to move it out of the way for him. He shuffles away from it, looking around for an Eric to get rid of it for him, but there are none to hand and he’s not going to ask a cameraman for help.

“Uh. Angel?” Crowley taps the toe of his boot against Aziraphale’s counter. “I need a favour.”

“Tongues are not luckier than cheeks, Crowley,” the Angel’s tone is clipped, his attention on several sheets of notes written in elegant copperplate script. “I’m not an idiot.”

Crowley snorts, he should have thought of that one, and clears his throat. “No. I… I need that bloody thing moving.”

He gestures to the electrical bastard, and Aziraphale’s forehead wrinkles in confusion.

“The Kitchenaid?” he asks, giving Crowley a doubtful look. Crowley, who can’t stand to look at the bloody thing.

“Yeah, well what ever it’s called I don’t want it,” Crowley shrugs, failing to look indifferent.

“Can you move it please?” The please, however hastily uttered, moves the Angel to action. He unplugs the infernal device and picks it up, carrying it over to one of the Welsh dressers and setting it down.
“There,” he says, looking like he can’t tell if it’s standard Crowley nonsense or something serious. “Anything else?”
“Nah.” Crowley fidgets, as though his body was a thing that could be sloughed off and he could wriggle away. No such luck. “Uh. Ta.”
“Well, then.” Aziraphale stares at him for another minute, eyes so pale they might as well be glass. “If you’re sure?”
“Yup.” Crowley nods, a little too fast and for a little too long. “Great. Thanks.”
Aziraphale returns to his counter, throwing Crowley a last, uncertain glance, and goes back to his notes.

Every weekend in the tent is fraught, with tension mounting and nerves fraying, and you’d think the fewer contestants there were, the less stressed it would all be. You’d be wrong, of course. Anathema alone is radiating enough psychic anxiety to make even the Jedi fractious, and Crowley isn’t doing much better, though in his defense his concerns are little more severe than a couple of elderly critics not liking his vol au vents.

Okay, that’s unfair. This is important to her, more than any of them, and she’s the only one who actually wants to be in the competition. Crowley’s mouth twists. Okay, maybe the Angel too.
The doppelgangers arrive, wafting into the tent like a breath of fresh air. Sue gives Crowley a pair of fingerguns, and he resolutely refuses to mime getting shot at as she passes. She takes it as a sign that he’s okay, gaze flicking to where the electrical bastard would be if it was still on the counter, and goes over to check on Anathema. Mel glides past with a cheery ‘Mor-niiiing!’ before parking herself beside Aziraphale. The pair of them start chattering immediately. A few minutes later the judges arrive, Paul in his usual jeans and dull shirt while Mary is wearing a bright pink bomber jacket. Good for her.

With the judges present things start happening, the cameras moving into position and the Erics getting restless. Once everyone is in their places the show finally begins.
“Welcome, bakers,” Mel begins, “To Finals week, which is all things pastry.”
“That’s right,” Sue continues. “For the Signature Challenge Paul and Mary would like you to make six each of two types of Danish pastry. That’s twelve Danish Pastries altogether.” She looks over at Mary and Paul, and Mary speaks up.
“We know that you three are talented bakers, so we expect to see some creative folding techniques.”
“And no soggy bottoms,” Paul adds, because it’s the law or something.
“You have three hours,” Mel adds. “Get. Set.”
“Bake!”

Watching Aziraphale working in his cosy little kitchen must have had some kind of effect on Crowley, because without even thinking about it he grabs a bowl and fills it with flour. There are a couple of packets of butter on the counter, so he unwraps one and drops it in the bowl too.
It’s oddly therapeutic, once you’ve gotten over the mess, to squish butter between your fingers, and Crowley spends five blissful minutes not thinking of anything at all but the flour and butter in his hands forming into fine crumbs. He adds a splash of milk and brings the whole lot together, and when it turns out he added too much milk he resist the urge to add flour, because last time he did that he got stuck in a cycle of adding more and more flour and milk until the whole thing went tits up. Instead he warns the dough of exactly what he’ll do if it doesn’t sort itself out, and the dough obediently stiffens up. Crowley grins to himself, this is almost as good as gardening.
The dough gets wrapped in clingfilm and put in the fridge, because while there’s no rest for the wicked, pastry has it easy. Next is one of the more bizarre things Aziraphale has suggested, and he eats raw fish for fun. Crowley wrinkles his nose, but gets on with it, tearing off a piece of greaseproof paper from the roll on his counter, and laying it out. Next he unwraps a packet of butter and drops it into the middle of the paper. Then he puts another piece of paper on top, picks up his rolling pin, and after a furtive check that no one is watching, starts whacking. A few deft
thumps has the butter spread out onto a rather lumpy rectangle, safely sandwiched between the sheets of paper, and he rolls it out into something a little less like the surface of the moon before putting it in the freezer.

The next hour is boring, but in an almost pleasant way. Crowley rolls out his chilled dough, then peels off the paper from his frozen rectangle of butter and drops it on top. He folds dough over butter and rolls the whole lot out, then folds it again before putting it in the fridge and having a cup of tea while it chills.

He repeats the process until he’s sick of the taste of tea, so the final time the dough goes into the fridge he goes to see how Aziraphale is getting on.

Well, he doesn’t walk right over there, of course, can’t be looking desperate or anything. Crowley does a slow circuit of the tent, nodding to Sue, who is chatting with Mel over something or other. The two of them watch with matching grins as he meanders over to Aziraphale, elbowing each other and whispering. Crowley ignores them, leaning against the counter with the kind of graceful disdain that takes a lot of practice in front of a mirror. Aziraphale is busy rolling out dough, already prepared to cut and fold his pastries.

“Remind me why we’re doing all this?”

“Well, correct me if I’m wrong.” Aziraphale gives him a sideways look. “But I thought we were both in the dark about that one.”

Crowley grimaces. “No, I don’t mean that,” he waves at the dough being cut into neat squares. Aziraphale has a paper template and everything. “The whole faff with rolling and chilling.”

The Angel relaxes a little, no doubt relieved that Crowley’s asking something more prosaic for once. “Lamination, my dear,” he says briskly, cutting into the first square. “Layers of butter and dough. When it bakes, the water in the butter turns to steam, causing the layers to separate, creating a light, flaky texture.”


“Yes, there’s a lot of it about,” Aziraphale agrees, folding over the cuts in his dough. “Why do you ask? I thought you were just going to miracle something up at the last minute.”

“Nah, just done my last lot of rolling and folding.” Aziraphale stares at him wide-eyed, and Crowley shrugs, feeling oddly self-conscious. “Don’t start,” he mumbles. “‘S more fun, doing it right. Isn’t it?”

“It is,” Aziraphale agrees, giving him an unbearably bright smile, and Crowley skulks back to his counter before he can do something stupid.

Crowley sets to work on rolling and cutting his dough, and doesn’t think about idiot Angels with their soft little smiles. He folds his pastries, keeping the filling simple with thin slices of apple in one lot and shards of bitter chocolate in the other. He slides them onto baking trays and then into the oven, then goes outside to curse at the wildlife before he starts feeling good or something equally barbaric.

By the time he goes back into the tent, having failed to chasten any of the cheerful little blackbirds, the pastries are done. They have been done for the last ten minutes, but the oven knows better than to let them burn. He pulls out both trays, setting them on the counter before rummaging around for some cooling racks. He doesn’t really need to, the pastry wouldn’t dare go soggy on him, but it’s what Fell and Anathema are doing.

“Bakers!” Sue shouts from across the room. “Time for your Danishes to make a killing!”

“You what?” Crowley shouts back at her, and she gives him a very unimpressed look. “Five minutes left, Bakers.”

“Oh, fuck!”

Sue spins around to look at Aziraphale. “Mr Fell!”

Aziraphale gives her a sheepish look, a tray of Danishes in his hand. “I… I slipped,” he admits. “Nearly dropped the lot!”

Sue tuts loudly while Mel rushes over to give him a hand. Between them they move the pastries
onto a wire rack while Sue practically begs the producers to keep just one teeny tiny swear word when they go to air.

The countdown is a little anticlimactic, as everyone has their bakes arranged on platters at the end of their counters. But tradition is tradition, even if you feel like an idiot doing it. Aziraphale has managed to get a cup of tea from somewhere, and gets filmed supping serenely as the last five seconds are called. You wouldn’t think he’d been swearing like a sailor five minutes ago, not that Crowley has any plans on ever letting him forget. They get sent outside while the tent is cleaned down and the bakes filmed, and an Eric whisks Aziraphale for an interview before Crowley has the chance to speak to him. Anathema is on her phone, no doubt giving Newt a detailed account of the morning, so Crowley kicks his heels until they are called back to the tent again.

They are sent over to their counters to wait for the judges, and Crowley consoles himself with the knowledge that it will be short at least. The tent that had felt so cramped and confined in the first week now feels cavernous and bare, and the other contestants far away. He thinks briefly of Tracy, and wonders what she’s doing right now. In bed with a cup of tea if she has any sense.

The judges approach his bench first, Paul swaggering a little while Mary is her usual serene self. “Anthony,” Mary says brightly. “What have you made for us today?”

“Uh. Danishes,” Crowley says, because isn’t it obvious? He points to the ones cut and folded to look like the Dahlias blooming outside, chocolate seeping from each puffed petal. “Chocolate.” He points to the pastry cups filled with rolled up apple slices that have, on baking, softened and opened out into roses, the red skin giving them a ruby hue. “Apple.”

“They look impressive.” Paul slices a Dahlia in two. “But do they taste good?”

He shoves a piece into his mouth, while Mary nibbles demurely on a petal. Mel and Sue snag a whole Danish between them, pulling the petals apart like a game of he-loves-me-not.

Mary makes a lot of approving noises, and Paul moves on to the second bake, hacking a wedge out of one of the roses.

“Dry,” Paul says. “It needs creme pat under the apple slices, a little bit of moisture. The whole thing’s so dry it’s sucking all the water out of my mouth.”

“And you’re still talking,” Crowley mutters.

“The apple is beautifully done,” Mary adds. “And the pastry lovely and crisp, but a little custard would make all the difference.”

Crowley glances at Sue to see what she thinks, but she is trying to sneak one of the chocolate Danishes into her jacket pocket, so he doesn’t call attention to her.

Aziraphale is next, and Crowley sidles around his counter, trying to get a look at what he’s done. “Mr Fell,” Mary says warmly, and the Angel gives her one of those unbearable smiles, the ones that make your insides feel like they’re bathed in sunlight (which in practice is pretty nasty, some things should never see the light of day). “What have you made for us?”

“Just a few little trifles,” Aziraphale says, acting coy. “Raspberry and white chocolate, and a classic Spandauer.”

Crowley wrinkles his nose. Aziraphale had mentioned Spandauer before, hadn’t he? For all the fuss they’re a little anticlimactic, the pastry folded in to make a little crown shape and a blob of custard baked into the middle.

“They’re a little plain,” Paul says, chopping one in half. Okay, scratch that. Spandauer are clearly a classic, and the height of sophistication. Shut up, Hollywood.

“It’s been years since I’ve eaten one of these,” Mary says before taking a healthy bite. She’s clearly never experienced the hotel breakfast buffet. “Beautiful pastry.”

“Now for the raspberry and white chocolate,” Paul says, chopping a Danish into uneven pieces. “You are kind of set in your ways when it comes to flavour combinations.”

“I like the classics,” Aziraphale says quietly, bowing his head.

“These are lovely,” Mel says, snagging another piece to eat. “I could eat them all day.”
“I will be eating them all day!” Sue adds, taking a huge bite out of a pastry. “Mnf!”
“Thank you, my dear,” Aziraphale says patiently, brushing away the crumbs piling up on the counter.
“Good, but I had hoped to see a bit more creativity in the cutting and folding,” Paul concludes, and Aziraphale gives him a tight-lipped smile.
The Angel’s smile softens at the corners. “You’re too kind.”

Anathema is last, and smiles in that too-bright way she gets when she’s nervous.
“Anathema.” Mary rests her hands on the counter. “These look splendid!”
Paul says nothing, which is a good sign.
“Pear and almond,” Anathema gestures to six tall, conical pastries, each topped with a single mint leaf, then to some odd-looking, curved pastries. “And Bear Claws. They’re American.” She gives Paul a pointed look.
“But do they taste good?” Paul asks, looking smug.
He takes a knife to the Bear Claws first, hacking one into segments. Sue is quick to grab a piece, and shoves it into her mouth before anyone can stop her.
“Bloody hell,” she moans softly.
“Oh, that is delicious,” Mary breathes. “The almond really comes through.”
Anathema mumbles nervously, something about making marzipan, and Paul moves on to the next Danish, slicing through the pastry to reveal a whole baked pear, encased in a winding ribbon of dough.
“Wow!” Mel says, looking delighted. In the hollow where the pear has been cored there is more of Anathema’s marzipan.
Paul eats in silence while Mary makes impressed little noises. The only sounds from Mel and Sue are wet and munchy, interspersed with the odd happy giggle. There’s no doubt who has won this round.
Crowley grins to himself. Good for her.

With the judging over they are called to lunch. Crowley isn’t that fussed about eating, though he is curious about Anathema’s pears. He grabs one of the apple roses from his counter and wanders over there, stopping off at Aziraphale’s for long enough to leave the rose and steal one of the raspberry Danishes. He takes a large bite, because it is not the kind of thing that can be nibbled at, and ambles over to the girl’s counter. The Angel is already there, a pear pastry cradled in his hands as he asks questions over some detail or other. He stops as soon as he sees Crowley, holding up the pear.
“My dear, have you seen this?” he enthuses. “Isn’t it remarkable?”
“My dear?” Anathema echoes.
“Nice,” Crowley says, then holds up the raspberry Danish to suggest that it, too, is nice. He emphasises his point with another bite, flakes of pastry fluttering to the floor and making a nearby Eric hiss ‘I just swept up there!’
“The two just don’t compare,” Aziraphale insists. “This is quite the superior bake, you must try a piece!”

The Angel holds out a sliver of pear and pastry for Crowley to try. He has never been one to resist temptation, and instead of picking it from the Angel’s fingers he ducks his head and snaps the morsel up with his mouth. As funny as it would be to suck loudly on Aziraphale’s fingers, really make the Angel shriek, Crowley pulls back at the last second, just letting his lips brush against skin before withdrawing in a sugar dusted kiss.
“Oh,” Aziraphale whimpers and Crowley straightens up, chewing thoughtfully.
“Not bad,” Crowley concludes, far more interested in the way Aziraphale rubs at his fingers, cheeks pink. “Still prefer this one.”
Aziraphale’s slightly dazed expression sharpens. “It was supposed to be fig and honey,” he says,
giving Crowley a look. “But after what you said about figs I—”
“What?” Anathema asks. “What about figs?”
“They look like—” Crowley struggles to think of something before the unbearably honest Angel goes and ruins figs for her. “Testicles?”
“Really, my dear,” Aziraphale sighs, taking Anathema’s arm and leading her out the tent, away from troublesome Demons and towards lunch. Crowley still catches the parting words, softly uttered and meant for no ears but his. “As if that would stop me?”
“Hmnrk,” Crowley says to the empty tent, and takes another bite of pastry.

After a lunch that Crowley doesn’t partake in, the contestants are herded back into the tent for the afternoons torment. The counters have been cleaned down, and fresh supplies laid out. As usual there is a sheet of paper left alongside the ingredients, laid face-down so the instructions can’t be seen. Crowley skulks over to his counter and picks up a Kilner jar. Inside are shelled walnuts. He gives the jar a shake, hearing the contents rustle and thump, and puts the jar down. There is also flour and sugar and an inordinate amount of butter, and last of all a rather forlorn looking lemon. The judges arrive after only a few minutes, Mel and Sue behind them. That’s not a good sign. Erics hurrying people about after lunch means the afternoon challenge is a long one, not something that can be knocked out in an hour or two.

“Welcome, Bakers,” Mel calls out. “To possibly the most fiendishly difficult Technical Challenge we’ve ever had in the tent.”
“Oh, that’s not good,” Crowley mutters.

“Paul and Mary would like you to make forty eight pieces of Baklava,” Sue continues. “Paul and Mary, do you have any advice for the bakers?”
Paul is the first to speak. “Roll your pastry as thinly as possible,” he says with a punchable smile. “And make sure it doesn’t tear, or you’ll have to start again.”
“Don’t be shy with the butter,” Mary adds. Crowley frowns, glasses slipping down his nose. Isn’t a Baklava a thing you wear? Are they supposed to make one out of pastry? While he was distracted the judges have been sent out the tent, as the challenge is judged blind, and Crowley is suddenly aware of how rapidly things are moving and he still has no idea what they’re doing.

“You have four hours,” Mel says. “Get. Set.”
“Bake!”

Crowley flips over the sheet of instructions. It is divided into two sections, the first marked ‘Pastry’. Flour, oil, water and salt are listed, along with the phrase ‘make the pastry’.

“Right,” Crowley mutters, and fetches a large bowl. He can do this, at least.
Flour, salt, water and oil all go into the bowl, followed by Crowley’s hands. The mix is sticky, clinging to his fingers like the disaster he served up in bread week, and acts nothing like the shortcrust pastry he’s made before. He figures as it’s a Paul recipe it must secretly be some kind of bread after all, sneaky git, and tips the lumpy mass onto the counter. He works until the sticky mess starts to come together, kneading it with his knuckles and pulling it apart until it looks less like cellulite and more like bread.

Sue ambles over, even though there’s no chocolate to steal, and watches Crowley pummel the dough like it’s Hastur’s face.
“Working off some stress there?” she asks eventually. Crowley grunts, because he’s a little out of breath, and shoves his glasses up his nose with his wrist. He still gets flour on the lenses. Balls. He wraps the dough in clingfilm and dumps it in the fridge.
“So,” Sue says, her tongue working it’s way around her mouth like a lush across a free bar. “You and—”
“What’s a Bakala...thing?” Crowley asks, partly to stop her line of questioning and partly because he still doesn’t know.
“Baklava?” The word rolls off her tongue like the lush getting thrown out the bar for gross
indecency. “You never had Baklava?”
Crowley doesn’t tell her what he was doing while the world was busy eating Baklava and
developing the internal combustion engine, and instead says. “What is it, a pie or something?”

“But really.” Sue looks around to make sure no one is watching, then launches into a description of
Bakala-things; tissue thin layers of pastry doused in butter, sandwiching a thick layer of chopped
nuts and more butter. Once baked the whole thing is soaked in sugar syrup, and a two inch square
piece contains enough calories to tide a black bear through a Siberian winter.

“Right.” Crowley says, when what he really wants to do is ask why?

“Because they’re bleeding delicious,” Sue says, because while his mouth is keeping zipped his
face is picking up the slack.
Sue gives him a light pat on the arm, and goes off to annoy Anathema.

The Angel, of course, is no bloody help. Despite Crowley using his most wiley wiles, all he gets
for his sweet talking is a rose printed tablecloth. He skulks back to his own counter and clears a
space before laying the cloth out and sprinkling it with cornflour. As instructed, he gets his pastry
out of the fridge and cuts off a piece. He drops it on the cloth and starts rolling.

“Roll it out until you see roses, my dear!” Crowley sing-songs to himself, and then for good
measure minces about a little. Then he rolls some more because that’s what Aziraphale and
Anathema are doing. The tent is extremely quiet, but for the odd gentle huff of exertion and light
swish of pastry on tablecloth.

After ten thousand fucking years, or at least thats what it feels like, Crowley sees roses. The sheet
of pastry he has rolled out, ragged edges hanging over the side of the counter, is thin enough that
he can make out the blowsy red roses on the cloth underneath.

“Huh,” Crowley says, dusting the pastry with more cornflour and moving it to one side. “Roses.”
He twists off another lump of dough and starts again.
Again. Again. Again. Again. Mel shouts that another hour has passed, and Sue brings him a cup of
tea. Crowley massages his aching wrists before taking the cup. According to the instructions there
should be thirty three sheets of pastry, but Paul can fuck off with his stupid recipes.

“Why do we have to make all this bollocks?” Crowley grumbles between sips of tea. “Can’t you
get it from Waitrose or something?”

“I can’t picture you in a Waitrose, stocking up on kombucha and beetroot houmous,” Sue says with
barely suppressed glee. “I bet you do your weekly shop at Oddbins.”

Crowley has the oddest urge to hug her, but manages to control himself. “Must be weird for you,”
he says instead. “All these people, here one week and gone the next, never to be seen again.”
He doesn’t say you miss them? Because it’s much too close to will you miss me? And there is no
power in Heaven or on Earth that will force those words out his mouth.

“I’ll see them tomorrow,” she says, and gives him a quizzical look. “Do you ever read the list of
challenges?”

“Uh.” Hang on, what was it? Stupid, curly writing. Sounded French? “Volly-vonts?”

“Yeah,” Sue says, looking like she knows he’s clueless but can’t prove it. “Vol au vents for the
garden party. All the contestants from this series will be there, to see the winner announced.”

“Even Tracy?” The question slips out without warning, and damn it for sounding so hopeful.
Sue nods. “Even Tracy. She’s bringing that gentleman of hers. I think Newt’s bringing his Mum.”
Sue looks over at Anathema. “Which won’t be stressful for anyone.”

Crowley makes it to twenty eight sheets of pastry before declaring fuck it and moving on with the
instructions. He chops walnuts, then melts an indecent amount of butter in a pan. It makes him
queasy to look at it, all yellow and oily, but he pours some into the walnuts and puts the rest to one
side while he gets everything ready. He lays out pastry, walnuts, baking tray and butter on the
counter before him, and then picks up a paintbrush from the supplies left out.

An actual paintbrush. The kind of thing you use on a house, not a watercolour. He dips it into the
butter and spreads it over the base of the baking tray. Don’t be shy with the butter, isn’t that what
Mary said? He lays a sheet of pastry on top, and slathers more butter over it, and keeps on doing that until he’s used up half the pastry he has. Next he tips the walnuts onto the tray and pushes them around with a spoon. There’s no way he can get walnuts to sit in an even layer, so he does his best and moves on, adding the rest of the pastry and butter one layer at a time. Over at his counter Aziraphale is slicing his own Baklava into diamonds before baking, which seems weird but Crowley goes along with it. Over on her counter Anathema is using a ruler to measure her cuts, which seems weird and Crowley is not going that far, thank you.

Once the Baklava is sliced up, Crowley puts it in the oven, then goes outside for some fresh air. No one else is outside, and there is no way he’s ahead in the challenge, which means there is more stuff to do in the instructions.

Crowley lets his shoulders sag, his head tipping back, and lets out a frustrated little ‘ugh’ to the sky. The sky has nothing helpful to add, so he turns around and stalks back into the tent.

The instructions tell him to make a syrup. It doesn’t say how, so he puts all the ingredients in a jug and curses at it until it becomes a syrup. A few curses fall wide of the mark, and the melamine counter starts to peel. Nothing catches fire, and Crowley miracles the damage away with a sweep of his hand.

When Aziraphale takes his tray out of the oven Crowley does the same, and pours the entire jug of syrup over the bake. By now the baking tray contains half a kilo each of butter and sugar, and not much of anything else. He’s pretty sure the pastry is only there to hold the layers of butter and syrup together.

Mel calls out the last ten minutes, and Anathema puts her tray back in the oven. Crowley watches her, brow wrinkled, while he waits for his pastry to reach syrup critical mass. Is her Baklava underbaked? She doesn’t seem worried as she tidies up her counter, so Crowley can only assume things are fine.

He picks up a spatula and starts levering out squares of Baklava. It’s like moving gravel around in treacle, and the first piece crumbles as he tries to extract it. He shoves the offending rubble in his mouth, and promptly has a coughing fit. It’s the sweetest thing he’s ever tasted, and he eats sugar cubes.

“Gak!” Crowley flicks out his tongue, his mouth somehow both sticky and greasy at the same time. The noise summons Sue, who waits impatiently for him to lever up a soggy looking corner piece for her to try.

Crowley, knowing when he’s beaten, dutifully digs out the diabetic cube and hands it over. “Mpf,” she garbles happily, sucking syrup off her fingers.

“That good?” Crowley asks dubiously, and she starts giggling.

With a bit more room to maneuver the rest of the squares come out more easily, and Crowley shunts them onto a large plate, counting as he goes. The ugly, misshapen bits go to Sue, who is starting to get as giddy as a toddler in a Haribo factory. Crowley shoos her away when he’s done, and she swaggers over to Anathema, who is levering up pieces of Baklava, still warm from the oven, onto her own plate.

Unlike the last round, on this one they are cutting it close, and Mel calls time just as Aziraphale is wiping the edge of his plate.

The challenge over, they are sent out for tea while the tent is cleaned down and set up for the judging.

Once Crowley has had a few restorative sips of tea he skulks over to the Angel, sitting at one of the plastic chairs set out on the grass for them. He looks a little bit shell-shocked, a clump of his tufty white hair glued to his forehead with syrup.

“Well, that was something,” Crowley says, taking the empty seat next to him. In the distance Anathema is pacing back and forth, phone pressed to her ear.

For once Aziraphale has nothing to say, just lets out a little wheezy breath and sips his tea. Crowley watches him, an odd bubble of sensation rising up in his chest, and reaches over to touch the clump
of hair stuck to the Angel’s brow. Aziraphale starts at the delicate touch of his fingers, but doesn’t pull away, or spit out invectives. He just stares, eyes wide and brown as a rabbits, as Crowley miracles away the syrup, combing his fingers through the pale strands of hair until they are puffed up like dandelion seeds.

“You, er, you had…” Crowley withdraws his hand, gesturing to his own forehead. “Sticky.”

“Thank you,” Aziraphale murmurs, reaching up to touch his hair, as if he could feel the shape of Crowley’s fingers between the strands.

“Shut it,” Crowley mumbles, more out of habit than anything.

“No, really,” Aziraphale’s expression remains neutral, but there is a light in his eyes. “Thank you.” Crowley mumbles incoherently, and sulks into his tea. Bastard.

They are called back to the tent, where three stools are placed before a table at the front of the tent. As usual, their photos are on the table, facing away from where the judges will stand, and they take turns to carry their bakes over.

With only the three of them left, Crowley finds himself sitting beside Anathema, Aziraphale on her other side. Without even thinking about it, he reaches for the girl, and she grips him tightly, pulling his hand into her lap, where Aziraphale’s soft, manicured fingers are interlaced with her other hand.

The judges arrive, and Paul looks over the bakes curiously, no doubt trying to guess who made what. Mary pays more attention to the three of them, huddled together in the face of the oncoming storm.

“They look marvellous,” she tells them. “I can’t wait to try them.”

Paul pulls the first plate towards him, the pastries cut into neat diamonds. Aziraphale’s. Paul picks up a piece and pops it into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. Despite having eaten most of Crowley’s offcuts and failures, Sue is straight in there, snagging a piece that looks maybe slightly larger than the others.

Mary bites into her piece with a loud crunch, nodding in approval. “Beautiful pastry,” she says finally. “I can really taste the lemon.”

Oh balls, Crowley had forgotten about the lemon.

“Very nice,” Paul says, and then rather than shut up he ruins it by talking more. “The walnuts are too finely chopped, they’re almost a paste. I would like to see more texture.”

Crowley hisses softly, which gets him a fondly disapproving look from the Angel.

The judges move to the next plate of Baklava, and Crowley tenses up a little. Mary picks up a square, biting into it with a sigh of pleasure.

Paul eats his in one go, grimacing. “Much too sweet.”

Well, duh.

“The pastry is lovely and thin,” Mary says. “And I like how chunky the walnuts are.”

Crowley hadn’t really been paying attention when chopping the walnuts, but a compliment is a compliment.

“On to the last one,” Paul says, picking up one of Anathema’s bakes. Her fingers clench around Crowley’s hand and he’s pretty sure something in there goes crack.

“Beautiful pastry,” Mary says, picking up a perfect little diamond shaped Baklava. “Lovely and crisp.”

“Oh,” Mel moans as she bites into one. Then moans a little more for good measure. Sue’s enthusiastic swearing is muffled by pastry, but not so much that you can’t tell exactly what she means.

“Good,” Paul says quietly. “Yeah, that’s good.”

There is barely a second of conferring between the judges, just a few short words and emphatic nods. They turn back to the contestants, and an Eric firmly discourages Sue from eating any more Baklava while they are filming.

“I have to say I am very impressed with today’s bakes,” Mary tells them. “You have all done so
Paul, however, has little time for sentiment, and points to Crowley’s plate. “Third place.”
Well, no shock there. Crowley raises his hand. “Yep.”
“Too sweet,” Paul says briskly.
“Yeah, that’ll be all the sugar,” Crowley retorts.
“Second place,” Paul continues, touching Aziraphale’s plate.
“Yes, that would be me,” Aziraphale says, raising his hand demurely.
“Overall a good bake,” Paul says. “A nice amount of lemon zest, but the walnuts were too finely chopped.”
Aziraphale says nothing, looking expectantly at Anathema as Paul rests a fingertip on her plate.
“Anathema,” he says, giving her what he probably thinks is a winning smile. “Well done.”
“The bakes were all excellent,” Mary adds. “But your pastry was so crisp and light, it was the definite winner.”

With the filming done for the day, people start to relax. There’s still interviews to be done and the tent to clean down, but for the moment all eyes are on Anathema as she explains some trick with her bake, which Crowley guesses was that whole putting it back in the oven after adding the syrup thing she did. He takes advantage of everyone’s distraction and slips out of the tent, shoving his hands in his pockets and taking a walk across the grass. He’s tired and his arms ache from all the kneading and rolling, but the sun is shining and the flowers are in bloom, and he should enjoy it while he can.

He walks over to the bridge that crosses the stream, and watches the ducks milling about in the water, tugging at the weeds that grow along the bank. He’s so lost in his own head he doesn’t notice he has company until a handful of peas drop into the water before him. The ducks quack excitedly, wiggling over to dive after the food, as plump and fluffy-white as their benefactor.
“Well, that was a challenge,” Aziraphale says, picking out a pea from the bag he’s holding and eating it.
Crowley grumbles half-heartedly, and another handful of peas get thrown to the ducks. “Where did you get them from?”
“The caterers.” Aziraphale looks at the diminishing contents of his bag, and still eats another one.
“You really should eat lunch once in a while.”
“Why?” Crowley mutters. “We don’t actually need food, remember?”
“No,” Aziraphale says slowly. “But I would enjoy your c-” There is a crack of thunder to their left, despite the bright, sunny day. Aziraphale straightens up, looking alarmed. “What was that?”
Crowley looks up at the blue sky, searching for any sign of clouds. “I dunno. A cloudburst or something?”
The thunder rumbles again, accompanied by a flash of lightning that strikes the ground beside the bridge, scorching the grass. The ducks quack loudly, taking to the air in a clumsy flight as the stream ripples violently, as if in the grip of an earthquake.
“Oh,” Crowley whispers, his stomach turning. “Oh no.”

“Crowley?” Aziraphale reaches out to grasp his arm as lightning strikes the ground again. The grassy bank by the stream splitting apart. “Crowley, what’s happening?”
A final bolt of lightning, forked and violet-coloured, flashes before them, and standing on the grass is a tall figure dressed in a dove grey coat and cashmere scarf. Beside him the earth bubbles up, and a figure claws its way out of the dirt. A giant red-eyed fly perched on its head buzzes angrily, and the apparition brushes off the dirt clinging to their morning coat.
The two exchange a look.
“G-Gabriel!” Aziraphale stutters, hands fluttering up to his chest like birds. “What... What are you -”
“Zip it!” Gabriel snaps, stalking towards them, and Aziraphale skitters back across the bridge, stumbling when his feet meet the grass. Crowley stumbles after him, reaching out for his arm to
keep him from falling, and the Angel flinches away, looking guilty and panicked. Crowley pulls back, kicking down any thoughts of being spurned, and turns to the Demon at Gabriel's side.

“Lord Beelzebub.” Crowley bows, plastering a wide, insincere smile on his face. “To what do I owe—”

“Silence!” Beelzebub cuts him off, the last syllable rising in a sibilant that sets his teeth on edge. “What are you playing at, Aziraphale?” Gabriel doesn’t raise his voice, but his words are filled with menace. “You were told to win.”

“I…” Aziraphale moves restlessly, desperate to flee but unable to. “I am trying, I swear. But the girl, Anathema, she is very good—”

“Spare me the excuses!” Gabriel stalks towards them both, finger raised in warning. “Did I not make it clear what is a stake here?”

“Well, no,” Aziraphale admits, shoulders drawing up around his ears. “You just said win, you didn’t say why.”

“You—”

Crowley steps between Gabriel and Aziraphale, hands raised. “Now, let’s not get carried away.” Gabriel turns to Beelzebub expectantly, and the Demon marches over to Crowley. “You were told to win,” Beelzebub seethes. “And all you’ve done is fail.”

“That’s not very nice,” Crowley mutters.

Aziraphale clears his throat, and raises a hand, like a child in a classroom. “What exactly is at stake here?” he asks, and flinches when Gabriel starts to move around Crowley, who scuttles crab-like to block him.

“Hell!” Gabriel snaps. “Heaven! That’s what’s at stake!”

“You what?” Crowley lets out a startled laugh. “It’s bread, it’s not Armageddon.” Beelzebub hesitates, and Crowley stops laughing. “Oh, come on, you’re not seriously—”

“When the Antichrist failed to appear at the appointed time and the appointed place,” Gabriel says, clipped and frustrated. “Ten thousand Angels were armed and ready for war.”

“And ten thousand Demons were armed and ready for battle,” Beelzebub adds pointedly. “Exactly. We couldn’t just… not fight.” Gabriel snorts. “It’s the war. To end all wars. You can’t just… not have the war.”

“So you chose another battleground,” Crowley says slowly. “In a tent in Berkshire?”

“Well, it’s as good a place as any!” Gabriel huffs. “So it’s not the plains of Megiddo or whatever. It doesn’t matter! What matters is Good finally triumphing over Evil.”

“Or Evil finally triumphing over Good,” Beelzebub adds.

“Yes, yes, whatever.” Gabriel tries to jab at Aziraphale, but Crowley is still in the way. “Which is why you have to win, Aziraphale. All of Heaven is counting on you.”

Aziraphale freezes, eyes wide and ice-white. “All of Heaven?” he whimpers. “On me?”

“No.” Crowley shakes his head violently. “No, this is ridiculous.”

“Crowley,” Beelzebub warns.

“No, this is ridiculous,” Crowley snaps. “This… this place is nothing to do with us, it’s nothing to do with Heaven or Hell. It’s theirs.” he waves a hand at the distant tent, and all that has gone on within in. “Humans took all of creation and did something we could never could, they made new things with it. Cars and cities and daytime television. They took grass and grew it until it became wheat, and they could have just made bread with it but they went and made cake.” Crowley shakes his head. “This is not ours it is theirs, and they deserve it. They earned it. And you’re just a… a pack of idiots arguing over things that don’t matter any more.” He swivels, pointing at Beelzebub. “So… so fuck you, alright? I’m out.”

Beelzebub glares at Crowley, who should be scared but he’s too angry to realise it.

“Well then!” Gabriel claps his hands together. “That’s great! The Demon here is bowing out of the competition, so that means you just need to beat the human. You can do that, can’t you
Aziraphale?”
“I…” Aziraphale says weakly.
“Crowley,” Beelzebub says in a voice carrion-sweet. “Do you remember what happened the last
time you failed? Do you remember how we strapped you down and slit you open? Tied your guts
to a windlass and made you turn the crank yourself?”
Crowley nods, his mouth suddenly dry, and all the fear he should have felt when he was flapping
his jaw comes rushing towards him in a tidal wave. “Rings a bell, yeah,” he rasps, his voice
cracking.
“You will long for those days before we are done with you,” the Demon promises.
Crowley’s hands clench, his body shaking, but he doesn’t cower. He doesn’t beg. “Right.” It
comes out rasping and pitiful. “Well, get on with it.”

Beelzebub stalks towards Crowley, and Gabriel moves out of the way. Neither of them hear the
soft, horrified voice asking “You did what?”
It is spoken a second time, louder and firm. “You did what?” and Aziraphale puts himself between
Crowley and Beelzebub.
“Aziraphale?” Gabriel sounds less calm, less certain this time, and Aziraphale glances his way for a
second before manifesting his sword. “Aziraphale!”
Aziraphale twitches his wrist, and the sword bursts into flame. He points it at Beelzebub, arm
steady, feet planted in the grass like tree roots.
“Get out of my way, Angel,” Beelzebub snarls.
“I most certainly will not!” Aziraphale snaps.
“Aziraphale, you worthless little -” Gabriel lunges for the sword, but Crowley is quicker, throwing
out his left hand and manifesting a plume of Hellfire.
“Back the fuck off, Gabriel!” Crowley shouts, and the plume of fire roars into a column of flame.
Gabriel skitters back, arms pinwheeling, and knocks into Beelzebub. “What… What’s happening?”

Gabriel?” Aziraphale fumbles for Crowley’s free hand, grasping it tightly. “You were going to
turn me over to Hell, weren’t you? If I won or lost?”
Gabriel looks briefly cornered, then shrugs. “Well, yeah,” he admits. “Look, it’s strictly business,
Aziraphale. The only way to get Hell to agree to a change of location was to, y’know, sweeten the
deal. And I couldn’t have you hanging around whichever way things turned out.”

Aziraphale doesn’t look shocked, just tightens his grip on Crowley’s hand when he lets out a loud,
furious hiss, and pulls him closer.
“Well, then. What is that American expression? Oh yes.” He looks delighted. “I quit!”
“You… you can’t quit!” Gabriel shrieks.
“I can and I have,” Aziraphale says, jabbing his sword in Beelzebubs direction. The Demon snarls,
backing away.
“You can’t have him!” Crowley shouts gleefully. “You come anywhere near him and I’ll burn you
to a fucking crisp!”
“And if you come near him,” Aziraphale adds, and then to make his point swings his sword with
surprising skill, flame arcing through the air.
Beelzebub gives Gabriel a look, and when he makes a slight move towards Aziraphale Crowley
hisses, the Hellfire in his open hand licking over his fingers and spilling to the ground.
“Ah,” Gabriels says. “I think this calls for a… a tactical retreat.”
“This izzzn’t over!” Beelzebub warns, and turns tail, diving into the dirt and burrowing back down
to Hell. Gabriel, outnumbered two to one, tries to claw back some lost ground. “This is not over,”
he warns, tugging at the collar of his sweater. “And Aziraphale, I am very disappointed in you.”
“You were going to turn me over to Hell!” Aziraphale says, sickened, and Gabriel shrugs
expansively.
“Your problem, Aziraphale, is you’ve never been a bigger picture kind of -“
The Hellfire in Crowley’s hand erupts, sending a jet of flame towards Gabriel and catching the tasselled hem of his scarf. He yelps, pulling the scarf off and throwing it at the ground, and after giving the pair a last, panicked look, vanishes.

Crowley closes his hand, snuffing out the fire, and feels a bit wobbly. He sways from side to side, a sapling in a stiff breeze, and okay, maybe he’s a lot wobbly and needs to sit down.

“Angel?” he asks softly. Aziraphale is staring at his sword, the last of the flames dying back. “I. Uh. Thanks. For, um.”

Aziraphale drops the sword and flings his arms around Crowley’s neck, and Crowley teeters for a moment before giving up and letting someone else deal with gravity, and clings to the Angel with all his might. It’s not a lot of might, but enough to keep them both on their feet.

“I’m so sorry,” Aziraphale babbles, voice muffled against Crowley’s shoulder. “For all the things they did to you, and for taking so long to… to catch up.” He lets out a loud sniffle. “I’ve been such a -”

“’Ssallright,” Crowley slurs. He would pat Aziraphale on the back but that would mean moving, and he doesn’t feel up to that yet.

“Oh, my poor dear.” Aziraphale pulls back, gripping Crowley’s face in his hands. “Oh, you look quite dreadful!”

With adrenaline coursing through Crowley’s idiot corporation he had soared, and without he is plummeting back to earth. He has Fallen once, he doesn’t need to experience it again.

“Sssweet talker,” Crowley says with a weak smile, and Aziraphale tuts softly.

“Come along,” he says firmly. “A bit of a lie down and you’ll soon feel better.”

Right now Crowley would take the muddy, churned earth alongside the stream, but Aziraphale wraps an arm around him, coaxing him to take one step, then two, and the world warps and shifts around them. Grass becomes carpet, and the open skies become the magnolia painted walls of a hotel room.

It looks very much like Crowley’s room at the hotel, only there are more books piled up on the bedside table. A pair of pyjamas, in red and black tartan, are pressed into Crowley’s hands, and he is gently shoved towards the little ensuite bathroom. Crowley stands in the harsh fluorescent light there for a little too long, blinking owlishly at the bathroom mirror, then clicks his fingers.

The pyjamas are soft and fleecy, and spectacularly ugly. They are fantastic. Crowley shuffles back into the bedroom, and Aziraphale turns down the bedcovers on the left side of the bed, urging him gently to have a lie down.

Crowley suffers the ordeal of being tucked in, a first time for both of them, and watches with hooded eyes as Aziraphale closes the curtains and turns off the light, then picks out a book from his pile and sits on the right side of the bed.

“You going to put your sword between us?” Crowley smirks at his own joke. “To protect your virtue?”

“I’d rather not set the blankets alight, if it’s all the same,” Aziraphale says mildly, swinging his bare feet up onto the bed. His socks are pale blue and patterned with little doves. “Might damage my books.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Crowley murmurs, blinking slowly as Aziraphale switches on the bedside lamp. He opens his book to his bookmark, and begins to read.

“Angel?” Crowley whispers.

“That’s debatable.”

“Angel,” Crowley repeats, because he’s not giving this up. “I just… thanks. For having my back. No ones ever backed me up before, and I… well. Thanks.”

“Go to sleep, Crowley,” Aziraphale says firmly. He says something else, too soft to hear, but Crowley is already asleep.

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Crowley wakes to an empty room and the shrill ringing on a phone. He fumbles for the damn thing, squatting on the bedside table like a toad, but doesn’t reach it before it cuts off.

Ugh.

He does feel better for having slept, but is still slow getting himself to his feet. He has no idea where his sunglasses are, so miracles up another pair, sliding them on as he ambles towards the door. By the time he is in the hallway his tartan pyjamas have transformed into the usual jacket and jeans, and he clomps downstairs in search of coffee. His plans are thwarted by an Eric at the bottom of the stairs, waving impatiently.

“There you are!” she calls. “Come on, the bus is waiting.”

Crowley makes some noise about coffee first, but she won’t hear it, herding him out the door and into the waiting minibus. He catches a brief glimpse of Aziraphale, deep in conversation with Anathema over some pastry nonsense. Aziraphale glances his way, giving him a brief, bright smile before returning to his conversation, and Crowley slips into the nearest seat. He stares out the window at the British countryside hurtling past, the world all strange and new. It occurs to him that he is, for want of a better term, unemployed. They both are.

The bus arrives at the estate, already a hive of activity, Erics and runners scrambling to get everything ready. Sue had said there would be a garden party for all the eliminated contestants, which apparently means the whole park needs to be covered in bunting.

They walk over to the tent, passing what must be the designated party area from the stacked chairs and scattered tables. A couple of Erics are moving furniture around like anxious cats with too many kittens.

While Anathema heads straight into the tent Aziraphale hangs around outside, waiting for Crowley. Is that a good thing or a bad one?

Crowley tucks his hands into his pockets and puts a little swagger into his step, which makes Aziraphale fidget a little more obviously.

“All set?” Crowley asks, nodding to the tent.

“Yes.” Aziraphale turns to look at the open doorway before turning back to Crowley. He really is twitchy, and Crowley’s heart sinks a little. Not good then. “And you? Well rested, I take it?”

“Yeah. Great.”

“Good.”

Well, might as well go down swinging. Crowley taps his cheek. “Kiss for luck?”

“You don’t need luck,” Aziraphale retorts.

Right.

An Angel and a Demon, or rather an ex-Angel and a whatever-he-is, it would never have worked, would it?

“We could…” Aziraphale says slowly, picking each word like he’s treading a path through quicksand. “We could… well, you know… because we wanted to.” He blushes, ears turning a charming shade of coral. “And it’s… nice. It’s a nice thing. I mean when we…” Aziraphale clears his throat. “It was nice.”

Oh.

“Well, that works for me,” Crowley says, shuffling closer until they stand toe to toe. Aziraphale tilts his head up, and Crowley bends to meet him halfway.

The kiss is chaste and brief, and though it lacks the thrill and panic of the first time, it is far more wonderful. It is a kiss that will be followed by others. Dozens, hundreds, thousands, more than there are stars in the sky. Brief and sweet, biting and impatient, lingering and bold. Kisses that taste of coffee and kisses that taste of wine. Distracted pecks on the cheek while Aziraphale is reading or Crowley is tapping on his phone. Sleepy kisses in the morning and drunken snogs on the sofa amidst the clatter of empty bottles. All that and more laid out before them, stretching out into eternity.
Aziraphale makes a contented little sound as they part, a low hum in his throat and Crowley wants nothing more than to put his mouth to that pale neck. Instead he gestures to the tent. “After you.” Aziraphale gives him a flustered little smile and scampers inside, and Crowley follows.

Crowley drifts around in a happy little daze, ambling over to his counter and watching Aziraphale get ready for the day’s baking. When he doesn’t acknowledge Sue passing by she punches him on the arm.

“Ow!” Crowley rubs his elbow absently. “What was that for?”

“Wakey wakey!” Sue says with a smirk. “Time to bake-y.”

“Oh, that was terrible.”

Sue takes the criticism with gleeful indifference, and goes to join the judges at the front of the tent. Oh, so things are starting.

“Welcome, Bakers!” Sue begins. “To the final day in the tent, and the last Showstopper Challenge of the Great British Bake off. It’s time to show off your skills and wow the judges with your pastry perfection.”

“Yes, and today Paul and Mary would like you to make forty eight vol au vents,” Mel continues.

“Those classic French canapes of delicious puff pastry so beloved by eighties dinner parties. Mary, I’m sure you’ve eaten a few creamed mushrooms in your time?”

“I have, and they were delicious,” Mary says happily. “Today we would like twenty four savoury vol au vents, and twenty four sweet.”

“We want to see perfectly risen puff,” Paul adds. Mel gives him an encouraging nod. “And no soggy bottoms,” he says reluctantly.

“You have four hours,” Sue finishes. “Get. Set.”

“Bake!”

Crowley stares blankly at his counter for a minute. Oh, pastry. He knows how to do that. He weighs flour and butter into a bowl, adds a little salt, and meshes it together until it looks like breadcrumbs. Egg yolk goes in next, and then a little more flour as the whole thing is a bit sticky. He works it into a ball, wraps it up in clingfilm and puts it in the fridge.

Two types of pastry, they said. Okay, so that’s got him a little stumped, because as far as he knows there’s just the one kind of puff pastry. Crowley shrugs, and makes the same pastry again, this time adding a dash of sugar. That’s sweet, isn’t it. He wraps it up in cling film and chucks it in the fridge. Five minutes later he takes it out again and writes ‘sweet’ on the clingfilm, then puts it back.

It takes a few minutes to snag an Eric and get a cup of coffee from her, but once he has his floury hands around a mug of painfully sweet coffee, he goes over to bother Aziraphale.

“Alright, Angel?” Crowley asks, leaning against Aziraphale’s counter in a completely relaxed and not at all showing off his best side kind of way. Aziraphale hardly notices, he’s too busy peeling mushrooms. Crowley didn’t even know you could peel mushrooms, but there’s a little pile of white curls on one edge of his chopping board, and a bowl of sadly denuded button mushrooms with trimmed stems.

“Tickety boo, my dear,” Aziraphale answers.

Crowley wrinkles his nose. “You’re not making creamed mushrooms are you?”

Aziraphale hesitates, before picking up another mushroom. “And if I was?”

Crowley’s ribs feel strangely tight, like his heart has swelled up or something. The moment passes and he can breathe again. “You are ridiculous,” Crowley says, but it sounds like something else. Aziraphale smiles, pale blue eyes creasing.

“And you are incorrigible,” he replies, in a warm tone that is not fit for broadcast.

“Gnk,” Crowley says, and retreats to his counter before he bursts into flames or something. He takes out his… frustration on some butter, rolling it out between two pieces of baking paper, then puts it in the freezer. With that done, he goes outside to yell at the flowers, but they’re all behaving so well, all pink and red and yellow, that he just stands on the grass and feels the sun
warm his shoulders.

The next hour is lost to rolling and folding the puff pastry, which is extremely boring but also quietly soothing. He keeps forgetting which pastry is which, so scatters a handful of dill over the savoury one, rolling and folding until the whole thing is flecked with green.

One last rest, and then more rolling. The contestants have been supplied with circular cutters, and Crowley stamps out circles and rings until he runs out of pastry and patience. The rings get stuck to the top of the circles with a little dab of milk, and the first couple of trays go into the oven.

“Good morning, Anthony,” Crowley looks up to see Mary approach his counter, Paul lurking behind her. “What have we here?”

She picks up one of the discs of dill-flecked pastry, turning it over in her hands with a craftsman’s eye.

“Just some dill,” Crowley says, and in that moment realises what he’s making. “Thought I’d fill them with a bit of salmon.”

“Oh!” Mary looks delighted. “Smoked or -”

“Gravlax,” Crowley says, and Mary nods, pleased.

“Sounds delicious.”

“And for the sweet vol au vents?” Paul asks.

Crowley gives him a dour look. “Bee stings.”

Paul snorts, but he doesn’t pass comment. Mary wishes Crowley luck, putting back the pastry disc before moving on.

Another hour passes, and pastry shells start to crop up on counters like mushrooms. Anathema is the first to break away from her counter, taking over the one that Newt used to have and covering it with wire racks. Aziraphale starts stacking his own wire racks until he has a pastry Tower of Babel wobbling on the end of his counter. Crowley just tips his pastry cases straight onto the counter before refilling the trays and throwing them back in the oven. If anyone sees him handling hot metal trays and pastries without cursing they don’t draw attention to it.

Just as Crowley is shutting the door on the last of his cases in the oven, one of the Eric’s announces that people have started arriving at the garden party. Crowley gives his hands a quick wipe with a tea towel and goes out to investigate.

In the last few hours the area has been festooned with bunting, and tables and chairs have been arranged for the guests. The refreshment table is currently being plundered by a gang of eleven to twelve year olds, who are squabbling over the jam tarts and cupcakes that are laid out, while leaving the sausages on sticks and sandwiches cut into triangles for the adults perusal.

“Adam!” a familiar voice calls. “Adam, those are there for everyone.”

Oh, it’s wosshername. “Deirdre?” Crowley says doubtfully, and she turns at the sound of his voice.

“Oh, Anthony!” Deirdre hurries over to give him a hug. “Congratulations on making it to the final.”

“Yeah,” Crowley mumbles, watching as the gang of kids, having stripped the plate of jam tarts bare, move on to the cakes. “I was shocked too. Are they all yours?”

“Oh, no,” Deirdre lets out a panicked titter at the thought. “Just that rascal there.” She points to the curly haired boy and shouts for him to put something back. He does as asked before the lot of them, weighed down with treats, scurry off to find a good hiding place to eat them in. “Oh, off they go.” She gives Crowley an apologetic smile. “Kids.”

Crowley nods, like he has the faintest idea what she means. Then he catches an unmistakable flash of blonde hair.

“Oh,” he says, because he may be a Demon but he’s not rude. “Gotta go.”

There are familiar faces everywhere he looks. Over to his left is Mary the Younger, with a gang of women he would bet money on all being called Mary (except for one Theresa). On his right is the girl who went out the first week, chatting to one of the Erics. But up ahead, wearing a coat that
must have been made out of a ‘70’s pub carpet, is the only one he really wants to see.

“Oi, harlot!”

Tracy lets out a delighted laugh, opening up her arms and Crowley scoops her up into a hug. “Oh, you cheeky devil!” she giggles, slapping Crowley’s arms until he puts her down again. There is a grizzled-looking man beside her, looking uncomfortable in a wool suit that smells faintly of Febreeze.

“This the wee scunner, aye?” he asks Tracy, his accent roving past Edinburgh and circling around Glasgow before fetching up in the Hebrides.

“Oh, Mr S, you behave,” Tracy says with gentle reproach.

“Yep,” Crowley says with a wide grin. “That’s me.”

Mr S looks him up and down, and eventually lets out a sniff. “Ye know where a man can get a pint o’ the black stuff?” He holds up a plastic cup of lemonade. “Or do I ha’ tae drink this pish?”

“Over by the sandwiches.” Crowley points at one of the tables, where a bucket of ice is filled with bottles of Guinness export and cans of pre-mixed gin and tonic. It wasn’t there a minute ago, but they don’t need to know that.

“Ahh!” Mr S claps his hands together. “That’s more like it, laddie.”

Tracy wraps her arm around Crowley’s waist and gives him a squeeze, then goes up on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. “You’re supposed to be baking.”

“Gnk.” Oh yeah. Baking. “Gotta go, lovely to see you.” He gives Tracy a kiss on the cheek, and absolutely does not run back to the tent.

He does not run back to the tent because he runs over to the caterers, who are a little surprised to find the salmon he’s after sitting in their fridge. Crowley snags a pot of sour cream that’s going free, and whatever speed he runs to get to the tent, he makes sure to swagger his way inside. You’d hardly notice he was out of breath.

The sour cream and salmon goes into the dill pastry cases, and then he whips up some cream and honey to pipe into the sweet pastry cases. There’s still time left, so he persuades an Eric to find some marzipan and a bag of almond slices for him, and while he waits melts a little dark chocolate on a pan.

Sue brings over the marzipan and almonds, and helps herself to some leftover chocolate while he rolls a piece of marzipan into a lozenge. He paints two chocolate stripes on it, adds a couple of little dots for eyes, and then sticks two slivers of almond into the body to make the wings.

“Bee!” Sue says, looking delighted. “Oh, that’s adorable!”

Crowley hands over the little marzipan bee, and gets to work on the next one. He still has forty seven left to make and not as much time as he thought to do it in. Sue carefully puts down the bee and helps him with the others, picking out the best looking almonds and pushing them into place on the little bee bodies. Before long the counter is covered in little almond bees. Crowley makes a couple of extra ones, which he gives to Sue.

“There you go,” he says, topping each cream-filled vol au vent with a sugary bee. “Don’t eat them all at once.”

“Eat them?” Sue looks scandalised. “You can’t eat them.” She arranges the bees in the palm of her hand, and starts talking to them in a sing-song voice. “We mustn’t eat the bees, not when they’re so adorable!”

Crowley rolls his eyes as she wanders off to show Mel, quickly finishing off his bakes and arranging them on plates. A moment later he hears a shriek of outrage, as apparently Mel isn’t so reticent when it comes to marzipan wildlife.

After a brief feud, and the making of an apology marzipan mouse with the scraps Crowley has left over, Mel is forgiven. She and Sue give the final countdown for the last challenge of the series. A few people get a bit emotional about things coming to an end, and Crowley has to go remind Anathema that there’s a lanky idiot over at the garden party at the mercy of Tracy’s charms. They are sent outside while the final round of judging happens in secret, and make their way to the party.
Newt, who has been quietly enduring the combined force of both Tracy and Mr S, nearly sobs with relief at the sight of her, and is quickly rescued. Crowley gives it half an hour before someone (Tracy) starts talking about wedding bells. Someone, Mary from the look of it, has brought along a tin of iced biscuits, and Crowley snags a rose covered in pink icing, wrapping it up in a paper napkin and taking it over to where Aziraphale is talking to Dierdre. Her boy and his friends, have come back in search of more cake, and the Angel is clearly struggling under the rapid-fire questioning of four pre-teens.

“Oh, look!” Aziraphale shouts, pointing to one of the tables. “A chocolate fountain!”

A fountain dutifully appears, and despite there being no electricity it obediently churns away, molten chocolate raining down in a sticky waterfall. A moment later several bowls of sliced bananas and whole strawberries appear around it. After an impatient look from Crowley, bowls of marshmallows appear too.

“Oh,” Dierdre says, more to herself than anything. “Maybe just one strawberry.”

She follows the kids over to the fountain, and Crowley nods after her.

“You met the kid, then?”

“Yes,” Aziraphale says, distracted by the biscuit being handed to him. “He seems a very bright young boy.”

Any interest in seeing the children dip marshmallows, then fruit, then limbs into the fountain is quickly forgotten, and he savours the sight of Aziraphale eating a biscuit instead.

“Something about him…” Crowley murmurs, some half-formed thought, but then Aziraphale dabs at his mouth with a napkin and it is forgotten.

“Hmn? What were you saying?”

“Nuuh,” Crowley shakes his head. “Can’t remember.”

Aziraphale gives him a very fond look, and his heart seems to drip and gloop and churn like melted chocolate.

They are summoned back to the tent, and for one nasty moment Crowley thinks they’re about to be judged. But they are just given their remaining vol au vents to take out to the party, where the winner will be announced. Crowley deftly lifts a platter each of his two bakes, carrying them over to Aziraphale.

“So, what did you make?” he asks. “Aside from the mushrooms?”

Aziraphale looks startled, then blushes, holding up one of the trays. Each pastry case is filled with a thick, rich chocolate cream. “It’s… er… it’s Devil’s food cake.”

Crowley is extremely aware that he must look like an idiot. An idiot with a massive grin on his face. He holds up one his own platters. “Gravlax and dill pastry.”

Aziraphale makes a sweet, surprised little noise, and Crowley waves the platter under his nose.

“Go on, let me tempt you,” he coaxes, and Aziraphale carefully picks out one of the pastries. He eats it in two slow, savouring bites, and Crowley has the strangest urge for a cigarette.

“Delicious,” Aziraphale declares, and holds up his own platter.

Crowley picks up a little pastry case, and crams it into his mouth in one go. “Mnarph!” he says, spraying crumbs. “Is that Talisker?”

“It might be,” Aziraphale says with a sly smile.

“Lovely.” I love you.

“Well, that’s good.” Of course you do.

Bastard.

The vol au vents are received with a round of applause, and Aziraphale soaks up the praise, looking flustered. Of all the pastries on offer, Crowley has to admit (quietly, under his breath) that Anathema’s are the best. Her savoury option is a twist on creamed mushrooms; wild mushrooms in a spicy, earthy mole sauce. Her sweet pastries are deep fried little squares of puff pastry filled with cream and jam, and Aziraphale quietly admits that in all his six thousand years on earth they might be the best thing he has ever eaten.
Paul and Mary arrive, and with little ceremony announce that they are giving their verdict.
Crowley, Tracy and Anathema stand together in front of the crowd, hand in hand in hand, and wait for the verdict.
“The winner of this year’s Bake Off,” Mary begins, so happy she can hardly contain it. “Is Anathema.”
Newt lets out a loud squeak, and then the crowd starts cheering as Mel and Sue rush over to drag her into a group hug. After a bit of frantic waving and grasping Newt is pulled into the hug as well, and then Mary and Tracy pile in, and it’s all a bit of a scrum after that.
Crowley extracts himself from the pile-up, hauling Aziraphale with him, and they retreat to a quiet corner to watch the celebrations. They also get to see Mr Shadwell corner Paul and start lecturing him on Tracy’s elimination. Roars of ‘the best blummin’ thing ye’ll ever taste’ and ‘ye wee gobshite’ float over the happy crowd. Tracy dabs at her eyes and watches on, plastic glass of gin and tonic in hand.

Newt kisses Anathema on the cheek for the cameras, and then Mel and Sue turn to Crowley and Aziraphale expectantly.
“Wot?” Crowley scowls, and then notices the cameras trained on them. He turns to Aziraphale for guidance, or perhaps admonishment. “Uh… we… well…”
“Oh, come now, my dear.” Aziraphale take’s Crowley’s hand in his. “There’s no need to be shy, is there?”
“Oh, you -” Crowley grabs the Angel by the waist and spins him around, dipping him backwards. Any squeak of indignation that might happen is muffled by a very loud, very wet kiss. He’s pretty sure Aziraphale kicks one foot up into the air, but it’s back on the ground when he rights them both.
The cheer that rises up is deafening. Several tenners are exchanged between the Erics. Crowley takes Aziraphale by the hand and leads his through the trees, away from the celebration.

They walk in silence for a few minutes, catching their breath and gathering their thoughts.
“Well,” Aziraphale says brightly. “All’s well that ends well, I suppose.”
“Yeah.” Crowley looks over his shoulder, the celebration behind them, the Bentley ahead.
“Could’ve been worse.”
“And what about the show?” Aziraphale sounds less confident with that question.
“Maybe the BBC will keep it.” Crowley shrugs, it’s all a bit ineffable really. “Maybe it’ll go to Channel 4, and the new judges will be mean, and people won’t like it as much as the old version. They’ll still watch it.”
“Panem et circenses,” Aziraphale says wistfully.
“Well, I doubt they’ll have any elephants.” That gets him a scornful look. Fantastic. “But it’s not up to us to fix it. It’s theirs, the humans, they created it, and they decide what happens next.”
They stop at the Bentley, and Aziraphale hesitates before speaking. “And Heaven and Hell?”
“They’ll be back. Eventually.” Crowley cracks open the passenger door. “Don’t know what’ll happen then.”
Aziraphale startles him with a kiss, sweet and brief. “We will prevail, my dearest.”
My dearest. It sounds nice. Crowley could get used to it, and other things.
He kisses Aziraphale in return, because he can, and steps back, ushering him into the car. He shuts the door and ambles over to the driver side, slamming the door and resting his hands on the wheel.
“So, then.” He gives Aziraphale a cheeky smirk. “Your place or mine?”
Aziraphale purses his lips, prim and proper and devious. “Is there a difference?”
Crowley snorts, starting the engine and turning the car towards London, towards home.
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