Doubt Thou the Stars are Fire
by LadyShipwreck

Summary

In order to impress his boss and keep his bookshop, Aziraphale sets out on a quest to bring back a fallen star. What he finds, instead, is Crowley. (And two Dukes of Hell with increasingly convoluted plans, a flying pirate ship captained by the Antichrist, abuse of footnotes, and a star that’s maybe actually a demon, but really, who’s counting?)

AKA: The Stardust AU no one was asking for! With art by the amazing lonicera-caprifolium. Go check them and all their amazing stuff out, go go go!!

Translation into русский can be found here!
The Bookseller

Chapter Summary

This fic would have been impossible without the work of Diamondot, who brought wisdom and cleverness and so much insight, and who was a goddamn saint of a cheerleader. You are Best Beta, and I am very spoiled to have you!

And everyone, go check out all of lonicera-caprifolium's art. Their work is that first breath of spring-fresh air after a long winter, and you owe it to yourself to treat your eyeballs.

Once upon a time, in the sort of quaint little village where all these stories start, there lived a bookseller.

That was the title given on his shop sign, anyway: A.Z. Fell & Co, Booksellers. He was A. Z. Fell, and as there was no actual ‘& Co.’ involved with the shop at all, it naturally worked out that he, Aziraphale, was the bookseller mentioned. It wasn’t quite accurate, but it didn’t seem proper to get cards made up that said “A.Z. Fell, Bookhoarder”. It was hardly needed anyway. The bookshop had none of the cozy and inviting characteristics of its business-minded brethren, but rather the feel of a forgotten museum run by a sweet yet somehow terrifying librarian. “People go in,” town children whispered in the dark, “and they do come out, actually, but they never go back in again.”

That suited Aziraphale just fine. He wouldn’t have minded if the literacy rate of the whole area dropped, so long as it lowered the number of potential people who might even think of becoming customers.

It was a terribly unangelic thought. Perhaps his business card should have read, “A.Z. Fell, Bookhoarder and Unangelic Angel”, for that was exactly what Aziraphale was.

On the night our story starts, he was busy being both. The angel walked between teetering stacks and rickety shelves, making sure the dust placement was just so to dissuade curious fingers. Satisfied that he wouldn’t be making a sale that week, he grabbed his mug of cocoa and nestled himself into a pile a pillows on a window seat at the back of his shop. He expected the over-sweet cocoa to be the perfect temperature, so it was. He settled into his nest with a happy sigh and felt the crisp fall air leech through the windowpane wherever he brushed up against it.

It really was the perfect night, and Aziraphale had seen enough of them to make that judgement. The few villagers who weren’t cozied up at their hearths wound through the streets on errands that carried no urgency. Above them, mostly unnoticed, stars twinkled and shimmered in a sky that looked velvety enough to snuggle. One spot of bright reddish-gold light streaked through the firmament. It passed behind chimney smoke and tree tops until it dipped below the dense line of forest that curled around the town’s eastern edge. Aziraphale sighed again, letting himself soak in the picture-perfect calm.

That lasted until a rush of air splashed cocoa all over his trousers. “Oh, bugger,” he muttered. He was halfway to miracling the stain away when he realized he should investigate the source of the sudden wind.
“Hello, Aziraphale,” said Gabriel, Archangel and Aziraphale’s direct supervisor.

“Um.” He, smoothly he hoped[1] changed his miracling motion into brushing the cocoa off his favorite tweed trousers. “What an unexpected surprise!”

Gabriel flashed a smile that, like everything else about him, was broad and shiny. It seemed the archangel was focusing on the ‘prize’ implication in ‘surprise’, and not the implication that left Aziraphale feeling like he had been plunged into a pit of ice-cold vipers. Gabriel arriving unannounced was rarely good or easy news[2].

Gabriel tucked his hands behind him in a way that somehow took up more room, not less, and turned in a slow circle to regard the bookstore. “You’ve done a commendable job blending in with the humans,” he said.

Aziraphale may have been willfully naive and a bit too trusting, but he knew a not-compliment when he heard one. “Thank you,” was still the only possible answer.

“Perhaps too good a job.” He circled back to face Aziraphale, feet set directly under his shoulders in what would someday be known as a ‘power stance’. “Some Upstairs are worried that you’ve gone a bit…”

“Native?”

“Soft.” Gabriel’s bright violet eyes dropped to Aziraphale’s midsection, and then back to his face. “Of all the miracles you’ve performed in the last decade, do you know how many could be described as ‘frivolous?” The question wasn’t one meant to be answered, apparently, as Gabriel barrelled on without stopping to take a just-for-show breath. “Almost all of them.”

Aziraphale was glad he hadn’t miracled the cocoa out of his trousers. He’d always know that stain had seeped into the wool, but maybe it had been worth it to save face.

“Well, all in the service of showing the locals the, um, earthly rewards of living a virtuous life,” he tried, finally summoning the willpower to wriggle away from his pillow nest and stand. He hoped it made him seem a bit less soft and more the soldier of the Lord that he was created to be.[3]

Gabriel tapped his chin, mulling it over. “Well, as admirable as that may be, it’s not exactly regulation methods. Look, I’ll be honest. Ha! Like angels could be anything but.” He broke into a quick laugh, with Aziraphale’s answering chuckle to weakly punctuate the joke. “Anyway. There’s a few Upstairs who want you to come back, maybe get a few centuries of retraining.”

Aziraphale could see it, endless years spent in the empty brightness of Heaven. Surrounded by his angelic brethren, flying over marble floors to join another chorus of hosannas. It sounded like his ultimate nightmare.

“-Remember the work you did in Eden, so I know you have it in you.” Oh, Gabriel was still talking. He pulled himself out of the echoing halls of Heaven in his mind and tried to focus on the emissary in front of him. “Just need a chance to prove it, right?”

“Right.” Aziraphale hoped that sounded confident, strong, and like he had been paying attention to what he was getting himself into.

“That’s the spirit. The star will be the perfect opportunity to show us you’ve still got it.”
“Right, of course. No, I’m sorry, what?”

Gabriel’s smile did not falter, and Aziraphale had a brief moment to wonder if the archangel just assumed people were paying attention to him and didn’t hear their questions. “Just come back and show me the fallen star. And absolutely no miracles except in emergencies. Simple enough! Well, best be going, I have to meet with my tailor. I’m counting on you, Aziraphale!”

Aziraphale had never witnessed a pep talk that sounded so much like a death sentence. The departing rush of air pulled the wind from him. Aziraphale dropped his eyes to the stain on his thighs, and let out another long gush of breath for good measure. “Oh, fuck.”

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1 His hope was misplaced. [back]

2 Just ask Miryam, who ended up having history’s most awkward “I’m pregnant, and you’re not the father” conversation. [back]

3 Misplaced hope was becoming a real habit. [back]
“Fuckfuckfuckfucking…” The stream of cursing broke off with a howl. Around the newly-formed crater, pine and hemlock trees trembled in terror.

The cause of the crater sucked in a steadying breath. Maybe poking at his wing wouldn’t hurt as much the second time. He glared at his hand until it wasn’t shaking, and prodded.

Nope. The trees shuddered again[4] alarmed by the continued swearing. Not only did touching his wing still hurt, the appendage hung at an awkward angle, taking a sharp detour from the rest of him halfway down the shaft. Sticking his tongue between his sharp front teeth, he jerked his hand upwards and snapped his finger at the apex. Little red-gold sparks flickered along the wing’s shaft, and then fizzled out.

“Someone bless it!” His own healing never worked on him, and it was plain idiocy to think this time would be any different. He tried putting weight on his ankle, and felt the grind of bone against bone, which he did not appreciate. Even hiding his wings away in their usual pocket of unreality hurt. With a whine he slumped over and then slowly let gravity take him until he was lying face-down in the dirt, mere inches from the reason he was in this predicament to begin with.

It was a sword, of all things. A short, old, flaming at the time but not currently, sword. He had been flitting about the heavens (not to be confused with capital H Heaven, where he definitely wouldn’t be flitting), minding his own business when the sword came rushing at him, flipping end over end as it streaked across the sky. There was only time to make sure he did not get the pointy end of the sword, but not to avoid it altogether. With the speed that thing was going, it was no wonder that it had knocked him clear down to earth. And then the bloody thing had apparently decided it wanted to follow him down to Earth, maybe to do some sightseeing. As soon as he got out of this crater he was going to find a way to melt it, or blow it up, or maybe just chuck it into the ocean and wave as it sank beneath the waves.

With his definitely broken ankle and mangled left wing, there was no way he was getting out of the crater any time soon. Using the last of his frustration-fueled energy, he tucked the sword into the same spot as his wings, away from prying eyes, and sulked himself into a shallow sleep.

~Meanwhile, in Capital H Heaven~

“Gabriel, where is the principality’s sword? I left it on your desk.”

“On my desk. Uh. With all the papers I knocked off into space?”

“Ah.”

Chapter End Notes

4 Thus answering the eternal question of objects in forests making sounds if no one is around to hear. The trees hear. They hear everything.[back]
From the moment Gabriel vanished Aziraphale started to form a plan; there was no way in Hea-, in Hel-, in Anywhere that he would return Upstairs for any length of time. He had his bookshop with its flat above, and his favorite bakery in Paris and his favorite wooly jumper. Trading that in for the vast, cold perfection of Heaven left him with a lurchy feeling in his chest.

He needed to think this whole enterprise through. Aziraphale’s thought process was much like his bookstore. Memories of almost 6,000 years of existence were crammed together in no particular order, and thinking things through often saw him stumbling into something interesting that veered him off course. There was never a simple A to B thought path, but it worked for him, just as his arcane book filing system worked for him even though it made sorting through take thrice as long.

It was probably blasphemy to explore his dread of Heaven further, and so he didn’t. What he did do was abandon planning to focus on fretting. Point A detoured to Point F. Fretting, with a side of mourning his stained trousers. He stepped out of them and lay them on the bed he had never used. “You’ve been a wonderful pair,” he murmured, patting them fondly. “A shame it had to end this way.”

Then it was onwards to a cup of tea to steady his trembling hands. He made too much, leaving him with three steaming cups on the table crammed into the corner of the kitchen. Two would be cold by the time he got to them, and he couldn’t even miracle them warm again.

“Pull yourself together.” The sound of his own voice seemed an intrusion, and hopefully the one needed to snap him out of his moping. “You are a Principality, not some clueless fledgling. Leader of a platoon! Guardian of the Eastern…” Well, perhaps it was better not to dwell on how poorly that had ended. Some Guardian he was if he couldn’t even stop an infernal snake from throwing the whole thing into millennia of chaos. “Find the star, bring the star back, easy as.” He couldn’t quite think of something terribly easy to do without a miracle to help, and so bit off the rest of the sentence.

Yes, the task seemed easy enough, even without relying on his celestial powers. Which was why he was certain there had to be a catch. The Archangel may seem affable, but he was never kind.

Aziraphale downed one cup of tea and moved on to the next. With the disappointingly lukewarm teacup cradled in his hands, he pushed himself up from the table and went to the window to see just where the star had fallen.

And there, plain as day, was the catch. Point W.

The little village of Wall had been named after the large stone border that cut off settlement from forest on the eastern side. There were no gates or breaks in the wall, nowhere to suggest that town
ancestors ventured into the woodland to forage or hunt despite the wealth of resources. Adults never seemed to think of it. Children, perceptive little things, would peer over the wall and spin tales of dark things wandering between the trees until they terrified themselves and ran, shrieking and laughing.

Well. They were not entirely wrong.

The land beyond the wall was not haunted by fairytale ogres and goblins, but by agents of Downstairs. What exactly happened, even Aziraphale had no idea, but at some point demons had sunk their talons into the territory and became far too entrenched to drive out. It was easier to set up a holy barrier to keep them away from vulnerable souls. It was a place where angels feared to tread. Only witches travelled west to east and back again, and no one but they knew the purpose of their journeys.

And that was where the star had fallen, because of course it had.

Another pep talk and another cup of tea followed. And then a detour back upstairs when he realized he had been going about his fretting in only his underthings. At last, Aziraphale’s thoughts and his corporation found their separate ways to the catastrophically organized back store room. One of Aziraphale’s more persistent customers had caught a mere glimpse of the objects inside, and for months afterwards the town gossip was that Mr. Fell was an occultist, or even a Satanist. Lovely people, Satanists, but far too fond of ominous chanting for the angel’s taste.

“I know I have it somewhere,” he murmured, scanning the shelves and poking at various boxes shrouded by dust. If ‘frivolous miracles’ were off the table, then flying no doubt would be as well. There was no way in he-, in he-, in Someplace that he was going to walk however many long miles to get to where the star had fallen. It was a lucky thing that somewhere in the clutter of interesting objects he had accumulated over the centuries was just the item to solve his problem.

“Aha! There you are.” Aziraphale unrolled a cylinder of butcher paper to reveal the black candle hiding inside. He held it in both pudgy hands, rolling it carefully so the carvings on it remained unsmudged. The Babylon Candle was not angelic in nature, but neither was it infernal, and Aziraphale assumed using it would not count as a miracle on those technicalities.
He set it aside and pulled a few more items off the shelves, shoving them haphazardly into a satchel he had received from Saint Crispin, that unfortunate fellow, back in 280. Another scramble among the shelves turned up a flint and steel, never used.

The angel swung the satchel over his head and patted the strap where it lay flat on his chest. “Well, then,” he announced, feeling as if he should say goodbye to the shop, and being unable to bring himself to do it. “Oh, on with it, you old fool.”

A few strikes of steel on flint, and the Babylon Candle burned with a bright blue flame. Aziraphale grasped it tightly, thought of the fallen star, and let himself be whisked away.

Aziraphale did not often fly. There were many other ways of travel that allowed him to sit back and enjoy a good book on the way. But just because it wasn’t his preferred method didn’t mean he couldn’t appreciate flying. The steady beat of divine wings carrying him high over the landscape below was joyful, graceful, and natural.

In other words, it was the inverse of traveling by Babylon candle. The angel found himself careering through the sky quite uncontrolled, arse over nose and back again until he had no idea which way was up. He would have liked to claim that he didn’t screech in terror, but even he couldn’t stretch the truth that much without breaking it into vain lies.

At least the trip was mercifully short. Whatever esoteric magics powered the candle were adept at slicing through space and time. Soon, Aziraphale stopped tumbling long enough to see that he was over a large clearing ringed by trees recently felled, all centered around a crater blasted into the clay-heavy soil.

The candle wasn’t done with him. He had a second to catch an unneeded breath, and then he was hurtled down into the crater. Aziraphale curled inwards to shield himself from impact. It was going to be rather unfortunate to be inconveniently discorporated this early into his journey, and he hoped healing any fractured bones wouldn’t count as a frivolous miracle.

But the expected face-plant into dark dirt never arrived. Instead his fall was broken by something pointy and warm. And angry.

“Oh, great, just what I need, a magical flying moron!”

Aziraphale reflexively stammered apologies like any proper British creature, and scampered backwards. When he was a safe distance away he looked up to find that he had landed right on top of the Star.

Chapter End Notes

5 More accurately, angels were reasonably cautious about treading, but that mild phrasing did nothing to deter fledglings. [back]
6 Book clubs, mostly. [back]
Aziraphale had no idea what a star would look like up close; he hadn’t been on the Celestial Object Quadrumvirate. [7]

Perhaps a bit of rock or metal, but even then he wasn’t solid on the concept. None of his non-ideas had prepared him for the object he careened into when the candle sputtered and went out.

For one thing, it was a man, or at least man-shaped; one should never assume.

He was long and lanky, with hair cascading over his shoulders that would have made a pre-Raphaelite swoon. Perhaps to blend in better with the night sky, he was clothed head to toe in black. Most striking of all were his eyes. Cat eyes, Aziraphale thought first, before correcting himself. No, snake eyes.
The star was beautiful.
The star was also very, very pissed off. He muttered creative swears, those yellow eyes narrowed at Aziraphale. If he had not been busy cursing, the angel was sure he would have been baring his teeth.

“Oh my. Oh, I’m so sorry.” Aziraphale scrambled to his feet. The star stayed splayed in the dirt, with his leg stuck out at an awkward angle. “I truly am. I don’t make a habit of crashing into strangers.”

“Oh, well, as long as you don’t make a habit of it.”

He hadn’t expected a star to sound so sarcastic, or so English. “My dear fellow, are you hurt?”

“Am I hurt, he asks. Comes streaking out of the sky like a drunk albatross and crashes into me, and asks if I’m hurt.” He gesticulated so wildly at the air that Aziraphale looked around, momentarily sure they were not alone. No one was there, not even a hint of woodland life. “What in the...what are you doing here?”

Aziraphale pointed at his own chest, just to make sure. The star’s face went through a series of annoyed contortions. “Ah, yes, well. You see, I am on something of a quest, given to me by...my goodness, what are you doing?”

The star was always in motion, first fiddling with a pebble, now sniffing the air. “You.” He dragged himself up by leaning against a boulder, one of the few things left unscathed by the star’s crash. Once on his feet he wobbled and leaned against the rock, nowhere near as casual as he obviously hoped to seem. Yes, most certainly injured, and Aziraphale would need to miracle that away as soon as he could. “You’re an angel.”

“Quite perceptive! And you are the star?”

“The what?”

Aziraphale’s question was met with such a look that he reflexively patted his shoulders, just to be sure the occult candle hadn’t caused extra heads to grow there. One never knew what strange side effects these things could have. Satisfied that he’d remained in his customary corporation, the angel cleared his throat and tried again. “The fallen star? That is, there was a star that fell, just here, in this crater, and as you are also in this crater...”

Did stars not need to blink? Those yellow eyes had been meeting his gaze an alarmingly long time. Ah, no, there they went, closing just as his mouth clicked shut. “Yeah,” he said, cutting Aziraphale off just as he began to ask again. “Yeah, that’s me, a star. Fallen star, twinkle twinkle and all that.”

It sounded unconvincing at best, but a star would certainly know better than an angel about their star-ness. He let the coil of tension between his wing joints unwind, and the feeling of Gabriel’s hand on his shoulder finally dissipate. “Oh, wonderful. Then you need to come with me for a bit.”

“Uh, no, what? Why? I’m not going anywhere with a random crashing angel.” His suave lean faltered again, and he transitioned into sitting on the rock instead.

“I already apologized for that, er, error in navigation. And you needn’t make such a fuss about what I am, stars have nothing to fear from angels!”

Even with the application of Aziraphale’s third most beatific smile, the star remained unmoved. In fact, he blew a few strands of copper hair out of his face with what sounded disappointingly like a snort.
“Really, Mr. Star-”

“Crowley. Anthony Crowley.”

What an odd name for a star. Aziraphale had always assumed that stars were named things like “Sirius” and “Alpha Centauri”, but he would concede that he was not the expert in this situation. “Crowley,” he said. “Yes, lovely to meet you, Crowley. I am the Principality Aziraphale, former Guardian of-”

“Skip to the part where you tell me why you want me to go with you.” Crowley drawled the words, picking an imaginary bit of fluff and some not so imaginary pine needles off of his robes.

“Needn’t be so rude,” Aziraphale muttered. Crowley’s eyes snapped back to him. Having the star’s full attention sent a warm little shiver up his spine, and he pressed on quickly to avoid thinking about it, or losing that attention. “Ah! Well! My, ah, my landlord said that unless I showed him the star that fell tonight, he’d evict me from my bookshop. It’s not a far journey at all, and you would be doing me such a favor.”

Alright, so it was technically a lie. But he was fairly sure white lies did not count, especially if they were serving the greater good. And what greater good could there be than an angel remaining on Earth to Thwart Evil?[10]

“No.”

“Of course, I can’t expect you to do it out of the goodness of your, er, do stars have hearts? I would be happy to grant you a favor, a miracle, whatever you’d wish. Within reason,” he added hastily, wary of the considering look that flashed across Crowley’s face. “Perhaps helping you get back to your rightful place in the sky?”

Crowley’s face did some more strange contortions at that. “And if I say no?”

Aziraphale drew himself up to his full height, tugging at the hem of his waistcoat. “Then I suppose I will leave you here. I hope it won’t be too hard to get out of this crater with your injured ankle.”

Crowley’s eyes widened, and then nearly sparkled with contained laughter. “Well, gotta recognize cunning bastardry when I see it. Fine, angel. Heal me and I’ll go with you.” He flung his arms out dramatically at the proclamation, and nearly toppled himself over once again.

Aziraphale almost giggled in relief. Only a stern reminder that he was trying to prove he was not the useless lump Gabriel thought stopped the sound. “Wonderful, wonderful!” He crossed the gulf between them and took Crowley’s hand. The skin was surprisingly cool, with the type of callus brought about from shoveling in the dirt. Aziraphale filed the feeling away in his mental record of indulgent sensations, and went about the task at hand.

Healing the Star, the very object of his quest, couldn’t possibly count as a frivolous miracle. Aziraphle raised his free hand and brought it sharply down again, letting healing energy travel from the crown of Crowley’s curls to the tips of his toes, knitting bones and torn muscle as it went. There was some point at Crowley’s left shoulder where the miracle ran into a block, but the man did not seem to notice. He had closed his eyes during the healing, which gave Aziraphale the perfect opportunity to strike.

The angel had stuffed his travel pack with more than just snacks and the stub of the Babylon candle. One never knew when an unbreakable chain would come in handy until one was without it.[11]
So when Crowley’s eyes snapped open, it was to the sight of an enchanted chain fusing itself into a loop around his wrist. “You have got to be kidding me.” His eyes truly were expressive, going through flashes of anger, surprise, amusement, settling on a forced blankness. “Didn’t take you for the kinky type, angel.”

Words poured from Aziraphale like steam escaping a kettle. “I am truly sorry, dear boy, but this really is a matter of utmost importance. I could tell you were going to flee, and we can’t have that. And I will help you, however you need, for your trouble. You have my word. And my apologies.”

Crowley’s sneer dropped a needle made of ice straight into Aziraphale’s stomach. The flat tone of his voice may have been even worse. “Fine. Sssssso be it. Lead on.”

The free end of the chain was heavy with regret in Aziraphale’s hand. There was no other way, he reminded himself. He would make it up to Crowley, and all would be well. He kept telling himself that with every footstep, but only the rustle of nearby trees answered.

~Meanwhile, in Nearby Rustling Trees~

“Stop moving so loud, they’ ll hear us!”

“Eh, they ain’t hearing nothing.”

“Think the angel’s gonna smite him before we can get his heart?”

“Nah. We just need to get the flash bastard alone. And I got a plan…”

Chapter End Notes

7 Come to think of it, no one had been on the C.O.Q. Rumor had it that one of the Archangels had gotten their sticky fingers onto that project and never let go. Talk in Heaven was that he was still out there working on the fringe galaxies. (One can read the acronym aloud to get an idea of that archangel’s level of maturity.)[back]

8 “He” was not one, but he’d acquiesce to the pronoun for the moment.[back]

9 He was quite tired, and those took quite a bit of effort.[back]

10 No Comment.[back]

11 A lesson learned during an embarrassing misadventure in Sumatra.[back]
The journey from the forest back to Wall was generally a short one, but that estimate assumed one had a willing travel partner. Crowley was not just unwilling, he was almost professionally uncooperative. No one could drag their feet and whine in such a variety of tones without decades of practice, and a preternatural ability to know what would annoy Aziraphale.

It had actually taken a bit of trial and error to find what would scrape up against the angel’s nerves the most. For the first stretch of their woodland trek, Crowley thought staying silent and sullen would be the ticket. A ticket to a one-angel play, as it turned out. Aziraphale certainly could monologue, nattering on about, well, *everything* in an obvious attempt to fill the heavy silence between them.

So, after night turned to day turned to evening, Crowley adjusted his angle of attack. He jumped in with his own comments and complaints. And arguments. His plan was to keep arguing with Aziraphale over every tiny observation, essentially nattering the angel into submission with a tidal wave of annoyance.

Most of Anthony J. Crowley’s wily plots had one thing in common: they backfired on him. And this one had followed in the fine tradition of infernal failure.

“Hang on,” he said, the hand that wasn’t tethered to Aziraphale waving in wild circles. “No, no, hang on, you’re telling me you think snakes are ticklish?”

“Not on their bellies, obviously. But all the creatures in creation have ticklish spots, so I fail to see where snakes would differ.”

Crowley really couldn’t argue. For one, the Serpent of Eden would have to explain why he had such intimate knowledge of snake sensations. For another, Crowley was extremely ticklish. “Have you personally tickled loads of animals to test that out?” he asked instead.

The little huff of mixed annoyance and surprise the angel let out was just more proof that the cunning plan had backfired. The more he bickered with the angel, the less it became about trying to torment his captor. Aziraphale was a good sparring partner, quick witted beneath that layer of bumbling politeness, and the little flush that spread over his cheeks when he had to concede a point was adorable.

Anthony J. Crowley was *doomed.*

The weight of that thought dragged him to the forest floor, conveniently on top of a comfy pile of leaves. There was even a nice smooth log he could lean against for support. Really, not a bad spot
Aziraphale turned around as soon as the demon on the end of his chain turned into dead weight. “And what do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m tired,” Crowley whined, letting his head flop back to rest on the log. He wasn’t really, of course, but it provoked an exquisite look of guilt from the angel. Crowley couldn’t decide if he wanted to bottle it for future enjoyment or punch it off Aziraphale’s face.

“You should have said something!” Aziraphale bustled to crouch near Crowley’s side, though he bobbed with slight hesitation before letting his trousers touch the ground. “Oh, I’m so sorry, my dear, I assumed stars wouldn’t need rest like humans.”

“I assume you don’t know a thing about stars.” Crowley knew lots about stars, and hearing this fool go on about what stars did and didn’t need was a professional insult. He could still remember the feeling, like dipping one’s hands into a bucket of grain, of scooping up stardust and molding it into nebulas, constellations, galaxies. He remembered scattering them across the cosmos with a puff of breath. He remembered flying through the night sky to get as close to the twinkling lights as he, one of the Fallen, could.

Crowley was of the opinion that anyone who thought stars were sentient beings was a complete dullard.

“Do you need to eat as well?” Aziraphale was already reaching into the leather satchel he had dropped between them. “Oh, you must think me terribly thoughtless.”

“Thoughtless isn’t exactly the word I’d use,” Crowley said, and made a show of jangling his end of the chain.

Aziraphale hid his guilty face by pulling a hunk of bread and cheese out of the satchel and shoving it into Crowley’s flapping hand. There was no frisson of recent miracle on the food, so Crowley had to conclude that the angel had carried it to snack on, despite not needing to eat. It was good stuff, too. The bread was crusty and slightly sweet, while the cheese was sharp and soft. Looking at how the angel’s plump manicured hand transferred bread and cheese to his savoring mouth, Crowley began to suspect that Aziraphale might be something of a hedonist.

Would wonders never cease.

They ate in silence for a bit, but it couldn’t last. Crowley was too tired and in too much pain to channel his constant swirl of anxiety into fidgety movements. With that outlet stoppered, the inner whirlwind had no choice but to bubble right up and out of his mouth. “You mentioned you had a bookshop?”

The resulting smile was almost too bright to look at. “Oh, yes, indeed! I’ve had it for a bit over a century now, lovely little spot. The collection’s a bit eclectic but I have all my favorites, and books of prophecy and first editions.”

“So you, what, sell them to spread the good word to humanity?”

Aziraphale’s horrified look wouldn’t have been out of place in a pantomime. “Sell them? My dear boy, what a horrible idea! If I sold them then I wouldn’t have them.”

“I’m not sure you really understand the concept of commerce, angel.” blinked long and slow, his favorite way to convey that someone was especially idiotic. The action usually went to waste,
Thanks to his glasses. It was quite gratifying to see Aziraphale’s huffy reaction. 

“Why don’t you tell me what you do up in the heavens?”

It was an obvious ploy to change the subject, but Crowley let him have it. Anything that would move them past Aziraphale’s unintentionally cutting choice of words. “Oh, nothing interesting. Lots of twinkling, bit of shining. Even a little wish-granting here and there if we’re in the mood.”

It seemed like Aziraphale was buying the star act like a cash-flushed Regency dandy in a cravat shop. Fooling an angel—he’d get a commendation from that and be able to slack off for the rest of the quarter. The thought cheered him up. If he could keep it up until he could figure out a way to free himself from the unbreakable chain, this whole captivity lark might not be so bad!

It was easier and less risky to let Aziraphale do the talking, which meant it was only a matter of time before Crowley started blabbering on again. For the time being he played it safe and asked another question about the book shop so the angel could monologue again, and he could devour the last crumbs of bread and cheese.

Aziraphale was filling the gaps in their conversation by examining flowers that had sprouted up around the decaying log. He’d let go of a stalk of butter-gold cowslip, and reached next for a flower that straddled the line between blue and lavender. “Don’t touch that!” Crowley snapped.

Aziraphale yanked his hand away and turned to Crowley with a strangely wounded look in his eyes. The demon cleared his throat and tried again in a softer tone. “‘S leadwort. Caussses blisters. Weird to find it here, though, it’s usually in the tropics. Loadssss of people pick it up and, bang! Days of ouch.”

Aziraphale looked grateful, at first, and then considering, before the expression was shoved somewhere deep behind his soft exterior.

“I watch Earth a lot.” Crowley was acutely aware of just how defensive he sounded, and just how much he was starting to hiss. “Look, twinkling’sss hard work and all, but there’s a lot of downtime!”

“And you spend that downtime watching humans like they’re some sort of amateur dramas troupe.”

“Well when you put it like that, it sounds sssordid.” Crowley clamped his jaw tight to cage his rebelling tongue. He vowed to keep silent from then on. A new bubble of nervous energy broke that vow seconds later. "I don’t watch humans. I don’t even like humans! They’re boring and never make anything interesting. I just like plants. Would have a garden if I could, grow all the plants that catch my fancy. Just spend my time puttering around, collecting flora from all around the world and making ‘em grow in, er, space.”

That considering look was back, but this time Aziraphale’s robin’s egg eyes were soft. “I was at Eden, you know. Well, no, you couldn’t know. Do you know about Eden?”

Crowley made a sound somewhere at the crossroads of “yep” and “ngk”, and Aziraphale barrelled on. “I suspect you would have loved it. I never knew the names of all the plants, not exactly my area of interest, but sometimes I overheard the Serpent—oh! Perhaps I should explain him?”

The hybrid ‘nope’ and ‘ngk’ was even higher pitched this time. “I’ve heard the stories.”

“Jolly good, you do hear a lot! Well. The Serpent used to chatter on about plant types to Eve. Ah, it
must have been then that he slipped in talk of the apple!” Aziraphale ate his last morsel of cheese and dabbed his lips primly with a lace napkin that had been hiding in another corner of his satchel. “I never did meet the fiend myself. I do wonder what dark deeds he’s done since.”

This was a trap, right? Not in all his wild imaginings had Crowley pictured his ultimate destruction coming at the hands of a pudgy, flaxen haired angel with an adorable nose. An angel who wore a tartan waistcoat and bowtie. Tartan! To top the whole nightmare off, Crowley would have to bear the ignominy of an unstylish executioner.

“Maybe,” he tried, once he got his tongue back under control and unforked, “he’s just slithering around the world, minding his own business?”

“Certainly not. Demons don’t simply ‘mind their own business’. They’re always plotting and performing their wicked wiles.”

Crowley was beginning to think his wickedest wile was not putting a stop to the acceptance of alliteration when he had the chance. “Lots of experience with demons, then?”

Aziraphale pointed over his shoulder at a spot vaguely grass-height. “Goodness, what a strange flower! Do you happen to know what species it is?”

The demon had to respect the angel’s continued talent in creating a very obvious distraction. It wasn’t the way Crowley would have gone about it, but smashing right through a conversational barrier was certainly an effective method. He let his lips curl into a smile. “It’s a spider orchid, angel.”

Crowley could figure out how to get out of the unbreakable chain later. For the moment he had a sunny spot on soft grass and botany to rant about. All things considered, it was a good day.

Chapter End Notes

12 That was especially easy to remember; he’d been doing it right before getting clonked on the head with a bloody flaming sword. [back]
13 Dark sunglasses, which he was feeling quite vulnerable without, but he didn’t dare miracle them up in front of the angel. [back]
14 Herein meaning ‘quarter century’. [back]
15 Then he remembered he’d have to explain why he didn’t wallop said angel, which cheered him right down again. [back]
16 Lie. [back]
17 Lie. [back]
18 Far too close to the truth for Crowley’s comfort. [back]
The trek back to Wall from the forest should have been a short one, but Aziraphale was reluctant to speed things up. It was partly out of kindness to the fallen star; from the way the poor thing walked, Crowley was obviously still getting used to using his legs to move about. There was no other explanation for how his hips were an unsteady pendulum. But the major cause of the delay was that Crowley would have no reason to stay around once the quest was complete, and Aziraphale was enjoying his company so very much.

It was just so rare that Aziraphale could have a decent conversation. Certain humans were clever and interesting enough, sure, but it was exhausting to discuss Shakespeare while trying to pretend he hadn’t met the fellow. Small talk was trivial, deeper conversations were a minefield, and it really was best to keep his interactions to “No, that book isn’t for sale” or “Yes, the Châteauneuf du Pape would be lovely, thanks”.

Crowley had professed to be unaware of just how long he had been shining in the night sky, but it must have been millenia. He spoke of Sumer and Rome and Vienna as if he had been there. “Just been watching for a long time, angel,” the star said with what Aziraphale assumed was meant to be a humble shrug. “Lots of free time in between twinkles.”

It would have been nice if Aziraphale could believe him. There was no amount of appending disclaimers to the end of his sentences that would sway Aziraphale’s conviction that Crowley had visited Earth before. What he couldn’t figure out was why Crowley felt the need to lie about it. Perhaps it was a taboo in star culture. Crowley was quiet close-lipped about that as well.

“Keep praising Hamlet all you like.” They’d stopped and settled beneath a tree for a midday rest. Crowley’s whining had initiated it that first day, and now two days later it was habit. It was a good excuse to nibble on provisions stuffed into his sack, and for Aziraphale to feast his eyes on Crowley’s angular form whenever he could steal a glance.\[16\]

“What was that, my dear?” Aziraphale hid his appreciative look by reaching for another blackberry. Crowley had spent most of the morning picking ripe fruit and putting it into a small bag made from Aziraphale’s handkerchief. The crisp linen was stained irreparably by the purple juice, but it was a sacrifice Aziraphale was willing to make for sun warmed berries and the accidental brush of Crowley’s hand against his.

“It just is- I mean, the way you make it sound is dreary. I think I’d prefer the funny ones.” He tossed a berry into the air and tried to catch it in his mouth. It bounced off his nose instead, falling into a tuft of grass. “Bugger it,” Crowley muttered, and reached out to reclaim the snack.

They both winced when the movement caused the chain, tied around low tree branch, to jingle.
The jovial mood vanished so quickly the honey-thick sunlight in the clearing seemed to dim.

“Apologies again, Crowley.” No muttered mea culpa was going to bring the easy banter back right away. Aziraphale hoped they could move past it quickly. There were only so many times the angel could tell himself it was for the greater good before his own belief began to erode.

Silence. Crowley let the berry stay where it had fallen. Instead he tore up a handful of grass, and began to rip the blades to shreds one by one. The tearing sound seemed too close to the noise the chain made as it rubbed on bark.

He’d only spent a few days in Crowley’s company, but Aziraphale already knew that the silence wouldn’t last. Sure enough the pile was only half shredded when words began to pour out of him again.

“So what’s the game plan, anyway? I make an appearance in town, your landlord looks at me and goes, “Well done then, Aziraphale, you’ve earned your moldy books!” and that’s the end of it?”

“Well, no, not exactly.” He had a strong sense that Crowley was not going to like hearing the specifics. But the dear boy had been so accommodating, and it would be unfair to spring Gabriel upon him with no warning. Aziraphale twisted his fingers together and set his hands in his lap. “I may have misspoke when I called him my landlord.”

“Misspoke.”

“It’s not entirely untrue! It is, thanks to his generosity in, ah. In not minding when I took up a profession that I have a shop at all. But no, he is more accurately described as my supervisor.”

“Your supervisor.”

“Are you going to repeat everything I say?” There was that horrible flat tone of voice again, the one Aziraphale had encountered the first night they met. He tossed his hands into the air in frustration, as a distraction, anything to get that tone to stop. “My boss, my commander, whatever you want to call it. We’ll just introduce you to the Archangel Gabriel and you’ll be free to go!”

Most sentient beings experienced awe and trepidation when informed they would meet an archangel, but the look on Crowley’s face? It was blind panic.

“Nope. Uh uh, nope,” Crowley said. Now his voice was not flat, but too calm for the way his hand was scrabbling at the chain around his wrist. “Not a chance, I am not-” He broke off and growled in frustration. The chain wasn’t allowing a centimeter of give. Not even when drops of blood seeped from the scratches Crowley was inflicting on his own skin in his frenzy.

Aziraphale watched the silver chain stain red and felt panic, like bile, rising in the back of his own throat. “Crowley, stop it. Anthony!” He tried to lunge forward and stop Crowley from digging into his own wrist to get the chain off, but the star flinched away from him. “What in Heaven is wrong with you? Gabriel can be quite intimidating, I will admit, but it doesn’t warrant this kind of reaction!”

Crowley closed his yellow eyes and laughed. The greenery around them trembled at the wild, hysterical sound, and a few ferns tried to shimmy away. “In Heaven. Yeah, that’s the problem, innit? Gabriel will destroy me.”

“That is complete nonsense. Why would an archangel destroy a star?”

“I am not a ssstar!”
Now the trembling trees stood still. Crowley’s chest heaved; Aziraphale’s did not. This was rubbish, a lie to get out of meeting an imposing figure. Aziraphale told himself that again and again until it ran together in one endless syllable, and each time it rang more hollow. Centuries of literature to draw on, and Aziraphale could not summon up a single word.

But Crowley had words aplenty, and each one rang out another death knell. He stood up, stooped slightly on one side thanks to his bindings. “You wanted to know what the Serpent of Eden was up to? Well, here I am.”

“You’ll have to come up with a less preposterous lie to get out of helping me.” Aziraphale sniffed, and waited for the punchline.

And waited. Nothing but silence and Crowley’s near-audible sneer.

“I have met many demons in my time on earth,” Aziraphale said, stretching the truth a bit, “and so I consider myself an expert on how very not a demon you-”

During that little speech, the angel had stretched out his preternatural senses towards Crowley’s aura. With no idea what a star’s true form would feel like, he expected something sparkling and pale and bright.

What he got was red and tarnished gold, sharp teeth, the blackness of space, the coldness of a disconnect from the Almighty.

No, Aziraphale wanted to shout. No, you’re no demon, you’re too nice and funny and beautiful. Yes, there was the snake eyes and hellfire-red hair and the hissing, but those could be star quirks. You can’t be a demon. I adore you.

What came out was, “Fiend! You lied to me!”

Gehenna itself could not be so cold and tormenting as the laugh that Crowley spat into the distance between them. “Big words from someone who snapped a chain on an injured being.”

Aziraphale’s thoughts lurched and jumped, point Z to L to A to D, and always coming back to orbit around Crowley. Crowley the star, Crowley the botanist, Crowley the Serpent.

Aziraphale needed space to think, and he needed it at once.

“You, stay here until I figure out what to do with you!” Aziraphale was sure he could feel the weight of those snake eyes on him as he stormed away.

The worst part was, Crowley was right. Gabriel would absolutely destroy the demon on sight. Aziraphale had been unwittingly leading Crowley to his demise this whole time. Which was right and proper for him to do to his hereditary enemy, and it would let him stay in peace in his beloved bookshop.

A bookshop in a world without the only friend he’d made in hundreds of years.

Aziraphale still had not decided just what he was going to do when he finally moved himself to return to the clearing. The sun was dipping low in the sky, bathing all hiding below it in a warm golden glow.

And there was no demon. Just a chain cut in two, and partly hidden under a pile of rotting leaves, a very, very familiar sword.
Humans considering carnal attraction sinful was entirely their own doing. Aziraphale was more worried about breaching Star Etiquette. [back]
As far as plans went, it was certainly a plan. A plan that relied on Crowley escaping the angel, wandering in the precise direction at the exact time to find the conjured inn, and deciding that he was quite in the mood for a lie down instead of further fleeing.

Hastur and Ligur agreed that it was foolproof. Outside observers would argue that if anyone fell for it, it was proof they were a fool.

Enter, stage right, Anthony Crowley.

The two dukes of Hell had a much busier day than they were used to. First there was conjuring an inn, then squabbling over what an inn really looked like, and finally enchanting some passing humans to play innkeepers.[20] But all the hard work had paid off, because here was the detested Crawly, sauntering vaguely inn-ward. It truly was a bless-, a curs-...well, it sure was something.

From his position lurking [21] on the floor, Duke Ligur raised up on his knees inch by inch. First his head lizard’s eyes, and then his own, peeked over the windowsill and out into the misty night.

“Shhh!” he instructed his silent companion. “Here he comes.”

Duke Hastur, who was doing some very important skulking in a corner, grunted in response. He didn’t need Ligur to announce it. Hastur would know the scent of that slithery git anywhere. [22]

The window’s view was blurred by the faux-antique warped glass, making Crowley look just as wiggly in man-shape as in snake-shape. Just a smudge of black and red in an increasingly dim twilight. A smudge that was speaking as much with his hands as his mouth, trying to talk the shockingly inept innkeeper[23] into letting him stay the night. “Looks like he doesn’t suspect a thing.”

“Yeah, well. Crawly’s stupid as dirt.” Hastur’s laugh was rumored to drive any mortal being who heard it mad, to leave them clutching their own heads screaming for the rest of their lives for the sound to stop. The sole mortal beings near enough to hear it now were the mice who had taken up quick residence in the new structure, and they just found it grating. The sound stopped on its own, no screaming necessary, when Hastur stopped finding his own joke[24] funny. “Makes it almost too easy to be worth killing ‘im.”

Crowley’s increasingly overt flirting had failed to charm the innkeeper, but a handful of conjured coin granted Crowley access to the establishment and a promise of a lovely hot bath to relax him. The door swung shut with a thud that, if one were the type to read meaning into sounds, would be a potent portent.
Hastur’s reptile headdress flicked out its tongue to lick Hastur’s wide open eye. “Almost.”

All the candy colors of sunset had long since faded from the sky, leaving nothing but inky velvet and cold pinpricks of distant light. Those stars, the proper stars, seemed even more unreachable than they ever had, and got no closer no matter how unblinkingly Aziraphale stared at them.

What a fool he was. He should have used up a miracle to get Crowley back to Wall instantaneously. He should have never chatted with him. He should have demanded some sort of star credentials to prove Crowley’s claimed identity.

Should have, should have, should. His centuries of partaking in human culture spread out behind him like a river delta of regret. Aziraphale had listened to his own judgement, supposing it was a reflection of the Almighty’s will, and what did he have to show for it? A broken chain, a demon on the loose, and a long-lost sword.

Gabriel was right. He was soft and silly and might as well report straight to Heaven for retraining.

Aziraphale finally dragged his gaze from the lowercase heavens, and let it linger on the sword in his lap instead. [25] The angel had never been one for asking questions, but one was bouncing around in his head and threatening to bring all of its friends. If Crowley had been armed the whole time, why didn’t he make a move to strike, or at least free himself?

He could almost hear Upper Management telling him to get off his tartan-clad ass and use the sword he’d ‘lost’ in Eden to cleave the demon’s very essence in twain. And if he did that, came back with Hellish ichor on his flaming blade, the suave Archangel would have to admit that Aziraphale was doing just fine on earth and could keep his bookshop, and everything would be tickety boo.

Aziraphale squeezed the hilt of his sword, [26] and his eyes closed. It should have been simple to let thoughts of the demon Crowley inflame his Heavenly Wrath. And yet every attempt summoned images of the soft smile Crowley gave him when Aziraphale had known the name of a flower, and the Serpent coiling on a sunny rock to snooze while Adam named the animals, and glimmers of good humor in eyes the color of an Inca marigold.

Crowley had handled an angelic weapon with no apparent trouble. He had played Aziraphale’s captive when he could have left at any moment. The past few days were some of the most enjoyable ones Aziraphale had experienced in decades. Crowley was funny and curious and more than a bit of a bastard, and Crowley was a demon.

Those truths blurred together until their outlines matched perfectly. Crowley was a foul fiend from the pits, but Aziraphale was the world’s worst angel, so who was he to judge?

Gabriel was right, he was soft. But soft things did not snap when pressure was applied, nor did they refuse to bend and ask for true forgiveness. And he was going to have to do quite a bit of groveling if he had any hope of inviting Crowley over for tea.

Aziraphale put his sword away into a reality pocket vaguely to his left, and stood. The angel let his spirit expand far past his corporation, feeling around with celestial tendrils until he found a whirl of energy that tasted red and gold.

The Principality reeled himself back into his body, and set out due east.

“Why’s he making that noise?” Ligur whined.
Hastur grunted again. No properly self-loathing demon would let out happy sighs and groans while sinking into a steaming bath. Or have a bath at all. Crawley had gone native, as Hastur had suspected since Sumer.

Well, once the Dukes were through with him, Crawley would be only be a native of nothingness, an occupant of oblivion. He just wouldn’t bloody exist anymore, now would he?

Ligur had hit upon the idea a few decades ago, while out soul searching. One of his willing victims, in an effort to impress the demon, had blathered on at length about all the methods he had heard about that would allow him to gain more occult power. Most of them were just propaganda put out by Hell in the Middle Ages, when everyone Downstairs was in need of a giggle. But one stood out as plausible: cut out the heart of a demon and consume it to gain their powers.

Though the Dukes held high ranks in Hell, it was thanks to being dedicated sycophants, not due to any raw power. It was quite clear that fact needed to change, and soon. And Hastur and Ligur were the type of go-getters who wouldn’t let “hearts aren’t standard issue in demon anatomy” stop them.

Whose power to consume was another matter. They couldn’t grab a prince or even a marchioness with any hope of walking away with their pieces intact. The piddling power they would get from an alderman or councillor-at-large was so not worth the effort. So their plan lay dormant until a midnight smoke break on the outskirts of the 4th circle.

“Crawly!” Hastur had said, nearly flinging his cigarette into the 5th circle with the sudden violence of his realization.

“Where?” Ligur looked behind them, getting a sneer ready, but there was nothing but the usual shuffling hordes of the damned.

Hastur shook his head and dropped his voice. “That git’s got power. Saw him stop time in front of a cherub, didn’t we?” Hastur waited for Ligur’s nod of acknowledgement, which came only after a prolonged and dramatic shudder. “And he’s doing nothin’ with it.”

“Yeah, we’d put it to much better use. Should be ours, by rights.”

“Yup. Now all we need’s a plan.”

To call what followed a “comedy of errors” would be giving the dukes too much credit. Their half-baked attempts to snare the serpent were so incompetent they went past amusing to land in the neighborhood of concerning. Catching him in a net, knocking him out with a mallet, and goading a horse into biting him with its toxic fangs all ended with Crowley sauntering away, none the wiser.

Thank Satan an angel had come along and done their job for them.

“Hello?” Aziraphale had knocked politely on the inn door for a few minutes before letting himself inside. No proprietor had bothered to greet him, and a cursory glance around the lobby showed no sign of any staff. “Really, what appalling service. Hellooo?”

Nothing. Well, perhaps the staff were off attending to other customers. There was at least one taking refuge from the dark woods, and Aziraphale knew that for a fact, as he’d traced Crowley’s trail straight to the inn’s door.

It would be rude to simply barge in if Crowley was resting, and Aziraphale still hadn’t thought up a proper apology. He had all the time in the world to wait, and those armchairs in front of the inn’s
large fireplace did look quite cozy.

Aziraphale sank into one of the seats, closing his eyes and letting the warmth suffuse all of his tired limbs.[29] He really did love the sound of a merrily crackling fire. The sound of quite a lot of fire, he realized after a few minutes of relaxation. A large fire that did not sound merry. And then a crash, and an awful lot of yelling.

Though he had only known the demon for a few days, Aziraphale would recognize his voice anywhere, and that was certainly Crowley snarling unintelligibly. Aziraphale raced up the nearest staircase, following the cacophony and an acrid waft of smoke until he came to a bedroom door blown clear off its hinges.

“Oh, dear Lord!”

Aziraphale struggled to piece together the scene in front of him. On one side of the room were two repulsive demons, their claws gripping daggers that gave off a feeling of disease and decay. On the other, Crowley, attired only in a blackened red-gold substance that oozed like sap from a ragged gash on his chest. In the middle of the room was an overturned bathtub and soapy water soaking into the floorboards, but everywhere else was going up in flames.

“Aziraphale!”

The whites of Crowley’s eyes had gone entirely yellow. With fire reflected in them, he looked truly demonic, and it did nothing to stop Aziraphale’s heart lurching towards Crowley. There was fear and uncertainty in Crowley’s face, which the angel knew he deserved, but there was also hope.

It was the hope that broke him out of his shock. “Crowley! What on earth is going on here?”

His question was inane, but at least it got the attention of the two knife-wielding demons away from Crowley.

“What’s a bleeding angel doing here?” Hastur snarled. “Back off! His heart’s ours!”

“Yeah!” Ligur could not let an opportunity to add nothing to a conversation pass him by. “Back off!”

The two started to lurch towards Aziraphale, who held up his empty palms. “Now, I am sure we can settle this like gentlefolk…” The drip, drip of Crowley’s blood came faster now. He slumped against the tiny stretch of wall not yet swallowed by fire, though the tongues of flame were growing close enough to make dots of blood on the floor sizzle. There was no chance Aziraphale’s demon could flee the chaos under his own power.

Hastur lunged, his knife held high, and Aziraphale burst into action without a plan to guide him. He ran to Crowley’s side, whispering a blessing that turned bathwater into holy water beneath his feet. It only bought them a few extra moments; Ligur grabbed Hastur by the coattails and hauled him back before he could wade into his own destruction.

Aziraphale needed to acquire a weapon before the two demons managed to find a way around the water. He thrust one hand into his satchel and closed his fingers over something stubby and smooth. What he drew out was not the sword he was looking for, but the remains of his Babylon candle.

Aziraphale grasped Crowley’s outstretched hand and dragged the candle across the burning wall to light it. “Think of home!” the angel bellowed.
With a speed that could have broken mortal bones, angel and demon shot off into the night, miles above the forest and the burning inn. And there, in thin and freezing air, the candle sputtered out.

Chapter End Notes

20 In a rare moment of insight, they realized Crowley might possibly recognize them in their own shapes.[back]
21 Hiding.[back]
22 “All botanical, like. No real sulfur to speak of. Ain’t proper for a demon.”[back]
23 A very confused beekeeper, whose bees tried hard to warn him, but did he ever listen? No? Typical human.[back]
24 Joke?[back]
25 Not innuendo. Not in this chapter, anyway.[back]
26 Still not innuendo.[back]
27 As in, ‘searching for a soul to steal”. For the thousands of times you’ve heard your wellness-trend friends use that phrase, thank/blame Crowley.[back]
28 They suffered from the common misconception that horses and komodo dragons are the same creature.[back]
29 Even the ones not currently in reality.[back]
When First Your Eye I Eyed

Chapter Summary

Title from 'Sonnet CIV', Shakespeare

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Between one breath and the next, all light and warmth around him was extinguished. Drops of moisture, so cold they burned, clung to his wings, which hung uselessly from his shoulders. The firmament had given out from under him, and Crowley was Falling.

He tried to scream, but he didn’t have a voice. He tried to reach out and grasp something, anything, to keep him from plummeting into the unknown but there was nothing but those icy droplets. His chest ached, this wasn’t fair, he only asked questions, why was this happening to him, he didn’t-

“Crowley!”

Something grabbed at his arms and he felt himself rise again. It didn’t get any warmer, but at least there was firm ground beneath him, and he could-

“Crowley?”

The demon finally snapped back into the present. The stabbing [30] pain in his chest and his wing made returning to his sickening flashback seem enticing. Worse still, Aziraphale had his hand on Crowley’s cheek and worry in his gaze.

Well, the warm, soft hand was nice. The coddling was just embarrassing.

“Uh, yeah. Hi, angel, fancy meeting you here.” He blinked cold raindrops out of his eyes and looked around. “Why are we here? Why are you here?”

‘Here’ was a slender ledge on the side of a very sheer cliff. Crowley looked down, felt his stomach do a funny little acrobatic maneuver, and looked back up again. Aziraphale was still there, giving Crowley as much distance as the ledge allowed. “Ah. Well. It’s a long story. You see, back when…” He withered under Crowley’s narrowed gaze. “I told you to think of home, and we ended up, well, in the clouds.”

Greeeeeat. Crowley could have landed face-down on the bed in his flat, but he had to be a fool who couldn’t let go of the past, no matter how many airs he put on. And he’d had that little slip up in front of a fussy angel. Forget crawling back into his flashback, he’d rather go another round with Hastur and Ligur.

Aziraphale rushed to the next part of his story, giving Crowley no time to really sink into a sulk. “Then I saw your wing was injured, and the knife wound was certainly not helping things, so I grabbed you and healed you a bit, but it might still ache, and here we are.” He gestured to the rock wall like it was a grand ballroom and Crowley was an esteemed visitor, hitting his knuckles against the stone in the process.
Thunder rumbled from far off, and the rain came down even harder.

It was just like that first rain in Eden when Crowley had been sodden and alone, and trying to find a way to sneak through the Western gate. No matter how close he pressed himself against the cliff face he couldn’t get out of the deluge.

Just when it seemed to be getting worse, the rain stopped. Crowley looked up, expecting to see a break in the clouds and the promise of some sun to warm him. What he saw instead were fluffy feathers, white and poorly groomed. His gaze ran from wingtip down the shaft to where it met a bashful angel. Aziraphale shrugged one shoulder, not moving his wing from the arc that sheltered Crowley.
“I have been,” Aziraphale said, “no, let me speak, don’t interrupt.” Crowley clamped his jaw shut, sharp teeth clicking together to make his point. “Thank you. I had a whole speech prepared but I can’t quite find the paper now.” The angel twisted his ring as he talked, keeping his gaze out into the middle distance and off of Crowley. “What I want to say is that I have been a fool. You were right, I don’t have much experience with de-, with your kind, but I am always keen on learning new things.”

"Need me to recommend a few books on demonology? Because I gotta warn you, the best ones are a pretty hard read."[31]

“Did I say you could talk?” Interrupting was very worth it to see the angel’s petty annoyance, and his blush. Aziraphale coughed and returned to his rambling. “The point is, it is vanishingly rare I meet a being I actually look forward to seeing again, and it would be very foolish of me to discriminate based on, um, occult-ness. And so, dear boy, I beg your forgiveness.”

If Crowley was forced to have this discussion sober, he was not going to do it unclothed and with
his eyes visible. No longer forced to pretend he couldn’t perform miracles, he snapped his fingers and was dressed like he was going to a very chic funeral. Another twirl of his fingers brought dark glasses into existence. He adjusted them on the bridge of his nose, made them a little smaller, then peeked at Aziraphale to see what effect the silence was having on him.

The angel beside had moved on to fiddling with the buttons of his waistcoat, coming just short of unbuttoning them top to bottom again and again.

“You had to go without tea for a few days.” Crowley looked over to soak up Aziraphale’s confused look. “Anyone would be a bit of a bastard in that situation.”

His angel’s eyes were nothing like the sun, but the way they lit up when he laughed warmed Crowley just the same. There was still quite a lot to hash out, he knew, but it could wait until the waves of relief stopped tossing them into fresh rounds of giggles.

The angel and demon were so caught up in giddy celebration that they did not notice the pirate ship until they had been caught in its net.

Literally.

Chapter End Notes

Uh, literally. 30[back]

31 This, tragically, was innuendo. [back]
The next few minutes were among the least dignified Aziraphale had ever endured, even when compared to traveling by candle. Ropes, scratchy with splintered fibers, dug into his skin and dug deeper when he struggled. Fight or flight snapped Crowley’s wings into reality. With no give to the ropes there was no way for them to stretch out, and the black feathers, unfairly well-groomed, smacked Aziraphale across the face instead. Someone squawked.

The whole bundle of wings and panic rose in the air before dropping onto a hard surface with an audible ‘thud’ and ‘fuck!’. One cheek was smooshed against damp wood, the other ticked by Crowley’s secondary coverts. Through a tiny gap in the feathers Aziraphale could just make out a massive Jolly Roger looming far overhead.

A century ticked by in the five seconds that followed, in which no one dared move or speak. Finally a voice piped up in relatable tones of long-suffering ‘I told you so’. “Wensleydale, that is not a bird. And definitely not a legendary one.”

“It looked like the one in my guidebook,” a second voice said, defensively.

The third voice was the one Aziraphale took the most interest in. It sounded exceptionally clear and bright, even over the snapping of sails and groaning of timber that were their current soundtrack. “Aunt Crowley!”

“Heard you, sweetheart.”

“Heard you, sweetheart.”

“Adam!” A curtain of black feathers lifted themselves from Aziraphale’s eyes just in time for him to witness Crowley somersaulting to his feet with all the grace of someone with too many vertebrae. The net had vanished like their capture had never happened, and Aziraphale was free to sit up and take in his surroundings.

He had never been on a flying pirate ship before. He hadn’t been aware they could fly until that very moment, but he and Crowley had been much too high up to have been captured by a non-flying version. And he certainly had never been on a pirate ship crewed by sailors barely out of their teens, for whom the phrase “motley crew” must have been invented. The four children stood in a semi-circle around Aziraphale, though most of their attention was on Crowley. All four were dressed in clothing no doubt stolen from a 17th century opera that was nominally about pirates. The one to his left, who had mistaken them for a bird, was dressed in a ragged petticoat and a preposterous number of silk sashes. Another wore two eyepatches high on her forehead and a ‘first mate’ badge as a necklace. The one to his right seemed to have missed the memo and dressed like a coal miner instead.

And then there was the fellow who had thrown his arms around Crowley, who Aziraphale supposed was Adam. His appearance brought to mind the first moving pictures Aziraphale had
ever seen. The figures on the screen had been at once too real and too unnatural for Aziraphale’s eyes to comprehend. It had taken some time to get used to looking at them without an uneasy shiver.

Adam was like that.

And Crowley was talking to Adam about him. “Yeah, no, he’s an angel but he’s okay. He’s with me.”

That little phrase warmed Aziraphale’s insides like a good cocoa, and gave him the spark of energy needed to get to his feet, fold away his wings, and set his waistcoat right.

“Aziraphale,” Crowley said, arm slung over the shoulder of the strange too-real boy [34] was beaming up at him. “May I present to you the fearsome crew of the good ship Kraken?”

“Charmed, I’m sure.” It was a bit of a faint response. Adam had turned all his attention to the angel, and Aziraphale had the sense that every celestial atom was being picked apart and judged against a cryptic checklist. And then it was gone, and Adam was just a boy with a lopsided smile and sandy hair delighted to see the being who was clearly his favorite aunt.

“Yeah, he’s alright,” he told Crowley. “Hullo, Aziraphale. Silly place to be in a storm, huh?”

“Good thing we were able to rescue you,” the coal miner said.

“Hang on, that is slander, I’ve never needed rescuing!” Crowley flung his hands around in sharp, fidgety gestures, and got only giggles from the surrounding pirates.

Everything was an untidy whirlwind after that. A secondhand tea table with a fourth hand tablecloth was dragged out of hiding, tea and cheese sandwiches were provided, introductions were given.

“Oh, yeah,” Wensleydale said after he’d arranged his sashes properly. “You’re the one who chased me out of a boookshop once.”

“Ah,” said Aziraphale.

“My mum said you’re a misanthropist,” Pepper said.

“Er,” said Aziraphale.

“Well my mum said you’re a front for the mob,” Brian said.

Aziraphale did not say anything to that, because Crowley broke into giggles. He had to fling his arm over the back of Aziraphale’s chair to stop from falling out of his own. And he left it there while he regaled the pirates with the story of their misadventures, playing down how Aziraphale kept him captive and playing up his own coolness.

In time, the giddy rush of adrenaline evaporated, and Aziraphale noticed just how sooty and exhausted Crowley seemed. He assumed if he allowed himself to take stock of his own corporation, he would be faring no better. “Would it be possible,” he asked, interrupting a story about how the Them, as they called themselves, stole a whole apple tree sapling, “for us to find some place to freshen up?”

The Kraken wasn’t a very large vessel. A few spoken instructions from Pepper were sufficient to send he and Crowley off to find their berth.
“I can’t say I’ve ever heard of a flying pirate ship,” Aziraphale said, once they were out of earshot of the Them.

“Ha! Yeah, Adam decided pirate ships should fly so, here we are.” Crowley was obviously proud, even though none of that had made a lick of sense.

“He’s a very talented boy, your nephew?”

Crowley stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “Only nephew in a sense, you know?” Aziraphale absolutely did not know. “I like to keep an eye on him and make sure he’s doing alright. Have done since he was a baby.”

“Well, as I was saying, he certainly has some...unique talents.”

Crowley’s grin faded into something smaller and more closed off. “He used to be the Antichrist. Or still is, kind of. But he’s a good kid. Nothing like his father.” He pulled his hands from his pockets and turned his head to count the doors the passed. “Oh, good, I think this one’s it.”

If that wasn’t a clear enough evasion, Crowley opening a door and stepping inside obviously was. Tempting as it was to push, Aziraphale had begun to learn just how quickly Crowley could snap shut and give up nothing. Risking their nascent camaraderie would not be worth satisfying his curiosity.

Adam had decided that pirate ships should have guest rooms and working plumbing, and so there were. The angel walked past the large and welcoming bed and straight to the bathroom. It was rather aggressively nautical-themed for Aziraphale’s taste, but he could be forced to admit that the barrel sink and anchor shaped mirror had their charms. He heard Crowley drop into the armchair in the adjoining room.

“My dear, do you want first crack at it, or shall I?” Aziraphale cocked his head towards the door and heard the clear sound of Crowley not getting up from the chair. “Very well, but you can’t say I didn’t offer.”

“Nnng.”

As tacky as the shower was,[35] it produced great quantities of hot water. It washed aches and an alarming quantity of grime down the drain, and soon Aziraphale emerged from the bathroom feeling spry and squeaky as a fledgling.

Crowley still hadn’t moved. “The shower is all yours, dear boy.” Still no response, though Crowley’s face contorted like he wanted to whine, but couldn’t find the energy to do it. “Well, suit yourself. I’ll be up on deck if you need me.”

Any good ship, pirate or other, needed a library. Apparently Adam agreed with that, for Aziraphale found some bookshelves shoved into a narrow hallway. Most of the books piled with no sense of order onto the shelves were ones Aziraphale was too proud to lower himself to reading, but diligent searching turned up a history of privateering that would suffice. With his book and the hope of more tea and sandwiches, Aziraphale made his way back to soak up the sun topside.

A pot of tea and several cucumber sandwiches later, the sun was low in the sky and there was still no sign of Crowley. Aziraphale tucked his book under his arm and took a few steps towards the quarters, stopped himself, took a few steps more. Crowley was a big demon, he could take care of himself. But the image of Crowley too injured to pull himself out of a freefall that would end in certain discorporation barged into Aziraphale’s mind. He weighed the risk of annoying Crowley...
before deciding, to Somewhere with it. A decidedly non-frivolous healing miracle had taken care of Crowley’s broken wing and knife wound, but Aziraphale was no expert on demonic injuries. He could not say with any certainty that there was no festering internal wound poisoning Crowley’s corporation. It was morally right and not just snooping, he reasoned, to check in on the poor thing.

Nothing was amiss in the corridor leading to their cabin. He tapped on the door. No answer, but no sound of running water either.

Easing the door open revealed that there was indeed rest for the wicked. Or at least, for Crowley’s brand of wicked.

Crowley sprawled, half on his stomach, in a diagonal across the bed. Sheets wound around one leg and over his torso, leaving what little modesty Crowley may have had completely unprotected. Well, there was no shame in admiring the human form, and it wasn’t like Aziraphale was leering.

Alright, maybe a bit.
“Close the door,” Crowley said. With his voice muffled by the pillow and softened by sleep, his tone was whiny, but adorable. “‘S drafty.”

Aziraphale slipped all the way inside and locked the door behind him. “Well, don’t you clean up nicely.”

“Shut up.” Crowley pushed himself up on his forearms so he could better glare at the angel. “If you’re gonna stay, be useful and bring me that comb?”

He crossed the room, making a stop at the dresser to obey the demand. Now that Crowley was sitting in a pool of light from the porthole, Aziraphale could see all the place his red tresses had snarled together during the mayhem at the inn. It would have taken a single thought for Crowley to
undo the knots. Aziraphale found his more human approach charming.

He perched on the edge of the mattress and propped himself up against the headboard. “It must be terribly difficult to reach some of these knots.” Could Crowley even hear him over the jangling of his nerves? “Allow me?”

“Might as well.” Crowley’s voice may have been infused with practiced indifference, but he moved so he was sitting with his freckle-covered back exposed and vulnerable to the angel behind him.

While Aziraphale’s hair hadn’t been long enough to need a proper combing in centuries, it was hardly the type of skill one forgot. Easy as getting back on a velocipede. He started at the ends, being gentle as he could while teasing out the tangles. “Have you always worn your hair this long?”

“Nah.” Crowley tilted his head here and there with the minute pressure of Aziraphale’s fingers guiding him. “Gets boring, keeping things the same all the time. And it’s always important to keep up with the times.”

If that was a dig at Aziraphale’s classic sense of fashion, he was not going to rise to the bait. For long minutes the only worth noticing were Crowley’s contented hums.

“There,” he said, finally setting the comb aside to run his fingers through soft, untangled curls. “You should wear it like this more often. It’s quite fetching.”

Oh, could demons blush? Behind his curtain of hair, Crowley’s cheeks glowed almost as much as the lit candles. Aziraphale ran his hands through Crowley’s hair again, root to tip, and let them continue down his back. His fingers mapped each cluster of freckles like it was a newly discovered galaxy.

Crowley’s breath caught. He caught Aziraphale’s too, twisting fast to steal a kiss from the angel’s ready lips.

Compared with all the first kisses in history, theirs ranked in the lower 30th percentile. Crowley smushed his nose against Aziraphale’s, the angel missed Crowley’s lips completely and landed on his chin. It was uncoordinated and inconsequential, since they tried again immediately. And again. More and faster until each kiss blended into the next and, were they human, they would have to come up for air. Aziraphale couldn’t blame his lightheadedness on his lack of oxygen.

With Crowley still undressed after his shower, only Aziraphale’s layers stood between him and the serpent’s cool skin. “Too many blessed clothes,” Crowley grumbled, and raised his hand.

“Crowley, don’t you dare-”

Too late. The snap of his fingers heralded a very frivolous miracle indeed. Aziraphale’s clothes were somewhere, but before he could start mourning the loss of his jacket Crowley whispered against the sensitive skin of his neck. “Stop pouting, it’s all in the wardrobe.”

“There best not be a wrinkle on them.” Aziraphale put his hands on Crowley’s hips, tightened his grip, and yanked Crowley into his lap. He was rewarded with a yelp and a breathy laugh, and the tiniest wiggle when Crowley made himself comfortable.

“Now.” He drawled the word out, keeping time with the slow movement of his right hand to the hardness he could feel pressing against his own soft belly. “Let’s see what a lovely cock you’ve
manifested for me.”

“Not much of an angel, using such filthy language, ah!” Crowley broke off into a moan. Aziraphale had skimmed his palm up the length of Crowley’s shaft, keeping the touch light and teasing. Unlike the rest of Crowley, it was hot, and Aziraphale would not have been surprised or disappointed to find it had branded his palm. He repeated the motion once more before wrapping his hand around Crowley’s heavy length. He’d made the mistake of looking down, of seeing where their bodies pressed together, Crowley’s angles against his curves. Teasing flew right out the porthole.

Long ago, in order to avoid strange looks in public baths, Aziraphale had created a manifestation of his own. He was rarely happier to have done it than now, as he wrapped his hand around both himself and Crowley and started up a swift rhythm.

“Fuck, Zira.” Crowley lay his head on Aziraphale’s shoulder. Little puffs of breath tickled his skin. That soft sensation was drowned out the moment Crowley started to move his hips and the needy slide of their cocks was all Aziraphale could focus on.

“That’s right,” he found himself babbling into the silent spaces between Crowley’s moans. “Wonderful, my darling, oh, perfect.”

He could feel Crowley going rigid against him, and the vertigo that started to sweep over his own senses. Aziraphale’s world narrowed to that sensation, and to the need to see his partner’s face.

Such lovely long hair as Crowley’s was perfect for grabbing, for yanking his head back until Aziraphale could see him. Those slitted pupils were so wide as to almost be round, and his mouth open like no amount of air would ever be enough. Crowley’s thrusts grew sloppy and frantic, and Aziraphale tugged on his hair again. Crowley keened, and shook as hot spurts coated Aziraphale’s belly, his cock, his hand...

And then he was gone, pushed over into bright nothingness. For the briefest moment he thought he had been discorporated, but his consciousness drifted back into his body to find that they were lying down. Crowley was snuggled against his side, with one hand doing a lazy twirl in the air until there was the tickle of a frivolous miracle cleaning them both. When he noticed that Aziraphale was semi-functional again, though, he pulled away.

A barbed wire fence made of quips and attitude started to crash down in Crowley’s eyes. Aziraphale had seen it before, when his conversations with the ‘fallen star’ had circled too close to vulnerable truth. Now that he knew what it was, he was in no mood to let it come between them again.

Aziraphale yanked Crowley back against his side. The angel pressed a finger to the demon’s protesting mouth. “Hush, none of that. I have half a mind to give this ‘sleeping’ lark a go, and I need an expert to show me how.”

Crowley’s eyes widened in surprise, though he quickly pivoted to huffing a short breath against Aziraphale’s shoulder. He followed it up with a flick of forked tongue against the angel’s ear. Aziraphale shivered, making the motion big and obnoxious. If perpetrating mild annoyances helped Crowley get his equilibrium back, well, Aziraphale could endure the torment.

“Alright, angel.” Crowley slumped down until he had his head resting on Aziraphale’s chest. “Just imitate the master.”

In the end, Aziraphale made no attempt to engage in Crowley’s type of sloth. It was restful enough
to lay there stroking Crowley’s hair, and watching the setting sun gild his still-warm skin.

Chapter End Notes

32 It was Aziraphale. [back]
33 That was Aziraphale too. [back]
34 When you’re 6,000 years old, everyone looks like a child. [back]
35 The showerhead was skull and crossbones shaped. Crowley adored it. [back]
36 Thankfully not pirate patterned. [back]
37 Unlike cooking, which Aziraphale had forced from his mind the moment humans invented restaurants. [back]
38 He was still mourning his trousers. [back]
The Best Laid Plans o' Mice an' Men

Chapter Summary

Title from "To a Mouse", by Robert Burns

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I made that one.”

Aziraphale followed Crowley’s pointing finger to a distant cluster of stars in the inky sky. “All by yourself?”

“Mmhm.” After a day of watching Crowley whisper to the Them and shoot the angel sly looks, Aziraphale wandered out of their cabin to find a moonlight picnic set up, and an anxious Crowley hovering around it. “Designed and constructed by yours truly.”

Picnics seemed to be another assumed part of pirate life, for Crowley had scrounged up a blanket and pillows and a wicker picnic basket. He’d fashioned them into a cozy little nest, and there they lounged under a dizzying number of stars.

There had been candles arrayed around the blanket, but a passing cloud had blown them out, and neither unnatural being made any move to relight them. Maybe the human cliche worked for them as well; it was easier to talk about the big things in the dark.

And after consuming a quarter of your body weight in wine.

“You must have missed them in Eden. Seemed impossible to see the sky though all the foliage.” Aziraphale bent to top off both of their glasses, allowing Crowley a moment of privacy to do whatever it was his face was going to do.

When he looked back up, Crowley crinkled his nose, and Aziraphale sank to a new level of infatuation. “I had more of a problem seeing past that sword. Flaming as anything! So flaming. Until you lost it.”

It may have been meant as a tease, but Aziraphale had to defend his honor all the same. “I didn’t lose it. I gave it away.”

What a shameful waste of wine, the way Crowley choked and sprayed it all over the deck. “You what?”

“I gave it away! Eve and her fellow were just so defenseless, and the rain seemed so cold, and why are you looking at me like that?”

Crowley’s unblinking stare only broke when he pushed himself up from the pillows and leaned towards Aziraphale. “Angel, you’re a bucket of surprises.”

“You’re drunk,” he accused, but there was a slender hand cupping his chin, and slightly chapped lips pressing against his own. Aziraphale felt his cheeks glow warm and bright enough to outshine
any candle.

Crowley pulled away from the kiss, but stayed pressed side to side with Aziraphale. They both stared in silence at the sky. Aziraphale wondered how many of the stars had been formed in Crowley’s hands, and if he had whispered to them the way Aziraphale caught him whispering to plants when he thought no one was around. Come to think of it, he couldn’t remember there being any plants on the ship when they first arrived, and certainly not a tiny greenhouse a few doors down from their cabin.

“Urrgh, okay. Okay, plans.” Crowley let himself fall back onto the pillows, somehow keeping his wineglass steady as he did.

“Plans,” Aziraphale repeated. They had been dancing around this for the three days they’d been on the ship. After Aziraphale had come clean about the details and the whys of Gabriel’s star quest, Crowley had declared that he would let Aziraphale be taken back to Heaven “over my dead body”. But every time they tried to actually plan what they were going to do, some new distraction bubbled up.

The little rascal Dog stole a tray of biscuits and needed to be chased around the top deck, or raucous pirate songs needed to be sung.

They would be landing the next day, very close to the wall, and they still had no plan.

“Okay,” said Crowley, after another long swig of wine. “So. We land, we go to your bookshop—”

“No, no, that won’t do.” Aziraphale saw Crowley’s questioning eyebrows, and went on. “The very stones of the wall are blessed to keep demons away from the village. Any who tried to cross would be discorporated, didn’t you know?”

“Uh.” Crowley disappeared behind his wineglass again. “Right. Yeah. Silly me, totally forgot that. So I stay on this side of the wall and you summon That Wanker, and you say, ‘Oh most mighty arsewipe Gabriel, I fetch’ed the star for you but it was a demon! And here he is, my prisoner!’ because I’ll be all wrapped up with that magic chain? And then we fake an escape and a fight and you’re all ‘No! Let me take care of him myself! I must prove myself!’ and I do some really really good acting and fake my death. And then he’ll see you need to stay and protect Earth from demons, and we’re all sorted!”

“That,” Aziraphale said, “is the worst plan I have ever heard.”

“Then let’s hear your plan!”

“The Archangel Gabriel is not idiotic enough for fall for it!”

“Yeah.” Crowley punctuated each word with a tap of his empty glass against the deck. “He. Is.” Angels were not supposed to lie, so Aziraphale could not really argue in Gabriel’s favor. “Tell you what. I’ll give you until tomorrow night, and if you’ve got a better idea, we’ll do it. Otherwise, we go with mine.”

“Fine,” Aziraphale said. “I can agree to those terms, and I will come up with a better plan.” He dug into the picnic basket, but the chocolate biscuits he sought had been crushed to crumbs under one of remaining wine bottles.

It did not seem like a good sign.

The Kraken touched down the next evening in one of the forest’s helpful little hidden clearings. Once they had disembarked, the ship looked much smaller outside than inside. Aziraphale could
not stop himself from eyeing it with suspicion, but if the boat had more secrets she was hiding them well. The Them surrounded Crowley with tight embraces and demands that he bring back more curios the next time he travelled somewhere interesting. Even Dog got a special snuggle from the demon.

While the rest were saying their goodbyes, Adam sidled up to Aziraphale. “He’s a demon, you know,” he informed the angel.

“Yes,” Aziraphale said. “I am aware.”

Adam shrugged and rubbed at his nose. The motion didn’t wipe away a smear of soot that ran over his nose and across his cheek. “Just sayin’. Because, just because someone is somethin’, doesn’t mean they’re only that somethin’.”

Once again Aziraphale felt like Adam’s gaze was splitting him microscopic motes of dust. He looked at the strange young man who was the maybe-Antichrist, and wondered just who Adam was really talking about. “Yes, my boy,” he said, letting his gaze drift back to Crowley. “Yes. I think I’m learning that.”

Adam’s lopsided grin was nothing but human. “Good. Make Aunt Crowley come to Tadfield more!”

After that final demand, the Them left with the kind of ruckus befitting a much larger group.

“Little punks,” Crowley said warmly. “Well, come on, angel. Let’s find somewhere to stay the night.”

As it turned out there was an inn nearby, one that wasn’t a sham or a trap. It was tiny and eclectically decorated and run by a witch who was too busy reading a pamphlet about the environment to pay them much attention. Once they paid\[41\] they were left with a tiny room, no new plan, and nothing to do until morning.\[42\]

Crowley and nothing weren’t on very good terms, and Aziraphale was reaching the limits of his patience.

“My dear, if you don’t cease pacing, I shall have to tie you to the bed.” Aziraphale meant it only as an idle, grumpy threat, but there was no mistaking the way Crowley’s step faltered, or the pink tint in his cheeks. Circulatory systems were delightfully revealing. “Unless that would be a reward?”

“Dunno what you’re talking about,” Crowley choked. Aziraphale’s own protests when offered dessert were more convincing than that, especially when Crowley peeked over the rim of his glasses and bit his lip.

“Don’t play coy with me, my dear.” The tension in the room remained, but shifted to something that tasted of forked lightning. Crowley stood without fidgeting, his hands twisted together behind his back. It was least motion Aziraphale had ever seen from the kinetic demon, at least while awake.

The angel rose from the bed and crossed the room in three quick steps. He brought his hand up and caressed Crowley’s cheek. With the fire no longer warming the room, the snake’s skin was cool to the touch. He started to open his mouth, but Aziraphale moved quickly, twisting his hand to grab Crowley’s jaw and put his thumb over his lips before Crowley could make some smart remark and ruin the moment.
Crowley stilled again, though his breath picked up.

“Good. This is what you need, isn’t it? Someone to take you in hand.” Aziraphale pulled his hand away, and then turned his back to the demon. The chair his satchel had been tossed on was only a step away. “Someone to take care of you. Get on the bed, Crowley.”

He had no need to look to know Crowley had scrambled to obey. The dear boy really could be so good at following direct orders. Aziraphale allowed himself to wonder, as he dug through his bag, if that was thanks to a wisp of the angelic left in Crowley. The thought threatened to make his heart ache, so he pushed it away and lifted what he had been looking for.

“Ngk. Angel, I was joking when I said those were bondage ropes.”

Aziraphale let the silver chain run, smooth as water, from one hand to the other. “Joke or not, it was certainly an interesting idea.” He crossed the room with a measured pace, leaving plenty of time for Crowley to object. Nothing came but the sound of Crowley’s breathing and the creak of the bed when Aziraphale knelt upon it.

Now came the hard part. Aziraphale held the chain stretched between his hands. With his attention all on Crowley, he would notice any flinch or hesitation. He was not sure, after all that had happened, just what Crowley would feel, what Aziraphale would deserve. They were still hereditary enemies on opposite sides of an eternal war, and a few days might not be enough to make a dent in that. Aziraphale squared his shoulders and prepared for whatever answer he would get. “Crowley, do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

There was not a heartbeat between the question and answer. If he hadn’t already braced himself, the force of that yes might have knocked Aziraphale onto the floor. As it was, he fumbled the chain. “Oh. Well, yes. Good. Very good, yes.” Retrieving the chain gave him space to regain his composure. What a funny old world it was, where a demon trusted an angel.

Aziraphale took Crowley’s left wrist and tied the chain around it. He looped it through a slat in the headboard and repeated with the other wrist. “Comfortable? You remember the trick to get out if you need? Wonderful.”

He rewarded Crowley with a kiss on the forehead, the nose, the lips. With steady, slow fingers, he lifted the glasses off Crowley’s face and set them on the bedside table.

“If I knew you were just going to ssstare at me, I would have- oh, fuck.”

Aziraphale was the picture of innocence, unless one noticed just where on Crowley’s anatomy his hand had landed. “Do shut up, dear boy, and let me take care of you.”

Crowley did not immediately relax, but having the serpent’s unblinking gaze fixed on him was a type of gratification on its own. Aziraphale held that gaze while he moved down Crowley’s body. With each slow trace of his finger down Crowley’s form, another inch of clothing vanished into the ether, until Aziraphale knelt at the feet of a naked demon.

“Oh, I see,” Crowley drawled, avoiding direct eye contact. “Trying to freeze me into hibernation, that’s the grand plan.”

Rising to Crowley’s bait was fun, but Aziraphale knew when it was best to be single minded. He started a slow journey back up, kisses and licks and small bites marking his path from ankle to hip. It was there, when his tongue skimmed the crease between thigh and pelvis, that he first heard the
rasp of chain against wood.

Aziraphale watched Crowley while he repeated his journey on the other side. Again, when his tongue traced over sensitive skin, Crowley tugged hard at his restraints. “No fair, come on, Zira, let me touch you.”

The desperation in Crowley’s voice was like lava in his veins. Aziraphale palmed himself through his trousers, allowing just a taste of the friction he was craving. But this was about Crowley, and before the demon could whine again, Aziraphale licked the head of his cock and swallowed him down in one go.

“Oh, *fuck.*” Crowley’s head had fallen back, but he angled it so he could see Aziraphale work him over. “Your lips look so good around me, yeah.”

No, this was no good. Crowley was straining at his bindings so prettily, but he was far too coherent for Aziraphale’s taste. He hummed and bobbed his head and gave Crowley a long demonstration of what weird things he could do with his tongue.

And then, when he was certain Crowley was close, he pulled off with a wet pop.

“Oh, come on, no no noooo,” Crowley whined. He tried to grab at Aziraphale again, only to be stopped short by his silver tether.

Aziraphale knelt on the bed between Crowley’s bent knees. He let his eyes feast on those bitten lips, the flush going from throat to belly. No angelic version of Crowley could possibly be as beautiful as he was in that moment.

“Prepare yourself.” When Crowley’s only movement was widening his eyes, Aziraphale tapped his hip sharply. “With a miracle, Crowley. Do it now.”

His frenzy to comply resulted in a few snaps of his fingers, until he finally managed the presence of mind to perform the miracle. Aziraphale dug deep into his reserves of willpower to stay calm and steady while he undid his trousers, and pulled his cock free. Again he palmed himself, again he swept his eyes over his lover’s form. They made such a pretty pair, with Crowley naked and desperate and Aziraphale fully clothed and composed.

“Did you do as I asked?” Crowley bit his lip again and nodded. “Brilliant, my dear.” He reached for one of the many throw pillows tossed on the bed and used it to prop up Crowley’s hips. A light press of one finger to Crowley’s hole came away slick. Good. He was ready, and Aziraphale couldn’t bring himself to wait a moment longer.

He hooked his arm under Crowley’s knee, lined himself up, and thrust into the demon in one long stroke. Crowley arched off the bed, wordless but loud. Aziraphale muffled him with his own lips, tender kisses contrasting with his forceful thrusts. There was no possibility of keeping his composure anymore, not when Crowley felt so tight around his cock and rocked up to meet each new stroke. Not when the sound of fine cloth rubbing on bare skin assaulted his senses. Not when Aziraphale shifted and found the perfect angle to have Crowley jolting and moaning with every thrust.

His rhythm faltered and grew sloppy. Crowley’s rolling hips did the same. The world narrowed to feeling of Crowley clenching around him as he came. Aziraphale followed him over the edge, fucking him through both their orgasms until it was too much, Crowley’s little whimper’s where too much, and he pulled out to flop beside Crowley.
Crowley made the complicated gesture that released him from the magic chain. He rolled right into Aziraphale’s waiting arms. The kissed until their kisses were slow and sleepy as molasses on a cold day.

“Alright, my dear?” Aziraphale finally asked.

“Tell you when I find my brain again.” Crowley gestured at Aziraphale’s waistcoat, cleaned by a miracle sometime during the comedown. “Not gonna fret about knowing there was a stain?”

“Well.” Aziraphale stared at the ceiling as though that would prevent Crowley from noticing his cheeks turning crimson. “That’s not a stain I, um, mind remembering.”

Crowley laughed loud and long, new fits of giggles hitting him every so often until, curled against Aziraphale, he drifted off into sleep.

The angel let the sound ring through his mind long after Crowley was asleep. The morning would bring danger, and if that moment of mirth could keep it at bay, Aziraphale would hold on to it as long as he was able

Chapter End Notes

39Factually improbable, but the sentiment was sweet.[back]
40Or argued about. Brian remained unconvinced that "A Frog he Would A-Wooing Go" was a proper pirate chorus, though he did concede the way it annoyed Aunt Crowley was worth it.[back]
41Aziraphale forced Crowley not to use a miracle to get out of payment.[back]
42Gabriel was not a ‘morning being’. Their chances of fooling him seemed better the earlier it was.
[back]
Rosy-fingered dawn had crept through the gauzy curtains when Aziraphale realized he couldn’t go through with the plan. Crowley may be a wily one, but Aziraphale had been watching him sleep for hours and could see no trickery in those splayed limbs and soft snores. And no matter how clever Crowley may be, Gabriel was an Archangel.

It was a strange feeling, to have made up his mind so firmly, with so little waffling. So this was what all the foolhardy lovers in his books felt when running off to greet the unknown. Aziraphale did not like the feeling, but needs must, as they said. He scribbled out a quick note to leave on the bedside table: My dearest, Have decided it was too dangerous for you to accompany me. Will deal with Gabriel and return when it is safe. Yours, A. He set the note down and bent over Crowley to take what he needed without waking the dear boy.

Preparations made, Aziraphale snuck from the room and started the short walk to Wall, ready to meet his boss and see just how far he could stretch the truth.

The stink of ozone wafted from a charred circle of grass. Even the dew and moss, fragrant in the early morning air, did nothing to dampen the sharp smell. That was just like Gabriel, wasn’t it? Always had to make a dramatic entrance.

“Aziraphale! I wasn’t expecting to hear from you so soon.” Now that he’d spent so much time with Crowley, he could hear the mocking bite beneath chipper words and a beaming smile. “I trust you have good news for me?”

Aziraphale touched the buckle of his satchel and forced his hands to stop their trembling. He could do this. He could absolutely pull this off. “It is lovely to see you again. I have very good, very interesting news. You see, it’s been a very interesting journey. And all without miracles!”

“With one miracle.”

“Ah, but not a frivolous one, I encountered someone gravely injured…” Aziraphale faltered under Gabriel’s unimpressed gaze, and started again. His voice and hands were still steady, but he could not waste time congratulating himself. “Well. When I found the star, it wasn’t a star at all, but a demon pretending to be one for his own fell deeds.” He reached into the satchel and, with all the flourish of an extremely amateur magician, pulled out the lock of hair he had snipped from Crowley’s mane not even an hour before.

Gabriel finally stepped off his circle of burnt grass to close the distance between them. He snatched the hair from Aziraphale and brought it up to his nose. “So that’s what smelled so evil. I was worried you’d got a new cologne, ha!” He clapped Aziraphale on the shoulder, smile growing even wider. “Get it? New cologne?”
“Ha, yes, very clever!” Aziraphale watched the twist of hair while Gabriel tossed it over his shoulder. It landed right on the smouldering grass. Was it graying and crumbling now that it was on this side of the wall, or was that Aziraphale’s imagination? “Erm, anyway. Once I saw that it was a demon and not a star, I vanquished the fiend and took his hair as proof.”

“Good! Just curious, how did a demon pretend to be a fallen star? It just looked like a big ol’ space rock?”

Now that victory was in sight, Aziraphale couldn’t prevent his tone from turning slightly huffy. “Well, not everyone was on the C.O.Q., I had no idea what-”

“Stop.” Gabriel put his hand up. “Did you hear that?”

Both angels turned to stare over the wall. A hellish stampede burst from the treeline. Crowley was in the lead, shouting incoherently and waving his arms like a drowning sailor. The two demons from the inn came next. The faster of the two, Ligur, held an axe, while Hastur was wielding a broken tree branch. Bringing up the rear was Hastur’s toad, hopping like mad to keep up with its usual perch.

“Oh, bugger.” All the worst case scenarios Aziraphale had thought of weren’t as dire, or as deranged, as the pageant unfolding in front of him. Desperate to cling to any threads of a plan, he stammered out, “Um, ah, let me! Prove myself? And take...I’ll deal with it.”

It worked well enough, if Gabriel putting his hand between Aziraphale’s shoulders and shoving him towards the wall was anything to go by. He clambered over the wall, needing no further encouragement to save Crowley’s feathers, yet again.

Ligur sped up, closing the gap between himself and Crowley. He lifted the axe high, ready to strike.

“Behind you!” Aziraphale called out.

Thank Somewhere for a serpent’s quick reaction time. As soon as he turned to see the peril approaching him, he’d summoned a curved dagger into his hand. Ligur snarled and swung the axe at Crowley’s head. The movement was clumsy and wide, allowing Crowley plenty of room to duck under it and pop up close to the Duke. The long weapon was useless at such a close range, but Crowley’s dagger was just the right size. He stabbed it into the side of Ligur’s neck, and used his momentum to slice clean through.

Ligur dropped his axe and frowned at Crowley. Then he fell like a boulder shoved off a cliff. Greasy-looking smoke poured from his neck wound. His corporation, now nothing but an empty husk, crumbled to ash, and a gust of wind caught both ash and smoke and scattered them until no sign of Duke Ligur remained.

Crowley half-turned to Aziraphale, the beginning of a triumphant smile on his face. That moment of distraction was all it took. Screaming “You bastard!”, Hastur caught up to Crowley and poured every ounce of his infernal strength into swinging his tree branch.

This time, it connected. The crack Aziraphale heard was the snapping of either the branch, or of Crowley’s bones. Too far away to do anything helpful, Aziraphale had no option but to watch, time slowing to a crawl, as the force of the blow lifted Crowley off his feet. Crowley sailed straight over the wall constructed with the sole purpose of destroying any demon who tried to cross it. The Serpent of Eden hung in the air for a moment, suspended like one of his beloved stars, and then disappeared. Gone. Erased as if he had never set foot on Creation.
What came next happened to Aziraphale in small flashes of motion. He would never remember deciding to do any of it, even when trying to reconstruct the scene for himself ages after. First he was frozen, staring at the spot of air Anthony J. Crowley had once occupied. Then his sword was in his hand, and then it was still in his hand, but shoved through the chest of the remaining Duke of Hell. It flamed, beautiful and terrible as it had been in Eden, and the flames spread over the demon. Hastur screamed as the holy fire consumed him from the inside out, and then there was nothing but the smell of charred bone and sulfur.

“-knew you still had some soldier in you, no matter what they said!” Gabriel was talking at him again. He snapped back in time to steel himself for another of the archangel’s crushing shoulder claps. “The way you pitted those two demons against each other? Brilliant! Gonna have to bring that one up at the next staff meeting!” The archangel made a show of checking his watch and feigning surprise. “Is that the time? Gotta run, appointments to keep. But hey!” He spread his arms wide as his grin. “You get to stay! Can’t yank a good demon slayer off Earth, after all! Ciao!” Gabriel, for some Satanforsaken reason, winked, and in another crash of lightning he was gone.

And so was Crowley. Aziraphale staggered to the stone wall so he could prop himself up. The world spun around him, and every sound that had been muted during his rush of action came back at full volume. Was this what humans called ‘nausea’?

He deserved it. He deserved any bad feeling that came his way. Karma, if he believed in such a thing, for going through with any plan so foolish and ill conceived that it ended in Crowley’s destruction.”

“Oh, my dear,” he said, his voice like that of a strangled frog. “My dear, Crowley. I’m so, so sorry, Crowley.”

“’S okay,” said a bush on the opposite side of the wall. “Buy me a drink and I’ll consider us even.”

Aziraphale found himself on that side of the wall without knowing how he had managed it. A snake slithered from its hiding place in the branches of a rosebush.
“Crowley?”

“Hiya, Zira.” The snake’s form did something no mortal eye could comprehend, and then it was Crowley, picking leaves from his hair. “Nice job with the stabbing, Hastur’s had that coming for a loooong time.”

“How.” Aziraphale grabbed Crowley by the shoulders. He was solid and alive, as much as any occult being could be. “You crossed the barrier! That destroys demons!”

“Oh. Well. I kinda spread that rumor. It was the 14th century, and that was the worst, and I just wanted five minutes to myself, you know?”

Aziraphale was not sure if he wanted to shake Crowley or kiss him, so he did a mix of both. He followed it with more shaking for good measure. But Crowley was still very much in existence, and it was an angel’s nature to forgive just as much as it was a demon’s nature to lie. He gave one last shake for good measure, and finally smiled. “You wiley old serpent.”

“Hey, you’re gonna scramble my brains if you keep it up.” Crowley pulled away to escape further punishment, and then held out his hand. “Sounds like this adventure ended up with you getting what you wanted, yeah?”

Aziraphale laced their fingers together and pressed a kiss to the back of Crowley’s hand. “All I wanted, and more. About that drink. How would you fancy a bottle of wine and a tour of the bookshop?”

Crowley pulled his glasses from thin air and pushed them up the bridge of his nose. The village of Wall was waking up below them, and Crowley was armored and ready. “Yeah, angel. I think I’d like that a lot.”

Chapter End Notes

43 True, if ‘vanquished’ was a synonym for ‘enthusiastically topped’.

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But Never Doubt I Love

Chapter Summary

Title from *Hamlet*, Shakespeare

Once upon a time, in the sort of quaint little village where all these stories end, there was an empty storefront that once housed the world’s least profitable bookshop. No one could remember when A. Z. Fell moved out, but then again, no one could remember when he moved in either.

At the same time in SoHo, a building was very surprised to find that it suddenly had a bookshop on its first floor, and a mostly-empty flat above it. A stylishly empty flat in Mayfair was somewhat less surprised to find itself occupied once more. And London, too old and labyrinthine to be surprised by anything, shifted to make space for the angel and demon and claim them as its own.

Did they live happily ever after? Hard to say, since ‘ever’ is quite a long time for ethereal and occult beings. On a blustery cold night, walk past a bookshop that will never be open, and peer in through the smudged and dusty windows. Make out the forms of two human-shaped beings sodden with wine and cocoa and companionship. Listen to the ginger one trip over his ‘s’ words in a manner that seems eerily serpentine, and the blond laugh and kiss away his pouting. And make up your own mind.

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