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Crown of Thorns [The Walls, the Wainscot, and the Mouse] 'Verse

by irisbleufic

Summary

“D’you realize,” [Crowley] said, “that we never tire of things humans get bored with on the regular?”

Aziraphale shrugged, lazily basking. “I’ve always assumed it’s that we don’t tire of each other.”

[FINALLY COMPLETE! #75 added 14 February 2019; ran from 10/1/05 - 4/14/19. My love to GO fandom, always.]

Notes

This series was never intended to be a series as such: I wrote "A Better Place" in the wake of rather accidentally getting to ask a certain question (What are Aziraphale and Crowley doing on the South Downs, anyway?) of both authors within a week of each other back in 2005 and actually getting an answer (Sharing a cottage), thinking it'd just be a happy little one-off. But something curious happened when my Good Omens Exchange 2010 assignment resulted in "The Walls, the Wainscot, and the Mouse." From that point onward, interest in this little 'verse slowly, but steadily picked up momentum, and I kept finding more stories to tell. Some of the characters that appear herein (Phillippa [Pippa] Morrison, the Mouse, Amanda [Mandy] Tomlin, Uriel, Raphael, et al.) first turned up in my one and only attempt at a second-Apocalypse dark mirror universe, A Crown of Stars (AO3 posting of same) and its follow-ups, which predates this series considerably. The two universes parallel each other, but this one is, for our purposes, post novel-canon and set in our reality. That's pretty much what you need to know. Thank you all for continuing to read and also for giving this project life. I'll continue to add stories and ficlets until I run out of ideas or until my heart stops (whichever comes first)! The current existing pieces are complete; the series overall is ongoing on an as-and-when basis, which means that the time between additions may be weeks or months or, in rare instances, up to a year.

For more on the South Downs Thing, see this post and this post. It's seemingly been codified as fandom history.

The playlist for this series is now available on 8tracks.com, so please have a listen if you're so inclined.

There is also a timeline of the pieces in this series, if you want to know how they fall chronologically.
Thanks to one of my anons, there is now an inventory of Crowley's eccentric mantelpiece collection.

Thanks to a handful of people nudging me on Tumblr, there is now a floor plan of the cottage and grounds.
Once, in the world, there was a cottage.

As cottages went, it was not remarkable. It had been built in the early twenties by a bored, wealthy Londoner for his bored, wealthy wife. They spent two happy weekends under its roof, after which sojourns they decided that the fog was much too damp and the fine kitchen tiles much too cold. Some years later, they remembered that they had built it, and brought their bored, spoiled children on holiday in hope of good weather.

It rained the whole time, and the mist was still damp.

They sold it.

* * *

Some mornings, gazing out the back window, Aziraphale catches sight of the limestone cliffs through the mist. The seasons seem to turn faster than they did in London, blowing over the fields and down the grassy slope of shore. It isn't a proper inlet by any stretch, no easy boating access to the open sea, as the neighbors had got that. It wouldn't have been worth it, Aziraphale remembers saying, and takes a sip of tea as steam curls gently into his eyes. But this one, with the view, is. He sets the cup down and opens the window, breathing in the chilly air.

Out here, what he misses most—Predictably, Crowley says—is sushi restaurants. The nearest town is six miles away, and it has a grand total of three pubs and one respectable café. When Crowley can be buggered to get up before breakfast, they sometimes take a drive and have breakfast there. The Bentley has become the envy of every local mechanic, and the crestfallen glances they cast upon it are palpable. It never needs repairing, and nobody does a better wash and wax than Crowley.

Aziraphale breathes in, picking up his cup again, and finds the newspaper already inside. Morning in the kitchen is always quiet, not a sound except for his slippered feet on the tile. They discovered promptly that shoes and tile are a bad combination, so Aziraphale bought slippers, and Crowley shrugged and went barefoot. The tile is old, but the restoration job had been a snap. The kitchen floor is the envy of their neighbors, and Aziraphale enjoys having something trivial to beam about.

Outside, the fog is drifting into a transparent mist. Aziraphale takes a seat at the table, unfolding the paper, and opens the patio door with a slight inclination of his head. The Sunday puzzles usually manage to be as good as the ones he used to do in the Telegraph, and sometimes Crowley remembers to fetch a copy of the Times.

Sipping his tea, Aziraphale sets his pen to the page and enjoys the breeze.
The cottage would not have known what to think of its new owner.

The gentleman was not rich, but he was not poor, either. He had recently lost his wife, and they had been childless. He had invested wisely, saving enough to retire in comfort. The bedroom, at least, was comfortable, as long as you never left it.

He very rarely did.

* * *

Driving down a deserted, winding road with the chilly wind streaming through his window, Crowley feels guilty for leaving the house alone. Still, there are errands to be run, and Aziraphale is too lazy to run them. Not that he disapproves.

Unless you count the M25 through Oxfordshire, you really can't get this kind of scenery living in London and environs. This is part of the reason why Crowley doesn't live in London anymore. Also, he had been getting tired of not being able to do 110 miles per hour down Oxford Street. Ever since things changed, something—or, he thinks acerbically, someone—has made it harder for him to tamper with police cars.

Out here, where there are no sushi restaurants, nobody gives a damn, and Crowley is all right with that. He shoves a tape into the Blaupunkt, and it trills solid Haydn. A motorist coming from the opposite direction, one of the neighbors, recognizes Crowley and waves. Cheerfully, Crowley waves back and watches the tiny car whiz past.

He's not the only one speeding, and he approves of that, too.

* * *

For a decade, the cottage lay locked and abandoned.

The widower's brother, after inheriting the property, didn't exactly know what to do with it. He had the vague feeling that he might also inherit a patch of bad luck if he were to be too hasty in selling it.
He stayed on a total of one week, just long enough to gather his brother's belongings, and spent six uncomfortable nights in an uncomfortable bed. On leaving, he dragged out the mattress with the trash.

Without fresh air and music, a decade is a very long time.

---

By noon, sunlight is streaming through the cottage windows. The limestone cliffs catch the light, blinding to look at. Aziraphale tilts the blinds just so, content with the slats of brightness that they cast. He walks back to the table and collects up the newspaper and the teacup. One, he tosses neatly in the bin, and the other, he sets in the sink.

Crowley has left the breadbox open and a jar of jam on the counter. Aziraphale closes the breadbox and takes the jam back to the refrigerator. They seldom lack for necessaries, as many of the locals bake, garden, and keep bees. Three months ago, when they'd first moved in, they'd ended up with enough honey to last a year.

Aziraphale leaves his slippers next to the doorway, pads across hardwood hall-floor and into the living room. The carpet is new and soft—Almost too plush, he'd said. Crowley had insisted that his furniture would look ridiculous without carpet. Aziraphale had said his furniture would look ridiculous anyway. They'd struck a bargain: Crowley had brought his furniture, and, now that they're settled in, Aziraphale has picked the carpet.

He understands why Crowley likes to go barefoot.

---

In 1978, the cottage got a name. The plaque was nailed above its door.

They were, as everyone called them, a bunch of hippies. Three men and one woman, to be exact. They stayed all of five months before deciding that the place was a bit too close to the shore. The woman, who was getting pronouncedly rounder about the middle, pointed out that the nighttime storms would scare her daughter.

You don't have a daughter, said the men.

Yet, said the woman.
They moved out before the child was born. The plaque stayed.

* * *

It said: Lothlórien. Which was not a very creative name.

* * *

Crowley doesn't like running errands, but they seem to be his lot in life. From the very Beginning, he's been running errands, whether it's causing trouble in a garden called Eden or renewing Aziraphale's subscriptions online so they don't run out. They come naturally, and in the end he supposes that is better than messing people about.

He hasn't taken the wrong turning for a couple of weeks now, though he catches himself just in time. He has to be careful not to let his mind wander, or he falls into old habits, usually ones that result in the unpleasant experience of having to stop and ask for directions. He is almost on the high street now, which has grown familiar, but the place he is looking for is not. He starts counting the box numbers, anxious.

There had been a rusty metal plaque above the door when they moved in, and, as names went, what was on it hadn't been satisfactory at all. In fact, it had been boring, and it was currently in the back seat, rattling around with the screws still attached.

Crowley has the distinct feeling he's going to have to ask for directions.

* * *

In 1985, the cottage got a new name. It was not necessarily a better one.

Ms. Jean Alice Prewett—J. Alice to you—got her seven cats and fifteen goldfish all settled in and decided that the plaque had to go.

So, she called up some local workmen and had them throw the rusty thing away, and repaint the cottage a pale, soothing blue while they were at it. All in all, J. Alice was pleased with the result, and she lived out the remainder of her days—twenty years, six hours, eleven minutes—in her newly named cottage. None of the animals outlived her.

The cottage might have told you it didn't feel much like a Windy Knoll at all.
Lacking anything useful to do, Aziraphale decides to take a walk. The mist has slunk off for the day, and the ocean is particularly calm. He doesn't bother with shoes, as there's nobody around to see him, and they track in the sand something awful.

The cottage is on a bit of a rise, and the slope down to the water is a long, grassy incline where waterbirds, and even a few ducks, nest in summer, according to the neighbors. Crowley wishes it were summer already, and Aziraphale tells him to be patient. The water is cold, and something scuttles out from under Aziraphale's toe.

Aziraphale tried feeding the seagulls once, but he quickly learned why that was a bad idea. These days, he keeps his hands in his pockets and doesn't make eye contact.

In the living room, Crowley has started a bizarre collection of found objects on the mantelpiece. There are waterlogged watches, shells, china-fragments, and small pieces of driftwood. There are bits of colored glass and a delicate, rose-colored globe with a rotted piece of netting for a shroud. There is a ring, a crab's claw, a pearl. Aziraphale suspects Crowley cheated to get that last one, but it isn't worth arguing over.

Something small has washed up a few feet away, and Aziraphale bends to examine it.

Crowley hasn't got a piece of eight yet, so into his pocket it goes.

* * *

The estate agent had begun to despair of ever finding a buyer.

The cottage was moldy, dusty, and the paint was chipping. The name plaque was rusty, and it had one of the worst names she'd ever seen on one of her sale listings. Over the months, she had shown it to dozens of potential buyers, all of whom had shaken their heads because it was too small or too old, or had stubbornly, nervously insisted that something rattled and thumped in the bedroom.

She had hoped that J. Alice Prewett's second cousin would just move in and have done with it, but the cousin had been the one to object to the rattling and thumping.

She'd been about to give up and sell it to a contractor, who had wanted to demolish it, when a young man in sunglasses and his fussy-looking partner had turned up asking to arrange a viewing. In the end, it was the young man in sunglasses who'd been the fussy one and his partner easy to win over. Prewett's cousin had accepted their offer.

The estate agent hadn't known whether to take the Windy Knoll plaque down or not.
She'd left it.

* * *

It's thirty minutes before Crowley manages to locate 10 Vine Street. He isn't pleased. The receptionist looks frightened, and he wonders vaguely if it's his sunglasses. He takes them off, and she looks even more frightened. She stammers into her phone.

"N—No, Mr. Andrews. I tried, Mr. Andrews. He's very impatient."

The receptionist makes an exasperated noise. Crowley raises his eyebrows.

"Apparently it's arrived," she says. "He said he'll bring it down himself if you can just wait a few minutes. Can you?"

"I have all day," replies Crowley, smiling until she squirms.

"The light must, um, hurt your eyes," babbles the receptionist, uncomfortably. "I've heard of conditions like that. I'm sorry."

Crowley replaces his sunglasses and, taking a seat, says nothing.

When Mr. Andrews finally appears, he seems unhappy about having cut his lunch break short. He is middle-aged, huffy, and will probably have a heart attack sometime in the next decade. Crowley tilts his head, regarding the small parcel in his hands.

"Allow me to apologize for the wait," he says, holding out the parcel. "Thank you, Mr. Crowley. Andrews Signage and Sales appreciates your business." Crowley takes the parcel, flips it over, and stands up, offering a hand to Mr. Andrews.

"You're welcome," he says, smiling in a completely different way. "Any time."

With that, he turns to leave. Behind him, the secretary is wishing silently, but loudly, that she had got his name and phone number instead of making a fool of herself.

Whistling softly, Crowley drives, already half a mile away.

* * *
These days, the cottage might say it feels much better.

Its roof doesn't leak anymore, and its chipping blue paint has been replaced with a sedate cream color. It has new shingles, and even double glazing. There is the start of a small, terrified garden staked off in the back yard.

Still, it would have said it felt naked somehow without a bloody plaque.

* * *

Aziraphale is doing the dishes when he hears a car pull up in the driveway. He knows who it is, of course. Mentally, he goes through a list of all the things he's going to say when Crowley walks in the door. You're late, and Lunch is almost ready, and, of course, What could be more important than spending a Saturday morning in?

"I had something to pick up," says Crowley, on his way in the door. "Business."

Aziraphale wanders up the hall to meet him, still holding the dishcloth.

"You missed a lovely walk," he says. "I found something."

Crowley hasn't closed the door yet, and he's wearing a curious expression.

"Oh?"

"Yes," says Aziraphale, and takes the piece of eight out of his pocket.

Crowley lights up and turns the coin over in his hands for a few seconds before palming it in such a way that it vanishes. Aziraphale knows exactly where it's gone. "I always wanted one of those. Thanks."

Aziraphale clears his throat. "This errand of yours—?"

"Yeah," says Crowley, grabbing Aziraphale's hand and leading him outside. "Terribly important." He points above their heads, and Aziraphale looks up. "I'm here," he says, anxiously biting his lip. "Isn't that what matters?"

Aziraphale peruses the plaque, then glances at Crowley, and back at the plaque again.

"Hm," he says, nodding, and sets the dishcloth on the porch railing. "Yes, I suppose."

Predictably, Crowley looks crestfallen. "Is that all you've got to—"

"No, my dear," says Aziraphale, and kisses him soft and slow there on the threshold.
All in all, if you had asked it, the cottage would have said it had seen worse days.

In spring, the garden bloomed into something miraculous. The double glazing got redone on a regular basis, and the paint never seemed to chip. Its new inhabitants took better care of it than any of its previous owners had, but then, none of its previous owners had exactly been inhabitants. Either they had spent too much time outside, or not gone out at all, and everybody knows that neither extreme will do.

The mattress in the bedroom—where the rattling and thumping has stopped—is new, and quite comfortable. There, on stormy nights, the new inhabitants lie still, and sometimes not so still, and listen to the thunder. On not so stormy nights, they read, and talk, and sometimes take their not-so-stillness outside. Sometimes they walk, and sometimes they don’t. Regardless of which it is, they are almost always touching.

And while the world was not a better place, the cottage, which was in it, was.

It would tell you that it feels exactly like a Home.
The Walls, the Wainscot, and the Mouse

Chapter Summary

A change of scenery often means more than you bargained for.

Chapter Notes

The title comes from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, specifically "Little Gidding."

Written for Atomais in the 2010 Good Omens Holiday Exchange.

The bookshop walls were crumbling.

Aziraphale had never particularly noticed this before, but then, he'd never particularly had the time or the inclination. He wasn't even sure he could chalk it up to time or inclination, in fact, given that he was, right now, three sheets to the wind and attempting to explain this to Crowley.

“But I like your walls,” protested Crowley. He wasn't drunk enough to hiss, not yet, which was mildly disappointing. There was something endearing about the tendency.

“What ever for?” Aziraphale asked, indignant, and half of what had been intended for his mouth went down the front of his shirt. He'd leave it for the dry cleaners to quarrel with.

“What ever for?” Aziraphale asked, indignant, and half of what had been intended for his mouth went down the front of his shirt. He'd leave it for the dry cleaners to quarrel with.

“They have, er,” Crowley said, wagging his index finger at the article he seemed to wish to name, but couldn't. “That thing. Mauve. Molded, has got flowers on. You know.”

“Wainscot,” sighed Aziraphale, refilling Crowley's glass. “And it's molding, I fear.”

The demon's yellow eyes widened a little, as if, in his present state, he'd forgot they were perfectly capable of doing so without lifting the bottle. He'd abandoned his sunglasses about an hour ago, as Aziraphale had kept complaining of the glare. Also, his drunken expressions were priceless.

“Replace it,” Crowley suggested in a rare moment of lucidity. “They've got a special on at B&Q.”

“Couldn't possibly,” Aziraphale muttered. “I'd know it was a sham. And this is a listed property.”

“You've got funny ideas about deteriorat—um. Interior decorating.”

“Rub it in, why don't you,” lamented Aziraphale, “since you're so bloody good at it.”

“No, 'm not,” Crowley insisted. “Besidesss, my flat's about as tired as your shop.”

Aziraphale frowned. “But I thought you liked my—”
“I do,” said Crowley, quickly, with a touch of guilt. “Better than mine, anyway.”

“Right.” Aziraphale tapped his chin; a bit more wine ought to do the trick. “Clearly, dear boy, we’re in a sorry state of affairs with regard to our respective residences.”

Crowley nodded morosely into his glass. “The carpet mockssss me.”

Whether it had to do with the hissing or the fact that Crowley looked utterly miserable, Aziraphale couldn’t rightly say. However, what he did know was that this was simply not on, and that something had to be done about it. Sooner, not later. Perhaps even immediately.

“We ought to relocate,” Aziraphale suggested.

“As in...leave London?” asked Crowley, as if such a thing were inconceivable.

“Well, yes. It would entail packing up—or, if you like, paying someone else to pack you up—and making a fresh start. Somewhere they don't know you.”

“Angel, this is London. Nobody knows me. Or you, for that matter.”

“I think you would be surprised,” said Aziraphale, carefully. He was dimly aware that this was territory that perhaps required more gravity than they were giving it, and so he sobered up just enough to realize that Crowley's eyes were the slightest bit manic, even afraid.

Crowley chewed on his lower lip, and then glanced up, nervously tapping his glass.

“You're saying we should both go?”

Aziraphale blinked. As far as he was concerned, that wasn't even negotiable.

“Of course. What did you think I was saying?”

“Well, there was you this and you that; I thought—”

“Yes, but in general terms. What I said first was that we ought to relocate.”

Crowley's color had gone back to normal, as if he'd seen the merit in sobering up himself.

“You do realize,” he said, slowly, “that we've made an awfully big decision whilst inebriated.”

“Nothing is set in stone,” replied Aziraphale, reasonably. “We might change our minds.”

“Might,” Crowley echoed, regarding his sunglasses. He put them on. “As far as location, what did you have in mind? I veto Yorkshire and the entirety of Wales.”

Aziraphale spluttered. “But Llangollen—”

“No.”

“Fine. What about Scotland?”

“Edinburgh is all right, and Inverness might be worth the mischief.”
“Those poor tourists,” Aziraphale groaned. “Crowley, really.”

He grinned, abashed, not snake-like in the least.

“It was worth a shot. Cornwall?”

Aziraphale thought about that for a few seconds, and then shook his head.

“I quite fancy Dublin. There's a lot of excellent property sitting empty.”

“Too volatile,” said Crowley. “I wouldn't invest.”

“Choosy,” Aziraphale muttered. “What's that leave us?”

“You can never go wrong with a seaside cottage, can you?”

“Perhaps Cornwall's a good choice after all.”

Crowley traced patterns on the table, as if trying to remember something.

“Bit too fashionable, now that you mention it.”

“But you mentioned it.”

“Never mind,” Crowley said, snapping his fingers. “South Downs. There are some pockets of not-too-trendy if you look hard enough, and you can see France on a clear day.”

“I thought you were all in favor of trendy,” said Aziraphale.

Crowley wrinkled his nose.

“Trendy things, yes, but have you got much experience with trendy people?”

Aziraphale smirked behind his hand.

“I'm faking it,” Crowley snapped. “There's a difference. Anyway, that's where I'd go.”

“Then let's,” said Aziraphale, converting the smirk effortlessly into a smile.

* * *

“Kitchen,” said the estate agent, stepping over the fine line between hardwood and tile as if superstitious. “As you can see, the window over the sink affords an absolutely lovely view.”

“Oh, that's perfect,” Aziraphale practically cooed. “My dear, won't you have a look?”
Crowley wrinkled his nose and stepped up beside him.

“Bit small,” he said. “The window, I mean.”

“The master bath off the bedroom's just stunning,” said the estate agent, as if she'd just been handed the key to clinching this sale. “If you'll follow me this way—”

“No,” Crowley said. “I'd rather not. Let's have a look outside, angel,” he added, because, really, it had been happening since time out of mind and, by now, it was patently ridiculous. Best just to play along and let people think what they wanted to think.

And try not to think about it.

They'd chosen a bad day for viewing. The sky was a muddled shade that Crowley suspected he ought to like, but didn't. The back patio became a sort of boardwalk and meandered toward where the grassy embankment dropped off. The sand was white and crisp in spite of the overcast pall that made sea and sky seem to fade together.

“It'll be no trouble, of course,” said Aziraphale, staring out over the choppy waves. “I rarely indulge in sleep. You may do with the bedroom as you please.”

Crowley shoved his hands deep in his pockets and stared at his feet. “We're really going to do this, aren't we.”

“Of course we are,” said Aziraphale, turning to beam at the estate agent, who had finally caught up with them. “Are there any structural issues of which we ought to be aware?”

“For nineteen-twenties construction, it's quite sound,” the young woman reassured him, running her expensive pen down her cheap clipboard. “It's been renovated several times by past owners. The boiler's in a bit of a state, but that can be replaced before you move in.”

“Please,” said Crowley, acidly. “Some of us appreciate hot water.”

“There, now,” Aziraphale said, patting his shoulder. “We'll be all sorted.”

“You'll take it, then?” asked the estate agent, entirely too hopeful for Crowley's liking.

“Of course we will,” Crowley snapped. “Make an offer, that is.”

The young woman blanched.

“What he means,” Aziraphale said, “is that he's sure that extra five thousand is merely a formality, and, that being done away with, we're more than happy to go through with it.”

“I'll contact the owner and get back to you,” said the estate agent, slightly crestfallen.

Two hours later, as they were sitting in a beach-front café sipping hot cocoa and enjoying still more views of the dismal weather, Crowley's mobile rang. He answered and said mmm-hmmm a lot in response to the young woman's excited wittering, mostly to savor the experience of Aziraphale sitting forward in his seat and biting his flawless nails. Crowley finally hung up and sighed.
“Well?” Aziraphale asked.

“We can drop by and fill out the paperwork today,” Crowley said.

As if the silly grin weren't bad enough, Aziraphale actually squeaked.

“Oh, Crowley,” he said, once he'd recovered himself. “Well done. You're a much better negotiator than I've given you credit for.”

“I'm assuming you can pay for your half straight up? Nothing dodgy on the books?”

“Of course not,” said Aziraphale, primly. “And of course I can.”

“Well, then, we'd best get a move on,” Crowley replied, rising. He left a fiver on the table.

“The service wasn't what I'd call stellar,” Aziraphale said rather too loudly on the way out.

“It's not about the service,” Crowley said. “It's about forging connections.”

“Oh,” said Aziraphale. “Oh, right. Since we're going to be locals and all that.”

“And all that,” Crowley echoed, sliding uneasily into the driver's seat. “Yeah.”

What bothered him wasn't the swiftness with which it had happened, or even the relative ease. It was how curiously much he wanted it. How easily he'd agreed.

* * *

The installation of Crowley's furniture was, to say the least, a nightmare.

“As much as you can't bear to part with it,” said Aziraphale, watching the movers struggle to find a proper angle for the unwieldy piece, “I'm afraid it's got to go.”

“Never,” Crowley said, folding his arms and squinting at the doorframe disapprovingly. “We've got history, that sofa and me. They'll squeeze it through.” Sure enough, they did. Just barely.

Crowley's book, cassette, CD, LP, and DVD collections came next, in a series of neatly labeled boxes. The potted plants, Crowley carried in himself, having preferred to transport them in the back seat of the Bentley instead of trusting them to the vagaries of a moving van.

Aziraphale's books came after that. They were all he'd brought.

“We'll need more shelves,” said Crowley, frowning, once the movers had cleared out.

“We'll need climate-control,” Aziraphale muttered. “Maybe that spare room near the end of the hall.”
“What? That's my office.”

“But where will I put mine?”

“In the bedroom,” said Crowley, absently. “It's not as if you'll wake me.”

“Very funny,” Aziraphale said. “You'll wake up and natter at all hours.”

Crowley scowled at him and bent to open the nearest box. “What makes you think that?”

“You're a light sleeper.”

“How would you know? Wait, don't answer that.”

Aziraphale sighed and wandered into the sitting-room, inspecting the damages. Crowley's sofa was overlarge, but it didn't make moving about impossible. A few of his plants had already found a home on the coffee table, and he'd placed the remainder on the dusty windowsills. Crowley was neither a skilled interior decorator, nor a logical one.

“Hey, would you look at this! It's that espresso machine you bought me two Christmases ago.”

“Put it in the kitchen,” said Aziraphale. “I'll fight with the instruction manual later.”

Crowley hummed contently as he sauntered past with the box under one arm.

Aside from the master bath, one of the bedroom's more redeeming features was, in fact, the presence of built-in shelves. They lined half of the same wall as the spacious closet, and there were more in the spare room he'd convert into his office. He'd worry about climate-control later.

Unlike the rest of the cottage, the bedroom had carpeting. It looked clean and plush, recently replaced. Aziraphale made sure no one was watching, sat down on the no-longer-bare mattress (easy enough to miracle Crowley's bedclothes out of their box and tailor them to fit), and removed his shoes and socks. He stood up again, wriggling his toes.

Just then, something tiny with soft paws and silky fur scuttled across his right foot.

Aziraphale shrieked. “Crowley! There's a—”


“...mouse,” Aziraphale managed, his cheeks heating.

Crowley relaxed. “Oh,” he said. “Well, that's all right. They rarely hurt anybody, mice.”

“I shall have to add traps to the grocery list,” said Aziraphale, determined.

“You bloody well won't,” Crowley said.

Aziraphale blinked at him. “I beg your pardon?”
“It’s bad enough, you killing hapless doves. I won’t have you adding mice to the bloodbath.”

“Very well,” Aziraphale sighed, and hoped for Crowley's sake the mouse wouldn't cross his path again. He had a dislike of the creatures; they tended to chew on vellum.

“Swear,” Crowley said, holding out his hand.

“I said, very well,” repeated Aziraphale, irritated, and shook it.

“Now,” Crowley said. “Come and give me a hand with that infernal machine, won't you?”

* * *

They’d scarcely been settled in for a week when the first curious neighbor turned up.

“Hallo?” Crowley asked, cracking the door only just enough to see the woman's kindly, wrinkled face: a swath of greying brown hair and one crow-footed hazel eye.

“So sorry to trouble you,” she said, and her accent was three times as posh as Aziraphale's, if that was even possible. “My Harold heard that the Prewett woman's cousin finally managed to find a buyer. I thought I'd pop by to see how you were settling in, Mr.—?”

“Crowley,” said Crowley, opening the door the rest of the way.

Difficult to feel threatened, what when the woman was standing there holding what looked like a home-made bakewell tart.

“Mr. Crowley, so nice to meet you. May I come in?”

“Er,” said Crowley, stepping back. “Yes. And you are?”

“Oh, dreadfully sorry,” said the woman, offering him her hand. “Phillippa Morrison. Please, call me Pippa. All my friends do.”

“Pippa,” Crowley repeated, starting as the tart was thrust into his hands. “Thanks.” He clipped the word to the roof of his mouth, hard, holding the tip of his tongue immobile.

Pippa breezed past him and into the dining room, smiling benevolently at her surroundings. “I must say, the cousin did a good job on renovations. This place was dreadful—no insult to Jean, rest her soul. All those cats running about. And the fishbowls everywhere.”

“Cats?” Crowley echoed. He couldn't help but think of the mouse. Good on it. Real survivor.

“She kept after them,” Pippa reassured him. “Very tidy, our Ms. Prewett. My, aren't you high-tech,” she said, admiring the espresso machine. “It looks new.”
"One owner from," was all Crowley could think to say.

"You've been too terrified to use it," said Pippa, knowingly. "You'll have it figured out in no time."

"I've got it figured out already," said Aziraphale, raising his voice from back the hall. He'd been holed up in the bedroom all day, unpacking and cataloguing his books. "It made a lovely cappuccino this morning. You missed it, my dear. You and your beauty sleep."

Pippa raised her eyebrows at Crowley, pursing her lips in a not displeased fashion. "I didn't know you had company," she said.

"He's not company," said Crowley, flatly. "He lives here."

"My mistake," she said, winking. "Would you mind introducing us?"

"Not at all," said Aziraphale, emerging into the kitchen entirely too quickly for Crowley's liking. "Pippa, what a pleasure. The tart will prove most welcome. We've next to nothing in the house. Would you like a cappuccino? Some nice cocoa? Or would a cup of tea do the trick?"

Crowley busied himself fetching down three mugs. Whatever conversation was imminent, he wanted no part of it. Not because he objected, but because he didn't trust himself.

"We decided it was time for a change of scenery," Aziraphale was saying to Pippa, already seated at the table across from their nosy visitor, who was busy slicing the tart. "Crowley, fetch a few plates, too, there's a good chap. What was I saying? Oh. Scenery. We felt it was time for a change."

Pippa was nodding enthusiastically. "I know exactly what you mean. That's what brought Harold and me out here twelve years ago. He'd finally taken retirement." Crowley tapped the countertop, forcing the water in the kettle to an early boil.

"After a while," said Aziraphale, in a low voice, "the pace grows dreadfully exhausting."

"You poor darlings," said Pippa, thanking Crowley with a nod as he put a steaming mug in front of her. "Well, maybe not you," she said to him. "You're young yet. Brave of you to give up a good city job with lots of prospects. But that's love, isn't it?"

Crowley was tempted to drop Aziraphale's mug in his lap, but didn't. Instead, he set it down in front of the angel, hard, letting a bit slop over and onto the table. Aziraphale gritted his teeth.

"Absolutely," Crowley said, sliding into the chair next to her, putting on a disarming smile. "But I've not given anything up; don't be fooled. I work from home."

"Lucky boy!" said Pippa. Crowley was almost shocked she didn't lean over and pinch his cheek.

For the next hour, Crowley sipped his tea and picked at a slice of tart while Aziraphale and Pippa chattered about everything from the foul weather to the mouse in the bedroom.

"Looks as if the cats missed one," said Pippa, chuckling.

"Glad of it," Crowley muttered into his mug.

"He's something of an animal lover," said Aziraphale, with an air of long-suffering affection.
“You don't usually see it in corporate types,” Pippa remarked. “What a catch!”

Aziraphale beamed, and Crowley wanted to smash something.

“Well, I’d best be off,” Pippa said, hastily finishing her tea. “Harold's expecting his supper soon. It's been lovely meeting both of you. I expect we'll run into each other quite often.”

“In a village this size, that's the logical conclusion,” said Crowley, deadpan.

Pippa paused and tilted her head at him, as if she had only just noticed something. “Light sensitivity,” she said. “My niece has got that. They make shades these days that look like normal glasses, you know. They're more compact and let people see your eyes.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Crowley said. A crack was forming at the juncture of the mug’s handle; he could feel it. How she'd failed to notice his white-knuckled grip, he'd never guess.

While Aziraphale saw a still-chattering Pippa to the door, Crowley lingered at the table, pushing the last few crumbs of tart around on his plate. Why couldn't people just mind their own business? Furthermore, why couldn't people just let him figure out what his business was?

Aziraphale finally returned, yawning. “What a lovely woman.”

“If you like them loose-lipped,” Crowley snapped.

“You can be positively dreadful sometimes,” said Aziraphale, giving him a look that he hadn't seen in a good decade or two and that was, unfortunately, genuine. “No manners.”

“At least I've enough sense not to go around knocking on strangers' doors,” Crowley seethed.

“What was it you were saying about forging connections?” asked Aziraphale, wearily.

Scowling, Crowley got up and left the room with his damaged mug in hand. “Maybe I was wrong,” he said, but didn't bother to look back.

* * *

Aziraphale had enough sense to know they had a problem on their hands. But what it was, exactly, he couldn't say, no more than he could've said whether he'd really lacked time or inclination as regarded his erstwhile bookshop's moldy molding.

To a point: whatever it was, it was making Crowley miserable. Over the next few weeks, Aziraphale organized as many distractions as he could possibly think of: trips to the local farmers' market (every second Saturday of the month), a survey of the local shops, a new restaurant for dinner every few evenings. They ran out of restaurants inside a fortnight.
Which was how they ended up back in the beach-front café sipping cocoa and staring at the rain.

“Bad time of year for a move, winter,” said Crowley, darkly.

“It'll be Christmas soon,” Aziraphale realized aloud. “I haven't sorted your gift.”

“As long as it's not another espresso machine, you'll be fine.”

“Have you given any thought to what you want? We're beyond surprises, I should think.”

Crowley shrugged. “We could lay in a garden come spring.”

“I'm not buying you seed packets,” said Aziraphale. “You start traumatizing them too young.”


“You haven't got enough jumpers. You've been chilled, all this damp sea air.”

“I don't do jumpers.”

“You might consider starting.”

Mandy, the girl from the counter, had wandered over and was standing beside their table, one hand frozen on Aziraphale's empty mug. She ducked her head and bit her lip. “Am I interrupting?”

“No, dear girl,” said Aziraphale. “I'll have another, thank you.”

Mandy glanced at Crowley, her wide blue eyes by now accustomed to their own reflection in his sunglasses.

Aziraphale couldn't help but notice that she pitied him. It was upsetting.

“I'm finished,” said Crowley, fishing in his coat pocket. He handed her what sounded like two quid.

“Thanks, sir,” she said, as she always did, but now there was more affection in her pronunciation of sir than Aziraphale found proper. He wondered if Crowley had noticed.

“She likes you,” said Aziraphale, once she was gone. “Rather more than she ought.”

Crowley actually lowered his glasses a fraction and stared Aziraphale in the eyes. “What she ought or ought not to do is her own business,” he said. “Leave her to it.”

Aziraphale's stomach twisted as Crowley pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

“She ought not to get her hopes up, is all I'm saying,” said Aziraphale.

Crowley snorted, not quite a laugh. “And why's that?”

“Never goes well,” said Aziraphale. “Our sort and humans.”

“Not that you'd know this from personal experience,” retorted Crowley.
“Nor would you,” Aziraphale replied, biting back the urge to attempt sarcasm.

“I don’t know,” Crowley said. “It might be worth a shot.”

“What?”

“Giving it a try. While we're on this whole change-of-scenery kick, you understand.”

“Crowley, she's sixteen. And you're—well, you're—”

Crowley stiffened, sitting back in his chair. “I'm what?”

Aziraphale swallowed. Suddenly, Crowley's discontent made perfect sense. “Not interested,” he said.


“Nothing favorable,” Aziraphale said, his stomach unclenching. “She's hardly your type.”

Crowley looked almost like he wanted to laugh, but like it might hurt if he did. “What constitutes my type, do you suppose?”


“At least she's kind,” Crowley said.

That gave Aziraphale pause, but it was true, really. Crowley couldn't abide cruelty.

“I'm sorry,” Aziraphale murmured. “This conversation has been anything but.”

“You still haven't answered my question,” Crowley reminded him, smiling sadly.

And it was hard, then, unbelievably so, to gather the courage to say what they both knew.

“It's a terrible idea,” said Aziraphale. “I'll hurt you. I always do.”

“But I feel safe,” Crowley pointed out. “I felt safe enough to follow you here.”

“You felt safe enough to bring us here,” Aziraphale corrected him. “There's a difference.”

Crowley's lips twitched, and this time, his smile was more hopeful than sad. “Call it a lark,” he said. “Everyone thinks we're married as it is.”

“True,” said Aziraphale. “I've been content to let them think so. Easier to fit in that way.”

“Exactly,” Crowley said. “Now, all we've got to do is...” He trailed off and ended up staring at his hands against the battered tabletop.

“Try,” said Aziraphale, reaching across to cover them with his own.
Human relationships, Crowley reasoned, generally started off small. Hand-holding, quick kisses. That sort of thing. Unless one or more of the parties involved happened to be some sort of sex maniac; in which case, all bets were off and it was straight into the sack. He severely doubted that either he or Aziraphale was prone to nymphomania.

They didn't discuss it again for the remainder of the afternoon, although Aziraphale went out of his way to do a handful of inconsequential things he would rarely have done otherwise, such as pay the bill and hold the door for Crowley on their way out. When they got home, he hung both of their coats and put the kettle on. He even suggested they watch telly for a while, and sat a bit closer than normal. It was, Crowley decided, an acceptable start—and curiously comforting, too.

In fact, they might have gone on like this indefinitely, even quite happily, if not for what happened on the second Saturday in December, which was, in lieu of the farmers' market, an indoor craft fair at the town hall where one was supposed to do one's holiday shopping. While Crowley was perusing some antique watch-chains at a stall otherwise filled with bizarre thrift-shop odds and ends, he overheard Aziraphale and Pippa engaged in conversation with a stranger. He'd seen this gentleman once before, as it happened, walking a gratuitously small dog.

“...used to run a bookshop in London,” Pippa was saying. “His collection's magnificent.”

“Extraordinary,” said the gentleman. Posh, too—even posher than Pippa. Outrageous.

“I wouldn't say that,” said Aziraphale, too modestly, and even somewhat over-protectively. “It's a handful of dusty liturgical texts, hardly worth anyone's while.” The gentleman chuckled: a deep, warm bass that made Crowley's skin crawl.

“You don't strike me as a collector of the insignificant, Mr. Fell.”

“Don't let him fool you,” Pippa said. “I Googled the titles. They're valuable.”

Crowley felt Aziraphale's flinch as keenly as if he'd been standing right next to him, rather than five feet away. He stood up straight and put his hands in his pockets, head tilted. “I'd like a private viewing,” said the gentleman. “If I may be so bold. I've some volumes of my own, and perhaps some of them might interest you. A trade, if you like. Or—”

“Angel, you have got to see this,” Crowley said, insinuating himself between Aziraphale and Pippa, slipping both arms through the crook of Aziraphale's elbow, pulling him in as close as he dared. “One of those chains is a perfect match for your old watch. Fifteen-carat rose gold,” he added, letting his breath ghost over Aziraphale's earlobe. “Delicious.”

It might've remained purely a sham if Aziraphale hadn't actually shivered. “I, er,” he said, gratefully, one hand flying up to cradle Crowley's wrist. “Let's have a look.”
“Ta,” Crowley said, beaming smugly at the gentleman. *And your little dog too,* he thought.

Pippa thwacked him lightly across the backside with her clutch. “You’re a saucy one once you get past the shy stage, aren’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Crowley, and dragged Aziraphale over to the jewelry case. It was strangely thrilling, the fine tremors running through Aziraphale’s upper arm and the way he hadn’t let go of Crowley’s wrist and was suddenly so fiercely *possessive*—

“This is dull,” he said, resting his chin on Aziraphale’s shoulder. “Let’s go home.”

Aziraphale hadn’t been breathing for the better part of five minutes. “Ah, yes,” he said. “Let’s. Pippa, my best to Harold.”

“Naughty!” Pippa called after them, her grin positively wicked.

“She’ll be the death of us,” Crowley muttered, almost glad of the cold as they emerged into the dim early evening.

Aziraphale laughed, the sound startling and wondrous. “I hope not, my dear,” he said, and kissed Crowley.

If Crowley had been thinking clearly, his first notion might have been that this was a bit faster than he’d intended to proceed. On the other hand, Aziraphale’s mouth coaxed his own half-open almost effortlessly, and he fancied he could taste everything that the angel had ever tasted. Château d’Yquem 1784. Dates from Baghdad. *Fugu*, prepared with a fatal mistake, on that trip they’d taken to Japan. Pippa’s admittedly excellent bakewell tart. The pomegranates of Eden.

“Crowley,” Aziraphale murmured against his lips.

“Hmmm, what?” Crowley ducked his head, nosing into the angel’s collar, seeking out his pulse-point. *There.* He kissed it lightly, just to see what Aziraphale would do.

“We were going home,” said Aziraphale, with slight difficulty.

Crowley grinned and breathed him in, warm tobacco-cotton-wool. “You gave me a fright,” he said. “The venom turned you a bit blue. Did you know that?”

Aziraphale took a shaky breath. “Venom?”

“Tokyo, three years ago. Never mind. In hindsight, it was funny.”

“If you want sushi for dinner, you ought to just say so.”

“I don’t want anything for dinner,” said Crowley, leading Aziraphale resolutely by the hand. “I want to go home.”

The Bentley was exactly where they’d left it, clamped tires and all.

“Finally,” Aziraphale sighed, sliding into the passenger seat.

Crowley fumbled his key into the ignition and sped the whole way back.
On arriving home, neither one of them said a word, trailing into the cottage one after the other, as if it were just another evening upon which Crowley would ask where on earth the remote control had got off to, and then proceed to watch some truly awful telly whilst Aziraphale caught up on the Saturday papers and then made the plant-watering rounds, because that was his job now.

Aziraphale was aiming for normal. For careful. For safe.

It was in the midst of plant-watering that Crowley crept up on him, catching Aziraphale by the wrist as he aimed the mister at a stubbornly dormant orchid's exposed roots. Aziraphale paused and turned to look at him, questioning, and his breath fled for the second time that day.

No glasses, no glare. Just Crowley's unblinking yellow gaze, hesitant and hopeful.

“I couldn't let them settle down for the night without supper,” Aziraphale explained.

“They never sleep,” said Crowley, his eyes flitting suspiciously from plant to plant.

Aziraphale set down the mister and took Crowley's face in both hands, stilling him. “I won't have this if it will hurt you,” he said. “I simply won't.”

Crowley's breath left him in a rush, half hiss and half laugh. “If you'd had that bloke around, that would've hurt.”

“What if I had him around for purposes of robbing him blind?”

Crowley's lips twitched as Aziraphale's thumbs played at their corners. “Only if he honestly doesn't know the value of his books. Fools deserve what they get.”

“So we do,” Aziraphale murmured, and leaned to kiss Crowley for the second time.

They ended up in the bedroom, because Crowley had issues with the sofa, history be damned. Aziraphale supposed he could understand: popcorn down the cushions and leisurely afternoon naps were not quite the same thing as lovemaking. Crowley caught his eye just then, and what he saw there drew a flush across his fine, high cheekbones. Damn them, too; Aziraphale understood why Mandy wanted what she saw.

Well. She couldn't have him.

“Jumper,” Crowley said, fisting his hands in the wool. “Get rid of it. Now. It's putting me off.”

Aziraphale struggled out of it with Crowley's hindrance (not help, he was never any help, bless him) and then turned his attention to the buttons of Crowley's expensive shirt.

“I recognize this,” Aziraphale said, parting the linen slowly, tracing spectral lines with his fingertips
down Crowley's pale chest. He let his thumb linger over one nipple, thoughtfully circling. "From before. From the Beginning, from the very first time you...changed. Has it really been so long?"

Crowley's breath returned to him, a brief, almost painful stutter deep in his chest. He struggled out of his shirt, disengaging Aziraphale's hand from its cautious explorations. Aziraphale took the opportunity to wish his own shirt away, hardly of a mind to let Crowley attempt buttons in a state of such agitation. He'd get worse, or have second thoughts. He watched Crowley drop his shirt on the floor with a look of abject frustration, and then pulled him close before he had the chance to work himself into a snit.

Crowley shivered and melted against him, both arms folding tightly about Aziraphale's neck. His breath came fast and shallow against Aziraphale's jaw, and when Aziraphale shifted his weight on the mattress just so, Crowley settled in his lap with a low, helpless moan. There, oh. There.

“Thank you,” said Aziraphale, softly, in his ear, working a hand in between them.

Crowley's trousers were uncomplicated enough to tease open, at least. Crowley's erection had already managed to slip free of his shorts, damp and hard in Aziraphale's palm. Aziraphale stroked him once, gently, kissing Crowley's groan right back into his mouth. He kept stroking, intoxicated and (he was startled to discover) more than a little smitten.

“For...for what?” Crowley panted, pushing forward into Aziraphale's hand.

Aziraphale kissed him, braced his free arm about Crowley's waist, coaxing him as his thrusts grew taut and erratic. Not long now, not long at all, and, oh, they were still half-dressed and it was wonderful just to hold him like this, just to have him. Unexpected, how it made Aziraphale's heart clench just to tell him so. Crowley came clinging and shuddering, not at all quiet, for what seemed like a very long time.

Aziraphale squeezed his eyes shut, swallowing amazed laughter, holding him closer still, calming him. Safe.

* * *

On waking, Crowley was certain of two things: one, that he was naked, and two, that he really hadn't dreamed the previous evening. The fact that he was draped over a warm, motionless Aziraphale was sufficient confirmation. Against all odds, the angel was asleep. And also naked. He wasn't so sure about the not-nymphomaniacs thing anymore. He nuzzled Aziraphale's ear and pressed down with one knee, parting Aziraphale's thighs.

“Get up. I want a cappuccino.”

“Mmm,” Aziraphale murmured, and then yawned. “No.”

Crowley wriggled impatiently, and all that got him was a fierce kiss. “Fine,” he sighed, settling into an easy rhythm as Aziraphale's legs came up to wrap around his hips. Fascinating, how effectively
sex could shut down all rational thought. It explained a lot about humans, and a lot about why Crowley liked humans. They lived in the moment.

“I thought,” Aziraphale gasped, both hands lost in Crowley's disarrayed hair, “you wanted—”

“Yes,” Crowley managed, remembering this from last night, the part where Aziraphale had tensed and tightened his fingers in Crowley's hair before hauling him bodily back up for a kiss (and for the rest of it, oh God). It was something of a pity Crowley couldn't taste him this time, he thought, driving down harder. “But I want you first, see?”

Aziraphale groaned and went still under him, and then their bellies were warm and slick and yesss. Crowley muffled his shout in the pillow, dimly aware he'd all but brought the house down the night before. It was a good job their nearest neighbor lived a mile off. With his luck, Pippa'd have heard him anyway. And if she'd not heard, she'd certainly know.

The angel curled and uncurled his toes against Crowley's calf. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Cappuccino,” Crowley lied.

A leisurely shower and a frantic mouse-chase later (they'd found him lurking behind the toilet, and Crowley had given him enough of a head-start to vanish out the door), Crowley got his coffee. It was nice, he supposed, if you liked that sort of thing, but there was too much foam, and Aziraphale had overdone it with the wonky cinnamon heart.

At lunchtime, they realized there wasn't any food left in the house. Aziraphale bribed Crowley into making a run to the nearest Tesco Express with a snog on the sofa. Baby steps, Crowley thought. The cushions didn't seem offended, although they'd left some spectacular wrinkles in the leather.

As it happened, Pippa found him in the produce section.

“Hi,” Crowley said. He clung to a bag of carrots, terrified.

“Don't you look well rested,” she said, smiling.

Crowley wondered if he was even speaking to the same brazen, handbag-wielding harpy as the day before. “I suppose,” he said. “But right now, I'm hungry.”

“Not to worry,” Pippa replied, taking the carrots out of Crowley's hands. “I'm about to put together a nice Sunday roast. Won't the two of you join us?” Crowley felt something like relief blossom in his chest. And, for the first time, he smiled right back at her.

Aziraphale would be cross at the unexpected change of plans, of course, but—

“Of course,” he said, brightly. “I'll bring the espresso machine.”

* * *
For Christmas Eve morning, Aziraphale thought, it's dreadfully quiet.

From his vantage point at the kitchen window, he could see the front walk, the narrow road, and the sweep of crab-grass beyond. There was a fine shimmer of frost all over everything—even the sand, which glittered like diamond-dust in the first pale light of dawn.

Sleeping was pleasant, but Aziraphale fell out of it from time to time, unable to find his way back in spite of Crowley snuggled up to him. The truth was, he sometimes missed the bustle of London. Two months in this tiny village, almost three, and what he found he missed the most were the fairy lights and the holiday rush. When he'd gotten up, through the back window, he'd glimpsed white sails on the horizon, or something that looked an awful lot like sails. He reflected on what else he'd seen: a familiar figure, plodding along in the surf, walking a ridiculously small dog.

Aziraphale plucked a mug off the dish-rack and miracled himself a cup of tea. No sense in using the kettle, not at this hour; he'd wake Crowley. And he did very much want Crowley at his best, what with guests coming later—Pippa, Harold, and their grown only child, Nicola. They'd paid the café a visit the day before and left a holiday card with forty quid in it for Mandy.

The mouse perched on the windowsill, a stale bakewell crumb clutched in its tiny paws.

“Shoo,” whispered Aziraphale, mortified. “It's not proper, you know.”

The creature just went on nibbling the crumb, its black eyes intent on Aziraphale.

“Mice live in fields,” said Aziraphale. “Thickets. Places like that.” The mouse twitched its whiskers and finished off the morsel, padding along until it found an easy point from which to leap down onto the counter and scurry over the far edge.

“It's a seaside mouse,” said Crowley, yawning as he wandered into the kitchen. “Hasn't got any thickets. Or fields. Nothing but sand and salt water as far as the eye can see.”

“My manuscripts,” said Aziraphale, worriedly. “Once we've run out of crumbs—”

“We'll get more crumbs,” Crowley said, stepping up behind him. “Think of it as similar to feeding the ducks.” His arms snaked tentatively around Aziraphale's waist. The gesture was somehow far more intimate than anything they'd managed in exactly a fortnight of being lovers.

But haven't we always been? Aziraphale wondered.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Crowley whispered, resting his chin on Aziraphale's shoulder.

“The wainscot has got to go,” said Aziraphale, and turned his head for a kiss.
Outtake #1

Chapter Notes

This is a missing scene from "The Walls, the Wainscot, and the Mouse"; it didn't quite feel like it fit the story in its role as a GOHE gift. For best results, read the previous chapter up through the section ending "Aziraphale squeezed his eyes shut, swallowing a burst of amazed laughter, holding him closer still, calming him," etc., and then read this piece, and then onward as normal.

It took forever for the shaking to stop, it seemed, like Crowley's body couldn't bear to let go of such stunning new information: Right, so, that annoying thing you have to do every once in a while to get an unbidden hard-on to go away? SO MUCH BETTER WHEN SOMEBODY YOU WANT MORE THAN BREATHING IS DOING IT FOR YOU. To you? With you? Whatever. Okay, in summary: solitary orgasms are messy and not always much fun, but orgasms and kissing and touching Aziraphale? Spot on.

"Oh," said Aziraphale, finally, between breath-hitching kisses, easing him down. He rubbed Crowley's back and picked fretfully at his trousers. They melted to nothing beneath the angel's careful fingertips, and, with a sigh, his own disappeared so that there was nothing left between them, no more hope of hiding. "Just look at you."

"At myself? Bit awkward," Crowley panted against Aziraphale's earlobe. "Also a bit weird." He shivered, oversensitive by now, and more than a bit overwhelmed at the sensation of Aziraphale's prick crushed up against his belly. He bit curiously at the patch of skin beneath Aziraphale's ear, and the angel's hands clenched on his thighs.

"You don't give yourself enough credit, dear boy," said Aziraphale, his voice patient and fond in spite of how much discomfort he was probably in. "Not nearly enough."

It was the wonder of what he'd become with the Fall, Crowley supposed, a curse millennia-old turned blessing: instinctive shock at the simple pleasure of loving. "You taste good," murmured Crowley, at a loss, and licked the spot he'd just bit.

Aziraphale turned his head and tilted Crowley's chin up for a questioning kiss. "My dear, mmm, I want..."

Crowley wanted to ask What? in response, but Aziraphale's hand was on him just like earlier, was on both of them, so attentively insistent, and, oh, for the sake of anything holy, he was turned on again. Aziraphale made a disappointed sound when Crowley disengaged himself awkwardly from the kiss and shifted back to sit on the duvet.

The angel's body was as pale as Crowley's own, flushed with inconvenient splotches and bite-marks where Crowley had left them in a frenzy up and down Aziraphale's neck and shoulder. Unthinking, Crowley reached out and touched the marks, both the ones he'd left and that rosy blush beneath the fair, sparse hair covering Aziraphale's chest. He crawled forward, stretched flat on the duvet, and curled an arm around Aziraphale's waist.
Crowley buried his face in the angel's soft belly, breathing his own scent mingled with Aziraphale's arousal. He let his tongue dart out; Aziraphale shuddered. Bloody miracle, this, he thought. Nothing less.

"If this is what you want," he said as clearly as he could manage, given that he was licking his way toward Aziraphale's hip bone, which was rather in the wrong direction, "now would be a good time to tell me, or I'll just keep going till I've tasted everything else. Save the best for last, if you know what I mean. Take the scenic route."

Aziraphale sagged back on his elbows, stretching his legs out on either side so that Crowley could settle in closer between them. He watched with hungry fascination as Crowley offered him an assenting glance that he hoped wasn't shy and abandoned the course he'd set himself on in favor of nuzzling what he'd so far purposefully neglected. The angel's trembling hands tangled roughly in Crowley's hair.

"Easy," Crowley said, not nearly as calm as he sounded, and took hold of Aziraphale's wrist while he carefully licked at the crease of Aziraphale's thigh. After a few seconds, Aziraphale's grasp let up slightly, so Crowley let go of his wrist, took hold of his erection, and guided the sensitive head to his scarcely parted lips. Aha. Even if he never heard Aziraphale make that sound again, this once would have been worth it.

Crowley settled in for however long it was going to take and sucked hard. Once again, there was far too much information to process. Aziraphale still tasted good, a sentiment he couldn't quite quantify, only here, it was different, darker and stranger and slightly surprising. Crowley hated that he couldn't see the angel's expression, but he could hear everything that he needed to hear, and then some. He'd have a crick in his neck by the end of it, letting Aziraphale move his hips like that, but whatever the angel needed for this to work, whatever Crowley could possibly do...

"Stop," Aziraphale was gasping, voice low and wrecked. "Crowley, stop, it's too—"

"It's the point," said Crowley, instantly regretting the fact that he'd pulled off in order to speak, because now Aziraphale was hauling him up by the shoulders with fearsome strength and it was all Crowley could do not to fold over, fall on him, clamp down with limbs and teeth and suddenly unfurled, unsteady wings and never let go. Which was more or less what happened.

Crowley snaked his arms around Aziraphale's neck and tried to get said urgent point across with lots of kissing, which hadn't really stopped, but it was no use. He could only make helpless whimpering sounds to which Aziraphale responded with breathy half-sobs and oh God, oh Heaven and Earth and everything, he never wanted to be anywhere else ever again but in this bed. Or in the very least wanted the guarantee of a bed, no matter where he happened to be, and Aziraphale always in it with him.

When it all finally became too much again and their bodies demanded completion, Aziraphale rolled Crowley onto his back, wings badly askew even as his own tore free, and drew Crowley's knees up snug against his ribs and then pressed both hands against the small of Crowley's back, rocking them together in tight little thrusts that made Crowley squeeze his eyes shut and stifle an embarrassingly desperate wail.

Was discorporation by sensory overload possible?
Look what you've done, Crowley thought feverishly, his second climax already building, too fast and too fierce and too soon. Angel, just look what you've done. I'm ruined for anything else: good food, better wine, a sunny afternoon with ducks, forget it. Crowley twisted under him and dug his fingers in just beneath where Aziraphale's wings joined with his back, moaning in response to Aziraphale's coaxing tongue.

"No one can hear you, not here," Aziraphale whispered, pressing their damp foreheads together, waves and wisps of hair plastered every which way. "No one but me, and I should very much like...Crowley, look at me, oh, if you'd just look at me..."

Crowley's groans turned to brief, hysterical laughter. "So I've got to keep my eyes on you, never mind that all I can see is feathers—"

"Oh—oh—Crowley, don't move, oh my dear stay right where you are—"

Crowley bit his lip and touched Aziraphale's cheek with hazy disbelief. This was really happening. He wanted to speak those same words just as much, just as badly.

"Let go," he panted, bracing himself, eyes squeezed shut as his resolve shattered. "That's what I did, anyway, and oh fuck I can't I don't even oh please Aziraphale!"

They were covered in each other: come and stray feathers, sweat and startled tears.

Aziraphale collected himself and rolled gently to one side, tugging Crowley along. Everything was dry and clean again, but the tremors hadn't stopped, and Crowley noticed with quiet astonishment that Aziraphale's pulse-point was triphammering away just beneath his overworked jaw. It wasn't supposed to do that, they weren't...

"I'll say it before I can't," he whispered. "Don't leave me here, angel. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Don't get tired of this wretched, rainy stretch of shore like you got tired of Herculaneum and Beirut and Melbourne and Caracas and London—"

"Never tired of London," Aziraphale cut in, snuggling him senseless. "Never tired of you."

"Oh," Crowley replied, curling in tighter against him. "Then that's all right."

"Are you?" Aziraphale asked at length, drowsily stroking Crowley's side.

Crowley nodded and closed his eyes, content enough to follow his own advice.
Outtake #2

Chapter Notes

This is another missing scene, set just post-"The Walls, the Wainscot, and the Mouse."

Crowley yawned, rubbed his eyes, and blinked until the fine cracks in the ceiling plaster vanished. *How’d I miss those?* he wondered.

Mystifyingly, Crowley's head hurt. About the time he remembered it had something to do with having drunk lots of whisky at Pippa's last night because Aziraphale had insisted on mixing up a proper seventeenth-century punch bowl, he'd decided that actually going through with a hangover did not have the same merits as actually going through with—*with*—

Aziraphale was dead to the world, one arm thrown across Crowley's chest.

*Happy bloody New Year,* he thought, turning his head sideways against the pillow.

In three weeks of sharing a bed and sweat and saliva and heaven knew what else (and, oh, yes, if Aziraphale was Heaven, then Heaven did know), this hadn't happened before. Crowley had rarely been the first one awake. Oddly fascinated, he stared. Aziraphale didn't sleep gracefully.

In fact, the angel seldom did *anything* gracefully (except remain motionless for hours on end, save for turning pages). Crowley didn't even know if Aziraphale had tried sleep prior to their first night together; even then, how could he have set about determining that even if he'd been awake to watch? He reached until his palm came into contact with Aziraphale's bare hip, stroked inward and up until soft belly and peaked nipples gave way to collarbone, throat, and cheek. He brushed fly-away strands of faintly peppered hair back from Aziraphale's forehead and wondered why open-mouthed snoring and a drool-spot on the pillowcase made his chest tighten.

Crowley closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe. He needed some air; he needed to *think.* Last night had been—


Crowley tensed, ready to rise just as he was, but quickly thought better of it.

Aziraphale so rarely got to know the pleasure of an uninterrupted lie-in; sure, he'd got the pleasure of eating down pat a long time ago and was doing just about as well as Crowley (if not better) when it came to the pleasure of... *pleasure.* His body was taking his line of musing very much to heart, so he disassembled his molecules with a thought, never mind paranoia with regard to changing back, and slithered to the floor.

The carpet tickled Crowley's belly as he nosed his way around the bed and glided into the hall. Wood, a hideous throw-rug that he hadn't been able to coax Aziraphale to part with, and then the cool rasp of kitchen tile. If the mouse was lurking anywhere about, he supposed he ran the risk of scaring it to death. Crowley flicked his forked tongue out in annoyance and shifted back to himself, barefoot and off-balance as the chilly air hit his exposed human skin. He clothed himself just as
quickly, including boots and a heavy wool coat.

Outside, where it was even colder, he'd hopefully get some decent fresh air.

Crowley liked the crunch of frost-bitten gravel beneath his soles; he surveyed the driveway and the Bentley covered in a fine sheen of ice, and blew a puff of appreciative breath in its direction. He spun on his heel and headed around the side of the cottage, keeping a brisk pace. The front walk had barren flower beds lining either side, so he imagined hellebore, crocus, and lily-of-the-valley. Maybe just loads of hellebore: they came in enough solemn colors, and they knew how to cower nicely.

Now, *there's something*, Crowley thought, pausing in front of the sliding glass door that served as the back entrance. He'd known the garden shed existed, of course, in a kind of theoretical, I'll-get-to-it-when-I-get-to-it kind of way. He crossed the small yard and picked his way through the remnants of weeds, broken-down stalks, and frozen earth, wondering what, exactly, this Prewett woman had planted and then neglected such that it had died so spectacularly. Catnip, Crowley reckoned.

"Lively, now," he muttered, kicking a patch of sorry-looking nettles.

Inside the dusty, cobweb-festooned shed, Crowley found an assortment of tools that suggested a strange conglomeration of hobbies on the part of all previous owners combined. The rake, shovel, and spades all looked relatively new, or at least in fairly good nick; Crowley could guess easily enough that those had belonged to Prewett. There was a tin watering-can and a stack of empty plastic flower pots, plus a couple of terracotta window boxes. He found a rusty scythe lurking inexplicably in one of the far corners.

*Maybe those hippies had pretensions of full-scale farming,* Crowley mused.

Aziraphale would convince him to plant herbs in the window boxes, he just knew it.

Wielding one of the spades, Crowley stepped back out of the shed. He crouched next to the exterior wall that faced the cottage, shielded from the wind and out of view from anyone who might come strolling along the shore. The ground was unyielding at first, resistant to Crowley's prodding with the point of the spade. He hacked loose a clod of root-laced soil and crumbled it between his fingers, sniffing warily. Clay and chalk traces with a hint of salt. He set down the spade and leaned against the shed's rough planking, considering his options. Ornamental plants, certainly: he'd be the envy of the neighborhood come Hell or high water (although he hoped for neither).

Crowley could plant vegetables, he supposed. Foodstuffs he could keep in line with the threat of inevitable slaughter. He might even take up cooking again, given Aziraphale's newly expanded repertoire of showing appreciation. Crowley couldn't believe they'd got so drunk in Pippa's presence, much less her husband's. He also couldn't believe he'd managed to drive them home at one-thirty in said state without wrapping the Bentley around a telephone pole, but that was ineffability for you.

They'd stumbled inside laughing, and Aziraphale had yanked him in by the lapels no sooner than they'd got the door shut. *My dear, he'd slurred. My dear Crowley—*

Crowley had just kissed him, because whatever it was that alcohol was supposed to make more difficult for humans, it was making the aforementioned whatever all the easier for *them*. They'd shed clothes haphazardly the whole way to the bedroom, just like in those horrible American rom coms that ended up on late-night telly. And then they'd been on the bed, all flushed skin and fierce kisses, and *then*—

(Hissing, Crowley pressed the heel of his palm to the front of his trousers, using his free hand to
steady himself against the shed. He'd come out into the cold to clear his thoughts, and instead he was
replaying the memory of something he ought to've done much less recklessly and much more sober,
but Aziraphale had insisted.)

—and then, simply put, he'd fucked Aziraphale, never mind that neither one of them had bothered to
work out the logistics this way around, or how badly his hands had shaken on the bottle of lubricant
Aziraphale had stashed in the nightstand, or the fact that he hadn't lasted two minutes in the tight heat
of Aziraphale's body and somehow even that pathetic brevity had been enough to make the angel
come shouting.

Crowley shakily got to his feet, fumbling at the belt of his coat. Not so easy to get at his trousers now
that he wasn't crouching, and of course he'd have been the completist even in summoning clothes out
of the ether. Ten o'clock in the morning and the rest of England was still passed out in a drunken
stupor, Aziraphale included, and he couldn't even bring himself to impose upon the angel's rare
sleeping-in stint for the sake of getting off. Oddly, there was something thrilling about being where
he was.

The rough wood splintered under Crowley's fingernails as he leaned harder into the shed, the wool
covering his forearm and elbow catching in even finer snarls as he stroked himself. His coat hanging
open would hide a multitude of sins, or at least the one he'd rucked up his shirt and unzipped his
trousers to commit. His breath escaped him in ragged puffs, and he drove harder into his hand,
wondering how he'd only grudgingly accepted this activity before and why now—

Except it was too late for him to retroactively register the soft crunch of footfalls across the ruin of a
garden behind him, too late for him to flinch from the steadying arm that slid around his middle,
although he wouldn't have anyway because he knew whose it was, too late to prevent Aziraphale's
hand from gently tugging him off-task and taking his oversensitized flesh in a sure, tight grip.
Crowley gasped and came, his knees buckling, but Aziraphale held him upright with a breathy kiss
tucked into the prickly, sweat-damp collar of Crowley's coat.

"You'll want to turn it under the soil, of course," Aziraphale said. "Very Roman of you."

"You mean very accidental," Crowley replied, twisting around greedily for a kiss. He used the
distraction to clean and put his clothing back together, at which point it was easy enough to turn his
body and knock Aziraphale back against the shed.

"I didn't think," Aziraphale began, apparently thinking better of whatever he'd been about to say and
licking his lips as he watched Crowley sink to his knees and undo the lowest few buttons on
Aziraphale's camelhair coat. "Didn't think...you'd like..."

"Out here?" Crowley asked, nuzzling his way into Aziraphale's trousers, which he'd already got
open. He smelled sleep and sweat on the angel's skin, poked in careful fingers to coax the head of
Aziraphale's erection free. "It's New Year's morning. There's a shed at your back and a cottage to
mine. You do the maths."

"Noted," breathed Aziraphale, and his perfect nails scraped at the wood.

"You're going to let me finish this," Crowley said, licking away the salt-dampness that had already
painted a smear across his cheek when Aziraphale hadn't been able to keep from jerking his hips.
"You haven't yet. Guilty of thwarting all around."

"Crowley, I don't—oh. Don't. Don't—stop."
Never, Crowley would have said, but it was more of a hum as he sucked and angled his head. It was true that a jaw-hinge and throat like his had advantages, not to mention the lack of a gag reflex as long as he was on his guard. He wrapped one arm around Aziraphale's waist and twined his fingers with the angel's at his shoulder.

“Oh, my love,” Aziraphale gritted out, and whether it was that or the bitter heat that hit the back of his tongue that made him choke and pull off, he couldn't have said.

Crowley felt faintly dizzy, but he had enough presence of mind to spit approximately where his own seed had already frozen dark and indeterminate on the ground. He maintained his hold on Aziraphale's hand as the angel sank down to sit beside him, boneless, back against the shed. They were both shaking; it definitely wasn't from the cold.

“Forgive me,” Aziraphale wheezed, running his fingers through Crowley's hair.

“Nope,” Crowley said, groping around for the spade. He found it half-stuck under Aziraphale's bottom and yanked it free. “Don't want to,” he added, making quick work of turning the evidence under. “What was it, to a prosperous harvest come spring?”

Aziraphale drew Crowley snug against his shoulder, cradling him. He began, “About what I said. It's not like that time in Tadfield. I didn't intend—”

“I felt it,” Crowley blurted, his words muffled in Aziraphale's coat.

Aziraphale sucked in his breath. “And now?”

“I still do,” Crowley said, burrowing closer. “It wasn't the place. It was you.”
High the Water, High the Walls

Chapter Summary

*One flood is much the same as another, and they should know.*

Crowley's leaning out the hotel window in nothing but his unbuttoned shirt, which he holds shut with tightly folded arms, whistling at the sight below. Aziraphale rolls over and blinks at the wall. One flood is much the same as another, and they should know.

"Ghost town," Crowley says. "You'd need a boat to navigate some of those streets."

"Shut the window," Aziraphale complains. "It's freezing."

"That's November for you," replies Crowley, but he snaps the window shut and walks barefoot over to the desk.

Aziraphale shifts quietly onto his back, watching. Pale skin and lean muscle, bony hips and ankles. Crowley's shirt skims the curve of his arse, a perfect tease in the low light. Every time they end up in this godforsaken, gorgeous city, it's near the holidays, and there's snow or some other weather-related disaster.

Crowley fiddles with the kettle, hissing under his breath until it finally clicks to life.

Aziraphale props himself up on his elbows, and, for one hazy, astonished moment, he can't recall how they'd got to this point: to Crowley wandering around posh hotel rooms more than half naked, watching York drown and making mediocre tea, almost completely unaware of the one temptation of which he ought to be most proud.

"Come here," murmurs Aziraphale.

Crowley turns and blinks at him, palms braced on the edge of the desk, letting the shirt fall open. Cheeks flushed and already half-hard, he licks his lips. Two years on, bedroom-talk still isn't his strong suit. It's maddening in the very best of ways.

"What if I want to come *here*?"

What he wants, though, he always gets.
Outtake #3

Chapter Summary

Practice makes perfect (except when it doesn’t).

Barcelona, 1488

The note had arrived three weeks earlier in the hands of a frazzled young courier; Aziraphale had set out from London posthaste. Crowley's angular script crabbed across the fine Spanish vellum with a visible sense of urgency. The phrase *If your lot are behind this, so help me, I will kill discorporate you* seemed so uncharacteristic of Crowley that Aziraphale had to wonder how wrong things had really gone.

Catalonia's stately capital was loud, bewildering, and beautiful. In spite of the exhaustion that came of two weeks' travel by sea and land, Aziraphale couldn't help but pause to set a hand on sun-warmed brick and admire the architecture. The church of Santa Maria del Mar, jewel of La Ribera, loomed pale and watchful over the square.

Crowley's return address was an inn on the Plaza del Borne, and it didn't take more than a passing glance to determine that the cantinas of this particular district excelled in every manner of vice known to man (plus some they'd only just begun to work out).

Determined, Aziraphale walked on. He felt he must be getting very close.

The proprietor of La Flor de Sol told Aziraphale he'd find *the other Englishman* upstairs, second room on the left, most likely dead drunk or asleep.

Aziraphale thanked the scruffy gentleman and promptly wiped his memory. It wouldn't do to have him slandering foreigners to every patron he set eyes on, especially not when Crowley was clearly in a vulnerable state. Robbers and cutthroats abounded.

Crowley was neither drunk, nor asleep: he was lying on his back blinking wide-eyed at the ceiling, obviously hung-over and too depressed to do anything about it. The bedclothes around him were a tangled wreck, and—Aziraphale averted his eyes upon noticing, so that his gaze fell on the myriad scattered Madeira bottles instead—he wasn't wearing much more than bedraggled underthings and a loose cotton shirt.

Aziraphale waded through the bottles and sat down on the edge of the bed, clearing his throat. Crowley didn't seem to notice, at least not till Aziraphale placed a stiff hand on his arm. The demon flinched and recoiled, curling in on himself tightly at the far edge of the mattress, breathing hard. His pale skin had a feverish cast.

"I assure you I knew nothing about it, dear boy," said Aziraphale, gently.

"Neither did I," Crowley rasped, his voice rough with disuse. "Not till the commendation arrived." He laughed, short and abrupt. "D'you know what's great? I mean, d'you know what's really great? I
had a look at the documentation, *Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición*, all so neatly official, you understand. The charter actually says *they're forbidden from causing permanent harm or drawing blood.*

It wasn't right that Aziraphale couldn't seem to focus on the words Crowley could scarcely force past his lips. What his eyes seemed hell-bent on noticing was the way Crowley's sharp chin dug into his knees, how fretfully Crowley's long fingers curled at his bony ankles, the smooth line of Crowley's thigh and exposed hip-bone where the side-laces of his braies had all but come undone. In a fit of frustration, he wanted to brush away the fine sheen of sweat on Crowley's forehead; he wanted to pin Crowley's wrists to the pillow, make him stop babbling about torture, talk some sense into him. Aziraphale shifted, scanning the room desperately for the rest of Crowley's clothes.

"So, what do they do?" Crowley continued, unfolding his legs and rolling onto his back. "The *garrucha*'s a clever one; it suspends the victim from the ceiling by the wrists. Dislocated joints and broken bones—no blood, in theory, and those kinds of injuries heal, don't they? I can only fix so much damage, let me tell you. I think my least favorite is the *toca*, not least because it's going to lead to waterboarding later on—"

"Crowley, stop," Aziraphale pleaded, holding him down. The contortions in his limbs were too much as he spoke; the way his body registered what doubtless flashed across his mind in flawless detail was horrifying. "I know what they've done, because I had a look around myself. I had to cross most of Iberia to get here, after all." The demon's chest rose and fell in panic. He writhed under Aziraphale's weight.

"Then let go of me," Crowley gasped. "Angel, are you deaf? Let me go!"

Aziraphale released Crowley's wrists and backed off the mattress, indignanty straightening his traveling clothes. "Get up," he said, tossing the first pair of breeches he could find in Crowley's direction, "and get dressed, for heaven's sake."

Crowley sat up, furiously picking at the breeches, which had landed in his lap.

"Why should I?" he demanded. "Where are we going?"

Aziraphale found a clean linen shirt and laid it at the foot of the bed.

"Home," he said, regarding Crowley's reflection in the crude wall mirror.

**Home, 2008**

The book must have made its way into Aziraphale's stacks quite by accident. Either that, or Adam Young's sense of how things would turn out for them had been more finely tuned than either one of them could have guessed. Aziraphale knelt next to the cardboard box and turned *Shibari You Can Use: Japanese Rope Bondage and Erotic Macramé* over in his hands while Crowley looked on with feigned indifference.

"It might make for a lively change," said Aziraphale. "Not that we need—er."
Crowley studied the diagrams, shifting his gaze from the book to Aziraphale.

"You want to give it a try," he said, not even inflecting it as a question.

Aziraphale set the book aside. "My dear, only if you think..."

"I think it could be interesting," said Crowley, shrugging. "If you do, that is."

"I'll do some more research," Aziraphale replied, touching Crowley's hand.

The proper materials were easy to acquire, if only because Aziraphale had remained on good terms with his former neighbor in Soho. John Grundel was nothing if not discreet, and Aziraphale's inquiry, by happy accident, coincided with the closing-down sale of Intimate Books. Grundel didn't charge him for shipping; Aziraphale reassured him he was much obliged.

Grundel's return email included a tracking number and wry congratulations that things had worked out between [Aziraphale] and that charming young man after all. When the parcel arrived, Crowley was out bullying the garden.

Aziraphale tested lengths of all three types of rope on his own wrist, violent twists of hemp, jute, and silk in thoughtful succession. He'd never pull them that tight on Crowley, of course, but it behooved one to be thorough. Silk did the least damage.

Halfway through dinner, Crowley noticed the residual marks on Aziraphale's wrist and set down his fork.

"More research, eh," he remarked. "You started without me?"

"No, of course not," said Aziraphale. "I wanted to make sure it was...safe."

Crowley's lips twitched in amusement. An old joke by now, but no less true.

"I don't know about you," he said, rising, "but I'm not really all that hungry."

Crowley had always seemed strangely vulnerable in various states of undress, but never more so than now. And ever since furtively looking his fill had ceased to be a guilty pleasure which Aziraphale had scarcely ever acknowledged...

The taste of port burned on Aziraphale's tongue as he coaxed Crowley's shirt off his shoulders. "Really," Aziraphale chided, running his palm down the damp front of Crowley's shorts. "You couldn't wait till after? We'd been saving that bottle."

Crowley whimpered and twisted under him, arms snaking up above his head.

"S'not just dessert wine, if you asssk me," he said, canting his hips.

Aziraphale reached under the pillow and caught hold of the silk rope, unspooling it gracelessly as they kissed. He threaded it around Crowley's wrists once, a loose, lazy start to both-wrists binding, ryoute kubi shibari—and let his thoughts take over, the rope guiding itself so that his hands were free to stroke Crowley's thighs. The more complex the knot-work grew, the less responsive Crowley's kisses.
"Too tight?" Aziraphale asked, vanishing the remainder of their clothes.

"Not exactly," said Crowley, breathless, but something was wrong. His chest rose and fell too sharply, breath ghosting jagged against Aziraphale's cheek. Skin curiously slick beneath Aziraphale's palms, almost clammy. His erection was fading fast.

Sunlight crept through the blinds, glinting off the mirror in Aziraphale's peripheral vision. Flash of memory five hundred years gone, something he'd entirely forgot. But Crowley, as always, remembered—and why should he not?

"Oh, my dear," Aziraphale whispered, and the rope fizzled to nothingness.

Crowley ducked his head into the curve of Aziraphale's neck, eyes tightly closed, his arms sliding down to close around Aziraphale's shoulders. His fingernails bit into Aziraphale's flesh, almost hard enough to leave scratches, and then eased off.

They lay still for a while, holding each other, and Aziraphale finally let out a sigh.

"You'll try me next time, of course," he said. "That's how it should have been."

"Next time," Crowley agreed softly, matching Aziraphale breath for breath.
Almost six years on, Crowley thought, pulling his coat tighter about himself to keep out the chill, hastily knotting the belt as he rounded the corner, and I'm still not sorry.

His flat had never been what you'd call easy to find, tucked down one of those innumerable charming side streets in the heart of Mayfair where the rent was higher than the population of Camden. Before the move, he'd considered putting it on the market, just as Aziraphale had done with the bookshop, but, at the last minute, he'd thought better of it. Or, rather, Aziraphale had thought better of it. He'd reasoned that a flat for weekending in the city might prove useful. Crowley had laughed at him.

Nobody from around here spends their weekends in London, angel, he'd said.

We're not from around here, Aziraphale had pointed out, the clever bastard.

All told, their weekending activities had amounted to roughly three or four times per year, mostly for purposes of visiting favorite haunts and collecting Crowley's post. He'd had a fright when a familiar change-of-address form had turned up several years ago in one such neglected batch, but he'd incinerated it on sight (Aziraphale had kicked up a fuss, worried that the property manager might notice the ashes).

Life had been much more relaxing with Hell well and truly out of his hair, and Crowley intended to keep things that way. Aziraphale hadn't heard anything from Upstairs, but then, his lot had never fully grasped the importance of memos. No: as far as Crowley was concerned, it was business as usual. And, frankly, after a botch-job like that, wouldn't you just soldier on as if it had never even happened? Let it not be said that their respective employers lacked common sense when push came to shove.

Crowley dashed up the front steps and fumbled his key into the lock. It was always a relief to know that they hadn't changed the fittings on him. There were advantages to owning a second-floor flat, the laziness of one's neighbors being chief amongst them. Nobody ever bothered to come up and knock, and in nearly six years of sitting empty, the premises hadn't once experienced a break-in. He hadn't left behind anything of value. The flat was sparsely furnished; next to everything had gone to the cottage.

The pile of accrued letters was substantial enough this time that Crowley had to give his door a good, hard shove. The envelopes went skittering, and he peered into the dim hallway with an irritated hiss. There were at least twenty or thirty pieces of correspondence, all shapes and sizes, most of which looked like rubbish. He shut the door and stalked off to the kitchen, where he dug a plastic Sainsbury's bag out from under the sink. He returned to the hallway and gathered up the post carelessly, dropping it into the bag. He'd leave it for Aziraphale to muck through, as the angel took perverse pleasure in paperwork. Odd, considering his superiors' poor example.
Crowley had scarcely had the chance to turn on the lights and have a look about when his mobile rang. He fished the device hastily out of his coat pocket. It only had three ring-tones. He'd assigned his favorite (Red Priest butchering Vivaldi) to Aziraphale.

"Great timing," Crowley told him, squinting at the ceiling. "These spiders are huge."

"I don't doubt you'll leave them to it," Aziraphale sighed on the other end of the line.

"They aren't hurting anything," Crowley said, idly swinging the bag full of letters as he wandered into the living room. "I guess you're ringing to make sure I got here."

"I would've appreciated a call," replied Aziraphale, tartly. "This winter's been dreadful, and it's freezing out there today. The sky's overcast. One never knows."

"The snow's all bugged off to America," Crowley said, brushing the dust off his lonely side-table. He could never stand to look at it for long; he suspect it resented him for leaving it behind. "Haven't you been watching the news?"

"No," Aziraphale said. "I've been reading those books Pippa brought. Speaking of—"

"We can discuss the relative merits of YA literature once I'm back," Crowley reassured him, not keen on getting another earful of what sounded like the most diabolical plotline since the Inquisition, only it was kids doing the killing. He'd liked it much better when it was those brats in Lower Tadfield dunking each other in the pond.

"Any post?" asked Aziraphale, eagerly.

"Loads of it," Crowley said, peering through the closed blinds and into the street.

"Don't forget my things," said Aziraphale. "You'd better go before they close."

"Yes, that's next, and then I'm off," Crowley reassured him, surveying the room. Nothing out of order: bookshelves still empty, entertainment center still bare. "What was it again? Fortnum and Mason? Red and white, a split half-dozen?"

"I wrote down the labels and vintages," said Aziraphale. "The paper's in your pocket."

"Right, yes, sorry," Crowley said, poking his coat, relieved to hear something crinkle.

"Love, do get out of there," murmured Aziraphale, and hung up.

Crowley bit his lip and smiled, slipping the mobile back in his pocket.

* * *
Aziraphale dropped *Mockingjay* on the sofa the instant he heard the Bentley pull up in the drive. By the time he reached the kitchen, Crowley had already come inside.

"Here," said Aziraphale, reaching out, "let me—"

Crowley deposited the cardboard box full of wine on the table with a *thump*.

"Three bottles of Domaine Jean-Louis Chave Hermitage Blanc 2001, plus three bottles of Château Palmer 1996. Do you have any idea how much those cost?"

"Nine hundred pounds, VAT inclusive," Aziraphale said. "The money's in your pocket."

"Not in my coat, it isn't." Crowley glared at him halfheartedly and stuck his hand in his back trouser pocket. "Fine, you've got away with it this time," he conceded, folding the bills and tucking them in his wallet. "It wasn't terribly funny at the till, trust me."

"I do," said Aziraphale, helping him out of his coat. "It's why I send you on errands."

"You might warn me when said errands are set to break the bank," Crowley sighed.

Aziraphale hung Crowley's coat in the hall and returned. "Our accounts are fine."

"Speak for yourself," Crowley said. "Mine have seen better days."

"It's all relative," Aziraphale reassured him. "Shall we open a bottle of the red with dinner?" He squeezed Crowley's shoulders, pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

Crowley resisted at first, and then sagged into Aziraphale's arms.

"Best save them for New Year's. 2012 approacheth, *et cetera*."

"That's nonsense," Aziraphale said. "And a whole year from now, besides."

"Angel?"

"*Hmmm*?"

"I'm not hungry," Crowley said, teasing at the top button of Aziraphale's waistcoat.

The bed was still unmade, just as they'd left it that morning. Aziraphale had given up on tidying the duvet a long time ago, and Crowley had claimed that having the covers bunched and skewed every which way made for more comfortable circumstances when he ended up flat on his back with his head just shy of hitting the footboard.

He hadn't realized how attractive sarcasm was until he'd heard that statement.

Aziraphale sucked sharply at Crowley's inner thigh, leaving a faint, rosy mark. Crowley clutched at Aziraphale's wrists, already trembling. He tasted of salt, of fever, of himself. He wrenched one hand free and stifled a groan in the crook of his elbow.

"It cou—couldn't wait?" Crowley panted.
Aziraphale pulled off, nuzzling Crowley as he gasped for breath. "No. You left in such a hurry this morning, didn't even finish your breakfast. I would have come with you—"

"But Pippa was stopping by, I know," said Crowley, sounding pained.

"There would have been time," murmured Aziraphale, and drew him back in.

"Yes," Crowley whimpered, mindlessly threading his fingers in Aziraphale's hair. Less than a minute later, he was shouting it, his voice gone dark, lovely, and broken.

And then, retaliation. Aziraphale couldn't bring himself to feel ashamed at how quickly he unraveled beneath Crowley's kisses, the slight warm weight of him, his words.

Half an hour later, Aziraphale shifted a heavily dozing Crowley to one side, got up, retrieved the Sainsbury's bag of post from where Crowley had abandoned it just inside the door, and snagged one of the bottles of Château Palmer as an afterthought.

Crowley was awake by the time he returned to bed, sleepy-eyed and inquisitive.

"Here," Aziraphale said, tucking the wine under Crowley's arm as he dumped the flurry of envelopes out on the sheets between them. "You won't feel a thing."

Crowley muttered and rolled over, clutching the bottle like a security blanket.

"You really ought to have set up forwarding," sighed Aziraphale, and got to work.

* * *

As it turned out, the red wine was good. In fact, it was very good.

Crowley spent a long, lazy while lounging against Aziraphale's side. By then, he'd drunk roughly half the bottle, and Aziraphale seemed so absorbed in his task of sorting papers that he'd forgot the wine was even there. At some point, when Crowley had returned to drifting in and out of consciousness, he felt the bottle pried gently from his fingers and something flat and smooth, yet scratchy set down on his belly.

"My dear, what's this?" Aziraphale asked, tapping on it.

Crowley propped himself up on his elbows. His stomach lurched, but it had nothing to do with the wine or how quickly he'd risen. He'd know that stationery anywhere.

"I can't persuade it to open," Aziraphale continued. "The seal's quite persistent."

"Hell does nothing by halves," said Crowley, picking it up by one corner.
He turned the document over. The seal wasn't one he recognized: not Dagon's, not Hastur's, not even one belonging to an under-secretary (and he'd always made good with the administrative staff, because you never knew when having them on your side might matter). With his free hand, Crowley made an intricate gesture, the one that always made his fingers cramp. The seal fizzled, popping neatly out of existence.

The letter, previously folded in three, dramatically fell open.

Crowley sat up and spread it flat against the mattress, frowning.

"Inhuman Resources?" said Aziraphale, leaning over and squinting at the letter.

"I advised them to re-name the department," Crowley replied. "Slaves and Minions was too outdated. Morale went up twenty percent with the change; I'm amazed they didn't revert back." They'd redesigned the seal, which explained why it was unfamiliar.

"Crowley, they're firing you," Aziraphale blurted.

Did he always have to read ahead?

"Correction," Crowley said, squinting at the next paragraph of sigils. "Literally translated, they're downsizing. I'm being let go. My job's been rolled into..." His stomach dropped lower. "Let it not be said that adopting a policy of non-interference in the affairs of man is unwise. Humans are doing a smashing job all on their own."

Aziraphale frowned. "Does that mean—"

"The severance package is two thousand years' pay, so that's all right; add that to what I've got currently and I'll probably last until the mortal inhabitants of this planet manage to annihilate themselves. As for what we'll do when that happens, I can't..."

He really couldn't imagine.

"Shhh, don't think like that," Aziraphale said, and before Crowley knew it, he was bundled into one of those too-close-for-comfort embraces that was, actually, just what he needed at the minute, because this nonsense was nowhere in the programming and what in God's actual name did they think they were doing? He had tenure.

"No more nine-hundred pound wine!" Crowley choked.

"I haven't been fired. There's nothing wrong with a one-salary household."

Crowley laughed hysterically.

"Time to face the music. It's not as if we've been of any use whatsoever to them for the past...what, when was it, 1990? Twenty-one years. So, Below's finally caught on, and I'm willing to bet you the remainder of our wine-rack that Up Above is next!"

"We never change policy," said Aziraphale, crisply. "It's policy."

"Oh, brilliant," Crowley groaned. He slitted one eye and skimmed the remainder of the letter.
Nothing about what he was supposed to do with himself. No personalized addendum from Beelzebub saying they'd caught wind of where he'd set his allegiances (with humanity and with a ludicrous, infuriating, wonderful angel), no summons warning that if he failed to comply, he'd be rather painfully collected. 

*Nothing at all.*

"It must be very liberating," said Aziraphale, with a touch of envy.

"Change makes me nervous," Crowley muttered.

"I have no idea how you've lasted, then," Aziraphale sighed fondly.

"With a little help," replied Crowley, chewing his lip.

Aziraphale took the letter out of his hand and set it on the bedside table. The rest of the correspondence, in five neat piles, scattered and mingled as the mattress shifted beneath them. Crowley allowed himself to be turned and tugged closer, burying his face against the angel's neck. Aziraphale took a thoughtful swig of wine, which turned into polishing off the bottle, and then set it down on top of Crowley's letter.

"Just to be certain," said Aziraphale, slowly, "can you still..."

Crowley snapped his fingers. The lights went out. He blinked, and they went back on. He summoned his shirt from where it lay discarded on the floor, only to have Aziraphale impatiently push it off his shoulders before he banished it again.

"Apparently?" he said.

"It wouldn't have been terribly sporting of them to disarm you."

Crowley shivered. He hadn't even thought of it until Aziraphale had brought it up.

"I believe the term *clusterfuck* applies."

"Of course not," said Aziraphale. "It's business as usual. Only without pay."

"I liked the part where I got paid."

"You'll get paid one more time."

Crowley winced.

"Do you trust me?" Aziraphale asked, his voice flat and calm.

Crowley lifted his head. "Yes, why wouldn't I? I let you send me on errands."

Aziraphale gave him that endearing, slightly tilted smile.

"Good," he said. "Because if they interfere, I shan't be responsible for my actions."

Crowley shivered again as they kissed, but for an entirely different reason.
Maybe he did like it dangerous. Once in a while.

* * *

That night, Aziraphale didn't sleep. He slipped out of bed as soon as Crowley was dead to the world, dressed with a thought, and resumed his reading. It's not that he'd been impatient to get back to the book, not really: reading helped to clear his thoughts prior to facing a particularly unpleasant task. He finished inside half an hour and set the book aside. Much better than those mystifying vampire novels, at any rate.

He was hard pressed to think of anything more unpleasant than Crowley frightened.

The address-book on his computer was badly out of date, not to mention sorely lacking in parties who might be of assistance. As far as Aziraphale was aware, none of the humans had any conscious memory of what they'd been through, and even if they had, what good would any of them be able to do, except for Adam Young himself?

Aziraphale shivered. He wouldn't go to the boy, not yet.

Perhaps it's all a misunderstanding, Aziraphale thought, clicking through tabs and closing windows in disgust. Some personnel files got scrambled, and Crowley got somebody else's letter. Much though Aziraphale wanted to believe that for Crowley's sake, instinct told him it wasn't likely. Hell's bureaucracy was far more efficient than Heaven's had ever been, no small thanks to Crowley. What a loss.

If only they'd have him back, Aziraphale thought, and banished the notion as quickly as it came. No; Gabriel would want him for a PA, and I'd never see him again.

Aziraphale was about to click away from the current tab when his eyes fell on the name: DEVICE-PULSIFER. A quick Google search and some quicker psychic snooping told Aziraphale that the couple had not only relocated to the vicinity of London shortly after the debacle at the air base (Newt had enrolled in some IT courses), but Anathema had managed to both complete a law degree and give birth to three daughters (Sophia, twenty, reading Politics and International Studies at Cambridge; twins, Janet and Natalie, seventeen, rebelling their way through sixth-form).

With a name like that, Anathema's website wasn't difficult to find.

Ten minutes later, having read several pages of cleverly veiled language, Aziraphale wondered, admiringly, exactly how many housewives in England could boast that they were not only an independent scholar, but also an Occult Solicitor in their spare time. Granted, the title appeared nowhere on her website; no, that was entirely Aziraphale's devising. She marketed herself as an all-around freelance family solicitor, but used terms like obscure matters and discreet handling and all other options exhausted.
Sophia on the front steps of Downing Street, smiling and waving for the cameras. Green Party, absolutely impossible. She's made history. And the blond man standing beside her, holding a black-haired, pale-eyed boy, perhaps three years old—

Aziraphale shook his head, told himself to focus. He jotted down Anathema's phone number and, on a lark, checked the AFFILIATES section of her site. Individuals who were equal parts dodgy and intriguing, all of them: Amsterdam, Chicago, New York, São Paulo. Her London counterparts sounded curiously mundane; since when did Occult Solicitors work with Consulting Detectives? Aziraphale squinted at the address.

Oh. Old magic, archetypes, and love that made Lower Tadfield's aura look like a tremor after a 10.0 earthquake, assuming there'd be anybody alive left to look. You knew it once you'd felt it. Always.

Tucking the scrap of paper in his pocket, Aziraphale wandered into the kitchen. Sunrise through the kitchen window was his favorite thing about the cottage; if they'd stayed in the city, he'd never have known what he'd been missing.

Crowley straggled out of bed at eight to find tea and toast waiting for him.

"You're up to something," he told Aziraphale around a mouthful.

The angel pursed his lips.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Did I get the sugar right?"

Crowley was already cradling his tea as if it were something precious.

"You always get it right. Which is rather annoying, actually."

"Eat," Aziraphale told him, brushing Crowley's arm as he passed. "I'll be in the study."

"You left the computer on. There was all this stuff about deduction. I closed it."

"No matter," Aziraphale called back over his shoulder, summoning Crowley's mobile to the palm of his hand. He'd have to make the call brief. Crowley wouldn't stay away.

He hadn't been so nervous about dialing someone in—well, twenty-one years.

It was the right number. Of course it was the right number.

"Good morning, Device-Pulsifer Consulting. Just so you know, we don't open for another hour." There was some rustling in the background, and then, plaintively, "Mum, Nat took my earrings!" followed by "I didn't! They're right here! She's mental!"

"I'm terribly sorry, my dear girl," said Aziraphale. "Forgive my familiarity, but—"

There was a long pause on the end of the line.

"It's you," Anathema said. "You fixed my bike. And stole my book."

"MUM!"
"Go to school," said Anathema, thinly, covering the mouthpiece.

"Can't find my Oyster card, either." Janet, Aziraphale presumed.

"Not my problem," sighed Anathema, returning to the call. "I'm sorry. My daughters."

_I know_, Aziraphale wanted to say, but instead, he replied, "It happens to the best of us, my dear. Yes, I fixed your bike, and as for the book, you'd left it behind."

"Are you still with him? Dark hair, sunglasses, nice smile when he bothers?"

"Yes, for all my sins," Aziraphale sighed. "He's why I'm calling."

Anathema suppressed a laugh. "What did he do?"

"No, it's the other way around. He's been done _unto_."

"I see. What's the trouble?"

"He's been let go. By his employer, that is."

"I hardly think my services are required in such a mundane matter."

"His former employer is anything but."

More silence, followed by another brief scuffle and the slamming of a door.

"They're gone, thank goodness," Anathema said. "Right, first things first: I know who you are, and I know what happened. Most of it, anyway. It took me a few years after the fact to piece everything together, but I got the shape of it. Adam kept dropping clues. He wouldn't go away. I think he wanted me to remember."

"You're a useful ally, certainly. What about your husband?"

"He doesn't like to talk about it," Anathema said. "He gets on with machines now. Sorts them out the traditional way, as opposed to applying brute ignorance. The truth is, I suspect he had some kind of curse, and Adam fixed it."

"Like he fixed everything else," Aziraphale murmured, tapping his chin.

"I'd ask him if he knows anything about this. By the way, which of you is which?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Who did the firing?" asked Anathema, wryly.

"Just who you'd expect, given your verb-choice. Pardon the pun."

"I'll be damned," she said.

"Nobody's perfect. Listen, do you think there's anything—"
"I'll have to talk to him myself."

"To whom?"

"Your young man, Mr. Fell. Whose mobile you're using without his permission."

"Right," said Aziraphale, swiveling around in the chair at a sudden noise behind him.

Crowley stood in the doorway, mug in hand, his eyes glowing worried gold.

"How does next Tuesday sound?" asked Aziraphale. "I'll pay for your rail fare."

"Excellent. Email me later today to arrange particulars," she said, and hung up.

"What are you doing, angel?" asked Crowley, warily.

"Getting you some help," Aziraphale admitted, holding out the mobile.

Crowley snatched it away and took a sullen sip of tea, staring hard at the floor. He looked fragile like this, but also strangely fierce, muscles coiled tight beneath his well worn grey Bentley-logo tee and nondescript pajama bottoms from Marks & Spencer.

"How is Ms. Device-Pulsifer keeping?" he asked.

* * *

"Remind me why we never come here in nicer weather?" Crowley asked, idly stirring sugar into what promised to be a mediocre cappucino. Since Mandy had gone off to uni, the beach-front café hadn't managed to hire anyone who could make one as well as she could (or, for that matter, as well as Aziraphale could make them at home).

"Because we're normally at home when it's nice out, or at Pippa's, or that Thai place with outdoor seating," said Aziraphale, waving at someone over Crowley's shoulder.

"Speak of the devil," Crowley muttered. This outing had not been his idea.

"I'm so glad you liked the books!" Pippa said, pulling up a chair right between them. She took the boxed set off the table and set it down on the floor beside her handbag. "And not a scratch on them. Nicola will never know I lent them out."

"How is your charming daughter?" Aziraphale asked.

"Busy with the little one," Pippa said, signaling to the bar that she'd be having what Crowley was having. "Robert turned three last week, can you believe it?"
"Yes," Crowley said, yawning. "They tend to do that."

Pippa chuckled, patting his hand. "I've missed your sense of humor! I wish we'd been home for Christmas, but the kids have been demanding. We'd have had you over."

"Crowley's had a spot of bad luck, I'm afraid," Aziraphale said. "His job's been cut."

Pippa's eyes widened, that oh-you-poor-dear look she reserved solely for Crowley.

"It was bound to happen eventually," Crowley said, which was more or less true.

"But you work so hard," Pippa said. "Always on the computer when I drop by..."

Are you kidding? I play Sims and Solitaire, was what he wanted to say, but instead, at a warning glance from Aziraphale, he just shrugged ruefully and sipped his cappucino. Sympathy from the devil, even this version of the devil, was better than none at all.

"All those jobs being moved overseas," Pippa murmured darkly.

Oh, just what I need, Crowley thought. Another reminder that you read the Daily Mail.

"Dreadful business," Aziraphale cut in before Crowley could draw breath to speak. "But we'll sort it out. And, if not, I should think we'll get on just fine. I'm still well enough connected through the antiquarian book trade—"

"Of course you are!" Pippa chided, slinging one arm across Crowley's shoulders and hugging him tight. "You should've encouraged him to take early retirement when you two first moved here. Would've spared you an awful lot of trouble, I should think."

Crowley wanted to shrug her off, but he couldn't think of any way of doing so that wouldn't offend Aziraphale. As for Pippa, well, nothing ever seemed to offend her. She seemed incapable of reading gestures as malicious, and if Aziraphale hadn't given him a look, he probably would've gone on about the computer games.

"We have a friend who might be able to help," Aziraphale said carefully. "A solicitor."

Aziraphale hadn't mentioned that's what Anathema was up to these days.

"Well, maybe he'll be able to help you," Pippa said, nodding thanks to the waiter as he delivered her cappucino. "Ooh, gracious. It's a bit strong today, isn't it, Crowley?"

"I'd noticed," he said, shoving the sugar bowl in her direction.

"In the very least she'll have some advice," Aziraphale said.

"A young lady, is it? They have opportunities these days I'd never have dreamed of."

That's because, for all of your kindness, you lack imagination, Crowley thought.

"She's coming for supper next Tuesday," Aziraphale replied, averting his eyes.

"Thanks for giving me fair warning," said Crowley, icily. Oh, now he'd done it.
Aziraphale cringed.

"You're hesitant to accept help, I understand that. But she might—"

Have previous experience running a law-suit against Hell? Not likely!

Crowley bit the inside of his cheek. "She might what, angel?"

"Have some ideas," said Aziraphale, helplessly. "Set your mind at ease."

"Oh dear," Pippa murmured into her cappuccino. "Ought I to—"

"No, not at all," Crowley said, and his hand was on hers before he could stop himself. "It's fine. It's just, communication isn't always his strong suit, you know?"

"Oh, don't I. That's my Harold for you. Well, I don't doubt you'll sort it all out," she added, giving Aziraphale a mildly reproachful look, which didn't happen very often and was far more satisfying than it ought to have been.

Crowley grinned behind his hand.

"Of course we will," said Aziraphale, firmly.

"Let's talk of happier things," said Pippa. "Which of the trilogy was your favorite?"

Crowley got up and excused himself, not bothering to take along his cappuccino, which had gone cold. He'd have thrown in some kind of jab, perhaps I'll leave you bookworms to it, but it always rankled that his reading preferences never seemed to line up with what Pippa constantly brought through their door. He'd recently read Cloud Atlas and found it nothing short of extraordinary, but how was he supposed to explain that to people who preferred violent post-apocalyptic futures and probably sparkly vampires, too? Granted, part of Cloud Atlas was post-apocalyptic...

There was sand all over his shoes by the time he reached the tide-line, but that hardly mattered. There was nothing of interest strewn on the shore. There rarely was. You needed Aziraphale for truly spectacular finds. He had a knack for them, and that knack was cheating. For what it got him, Crowley was willing to turn a blind eye. It had been wrong of him to get angry over Anathema, he supposed.

At least one of them was willing to cheat when there was no other option.

* * *

In the living room, after they'd eaten, Anathema pored over Crowley's letter while Aziraphale busied himself with a tray of coffee and biscuits in the kitchen. She'd aged visibly, which shouldn't have
been so startling, except the long-haired nineteen-year old who'd worn skirts and dangly earrings had transformed into a jeans-and-clogs-wearing forty year-old mother with hair neatly cropped to her chin (no less brilliant).

Her earrings were still eccentric, but now you had to squint to see them.

"They have nice stationery," Anathema was saying to Crowley as Aziraphale carried in the tray. "Why worry about image when you're in the business of damning people?"

"Because I advised them to," said Crowley, wearily.

"They seem to have taken your advice in quite a number of matters, then," Anathema said. "We could always highlight that in your response."

"I'll be responding?" asked Crowley. "I thought you were just here to give advice."

Anathema tucked her hair behind her ear and glanced up at Aziraphale.

"We hadn't really discussed a course of action," said Aziraphale, defensively.

"You'll be paid for your time," said Crowley, grimly. "Don't worry about that."

Anathema set the letter down and accepted a cup of coffee.

"I'm not. I think you'd have a case. They didn't give you fair warning."

"There isn't exactly a court system in place to hear things like this," Crowley said, eyeing Aziraphale pointedly. "You should've thought of that."

"Why wouldn't a human courtroom hear it?" Anathema asked. "You're proof that Hell can send up representatives that don't look like walking nightmares, and—"

"In case you weren't paying attention, I'm the exception to that rule."

Anathema nibbled on a biscuit. "I suppose they'd laugh at a threat, wouldn't they?"

"Depends on the language you use?" Aziraphale asked, taking a seat beside Crowley.

"Angel, the language won't matter. A law-suit is a threat."

"I hate to say this," Anathema said, "but why didn't you go to Adam instead of me?"

Aziraphale exchanged a nervous glance with Crowley.

"Because he's terrifying," said Anathema, flatly. "Right. I'll grant you that."

"You're much more level-headed," Aziraphale told her. "Less impulsive."

"Ah, I see. You're afraid that if he were to Change things again—and, yes, you heard me right, that's a capital C—he might upset the balance. And it doesn't take a genius to see that balance means the world to you. It means a lot to me, too."
"On the contrary," said Crowley, softly. "World without end."

*How is it that your heart survived intact?* Aziraphale thought, momentarily overwhelmed. *And how is it that I deserve to be at the center of it all, what when you love doves and mice and spiders, otherwise good and innocent things?*

"Should you decide you want to speak with him, I'd be happy to set you up."

"About him not going away," Aziraphale said. "He always was fond of you."

"These days, it's not me," Anathema said wryly. "He's dating my eldest daughter."

*Sophia, Downing Street, the child, Aziraphale thought. That explains everything.*

"Even more terrifying," Crowley said. "Antichrist as prospective son-in-law."


"Or maybe he's the terrified one," Crowley added, breaking into a full grin.

Anathema smirked. "So, are we sending a letter to these twats or what?"

Aziraphale sipped his coffee in the silence. It was Crowley's decision. It had to be.

"I'll think it over," Crowley said. "I'll email you by Friday, I promise."

"Excellent," Anathema said. "For now, we've got a lot of catching-up to do."

She seemed sad to hear that they were hardly ever in London anymore, and Aziraphale got the uncanny sense that, for her, that absence made some sort of palpable difference. He'd never considered the void they'd leave behind, if any at all: there would always be someone to dine at the Ritz, always be someone to go speeding down Oxford Street, always someone to feed the ducks in St. James's Park.

Did the *who* really make a difference?

"How's Newt?" Aziraphale asked, shifting in his seat uncomfortably.

"Settled," Anathema said. "He's so patient with the girls, never loses his temper. That's more than can be said for me. The twins never stopped being a handful."

"And how does he feel about Adam...?" Crowley ventured.

"Are you kidding? I was barely twenty when he and I met, so you can imagine he sees nothing wrong with the age gap. And, as I said, Adam's very good at playing by the rules. Newt keeps less of an eye on him than I do."

Anathema excused herself after her third cup of coffee, insisting that she'd better get going if she planned on catching her train. Realizing that volunteering Crowley's services as a chauffeur probably wasn't the best idea at the moment, Aziraphale said that, yes, of course, that was perfectly understandable. Crowley embraced her briefly and wished her goodbye, excusing himself with even
less grace than usual.

Aziraphale saw Anathema to the door.

"I can't thank you enough for coming, although I should expect nothing will come of this," he said, pressing a folded check into her hand. "As unsettled as Crowley is by these circumstances, I don't think he truly wants to fight them."

"Why would he?" Anathema asked, handing it back to him. "If there's no sign that they intend to follow up, and you're sure there will be no negative repercussions, why bother taking action? In his shoes, I'd be downright relieved. Good riddance."

"I think he might be," Aziraphale said. "But he hasn't taken the time to let it sink in."

"He really doesn't cope well with it, does he?" Anathema asked.

"With what?" Aziraphale asked, holding the door as she went out.

"Change," Anathema said, waving from the foot of the steps.

* * *

Crowley slumped forward, jaw resting heavily on Aziraphale's shoulder, temple plastered to the headboard. His thighs ached from the strain, although they wouldn't do for long, and he was still searching for his breath, which at times like this tended to fail him completely. He felt open and wholly undone. That look in Aziraphale's eyes as Crowley had positioned himself, borne down hard, taken in all of him.

He hadn't seen it in twenty-one years.

"Penny for your thoughts?" asked Aziraphale, scarcely above a whisper.

*That's my line,* Crowley thought, drawing a desperate lungful. "None as of yet."

"Liar," Aziraphale murmured, trailing one hand from Crowley's hip up to his nape.

Crowley vanished the mess before Aziraphale decided to run for a washcloth, settling in closer. He traced an absent pattern on the angel's upper arm, unable to find words.

*I'm sorry I was mad about Anathema; I know you were only trying to improve the situation. I'm about to do something that'll upset you. I'm sorry about that, too.*

"You're heavy enough without brooding," Aziraphale teased gently.

"She looked so different," Crowley said. "So different from what I remember."
"She's been through quite a lot since last we saw her," Aziraphale replied, pressing his mouth to the side of Crowley's neck. "But she's aged gracefully. I would have liked to have seen Newt again, too. And their daughters."

"Nothing says we can't," said Crowley. *I'll be seeing one of them soon.*

"There you go again. Crowley, what's the matter? We've just..."

Crowley turned his head and kissed Aziraphale as deeply as he dared. What Aziraphale couldn't read from his expression, he'd certainly have tasted in the wistfulness of Crowley's lips and tongue and newly restored breath.

"But we haven't," he said, breaking away. "Not in the least."

"Haven't what?" asked Aziraphale, his voice tinged with worry.

"Changed," Crowley said. "Why didn't she run? It must have been unnerving."

"She knows what we are. And I'm afraid I'm going to have to disagree with you."

"On what?"

"Our not changing. Crowley, there's more to change than appearances. We *have.*"

Crowley sighed and shifted away from him, settling down against the pillows. "The sight of her affected us more deeply than the sight of us affected her."

"That's precisely what I mean," said Aziraphale, settling down beside him. He slid one arm around Crowley's waist, drawing him in close. "You've had a long day. *Rest.*"

"You'd do well to get some sleep, too," Crowley said, cringing inwardly.

"Sleep for everyone," Aziraphale said, sounding so relieved that Crowley felt sick with guilt all over again. "That's wise, my dear. Very wise."

_You'll hate me in the morning,_ Crowley thought, counting the interminable minutes until Aziraphale's breath had slowed to almost nothing and his arm thrown across Crowley's middle had gone limp. _Good thing I won't be here to see it._

He squeezed his eyes shut. Shifted shape, slithered free. Vanished.

It was a two and a half hour drive to Cambridge. That's where she was: Sophia, the eldest daughter. He'd pulled it from Aziraphale before he'd sounded Anathema out for confirmation, so strong was the wave of recollection he'd felt rolling off the angel during that point in the conversation.

*Find Sophia,* he'd told himself, *and you'll find Adam.* He had no plans to disturb Anathema any further, and she was right. He ought to have gone looking for Adam in the first place, rather than worrying Aziraphale.

Crowley arrived just after two in the morning. Parking was easy to come by, so long as you could justify cheating. He wandered the streets aimlessly until dawn, although it wasn't as if there were
many streets to wander, at least not where the town center was concerned. Sophia lived in a private flat not far from Sidney Sussex College.

Perched on the front steps of Great St. Mary's, Crowley bullied his mobile into yielding up a photograph off a closed campus directory. Second-year student, just beginning spring term. Already earning high marks. She looked very much like her mother had when she was younger, although she had her father's eyes and a sense of mischief in her expression that Crowley couldn't help but imagine was pure Agnes Nutter.

Crowley's phone rang. Vivaldi. He rose and ignored it, crossing the market square.

Through some strange confluence of cobbled side-streets and sheer force of not trying to get anywhere, Crowley found himself standing next to the entrance of King's College Chapel. He'd unwittingly gone from one church to another.

"It doesn't open for an hour and a half," a passing student told him. She looked tired, maybe even worse for wear. Crowley felt in her an exhaustion equal to his own, a hope both quiet and unspeakably fragile. She was in love and stood to lose it.

"Thanks," he said, and, once she'd passed, slipped inside.

The art of passing through places unseen wasn't as difficult as Crowley seemed to remember. Maybe it was because there were so few souls about in the cavernous space, no hushed voices to echo off the ancient stones and myriad, towering panes of glass. He stood still in the center aisle for a very long while, staring, until his mobile went off again, the irreverent strings harsh and vibrant. Footsteps echoed behind him.

_Help her_, he thought, and fled as quickly as he'd come.

Catching up with Sophia proved slightly more difficult than he'd imagined, if only because, by the time he reached her front door, both she and her flatmate had already gone. In his second feat of breaking and entering that day, Crowley managed to learn from some saved email on her laptop (how lucky that she didn't carry it everywhere, he supposed, but how unwise, given that their common-room window was right at street level) that she was meeting Adam at Caffè Nero on Market Street once her morning seminar let out. Perfect. He'd intercept them.

Crowley had a good few hours yet to decide how on earth he was going to explain himself, although something told him that wouldn't be necessary, if Adam setting eyes on him this time was going to be anything like the first. He wasted an hour in Waterstones and ended up purchasing the first book of the _Hunger Games_ trilogy in a fit of guilt. He'd give it a chance, but he'd also make Aziraphale read _Cloud Atlas_.

Lacking anything to do besides drink coffee, Crowley settled in at Caffè Nero with a mediocre cup of tea and started to read. His phone went off again, which earned him some irritated glances. Crowley turned it off.

And, nearly two hours later, when he was certain he couldn't stand any more heartbreak than he'd just waded through, the door opened, and a tell-tale prickle raced down his spine. Adam took a detour and ordered some hot cocoa before making his way directly to Crowley's table in the corner.

"I expect Soph will be late," he said, setting down his drink before flopping into the armchair across from Crowley. He broke into a genuinely delighted grin, and, instead of fear, Crowley found himself
mesmerized at how much the *same* Adam was, never mind the fact that he wasn't eleven anymore and had grown so tall that he had nearly an inch on Crowley. "It's been ages, hasn't it? What are you *doing* here?"

"You mean you don't know?" Crowley managed.

Adam shook his head. "Not a clue. But it can't be anything good. You look troubled."

*Oh, God,* Crowley thought. *He remembers, but he's given it up. He can't do a thing.*

"Losing one's employment is rarely good," Crowley said, resuming his mug.

Adam frowned, nodding gravely. "Yeah, I know what that's like. I got laid off last week. Mum had a fit, but I told her it was all right; something else will come along."

*The former Antichrist at a loose end. This economic crisis has gone far enough.*

"Did you study here, too?" Crowley said at length.

"I went to Oxford and couldn't wait to leave. Pepper came here, though. She did postgraduate work at Canterbury and teaches in London now. Do you remember her?"

"Red hair," Crowley murmured. "Yes, of course. Do you think I forget any of it?"

"It gets hazy sometimes," Adam admitted. "I hope it doesn't haunt you."

"Sometimes," Crowley echoed. "So, about what's happened...you don't know..."

"Not as such," said Adam, thoughtfully, "but I reckon it was inevitable. When I said no more messing about, I seem to recall *meaning* it, and that didn't just go for you and for him, you know. It went for *both your sides,* full stop."

*Both our sides,* thought Crowley, wonderingly. *No more messing about. Full stop.*

"Thank you," he said. "That explains a lot. Explains everything, actually."

"Ace," Adam said, clinking his mug against Crowley's. "Because Soph says she can't make heads or tails of it when I get to talking to her mum. She says we ought to be locked up for our own safety and everyone else's. She may have a point."

*You're going to marry her. You're going to marry her and she's going to be Prime Minister and bloody hell. Your son will grow up and do something really very important, but I'm not sure I want to know. Not right now. I'll let it go.*

"I don't know," Crowley said. "You seem harmless enough."

"That's not what my mother says."

Crowley and Adam both looked up in shock, and it must have been comical, of *course* it had been comical, to prompt such a smug, familiar smile from the young woman who stood watching them with one slim hand resting on the back of Adam's chair.
"What's going on?" Sophia asked Adam. "And who's this?"

"Crowley's a very old friend of mine," he said. "And your mother's, as it happens."

"That village you grew up in seems creepier every time I hear about it, let alone visit," Sophia said. She leaned across the table, offering her free hand to Crowley. "Hello. It's very nice to meet you, and I'm sure you're not crazy."

"Pleasure's all mine," said Crowley, and thought, I'm not sure that's not true.

"Will you stay for a while?" Adam asked. "Have something else? My treat."

"I'd love to," Crowley said—and, oddly, meant it—"but I've really got to be going."

"You didn't tell him you were coming, did you?"

"No," Crowley admitted, rising. "And so—"

"Your name sounds familiar," Sophia said. "Mum mentioned on the phone last night—"

"I'll see you again," Crowley said, stumbling past them. "Both of you. Very soon."

He thought he heard Sophia say You've got a lot of explaining to do as he rushed out.

Which was exactly what he was going to hear from Aziraphale, only worse.

* * *

Aziraphale had done the only thing he knew how to do when waiting was the only option left. He'd staked out a spot at the kitchen table, made himself cup after cup of hot cocoa, and begun to read whatever was on hand. As it happened, he'd found a copy of a novel called Cloud Atlas buried in the covers at the foot of the bed.

He'd attempted to ring Crowley several times as the intricate, nesting-doll narrative unfolded and began to collapse back in on itself, from spectacular supernova to a dying star. And at its center, inevitably, a black hole: Crowley's absence.

By mid-morning, it was all a bit too much to bear. He tried ringing Pippa, but there was no answer. She and Harold were likely on their morning walk.

Crowley's preferred method of clearing his head was normally strolling on the beach, so Aziraphale abandoned his shoes just inside the front door, never mind how cold it was, and headed down the strand. The beach went for miles in either direction, and Aziraphale doubted Crowley could have got far. He'd find him hunched down next to one of his favorite tide pools, perhaps, collecting shells and God knew what else.
Three tide pools within the first mile and a half, and Crowley wasn't at any of them.

Aziraphale lingered at the farthest one for a very long time, seated on an unpleasantly damp patch of sand. Perhaps if he waited, Crowley would eventually show. He pulled wonder after wonder from the shallow pool at his feet: a painted medieval tile fragment, an Elizabethan coin, a tiny Regency finger-ring made of hammered gold.

_Crowley would tell you to stop_, he thought. _Save some of those wonders for later._

Rising, Aziraphale pocketed the three he'd got with very little sense of guilt.

By the time he got home, it was almost three in the afternoon, and the Bentley was back where it should be. Aziraphale brushed his feet off and entered the house soundlessly. Whatever Crowley had done, he would remain calm. He would _try_.

He found Crowley asleep on the sofa—shirt untucked, sunglasses askew, shoes abandoned—with two familiar paperbacks clutched to his chest. One of them, he must have acquired wherever he'd gone. The other, Aziraphale had been reading up until he'd left the house. He bent and carefully removed Crowley's sunglasses.

Crowley stirred with a gasp, but his eyes opened slowly, already focused.

"My dear," Aziraphale murmured, "where have you been?"

"This is the part where you yell at me," said Crowley. "I think."

Aziraphale shook his head, taking a seat on the edge of the cushion. Crowley shifted to accommodate him, losing his hold on the books in the process. They tumbled to the floor in a messy flutter of pages. When he tried to fetch them, Aziraphale stilled him.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" he asked. "Answers, perhaps?"

"You might say that," Crowley replied. "We're not in any danger, if that helps."

In spite of himself, Aziraphale felt a rush of unadulterated relief.

"I always knew he was sensible. That'll be Anathema's good influence, of course."

"Of course," said Crowley. He curled a bit closer, uncertainty hovering about his lips.

"I imagine you found him by stalking the girl. She didn't mind terribly, did she?"

"Adam found me first. She never even knew she'd been stalked."

Aziraphale frowned at him, leaning until their noses almost touched.

"What is it, Crowley? For heaven's sake, I can only take so much."

"Let's not lose track of them," he said desperately. "Or London."

Aziraphale kissed his forehead.
"What are we waiting for, then? Let's go."
Inasmuch as it was a rare occurrence, this was not the first time that Aziraphale had awakened to find Crowley's side of the bed empty. Only once, a few weeks ago, had it ever given him cause for concern. Crowley had been sufficiently (if unnecessarily) penitent. He'd taken to rising with Aziraphale, no matter the hour: an impressive feat for someone so attached to sleep. When nightmares set in, he slept lightly.

Aziraphale ran his fingers across Crowley's pillow-slip, finding a few soft, dark hairs caught in the weave. The worn cotton smelled faintly of the clove cigarettes Anathema had given him. She'd confiscated them from the twins. Crowley hadn't quite known what to do with them, but it was clear he'd decided otherwise on the sly. Which was fair enough, given Aziraphale enjoyed a nice, solitary pipe now and again.

There was time enough to rise and dress and have a cup of tea, as Crowley couldn't have got far. He tended to follow the tide-line with willful deliberation: zig-zagging barefoot across the wet, freshly exposed sand, leaving a snake's trail at a snail's pace.

Crowley was choosy about what he picked up. Shells needed to be intact, unbroken and unmarked. Limpets were too common to consider unless the color of a specimen proved exceptional. The shells he most wanted washed up in warmer climes, but that hadn't prevented Aziraphale from indulging him. The treasures on their mantelpiece were Crowley's pride and joy. He suspected that the houseplants had grown jealous.

Aziraphale washed out his mug and left it in the drying rack. He checked the closet and found his suspicions confirmed; Crowley had forgot his pail again and was likely getting sand all through his pockets. Aziraphale slipped it over his arm and left the house, not bothering with shoes. It was cold, and inasmuch as Crowley disliked winter, springtime and the sea were near enough to lure him out-of-doors.

The breakers were beginning to come in, but they hadn't yet made a wreck of Crowley's footprints. Aziraphale followed the trail for a good half-mile, found Crowley at the third tide pool down (precisely where he'd thought to look before).
The sight never failed to make Aziraphale's heart clench, make him remember he had a human heart.
Crowley almost never realized he was being watched, his quiet, exposed gaze trained on the waves.
He looked a fright, what with his windblown hair and the t-shirt he'd slept in rumpled and sand-
flecked. The pair of faded jeans that normally languished in the wardrobe's bottom drawer were
rolled up to his knees. Doubtless his backside was damp from being sat on that seaweed-strewn rock
for heaven knew how long.

Crowley shifted and straightened up, suddenly wary.

Aziraphale paused and, over the short distance between them, smiled.

"Bring it over," Crowley said, rummaging in his pockets. "I've got..."

By the time Aziraphale reached him, proffering the pail, Crowley sat with both hands outstretched.
In his right palm, a cache of worn china-fragments: blue and white and rose-tinted and burgundy. In
his left, a perfect scallop shell. One by one, Aziraphale placed them at the bottom of the pail. He set it
aside and took Crowley's hands.

"Breakfast, my dear," Aziraphale said. "The sea can wait."

Crowley went warm and pliant, shivered effortlessly into a kiss.

"Yeah," he murmured. "But I can't."

And so, side by side, they walked on, racing the tide.

2.

*If I'm lucky,* Crowley thought, *the sofa cushions will have mercy and swallow me.*


"It's quite stylized," Aziraphale replied. "Hardly convincing, I find."

Crowley slouched a little bit closer to Aziraphale's side, averting his gaze. He'd never liked watching torture scenes, especially where more was implied than shown. His mind could fill in the details. Unfortunately, the details he had to work with were *real.*

That the film was set in Spain was just an added bonus.

"Dying for a cup of tea," Crowley said, rising, his back to the screen. "Anyone else?"

"I'd love one," said Pippa, her eyes still fixed on the carnage.

"Shall I pause it, my dear?" asked Aziraphale.

"No," Crowley said, already halfway to the kitchen. "Don't." With any luck, by the time he got back, they'd be on a scene free of razor blades and creatures more nightmarish than Hell could ever conceive of. Guillermo del Toro had a fascinatingly sick and gifted mind, Crowley would give him that. Right up there with Hieronymus Bosch.

Crowley was busy fishing bags of Lady Grey out of three neatly lined up mugs when a hand gently squeezed his shoulder. He jumped, dropping the third and final tea bag back into the mug with a *splash.* He cursed under his breath.

"I'm so sorry," Pippa said, giving him a brief, bracing hug. "I'd have brought a different film if I'd known this one would bother you."

"I'm enjoying it," Crowley said, which was true. He liked the brooding atmosphere and the sense of wonder, even if the girl was an unreliable narrator. He stepped aside to let Pippa mop up the spilled tea with a dish cloth. "It has a happy ending, doesn't it? Even the darkest fairytales these days tend to have happy endings of a sort."

"Of a sort," said Pippa, with a contrite grin. "Two lumps or three?"
"Are you certain you ought to be prodding it like that?" Aziraphale asked.

Crowley continued in his task of carefully uncurling wayward, leafy tendrils and guiding them to unoccupied sections of the trellis. Of all the seeds he'd planted in late spring, the pea vines had proved most contrary. Already they had rocket and mint and a handful of other herbs, and the heirloom tomato plants seemed to be doing nicely, but the peas, in spite of flowering early, had yet to bear anything edible.

"It needs to spread," Crowley said, "but isn't bright enough to figure that out."

"Crowley, it's a vine. I'm sure it knows what's what."

"You don't know what plants are like," Crowley said, poking at the soil with a frown.

"No threats?" Aziraphale asked. "No showing it who's boss?"

"That only works on houseplants," Crowley replied. "Outdoor ones—they know better."

"That would explain why the nettles don't back down," Aziraphale muttered.

"That's what the gloves are for," Crowley said, handing him a pair. "Check on the carrots, would you? They're nice when they're young. Tender."

"You find fish and plants endearing, but you'll quite happily eat them."

"Shhh," Crowley hissed. He reached for the mister and spritzed the peas.

Aziraphale pulled up one small carrot: pale orange and perfect.

4.

If not for Aziraphale taking hold of his hand, Crowley would have slipped climbing over the side. There was somehow enough room in the tub for both of them and all of the water, but Aziraphale insisted on pulling him in close, curling them both against the far end, the cool porcelain warming at his back and hard against Crowley's knees as he settled. The water was almost scalding, a preference they had in common.

"A week of plumbers trailing in and out for this," Crowley said, allowing himself to be manhandled so that he sat between Aziraphale's thighs, his back to Aziraphale's chest. "They demanded tea and biscuits. As if that were part of the contract."

"It's only polite," Aziraphale said, one hand sliding from Crowley's upper arm to cup his elbow underwater. "It would've been less time if the younger chap hadn't got part of the installation wrong." His other hand splayed across Crowley's belly, teasing.

"That's not," Crowley sighed, letting his head fall back against Aziraphale's shoulder. "Now that you've got me here, what did you have in mind?"

Aziraphale pressed his mouth to the side of Crowley's neck and parted his lips, letting both hands glide lower to find Crowley's wrist, his thigh, his palm, his cock. Crowley shivered and closed his
eyes, sank lower in the water and waited.

"Everything," said the angel.

5.

"Oh my," Aziraphale murmured as they followed Sophia through the front doors.

"I'll say," Adam agreed. "Vinopolis. It's like a theme-park. You can take tasting tours and everything. Soph and her friends did this custom one, all Chardonnays—"

"Rieslings," she corrected him, studying a bin-end half bottle of 2005 Crianza.

"A booze theme-park," said Crowley, as if he wished he'd thought of it. Which answered that question. Besides, he'd never have hidden it down an alley in Borough Market. He'd have put it on a main thoroughfare and stood back to watch.

"My dear, look at this," said Aziraphale, setting a reverent hand on the security-capped bottle. "It's the '98. It's been years since we've had—"

"Until you find an '01, we're not discussing this," Crowley said cheerfully, holding a bottle of Chianti up to the light. He hummed and shook it a little. "Nice sediment. Has the d'Yquem got sediment? I like my wine with a bit of character."

"Not that I'm aware," Aziraphale sighed. "It's the '98, not the '99. You're confusing—"

"I am not," Crowley said, clutching the Chianti to his chest. "We had the '99, which was all well and good, but one year back isn't likely to make much difference."

"And three years forward is?" asked Aziraphale, somewhat defensively.

"The reviewer at Berry Brothers & Rudd calls it ethereal," Crowley murmured.

"What've you guys got there?" Adam asked, cutting in. He was carrying the Crianza.

"Swill," lamented Aziraphale, glaring at Crowley's Chianti.

"Second-rate Sauternes," Crowley countered bitterly.

"The '98 is pretty sought-after," Sophia said, picking up the bottle. She whistled when she saw the security cap and the price-tag. "Hey, big spender. He'll love you for that."

"He won't," Adam said. "Haven't you been listening? He wants the '01."

Sophia inspected the label. "Well, you've misread it. This is the '01."

Aziraphale pursed his lips smugly, and Crowley's face lit up like Christmas.

6.
Crowley managed to keep himself from flinching until the third time the machine gave him a faceful of steam and foam. He set the sticky mug down and thumped the bloody thing just hard enough to get some satisfaction out of the gesture.

Aziraphale would never forgive him if he were to break it. Crowley tried again, but to no avail. If he lost any more foam, there'd be nothing left in the mug. Just then, Aziraphale wandered in.

"My dear, are you getting on all right?"

"Yes," said Crowley, peevishly, picking up the mug and inspecting the bottom.

"I don't expect anything fancy, you know."

"Says Mr. Cinnamon-and-Cocoa-Hearts," Crowley muttered. In his frustration, he almost dumped in half the sugar bowl. He stirred the mug's contents surreptitiously, but it was no use hiding; Aziraphale was already looming over his shoulder.

"Café au lait will do nicely," said Aziraphale, pressing a kiss against Crowley's nape.

Crowley shivered, thinking of windswept beaches and long, hot baths.

"Good," he said, turning, and raised the mug to Aziraphale's lips.
"You're wearing trainers," Crowley said, hesitating, his hand frozen on the doorknob. "And we're going where?" He wouldn't have let Aziraphale leave the flat looking like this under most circumstances, much less for a day trip to—

"Richmond," said Aziraphale, pleasantly, adjusting his ratty scarf. In fact, everything he had on smacked of a charity-shop raid; even at home, around the cottage and environs, he certainly didn't favor such frumpery. "Orleans House Gallery. That Asian festival I'd mentioned, don't you remember? Worth a look, I should have thought."

Crowley sighed and opened the door, ushering the angel into the corridor. His Mayfair flat was keeping dustily enough in their absence, although it sparkled on the odd weekend they decided they'd had enough of the sea air and needed a dose of city excitement. This wasn't so much his idea of excitement as it was Aziraphale's.

Crowley punched the down-button on the lift. The things he'd do for love.

Aziraphale tried to insist that they use public transport, but Crowley wouldn't hear of it, even if parking promised to be a somewhat hellish affair.

What should have been a thirty-minute drive turned into a fifty-minute one courtesy of some inexplicable traffic; Aziraphale cheerfully suggested that they weren't the only ones headed for Twickenham today, and Crowley could only turn up the radio and jam his sunglasses bit further up the bridge of his nose. They could've had a cozy lie-in and a perfectly civilized breakfast at Claridge's, but no. Rampant multiculturalism had won out.

Still, he felt better when the parking space he'd been expecting to turn up did.

"Well," said Aziraphale, squeezing his knee. "Not such a terrible drive, was it?"

"Get out of the car, angel," Crowley muttered, but he warmed to the touch.

The grounds of Orleans House were lovely, but they were also completely mobbed with young people in an odd mix of appalling modern fashion and traditional Indian garb. The music wasn't anything Crowley would have chosen given half a chance, but it had a catchy beat, and Aziraphale seemed genuinely content to be amidst the ruckus.

Crowley took hold of his hand, preferring to be dragged along.

"What's this, again?" he shouted above the crowd.
"Holi," replied Aziraphale. "It's the Hindu festival of colors, dear boy!"

"The point being?"

"To celebrate spring. Or, if you like, the burning of Holika and Prahlada's survival."

Crowley stopped and yanked Aziraphale around to face him. They were jostled and elbowed on all sides, but nobody seemed annoyed in the least.

A blonde university student shimmied past Crowley, her hair a riot of sapphire and fuschia.

"Wait a minute, what's with—"

"Oh," said Aziraphale. "I'm sorry, I hadn't considered this might be in poor taste."

Crowley blinked as a young man wearing bright red face-paint sprinted by.

"Poor taste?" he blurted, his initial confusion momentarily forgotten.

Aziraphale's features softened in a way Crowley had only come to recognize since, well, since everything that had brought them to where they were now had transpired. He had one hand in his cardigan pocket, probably fussing with a loose thread; all signs pointed to a manifestation of his newfound fear of hurting Crowley's feelings.

"Ssspit it out," Crowley hissed, leaning close to Aziraphale's ear.

"Prahlada, the demon-king Hiranyakashipu's son, refused to show his father reverence, praying instead to Lord Vishnu," Aziraphale recited, like a human child tired of being asked to repeat nursery rhymes. "Hiranyakashipu's sister, the demoness Holika, built a pyre in her lap with intent to burn her nephew to death. Prahlada prayed to Vishnu and was spared; Holika, on the other hand, was not."

Crowley realized then that Aziraphale's hand had at some point made its way from his pocket to rest against Crowley's cheek. His fingertips felt strangely gritty against Crowley's skin as they stroked slowly, deliberately down to his chin.

"Swell," Crowley said. "You'd best keep me away from the bonfires."

Aziraphale was the one who looked hurt. He ran his thumb over Crowley's lips.

"I hadn't meant..."

Crowley's tongue flicked out briefly, just enough for him to notice the acrid taste.

"What," Crowley demanded, "have you done?"

Aziraphale's fingertips were covered in a thick dusting of luminescent emerald powder. His expression was stuck in that curious space between guilt and amusement. "Festival of colors," he repeated, unable to keep from smiling. "My dear, you look—"

Just then, a shrieking gaggle of teenagers hurled a bucketful of canary yellow chalk at them. Crowley stumbled forward, his eyes shut tight against the grit, knocking into Aziraphale. His sunglasses went flying, and Aziraphale caught him around the waist.
Crowley opened his eyes and smeared his gritty palm across Aziraphale's forehead.

"You were saying?"

Aziraphale kissed him in spite of the bitter taste, a little bit breathless.

"Ravishing," he said, tracing a scale-pattern from Crowley's jaw down to his throat.

Indignant, Crowley retaliated—but, the truth was, he knew Aziraphale meant it.
The Beach Botanist's Survival Guide

Chapter Summary

All Crowley had wanted was to have a go at the infamous *Rosa rugosa* and spend a lot of time under the covers.

Chapter Notes

Illustration by Eldanis

1. Early to bed, early to rise. Some of the rarest blossoms open at sun-up.

Crowley woke with a start, limbs shooting out in all directions. The sensation of falling always hit him on waking from night terrors, and, much to his rattled irritation, his twitching left foot found Aziraphale's side of the bed empty. Crowley closed his eyes, willed his trembling body still, and took a series of deep, deliberate breaths. Slats of sunlight poured across his cheeks, lush and golden, which answered his half-formed question of what bloody time it was. As his ears acclimated to the bedroom's familiar silence, other sounds filtered in: the low, busy hum of the espresso machine; Aziraphale pottering about the kitchen, humming a good song rather badly.

Yawning, Crowley grimaced at the ceiling. *Venus in Furs*, disgraced.

Hauling himself off to the shower first wouldn't normally have been his preference, but given that Aziraphale was busy being a disgustingly cheerful morning person in the kitchen rather than being a warm and suggestive one in the bedroom, he'd make do.

Freezing water hit Crowley full-force on the chin. He flinched, cowering against the tiled wall until the water had settled down to scorching. He sagged and exhaled, watching his breath curl upward in tendrils of steam. Horrid stuff, that dream.

Pippa really needed to stop bringing her gore-drenched epics on Movie Night.

Crowley had just about managed to scrub the lingering image of Commodus jamming his blade hard into Maximus's side (tea-tree shampoo made his scalp tingle; it was almost like proverbial brain-bleach) when the shower curtain stirred and a whisper of chilly air filtered in. He lashed out reflexively, eyes screwed shut against the suds sluicing down his forehead, but a steady hand caught his forearm and used the momentum to drag him in close. He reached over Aziraphale's shoulder and raked the curtain shut, otherwise hanging on for dear life, mouth pressed to the angel's neck.

"I shouldn't have left you," Aziraphale crooned regretfully, threading his fingers through Crowley's drenched, soapy hair. He'd let it grow longer than usual, and wisps of it were unexpectedly beginning to curl. "Not after last night's main feature. The blood's ghastly enough, I should have thought, but that soundtrack did you in."
"Please don't remind me," said Crowley, gloomily.

Aziraphale kissed his jaw and rummaged on the rack for the loofah, which he promptly set to work on Crowley's back. Bathing together hadn't been a typical occurrence till relatively recently (they'd had a monstrous tub installed, plus both bathrooms completely refurbished), and Crowley still wasn't sure how he felt about communal showers. They tended to be awkward and afforded much less space. That said, at this particular moment, he was simply glad Aziraphale was there. He sighed.

Aziraphale set the sponge aside and stroked down Crowley's flanks, clearing whatever residue might have remained. He maneuvered Crowley until he stood directly under the jet, plastering Crowley's hair back to catch the remainder of the shampoo.

Crowley's skin prickled, and he slitted his eyes expectantly in spite of the fuss.

"News for you, my dear," said Aziraphale, his tone suggesting that he was about to import something Crowley would find less than thrilling. "Uriel rang up this morning, such a delightful surprise. She's been in San Francisco for the past six months; no wonder I couldn't reach her at home in Toronto. Raphael's been terribly persuasive."

"Convincing her to get a mobile would have solved this problem for everybody," Crowley muttered, but he leaned closer to Aziraphale, savoring the contact. "And?"

"And they miss us," Aziraphale replied, backing Crowley carefully up against the wall so that he could take his turn under the spray. Crowley reached up and returned the favor, flicking Aziraphale's not-quite-dampened hair off his forehead.

"They miss you," Crowley corrected him.

"Do give Uriel a bit of credit," Aziraphale said, slipping an arm low around Crowley's waist. He tugged hard enough to crush their hips together, and Crowley hissed with pleasure. This was the sort of thing he preferred after a harrowing night, but, for some reason, it hadn't occurred to him to prefer it in the shower. "I know you got off to a rough start all those years ago, but why not let it go? She's grown fond of you."

"Not sssso with the other one," Crowley gritted out, shifting so that his erection nudged up against Aziraphale's. He wasn't sure how dangerous this venture would prove, but he was both love-struck and lust-hazed enough to give it a try.

"Raphael, I fear, is no better than Michael in some respects, and I'm sorry for it."

Fervent apologies, as delivered by Aziraphale, were an unbelievable turn-on.

Crowley squirmed, leaning back enough to hook one slippery leg around him.

"Your news was...?"

"Not important," said Aziraphale, dismissively, and hefted Crowley up into his arms.

They got the bedclothes wet, but that kind of mishap was minor in light of the fact that Aziraphale unerringly knew just when a thorough shag was in order. Crowley shuddered with every slow thrust, his thighs screaming protest at the fact he'd wound both legs around Aziraphale's. Normally, he
wanted eye contact while Aziraphale took him, but, right now, *not* having eye contact while *he* took Aziraphale was just fine.

Better than fine, better than brain-bleach, better than anything on God's green earth.

"Please, yes, *do that*, yes," Aziraphale panted, craning his neck for a kiss. "*Soon.***"

Crowley obliged him and made a teeth-clashing mess of it, groping mindlessly in the sheets beneath them for Aziraphale's cock. He had just enough presence of mind left to throw his weight backwards, swinging them onto their sides at the last minute.

Aziraphale caught Crowley's free hand and dragged it across his belly, locking Crowley's wrist in a white-knuckled grip. "Oh, love. *Shouldn't, shouldn't* have left."

"I just—" Crowley faltered, his pace grown frantic "—want you to know—"

But adding *you're fucking perfect* would've been a moot point, what when he was already coming with great, ragged gasps and Aziraphale was a second behind him. In the damp, sticky silence that followed, the other shoe dropped.

"They've invited us on holiday," Aziraphale said at length, stroking Crowley's hip.

"I am *not* going to Canada," Crowley said firmly, turning his face into the pillow.

"They haven't invited us to Canada," Aziraphale replied, and suddenly everything was dry and comfortable again, except for the sweat cooling on their flushed skin, which Crowley actually quite enjoyed. "Or to California, for that matter."

"There goes the option of drinking myself stupid."

"Crowley, *shush*. You've a soft spot for New England, haven't you?"

Boston's perpetual construction nightmare *was* a thing of beauty and a joy forever.

"What part of it? They've got lots of tiny states you might miss if you blink."

"No, only the one—*something* to do with Island Road?—*and* we're not going there."

The decision had not only been made without his consent, but Aziraphale had also seemingly assumed that subjecting him to Raphael for an extended period of time was, as they say, *no big thing.*

"It's Rhode Island, angel. Get it right. You can borrow my world atlas for an afternoon." Crowley stretched, and then coiled himself into as little space as possible. "So, where *are* we going?" he asked peevishly.

"They've booked us a lovely holiday flat in Provincetown. Cape Cod, well within reach of the Boston grind?"

Crowley turned in Aziraphale's embrace, still wary. "If we're all staying in the same flat, you can count me out."

"Of course not," Aziraphale said, nuzzling his cheek. "They like privacy these days."
"Cop-outs," Crowley blurted. "Don't tell me they've settled down."

"We've settled down," Aziraphale pointed out, bemused.

"Yes," Crowley conceded, finally settling in for a cuddle, "but that's different."

He dozed for another forty-five minutes, calm and dreamless, until Aziraphale rattled in with a tray containing two mugs of Twinings Classic Irish Breakfast and a plate heaped with toasted soda bread. Comfort food. Crowley ate four pieces in quick succession and wrapped both hands around his mug, leaving the remaining two for Aziraphale. The angel ignored his mug in favor of lavishing attention on Crowley: arm snug around his waist, lips lingering at his temple, fingers combing through his hair.

"So long," Aziraphale murmured. "Deliberate choice on your part, dear boy?"

Crowley sipped his tea; it was milked and sweetened to perfection. "Neglect is more like it," he said. "Gross indifference. No more city crowd to impress. You don't seem to mind, so I don't either. By the way, don't think you're getting off so easy."

"I don't know about that. You didn't make it terribly difficult for me earlier."

Crowley's cheeks heated, and he set about finishing his tea with mute determination while Aziraphale happily ate the remaining pieces of soda bread. So utterly smug when he got in the last word. Absolutely sickening. Crowley adored him for it.

The garden was a breath of fresh air after the angel's insistent coddling. Crowley idly ran his fingertips across the heirloom tomato plants' leaves, making his way steadily toward the trellis. The Pisum sativum had yet to flower, much to his annoyance, although the royal purple clematis ran gleeful riot amidst the stubborn pea-vines. Crowley touched one vibrant petal and showered it with praise.

"You show them how it's done," he said, "and let them be grateful your root-systems share the same patch of soil. I've ripped sprouts up for less."

"And promptly repotted them," Aziraphale cut in, ambling leisurely down the path. "Pippa was ever so grateful for the alpine strawberries. They're thriving for her."

"Shhh," Crowley hissed. "Must you always undermine my authority?"

"Deep down, they know you've got a soft heart."

Crowley rolled his eyes and looked the other way, suppressing a smile.

"Just like you do, eh?"

"Tempting offer, but I'll not rise to it," said Aziraphale, admiring a Bermuda lily in full bloom. "You may want to take your North American field guides on this trip," he suggested. "The Cape is home to some fascinating flora, I'm told."

"Clever of Uriel, isn't it? Slipping that in to seal my complicity."
"She was very impressed with your handling of Pippa's begonias last spring. Perhaps she's got a bet going with Raphael concerning how easy you will—or won't—find turning your hand to the cultivation and disciplining of *Rosa rugosa.*"

Crowley ceased pinching dead leaves off the small, pathetic potted date-palm that the previous owner had left behind. He searched his memory for the scientific name Aziraphale had just used, but came up blank.


"Not originally native to America, according to this," Aziraphale said, drawing one of Crowley's pocket-sized Audubon guides from behind his back. "An Asian import, it would seem. The bushes ran riot on the islands off Massachusetts, and that was that. The dunes are covered with them, if this write-up is to be believed. They thrive in sandy soil and require no care; they’ll be here long after humanity is gone."

*And us,* Crowley thought, taking the open book from Aziraphale's freshly-moisturized hand. Bright fuschia to dusty pink blossoms against a fine-thorned, knee-high glossy sea of dark green leaves. Fierce, stark, and defiant. These prickly plants had *style.*

"I want one," he said, and stalked determinedly inside.

Google would surely enlighten him further.

2. *Stand your ground. Not all seedlings will show such principle.*

Aziraphale's second mistake, without a doubt, had been not telling Crowley till supper that they were leaving in four days' time. He ate scarcely half a dozen bites of shepherd's pie, after which point he spent the better part of the next forty-eight hours not speaking to Aziraphale above and beyond two-syllable responses whilst fretfully packing and web-surfing.

Aziraphale wondered if he'd run across the unfortunate fact that the UKBA would never permit him to bring back a cutting from one of those lovely rose bushes. He'd have to hope Crowley's smuggling skills were up to snuff.

Several hours before they were due to drive to West Drayton (Anathema had kindly agreed to let them stay overnight and then drive them to Heathrow at what Crowley dryly referred to as *arse o'clock*), Aziraphale sidled quietly up behind him in front of the full-length closet mirror. He was clearly discontent, fiddling with the top buttons of his new shirt. His hair had grown so much that it nearly brushed his collar.

The reflection of his eyes gleamed with accusatory doubt, fixed on Aziraphale's.

"Nobody's expecting you to look as if you've stepped straight off the runway at London Fashion Week," Aziraphale told him. "To the best of my recollection, Americans are very casual. They go in for t-shirts and whatnot. Perhaps wear your jeans instead?"

"I'm hardly going to wear the same trousers every day for five days," Crowley snapped, curtly unbuttoning his cuffs. "Besides, you know as well as I do that that insufferable twat of an Archangel will be judging me right down to the way I blink."
"I thought that's what the sunglasses were for," said Aziraphale, and then realized instantly it had been the wrong thing to say, not least because Crowley hardly bothered with them anymore except when they were out, around strangers—and, even then, enough of the locals had got used to his appearance that they accepted his unusual eye-coloring as either a medical condition or an unusual quirk of genetics. Pippa's young grandson was simply star-struck by them, and the first time Mandy at the café (home on break from uni) had seen them, she'd stood stammering for a full thirty seconds before gathering her wits sufficiently to take their drinks order.

"Let's hope it doesn't bucket down rain, then," Crowley said, lowering his eyes as he set about unbuttoning his shirt, fingers flying in quick, angry dips and plucks.

Aziraphale grabbed his hands, forcing them still. Crowley's fingers clenched in Aziraphale's grasp, and then went limp. His eyes remained fixed on the plush carpet, strangely impassive. In moments like that, he looked so foreign, so cold, so other.

Aziraphale breathed in to steady himself and pressed a quiet kiss to Crowley's nape.

"You," he said, "are beautiful in spite of yourself, in spite of every assumption Raphael could possibly make. I won't let him belittle you, and I won't let you belittle yourself."

"He's made quite a lot of them over time," Crowley said, his lips scarcely moving.

"Yes," said Aziraphale, patiently, "and, in every case, you've proven him wrong."

Crowley sighed and reluctantly lifted his chin, staring haughtily down the bridge of his nose at their reflection. He wrapped Aziraphale's arms around his waist, shifting his weight slightly from one high-arched bare foot to the other, wriggling his toes.

"What do you think she sees in him, a whip-smart creature like her?"

Aziraphale pursed his lips; it was his turn to stare at the floor, although Crowley's feet were distracting. He had sensitive ankles. Aziraphale hadn't known that was possible.

"To play devil's advocate, she once asked me the same thing about you."

Crowley nodded, apparently unsurprised. "And what was your answer?"

"I told her to mind her own fucking business," said Aziraphale.

"Would you tell me? If I ever decided to ask you, I mean."

Aziraphale closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Crowley's wayward hair.

"If I've failed to show you at any time since we arrived here, then I'm undeserving."

They spoke no further that evening, but not out of anger. They were half an hour late getting on the road, and Crowley was moody again in no time thanks to an unplanned petrol stop. Fortunately, Anathema's effusive welcome melted his icy demeanor in no time. He quickly lost himself in a few glasses of wine, as Anathema's teenage twins, Janet and Natalie, kept peering in from the hallway to stare at him (until Newt, without looking up from his iPad, told them to go back to bed or they'd be banned from using his Angry Birds app for a week).
Aziraphale fought the urge to regard them the same way he did Mandy: with completely unwarranted coldness. They could not take what was his, no matter how thoroughly they may fantasize about trying.

Crowley set down his wine-glass and stretched, offering Anathema an apologetic grin.

"It's been a long day, and I'm knackered. I hope you'll excuse me?"

"You could've just buggered off to bed, and I'd have thought nothing of it," said Anathema, waving her hand in the direction of the hallway. She was on her third glass of wine, and Aziraphale was somewhat concerned about the fact she had to drive them in the morning. "You know formalities aren't neck—necessary," she enunciated. "We're beyond them. Sleep tight, and I'd lock the door if I were you."

"Why?" Crowley asked, already halfway there, but he stopped. "Oh," he said. "Oh."

Once he'd gone in a flustered hurry, Aziraphale and Anathema burst out laughing.

"What is it this time?" Anathema finally asked, once they'd regained their composure.

"Not job woes, thank goodness," Aziraphale said, wiping an errant tear off the side of his nose. "Unemployment suits him very well. It's this trip we're taking, you see. They're old friends of mine—older even than him, although not by much; I do try not to mention it—and he's never got on with one of them in particular."

Anathema's expression softened, and her eyes grew distant. "I know I've never met them, but I feel as if I must have. Very long ago, perhaps, or maybe not just yet."

Aziraphale should've known that excessive alcohol would bring Agnes out in full force.

"Listen, dear girl," he said, leaning to close the space between them as he reached for her hand. "Pray that you never do. Pray with all your might, mind, and strength. The likes of me, I'm for interaction, even acquaintance and friendship, with mortals in the most ordinary of times. The friends of which I speak? If they ever make themselves known to you beyond just passing by, a glance in the street, if ever you found yourself offering them shelter or the other way around, you'd know things were over. You'd know this precious world of ours was done for. Of all people, you must know this."

There it was: the widening in horrified amazement, the ring of electric flame from the fake hearth catching fire in Anathema's dark eyes as she saw what might have been.

"You didn't tell me about her," said Anathema, quietly. "My Sophia. Thank the stars she's not home this weekend. You didn't tell me that if things had gone differently—"

"She would have loved Adam Young regardless, come the End or come nothing."

"They're getting married," Anathema sighed. "Next spring. Did I tell you?"

"No, my dear, you did not," said Aziraphale, beaming. "A toast!"

Anathema was hung-over the next morning, but it didn't impair her driving.
Aziraphale had seen to that.

Once they'd checked in (first-class priority, express lane, the whole nine yards; Crowley did love his conveniences), Terminal 5 offered an array of shiny distractions, which Crowley, strangely enough, ignored. He parked himself in one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs, safely hidden behind his sunglasses and the smartest suit he could conjure, and told Aziraphale to knock himself out. Harrod's was that way, Bulgari was that way, and there was apparently something called Chocolate Box that sounded quite sinful. Aziraphale bent and kissed him before wandering off.

He wished he'd been able to see Crowley's eyes, because the demon's expression had remained neutral. If this sulk was going to last a while, he'd best get on with determining how best to break it. Under normal circumstances, given a leisurely morning, sex and a cozy breakfast would have solved any stroppy conundrum Crowley was capable of throwing his way. Maybe the chocolate place would have cocoa.

In the end, Aziraphale drank the cocoa and ate the croissant himself while Crowley continued reading whatever surprising novel he'd ordered most recently from Waterstones. A glance at the cover told him it was another one of those brooding, yet beautiful existential epics he was forever finding in the covers at the foot of the bed.

Crowley slept through most of the flight, curled sideways in his seat, leaning heavily on Aziraphale's shoulder and snuggled into the curve of his neck. Aziraphale vanished the sunglasses so that they were no longer digging into his jugular. The stewardess brought him a tiny bottle of scotch and a glass of ice every time he asked.

"Out like a light, poor thing," she said, regarding Crowley with amused pity.

"You'ave no idea," Aziraphale slurred. "Another, if you please."

Crowley woke up half an hour before landing, just as the stewardess was handing Aziraphale their landing cards. He snuffled groggily and rubbed his eyes, at which point several things happened in quick succession. The stewardess screamed, Aziraphale dropped the landing cards, and Crowley performed a quick pat-down examination of his nose-temple-forehead-eyebrows with barely concealed fury.

He lowered his eyes and shushed the stewardess, reaching for her placatingly while Aziraphale collected the landing cards off the floor.

"It's a condition," Crowley said. "Don't be startled." And, with much more composure than he actually had to hand, he calmly reached inside his jacket and drew out a pair of sunglasses. "There," he said, and put them on. "Much better." He tilted his head up and flashed her a winning smile.

She moved off in a hurry, and Crowley's smile faded the instant Aziraphale had finished messing about with the landing cards (which had included miracling their information onto them; he'd grown good at forging Crowley's tidy, angular script).

"Why, why did you do that?" he demanded, snatching his card away from the angel.

"Do what?" asked Aziraphale, helplessly, still rather drunk.

"Remove them," Crowley snapped, leaning forward to sniff Aziraphale's breath.
"You were asleep," said Aziraphale, vaguely hurt. "They were digging into my neck."

Crowley's eyebrows unwrinkled, and the tension at the corners of his mouth subsided.

"Sssorry," he sighed, and turned to watch the harbor below loom ever closer.

According to the rental car's sat-nav, the drive from Logan International to Provincetown should've taken two hours and five minutes. In reality, it took three hours of navigating what felt like one interminable, jammed stretch of highway. Crowley blared '90s rock stations and laid on the horn almost cheerfully. Harsh on the ears, but an improvement, Aziraphale thought. He even liked some of the songs.

Four hours later, once Crowley had negotiated weekend-long parking and they'd argued over who was carrying which suitcases, they settled into the agreed rendezvous point, which was Café Heaven at 199 Commercial Street. Crowley didn't appreciate the joke; then again, he'd never been one for Raphael's heavy-handed (and sometimes cruel) sense of humor. He ordered cappuccino and resumed reading his book, leaving Aziraphale to dither over the menu and handle the admittedly very handsome waiter, at whose urging he caved in and ordered Eggs Benedict.

By the time a familiar pair of ne'er-do-wells swaggered up to their table, Crowley had warmed to sharing Aziraphale's food and was happily picking apart tiny complexities of plot and characterization in *Doomsday Book*. Aziraphale smiled and let him continue, as yet unwilling to acknowledge Raphael's impatient foot-tapping.

"I only just realized it!" Crowley continued, thumping the table. "She was up against a wagon wheel; *no wonder* Roche thinks she's St. Catherine. And now she's healed the younger brat's leg wound using old Communion wine as antiseptic, so of *course*—"

"It'll end in tears," Raphael drawled. "Which ought to please you."

The rest of Crowley's breath left him in a low, aggravated hiss. He paused, composed himself, deliberately removed his sunglasses, and placed them neatly inside his coat.

"Thanks for the spoiler," Crowley said tartly, fixing the Archangel with a sharp smile. "Hi."

Aziraphale couldn't help feeling a swell of pride. He hadn't miscalculated the pep-talk.

Uriel elbowed Raphael out of the way and attacked Crowley with a hug that nearly rocked him out of his chair.

"You look like a movie star!" she exclaimed, smacking a loud kiss on his cheek. "Oh my God, your hair. I love it," she said, tousling it with artful care. While Crowley scrambled uselessly at her forearms, trying to wrestle her off, she gave Raphael a knowing look and said, "Be nice."

"Oh, it's all we can any of us be," he assured her, still shaking Aziraphale's hand. "Except for that one. What's the latest on the Dig? Another twenty years? Thirty?"

"I wouldn't know," Crowley said, finally untangling himself from Uriel's enthusiasm. Remembering propriety, he rose and kissed her on the cheek. "I lost my job."

Uriel gasped. "When did *that* happen? And how are you still here?"
"A year and a half ago," Aziraphale answered for him. "The same way all of us are."

"All that overspending was bound to catch up with them," said Raphael. Aziraphale tactfully busied himself with piling his used silverware onto the plate.

Uriel put an arm around Crowley's neck, beaming. Crowley gave her a nervous grin. "So much catching up to do. Is shopping your thing, or is that just Aziraphale?"

"Er," Crowley said, and shrugged. "There's always beachcombing. Much cheaper."

"You won't find many shells here," Raphael said, heading for the door. "Right, accommodation's just a stroll up the road. Pip-pip, tally-ho, and all that, chaps!"

Aziraphale noticed that Crowley was bristling, but Uriel had him in check. "There's a shop that sells some," she told him. "I saw it when we drove in."

"Sells what?" Crowley ventured as they filed into the street. "Ball gags, or shells?"

"You be nice, too," said Uriel, taking his arm as they followed Raphael's lead.

For once, Aziraphale was grateful to have some assistance on damage control.


Check-in at Angels' Landing was everything Raphael had hoped it would be: painless, efficient, and a massive source of annoyance to one Anthony James Crowley. Between that and Café Heaven, he'd wedged in a thorn for the duration.

“I've put you in numbers 17 and 18,” explained the receptionist. “I don't care who goes where, as long as it's only two of you sleeping in each suite at any given time. Otherwise, I've got to charge extra. Parties are okay by me, but make sure you don't bother your neighbors or break anything, and make sure to kick your friends out before bedtime, no matter how late that is.”

“Fabulous,” said Raphael, and dropped one of the two sets of keys into Crowley's impatient palm. It had a tag reading #18 - FALLEN ANGEL. Raphael's own set was labeled #17 - ANGEL'S FOLLY. “We're the balcony directly above you. Yours has a ground-level view of the garden. Unless you'd like to swap?”

“I'll take my chances with the plantssss,” Crowley hissed, snapping his fingers. The receptionist had already turned to another task, and therefore didn't notice that his luggage and Aziraphale's had vanished. “Come on, angel. Let's get settled.”

Aziraphale followed him out of the office without any protest.

“I simply don't like it,” Raphael said, turning to Uriel, who'd already wrangled all of their luggage onto her back and into the crooks of her arms and around her delicate wrists. So slender, so strong. Later, he'd have her in handcuffs.
“You don't like what?” she asked, smirking. “That they're ridiculously happy?”

“No,” he said, leading the way into the breezy courtyard. “I don't like the fact that that serpent has our mutual friend cock-whipped or pussy-whipped or whatever-the-hell-he's-got-down-there whipped. There's danger in relinquishing the upper hand.”

“I think you're full of shit,” Uriel told him. “And also not seeing straight. Whatever he's got down there is his business. I don't see you flashing your freak-show voluntarily.”

Raphael grinned and dashed up the stairs, sliding the key smoothly into #17's lock.

“You like my freak-show just fine,” he told her, winking, and went inside.

The real kicker, Raphael thought as he unpacked his things, was that Crowley really was gorgeous. That wasn't up for dispute. Losing the sunglasses was an excellent decision, because who wouldn't want to see those stunning pupils widened in unabashed pleasure? If not for the fact that Aziraphale would have cut him in half with a certain lost-but-retrievable-in-moments-of-extreme-need object, he'd have had the demon long ago. But not for a lover, never for a lover. His sort, Raphael imagined, were best kept for casual amusement, perhaps the odd dalliance.

Uriel's grey eyes bored furiously into the back of his head.

*How dare you,* she sent plaintively. *You racist asshole!*

*Race has nothing to do with it,* Raphael countered, humming in satisfaction as he hung up a few skirts. *We're all the same stock, remember? I mean, look at him; clearly a fallen angel and not one of those lumps born down there. Have you seen Duke Hastur?*

*Fine,* Uriel snapped, knocking his skirts on the floor as she hung up some tank tops. *Then you're a bigot. Which is sick and ironic in all the worst ways. You know Hastur and that persistent sidekick of his were with us before the Fall. Knock it off.*

“As you will,” he purred, retrieving the skirts. “Which one of these for dinner?”

“Who cares,” said Uriel, from the bathroom. “You look like a hooker in all of them.”

Raphael sat down on the bed and removed his hat. It hadn't all been wine and roses, learning to live with her. She was anal-retentive about cleanliness, to the point where she'd scrubbed down his entire apartment within a week of her most recent arrival. Six months on, the place still smelled like Clorox. She insisted on doing the dishes right after they ate, and she didn't like leaving clothes lying everywhere after sex. Which had, much to Raphael's alarm, grown more tame and familiar over time. Leather and foodstuffs had fallen out of favor. At least she still liked being tied up. And he was relieved that she was content to call San Francisco home for now.

There were some other nasty trade-offs, though—such as all the restless dead that tended to hang around waiting for her. Dominion Over the Souls of Men, the ones not neatly whisked off by Azrael to one place or the other, meant that she'd acquired all the hang-ups of a human social worker.

Uriel's sometime duties as Holy Assassin had mostly fallen by the wayside, as humans almost always took the initiative in such matters these days. Still, she'd been the best archer in Heaven's army. Tanith had been second-best, and Uriel had been disconsolate when she'd Fallen.
Raphael wondered if he’d only ever be, at most, an entertaining substitute.

Just then, Uriel emerged from the bathroom. She'd ditched her jeans and tee for a sun-dress and sandals, a rare enough vision in its own right.

Raphael stared at her.

“You're really not pretending, are you?” Uriel said, fastening her hoop earrings.

Raphael offered her a hand. “You are the loveliest creature this side of Paradise.”

Uriel slid easily into his lap and played absently with his short, textured hair.

“Let it grow again,” she begged. “I remember your wild auburn mane even now.”

“Don't you dare grow yours out,” Raphael whispered in her ear, letting a hand slide down to the small of her back. She wasn't wearing anything under the sun-dress. Her sandals dropped to the floor. “You seemed to like the snake's an awful lot. I won't dye mine black, not even for you.”

“You'd look like a trimmer, gothed-up version of Eddie Izzard,” she said. “Appealing, but it really wouldn't suit. Your hair looks great on fire, and I should know.” His skirt melted into firmament between them, and she canted her hips forward with a sigh.

Uriel liked the fact he was an easy fit, none of the pain of adjusting to inch after thick inch. He had just enough to fuck with, and just enough besides for being fucked. He wondered why biology didn't permit the birth of more humans with such variations, and he wondered why they stigmatized and cut each other up when they were. It all worked just fine; hadn't they figured that out?

They turned up for dinner in excellent spirits, although Uriel still had him on notice.

Aziraphale had sorted out a picnic basket—excuse him, hamper, and the accent still rankled no matter how many times Raphael heard it—and a blanket on the sand. He beckoned, and then thrust a glass of wine in each of their hands once they'd settled.

Crowley was nowhere in immediate evidence.

“Scared him off too soon, did I?” Raphael asked, raising his glass. “Apologies.”

“Not in the least,” Aziraphale said, taking a sip of what turned out to be an excellent blush. He gestured off down the strand, his eyes following. “He wanted to get a head start, you see. Find out if what you said was really true.”

Uriel snorted. “Which part of what he said? He says a lot, and not much of it's true.”

“About the shells, at a guess,” Raphael sighed. “Look, it's true. If it's shells he likes and you're hell-bent on keeping him happy, which I can see you are, why didn't you just talk me out of the Cape and suggest Sanibel instead?”

“This is a sensible halfway point,” Aziraphale said. “And I fear I don't know much about shelling, although if you let me join him for a moment, I'm sure I can sort out a find worth his while, and we can get on with supper.”
Uriel drained her wine as they watched him shuffle off toward the water. He looked ridiculous, Raphael thought, barefoot in his spectacles and all that tweed. He could stand to lose twenty pounds, and why in the world was that so irresistible to a demon, anyway? Ample proof of Gluttony? It wasn't natural for their kind to need this; you could argue it was a choice open to any of them, but did they need it? Not really. Gabriel was married to his desk-job, and Michael wasn't interested in a relationship unless it involved beating someone—or something—up.

Raphael refilled Uriel's glass and gave it back to her.

“Watch them,” Uriel said gently, turning up his palm so that she could cross it with a with a sprinkling of fine, white sand.

Raphael turned his gaze back to the sea.

Aziraphale was standing ankle-deep in the quickly approaching surf, examining something in Crowley's cupped hands. Even at that distance, you couldn't help but notice that the demon's eyes glowed. What could've raised his spirits so dramatically?

“Aziraphale cheats,” Uriel explained. “Miracles up all kinds of things. Coins, rings, tiles, priceless relics from the deep.” She rose to her knees, smoothing down her skirt as the wind buffeted it about her thighs, quicksilver eyes squinting in their direction. “It's gold from the Whydah,” she continued. “Maybe he dredged it from the sea floor, or maybe he spirited it out of the museum that's not even a mile from here. My point is, Rafe, that you can't buy love like that. You just can't. It happens or it doesn't, and if it does, in Aziraphale's shoes, you'd move Heaven, Earth, and Hell to keep Crowley safe and content. Don't you think he's suffered enough? Don't you remember what happened? He's escaped: one eternal, deathless soul out of so many thousands.”

“Luck,” Raphael murmured. “The devil's own.” She was thinking of Tanith, and it made his heart clench. He hated, hated, hated his human nickname, but she enjoyed the unique privilege of getting to call him that without suffering verbal torment.

Crowley let Aziraphale kiss him, not even caring who might see. Moody creatures, demons. One moment, they've got daggers for you; the next, they'll snog you silly.

After they ate cheese and pickle sandwiches (vile, but it was obvious this constituted one of Crowley's favorite foods) and drank their way through two more bottles of Barefoot Zinfandel (not the best California fare, after all, but the best they could do out East, what with how little of the gross total production got exported), Uriel tipsily tugged Crowley to his feet and hauled him back down to the water. She'd taken the basket—hamper—so they could toss further finds in it. At a distance, they were a sterling facsimile of carefree humans doing what humans did best: make discoveries.

From the look of things, Uriel was cheating a lot.

Aziraphale looked somewhat relieved to be off the hook for a little while. Raphael offered him some more wine, but, this time, the bottle wasn't labeled Barefoot. It was Rosenblum Cellars' holy grail of red Zins, the legendary 2005 Paso Robles.

“Crowley will be sorry he's missing this,” Aziraphale said. “Save him a glass?”

“I'll save you a glass,” Raphael replied, pouring some for himself, “and if you want to give it to him, that's no skin off my back.”
Aziraphale's expression suggested he wasn't pleased. “Still like it rough, do you?”

“She's happy to oblige,” said Raphael, trying for nonchalance. He hadn't succeeded.

“I see,” mused Aziraphale. “She's thinner than I remember. Do you feed her at all, I wonder, you fashionistas out there in New Sodom?”

“Don't look at me like that. Of course I do. She's taken up a strenuous form of yoga.”

Aziraphale didn't look impressed. “If you hurt her,” he said, calmly sipping his wine, “I'll see to it that you never again enjoy what you so callously take for granted.”


“You ought to've comforted her when it happened, but all you did was watch.”

“And, as I recall, you were right there beside me.”

“Yes, I was, for all my sins. But I wasn't laughing with you.”

“Did you know he was there amongst the Fallen? Did you even know who he was until he slithered up to you one fine day in a garden that none of us will ever see again?”

“I didn't,” said Aziraphale, as if the admission pained him. “I mean, I knew who they were in a general sense, you know, our sisters and brothers, but...”

“Does he please you?” asked Raphael. “How often do you, how did you put it, enjoy that skinny, neurotic piece of infernal arse?” The last word tasted strange, sounded ludicrous passing his lips. He couldn't mimic their diction, not even to ridicule.

Aziraphale didn't speak for a long time. He finished his wine, watching the two figures growing ever more distant down the strand. His clear blue eyes never wavered.

“As often as he'll have me,” he said, so softly Raphael almost didn't hear him. “I'm dreaming, I think, endlessly, that he's content to share my bed. There's nothing he won't gladly take, nothing he won't willingly give. He has nightmares like you wouldn't believe—dear boy, don't look so shocked. He's seen horrors at which we can't possibly guess, and if you think I'm talking about Hell, guess again. He was in England during the Plague and in Spain during the Inquisition. That book he's reading, for example: if I've got the shape of it from what he's said and from reading the dust jacket, he'll have bad dreams for a month afterward. I'm tempted to toss it in the sea, if you want to know the truth, but he'd never forgive me. He'll risk no end of heartbreak for even one moment of heart-stopping beauty. Tell me, is there something like that coming?”

Fucking Christ. First Uriel's infuriating insight, and now this.

“Let him finish it,” said Raphael, convinced that the stinging in his eyes was sand.


What bothered Raphael the most wasn't the fact that Crowley was a demon, not really. It was just
how astonishingly well they were making the relationship work.

_You can never come home_, he told Aziraphale, the thought heavy with regret.

_I didn't want to twenty-two years ago, not even when the door was standing wide open, and I don't now. Whatever happens, I'll stay here with him. And you're wrong._

_About what?_ Raphael frowned at him.

_Eden_, Aziraphale said, already rising to meet Crowley and Uriel. _It's here. All around us. Every bird, every mouse, every fish, and every last shining grain of sand._

The demon wore a crown of bright beach roses, thorns catching in his windswept hair.

Judging by Aziraphale's expression, there wasn't any part of Crowley's anatomy, whatever it might be, that would lack for the attention of his hands, his mouth, and his solid, comforting body long into morning. The thought made Raphael shiver.
And even though Uriel's fingertips were cut to shreds for her flower-picking trouble, she was still the loveliest thing that Raphael had ever seen: standing there with a basket of damp, sand-dusted treasures in the bruised crook of her arm.

“It's cold,” Raphael said, stumbling to his feet. He draped his shirt around her.

“Pretty fly, but you could use a tan,” she said, and went up on tiptoe to kiss him.

For all his sins, he let her.

4. Never lose your sense of wonder. Always turn toward the sun.

Uriel woke to the sound of muffled snoring, which wasn't unusual of itself.

What was strange was how clear-headed she felt, even after how much they'd all drunk. She'd known Aziraphale to surreptitiously fix things for people—total strangers, even, not just for his best-friend-turned-lover. She sat straight up in bed.

Was that the problem with her and Raphael, she wondered: that they hadn't bothered to become friends first? The sex had always been fantastic, no questions asked, although she had the sneaking suspicion that, as satisfied as they were, Raphael was starting to worry. She had less of a tolerance for complicated gear, and sticky bedclothes, where once she'd endured them for his sake, were nigh unthinkable. She'd grown more assertive, had fewer reservations about telling him what didn't work.

That was what friends did, wasn't it? Told the truth even when it hurt?

Raphael rolled over and reached for her, but got an armful of pillow instead.

Uriel slipped out of bed and wandered over to the sliding glass door. If someone reported her for public nudity, she'd accept the consequences. It was a beautiful morning. She unlocked the door, slid it open, and stepped out onto the balcony.

Down below, Crowley, in a ratty Bentley-logo tee and faded blue-and-white plaid pajama bottoms, crouched next to the garden verge. He prodded a sturdy Solomon’s Seal stalk with careful fingers, asking it some question too hushed for her to hear.

Uriel covered her mouth, but it was too late.

Crowley stood to attention, his cheeks turning faintly pink when he finally looked up.

“Good morning,” said Uriel, laughing. “I'm sorry. You're rather reserved, aren't you?”

“I've seen naked women,” Crowley replied. “Usually not by preference, but I don't find you repulsive, so, yeah. Keen. Might as well add woman-shaped angels to the list.”

“Have you ever lain with one?” Uriel asked—not to be rude, but because it was so rare to have the opportunity to ask him such questions. “A woman, I mean,” she clarified. Aziraphale would tell her anything provided she got him drunk enough, and it had always been disappointing to hear, decade after decade after century, that he'd never slept with anybody. She was of the opinion he'd accrue the kind of conquests worth relating. Human bodies were a miracle, in her estimation. Best invention
since wings.

Crowley appeared to have turned pink again, but it might have been sunburn.

“No,” he said. “I've never really been so...inclined.”

“What about with men? And, no, Aziraphale doesn't count, because he's like us.”

“What does that mean?” asked Crowley, frowning at her. “No. Not with men, either.”

“Not human, is what it means,” said Uriel, standing up. Her nipples peaked in the cool morning air, and she couldn't help but notice that Crowley had averted his gaze.

“But we're like them,” Crowley said. “At least in part. Now, like this, as we are.”

Uriel leaned forward again, hugging herself against the chill. The demon looked up at her again, thoughtfully chewing his lower lip. He was studying her wrists. “You have bruises,” he said.

“And you've got a hickey,” she countered.

Crowley rubbed at his neck, suddenly self-conscious.

“From the luggage,” Uriel said, showing him her inner arms just below the elbow.

“You had those yesterday,” he said slowly, “but not the ones on your wrists.”

“Handcuffs,” she said, grinning down at him. “Ever try them?”

Crowley's eyes went so dark they held nearly no color at all. “I've had more than enough of restraints in other contexts,” he said, and crouched back down beside the Solomon's Seal. He set a hand on one broad, strong leaf.

“Get back in here, for God's sake,” Raphael groaned from inside.

“In a minute,” she said. “Let me do some stretches.”

“We may be in P-town, darling, but this is the US of A. Prudes everywhere.”

“Fuck 'em,” she said, already folded in half on the rug-covered concrete.

They met up for breakfast at Café Heaven. In spite of how relaxed Crowley seemed in comparison to the day before, he was strangely quiet. She'd expected him to open up after the beachcombing they'd done, during which she'd fetched him no fewer than six precious objects: an intact seventeenth-century clay pipe, a Viking glass bead that had been manufactured near York sometime in the late nine-hundreds, an Egyptian burial amulet shaped like a bunch of grapes that had been with the mummy on the Titanic, another coin from the Whydah (this one silver), a tiny doll's arm carved from pearly grey granite, and a wave-tumbled piece of Baltic amber (rather a stretch).

Maybe it was too early. Aziraphale had once told her he wasn't a morning person.

“What should we do today?” Uriel asked. She'd dressed casually, low-riding denim shorts and a top that, Raphael said, showed off her archer's arms to perfection. He was, as she was so fond of telling
him, full of shit, because she was out of practice.

“You'd mentioned you like shopping?” said Crowley, uncertainly.

“Leave that to your sugar daddy and me,” she said, and winked at him.

Crowley's sunburnt cheeks went very pink indeed. She hadn't been seeing things.

Aziraphale, on the other hand, didn't get the joke. He smiled at her beneficently.

“I'd be up for a stroll through the shops,” he said. “The high street's full of them.”

“Main street,” Crowley corrected him. “They don't say that here.”

“A high street is a high street,” Aziraphale insisted. “This is New England, after all.”

“You'll never hear this out of me again, but: what Crowley said,” Raphael added.

The demon rolled his eyes and flagged down a waitress.

Before she had the chance to scream, Aziraphale miracled his sunglasses into place.

“How often does that happen?” Uriel asked him later, once they'd all finished their Eggs Benedict, French toast, and Maine-blueberry pancakes and piled into the nearest shop. She picked up a handcrafted leather wallet and noticed that the man who'd made it was based in the Bay Area. She'd look him up when she got home. Raphael came into contact with lots of artists on a passing basis; surely he'd—

Home. Oh hell no. Was she that far gone?

“It's a strange feeling, I must admit,” said Aziraphale, from behind her, placing reassuring hands on her arms, her wrists, her hips. The tender spots faded, although she was sorry to lose them. “How often does what happen, dear girl?”

“How often do you have to cover for him? Make sure he doesn't put his foot in it?”

“Hardly at all,” Aziraphale said. “In fact, I'm more often prone to exposing him when he'd rather stay hidden—of which I'm hardly proud.”

Uriel traced the black-and-teal wave pattern tooled into the soft leather.

“He's got such a sense of wonder,” she said. “Everything is always and already new.”

Aziraphale hummed in agreement, reaching around her to inspect the price tag.

“His delight in the small and peculiar knows no bounds.”

“Those windscreen transfers were hilarious,” Uriel said, letting Aziraphale take the wallet out of her hands for inspection. “I hope he never grows out of it. What a dork! Actually, though, it's kind of hot, so I don't blame you for loving him. Sorry I ever doubted. Speaking of dorky, how long did it take him to fess up to the fact that he devours literary fiction and SF novels like a procrastinating first-year English major?”
“I caught him out shortly after we started living together.”

“You mean sleeping together.”

“Living. The rest of it came after,” Aziraphale said, tucking the wallet under his arm.

“You moved in with him before taking him to bed? I'm impressed.” Uriel grabbed for the wallet, but Aziraphale turned and walked toward the till. “Seriously, don't you dare. It's a hundred and twelve dollars, and Crowley's lost his job.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” said Aziraphale. “You deserve nice things.”

“Both my thanks and my protestations fall on deaf ears,” Uriel lamented, but she couldn't stop grinning. “Where have they got off to? Rafe's probably trapped Crowley in a fitting room and won't let him out till he tries on something outrageous.”

“Oh, they're over the road in one of the gallery shops,” Aziraphale said, handing his debit card to the proprietor. “Crowley saw a painting, and Rafe saw lots of paintings. They won't come out till they've inspected everything.”

“He's what you've always wanted,” Uriel said, “From the very Beginning. I can tell.”

Aziraphale thanked the proprietor and handed the tissue-wrapped parcel to Uriel.

“What's that, my dear?”

“Someone to coddle and do for and cherish and call your very own.” She would have ended with call George, but Aziraphale wouldn't have recognized that joke, either.

Aziraphale sighed. “I suppose you're right. From the moment our paths crossed, I couldn't leave him. Not knowing who he was, not knowing I'd done nothing when...”

“I forgive you,” said Uriel, and it was harder than she'd have thought. “Rafe, too.”

“I didn't want to think I'd let him into my existence out of guilt. It was a very long time before I realized that wasn't it at all. I couldn't put my finger on it. Not till now.”

“I'm glad it wasn't guilt,” Uriel said, “but he'd have been completely lost out there, in the grand scheme of things, without someone to share all his treasures with.”

Aziraphale smiled sadly. “Not lost, I should think—just very misguided and lonely.”

“And you,” said Uriel, darkly, “would have been a holy terror.”

“Let's go find them,” said Aziraphale, tone mildly warning, and strode out of the shop.

Uriel followed, but she kept some distance. Arrows were no match for a sword at close range.

They found Crowley trying to talk Raphael out of making a purchase.

“Paintings don't travel well,” said the demon, desperately. “Packing's expensive.”
“Pffft,” said Raphael. “I thought you were more persuasive than that.” He winked at the dour-looking woman beside them who was clearly waiting for an answer. “That'll be a yes. Send it to Angels' Landing.” He handed her a stack of bills that, at a glance, contained an extra few hundred at least. “Fantastic doing business with you.”

Crowley slunk to Aziraphale's side. “Make it stop,” he pleaded.

Aziraphale studied the canvas while the woman counted Raphael's cash.

“This isn't your taste at all, Rafe,” he said. “Surreal color washes, blatant abstraction—”

“As I was saying to Crowley, I wouldn't dream of setting foot in your cottage until it's properly decorated,” Raphael said casually. He got right in Aziraphale's face.

Uriel felt her stomach drop through the floor. Her right hand flew instinctively to her back, grasped at empty air. But that could be fixed, so very easily fixed...

Raphael said, “Do you love him—”

“Tread carefully—”

“—more than anything else in Creation,” Raphael ploughed on. “Answer me true.”

Torn between duty and compassion, Uriel let her arm fall limp and stepped close to Crowley, pulling him back from Aziraphale's side. He'd gone whiter than the sand, his worried yellow eyes blazing and uncovered for all to see. She held him.

Oblivious to the showdown happening in front of her, the woman murmured something that sounded like Be right back, counting greenbacks, and left the room.

Aziraphale stood his ground and said, “I do.”

Raphael's deadly expression melted. In its place, naked admiration.

“Then it's yours,” he said, and clapped Aziraphale on the shoulder. “Enjoy.”

“We're leaving,” Uriel said, patting a stunned Crowley on the shoulder. She grabbed Raphael's hand and started for the door, hauling him along with all her might. “We'll catch up with you for dinner. Lobster Pot at seven? What do you say?”

“He bought us a painting,” Crowley said, flabbergasted.

Aziraphale sighed and rubbed his temples.

“Fine,” he said. “Yes. Splendid.”

The last thing Uriel saw was how quickly Aziraphale forgot they were still there, forgot the woman was still there, forgot everyone else in the world was still there. He held Crowley so close she thought their atoms might combine and occupy the same space.

So much for that dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin question.
Breathless and half a block away, she brought Raphael to a painful halt.

“Don't do that again,” said Uriel, and shoved him up against the side of a convenient brick building. “You're a bigot and a bully and a busybody and I don't even—”

“He's fine,” said Raphael, actually raising his arms to shield himself from her blows. “It's all fine, I'm done. I understand now, but before, I just couldn't—”

“Couldn't stand not having whatever it is they have,” Uriel spat. “Covetous fuck.”

And then she noticed how pale and scared he looked under all that eye make-up.

Raphael's words left him in a devastated rush. “I'm sorry, I had it, we had it, I was too stupid to see it, I didn't know how—”

Uriel gave in and clung to him, burying her face in his expensive shirt.

“There's no how,” she cried, snarling her fingers in the sheer fabric. “And no why!”

“A war would have been good for us,” said Raphael, unsteadily. He kissed her gel-spiked hair, traced her ribs, realizing for the first time how gaunt she'd grown.

“I want lobster,” she seethed. “And I love you, you stupid fucking cunt.”

Raphael blinked in amazement. His eyes were filled with tears.

“I can't go back to the Beginning. I can't change my actions. I can't bring her back from Hell. I can't be what she was, but I can be myself, and maybe if you'd let me...”

She looked up at him, sniffing loudly. “Yes?”

“Love you, darling,” he said. “Flawed as I am.”

Uriel wiped her nose on his shirt, but she was smiling.

“Let's try this again,” she said. “England in the spring. There's a wedding.”

“Rules are rules,” Raphael said, touching her cheek wistfully.

“And if those two can break them, so can we. I'm sick to death of them, rules.”

“So am I, darling,” he said, blinking dazedly into the sunlight. “So am I.”

Uriel led him back into the street, giddy with how tightly he held her hand.

And once they'd all gone home, she'd send wild roses to a cottage by the sea.
Chapter Summary

Another question, perhaps more interesting than musing on how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, would be: *Do angels have to worry about sand in awkward places?*

**Moonlighting**

Uriel fished in the packet between them, careful not to up-end it in the sand, and delicately extracted another cigarette. She lit it, shivering, sheltering the flame she'd produced with a snap of her fingers. Raphael's blue eyes—*So like Aziraphale's*, she thought—flickered with amusement.

She couldn't tell whether he was laughing at her or at the action going on twenty yards off to her left.

“Always thought it'd be the other way around, didn't you?” Uriel asked, flicking a shower of ash at the stars. She missed Orion in summer; she didn't know why.

“Not so loud,” Raphael murmured, reaching for the cigarette. “They'll hear.”

“Get your own, dude,” she said, taking a long, dizzying drag. “We have five left.”

“Uneven numbers never bode well,” he said, producing a lit Cuban from nowhere.

“I mean it,” Uriel said, squinting through the shadows produced by the artificial light filtering dimly down from the street far behind them. “I'd have sooner thought...”

The mess of tartan blankets was overkill, because there'd be sand everywhere by the time they got around to a walk of shame back to #18 in the early hours of morning, but the couple under it seemed genuinely oblivious. She hadn't heard them pause breathe or even to speak, but then, they didn't *need* to breathe, no more than she needed to smoke, and, if she listened closely, the only audio more obvious than the bass-line of deep, constant kissing was Crowley's complete inability to stifle the broken sounds he made when Aziraphale moved under him.

Or at least she thought that's the order they were in; Crowley's tumble of black hair, waving profusely in the humidity, was about the only thing not covered by those awful blankets. She didn't think they were foolish enough to risk total undress, but you didn't pile on the cover if you weren't reasonably exposed. She imagined them both naked from the waist down, their skin prickling with sweat at all that swaddling wool, and her own skin prickled with a flash of heat and faint want.

Raphael picked the burnt-out cigarette stub from between her fingers. He scooted up behind her, legs spread, and drew her back tight against his chest, raising the Cuban to her lips. She pulled deeply and coughed, turning her head to muffle the sound in Raphael's bare shoulder. The shirtless thing was sexy as hell, and she groped at his thigh, only to be thwarted by swim-trunks.

They'd spent the entire evening on the water, and she wondered if Aziraphale and Crowley had realized the stretch of beach they'd cautiously approached at dusk was already occupied. She and
Raphael had discovered them on strolling back up from the tide pools and kept a quiet distance.

“We'd have done it because we're thrill-seekers, but I doubt that's what we're seeing here," Raphael said. "They must do this at home, on that secluded beach of theirs."

“So, about this mess…” Uriel blew smoke against the light breeze. “What do we do?”

Raphael stuck the Cuban between his teeth and was silent for a long time. They both watched the pile of blankets, which was talking now, in Aziraphale's low soothing murmur, and Crowley's pale hands had snaked their way out from between voluminous folds to clutch at something, anything, but found only the frayed edge of the blanket they were lying on and a mess of forgiving sand.

“I don't know,” he said, pointing with the cigar, “but we could always do that.”

“No way,” Uriel countered, stealing it back. “This is too interesting. Are they fucking?”

“Wrong angle,” Raphael said. He slid his free hand inside the lower half of Uriel's two-piece, deftly thumbing his way home. “The snake's clingy, needs lots of skin contact—heat-loss thing, biology—and he loves it when good old Az uses his hands.”

Uriel shifted her hips, trying to squirm him off-task, but it felt too unbelievably good, and with her skin and her head and her body buzzing as it was...

“Would you please stop calling him that?”

“Calling which one of them what, darling? Mmm, so wet, if you'd just turn around—”

“Won't do another damned thing until you stop calling him that, it's not so hard, ahaaah, you did it in the cafe this morning, I heard you…”

“Crowley,” Raphael whispered, slipping two fingers inside her. “Do you suppose he hates being called Anthony as much as I hate being called Rafe? If that's the case—”

“You've still got a mean-streak a fathom wide,” Uriel gasped. “Another.”

Raphael's breath sped up at her ear; she tossed the cigar into oblivion. He was thrusting against the small of her back, and, oh, if she turned, it would be so easy to palm him through those designer swim-trunks, wipe that smug look off his face. He kissed her neck and complied, knowing that was all she preferred to take. His wrist must have been aching, unless he wasn't too distracted to control his nerves.


“I value my own skin too highly for that,” laughed Uriel, breathless. She braced herself, arms hooked around Raphael's knees, kneading his calves. She could move as much as she wanted, perhaps even take away some of his leverage.

Raphael sighed and stilled his hips, withdrawing his fingers. “It was a near thing, you know,” he said. “Earlier today, I saw you reach for an arrow before you decided to tug dear Crowley out of harm's way. Does he remind you so much of her, my love; is that why you're so fond? That same spark in both of them, questioning mischief and insatiable wonder, which led to the Fall for so
Uriel twisted around with a hiss of pent-up lust; she knocked him flat on his back, and they were naked inside a heartbeat, sand sticking to their damp skin.

“Maybe it started out like that, okay? But what if it's different now? What if I like him for him? What if I'd ever decided you were a massive dickhead, which, by the way, was a pretty near thing? I'd have needed somebody to keep me company, wouldn't I? What if good old Az ever had been stupid enough to let him go? Do you understand why I think like this, plans within plans?”

Raphael nodded mutely, reaching up to frame her face as she covered all of him easily with her fist, working the loose skin over his shaft to perfection. Large clit, small dick, she didn't care; if Crowley had anything half as responsive as this between his legs, then Aziraphale was one lucky bastard. She let her thumb find the slick cleft just below, so very like her own. Raphael was trembling.

“Did he like what he saw, the old serpent?” he gasped.

“Hard to tell,” Uriel said gently, curling over to kiss him. “He's so far gone, Rafe. Beloved Enemy, His Only Holy One. Call it whatever you like in any mythology or in any tongue. He'll never stray from his place, not as long as there's a place for us here in the Garden. And not even after that.”

“Pity.” Raphael swatted her hand and pulled her down. “We could've shared him.”

“You'd leave Aziraphale out?” Uriel asked, smiling; she pressed their damp foreheads together and made short work of taking him inside herself, safe out of sand's way. She knew the answer, as it was the same for both of them, but making him say it—

“It'd be like incest, only worse,” Raphael groaned. “Please, please will you stay, will you look at me the way Aziraphale looks at him, the complete idiot, will you let me—”

The pile of tartan blankets had gone very, very quiet and very, very still.

Uriel covered her mouth and shook with laughter, didn't stop riding him till the tension broke. She felt grit between her teeth, beneath her eyelids. She knew Raphael was close to coming because he'd levered them back up to sitting, folded together as they were; even if he happened to slip free, which he might, as fast as they were moving, he'd hopefully still find enough friction—oh, there.

Raphael was so quiet it hurt her heart; she shielded them with sudden, sand-strewn wings.

“You risk it all,” he whispered, slumping under her, spent as he raked his fingers through her pin-feathers, gathering them at the small of her back. “Come for me.”

Nothing spectacular this time, not with as much effort as she'd burnt in those last moments, but: with what little breath she had, she told him yes.

**Think of England**

Aziraphale swore testily, hauling the blankets up over their heads.
“Let there be light,” he murmured, and then kissed Crowley to calm him as the muted blue glow formed a halo around them. He’d gone so tense and still, fight or flight kicking in, never mind that human eyes wouldn’t find them an easy spectacle.

The problem was, ethereal ones already had. Crowley's breath was still coming in short, ragged bursts, but he'd softened against Aziraphale's belly. He bit the kiss short, moaning in abject frustration. “Didn't think they'd be so reckless? Or voyeuristic, in the event of a happy accident?”

“She's cloaked them now,” Aziraphale said, working his hand back in between them. “They'd like disturbing even less than we would, at this point, I should think. Lift up a bit, my dear, and you'll—yes, mmm, better. Shhh,” he whispered, mouthing Crowley's earlobe. The demon shuddered and clamped down again, canting his hips in tight, controlled thrusts. Aziraphale fumbled gracelessly till he had them both in hand, sighing. Even in spite of the interruption, still it was bliss.

“Wouldn't have had this problem at home,” Crowley was muttering against Aziraphale's shoulder. “Think of it. No prying eyes, no light pollution.” He made a fretful sound, his thighs tensing with effort. He was hardening again, but not enough.

Aziraphale hated to see him driven to distraction; much though Crowley enjoyed taking their leisure out-of-doors, they shouldn't have risked...

“Now who's drifting?” he asked, covering Aziraphale's hand with his own. Fond, measured, undemanding. They breathed harshly in the cocoon they'd constructed.

“Not any longer,” Aziraphale said, batting the covers back with his free hand, which until then had been concerned with tracing the curve of Crowley's arse. The room was as dark as they’d left it, and the curtains stirred with the breeze of their unexpected entry. They'd manifested more or less neatly on the bed, as had the blankets, but the sheets were now scratchy with traces of sand.

Aziraphale's skin prickled with the sudden electricity of Crowley banishing the remainder of their clothing, the woollen blankets, the sand, all of it. He rolled off of Aziraphale and onto the pile of crisp, clean pillows with an exhalation of profound relief, stretching against the fine thread-count. He'd improved that, too, as hotel-grade was never to his liking.

Aziraphale leaned close and kissed Crowley's forehead, stroked his belly, his thighs, his flagging erection. Crowley shivered, let Aziraphale set the pace again, but he lay reserved and quiet.

“My dear, if you've had quite enough...” Aziraphale paused, pressed a hand to Crowley's racing heart.

Crowley's eyes seemed to glow brighter as Aziraphale spoke. Had they always done, he wondered, or did they truly so seldom make love in the dark? “Listen, all this heartsss and flowers stuff,” whispered the demon. “How...”

Aziraphale was quickly losing patience, but not with Crowley.

“Don't ask me the same daft question, please,” said the angel, wearily, and gathered him close, hesitantly manifested wings and all. He sat up, precariously balancing Crowley in his lap, and closed the circle with his own unkempt feathers. It felt wonderful to stretch them.

“What question would that be?” asked Crowley. “There are two of them, remember.”
“Raphael's and yours, yes,” Aziraphale sighed, running wistful fingers through the fine white fluff at the base of Crowley's wings. “But they're essentially one and the same.”

Crowley leaned forward, sagging more heavily into Aziraphale's embrace. He squirmed, increasingly restless, as Aziraphale absently groomed him. The wrecked, helpless sound stuck in his throat was more than enough warning.

“You have the answer to his—that is, my dear, I do, the rest of Creation be damned—but it's the answer to Uriel's and yours that you're seeking, the matter of what I see in you, never mind that I'll readily enough say I love you beyond reason?”

Crowley flinched; he muffled his cry against Aziraphale's neck, shaking hard as he took his pleasure.

“Yes,” he gasped as Aziraphale coaxed the last tremors from him. Aziraphale wasn't terribly fussed about whether he got off, not with Crowley warm and pliant and sated now in his arms, but once Crowley recovered, he probably would be.

“It's not just your spark of goodness, you see. It's that you are, simply put, yourself, dear boy, and this world, our world, is much better for it.”

Crowley winched in his wings and ruffled every inch of Aziraphale's he could reach.

“Is that your way of saying you're better for it, angel?”

“As are you,” said Aziraphale, but he was pitched up to the edge, already falling.

“I'd say you really have no idea,” said Crowley, softly, “but I know you do.”
One Good Turn

Chapter Summary

*It had, simply put, been a while; Crowley hoped it'd be worth his trouble.*

Crowley woke from his forty-eight-hour coma (later, he'd face a quandary as to whether he ought to blame the return-flight jet lag or the trip itself) to a plate of Hob Nobs and a neatly folded note on the bedside table. The dried rose petals that fell out into his sheet-covered lap smacked of overkill, but his heart clenched a little at the realization that Aziraphale could only have smuggled them back pressed in a book.

*My dear (it read),*

*Have popped off for a day at the shops with Pippa; would have asked you along, but I just couldn't bring myself to wake you; still shattered, poor love. Tea's on the table; it ought to have kept. If not, give it a poke, and it'll be right as rain. Don't expect me back till seven-ish, as we've ever so much catching up to do. Say hello on your behalf, shall I? Do get some rest*

*Yours,*

*A.*

Normally, Crowley might have been irritated by such gross sentimentality first thing in the morning, but, given the fragrant, papery scattering of *Rosa rugosa* and the fact he wasn't yet fully awake, instead, his brain did its best impression of warm, bewildered, affectionate mush.

In short, he wanted to *do something nice* for Aziraphale.

As for the plan already forming in the auto-piloted part of his subconscious, *well.* It had, simply put, been a while; he hoped it'd be worth his trouble. If nothing else, it'd be worth Aziraphale's stunned expression (and, hopefully, hours of fantastic sex).

He decided he'd best get to work; the quail weren't going to cook themselves.

* * *

Poultry, *check.* One good thing about living in the arse-end of nowhere: abundant earthy-crunchy, free-range, hippy-dippy farmers. Crowley left the birds locked in the boot and put on a brave face. He didn't like supermarkets, even tiny local ones.
The shallots weren't going to be a problem. Those, he had at home in the garden; likewise, carrots and onions and rocket for the starter. He didn't like celery and cucumber, as they crunched strangely and often tasted weird (respectively).

While they were in the States, Aziraphale had taken a shine to Maine-blueberry vinaigrette. Shropshire ones would have to suffice, so he transferred a carton from the refrigerator case to his trolley. He already had extra-virgin olive oil and ten-year aged balsamic. He ignored Escoffier's horrified commentary on his salad plans. The thing about stubborn old mentors was, they stuck with you—dead or not.

Butter next, and then eggs. Crowley caught himself hesitating between brown free-range and white free-range, at which point a rogue toddler, pursued by his perturbed young father, got into one of the cartons and made a mess of the floor.

The small boy stuck two yolk-covered fingers in his mouth and blinked up at Crowley while his father muttered outrageous apologies to a shelf-stacking flunky. The girl had a mop and looked frazzled enough to cry.

"I believe this is yours," Crowley said, bending to scoop up the child.

He blinked at the mess.

"Little devil," said the boy's father, taking the creature off Crowley's hands.

The supermarket girl stared at the floor, where four whole, perfect white eggs rolled idly to a stop against the scribbled-on rubber toe-caps of her black Chuck Taylors.

"Near miss," said Crowley, grinning, and gave her shoulder a pat. He grabbed a carton of brown eggs and left.

Appalling, what they were charging for saffron these days.

* * *

Specialty shops, on the other hand, Crowley liked very much. Especially tiny local ones.

"You're looking for what?" asked the middle-aged proprietress.

"Armagnac," Crowley repeated. "I'll take VSOP in a pinch, but if you've got XO or Napoleon, that'd be better." Distractedly, he squinted at the fine print on the bag of rock-salt he'd already picked up. "Better yet, Hors d'Age. We'll drink what's left."

"Picky," said the lady, shuffling down an adjacent aisle. "I'll see what I can do."

You would be, too, Crowley thought, if your lover were prone to meddling on a molecular level. The
rock-salt was pink. Since when was rock-salt pink? Himalayan, said the label. *Huh.* As a rule of thumb, he'd try just about anything once.

The Japanese silk rope (never mind handcuffs) had been a minor disaster.

"What'll it be?" the lady was asking, holding up two bottles for him to inspect. "Clos Martin Folle Blanche XO—good value, that one—or Domaine de Rieston 1992?" Crowley shook himself and blinked at the Domaine de Rieston.

"Have you got anything from two years earlier?" he asked, tapping the label.

Ninety quid later, wincing, he left with both the rock-salt and some Gosperrin 1990.

The Escoffier in his head approved, and you couldn't put a price on memories.

* * *

Damn and blast. He always managed to forget *something.*

Crowley deposited his parcels on the kitchen table, only to turn on his heel, dash out of the cottage, and hop back into the Bentley. It was already pushing four o'clock, and even if he didn't need more than two hours' prep-time, that was cutting it close.

*If you can't get the cream fresh and the mushrooms fresher, forget it,* Escoffier had told him once. *The trick's in those, no matter how fine the brandy or the eggs.*

Ten minutes later, he bit his lip and jammed the Bentley in park. He'd never been to the café's back entrance, and he hoped this didn't mark the start of a trend. One of the assistant chefs answered; Crowley made his request snappishly, and the lad fled.

It took fifteen seconds for both Crowley to lose his nerve and Mandy to show up.

"Er," Crowley said, pushing his sunglasses up into his hair. "Hi."

Mandy gave him a helplessly muddled look. Was uni rotting her brain?

"D'you have fresh cream? And that chantarelle paté, are you still making it in-house?"

"We do," she said, "and yeah to the second, but our supplies are running short."

Crowley produced a crisp, folded twenty-pound note from his jacket.

"I need a carton of the cream and half-pound of those mushrooms," he said.

"That'll clear us out," said Mandy, troubled. "Of the chantarelles, I mean."
"Forty, then," said Crowley, desperately. "Fifty, whatever you wa—"

Mandy kissed him on the cheek, a tense puff of breath escaping her lips.

"Be right back," she said, and dashed into the humid kitchen.

Crowley stood rubbing her lipstick off his cheekbone, flustered.

"Here," said Mandy's voice, accompanied by her bangled arm dangling a take-away bag out the door. "Sorry about the, um—look, mate, considering the amount of trouble I'll be in? It was a fair price. Your husband's gonna be mad at me, I get that."

He left with not only the requested items, but also what was left in his wallet.

Best not to mention it to Aziraphale, perhaps. He did want the girl to live.

* * *

The front door opened while Crowley was in the thick of it: a face full of saffron-scented, cream-laden steam. The Armagnac and the eggs were playing along beautifully; the soup was almost finished. And as for the salad...

Aziraphale pottered up behind him (with a number of crinkly plastic bags in tow from the sound of it), but Crowley didn't let that derail his concentration. Perilous business, negotiating the addition of chantarelle purée to the rest of the simmering mix. Not even the sound of Aziraphale's dropped parcels and the angel's firm hand on his hip as he leaned in to kiss Crowley's cheek deterred him from his careful stirring.

Aziraphale froze, delicately inhaling against the fine sheen of sweat at Crowley's temple. He sighed and said, "Whatever it is she's tried this time, I'll not stand—"

Crowley whisked the wooden spoon to one side, plopping the lid on the pot.

"She's a lovesick kid," he said, "and not my type. Let it go."

Aziraphale watched, fascinated, as Crowley licked the spoon and frowned at it.

"You have a type?" he asked vaguely, and then, wonderingly: "Crowley, you cook?"

"Yup," he said, hastily reaching for a fresh dish-cloth. "Took lessons."

Aziraphale watched him clean the spoon fastidiously, still baffled.

"But—when?"
"While you were busy messing about with that hack Maskelyne, of course."

"That doesn't answer my question," said Aziraphale, who hadn't quite managed to hide how impressed he was and that he didn't quite know what to do with this information.

"Oh, I don't know," Crowley said, tossing the dish-cloth aside as he turned to face the angel.
"Eighteen-nineties, nineteen-oughts? It's all a bit fuzzy now. Listen, there's a salad on the table, and if you don't start to eat it while I finish this up, the dressing will go all soggy, and I simply won't be held accountable—"

Aziraphale kissed him on the mouth, throwing them both off-balance.

Crowley's elbow just missed knocking the pot off the hob.

"You made supper," said Aziraphale, stupidly.

"I'm looking at it," replied Crowley, belatedly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My type. Now, if you don't mind, there's salad. Shoo."

"My dear, I could help—"

"Blueberries, angel," said Crowley, casting about for the rock-salt. "Rocket, baby carrots, those sweet little vine-ripened heirloom tomatoes..."

Aziraphale made it to the table in record time.

Crowley just barely prevented the soup from scorching.

Totally worth it, he thought, pouring the lovely stuff into a hastily miracled tureen.

He turned just in time to catch the dawning of Aziraphale's fondest smile.
Crowley's first warning should've been the giggling. He'd scarcely dropped one sand-and-soil encrusted flip-flop on the kitchen tile when the sound started right back up where it had left off, a terrible chorus of just-post-pubescent female glee.

And Aziraphale, which about put the icing on the proverbial cream cake.

Anathema sat at the dining-room table, calm as you please, surrounded by legal tomes.

"Hi," she said, briefly looking up from her laptop, fledgling crows' feet crinkling at the corners of her eyes. "Aziraphale's put the twins to work on that shipment you two just got from London. I've had a look through myself. Rather amazing stuff."

Crowley wiggled his other foot free of the remaining flip-flop, attempting a smile.

"You're here to use the library, then, as it were?"

"No, it's for one of the twins' courses. They're taking a medieval literature seminar. I mentioned it to Aziraphale on the phone the other day, and he said they might enjoy helping him pick apart what was coming in from his last safety deposit box."

Autumn-term freshers' whimsy, Crowley thought grimly, dusting his hands off on his jeans. It ought not to be allowed. "Didn't know they were both reading English at uni," he said casually. Or anything other than Twilight, for that matter.

"Much to the department's chagrin, they are," said Anathema. "How's the garden?"

"Putting on airs," said Crowley, distractedly, searching for the bottle of red wine he'd only half drunk the night before. "You'd better take those potted tomato starters I've left at the foot of the drive. I can't let them stay. It'd be too good for morale."

"Your crazy is incomprehensible," Anathema said, typing away, "but it's cute."

Crowley yanked the cork free of the bottle and answered her with a silent toast before following the sound of teenage wittering through the kitchen and down the hall.

Eighteen year-old hellions in the office meant eighteen year-old hellions in the bedroom. He wondered if he and Aziraphale were going to have to negotiate a surreptitiously miracled addition, or, perish the thought, hire actual builders. He nudged the cracked door wide, only to discover a scene far worse than he'd been expecting.

The twins' dark heads, previously bent over the fragile-looking manuscript Aziraphale had just
opened before them on the duvet, shot up in tandem. They were sitting on the bed, all three of them *sitting on the bed with a thing that might have bookworms*.

"Off," Crowley said, taking another very long drink. "Now."

"My dear, what have I told you about open wine bottles and fragile stock—"

"You don't have a shop anymore; ergo, it's no longer stock, and your argument is invalid." Crowley pointed the bottle at the one he thought was Janet, impatiently snapping his fingers. "Oi! Feet off the pillows. Those linens cost more than your life."

"Told you, Nat," said the one who was actually Janet. "He's proper fussy."

Natalie curled her legs tightly under herself with a muttered *sorry*.

Aziraphale had fixed Crowley with the sort of look that strongly suggested he'd be in for several days' worth of semi-silent treatment in favor of the newly arrived vermin with crumbling pages. Far worse than mice, in Crowley's estimation.

Crowley sighed in defeat and sat down on the edge of the bed opposite them, setting the wine bottle on the floor. "Now that I'm here, you might as well share with the class," he said, leaning over to squint at the vellum beneath the angel's fingers.

"Your Latin's as good as mine at least," Aziraphale demurred. "Why don't you translate? The girls are ever so keen on a firsthand lesson. Lecturers are so very out of touch with the young people of today. It's dreadfully unfortunate."

Crowley gave him a stupefied blink. Wasn't *he* the one who'd been drinking? "But you're, er, you know, more the literary, *ah*, type." The letter-forms were actually starting to make sense even through the protective barrier of his sunglasses.

As if she'd been reading his mind, Janet leaned forward and yanked them off his face. "There, that's better," she said smugly.

Crowley caught Aziraphale's approving nod out of the corner of his eye.

Right. He'd not be shown up by his complete git of a lover and two witch-brats.

"*Incipit liber de Co}ytu,*" Crowley read aloud. "*Creator volens animalium genus firmiter*—wait, hold on." The part of his brain that translated everything automatically had been thrown by the fourteenth-century spelling, but as soon as *Co}ytu* resolved itself into *Coitu*, he wondered if Anathema would come after him with one of those impressively heavy volumes because he'd exposed her youngest daughters to...

"You were doing just fine," said Aziraphale, sweetly. "Continue."

Janet looked fiercely puzzled, but Natalie had one hand over her mouth and was trying desperately not to laugh. *Somebody* had paid attention during sixth-form Latin.

"What?" asked Janet, irritably. "What's so funny? What's it say?"

Crowley cleared his throat and picked the book up, relocating it to his lap.
"Liber de Coytu—Coitu, if you like—means Book of Coitus. Have you got that?"

Janet opened her mouth and then shut it again; Natalie punched her arm.

"It's a book about sex, you numpty. The title means Book of Sex, in fact."

"Cor! What kind of sex? Is it all that Kama Sutra stuff?"

Aziraphale gave Crowley another cheerfully expectant look, which was completely unfair, because by then his face was probably ten shades of red and, yes, Anathema was going to squash him like an insect when word of this got out.

*Bugger this for a game of soldiers*, thought Crowley, and picked up the bottle.

"Let's see," he said, idly flipping forward a few folios. "What have we got? This first bit here is all about how God wants you to enjoy sex—no, *really*—as long as you're down with making babies, and, oh, this here's *really* ace—you could horrify your father with the delightfully poor grasp medieval minds had of male anatomy, and *then*—"

Janet looked kind of traumatized, and Natalie, who had edged forward so she could read along as Crowley flipped through and took a drink every few pages, was laughing so hard that her tears were in more danger of damaging the pages than the wine.

Aziraphale tried to insinuate himself between Natalie and Crowley, but it was no use.

"There are, well, complications," Crowley said, tapping the page on which he'd come to rest. "Lack of...vigor, you understand. Maybe you know all about that; kids and self-temptation these days, eh? Look, natural aphrodisiacs! Also, there's more on the benefits," he added, flipping forward to the next quire at a speed that caused Aziraphale to turn slightly purple. "Has a calming effect on the high-strung."

"What does?" croaked Janet, just as her sister's hysterics started afresh.

"Orgasm, of course," said Aziraphale, tartly, finally working a determined arm in, and snapped the book shut one-handed. "That will be *quite* enough for today."

Natalie flopped onto her back and wiped her eyes, grinning. Her head was almost in Crowley's lap.

"You should come do our next seminar," she told him.

Janet gave Aziraphale an imploring look, touching the manuscript's delicate binding.

"Can I borrow that?" she asked shyly.

"That's it, off you go," said Aziraphale. "Here endeth the lesson."

The twins disappeared in a scuffle of bare, painted toenails and hastily snatched-up bags.

Crowley drank the last of the wine, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"I hope you realize that was cruel and unusual in the extremest sense of both words."
Aziraphale grimaced and set the book gingerly down on his desk.

"They'll be grateful of it one day, I have no doubt."

"Natalie already knows which way's up and what goes where," said Crowley, grimly.

Aziraphale sat down beside him on the mattress, sighing heavily.

"They grow up so fast," he lamented. "Sophia and Adam—"

"Wedding's not till spring," Crowley reminded him, leaning into Aziraphale's shoulder.

Just then, Anathema peeked in the door and gave them a double thumbs-up.

"Gotta go," she said. "Thanks, you've sorted Janet out for a week at least."

Once she'd gone, with girls and tomatoes in tow, Crowley flopped onto the duvet.

Aziraphale returned from the window, where he'd been waving, and joined him.

"Calms one right down, does it?" Crowley ventured, sobering up slightly.

"I should know," Aziraphale replied, brushing back Crowley's hair. "It works on you."
Aziraphale took care of the booking discreetly, careful not to leave any ticket receipt print-offs lying around the study. There was no guarantee that Crowley wouldn't hack into his email account and find them anyway, but one did one's best. They hadn't traveled by boat in quite some time, so perhaps Crowley wouldn't even register a subject line containing *Brittany Ferries* as anything more than droll travel spam.

It's not to say that the Cape Cod jaunt back in June hadn't been relaxing; far from it, in spite of those few tense moments, which Aziraphale found he could put out of his mind without *too* much effort. It was more for Crowley's sake than anything: a little bit of time away from Pippa and Anathema and all the rest. Just the two of them.

It wasn't until several days after the trip was bought and paid for, when Aziraphale double-checked the ferry and hotel bookings just to make sure he could forewarn Crowley about the drive to Plymouth for purposes of *catching* said ferry, that he noticed the dates (23-30 September 2012), which he'd chosen for the reasonable return fare more than anything else. There was nothing wrong with off-season.

A sojourn at Mont St.-Michel with Michaelmas *smack in the middle of it* came off even worse than the outing to that festival with allusions to demon-burning *and* Raphael's Provincetown room assignments combined. Aziraphale held out *some* hope that 29 September had never been over-firmly planted on Crowley's temporal radar.

Considering the past thousand years' iconography, he ought not to hold out too much.

---

The drive coupled with the prospect of an overnight sea voyage had made Crowley somewhat cranky, but now, at the *Bretagne's* bar with a six glasses of a passable Rhône Valley rosé down him, everything looked considerably more promising.

"'Thisss place," said Crowley, unfussed at how far down the bridge of his nose his sunglasses had managed to slide. "Tell me about it. Don't think I've ever been there. Not since it got civilization, you underssstand. Very, *very* dull without cheese."
Aziraphale steadied him on his stool, his arm firmly about Crowley's waist.

"Well, you see, we'll be passing through more than one, er, town on the way—"

"Sssaint-Malo. Sspeck on the map where thisss thing lands. Who the hell was he?"

Aziraphale shushed him with a brief kiss, pressing his thumb to Crowley's lower lip.

"No one of very great import, my dear," he said. "Not with a name like Malo."

Crowley bit down softly, understanding, and positioned his tongue more carefully.

"This place we're going, then, it's just another seaside dive with bugger-all to do?"

"We're not staying in St.-Malo. We transfer from there to Mont St.-Michel."

Crowley tottered in his seat, no small thanks to the fit of laughter that seized him.

"Now, I was in Avranches," he said. "Poor Aubert never knew what hit him."

Aziraphale looked away and took a judicious sip of his fourth glass.

"I wouldn't know," he said. "The Bishop and I never did get on."

Later, tangled up warm and naked and slightly worse for wear in their surprisingly comfortable cabin (on that, at least, Aziraphale had splurged a little), Crowley gave him a hazy look from the edge of sleep suggesting he'd remembered something.

It wasn't at all difficult to make him forget, at least for the time being.

* * *

Crowley stared forlornly at the rusty signpost and the empty bus shelter.

"The first one's not until nine forty-five," he said, yawning. "This schedule sucks."

"There were once far fewer, I'm told," said Aziraphale. "No matter; we'll hire a cab."

Crowley blinked in sleepy disbelief; it was six-thirty in the morning.

"That's, let me see—seventy or eighty euros. I'm not springing for that."

"Of course you're not," said Aziraphale, already waving at the nearest lazily smoking taxi driver. He had to wrestle Crowley's shoulder bag off him and bundle the poor dear into the back seat, protests and all. It was high time he let the money anxiety go.
The driver wasn't miffed by their Englishness or by the prospect of an hour-long drive.

*Will wonders never cease,* Aziraphale thought, and got in the back beside Crowley.

Of course, the fact that they both spoke flawless Breton probably helped.

For the majority of the ride, Crowley dozed with his cheek mashed up against the window while Aziraphale chatted with the driver. Lovely chap, really; he had children and grandchildren in the area. It would've been rude to refuse his offer of a cigarette.

Aziraphale watched the daylight break over the ocean, which was visible at a distance.

"My dear," he murmured, shaking Crowley's arm. "Look."

The demon grunted and peeled himself off the window; he removed his sunglasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose where they'd dug in. Aziraphale scooted up behind him, tilting his head, as the sight he was interested in now certainly wasn't outside.

Crowley's pupils reflected sunrise and the Mont's dark, flame-ringed silhouette.

---

At least once in every meticulously planned trip, something tended to go awry.

Their hotel room at an establishment on the Mont itself not being available due to pipe-flooding counted as just such a mishap. Aziraphale listened patiently while the concierge made effusive apologies (French, not Breton) that were an affront to her pride; meanwhile, Crowley wandered around the quaint, cramped lobby and peered at the seashells and other maritime memorabilia adorning every wall and fixture.

*Not here, love,* Aziraphale thought. *So many lives lost to the perilous tide over time; we would find so many of them. Shoes and buttons, pilgrim-badges and teeth. You would mourn the loss of every single one, down to the last drowned soul.*

Crowley straightened, turned, and fixed him with a determined glare. *You know there are still tours that cross the flooded sands out there. Tourist attraction since time out of mind. I'll brave the whirlpools without you if I have to, angel.*

"You're so stubborn," said Aziraphale, sharply, and turned back to the concierge.

"Check for cancellations," Crowley said, sidling up behind him. "He didn't mean you."

The woman's expression went from irate to neutral. She flipped pages in the register.

"You may be correct," she replied cautiously, tapping a scribbled-out block.
Aziraphale instantly recognized the scrawl, even though it didn't say anything.

"It's smaller than the room we'd booked you into first. But it's got a sea view."

"Very good," Aziraphale sighed. *Trickery and deception, just like the old days.*

Crowley took the key and raced ahead, leaving him to sort the luggage.

* * *

They strolled idly beneath the cloister: Aziraphale admired the columns while Crowley admired the hedges. It had been a marvel of modern architecture in its day, this lonely rooftop garden, and it had stood up to the centuries admirably.

"Clipped within an inch of their lives. I'll give those nuns credit where it's due. They run a tight ship. Those roses look a bit anemic, though, don't you think?"

Aziraphale set one hand against a patch of worn masonry and closed his eyes. "That's the color nature intended, at a guess," he said.

The column hummed with solitude, resigned to supporting the weight of forgetting.

Opening his eyes once more, Aziraphale let his hand drop back to his side.

Crowley had breached *the hedge barrier and was crouching next to the rose bush.*

"Your wild North American cousins put you to shame, you know," he told it.

"Crowley, for goodness' sake, get out of there," Aziraphale pleaded.

"I could use a proper telling-off," he said. "They're good at that, too, nuns."

"I don't want to make a scene, but you're leaving me very little choice."

"There's no one else here, angel," said Crowley, rising. "Come on," he said, offering Aziraphale his fist. "Step out of those shadows, won't you? It's much warmer here in the sun." He opened his outstretched hand, let go a shower of pale petals.

"You've been difficult ever since the hotel this morning," Aziraphale said, standing his ground. "I don't understand it. You've no reason to be on your guard, my dear."

Crowley removed his sunglasses and stared up at the cloudless sky, brow furrowed. "All of that business with you and Aubert not getting on," he ventured. "Remind me, what was it? No luck egging him into an early Crusade? A divine property dispute over this island when it was nothing more than a miserable chunk of rock?"
Aziraphale managed to snag his sleeve and yank him back through the hedge. "He was onto you," he told Crowley, in a low voice. "I suspected that he knew—"

"Clerics sometimes do," said Crowley, brushing dry shrub-leaves off his trousers.

"And if he'd gone after you with Holy Water? A sanctified weapon of some sort?"

Crowley paused in the act of withdrawing his sunglasses from his pocket and fixed Aziraphale with a strange, disquieted look. Objects and substances that could harm either one of them were few and far in between, but they did, in fact, exist.

He took a shaky, smiling breath and said, "I never thought..."

"No, you wouldn't have," said Aziraphale. "So trusting, my dear."

Crowley's smile faded. He replaced the sunglasses, shoving both hands in his pockets.

"You mentioned model ships suspended in the chapel," Crowley said. "Sounds neat."

Aziraphale followed him out of the cloister, releasing the breath he'd been holding.

Let it not be said that keeping him out of harm's way had ever been easy.

* * *

"Those," said Crowley, "are tacky beyond belief. How do you manage it, how?"

Aziraphale wistfully admired the brightly painted bols de chocolat.

"They'd hold so much more than those mugs Pippa gave us for Christmas."

"Pathetic handles," Crowley said, dubiously picking one up. "Not very ergonomic."

"The point is that they're traditional," said Aziraphale, lifting another. "And pretty."

Crowley gave him a long-suffering look and placed the bowl he'd selected in Aziraphale's free hand. He folded his arms and stood there glancing from one to the other, as if searching out imperfections. Intensely familiar, this search-and-destroy methodology. No flaws permitted in the paint, no unseen chips along the rims.

"Fine, they're on your head," Crowley said, taking Aziraphale by the elbow. "Till's this way."

The bought four, as it wouldn't have done to forget Pippa and Harold. Once they'd deposited their parcels back at the hotel, Crowley suggested a stroll along the parapets, as the tide would soon be coming in, and the weather was as clear.
The wind was brisk out on the walls, and it bit tenaciously at their clothes and skin.

Crowley stood staring down at an impressive vortex of dazzling, foam-flecked waves.

"You were protecting me," he said, not looking up from his meditation. "Why?"

Aziraphale leaned close to him and considered the death-trap below. "It seemed like the thing to do," he said, measuring his words carefully. "At the time."

"In 708," said Crowley. "When the Franks had scarcely worked out how to use forks, and well before our little understanding of some three hundred years later."

"Three hundred and twelve," Aziraphale corrected him. "And, not to put too fine a point on it, yes. Even then, it seemed like the way forward. I can't expect you to understand what must have possessed me, what when I don't even understand..."

Crowley turned from the stunning scene below and tilted his head: an unspoken question. But you understand now, I take it? We understand now, I mean. Aziraphale reached for him, reached for anything, and caught Crowley's lapels.

Once upon a time, he thought, a man had a vision about this very spot.

Crowley smirked. It was a bit further up, I think.

No matter. A man had a vision detailing what he was to do with this chunk of rock, as you put it yesterday. An oratory in a high and desolate place, a beacon that would become Geoffrey of Monmouth's fire on the hill. You know his narrative about the giant, I take it? This place has seen no end of carnage, both real and imagined.

What's your point, angel?

Do you know the man, my dear? Do you know the story?

Crowley shifted where he stood, and then stepped closer. The toes of their shoes touched.

Aubert was delusional. The Archangel Michael told me blah blah blah, and, oh, what do you think about this nice, impossible construction project? Would you like to help me oversee it? Might be of some interest to you, Crowley. Pour us some more wine.

Aziraphale felt the stab of panic in his chest, as if Crowley's original relay of this information had happened the day before, not in the year seven-hundred and eight, anno domini, when the world was still clawing its way out of newborn chaos.

I remember. When you told me he'd offered you a job on-site, what happened then?

Crowley frowned and looked down at their feet, forehead bumping Aziraphale's nose. You suggested it was a fine time for me to get out of dodge, perhaps go and cause some mischief for the actual Northmen. See what they had going by way of saints.

You did quite well with Lucia, dear boy. So striking, those wreaths of candles.
"There's something you're not telling me. The man is Aubert, and the story..."

"Is emblazoned on stained-glass windows from here to the Holy Land. Carved in every cathedral, drawn in every manuscript margin and miniature, forever and ever, amen."

"Michael and the Dragon," Crowley said. "Or the Serpent, if you like. Never happened."

"And we know this because..."

"I'm still here," said Crowley, impatiently. "I told you, it never happened. So why—"

"Aubert had his second vision after you left," Aziraphale replied gently.

Crowley's eyes were on fire, and, this time, the sun wasn't even to blame. You gave him that bloody stupid vision in order to save my life? Skin. Something like that. But it still doesn't account for the first one, his reason for wanting to build...

In spite of the fact Aziraphale’s hands were still fisted in Crowley's coat, it was Crowley who drew Aziraphale forward instead. They stood locked like that for a minute at least, with the tide whispering fervently up with each fresh gust.

The first one was Michael. The second one—well, that was my doing, I'm afraid.

You got me out of the picture, but the picture stayed anyway. Crowley's thoughts were a hysterical psychic giggle, but underneath them, there was genuine terror, too, at realizing he hadn't known how close he'd brushed with an untimely, unpleasant end.

Aziraphale tilted his chin up and kissed him: brief and longing, an apology past due.

Crowley drew back, smiling, actually smiling, and then pressed close again, all pliant lips and clever tongue. Never easy to shield him, no; that, Aziraphale knew. But he was worth every shred of effort under heaven, fierce as the tide and as true.
Some Assembly Required

Chapter Summary

Even the best-laid wedding plans come at a price for those invited.

Uriel tucked her chilly feet under herself and stared out the patio doors. She'd been up most of the night, restless, although a few spirits had kept her company until dawn broke over the glittering horizon. Raphael had acquired this property in the late nineteen-fifties, and he'd been smart not to sell. He'd let it to various tenants over time, he'd assured her, but had been resident since the eighties.

The sofa was comfortable: black damask with even blacker abstract embroidery.

She contemplated how unusually calm the waves seemed, and then considered tea.

She'd just about drifted off before she could complete the thought, her head lolling to one side against the sofa's overstuffed back. Someone's careful fingertip drew a straight, unwavering line from her wrist up to her shoulder. She shivered awake.

"Move over," Raphael said softly, insinuating himself behind her so that she really had nowhere to go but on him. "Burning the candle at both ends again, I see. You've got to let all those suicides get on with their business. Your presence distracts them."

Uriel elbowed him in the ribs and squirmed around so that they faced each other.

"They want some reassurance on the way out," she said. "Wouldn't you?"

Raphael framed her face with both hands, studying her features in the low light.

"I would want yours," he said, "so in that respect, at least, I can't begrudge them."

They kissed for a long while, tangled in thin nightclothes and vague drowsiness, and, around the time things started to get interesting, the sun through the glass behind them grew bright, although something seemed wrong about the angle—

Uriel paused mid-grope and twisted her head around, only to find herself squinting up into a pale blue spotlight. "Shit," she hissed. "How about knocking first, you creep?"

"Language," warned the familiar, fussy voice, but was that an undertone of laughter?

"That's no way to treat old friends," Raphael said, keeping a hold on her as he sat up.

"A little decency, if you please?" asked Gabriel, thinly, his amusement receding.

"Of course," Raphael said, letting his robe slip lower. "What was I thinking?"

"We had, of course, foreseen this eventuality," Gabriel said with long-suffering candor. "Please
accept our congratulations, but be mindful of the fact that you are on duty."

"Not me," Raphael reminded him, cheerfully. "I resigned, remember?"

"One cannot resign if one's resignation is not accepted," replied Gabriel. "As per our records, you are, in fact, an active field agent—an exceptionally lazy one, I'll grant."

"So now you're making house calls when employees shack up?" Uriel asked.

Unexpectedly, Raphael tensed under her and sucked in an unnecessary breath.

A split-second later, she knew why, but the words were already out of her mouth.

"Oh, that reminds me," said Gabriel, absently, shuffling what sounded like a thick stack of vellum sheets, "there is, of course, the matter of your immediate superior."

Immediate superior? Uriel mouthed at Raphael, flabbergasted.

Aziraphale, he returned, grimacing. I know; easy to forget we're outranked.

"Matter?" asked Uriel, struggling to keep her tone neutral. "Which is?"

"He's been keeping strange company of late," Gabriel said. "Besides yourselves."

"Smile, you're on candid camera," Raphael sing-songed under his breath.

"I don't understand," Uriel said. "Dates? Times? Specific instances?"

"Nine months ago," Gabriel replied. "Almost to the day, if you insist upon precision."

Raphael eased Uriel off his lap and straightened his robe, peering up into the glow.

"That's right," he said. "We went on holiday together. June last year."

"My records show it wasn't just the three of you."

Uriel wanted to throw something. Preferably upward.

"How would you know?" she asked, tone as non-confrontational as possible.

"Aura Confluence," Gabriel said. "I keep the trace running on principle, even if there's very little call for it these days. I thought it might interest you to know that two Archangels plus a Principality plus the Adversary's rather ineffective meddler constitutes a Four. Thanks for the Richter Scale model, by the way. Works great."

"You built a fucking spectral seismograph?" Raphael blurted.

"Language. Asmodai helped, so I can't take all the credit. Brilliant boy; David's incredibly proud. He came 'round in the end. I couldn't have asked for a finer PA. It does take one of those infernal types to develop real innovation. They've got vision."

And yet the kind of vision you're looking for really doesn't extend to a green thumb and a keen
appreciation for fine cuisine, seashells, and sundry human artifacts, thought Uriel, bitterly. You could've made him Head Gardener, or maybe even Curator of Collections in the Hall of Wonders. Who's ineffective now, you nosy quill-pusher?

"What are Aziraphale's dealings with the enemy agent known as Crowley?"

Arrows, Uriel seethed. If you want a fuck-ton in your stupid face, just keep talking.

"Do you mean last summer, or generally?" Raphael asked, squeezing Uriel's arm.

More vellum-shuffling, chit-chat that might've meant Asmodai's presence, and then—

"Contact seems to have been more or less par for the course up until the year mortals call nineteen-hundred and ninety, at which point there's a, shall we say, forgivable spike in late summer to early autumn—stressful time for all of us—at which point Aura Confluence points to almost constant direct contact for the next fifteen years, at which point it is, quite simply put, off the charts from two-thousand and five onward."

"Hard to say," Raphael murmured, tapping his chin. "I thought perhaps it was some kind of complicated double-cross; Aziraphale is awfully clever, darling, and an absolute bastard when it comes down to what he's willing to do for the cause."

Uriel hadn't heard that tell-tale hint of scared in his voice for ages.

"I don't think Crowley knows what he's in for," she lied, playing along.

"I see. In any case, I thought that the two of you might be able to provide some insight, having had some days' extended exposure. You're both as neglectful and uninsightful as ever, it would seem. I should have expected nothing less."


"Principalities are best left to their own business," Raphael said, a sterling imitation.

"Ah," Gabriel sighed. "That's as may have been, but times, as they say, are changing."

"No," Uriel corrected him. "Time has changed, and there's nothing we can do about it."

"The matter of the boy," said Gabriel, wearily. "Yes. Self-neutralizing bomb at this point, which is the best we could have hoped for in the face of such an...unexpected and demoralizing turn of events. A disappointment to all of us, no doubt."

"He's getting married," Uriel said, enjoying the slight choke from above.

"To a very nice young witch," Raphael added, and the choke became a splutter.

"You will," said Gabriel, recovering himself, "attend this affair—"

"Yes," said Uriel. "We've been invited. That is, Aziraphale implied he'd see to it—"

"—whether you're invited to do so or not, and you will report your findings."
Forget her bow. At this point, Uriel just wanted to punch him in the teeth.

"We'll proceed with due caution," Raphael said. "You have our word."

"Speaking for yourself and for your consort," Gabriel mused. "How traditional."

"Get out of here before I shove something longer and a lot more complex than an arrow up your ass!" Raphael snapped. "If you've forgotten exactly what that means—"

The blue light fizzled to nothingness, leaving a few trace shimmers in its wake.

"We're screwed," Uriel said, rubbing her arms to force blood into them. "Right?"

"Maybe," said Raphael, clearly troubled. "Or it might come to nothing."

"Still. Target practice?" Uriel asked, rising, and hauled him to his feet.

"Target practice," Raphael agreed balefully, shining weapon suddenly in hand.

* * *

"I don't understand it," Crowley said to the rose bush, which stood as compelling proof that Uriel wasn't such a bad sort. "It's late March, and unseasonably warm to boot. There's really no excuse, what with leaves that glossy already out en force. If you haven't got any buds to show by the first of April, mark my words, I'll—"

"Crowley, someone's come calling! Get the door, would you?" Aziraphale shouted from the sitting-room window. "I've got to get back to the kitchen, or else—"

"Busy!" he replied. "What's so bloody important you can't bookmark it for later?"

"Your eggy-in-a-basket might burn, and then whose fault would it be?"

"Sod off!" Crowley shot back. He stood and stalked barefoot to the front yard.

"Hullo," said Adam, grinning as he leaned on the doorframe. "Is this a bad time?"

"No, not at all," Crowley said, brushing his hands on his pajama bottoms. "Just, er, tending the garden, you know, early to rise and all that," he said, yanking the door wide open. "Don't just stand there; come in. You're in time to join us for breakfast."

Aziraphale's glare didn't last for long; five minutes later, there was enough eggy-in-the-basket for everybody, along with tea, a plate of warm blueberry scones, and a dish of clotted cream. Adam situated his chair across from both of them and waited until Aziraphale had finished serving Crowley to reach eagerly for a scone.
"Mug's hot, _do_ be careful," said Aziraphale, nudging the sugar bowl in his direction.

"Early for you to be up on a Saturday," Crowley remarked around a mouthful of egg and toast. "Not to mention the drive. I can't imagine Soph would've been up for it."

Adam reached inside his coat, and then handed them a pair of posh-looking envelopes across the table. "I hadn't expected food, but thanks," he said. "I just wanted to deliver these in person. And you're right about Soph; she kicked the alarm off the nightstand and pulled the blankets up over her head." He leaned forward a little, conspiratorially. "I think she's got gills. And an extra set of lungs or something."

"So much for all that third nipple nonsense, then?" asked Aziraphale, dabbing his lips.

It ever ceased to take Crowley by surprise, his angel making a successful joke.

"Oh, that's a good one," Adam said, smirking. "I'll run it by her dad, shall I?"

"Don't," Crowley groaned. "Please, if you know what's good for you. He's already got daggers for us thanks to that train-wreck of a Latin palaeography lesson—"

Adam laughed for an impressive duration and ended up choking on his tea.

"I reckon you saved poor Janet's life," he said at length, wiping his eyes.

"It's always good to know one's charitable efforts haven't been in vain," said Aziraphale, mildly, opening the envelope addressed jointly to him and to Crowley. He held out the invitation and smiled at it in a sort of sappy, sickening way. "Oh, isn't that _superb_. Twenty-eighth of April. We should be absolutely _delighted_ to attend."

Crowley squinted at the smaller line of elegant script along the bottom.

"What's this? _Venue to be announced_?"

"Ah, yeah, that," Adam said, rubbing the side of his neck. "These are sort of the...advance invites, if you know what I mean. We had a few prototypes printed up, and you know Anathema—waste not, want not; reduce, reuse, and recycle. Pippa won't mind that, will she?" he asked, looking genuinely concerned, fingering the second envelope. "Thought I'd leave the one for her and Harold with you."

Aziraphale already looked worried. "That's a month and four days off. You've an awful lot of planning to wrap up, never mind sorting a venue."

Crowley patted him on the back. "They're big kids," he said. "They'll figure it out."

"The thing is," Adam admitted, "we can't seem to agree on one. Anathema's pushing for some kind of ancient holy site, but good luck getting that kind of thing past English Heritage or UNESCO without shelling out a boat-load of money. Newt keeps mentioning the village church where he grew up, but he always sounds guilty and half-hearted about it. My parents don't actually give a toss; they got that out of their systems with Sarah, stonking great white wedding for the firstborn and all that rot."

"What about you and Soph?" asked Aziraphale, pointedly, in protective-godparent mode. "What do you want? It's all very noble, taking into consideration others' suggestions and frivolous desires,
however..." He spread his hands meaningfully.

*Oh, sure,* thought Crowley, sarcastically. *The world on a platter, anything for the former Princeling of Darkness—who, by the way, seems to think absolutely nothing of dropping in on our nice, quiet morning with a load of personal baggage to dump.*

Adam fixed him with a wry glance, as if he'd caught every word. He probably had.

"Honestly? I don't mind," he said. "We could've agreed to a plainclothes civil ceremony at the registry with nobody there but our parents and anybody else who might be arsed, and I wouldn't have minded. But Soph does want something distinctive."

"Let me guess," Crowley said. "Her mum's calling in the high priestess of some obscure coven of New Age nutters—no pun intended, by the way—and it's going to be a right solemn hand-fasting with a vegan pot-luck and tarot-card readings afterward."

"You do know Anathema gave up on the whole dietary endeavor ages ago, right? These days, she's happy if the meat's free-range and the veggies and other produce are locally sourced. She keeps talking about moving to the country once she and Newt are retired, wants to open some kind of off-grid farm-commune-campground thing."

"That doesn't really answer my question, dear boy," Aziraphale said, curling one hand around Crowley's under the table. This usually indicated an apology (not far enough) in advance for being about to say something incredibly reckless and ill-advised.

"Fine," Adam said, as if regretting what he was about to say. "She wants a seaside ceremony. Civil, of course, none of that other nonsense, although I think there might've been some talk in the early stages. So Anathema started pushing for some coastal nature reserve in Cornwall, and Newt went on about Brighton being perfectly serviceable, if a bit touristy, and the twins started yammering about how it would be really cool if we all just took a trip to Ibiza or someplace and had done with it—"

Crowley tightened his grip on Aziraphale's hand, but it was no use trying to stop him.

"Nonsense," Aziraphale said. "There's a lovely beach just outside. We'll hold it here."

Adam's eyes widened, as if he couldn't believe he hadn't thought to ask them in the first place. Crowley sighed, swilling his tea. The young man sincerely hadn't.

"That would be ace," Adam said, "and it would also solve a lot of problems. But even though you're offering, it's a lot to ask; I know you value your privacy these days, and a load of people you don't know turning up on your doorstep doesn't seem right."

"I have only one favor to ask in return," said Aziraphale, firmly.

*Ah,* Crowley thought, lacing their fingers together. *Bastard. I love you.*

"What's that?" asked Adam, warily. "Keep in mind I've sworn off a lot of things—"

"A trifle, I assure you," Aziraphale replied. "We have two very good friends in America, and they've not visited in ages. You may have met them in passing; I can't be certain, and you would have been rather small at the time. They're going to be staying with us around then, you see, and I couldn't possibly ask them to nip off while such extensive festivities carry on. Surely the rules could
be...modified?"

"Oh, them," said Adam. "Anathema might have a thing or two to say about that."

"Good old Rafe and Uriel," Crowley muttered. "Life of the party."

"It can't hurt," Adam reasoned. "They'd make excellent security detail. You know, in case anybody else gets any ideas. Not that I expect they would, but what do I know? Out of the loop's a dangerous place to be when there are loved ones to consider."

"Most definitely," Aziraphale agreed. "Does the arrangement satisfy all parties?"

Crowley stared at him; uncanny, to hear it again after so long and in another tongue.

"Soph will be over the moon," said Adam, gulping down the rest of his tea before rising. "Maybe I can catch her before she wakes up; it's really funny, let me tell you, when she's a snoring pile of blankets. I reckon she'll think she's dreaming."

Aziraphale had an annoying way of drawing out goodbyes, and he insisted on sending the remainder of the scones off with Adam. They lingered in the doorway until Adam's car vanished around the bend that would soon carry him past Pippa's and the café.

"You haven't lost your touch," said Crowley, shooing Aziraphale inside. "That was low even by my standards." He slammed the door behind them, advancing on Aziraphale until his back was against the wall. "And if there's anything you've taught me, they're not nearly low enough." He didn't try to escape as Aziraphale took hold of his wrists.

"I know you're not keen on crowds or strangers, my dear, but please tolerate it for their sakes," said the angel, gaze modestly lowered. "I'm not as selfish as all that."

"Yes, you are," Crowley insisted, melting against him. "Take me back to bed."

* * *

Such extended, subtle endeavors in the realm of seduction, Aziraphale knew, were invariably worth the effort. It was all well and good taking the direct approach; Crowley responded to just about any overt advance without hesitation, provided he wasn't in a funk about something. That morning's tetchy exchange, plus Aziraphale's bold invitation to Adam Young and his bride-to-be, definitely required that amends be made in a deft, feather-unruffling manner. And leisurely fellatio never did hurt.

Aziraphale breathed deeply against the side of Crowley's neck, nosing up an angle until he found soft, neatly-clipped wisps that smelled of that morning's dew on the garden hedge. He'd cut his hair again not long after they'd returned from France in the autumn. Strange, how little things took getting used to even if they were, in fact, a shift away from something that had been a novel change in the first place.
Crowley shivered, tucking his chin so low that his forehead was plastered against Aziraphale's collarbone.

"That was a ssstupid thing to do," he murmured drowsily.

"I don't know," Aziraphale said, massaging a knot below his clavicle. "You did ask..."

"Nicely," Crowley reminded him, nuzzling Aziraphale's breastbone, breath humid under the covers. "And all I get for my trouble is a—" the phrase thorough sucking-off got muffled against Aziraphale's belly "—and a blessed white-lighter wedding to plan."

Aziraphale closed his eyes and bit his lip as Crowley mouthed him.

"Like their style, though," he mumbled. "Nontraditional. Bet Dad's bent out of shape."

"Which—which one?" Aziraphale gasped. "And what do you mean?"

"Former Witchfinder-Private Dad," Crowley clarified, kissing Aziraphale's hip. Endlessly charming, his slightly muffled voice and the way he slithered so effortlessly under the clinging sheets and heavy duvet. "He's progressive enough to have married a witch, sure, but deep down, he and Mr. Young, Senior have got a lot in common."

"But that doesn't explain..." Aziraphale lost the plot, groaning into his pillow.

Crowley stopped mid-lick and slid back up the length of Aziraphale's body.

"He was wearing a diamond engagement band. Hadn't you noticed?"

Aziraphale rolled Crowley onto his back and kissed him a while before responding.

"Sophia may already have one to match, my dear. One never knows."

Crowley regarded him hazily, all half-lidded eyes and enticingly swollen lips.

"D'you want me to finish you or not?"

Aziraphale settled in closer against Crowley's belly, finding him aroused.

"Shhh," he said, working one hand between them, and it didn't take long at all.

"Had a ring once," Crowley said as they lay recovering. "Remember?"

Aziraphale shook his head, yawning in spite of himself.

"You've had all manner of finery over time. That watch, for example."

"Sold it," said Crowley. "No use keeping tabs on time Down There anymore."


Crowley turned pink; he hadn't quite forgiven Aziraphale that holiday extravaganza.
"It was old when I lost it," he went on. "Roman gold. Set with molded glass."

Aziraphale wondered vaguely if he'd ever pulled it from the sea, but...surely not. The truth was, he couldn't even picture it, and that bothered him a great deal.

"You lost it when?" Aziraphale murmured against Crowley's mouth.

Crowley hummed and shrugged. "On Crusade?"

"Which?" asked Aziraphale, with fond exasperation.

Crowley closed his eyes and squirmed closer, latching fiercely onto Aziraphale.

"Children's," he whispered.

*How do I do this?* Aziraphale wondered. *So much pain, and still you don't leave.*

"We'd best get up," he said, kissing the top of Crowley's head.

"Why?" asked Crowley, plaintively. He tightened his arms around Aziraphale.

"Because we have an invitation to deliver," Aziraphale replied, but it was no use. He'd wrapped himself around Crowley, too, desperate to erase the memories he'd evoked.

"It can wait," said Crowley, his tone low and hopeful. "A few days at least."

Aziraphale kissed him feverishly and, with a thought, locked every door in the house.

* * *

Crowley had a haunted look about him as Aziraphale bundled him up the flagstone walkway; the older-looking man steered him along with infinite patience and a careful hand against the small of his back. The truth was, it was difficult to tell exactly what their ages might be, or how they even came to be so hopelessly in love. Or what they must have seen in each other at the very start, for that matter, before how much they needed each other had become apparent. Magic of the best sort, really. Fairytale stuff.

Pippa extracted her fingers from between the blinds and grinned.

She waited for the doorbell and dashed to answer (insofar as her hip permitted).

"That'll be yours, Pip!" Harold called from his seat in front of the telly.

"Hush, you!" she called over her shoulder, opening the door. "So sorry. Come in."
"Whatever for?" Aziraphale asked, taking her hands, and kissed her on one cheek, and then the other. "Your young man's done no harm, I'm sure," he added, and then raised his voice to a sort of pleasant shout. "A fine afternoon to you, Mr. Morrison!"

Harold's response was little more than a crotchety mutter ending in Hullo to you, too.

Honestly, she couldn't take him anywhere, which was why she usually didn't.

"Pippa," said Crowley, tucking away his sunglasses and offering that fragile, tentative smile of his. He didn't reach for her—he never did—but his arms slid around her when she hugged him, and he held on even when she kissed him on the cheek.

"How cold you get, no blood whatsoever!" Pippa lamented. "I'll put the kettle on."

She watched out of the corner of her eye as Aziraphale helped him out of his coat and hung it before sorting out his own. It was the opposite of what she'd expected, nearly, the way in which they complemented each other. For all that Aziraphale looked like the absent-minded, sensitive one who might need a bit of managing, it was the other way around. Although quite sensitive, Crowley wasn't absent-minded, not by half.

Aziraphale leaned close, touched Crowley's neck, and smoothed down his raised collar.

Pippa pursed her lips and carried the tea tray over to her kitchen table. They hadn't answered the phone when she'd tried ringing the day before, which was a fair to good sign they'd needed some time alone. She pulled out two consecutive chairs and then sat down at the head of the table. Her body wasn't thanking her for the run-about.

"You mustn't overdo it," said Aziraphale, setting a hand on her shoulder.

Something about him always calmed Pippa. The ache in her hip subsided.

She didn't protest when he busied himself pouring cups for all three of them. Crowley sat down adjacent to her, depriving Aziraphale of his usual spot. He peered at her with tense concern, eyes luminous. That famous National Geographic cover didn't have a patch on him. Green eyes, yellow eyes—it was all the same sort of genetic miracle in the end, wasn't it? And to think he felt he'd needed to hide them from her at first!

"Are you well?" he asked, hands curling around the cup Aziraphale set before him.

"Oh, you know the usual," she said, reaching for the one Aziraphale offered her. "Thank you, dear—as I was saying," she continued, turning back to Crowley. "These old bones aren't what they were when you first met me. Arthritis runs in the family."

Crowley lowered his eyes and took a long sip of tea.

Years ahead of you yet, my lad, she thought. Why such sadness—

Was it for Aziraphale, she wondered, or was it for her?

"A little bird left this on our doorstep," said Aziraphale, finally seated, and handed her an envelope. "You've met him—let me think, perhaps two or three times? Adam Young. If you recall, he's
marrying Anathema's eldest, Sophia. An excellent match."

"They'd best get on finding a venue soon," Pippa said.

"Actually, that's settled," Aziraphale replied. "It's our beach and back garden."

"Lovely!" Pippa exclaimed. "Not having children of your own, I suppose..."

"We're Adam's godfathers," Crowley put in. He sounded ever so proud.

"For all the time we've been friends, there's a lot I don't know about you," Pippa said.

"So much planning to do," Aziraphale murmured. "Catering, decorations—"

"Anyone would think it was your wedding, angel," Crowley remarked.

Pippa blinked. That, for instance, was an excellent example.

"You never did tell me about yours," she said. "What was it like?"

Aziraphale snapped out of his reverie. "I beg your pardon?"

Crowley was staring into his teacup again; Pippa took it and topped it up.

"Your wedding," she prompted, adding milk and some extra sugar.

"Oh," said Aziraphale. "Well, we—" He paused, as if the question had only just sunk in.

"We didn't have one," Crowley said, taking the cup from her grasp using both hands. "You might argue that moving out here was, as they say, it. Pooling resources is a huge commitment these days, and you don't just move in with somebody on a lark."

It broke Pippa's heart a little, the hidden depths of meaning beneath his flippant tone.

"It's not everybody's style, I'll grant, a big to-do," she said, patting Crowley's fingers. "The registry's enough these days for some. As long as you're looking out for your rights. Common-law marriage is a myth. Make sure you've got wills sorted out."

Aziraphale looked somewhat lost, and more than slightly guilty, too.

As well you should, thought Pippa, and squeezed Crowley's hand.

"It was a long time coming," Aziraphale said, as if that in any way helped.

"What he's trying to say is, we're thick as two short planks," said Crowley.

"Well, you got there eventually," Pippa said, but she had the niggling suspicion they hadn't even got to the registry. "Now, what can I do to help out with your godson's special day? Harold knows his way around a hammer and nails if you need—"

"I charge by the hour!" Harold called.
Two pots of Oolong and a packet of biscuits later, Pippa had agreed to help with sundry decorations. Crowley didn't look as displeased as she might've expected him to, given he'd just been assigned the task of working out a spread of canapés. Full catering was too much of a fuss, they all agreed on *that.* Crowley seemed grateful. Four o'clock came and went, and Harold started making noises about wanting supper.

"Why don't you go fetch the coats, dear?" Pippa suggested to Crowley.

Aziraphale was busy clearing the tea tray, but she stopped him mid-lift.

"Just leave that," she said, "and you listen to me for a minute."

"Of course," he said, and set the tray down, eternally patient.

"You haven't even got rings, have you?" asked Pippa, sharply. She couldn't help it.

Aziraphale's brow furrowed; she thought she'd seen a flash of anger.

"One didn't feel it was necessary at the time," he said. "It never came up."

"One might wish to reconsider," she said, beaming at Crowley as he returned.

"Speaking of supper, it won't cook itself," Crowley said, holding out Aziraphale's coat.

"It might do, if we drop in on them up the road," said Aziraphale, shrugging into it.

"That paté is back on the menu," said Pippa, encouragingly. "The one you like." She sent them off with four pieces of her most recent bakewell tart, although it had gone a bit stale. Served Aziraphale right, after all. Let him chew on *that.*

* * *

It was raining by the time they reached the café, which put Crowley in an altogether unpleasant mood. He parked the Bentley crooked in a spot reserved for staff and clamped the wheels within an inch of the tires popping while he was at it.

Aziraphale gave him a disapproving look, but he got out of the car and headed straight for the entrance. The angel dashed to catch up, taking hold of Crowley's hand as he pushed his way inside. The door handle was clammy, and the floor-mat slipped.

"Bit too late for that," Crowley said, hanging up his coat.

Aziraphale hung his own in a huff, slightly out of breath. "She means well," he said. "We'll need the help; we've never done this."

"So many firsts, so little time," Crowley remarked, scanning the café distractedly. At least five or six
tables were occupied, but it didn't otherwise look full. And, thankfully, Mandy was nowhere—

"We had a bet going. Me and the kitchen staff, I mean."

Crowley wheeled around and blinked at her. "Yeah?" he asked, but, really, he just wanted to swear.

"On whether or not you guys would turn up this weekend," Mandy said, collecting two menus from the front desk. "They let me pick up a few odd shifts if I'm home."

"I imagine so," Aziraphale said, insinuating himself between her and Crowley. "At the window, if you please. It's quieter back there. Our apologies for not calling ahead."

"Right this way," she said, hips swinging as she turned. High heels? That'd end badly.

"Shameless," Aziraphale muttered, sliding an arm around Crowley as they walked.

"Pot, kettle, black?" Crowley suggested, and ahead of them, Mandy wobbled a little.

Aziraphale suggested that they share an order of the chantarelle paté, but Crowley stubbornly ordered his own. He couldn't untangle the complicated mess of uneasy thoughts the visit to Pippa had left him with, so he asked Mandy to bring two bottles of the house red, which made Aziraphale cringe behind his napkin. Let him turn that into whatever the hell he pleased.

"If it's too much, my dear," Aziraphale pressed once she'd gone to submit their order, "you need only say so. I won't have you agreeing to this out of some misplaced sense of duty, or because you'd like to please me—"

"The kids deserve it. What bugs me is that you've dragged Pippa into this. She's..."

Aziraphale gazed at him expectantly, with no criticism implied.

"...dying," Crowley finished, covering his mouth with both hands.

"I wouldn't say that," Aziraphale reassured him. "She's seventy-one, that's hardly—"

"They all are, humans," Crowley insisted, unable to stem the ache that had swelled in his chest. "Slowly and constantly, without warning. One day you're having a chat and sipping white wine in the sun, turns out the artist's a decent bloke, and the next..."

"Acceptable losses," Aziraphale murmured. "It can't be helped."

Crowley kicked the leg of the table and upset his water-glass.

"No loss is acceptable," Crowley hissed. "Not if I know them, anyway."

Aziraphale was mopping up the mess with napkins from a neighboring table.

"My dear, really?"

Crowley closed his eyes and leaned hard into his hands.

"You're right. It doesn't matter if I know them or not."
"We can't save them all. That's not how it works."

"What's this it you're so keen on? Last I checked, we'd sailed right over the edge into some happy little no-man's land where all bets are off and we ride into the sunset."

Aziraphale pried his hands away from his face, leaning perilously across the table.

"We love them, Crowley," he said in a quiet voice. "And we do our best."

Crowley was astonished to realize his vision had gone a bit blurry.

"What about us?" He twitched as Aziraphale dabbed at his nose with a damp napkin.

"We do our best there, too," the angel sighed, resuming his seat. "Most of the time."

Mandy returned with the bottles of wine in one arm and a pair of glasses in hand.

"You're keeping an eye out for odd jobs, then?" Crowley ventured.

"As and when," she said, setting the glasses down, and proceeded to uncork the bottles with practiced ease. She'd got used to the fact that when they ordered two bottles, it meant one for each of them, and that was just to start. "Why?"

"April twenty-eighth," he continued. "Are you busy?"

"Don't think so," she said, pouring them each a half-glass. "Again, why?"

"Some dear friends of ours are getting married," Aziraphale said, falling easily back into the tag-teaming snare tactic at which they'd got so good since...well, since.

"We're holding the ceremony at ours," Crowley said. "I'm overseeing the food, but I'll need help with serving. I expect it won't be as extravagant as it sounds."

"What kind of food? Full service dinner? Buffet?"

"Small nibbles before the ceremony," said Aziraphale. "Nothing too taxing."

"Yeah, always good to keep people fat and happy while everyone else arrives," Mandy agreed, apparently considering the proposition. "You never can count on everybody to turn up on time, the bride and groom least of all. They get cold feet."

"In this case, the bride won't be a problem," Crowley said.

He was thinking of Shadwell and Tracy.

"I'm in," Mandy said, clearing away the napkins and water-glasses.

"Thanks," Crowley said. "You're a gem. Payment to be decided later. Er."

Mandy winked at him. "No more lipstick on your cheek, I promise."
Aziraphale stiffened, but he smiled in benign, feigned agreement.

Crowley couldn't drink his first glass of wine fast enough.

* * *

Raphael shifted in his seat, staring off into the distance, Uriel's head heavy on his shoulder. The train ride out of London had been tiresome enough, but twenty minutes by cab on top of it was ludicrous. How sleep came so easily to her, he had no clue.

He'd never admit it to Aziraphale's face, the smug bastard, but the English countryside was sickeningly pretty. They'd paid a visit to the cottage three years ago—a belated housewarming, of course Uriel had insisted—and his impressions had been much the same. They'd passed a very quiet week between London and the new homestead, during which time Uriel had pestered Aziraphale persistently about their human friends and neighbors. She'd been rewarded with little more than a brief walk-about and a survey of Pippa's garden while the good lady herself and the husband had been out (rather stalkerish on Aziraphale's part, Raphael had thought, although he'd enjoyed watching Crowley quietly blow a gasket while he waited in the car). Things were different now, though; Raphael could sense it.

Was one word with that stupid boy really all it took?

"The one called Home, you said?" asked the driver. "Not too far off. Always thought that was clever, meself. The Morrisons, now, they call theirs The Shambles."

"It's twee, is what it is," Raphael replied. "Isn't that your turn of phrase? Twee?"

The driver grinned at Raphael's reflection in the rearview mirror.

"That's right, lad. You'll do well enough out here."


Uriel groaned and kicked his shin. "No shows, okay?" she yawned.

"Nonsense. If I don't make a scene, I'll never live it down."

"Make a scene and I'll go stay with Pippa, just see if I won't."

"You don't actually know her yet," Raphael chided.

"Well, I feel like I do," Uriel insisted, rubbing her eyes.

"Everybody knows Pippa," the driver reassured them, already slowing.
Twenty pounds sterling, plus tip. Raphael stuffed his wallet into his back pocket and let Uriel bully their luggage through the front gate, idly surveying his surroundings. The faint salt-taste of the air clung to his lips and bit the back of his throat, and it was at times like this that he had to admit breathing was one of his guilty pleasures. He dashed to catch up with Uriel, wrestling one of the heavy suitcases away from her.

The front walk was neatly kept cobblestone; the flower beds running along each side boasted a riot of tasteful, muted shades. Crowley's patience knew no bounds, he realized, upon counting no fewer than five varieties of hellebore all in full bloom.

*Christmas rose indeed,* he thought. *So fond of Lenten trappings, this dour island.*

Between the blossoms' fragrance and the effect of mingled dark purple, luminescent white, deep burgundy, pale green, and ethereal pink, his thesis was, perhaps, not the strongest argument he'd ever constructed. Uriel was at the door, already knocking.

To Raphael's surprise, Crowley answered, peering owlishly out at them.

"You're early," he remarked, opening the door a fraction wider.

"Not really," Uriel said, tiredly smiling. "We're only just on time."

"Aziraphale's not here," Crowley said, accepting Uriel's embrace with much more ease than he had on previous occasions. "He's gone up the road to have a chat with Pippa about decorations. I don't know about you," he said in a low voice, holding the door while both of them filed through, "but I can't imagine how your lot get anything done. Committees and sub-committees and endless lists, and who knows what else..."

"You have my deepest, sincerest sympathies," Raphael offered, if only because, to his memory, working on even a minor project headed by Aziraphale had, back in the day, been nothing short of career suicide. "How are you holding up, darling?"

Crowley busied himself with clearing breakfast off the coffee table.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," he said. "Tea, anyone? Cappuccino?"

Uriel collapsed on the white leather sofa, sighing blissfully at the ceiling.

"Anything with caffeine in it, seriously," she said. "I'm game."

"Whatever you're having," said Raphael, absently, abandoning his suitcase next to the sofa. His eyes had already lit on the mantelpiece, which, although it had been a hot mess of ephemera even three years ago, was just mesmerizing in the scope of its beach-plucked contents. Was that a fountain-pen nib next to the piece of eight?

"Don't touch that," said Crowley, turning in the kitchen doorway. "It's platinum."

Raphael withdrew his hand, sighing, and went to join Uriel on the sofa.

The machine in the kitchen made a horrible racket, but the espresso was, in fact, heavenly. Crowley sat across from them in the tartan armchair that he no doubt pretended to hate, but secretly loved for the fact that he could curl up in it just like he was doing now with his bare toes wiggling against the
arm-rest. He was much more at ease in his own home, and, Raphael was shocked to discover, a charming host.


"Convenient," Raphael countered, peering into the dregs of his tiny, fashionable white cup. It was really more of a Turkish coffee than an espresso, and the sediment had more than enough punch for Uriel's taste. At least they'd be up all night together.

"Look at us all," said Crowley. "So tame we can't be bothered to do anything the old-fashioned way. It's a good job they don't keep tabs on that sort of thing anymore."

"I don't know about you, but a flight that long fucks my wings right up," Uriel said.

"She's too lazy to keep after them," Raphael explained. "I have to do it for her. She hates ironing, too. When was the last time you met somebody who based their clothes-shopping decisions on whether or not stuff will wrinkle in the wash?"

"Everybody hates ironing," said Crowley, downing the rest of his coffee. "Biscuits?"

"Those chocolate ones?" asked Uriel, hopefully. "Please."

Between the three of them, they'd cleared two and a half packets by the time Aziraphale got home. Sometime since their arrival, it had begun to rain; Aziraphale shrugged out of his camel-hair coat and propped his umbrella against the door.

"Fairy lights," he lamented, turning as he hung his coat on one of the charmingly old-fashioned hooks affixed to the wall. "White, blue, and purple fairy lights all through the house and in the tent and good gracious, where are my manners? Hallo."

"That's assuming you ever had them?" asked Uriel, bouncing to her feet. "Hey!"

Crowley sank lower in the armchair, stuffing half a biscuit in his mouth.

"She'll regret it," he muttered. "Has she even met the bride?"

"Manners are overrated," Raphael said, leaning to embrace Aziraphale once he'd managed to peel Uriel's arms from around his neck. "You're a wedding planner now?"

"It's not what you think," said Aziraphale, huffily. "Surely Crowley explained—"

"It's okay," Uriel said, flopping on the sofa. "I'd have done the same. Possibly."

Raphael sat back down beside her and took away her espresso cup.

"See?" Aziraphale said, stepping close to the armchair. "Entertaining's not so bad."

Crowley glowered at him, but it was halfhearted at best, and the biscuit crumbs stuck to the corner of his mouth really did nothing to bolster his credibility. Aziraphale crouched next to him, resting one damp arm on Crowley's drawn-up knees.

"Anathema's coming tomorrow," said Crowley. "She rang after you left. Woke me up."
"To inspect the beach, I suppose," Aziraphale replied. "Is she bringing the girls?"

"What d'you think? Yes. All three of them. If you don't lock the bedroom, I'll—"

Raphael continued to watch, fascinated, as Aziraphale leaned and brushed away the crumbs. Crowley unfolded his limbs and tilted his head into the touch, closing his eyes as Aziraphale pressed a kiss there instead. The tableau lasted all of a quarter-second, and still Raphael was sure he'd never forget it. It came to them so easily, didn't it?

"Good morning, my dear," said Aziraphale, as if he'd forgotten they weren't alone.

Uriel nudged Raphael in the ribs, surreptitiously inclining her head at them.

"You could learn a thing or two," she said.

* * *

Crowley handed Uriel the spade, pointing beneath the bush's low-hanging branches. "There's an exposed root. No matter what I do, it keeps poking back up. Maybe it'll listen to you. I've tried heaping on more soil, but clearly the air's preferable."

Uriel tapped the root with the flat of the spade, clucking her tongue.

"Listen, dude. Behave your spiky self, or I won't be responsible for the consequences."

"Sure, defer back to me," Crowley said. "Since that's been going so well."

Uriel stuck the spade point-first in the dirt, heaped a handful over the root, and brushed her hands off. "Oh, I wasn't," she reassured him. "The stupid thing'll die of blight if you don't get blooms in time for next Saturday. Jeez. Only a week."

Crowley reached out and touched the tightly curled tips of one branch. More new leaves. He thought idly of the tea bushes they'd managed to cultivate at Tregothnan. "Bit harsh, don't you think? Blight?"


"If shrieking teenagers are your thing," sighed Crowley, and followed.

It was cool and windy for mid-morning. Uriel took his arm as they strolled down the sandy stretch toward the three figures locked in heated debate on the tide-line. Anathema glanced sidelong and spared them an isn't-he-hopeless kind of smile, and, having known Aziraphale all too well for far too long, both of them returned it.
"I assure you there isn't any problem," Aziraphale was saying. "Locals do stroll by on occasion, but I'm sure they wouldn't dream of interfering with the ceremony."

"They can stop and watch if they want," Sophia said, hugging herself against the chill. "I don't mind. I think it'd be sweet if some random passer-by caught the bouquet." Crowley hunched closer to Uriel; it was making him cold, just looking at her.

"Do you want strangers recording you on their smart-phones?" Anathema countered.

"Depends on how the dress looks," Raphael offered, strolling up behind Aziraphale with the twins eagerly trailing after him. The three of them were barefoot, shivering, and more than half soaked. Crowley wondered if they'd gone as far as the tide pools.

"It would look great if we could get the zip up," said Natalie. "Gotta lose an inch, sis."

"Oi, shut up," Janet told her. "It was just the once. We'd all had a big lunch."

Sophia winked at Janet. "Guess who gets to carry my train?"

"We'll both do it," said Natalie, petulantly. "Jesus, sorry."

Crowley wriggled free of Uriel's arm, broke from the circle, and waded into the surf.

Human family politics were hellishly complicated, but being party to such exchanges never ceased to amaze him. How did they switch from love to enmity to annoyance back to love, often all in the same breath? Why didn't they take more care with each other, knowing that nothing is permanent? And why, in the end, did it not seem to matter terribly much, as if blood actually had some inherent advantage over water?

"Let them fight it out," said Sophia, softly, wading out to stand beside him.

Crowley turned to look at her. "Why? I thought this was what you wanted."

"It is," she said. "This. The sea, the sky, and your good company. I don't give a toss otherwise; fairy lights make no difference to anyone but Pippa and Aziraphale, and anyway, that bit's more about them than about me. They're so determined."

"Careful," Crowley said, taking her arm, steadying them both against a wave that crashed against their knees. Sophia shrieked and clung to him, losing her balance. They fell in the water fully clothed; Sophia was laughing madly. They had an audience by now, but, strangely, neither one of them cared. High tide stopped for no one. They sat waist-deep, hand in hand, letting the next wave crash over their heads.

Crowley fished his sunglasses out of the water and laughed with her.

* * *
Aziraphale left the driest of the four Device-Pulsifer women in the kitchen with Raphael, Uriel, and Pippa (she'd noticed the commotion from a distance and had driven up just in time to catch them at the house). He escorted Sophia to the bathroom and told her she ought to find whatever she needed in the cupboard. Hopefully he'd got her size right. She looked much healthier now than the last time he'd seen her. Shame on Natalie's wicked tongue; she was fine just as she was. He crossed the hall and rapped on the bedroom door.

"Crowley, how are you getting on? Pippa's asking after you."

He made a noncommittal noise that sounded like it was muffled in a pillow.

Aziraphale opened the door and slipped inside, found him curled up naked under the woven cotton throw that they kept folded at the foot of the bed. His wet clothes were in a pile on the floor. Aziraphale sat down on the edge of the bed, reaching to stroke Crowley's exposed shoulder. His skin prickled: dry now, but rough with residual salt.

"Too much exposure, I see," Aziraphale said, stretching out beside him. "Guests, weather, and otherwise." He untangled the blanket and reached underneath, pulling Crowley against him. Novel, almost, feeling every exposed contour of him through this many layers of clothing; Crowley's breath hitched a little as he pushed against the teasing fabric of Aziraphale's rucked-up shirt and badly wrinkled trousers.

Guiltily, Aziraphale encouraged him; for heaven's sake, they had company, and he could hear Sophia running hot water from the tap. Crowley whimpered as Aziraphale shoved his trousers down just far enough to let skin touch skin.

"Oh, oh God," Crowley moaned, coming no sooner than he'd got in half a dozen helpless thrusts against Aziraphale's hip. "Sssorry, oh, I really have no idea what I thought—why did you have to do that, somebody's lisstening, angel, I just know—"

Aziraphale kissed him, biting down hard on Crowley's lower lip as they shook against each other. "Get dressed," he said after a moment, when breathing seemed easier.

"Speak for yourself," said Crowley, untangling himself from Aziraphale and the throw. "Just a quick zip-up for you, very convenient. Where the devil are my pants?"

Aziraphale got him presentable and out the door just as Sophia was emerging from the bathroom. She hung back against the wall and winked, letting them pass by first.

"Oh Lord," Crowley muttered under his breath. "They're all just wrong, these kids."

"Off you go, all dry," Aziraphale said, leaving him beside the sofa, which was already populated by Uriel, Raphael, and Pippa. Anathema sat reading in the armchair, and the twins lay sprawled on the floor, both absorbed in their elaborate mobile phones.

The kitchen was warm and quiet, and Aziraphale soaked it in gratefully.

They had enough mugs to go around, although the real conundrum was making something that would suit everybody. He wasn't in any mood to take individual orders; he readied the tea tray on autopilot. One look at Crowley and he'd wanted them all gone, had wanted time and space and leisure enough to shut out the world beyond these four walls and what he could never seem to hold
for long enough.

Something wasn't right, and Aziraphale hadn't caught wind of it till that morning.

Raphael and Uriel could be secretive, but the wordless argument he'd walked in on at dawn had left them frozen and staring at him for at least ten seconds before Raphael shot off his mouth in a cover-up attempt. He'd caught *Gabriel and What do we do if...*

What indeed. Instead of pushing it, Aziraphale had gone to make breakfast.

Pippa shuffled into the kitchen just as the water came to a boil, watching Aziraphale drop a bag of Yorkshire Gold into each one of the mugs. She carefully took hold of two mugs as soon as he filled them, but she didn't return to the living room.

"They make him uneasy, you know," she said.

"Yes," said Aziraphale, thinly, filling the remaining cups. "I had noticed."

"That Uriel, she's a lovely girl, but I can't quite..." Pippa trailed off, setting the two mugs back down on the tray. She leaned against the work-top and folded her arms, fixing Aziraphale with a reproachful look. "Rafe's always mocking Crowley somehow, I just know it, and that's about the worst hypocrisy I can imagine, come to think—"

"Phillippa, enough," said Aziraphale, returning the kettle to its coil. "What is it?"

"Marry him, you sodding idiot," Pippa snapped.

With that, she took one cup off the tray, sloshed it down next to Aziraphale, picked up the rest with difficulty, and wobbled back into the living room. The sound of eight voices dipping in and out of animated conversation was warm, familiar, and inviting.

Aziraphale wandered over to the sink, peering out the window at the gathering fog.

Neither the mouse, nor Crowley turned up, so he drank his tea alone.

* * *

Adam shifted uncomfortably on his milk crate. It was well past dusk, and he'd been waiting for the better part of half an hour for the others to show. As many things as had changed in the past twenty-two years, this, at least, hadn't. He *hated* waiting.

Also, they didn't make milk crates as big as they used to. Shame, really.

"What a tosser," Pepper said, striding over the rise and into plain view. She wore black trousers, sensible boots, and a charcoal pea-coat that blended almost perfectly with the descending dusk.
"Sitting there all alone in the dark, brooding on your last week of freedom," she added, thunking two six-packs of Bulmers Red Apple down at his feet. "Do you know how hard it is to find this stuff? It was a limited edition two or three years ago. Well? What have you got to say for yourself?" She kicked the toe of his trainer and pulled up one of the three remaining milk crates. It creaked under her.

"You're late," he told her, grinning. "That's what."

Pepper removed her beret and hit him with it, and then pulled a bottle opener out of her pocket. "Might as well get started," she said. "You can't count on Brian to be punctual for shite these days, and Wen's working late again. I got out of the city just in time, missed the traffic. Cheers," she added, handing him an open bottle.

"I resent that statement," Brian said, strolling up behind Pepper. He mussed her hair, which didn't make much difference, because it was short and feathery and artfully mussed to begin with. "Annie still doesn't like you lot. Thinks you're a bad influence."

"Oh, right," Pepper said. "Me—the responsible university lecturer—a bad influence!"

"Adam's a bad influence," Brian said, teetering on his milk crate, which was split along one seam. "Here we are, mate, you and me: thirty-three and still working odd jobs for sod-all. Lucky thing we found us some bright, ambitious ladies, innit?"

Pepper didn't look the least bit amused. Her beret hit him next.

"Is that hello from Katerina?" Brian asked, plucking the hat off his shoulder.

"No. Hello from Katerina has a lot more syllables and, in your case, some Russian swears thrown in. And maybe a bucket of paint chucked along with 'em."

Adam cleared his throat. "How're you two holding up, Pep?"

"Couldn't say," Pepper sighed, resting her chin in her hands. "I'm working long hours at the uni, she's putting in long hours at the studio, and, between one thing and the next, we're only ever home at the same time for three hours out of any given day."


Brian wiped his eyes and reached for a bottle of London Pride.

"Still got that bottle opener, Pep?"

"Not if that's how you're asking."

"For fuck's sake. Please."

Pepper handed it over, and Wensleydale politely waited his turn.

Adam thought it was time they got things started, even though there hadn't ever been a plan beyond
"Well, thanks for coming," he said, and the rest of them fell silent.

After a few moments of awkward silence and deep drinks all around, Pepper said, "Of course we came. We always were good at keeping promises, so here we are."

"I can only stay for two hours," said Wensleydale. "I've got to go in early tomorrow."

"Oh, bollocks," said Brian. "We'll stay all night if that's what you want."

"I don't know about all night," Pepper said, "but as late as I can, sure."

Inexplicably—or maybe it was the cider going to his head by way of his empty stomach; he couldn't be sure—Adam started to laugh. By the time he'd been laughing for about thirty seconds straight and ended up wheezing on the ground, his bottle unceremoniously up-ended, Pepper was kneeling beside him and Wensleydale was leaning over her shoulder wearing a look of pinched concern. Brian stayed where he was, quietly alternating sips of porter with sips of Jack Daniel's.

"Are you sleeping well?" Pepper asked, tilting his chin up so she could peer into his eyes with the mini-torch on her keychain. "Stressed? Not having second thoughts about marrying Sophia, are you? If you are, you've got another thing coming. She's absolutely lovely, and I'll kick your sorry arse if it's anything like that, so help me."

Wensleydale helped Pepper settle him back on his milk crate. Adam didn't protest.

"Nothing like that," he said, gesturing to Brian, who handed him the Jack Daniel's. He took a long swig, savored the burn of it going down. "I never imagined this, to tell you the truth. I'm nothing special, and she's everything special. How does that happen?"

Pepper leaned over and ruffled his hair, taking the bottle away from him.

"Love's a fucking sneaky bastard," she said, and took a drink. "That's how."

"Did you ever notice," said Brian, "how we kind of turned out to be matchmakers?"

Wensleydale frowned at him and said, "Explain?"

"When we were kids," Brian continued. "D'you remember all those people we met when there was a spot of bother down here, all that cops and robbers business that probably had something to do with national security or America's trigger-happy president, or MI6 and the FBI or whatever? Not them, I mean. The nice people. That cranky Mr. Shadwell married Madame Whatserface, and those odd gents with the vintage car who you neglected to mention were your godfathers shacked up, and..."

"Anathema and Newt," said Pepper to Adam, fondly. "Look at where that's got you."

Adam closed his eyes and pretended to be processing all of this, but the truth was, he'd processed it long ago. Let them think they'd been involved in some big, romantic star-crossing, sure—it was better that way. Let them never know that he was the one who'd messed people about without realizing what the consequences would be.
Let them never know the exquisite agony of a love that was a direct consequence of his meddling. He'd got what he deserved for his hand in it all, that was for sure. Sophia was everything: his Woman Clothed With the Sun, everything and all.

And as for the others—oh, the others. Had he done right by them, he wondered?

"Adam," said Pepper, quietly, touching his shoulder.

"You okay, mate?" Brian asked, his bleary smile uncertain.

Wensleydale put his hand on Adam's other shoulder, squeezing tightly.

"You were the only ones I couldn't touch," said Adam. "The only ones safe."

"Cor, is he that drunk already?" Brian asked, finishing off the Jack Daniel's.

Pepper yanked the bottle away from him and tossed it over her shoulder.

It smashed on the unforgiving chalk scree, making them all jump.

"If you think you somehow bollocksed things up for all those other people just by getting in the middle of things," Wensleydale offered, still reasonably sober, "I doubt that's anywhere near the truth. It's all one big happy accident. That's life."

"Happy," Adam said. "There's the rub. I hope they are. I hope we'll be."

"Pfft!" Pepper said. "Look at you two," she said. "It's like...I don't know. Cupid and Psyche. No, wait, worse—Zeus and Hera. Maybe? I don't know. Don't attempt mythology whilst drunk is the moral of this story, but my point is—"

The point is the dolphins, Adam thought, and then shook himself. No. That was somebody else's intoxicated thought, somebody else's mind, somebody else's fairytale that he'd glimpsed in the making and had perhaps even helped wish into being.

"Your point is rubbish," Brian said, starting on a bottle of cider.

Red Apple, Adam thought. Yes. It always started with one of those.

"Hey," Wensleydale said, shifting from his milk crate onto the ground next to Adam's. "Penny for your thoughts? You're getting married seven days from now. We'll all pile into Pep's car and turn up on your godfathers' doorstep, and it'll be ace."

How did that song go? The wolf is getting married, and he'll never cry again—

"I'm not sorry, though, is the strange part," Adam said, grinning at each one in turn.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Pepper insisted. "C'mon. Let's drink."

Never sorry, he thought, accepting another bottle of cider. Not in the least.
"Shadwell at twelve o'clock," Crowley hissed to Mandy in passing. "Look sharp!"

In retrospect, Crowley's prediction that it wouldn't be as elaborate an affair as it had sounded had been proved an outright lie. Between Adam's childhood friends and one of their significant others, the bride's parents and the groom's parents and all of their siblings, plus Shadwell and Tracy and the Archangels and Pippa and Harold...

It was all they could do to bloody well *keep up*.

"Aye, aye," Mandy said, putting on a come-hither smile.

Shadwell muttered something about painted Jezebels; Madame Tracy beamed at her.

*Takes one to know one*, Crowley thought, offering his tray to the man beside him.

"How very kind," said Mr. Young, faintly puzzled. "What's this?"

"*Gougères*," replied Crowley, distractedly. "Er. Puff pastry filled with Mornay sauce."

"Terribly exotic, Dierdre," he told his wife, handing her one first. "That girl."

"Sophia, you mean?" Crowley asked, stepping away. "Perfectly nice, if you ask me."

He dodged his way out the back door and into the garden, somewhat relieved to see that Pippa had cornered Raphael and Uriel into what sounded like a lengthy explanation of how they had got together. They were having an awfully hard time putting together a human-friendly story from the sound of things.

"There won't be any more of these coming out of the oven, so stuff your face while you can," Crowley told them, thrusting the tray into their midst. "I'm going to have to evacuate the kitchen. The bride, her sisters, the groom, and the erstwhile Tadfield brats have got it in their heads that it's some kind of VIP lounge."

"You could go into catering," Pippa raved, licking her fingers. "You really could."

"No more for me," Raphael said, waving Crowley off. "I've had at least a dozen."

"Don't forget the prawns Mandy's taking around," Uriel said, stuffing another *gougère* in her mouth. "Mmmh. Crowley, you could make a killing in Los Angeles."

"I'm looking for Aziraphale," Crowley said, scanning the yard. "Have you seen him?"

"Something about a faulty strand of lights out front, last time I checked," said Pippa.
Crowley passed the tray off to her and cut around the side of the cottage.

Aziraphale was sitting on the front steps, an incongruously casual pose for as finely as he was dressed (and Crowley had seen to *that*), smoking his pipe. The number of times Crowley had ever caught him in the act, counting now, amounted to twice.

"We could just agree to make an evening of it now and then," Crowley said, taking a seat beside him. Aziraphale blew a puff of smoke and handed Crowley the pipe.

"Just as long as you don't mean another one of these blessed affairs," he said.

Crowley took a few puffs and sighed, tasting apricot and clove.

"I don't know how you can claim not to like my cigarettes."

"I don't know how you can claim pipes aren't fashionable."

They passed the pipe back and forth until its embers burned low.

Aziraphale tilted his head so that it almost, but not quite, rested on Crowley's shoulder.

Crowley tilted his head so that it rested against the top of Aziraphale's.

"The best man's getting anxious. She thinks the bride and groom need a run-through." 

"She?" asked Aziraphale, with a frown in his voice.

"Yeah," Crowley said. "Pepper's Adam's best man. Where have you been?"

"Heaven knows," replied Aziraphale, shrugging. "What about the bridesmaids?"

"The twins make it all up as they go along. They'll be fine."

"That young man with dubious certification...?" Aziraphale asked.

"Wensleydale has been vetted by the Universal Life Church website," Crowley said.

"I thought that was only legally binding in America?"

"They don't give a damn," Crowley said. "If it's not binding, they'll sort it out later." He turned his head and breathed in the scent of Aziraphale's hair: pipe smoke and dew, plenty of fresh worry. Cream cake, maybe, if he closed his eyes tightly enough.

"My dear," said Aziraphale, almost inaudibly. "Have I done wrong by you?"

"Not unless you've got another dove up your sleeve," Crowley said. "Don't think so."

Aziraphale took hold of Crowley's left hand and pressed it between his palms.

"Pippa's got it in her head that I ought to marry you, and I think she may be right."

Crowley frowned into Aziraphale's hair. "But it would be superfluous," he said.
"I know, dear boy," Aziraphale said, and did something peculiar with his right index finger along the underside of Crowley's left ring finger. "But doubt's a funny thing." At first, Crowley's skin tingled; after a few seconds, it burned. He pulled free.

"Ow! What are you playing a—oh," said Crowley, blinking at his hand. "Oh."

"Uriel has a better knack for finding lost objects than I do," Aziraphale explained, eyes lowered. "Comes of all that Dominion Over the Souls of Men business. If humans have loved something enough to pour a piece of their soul into the crafting..."

Crowley stared at the gold signet ring set with a piece of carnelian glass. The features molded into the oval setting were much worse for wear now, less distinct than he remembered them. He'd bought the ring secondhand from a street vendor; he hadn't even known whose likeness the glass bore, only that it had fascinated him to know someone had been devoted enough to commemorate a loved one's face and wear it.

Gently waving hair and a calm, constant profile worn by centuries of care.

It could have been anyone, but now, there was no one else it could be.

They kissed for even longer than it had taken them to share the pipe.

Somebody finally sent Pippa after them, because the ceremony was about to start.

"We'd best get out there," she said, ignoring the fact that Crowley couldn't look her straight in the eye and that it was taking Aziraphale far too long to adjust his collar. "They'd never forgive you if you missed it, and all for a quick snog, at that!"

Crowley trailed after her, contrite but giddy, and Aziraphale wasn't far behind.

Ironically, the whole affair took roughly fifteen minutes. There wasn't any faffing about with lengthy vows, so standing on the wind-buffeted sand wasn't too taxing on the more elderly persons in attendance. Behind Crowley, the father of the bride was in silent, dignified tears; to his right, Pippa sniffled into her lace handkerchief and Harold kept nudging her arm.

Up front, beside Adam, Pepper had on a brave face—perhaps too brave. Janet and Natalie stood on either side of her, tall and serene in matching green gowns; they held hellebore bouquets. Crowley had never seen them so still.

As Wensleydale proclaimed that Sophia could now kiss the groom, Crowley noticed a flash of bright pink petals behind her ear. He searched the small crowd for Uriel and found her standing behind Shadwell and Tracy. She met his eyes and nodded.

That was a relief, at least. He couldn't very well risk the spread of blight.

While everyone else applauded the kiss, Crowley stood motionless, Aziraphale's hand clasped in his. And while none of it made the complex politics of human family relations any clearer, it was an entrancing tableau nonetheless. And breathtaking.

Afterward, Mandy served cocktails in the living room for anyone who wanted them.
Pippa, Harold, Shadwell, Tracy, and the parents were eager to file in and get off their feet—except for Anathema, who lingered outside to serve as DJ on her laptop while everyone who was left over danced. Or stood on the sidelines and watched everyone else dance. Uriel tried to convince Raphael it'd be fun, but he preferred to smoke. The twins badgered Adam and Sophia into choosing a slow number first.

"Oh, unbelievable," Uriel muttered into her glass of wine as, barefoot, the newlyweds took to the sand. "I swear, you get sick of this one in my line of work. Humans get funny about it, especially dead film-buffs. What's that movie called? *Ghost.*"

Crowley snatched the pipe away from Aziraphale and stuck it between his teeth.

"I don't know," he said. "I never minded it. There are worse songs."

"Righteous Brothers," Raphael agreed. "You can't go wrong."

"It's very pretty," said Aziraphale. "I'm not sure I've heard it."

Uriel set her glass on the sand, where it tipped over, and then spent five minutes wheedling Raphael. "Look, everyone else is out there," she told him. "Adam and Sophia! Pepper and the pretty Russian girl! Brian and Wensleydale have each got one of the twins, and I bet their girlfriends are going to be sorry they didn't come!"

Raphael shook his head and lit another cigarette. "Later," he promised.

"Fine," Uriel said, offering her hand to Crowley instead. "Dance with me."

Crowley smiled at her, but Aziraphale was watching him with the kind of quiet hunger that suggested making a fool of himself would, later on, pay off in *spades.*

"Shall we?" he asked the angel, setting the pipe beside Uriel's glass.

"I thought you'd never ask," said Aziraphale, rising, and pulled him to his feet.

* * *

Aziraphale woke just before dawn, finding that the window was obscured from his line of sight by Crowley's dark, tousled head. He tasted smoke and brine in the curve of Crowley's neck and could feel a few grains of sand, gritty beneath the sole of his foot, still stuck to Crowley's calf. They'd never danced before last night. Remarkable. Crowley sighed in his sleep as Aziraphale slipped free of both him and the covers.

Aziraphale looked in on Uriel and Raphael on his way through the living room.

Crowley didn't like the sofa functioning as a pull-out, but he'd been considerably friendlier to the idea this time around. Raphael snored, wrapped tightly around Uriel's slight form. His unfurled wings
very nearly obscured them both.

By the time he reached the front door, Aziraphale was fully dressed.

He walked the shore alone for much the same reason Crowley did, although he rarely found himself searching intent only unless he knew there was something Crowley wanted. This was for clearing his thoughts, for reflecting on what had transpired the day before. And there it was again, huddled in the corner of his mind: doubt. But not about Crowley, never again about Crowley for as long as they had left. He’d fight anyone to the death if it meant they would get to dance again.

The air just ahead of him shimmered and tore, red with warning.

"That's what you wanted to hear," Aziraphale said. "What you've been waiting for."

Michael stood directly in Aziraphale's path, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Gabriel said I wouldn't be disappointed. For once, the fuss-budget was right."

"Who put you up to this, I wonder?" Aziraphale mused. "Orders from Gabriel are not, as such, Orders. You've both experienced a great deal of frustration in the past twenty-odd years. What a disappointment, all of that time and effort—"

"You've grown clever," Michael said. "The Metatron made such outlandish claims about your verbal prowess that I thought there'd been some mistake. Aziraphale the ditherer? Aziraphale of the endless lists? You couldn't even keep order in the Garden, it was said, which was why you deserved to stay. Cast out for a time, as it were, doomed to wander. Put to the same test as mortals. Do you think you've passed?"

Aziraphale smiled at him sadly, taking in the dark hair and even darker eyes, the flawless burnished armor. He still looked every inch the consummate soldier-saint. "I'm afraid that's not for you to decide," he told Michael. "It never was."

The Archangel's perfect demeanor twisted and cracked in a scowl.

"Surely you know this isn't business," he seethed. "It's personal."

And suddenly it all fell into place: France in the autumn, remembrance of things past.

"Ah, I see," Aziraphale said. "You convinced Gabriel to keep the trace running. To make spies of them. Wouldn't it have been easier to come yourself to begin with?"

"Crossing you is a risk, old man," said Michael, "and everyone knows it."

"What, Aziraphale the ditherer? Shall I slay you with lists?"

"It's what you've become. You are not what you once were."

"Then what am I now?" Aziraphale asked, carefully slipping his hands in his coat pockets. There was no miraculous dagger forthcoming, not even a poisoned dart to throw. He looked Michael up and down and weighed his odds. They weren't good.

"No better than the monster you lie with," replied Michael, and drew his sword.
What happened next was fuzzy, although Aziraphale realized the tide was up to their ankles only when it bubbled and seethed to boiling with the force Crowley must have used to manifest, directly from bedroom to garden shed to shore, poised exactly between Aziraphale and Michael with the previous resident's rusty scythe in hand.

"You never did play fair, did you?" said Crowley, breathing hard. "So they say."

"Although the gesture is largely meaningless now," said Michael, "I'll find it satisfying to know that this task, however long overdue, didn't go unaccomplished. Shall I give you a fair chance, wretched Adversary? Do you even know how to fight?"

Once his wits returned, Aziraphale couldn't feel anything but raw terror and the sense that if he didn't do something quickly, he wouldn't get the chance to do either killing or dancing. He raced forward and grabbed Crowley from behind, one arm tight across his chest and the other on his wrist, creeping up to get a grip on the scythe.

"Angel, what d'you think you're doing? This isn't—"

Aziraphale's fingers found purchase between Crowley's, wrapping around the handle.

The dull, decrepit curved blade erupted in an arc of blue flame.

Stunned, Crowley let go; Aziraphale pushed him down in the surf and shielded him.

"Shouldn't have let them in," Crowley hissed, disbelieving. "I should never..."

In Aziraphale's peripheral vision, Uriel advanced from the right with her bow at the ready. Raphael flanked him to the left, his pollaxe trained—well, on Aziraphale. Crowley's fingers twisted in Aziraphale's soaked trouser legs, tight with anguish.

"Stay where you are," said Uriel, her tone strangely neutral. "What a lovely reunion."

"Entirely charming," Raphael agreed, edging closer to Michael. "Do the honors?"

Michael shrugged, lowering his sword. "Wouldn't you rather have a bit of fun first?"

"Arrows aren't exactly sporting material," Uriel said. "Swift. No time for a tease."

Crowley, I'm sorry, thought Aziraphale, and stood his ground with the scythe extended at arms' length, waiting. Whatever comes of this, we'll share the same fate.

"Go on," Michael said, nodding to Raphael. "Do you even remember how to use that?"

Raphael grinned: companionable, but cold. He took one step closer to Michael, as if to embrace him briefly, and then—

"Stay where you are," he gritted out, sinking the pollaxe into Michael's breastplate, using it to yank him off balance. Michael went down face-first in the surf, sputtering. Uriel cleared the remaining distance in just a few strides, crouching so that her arrow was level with Michael's sopping, slightly raised head. If she fired, he was done for.
"Now I remember why you guys were no fun to hang out with," Crowley said, sagging against Aziraphale's shins. "No sense of humor whatsoever." He was soaked now, shivering with the swells that were threatening to cover Michael entirely.

Aziraphale dropped the scythe and sank down beside him, taking hold of whatever part of Crowley he could reach, which was, admittedly, just about all of him. Crowley stiffened—only briefly, thank goodness—and then clung to him, utterly exhausted.

"You're a fucking idiot," Uriel said, using her arrow to indicate that Michael should let go of his sword.

Raphael hauled him to his feet, roughly dislodging the pollaxe. "Are you going to get out of here? Or shall we escort you back?"

"Just like the old days," Uriel chided, lowering her bow. She returned the arrow to her quiver with a flourish. "All bloodied up after a street brawl. You never could hold your liquor on the odd weekend down here, but seriously, dude, you're not even drunk."

Michael glared at her, scrubbing at his sand-burned cheek. "If you think the manner in which you conduct yourselves is dignified—"

"Dignity's kind of uncool these days," Raphael said. "It's more about being yourself."

Aziraphale wanted to say something clever, but he knew he was outclassed.

"Can we go now?" asked Crowley, resting his chin on Aziraphale's shoulder.

Michael was studying the demon with something akin to confusion.

"When the scythe transformed," he said, "you were touching it. You should've been..."

Crowley's eyes went wide. "Vaporized on the spot? Quite possibly. Huh."

They regarded each other warily, and then both of them looked at Aziraphale.

"If you think I've got any idea, then you'll be sorely disappointed."

Raphael and Uriel each took one of Michael's arms.

"He got laid off," Uriel said. "Long story. Would you like to hear it on the way back?"

"Who keeps the keys to lock-up these days?" Raphael asked him.

"That won't be necessary," Michael insisted, struggling in their combined grasp.

"It looked an awful lot like disturbing the peace to me," Crowley remarked.

Uriel shaded her eyes and stared up at the clouds, which were luminous with sunrise.

"I'm so not looking forward to this," she said. "Unless I get to punch Gabriel."

"We'll see, darling," Raphael said, flexing his wings. "Are you all finished here?"
Michael gave a curt nod, but his eyes never once left Crowley.

"I'll call you when we get home," Uriel said. "You owe me a dance," she added, and winked at Crowley. "I can think of at least a dozen ways to make you pay up."

Before Crowley could respond, liquid-gold lightning cracked the sky and lit the horizon from end to end. His wings unfurled a fraction of a second behind Aziraphale's, attempting to shield them from the blowback. They ended up in a sprawl on the sand, and the next breaker wasn't far behind. Crowley's sodden wings flopped uselessly.

Aziraphale regained his footing first, helping Crowley to his feet. "Indoors, my dear," he said, adjusting Crowley's ring, which had swiveled around on his finger. He drew Crowley's knuckles up to his lips, kissed them, and studied Crowley's drawn, apprehensive face. "Get some tea and decent hot breakfast in you."

"Did you see it coming, angel?" asked Crowley.

"No," admitted Aziraphale, sighing. "Not by a long shot."

"Do you think it'll happen again?" Crowley pressed, wincing as they made their way up the beach with arms slung about each other's shoulders. "If that was more than just a divine temper tantrum on time-delay, we're in trouble. Totally screwed, even."

"I doubt it," said Aziraphale, "but if he so much as tries, I'll run him through."

"With a scythe?" asked Crowley, with a wry sidelong smile. "Difficult."

"His head makes for a fine target," Aziraphale said, coaxing him through the garden gate and up to the back porch. "What a mess they've left," he said, glancing about.

"Humans tend to do that," said Crowley, holding the door open for him.

"With a little bit of help," Aziraphale replied, and followed him in.
"This is awesome," Mandy said, grinning conspiratorially at Crowley, elbows propped on her raised knees. "Anybody else would've shouted at me by now. Mum never liked it when I put my feet up on the seat in front of me at the cinema."

"Well, it's for a good cause," Crowley said, his feet likewise firmly planted on the stool next to the one he currently occupied. "When Aziraphale tells you to stake out seats and reserve them, he doesn't particularly care how you go about it."

Mandy peered across the cafeteria table, almost losing her balance.

"I like your socks," she said, eyes on Crowley's ankles. "Where'd you get those?"

"Covent Garden," said Crowley, distractedly, waving at Pippa and Aziraphale, who had finished paying the cashier for two dangerously overloaded trays full of assorted edibles. "Sock Shop. I think it's in King Street, but don't quote me on that—"

"Careful, love," Pippa said, setting her tray down in front of Mandy. "Everyone can see your knickers." The girl straightened up sulkily, planting both feet firmly on the floor.

*Madame Tracy would be proud*, Crowley thought, swinging his own legs down so Aziraphale could sit. The angel positioned his tray between them; before Crowley could reach for the mug of Earl Grey he'd requested, Aziraphale handed it to him.

"Sugar's already in, my dear," he said. "I've got extras if it's not enough."

Crowley shoved his sunglasses up into his hair and took a grateful sip.

"Thanks," he said, leaning ever so slightly into Aziraphale's shoulder. "Hits the spot."

"One does try," replied Aziraphale, and took a brisk sip of his coffee. "Now, would you like the egg and cress or the cheese and pickle?" He opened the sandwich cartons one after the other for Crowley to inspect, shiftily eyeing the cheese and pickle.

"Whichever," Crowley said, taking the egg and cress. He'd surrender his prize.

"You guys are so cute it's gross," Mandy muttered into a bite of her Cornish pasty.

"It's just give and take," Pippa said, poking her salad, which looked a bit brown at the edges; Crowley fixed it before she could complain. "Takes years to cultivate, of course, and when what you've got to work with is as stubborn as Harold..."
Mandy yawned behind her napkin. "Can we see the Roman galleries next?"

"An excellent choice," said Aziraphale, already two-thirds finished with the first half of his sandwich. "You'll find Room Forty-Nine especially interesting, I expect."

Crowley focused on his tea, because that, at least, was lovely. "Roman Britain?" he ventured, relaxing under Aziraphale's hand on his thigh. "That's an odd one, given your course. Aren't you reading Comparative Religion?" That, at least, was a step up from the bloody Device-Pulsifer twins reading bloody English.

"I switched to History," said Mandy, guiltily. "Graduation's in June, remember?"

"Acceptable pursuits, both," said Aziraphale, diplomatically, although Crowley instantly recognized that subtle whiff of disappointment. Most humans, even ones who'd got to know Aziraphale reasonably well, rarely did. "How did you find the transition?"

Mandy never did get to answer, because, from across the table, Pippa suddenly had Crowley's left wrist in a vise-grip. Alarming and heartening all at once, he supposed, how strong she was. There wasn't the slightest tremor in her soft, wrinkled fingers.

"Young man, have you been keeping secrets from me?" she asked in a delighted tone, her thumb tracing the upper arc of his ring's gold bezel with fond care. "It looks very old," she said, peering at the weathered portrait in the glass setting as Crowley obediently extended his arm. "A happy coincidence, I'm sure," she added, her eyes flicking up to study Aziraphale's features. "And a striking one, at that. Clever."

"I had it a long..." Crowley paused, considering his explanation carefully. "No, actually. I should say, I had one like it a long while ago, but I lost it under less than fortunate circumstances." Kids dying faster than you can revive them; that's always really great. "Aziraphale still knows some of the antiquities-dealer types here in London, so..." Sorry, he thought to Uriel, wherever she was: whether in Heaven or in America, it was nonetheless a world away. Believe it or not, I wish you were here.

"You old romantic," Pippa said to Aziraphale, letting Mandy take Crowley's hand.

Rather than answer, Aziraphale pursed his lips and watched her trace the full bezel.

Mandy's fingertips were cool against Crowley's palm; he hadn't come in contact with her skin since the kiss she'd stolen all those months ago behind the café. She traced the oval a second time, probably just to make Aziraphale squirm. For once, all of that delicate intensity wasn't focused on Crowley's face or on his ankles or on any other part of him. He knew covetousness when he saw it; that, at least, was second nature, an old habit peering in briefly from retirement. She'd become a collector one day.

"Second century," she murmured, leaning over to squint at the portrait. "Third?"

Aziraphale's hand drifted down to Crowley's knee, squeezing gently.

"That's about right," Crowley said, extracting his hand smoothly. He picked up the half of his sandwich that he'd reluctantly started on and finished it, buying himself a minute or so. "Those first few centuries after got pretty blurry for everyone."

"One imagines," added Aziraphale, hastily. "So much going on, such volatile change."
Mandy picked up what was left of her pasty and gave Crowley a strange, sad smile.

"Dance at my wedding," she said, and then looked to Aziraphale. "Promise."

Crowley let his free hand drop beneath the table; Aziraphale caught and held it fast.

"Oh, bless," Pippa said, dabbing her eyes. "You've got ages yet, don't talk like that!"

"There is nothing, my dear girl," said Aziraphale, "that I would more gladly do."

Crowley returned her smile, but he was sure his rendition paled in comparison.

"Not just with him," he said, tilting his head at Aziraphale. "I promise."
Chapter Summary

In search of the unattainable, it's wise to bring along some friends.

1. Consultation

"She's bringing what?" asked Crowley, stupefied. "And who?"

"The Hunger Games," repeated Aziraphale, patiently. "It's out on DVD and blue rays and such now. And Robert—you know, her daughter's boy. She's got him this week while Nicola and her husband are on holiday in Provence. They ought to've taken the child, if you ask me. Travel from a young age does them a world of good."

"Blu-ray," Crowley corrected him. And too little results in army-base playgrounds and backyard Inquisitions, he thought, fetching a dishcloth to wipe down the table. "Robert is five," he said. "What's that film rated? I mean, I remember the books from when you blitzed them a couple of years ago. Not what I'd call standard fare for a toddler."

"He speaks in fully formed sentences and excels at basic maths," said Aziraphale, hastily taking the dishcloth off of him. "My dear, please let me. He's old enough for those dreadful video games full of guns and gore, so why not this film?"

Crowley stood back and folded his arms, watching Aziraphale make an extravagant show of herding the crumbs from breakfast and lunch into a soggy pile at the far end of the table; he hoped the mouse had got a few. "What time are they coming?"

"Six o'clock, and I promised we'd sort out nibbles," said Aziraphale, cringing, using the cloth to brush the crumbs into his palm. He marched them over to the bin with a grimace that Crowley ought to have photographed with his mobile. "Why?"

"It's Monday," Crowley said. "Movie Night is Wednesday, unless it's canceled."

Aziraphale was busy scrubbing his hands clean under the tap. "Which means..."

"Which means I have a Skype date with Uriel," Crowley said.

"Since when?" Aziraphale asked, drying his hands.

"Every Monday since the one after the weekend we took Pippa and Mandy to London."

"So, three weeks now," said Aziraphale. "Can't you cancel? Surely she'll understand."

"No," Crowley told him, turning to face the work-top. He took down a single mug and punched the switch on the kettle. There was no explaining that Pippa was half the reason for tonight's chat to begin with. He needed advice, and he needed it from a sane person. He'd have asked Sophia, but her
MA dissertation was riding her hard.

Aziraphale stepped up behind him, reaching around to take the mug from his hand.

"I had forgot," he said, his cheek pressed to Crowley's ear. "What would you like?"

"Anything that's not that stupid caffeine-free rooibos," Crowley sighed.

"You can just nip out when it's time," Aziraphale said, setting the mug down.

"I'll have nipped out by then anyway, if the film's paced properly," he said.

Aziraphale sucked in his breath and let it out again: acknowledgment of deep error.

"You needn't watch at all," he said. "Apologies. I should know better by now—"

"Shut up," said Crowley, and kissed him. "Tea. And then Tesco, because I want popcorn. You'd better be up on what five year-olds eat, because I haven't a clue."

Two mugs of tea and a phone-call to Pippa later, they had it on proud granny's good authority that young master Rob liked raw carrots, diced-up tomatoes, cucumber sticks, and about anything else green he could get his clever little hands on.

There might be hope for this one, Crowley thought on their way out the door.

Three hours later, they returned and arranged a full spread that included a few early carrots from the garden. They had an hour and a half to spare, during which time Crowley insisted a nap was in order; Aziraphale sat beside him in bed with a book, although the pretense didn't last long (because, truth be told, Crowley wasn't all that sleepy, and Aziraphale had other, warmer ways of making missteps up to him).

They'd only just got dressed again when the doorbell rang.

"Your timing's getting better," Crowley said, dodging a tossed pillow.

When they answered the door, Rob vaulted himself straight at Aziraphale.

"I learned a new magic trick from Mum!" he exclaimed.

"Then you must show me later," said Aziraphale, swinging the boy from side to side until he'd managed to extract a giggle. "In the meantime, we've got plenty for you to eat, and your Gran's brought an exciting film for us to watch together."

Rob turned to watch Crowley, who hadn't managed to extract himself from Pippa.

"Well, how's it going?" she hissed in his ear. "Any luck yet?"

"No," Crowley said, making his escape. He straightened his shirt and looked at Rob. "How're you, then?" Crowley asked. "I haven't seen you since Christmas."

"Mum says when I'm older there are things I can put in my eyes to make them look like yours. It's not exactly the same, but I'm sure nobody will know the difference."
"They're called contact lenses," Crowley said, "and I think that sort are for Halloween costumes. They can cause allergic reactions, I've heard, so you'd best be careful."

"Some people wear them all the time," Rob insisted. "My eyes are starting to get blurry. I can't even read that," he said, pointing to the calendar on the wall. "Mum says we'll have a 'scussion with the optics-man who's a lady at my next check-up."

"Very good, Rob, my lad," said Pippa, taking him from Aziraphale. "Run along and have some veggies while we set up the film." She turned to Crowley and set a hand on his shoulder. "Oh, bless him, there's no hearing the end of it. Sorry."

"At least he doesn't want piercings," Crowley said, wrestling a bag of popcorn out of its wrapper. "I hope you'll forgive my absence," he added. "I've got a video-chat date in half an hour." He put the bag in the microwave and slammed it shut.

"Uriel's very determined to keep in touch," Aziraphale explained.

"Ooh! Well, surely you'll be wanting to nip off and say hello, too! We can hit pause."

"There's really no need," said Crowley. "On either count."

"She has a point," said Aziraphale. "I might nip in and say hello."

Crowley's gut twisted uncomfortably. "She wanted to ask my advice on something."

Pippa gave Crowley a knowing look, which she instantly turned on Aziraphale.

"Let the bright young things have their secrets," she chided, catching his sleeve. "Come on, I've been dying for you to see this. They've done a marvelous job..."

They vanished into the sitting-room, leaving Crowley alone with Rob's gleeful crunching and the sound of popping corn. The boy hopped down from his chair, plate of veggies in hand, and wandered over to stand beside Crowley at the microwave.

"Uriel's not your girlfriend, is she?" he asked worriedly. "I thought you were taken."

"I am," Crowley told him. "I'm with that silly man in there, and don't you forget it. You'll learn the difference, school-yards being what they are. Uriel's a friend."

"Who's a girl," Rob added, sticking a carrot in his mouth. "I was just making sure."

"How conscientious of you," Crowley said, taking the boy by the shoulders. "Now, off you go to see Gran and Aziraphale. They've got the title screen up and running."

"I've seen it already," said Rob. "With Mum and Dad. There's lots of blood."

"I've heard," Crowley said, ushering him along. "I don't know if that's my thing."

"I'll watch it again just for you," said the boy, bravely, "and report back."

"How very considerate," Crowley said, leaving him next to the sofa, enduring amused glances from
Pippa and Aziraphale as he crossed the room, ducked into the study, and closed the door firmly behind him. The computer was just as he'd left it, turned on with Skype booted up, and damn it, Uriel's call was already ringing through.

"Sorry!" Crowley exclaimed, clicking rapidly and adjusting the webcam. "Sorry. Hi."

Uriel's image feed went from grainy to crystal clear. She beamed at him.

"Let me guess," she said as he adjusted the sound. "Surprise! Pippa?"

"Is there any other kind?" Crowley asked. "The grandson, too."

"The one from Christmas? You said he was adorable."

"Did I?" Crowley asked. "Must've been drunk at the time."

"You were," Uriel replied. "I hope somebody got you two dancing on video."

One blue eye and a strand of fiery auburn hair invaded the feed.

"You're blocking my view," Crowley told them irritably.

"Hey there," said Raphael, drawing back until the rest of his face was visible. "What's up on your side of the pond, darling? Where's our favorite Principality?"

"Get the hell out of here," Uriel said, shoving him roughly; the camera went wonky, and all Crowley could see was some papers and a purple gel-pen on her desk until the camera righted itself again and her apologetic expression filled the lens. "He's having one of his douchebag days, but you could probably already tell. Where were we?"

"Fiercely hoping nobody had caught Aziraphale and me on video," Crowley said.

"Let me see it again," Uriel said, resting her chin on her hand. "It was so dark out there, and then, of course, we all just kind of stumbled to bed—and, well, what happened in the morning bumped getting a closer look off my list of priorities."

"I thought you must've had a good look when you traced it?" Crowley asked, removing the ring. He held it up to the lens of his webcam, adjusting the distance until the likeness in the molded glass was clear. Even in simulacrum, it was perfect.

"Nope," Uriel said, her silvery eyes widening slightly as she studied it. "I just told him where he'd have to focus his energy as far as retrieval. It's so pretty," she said. "Put it back on; I don't want you to drop it. I'd never forgive myself if the glass cracked."

Crowley twisted it back onto his finger. "I don't even know where to begin," he said.

"I got your email, and I've been thinking about those few ideas you mentioned," Uriel replied. "I think he'd have a fit if you were to buy a snuffbox and have it torn apart; he'd always regret not seeing what it looked like in its original form. Also, silver tarnishes very easily, and I doubt he'd be the sort to conscientiously remove a ring for purposes of bathing or doing dishes. If he can sit and read for three days and nights without interruption, he's damned well going to put the thing on and leave it."
"Right," Crowley said, crestfallen. He ticked Great Idea Number One off his list.

"Next up: the tire iron. Personally, I think that's incredible, but I've seen that thing; it's as old as your car, and the metal's pitted and worse for wear. You'd end up kicking yourself if you cannibalized even a little bit of it for melting down. Just like the car, it's got memories attached. You'd do better to keep it in one piece."

"Why is she always right?" Crowley asked the ceiling.

"If I'm actually wrong, you can tell me," Uriel reassured him.

"But you're not," Crowley sighed. Great Idea Number Two bit the dust.

"That leaves the option of some other type of custom job," Uriel said, "but I know you're hesitant to spend money, and you have a point about the inherent difficulty. Aziraphale is either totally unfussed or fucking picky. And I have no idea which end of his spectrum a ring would fall on, given I've never even seen him wear one."

"My prospects for pulling this off, then," Crowley said, "are nil." Great Idea Number Three didn't just go down like a lead balloon; it took out some floorboards on the way.

"Don't give up hope," Uriel said, reaching for the screen, as if to touch his face. Her fingers stopped short and dropped to the desk, planting themselves on the gel-pen. "I'm the wrong person to ask," she said, fiddling with it. "I don't have much use for jewelry unless it's cheap earrings. The humans you guys have been hanging out with might have a better sense for what his inclinations might be. Although Pippa..."

"...is a pain in the arse, so let's not go there," Crowley finished for her.

"Please don't cry. You look like you might. You know so many clever people, and—"

Crowley pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let's not talk about this anymore."

They spent the next forty-five minutes discussing the improbability of Shadwell and Tracy ever formally tying the knot, although it was clear from Uriel's vague distraction and furrowed brow that she was running just as many eBay searches as he was. Why were Regency-era men's rings so gaudy in comparison to the delicate wonders wrought for women? He couldn't see Aziraphale sporting a huge square of polished opal any sooner than he could approve of all those ungainly three-stone settings.

Just then, Aziraphale pottered in with a mug of tea and a bowl of popcorn.

Crowley hastily clicked the browser shut and turned around.

"I wondered if you'd turn up," Uriel said. "That's better room service than I ever get."

Aziraphale set the food down on the desk beside Crowley's arm and bent to kiss his temple. Crowley tilted his head up and kissed Aziraphale on the mouth, hoping his agitation wouldn't show. Aziraphale touched his cheek, brow furrowed.

"Loo break for the little one," he explained. "Hello, dear girl. Nearly finished?"
"Nearly," Crowley said, cutting Uriel off. "How's the film?"

"Unexpectedly gripping," Aziraphale said. "Coming up on the worst of it, I fear."

"I'll keep him busy," Uriel promised, crossing her fingers. "Scout's honor."

"I'll leave you to it," Aziraphale said, helping himself to a few pieces of popcorn.

"We might've been onto something," Uriel told Crowley once he was gone.

"Clearly we weren't," said Crowley, frowning. "Explain?"

"Not _what_," she said, idly scribbling on her wrist. "Think _who_."

**2. Aggravation**

It was several days before Crowley got enough time alone to make the call.

Aziraphale had arranged to meet Anathema at the local historical society for a chat (a tricky case, apparently, that called for research skills slightly more practiced than even a human as clever as Anathema could boast), and _a chat_ normally meant _five or six hours of poring over books and going mmm-hmmm at each other._

Crowley clicked through the neatly organized tabs in Aziraphale's address book. If there was anything he'd learned since they moved in together, it was that Aziraphale religiously upgraded both his machines and his operating systems. He'd switched from Apple to PC sometime in the mid-nineties, and Crowley still wasn't sure he approved.

There it was: _Shadwell / Tracy Household; Shangri-La, Folkestone, Kent._

He experienced a moment of deep gratitude that they hadn't moved to Dover.

Crowley's fingers faltered a bit on the keypad of his mobile.

"Hello, love," answered a motherly voice. "Sadly, Madame Tracy No Longer Draws Aside the Veil unless it's for private functions at a very good fee. How can I help?"

"Er, hi," Crowley said. "It's me. Lovely seeing you at the wedding, by the way—"

"Crowley, how _nice_," said Madame Tracy. "Lovely seeing you and the husband, too!"

Crowley scratched the side of his neck. "How's Shadwell keeping? He seemed a bit...worse for wear by the end of the evening. I trust he's fully recovered by now."

"You know how he is once he's had a few pints in him, love. He only means well."

"Yes, wonderful," Crowley said, leaning hard on the desk. "I was wondering..."

"Is everything all right between you two?" asked Madame Tracy, concerned.
"If it's not, I'd be the last to know," Crowley told her. "It is to do with Aziraphale, though, and I thought you might be able to point me in the right direction."

"Last time you rang up, you were in a right state," sighed Madame Tracy.

"We agreed to disagree," said Crowley, clearing his throat. "This is a happier matter."

"Really, love?" asked Madame Tracy, dubiously. "I'd have put the kettle on by now."

"That's very touching," Crowley said, rising, and headed for the kitchen. "I'll do it for you if you like. Just—listen, you saw the ring, I'm sure, as perceptive as you are, and now I haven't got a bloody clue where to start with Aziraphale's and I thought—"

"Ring," she said, her voice soft and wondering. "Oh, you dear thing. Congratulations."

Crowley covered his eyes and cursed silently at the kettle, which was as slow as ever.

"I thought everybody had noticed, but, no, Mandy and Pippa hadn't, either, so leave it to Uriel and Rafe to be the only ones, splendid, right," Crowley babbled, pulling his thoughts back on task. "I want to get one for Aziraphale. That's how it's done, yeah? You exchange rings. You in the general sense, of course, as I wouldn't presume—"

"We did the paperwork a long time ago," said Madame Tracy. "Very low key."

Well, what do you know, Crowley thought. I just won a bet.

"Then I'm happy for you," he said. "Did you...ah..."

"Plain gold bands in fifteen-karat," she replied. "I forget to wear mine half the time."

"Listen, I hope this isn't rude or anything, but he was in your head for at least a few hours," Crowley said, pushing his tea bag around fretfully with a fork, which was the only piece of silverware he'd found to hand. "I know it was over twenty years ago now, but—quite frankly, I can't even boast that kind of extended exposure, and you've kept up correspondence with him over the years, so I just thought—"

"He doesn't spend much time thinking about jewelry, love," chuckled Madame Tracy.

"Then what was he thinking about, for heaven's sake?"

"Finding a way to Tadfield, of course. Finding that dear, sweet boy. Finding you."

"Third on the list, sure," Crowley said. "Not surprised in the least."

"You know better than that," Madame Tracy chided him. "Now, then: have you considered hitting the antique shops? I'm sure you've scoured eBay and all of those other computer things, but sometimes you've got to do it the old-fashioned way."

"I've been through all of the local ones a dozen times," Crowley said, rummaging in the cupboard for his jar of Italian acacia honey. "Couldn't really steal away when I was in London a few weeks ago, either," he said. "I was surrounded."
"You know, when I was in Cambridge years ago visiting my niece Petula at uni," she mused, "I remember browsing the shops. Such a charming town, if you can tolerate all those giddy first-years running about. Most of them aren't interested in antiques."

_Then you haven't properly got to know Amanda Tomlin_, Crowley thought, although that was a bit irrelevant now, as Mandy was in her third year at Bristol and just a month off graduating. Humans had got it right: _time did_ fly, and it was alarming.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said. "And I know somebody who lives there."

"Pay them a visit," suggested Madame Tracy. "You never know what you might find."

They spent the next two hours discussing the frustrations of life-partners who rarely did housework unless it was for purposes of sucking up or out of some misplaced sense of guilt. Crowley was pleased to note that Aziraphale's guilt was rarely misplaced these days, and Madame Tracy admitted that she envied him on that score. Aziraphale and Anathema turned up just as he was saying his goodbyes.

"Don't be a stranger," Madame Tracy told him. "Come see us more often, won't you?"

Crowley waved at Anathema first, who was hovering next to Aziraphale in the doorway. Much to his shock, she was dressed closer to the way he remembered her as a young woman. Her skirt almost brushed the floor, but it didn't hide her clogs.

"I'll mention your invitation to Aziraphale," he said. "I'm sure we will do."

"As you young people are fond of putting it: go get him, tiger!" she said, and hung up.

"You'll mention what, my dear?" asked Aziraphale. "Who was it?"

Crowley sat blinking at his phone for a few seconds before responding.

"Madame Tracy," he said finally. "She'd like us to come 'round more often."

"She _does_ get awfully chatty," said Aziraphale, offering Crowley his hand. "Up with you, my dear. Time for some fresh air. I promised Anathema we'd treat her to lunch."

"Shoes," Crowley said, casting about the room, and then looked up at Anathema. "You don't mind, do you?" He snapped his fingers, and they were suddenly just where they ought to be. "Are Sophia and Adam at home this weekend, or at yours?"

"Not at all," Anathema said. "And why do you ask?"

"Sophia mentioned some new wine shop she wanted to show me," Crowley lied.

"Sophia's supposed to come home Saturday evening," Anathema said. "Otherwise, she's free. Adam's in Tadfield, because Sarah's in town visiting their parents."

"Brilliant," said Crowley, finishing off his tea in one gulp. "Let's go."
3. Excavation

"I won't need it," Crowley insisted. "We're meeting at Caffè Nero."

"It's a two and a quarter hours' drive," Aziraphale replied, handing him the thermos.

"An hour and forty-five when I drive it," Crowley said, but he didn't hand the tea back.

Aziraphale kissed him, and they stumbled back against the doorframe.

"You'll be back late?" he asked, straightening Crowley's sunglasses.

"Possibly," Crowley said. "I promised I'd drive her to her parents' place this evening."

"That takes you an hour and a half out of your way," Aziraphale sighed. "Very well."

Crowley opened the door, thermos clutched to his chest, and paused for a moment.

"Angel?"

"Hmmm?"

"I'll come back," he said, stepping out into the sun. "I'll always come back."

They stood palm to palm through the glass for a moment, and then Crowley left.

The drive seemed less ominous than the last time Crowley had made it (although the primary difference may have been Aziraphale's tea). It took him a while to find parking, however, which necessitated profuse apologies on sighting Sophia in the coffee shop. She'd situated herself in the back right-hand corner, the exact spot where they'd first met. She snapped her book shut and rose to hug him. Her black hair was impossibly soft against his jaw, several airy wisps escaping her tight fishtail braid.

He held onto her like a lifeline; why she comforted him so, he couldn't say.

"I got your email," Sophia murmured. "You're having a rough time, aren't you?"

Crowley let go of her and stepped back, adjusting his jacket.

"Now I know what you—you mean when you say someone's tough to shop for."

Sophia narrowed her eyes at him, unblinking, and earnestly studied his face.

"I'm nearly there. I can't get Mum to talk straight about you two, no matter what. I accept impossible things; I've grown up with quite a number of them as just a matter of course. You're one of those things, aren't you? You and Aziraphale, I mean."

Crowley smiled nervously, took her offered hand, and gestured toward the door.

"It's almost eleven," he said. "Even the most cantankerous of the lot will be open."

"I'm sorry," she said, leading him out into daylight. "I shouldn't pry."
"I'd rather she told you," Crowley admitted, following her past an open-air fruit stand. "Or let you work it out for yourself," he said, watching her trail delicate fingertips over cherries, pomegranates, and apples. She handed the vendor fifty pence and took one.

Sophia gave him a dazzling grin over her shoulder as she walked, and time stopped.

(The resemblance was there to torment him, he imagined: black-haired, headstrong, and brave. If any bloodline had half a chance at holding the memory of Eve's likeness fast, he didn't doubt the Device family tree one whit. And she'd gone and married Adam.)

"The first one's just up here," she told him. "Had a look in the window yesterday."

*You're proof something went right in spite of it all,* he thought, following her inside.

The establishment reminded Crowley of every other antique-dealer's shop he'd ever run across, Aziraphale's included. Dim lighting, dust, and a certain hush: you'd sooner talk in a bloody library. Sophia trailed along the first glass case, carefully concealing the apple in her pocket. It was unusually early in the season to see russets. She'd already taken a bite, telltale sheen of juice on her upturned hand.

"Can I help you?" asked the proprietress brusquely, looking up from her magazine.

"No," Sophia reassured her before Crowley could open his mouth. "We're just looking."

The woman's features softened. She nodded and went back to reading.

Crowley paused over a display of Victorian pocket-watches. He remembered a time when Aziraphale carried one, although he couldn't say when that had stopped. Nineteen thirty, perhaps, or nineteen forty? He wouldn't have minded if *that* feature had stuck around, because pocket-watches had never really fallen out of fashion.

"Hey," said Sophia, quietly. "There are some gents' rings over here. Come and see."

They were, as Crowley had feared, nearly all masonic pieces. The ones that weren't masonic were signets engraved with cryptic initials, all of them wrong. There was a shield-shaped one set with coral, and even a split-setting with opal and lapis, but he'd seen any number of pieces similar to those on eBay.

"Not quite right," Crowley said. "They're all too clunky and impersonal."

Sophia frowned. "Now I know what you mean by hard to shop for."

They tried three more shops before deciding it was time to get lunch, and none of them proved more helpful than the first. Sophia suggested Rainbow Café; although it was a popular student hang-out, she assured him the food was worth any ambient undergraduate chatter they might have to endure. She managed to tempt him in on the merits of its organic wine list alone.

Crowley wasn't sure the Can Vandrell Tinto was going to pair well with his *tagine l'algerienne*, but what the hell. Fifteen quid for a bottle of quality Spanish red was difficult to pass up under any circumstances. Sophia learned the hard way that spinach lasagna didn't pair well, either.
"Mum said you guys took her out the other day," she said, on her second glass.

"That's right," Crowley said, pushing couscous and sultanas around on his plate.

"She and Aziraphale get on," Sophia continued. "Does it ever bug you, his social life?"

Crowley shrugged and emptied the dregs of the wine into his glass.

"Most of them are friends of mine, too. I'm more of a homebody these days, is all."

"You're not as good with crowds. There's nothing wrong with preferring one-on-one."

*Guess I've always been like that*, he thought. *Where one equals Aziraphale.*

Sophia almost dropped her fork. "Did you...did you just let me..."

Crowley gave her an innocent look. "How did you put it? Just one of those things?"

"It's not funny when you grow up with a mum who can do that," she said. "It's even less funny when you realize you're reading your younger sisters *all the damn time* unless you make a real effort to shut it out. So, kindly don't take the piss."

"Your birthright," Crowley told her, "is complicated. You'd better get used to it."

"Adam's part of it," she said, emptying her glass. "He must be, the wanker."

"Finish your lasagna," Crowley said. "I want to see if they'll sell me another bottle of this stuff on the way out." Much like with her mother, even mild drunkenness gave way to bluntness and cursing. He paid the tab, and they left with more of the wine.

They meandered their way through four more antique shops before Crowley announced that he'd had it up to *here* with the nonstop, multi-stone setting sapphire and ruby nonsense. Still slightly tipsy, Sophia agreed.

They made their way to the riverside green behind King's College Chapel and opened the second bottle.

"I think," Sophia said, passing the wine, "you've got to consider later pieces."

Crowley took a long swig and gave her a bleary stare, wiping his chin on his sleeve.

"Later than what?"

"Later than Regency and Victorian. Have you tried searching for Art Deco stuff?"

Crowley cringed and passed her the bottle. "No **thankss**. The architecture was bad enough."

"My friend's dad's a jeweler," Sophia said. "He sells estate pieces. Anyway, he gave Marjorie this gorgeous platinum ring from around nineteen twenty for Christmas. My point is mostly that platinum would suit Aziraphale better than any shade of gold."

Crowley lay back in the grass and considered this, watching some clouds drift by.
"Maybe," he said. "Expensive, though. I mean, guess this once wouldn't hurt."

Sophia leaned over him, braid dangling, and plucked off his sunglasses.

"You hiss when you're drunk," she said. "Or you hiss when I'm drunk. Either way."

Crowley put his arms behind his head and shrugged. "It can't be helped. So, platinum? Really?"

"Yeah," she said, setting the sunglasses on his chest, and flopped down beside him.

Crowley must have drifted off, because the sun was low in the sky when Sophia shook him awake. She must have done, too, because there were grass-imprints on her chin.

"Crowley," Sophia whispered, lightly patting his cheek. "I've thought of something."

"What?" he asked, replacing his sunglasses. "Surely it's too late, though."

"Too late for the shops," she said. "But not for what I'm thinking of. Take me home."

Crowley knew better than to ignore that kind of quiet urgency. He helped Sophia to her feet and they walked arm-in-arm to where he'd left the Bentley, both of them more or less sober by the time they got there. He'd surreptitiously seen to it.

"This is still warm," Sophia said, examining the thermos once she'd buckled herself in.

"And it'll never cool," Crowley said, jamming the Bentley into reverse. "Have some."

Aziraphale's estimate of an hour and a half from Cambridge to West Drayton wasn't too far off, although Crowley managed to cut it by about twenty minutes. By the time they pulled up in the Device-Pulsifer driveway, Crowley had heard Sophia sing along with all of the words to his favorite Velvet Underground album. She clearly hadn't got her taste in music from either of her parents. He followed her up the front stairs.

"Eight o'clock," said Anathema, answering the door. "Better than Adam ever did."

"Mum, shut it," Sophia said. "I've got to ask you something. It's important."

Before Crowley could so much as say hello, she'd stepped up close and begun to whisper something quick and complicated in Anathema's ear. Her mother stepped back and made a face, as if trying to remember something she had forgot on purpose.

"We must have it somewhere," she told Sophia, "but if you think I'm digging around in that attic with you, forget it. Why don't you two go up and have a rummage?" Sophia hugged Anathema hard, and then beckoned Crowley into the house.

The way to the attic was up a rickety pull-down ladder that narrowly missed hitting Sophia on the head. Crowley soldered the connecting joints solid with a glare as he climbed up after her. He'd worry about reversing the process later; the last thing he needed was for Adam Young's new bride to break her neck on his watch.

"Gah, it's stuffy up here," Sophia wheezed, crawling on all fours to reach a dangling chain. She
yanked on it once, and harsh orange light filled the cramped space. "Mum said she thinks that what we're looking for is in the Device Trunk."

Crowley disguised his snicker as a violent sneeze.

"What are we looking for?" he asked.

"Treasure," said Sophia, gravely.

They had to move five or six boxes in order to get at the trunk, which was large, unfriendly, and sported an ancient padlock. Sophia swore under her breath and muttered something about a key, but Crowley touched the lock and it instantly clicked open in his hand. With a wordless nod, they each took a corner of the lid and lifted.

"Ages ago," Sophia said, leaning to feel around inside while Crowley held the massive thing open, "when Mum was on one of her reciting-family-history kicks, she said something about her paternal great-grandfather being a metalsmith. We have a silver tea service that he made, plus some brass and copper vessels from when he was young and learning the ropes." She drew out a thick sheaf of papers wrapped in a leather wallet that didn't quite contain them and set them aside. "He didn't just make housewares; he'd sometimes try his hand at jewelry, too. He only ever made that for family, given the cost of precious metals. Mum has a pair of elaborate gold earrings that she made. In fact, I think she wore them to the wedding."

Crowley shifted from crouching to kneeling, still bracing the lid up with both hands.

Hesitantly, he said, "Are you telling me..."

"He was making jewelry around the right time," Sophia said, followed by a triumphant exclamation that made Crowley jump. She sat back on her heels and presented a jewelry box covered in moth-eaten dark blue velvet. "You can close the trunk."

Crowley did as he was told and settled down cross-legged beside her.

Sophia brushed a fine layer of dust off of the box and opened it.

To say that the contents of the box would fetch a small fortune was, in Crowley's estimation, grossly short of the mark.

The bottom was strewn with bright, winking artifacts in the artificial light. Sophia picked up a few gold rings to study them more closely, rejecting them on the basis of both make and material (most seemed to be bands etched with abstract floral patterns or signets engraved with initials). She picked aside tangled chains and filigree earrings set with emeralds, revealing another cluster of rings.

Diamond and sapphire solitaires. She picked up one piece in polished white metal and eyed the inside of the band. It was thicker than most of the others, and Crowley couldn't see the stone because she was holding it upside-down.

"Birmingham," Sophia said. "There's the anchor. Next to it, nine-five-zero. Platinum."

"Do you all go around with a catalogue of family possessions fresh in your minds?"

Rather than answer, she turned the ring around to study the setting.
There. There it was, out of nothing, as if she’d known his mind and wished it so.

"What is that?" Crowley whispered. "Between the diamonds, what—"

Sophia tapped the central stone with her fingernail, held it up to the light.

"Damned if I know," she said. "There's a tiny bit of translucency. Smoky quartz?"

Crowley closed his eyes. Five hundred dollars he'd won from Uriel. Would it even...

"Jesus, that old thing," Anathema said, poking her head up through the trapdoor.

"It's heavy," Sophia said, putting it in Crowley's hand. "Whose was it, Mum?"

"Your great-great grandfather made that for himself, the old miser," Anathema said. "In his memoirs, he swears he'll never work with that blasted metal again—I mean, look at how he grooved the band, carving the mold can't have been easy."

Crowley just stared at the ring where it sat in his palm. He didn't dare look up.

"Mum," said Sophia, very softly. "We searched all day. There was nothing."

"He made that in nineteen eighteen," Anathema said. "Mad project in madder times."

Crowley held the ring out to her. "Your husband should wear it."

Anathema didn't take the ring. She fixed Crowley with an ironic look.

"I offered it to Newt once upon a time," she said. "We came across the jewelry box when we relocated from Jasmine Cottage to here. Every time I turned around, I found it sitting on the bathroom sink or the shower ledge. He said it felt strange, just wasn't him, so I put it away again. It looked modest, yet refined, I told him. His loss."

Stop it, Crowley thought. He held the ring out to Sophia instead.

"Adam, then," he said. "Surely. It's a bit large and all, but I don't doubt—"

Sophia took Crowley's hand in both of her own, folding the ring into it.

"Whatever you did all those years ago," she said, "I can't even begin to guess. Mum said once that she owed you a debt so great she'd never even begin to pay it back. Presumptuous of me, maybe, but she's standing right there and has no objections."

"I can't," Crowley said, realizing he hadn't blinked in several minutes. "I really can't."

"Would a token payment make you feel better?" asked Anathema. "Go on, make me an offer. Have you got a fiver in your pocket? I'm sure Sophia would lend you one."

"I won a bet," said Crowley, weakly, "but I don't think it's enough."

"Your bet winnings for my great-grandfather's dead-end project of a ring. Sold!"
"Aren't you even going to ask how much you've made?" Sophia asked her mother.

"Five hundred dollars, as it happens," said Crowley. "At a terrible exchange rate."

"Come on," Anathema said. "Stop staring and put it in your pocket. I've made tea."

Crowley followed them down the ladder in a daze, fizzling the solder as he went.

4. Illumination

Crowley glanced at the clock as he drove, cursing under his breath.

Ten minutes till midnight. He hadn't meant to stay out that late, but how on earth could he have refused the offer of tea after he'd all but been given a Device family heirloom that could easily have fetched two thousand quid or more at auction?

Crowley flew past Pippa's cottage at seventy miles per hour, noting nonetheless that every light appeared to be on. He wondered if Aziraphale had rung her up for a long chat, or if he'd arrive home to find that Aziraphale had gone to see her.

Nearly there, he thought, pressing one palm flat to his pocket. Nearly.

Two minutes later, he pulled into his own drive. The kitchen windows glowed softly, and even after Crowley had killed the ignition, he couldn't bring himself to vacate the Bentley. He was safe there. Safe from the discovery that he hadn't quite got it right after all, or, worse yet, that Aziraphale would turn out to have no need—

The porch light went on as Aziraphale opened the door.

In for a penny, in for a pound, Crowley thought, and got out of the car.

"No wine after all," said Aziraphale as he approached, with slight disappointment.

"There were two bottles," Crowley admitted, climbing the stairs, "but we drank them."

"She'll have needed a day off," Aziraphale said. "My dear, come in. It's chilly."

Crowley held the door open, frozen there on the threshold.

Aziraphale took another step backward onto the kitchen tile, expectant.

I couldn't have planned this, thought Crowley, and swallowed hard. He let go of the door and took off his sunglasses, sticking them in his pocket one-handed. He snagged the ring unseen with his pinkie, to make sure it wouldn't get away.

"Crowley, is something the matter?" Aziraphale asked.

He thought about the last time he'd been in this position. It had been over the matter of a sodding plaque, which hung above his head even as they spoke. He'd never had a knack for surprises, but
they were worth it if Aziraphale was on the receiving end.

"I hope not," Crowley said, withdrawing his hand from his pocket. He fisted the ring against the hem of his jacket and reached for Aziraphale's left hand with terrified determination. It was a bit far, so he stepped forward. And tripped. How he'd managed to keep hold of the ring, he wasn't certain, especially not with Aziraphale, grave and concerned, bent over to help him up on his knees.

"You're not hurt," Aziraphale murmured, touching his cheek.

Not a question, it was never a question.

"I will be if I've got this wrong," Crowley said, taking hold of Aziraphale's left hand again and sliding the ring into place. Sizing on the spot was easy; it would burn about as much as Aziraphale materializing his own ring into place had done.

Instead of flinching, Aziraphale lifted his hand up to the porch light and stared.

"Carré cut diamonds," he said, slowly, his voice clipped. "These are...rare. Crowley—"

"I didn't do anything stupid," Crowley babbled, using Aziraphale's dangling right hand to haul himself to his feet. "Don't ask me where it came from; that'll spoil the moment. Oh, what do I know; maybe you've guessed. All you need to know is that I've been to hell and back again in order to find it, metaphorically of course, and I—"

Aziraphale drew him inside with a crushing kiss, slammed the door behind them with a thought.

"You didn't need to," he said against Crowley's mouth. "You're enough."

"Nonsense," managed Crowley, giddy enough to feel lightheaded. "It's tradition."

Aziraphale kissed him again. "We'll not hear the end of it."

"We weren't going to anyway," Crowley said, grinning helplessly.

He'd email Anathema's bank details to Uriel, but definitely not tonight.
"Let me get this straight," said Crowley, opening the container in which his latest culinary experiment had, hopefully, not gone awry. "You chucked the dissertation at your department secretary around four, and here you are? You're knackered, surely. It's *de rigueur* on the MA course to pull an all-nighter leading up to hand-in, isn't it?"

"Not if you're me," Sophia said, leaning on the work-top. She peered under the lid along with Crowley, wrinkling her nose at the sharp-sweet tang of fermentation. "Besides, you promised we'd celebrate. I borrowed Adam's car. What is that?"

"Date-palm paste," Crowley said. "Waste not, want not. If it's cocktails you're after, there's no time like the present. This stuff smells ready to me. Can you get those tumblers down from the cupboard? Thanks. Also the tin of coconut milk if you find it; that'll probably make for an excellent base, although I can't be sure what else that barkeep used to throw in. Besides nutmeg and crushed lemongrass, I mean."

While Crowley poked the vile-looking stuff with a fork, Sophia paused with the glasses and the tin cradled in one arm. "Lemongrass," she said. "Is it a Thai specialty?"

"*Mmm*, no," Crowley said, licking a bit of date-palm paste off the fork. "Say, that's pretty close to what I remember. I wish I'd paid more attention at the time."

"Fine, then," Sophia said, depositing her burden on the work-top. "Indian? African?"

"Try ancient Near East," Crowley said, reaching for the tin-opener. "Jordanian, maybe, going by today's borders? I promise you it's nothing but sand out there now."

Sophia was strangely quiet as she watched him work; he tried to pay it no mind. She fetched everything else he asked for: fresh lemongrass from the refrigerator, ground nutmeg from the spice-rack, and vodka from the liquor cabinet. It would hide beneath the rest of the flavors easily enough; if the date-palm hadn't fermented properly, he wanted to make damned sure the alcohol content was to their liking.

"Are you having one of these, angel?" Crowley called into the living room.

"One of what?" Aziraphale asked thirty seconds later, absorbed in his reading.

"One of these cocktails you never had the good sense to try."

"Whatever you wish, my dear."

Crowley made a face at Sophia's amused shrug.
"I guess that means three," he said, and Sophia fetched another tumbler from the cupboard. Mixing by hand proved difficult, as the paste was thicker than it should have been, and the coconut milk wasn't a very efficient solvent. In the end, they threw it all in the food processor with honey, vodka, and crushed ice for good measure.

"This is not, strictly speaking, authentic," Crowley said, somewhat dissatisfied as he poured an even amount of the contents into all three tumblers. "I've done the best I can from memory, and it's not as if anybody wrote this down." He handed a glass to Sophia and picked up the other two, which were already slick with condensation. "Let's go in and keep him company. We'll make him celebrate with us, if you like."

"Oh?" Sophia asked, trailing after Crowley into the living room. "You had me thinking you'd pulled this from one of Aziraphale's rare books," she said, nodding to the angel where he sat in his tartan armchair. "Did that barkeep teach you how to make it?"

"The barkeep never offered me anything except every tenth drink free," Crowley said, gesturing for her to take a seat on the sofa. "Therefore, this is entirely experimental." He stepped in front of the armchair, waving one of the cocktails directly beneath Aziraphale's nose. "Sophia's handed in her dissertation," he said, passing the tumbler off to Aziraphale. "Many happy returns, and, of course, to an eventual PhD."

"*Hell no,*" Sophia said, leaning to clink her tumbler against Aziraphale's, and then against Crowley's as he took a seat beside her. "Mum expects it, of course, but that's because she earned hers at scarcely twenty," she added. "What a freak."

"Have you tasted this?" Aziraphale asked both of them, with mild trepidation.

"*Nope,*" Crowley said, bringing the tumbler to his lips. "Bottoms up!"

Sophia and Aziraphale both choked, but Crowley did his best to remain composed.

"Okay, that's *gross,*" Sophia said. "No offense, but the vodka is overkill."

"I fear the young lady's assessment is correct," Aziraphale sighed.

Crowley snapped his fingers in irritation, taking another sip of his own. *There.*

"It's better now," he said. "Takes a minute to...you know, settle."

Sophia grimaced and swilled her cocktail. "Are you serious?"

"Actually, yes," said Aziraphale, blinking on his second sip. "Surprising."

Crowley drank some more of the miraculously corrected concoction and watched as Sophia peered into her tumbler, swilled its contents again, and then frowned. She sniffed the cocktail suspiciously, and then held it up to the light in wonder.

"It smells different now," she said. "It even *looks* different."

Aziraphale set his paperback aside and gave Crowley a warning glance.
The ingredients were all wrong, Crowley protested. I had to fix them.

Serves you right, thinking you could replicate it, Aziraphale replied.

Just then, Crowley realized that Sophia had bravely emptied a third of her glass and was staring at both of them with the glassy expression of someone who’d not only just tried the most fantastic drink in Creation, but who’d also heard both of their thoughts as clearly as she’d heard Crowley’s the day they’d gone to lunch in Cambridge.

"Oh God," she said, taking another gulp. "Why does it always happen when I drink?"

"Because you have a talent for it," Aziraphale told her. "Just like your mother."

"Lowers your inhibitions," Crowley said. "Makes the whole process a bit easier."

She squinted at him, then at Aziraphale, and downed the remainder of her glass. For several seconds, Crowley thought she might be sick, but she closed her eyes tightly and held out a hand. "I'm fine," she whispered, lifting her head. "I'm..."

Crowley, what did you put in this? asked Aziraphale, somewhat desperately.

What do you think? Crowley shot back. Whatever originally went in it!

"Which you don't," said Sophia, eyes opening, "kno—oh holy fuck. You have wings."

Crowley felt a thrill of terror; it had been ages since he'd known a human who could catch the impression of them even when not fully manifested, much less pitch from mundane to switched-on so quickly. In fact, only her husband as an eleven year-old boy had earned that distinction (but, of course, Adam had been sober at the time). The wine in Cambridge simply hadn't been strong enough to tip her.

"Which of us, dear girl? You've drunk that rather fast, and the angle of the light—"

"Both," she said, just barely managing to slam her glass on the coffee table as her hand sagged toward the floor. "Oh God," she repeated, covering her mouth with her other hand, which was shaking. "Maybe I'm having an allergic reaction. But what...?"

"Calm down," said Crowley, taking her wrist. "You were nearly there anyway."

"Yes, but you didn't have to force it!" hissed Aziraphale.

"I didn't force anything! All I did was adjust the recipe!"

"Then there must be something in it modern humans aren't used to!"

"Shut it!" Sophia shouted.

They both looked at her, chagrined and instantly contrite.

"It's just...wow, my head hurts," she said, and dazedly reached out to touch Crowley's face. "Your eyes," she said, tracing the plane of his cheekbone up to his temple. "Not human. I always knew." Her eyes flicked over to Aziraphale, quietly afraid. "Nobody can read that many dead languages."
Not even Mum. Where'd you first have that cocktail, then? Ur? Babylon? No, wait. Maybe you'll tell me it was Atlantis."

"Actually, it was Gomorrah," said Crowley, pensively staring into his tumbler.

Sophia groaned. "Oh, of all the tired paradigms—"

"If it's any consolation," said Aziraphale, "we got tired of it, too."

"Explain?" she asked, allowing Crowley to remove her hand from his cheek.

"With regard to what we did all those years ago, the thing your mum and Adam both remember in spite of certain Powers' best efforts to the contrary," he said, "you might say we helped your lot stage a rebellion of sorts. And together, fortunately, we won."

"Suddenly," said Sophia, "those note-cards in Mum's files make sense." She folded her hands in her lap and stared at them, as if piecing things together the way Aziraphale must have when he'd got his hands on the Book. "Powers," she echoed. "I always did wonder about the Two Powers nonsense. Agnes had an odd sense of humor, and Mum had always tried to explain it away as a cautionary tale or a metaphor. Imagine."

"You don't know the half of it," Aziraphale muttered.

"I do," she said. "You're angels, and not in the fluffy sense people like to imagine."

Crowley opened his mouth, shut it again, and then sighed.

"Fluff never had anything to do with it, believe me. If you'd met the others—"

"No kidding. Those two at the wedding? Mum was afraid of them, but I felt safe."

"As safe as you feel with your husband, no doubt," said Aziraphale, carefully.

Sophia gave him a wry smile as knowing, innocent, and old as Earth itself.

"He's got a lot of explaining to do. Don't worry; I've got his car."

"Which you won't be driving back," said Crowley. "Not in this state."

"I'm not drunk, thanks very much," said Sophia, over-enunciating.

"No, but you're under the influence of a mild narcotic," replied Aziraphale. "Or an opiate, or heaven knows what. Dreadful stuff, of course. They didn't regulate what was put in drinks back then, and I'm afraid Crowley's reproduced this to a fault."

"Not with the blender," Sophia insisted. "I saw everything go in."

"Not with the blender," agreed Crowley, wearily, taking a sip. "When I fixed it."

Sophia blinked at him in stupid fascination and mimed snapping her fingers.

"Just like that? You transformed it without even knowing what went in?"
"He transforms inferior wine all the bloody time," Crowley said.

"Why shouldn't I?" asked Aziraphale, defensively. "No harm, no foul. Er."

Sophia was studying them both with the same intent consideration that Adam could summon even in a casual glance. Crowley wondered what the label pasted to the back of his skull said when she looked at it; was it slightly blurry, he wondered, like the distant letters on the wall that young Robert's optician would make him try to read?

"But you're so human," she whispered. "You fell in love."

Before either one of them could respond, Crowley's mobile, which was on the coffee table, rang. Aziraphale picked it up before Crowley could even react, apologizing as he answered it. Pippa, from the sound of things, judging by that greeting—

Aziraphale's expression withered, unlike anything Crowley had ever seen.

"Oh," murmured Sophia, in prescient warning. "Oh no."

"We'll be there straightaway," said Aziraphale, and hung up.

Crowley tugged Sophia to her feet, nudging her urgently toward the door.

"The Bentley," he said, reaching to catch Aziraphale's hand. "Now. I'll drive."

* * *

Even at Crowley's habitual breakneck speed, they didn't beat the ambulance.

Pippa hovered on the porch as medics passed her with the stretcher, oddly stoic.

It wasn't till she saw the Bentley roar into park along the road that her expression began to crumble, till she saw Crowley racing across the lawn ahead of Aziraphale, who had the unenviable task of keeping Sophia on her feet. The girl stumbled as they walked arm-in-arm, almost dragging them both down in the muddy grass.

"Sorry," she murmured, pulling free of Aziraphale's grasp. "God, what was in..."

Aziraphale left her swaying with one hand on the bird-bath and continued to the porch, where Crowley already had Pippa folded so tightly in his arms that Aziraphale wondered if either of them could breathe. He touched Crowley's shoulder.
"What happened?" he asked. Bewildered panic hovered beneath his sense of calm.

Crowley tucked Pippa's head under his chin, gathered her shaking form even closer.

"Heart attack," he said, eyes fixed unblinking on the front door. "Stroke. Hard to say."

Aziraphale stroked Pippa's hair; her sobs were muffled in Crowley's jacket.

"Go get her," Crowley snapped, his eyes darting to Sophia. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'm okay," said Sophia, hovering nearby, unsteady in her muddy shoes. "I'm here."

"Up you get," Aziraphale helping her step onto the porch. She didn't let go of him this time, her eyes wavering between Crowley's pale, pinched features and the medic emerging to hold the door open for his colleagues as they bore Harold outside.

"Who're you?" asked the medic, closing the door. "We can't take you all."

"The neighbors," said Crowley, indicating Aziraphale with a nod. "Next cottage up."

"You too?" the medic asked Sophia. "Daughter? Granddaughter?"

"Friend of the family," said Sophia, helplessly. "I'm just visiting—"

"There's no time for that," said the medic, taking Pippa's shoulder. "Come along."

Pippa disentangled herself from Crowley, dabbing her eyes on her sleeve.

"I'll ride with these gentlemen here, if it's all the same to you. Get a move on!"

"Yes, ma'am," said the medic, and dashed hurriedly away.

Twenty-five minutes later, once Harold had been stabilized and the team on-site had found all of the initial paperwork miraculously completed, a young Indian woman in a lavender lab-coat met the four of them in a secluded waiting-room at St. Richard's Hospital. Aziraphale, Crowley, and Sophia hadn't been told to leave, as no one since the young medic had attempted to cross Pippa. Nobody had dared to try.

"Mrs. Morrison," said the woman, gently, extending a hand to Pippa. "My name is Doctor Rathod, but you can call me Aishwarya—aactually, just Asha if that's easier."

Pippa blew her nose on Aziraphale's handkerchief and let go of Crowley's hand, to which she'd been clinging on the arm-rest of her chair ever since they'd been shown into the waiting room. Sophia, much improved, had run to the vending machine and got them all tea. She sat across the aisle from the rest of them, nursing her cup.

"Phillippa," she said, shaking Asha's hand. "But you can call me Pippa."

"I'll be taking care of Harold," Asha said. "This is not an easy thing to tell you, but your husband has suffered a major stroke. He is unconscious and in critical condition, but stable for now. We are doing everything we can to make him comfortable, Pippa, and we are considering the possibility of surgery to alleviate the pressure caused by hemorrhage in his brain. Do you understand, or would you like
me to clarify further?"

Aziraphale stared at his hands, not quite able to meet Crowley's gaze across the space between them, which was occupied by Pippa. It was a terrible prognosis: coma on the heels of a stroke. Asha had essentially asked Pippa if she understood that her husband was dying and that there was very little they would be able to do to save him.

"No, that won't be necessary," said Pippa. "I understand. It's how my mother passed."

Asha crouched in front of Pippa and took hold of her free hand.

"I can't imagine how difficult it must be for you to hear this again. I meant every word about the surgery; we will leave no option unconsidered. If surgery is possible and he survives, he may never speak again. There will be significant paralysis. If we can't perform surgery, he may last forty-eight hours, or he could last a week."

Pippa nodded, closing her eyes. "Three days we waited on Mum," she said.

"You can stay if you like," said Asha, "but I strongly suggest that you return home and get some rest. We'll call you when we have further answers, and I'm so, so sorry."

"Goodness, it's not your fault," Pippa said, welling up as she patted Asha's hand.

"If you'd like to stay, my dear, I'll stay with you," said Aziraphale. "Crowley's got to get poor Sophia back to Cambridge; Adam will be wondering where she's got off to."

"I went to Cambridge," said Asha, turning to Sophia. "Give it my best."

"She's a bright girl," said Pippa. "A good girl, and a very great friend."

Crowley rose, releasing Pippa's hand. "You've got my number. If you need anything, call. I'll have the phone on—angel, don't worry, Sophia can answer if I'm driving."

Aziraphale stood and grasped Crowley's lapel, kissing him on the cheek in spite of Asha's vaguely surprised expression and Sophia's failed attempt to look away. "Be careful," he said. "Mind the speed limits."

"I'm always careful with her," Crowley said, offering Sophia his arm. "Let's go."

And then Aziraphale and Pippa were alone, each staring into a cup of lukewarm tea.

"This isn't how I imagined it would be," Pippa said. "Sit back down, love."

"I should think not," sighed Aziraphale, and sat. "Things rarely turn out as we expect."

Pippa nodded. "You'd know that better than most, I don't doubt."

"How do you suppose?" Aziraphale asked, surreptitiously heating both cups of tea.

"You found love later on in life, so you never know how much time you've got. It's all well and good you've exchanged rings, but it's times like this that I'd fear for you."
"If you end up in hospital," said Pippa, pressing the handkerchief to her lips, "they could bar him from seeing you. Not as likely these days, but if the paperwork's not all signed and sealed, they could. Do you mean to tell me you've never had a scare?"

"There was once," Aziraphale told her, before he quite realized what he was saying. "We went to Tokyo eleven years ago. This was before—well, not _long_ before we became—before we moved out here," he continued, mindful of Crowley's preference for privacy even in his absence. "There was a very famous sushi restaurant with an even more famous chef. Foolishly, I decided to try _fugu_—pufferfish, that is."

"The one that's poisonous if they don't do it right," said Pippa, darkly.

"Yes, the one that's poisonous if they don't do it right," Aziraphale sighed.

"Close call? I mean, the chef had to've done it right. You wouldn't be here otherwise."

"I choked on it," he continued. "Crowley caught on to what was happening—" _miracled the poison from my bloodstream_, he thought, _just before it could shut down anything important_ —and, well, thank goodness for the Heimlich maneuver, I always say."

"I suppose you must worry about _him_, too," Pippa said, "what with the way he drives."

It was the tone of her voice, perhaps, the fragile emptiness that only genuine loss could impart to a statement that, for Aziraphale, would otherwise have gone in one ear and out the other, if not for the memory of a certain windswept morning several months before, by sword and scythe and arrow-point, how close they'd really come—

_If only you knew how little you need worry_, thought Aziraphale. "Why?"

"I'd have been discorporated if Crowley hadn't been faster than the poison. If he's ever in a collision and I'm not there to stop it, too far gone to repair the damage himself..."

Aziraphale had never had a particularly difficult time obtaining a new body. These days, he didn't doubt Gabriel would require a significant amount of bullying if it came to it, but having two out of four Archangels on one's side did rather bode well—

But _Crowley_, set adrift by his former employer, no longer had any such recourse.

If he were to be discorporated—if, heaven forbid—

"Fuck," Aziraphale whispered, every other thought pushed from his mind.

"I'm sorry," said Pippa, in tears again. "I didn't mean..."

She'd burrowed against Aziraphale's shoulder, sobbing, before Aziraphale could collect himself.

"My dear, I need your mobile," he said shakily. "We ought to call Nicola."
Crowley was sitting at Anathema's dining-room table, drinking some tea that was much better than what he'd got at the hospital. Sophia had instructed him to drive her to her parents' house instead of to the flat in Cambridge, as she suspected she'd find Adam there anyway. Newt had invited him to informally crash-test some software.

"How'd it drive?" asked Adam, joining Crowley and Sophia at the table.

"It makes less noise than I'm used to," Crowley admitted, studying his mug.

"It's not half bad," Adam said. "Want me to drive you home? Rough day, sounds like."

"Yes," Crowley agreed. "And that's not necessary. I can just as easily fly."

Adam gave him a curious look, and then turned to Sophia.

"Yep," she said, blowing on her tea. "Shit just got real."

"I guess that means you've got a lot of questions," said Adam, pensively.

"Yeah, but they can wait till later," she replied. "I'll steal the note-cards."

"Borrow them, you mean," said Anathema, wandering in from the kitchen with a bowl of kettle corn. She set it down in the middle of the table and sat down beside Crowley, leaning over to look at him more closely. "You're not really ready for this, are you?"

Crowley shook his head. "That's not the problem. Not by far."

"Aziraphale's not ready, then. He knows intellectually, I'm sure, that we're all going to die on you. He hasn't let it sink in, though. Not the way you have. Is that right?"

"And then some," said Crowley. He looked at Adam, but the young man's face was impassive, as difficult to read as Aziraphale at his most closed-off. Will you die on us, I wonder? I still don't know just how much you've kept and just how much you've sworn off. You've let half of Heaven's SWAT team get cozy with humans. What next?

I'll figure that out when the time comes, Adam sent back tetchily.

I beg your pardon, Crowley replied. What?

Sophia was trying hard to pretend she hadn't heard, but she looked frightened.

Anathema set her chin in her palm. "Crowley, what can I do?"

"Stand by," he said, rising, loath to leave his tea unfinished.

* * *

Crowley was sitting at Anathema's dining-room table, drinking some tea that was much better than what he'd got at the hospital. Sophia had instructed him to drive her to her parents' house instead of to the flat in Cambridge, as she suspected she'd find Adam there anyway. Newt had invited him to informally crash-test some software.

"How'd it drive?" asked Adam, joining Crowley and Sophia at the table.

"It makes less noise than I'm used to," Crowley admitted, studying his mug.

"It's not half bad," Adam said. "Want me to drive you home? Rough day, sounds like."

"Yes," Crowley agreed. "And that's not necessary. I can just as easily fly."

Adam gave him a curious look, and then turned to Sophia.

"Yep," she said, blowing on her tea. "Shit just got real."

"I guess that means you've got a lot of questions," said Adam, pensively.

"Yeah, but they can wait till later," she replied. "I'll steal the note-cards."

"Borrow them, you mean," said Anathema, wandering in from the kitchen with a bowl of kettle corn. She set it down in the middle of the table and sat down beside Crowley, leaning over to look at him more closely. "You're not really ready for this, are you?"

Crowley shook his head. "That's not the problem. Not by far."

"Aziraphale's not ready, then. He knows intellectually, I'm sure, that we're all going to die on you. He hasn't let it sink in, though. Not the way you have. Is that right?"

"And then some," said Crowley. He looked at Adam, but the young man's face was impassive, as difficult to read as Aziraphale at his most closed-off. Will you die on us, I wonder? I still don't know just how much you've kept and just how much you've sworn off. You've let half of Heaven's SWAT team get cozy with humans. What next?

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Anathema set her chin in her palm. "Crowley, what can I do?"

"Stand by," he said, rising, loath to leave his tea unfinished.
You didn’t think I knew enough to decide all the rules for myself in a neat little row, did you, which ones I’d hang onto and which ones I wouldn’t? Adam asked. I was eleven. I knew I could do anything I wanted, but in the broadest sense possible. I knew that no more messing about sounded like a great idea, and I knew enough to put things back the way they were, with interest. Should I have left off the interest? Should I have forbidden collateral, the good and the bad? What do you think?

Crowley blinked at him. So you don't know if you're going to die?

Not exactly, Adam said. It's just that I haven't decided.

We're not finished here, Crowley thought, buttoning his jacket. "Anathema, Sophia, thanks ever so much. As always, it's been a pleasure. You," he said, pointing at Adam, "keep your nose clean, and don't break anything your father-in-law can't fix."

He disappeared before any of them could respond; the last thing he saw was Sophia's wide eyes, her lips parted in eloquent dismay. He hated this part. Reassembly still gave him the creeps no matter how many times he'd done it or would yet do.

Aziraphale was sitting at the kitchen table with his crossword and a cappuccino. He looked up, and Crowley had never seen such unabashed relief in...well, ever, and he'd seen more humans with cause to wear that expression than he'd have cared to recall.

"I was wondering when you'd return," said the angel, standing in such a rush that he spilled half the cappuccino across his copy of *The Telegraph*. He vanished the spill with an irritated huff, reflexively reaching for Crowley. "I couldn't help—"

"Pippa," Crowley said, holding him at arms' length. "Why aren't you with her?"

"Nicola and Trevor came as soon as they could," Aziraphale said. "I rang them."

"What about Rob?" asked Crowley. Did the boy know his grandfather was dying?

"He's with Trevor's parents," Aziraphale reassured him. "Crowley, you look..."

"Awful, yeah," Crowley said, sagging into Aziraphale's embrace. "We've got to talk."

Aziraphale stiffened against him, but relaxed again just as quickly.

"It can wait, my dear, surely," he said. "You're wrecked."

Crowley turned his head, perfectly willing to lose himself in Aziraphale's kiss. Besides, he hadn't quite found a way of framing the information he'd got his hands on: Oh, yeah, by the way, the former Antichrist hasn't quite thought things out as clearly as we would have liked. D'you suppose this will pose a problem? It wouldn't do to spring that on Aziraphale, not after the shock of what had happened earlier that evening.

Bed seemed as logical a place to take this as any. It very rarely hurt, at least.

"Slow down," Crowley muttered several minutes later, halfway out of his clothes and already pinned to the mattress. Letting Aziraphale have his way usually wasn't anything to complain about; as
Crowley understood this in human terms, the angel was what most of them would call *thorough to a fault*. He nuzzled and then bit Aziraphale's lower lip, working both hands down the back of Aziraphale's trousers.

"Terribly sorry," Aziraphale sighed, his breath hitching as Crowley's fingertips skated down the backs of his thighs. When their trousers and underthings vanished, all pairs present, it wasn't really worth asking who'd done it. "It's just that I've missed..."

"I was gone for all of three hours," Crowley said, distracted by the fact that Aziraphale had got at his hips and his lower back and was slowly, teasingly kneading his way down to Crowley's arse. "This isn't going to work, angel. You've got my arms trapped."

"Then lie back," Aziraphale murmured, running one knuckle deftly down the cleft, "and leave me to it." Crowley shivered at the sudden slickness. One finger, *two...*

Aziraphale left it at that, knew exactly where to press. He worked a thigh in between Crowley's as they twisted and gasped, never wavering, his pacing clever and careful. Crowley came first, clutching with it: pleasure like a knife slipped in where you'd least expect. He flipped Aziraphale over, finished him off with fervent mouth and hands. Afterward, Aziraphale arranged them front to front and drowsily draped one leg over Crowley's hip. He traced the length of Crowley's spine and asked what was the matter.

"Nothing," lied Crowley, snuggling closer with a yawn. "Pippa and all. 'M tired."

"Yes," sighed Aziraphale, sounding genuinely exhausted. "Yes, *quite.*"

Whatever the matters were, they'd both do well to sleep on them.

* * *

Aziraphale woke up at eight-thirty in the morning to the sound of Crowley's mobile vibrating its way off the bedside table. He caught it just in time, fumbling the ancient flip-phone open. He'd have a word or two with Crowley about an upgrade.

"*Mmm,* yes? Hallo?"

"I didn't mean to wake you," said Pippa, her words slow, tone hollow.

"Don't even think it," Aziraphale said, sitting straight up in bed. Crowley had rolled away from him sometime in the night to curl toward the door, one hand fisted fretfully in his pillowcase. "How are you holding up? Has there been any news?"

"They can't operate," she said. "Trevor's father's bringing Rob this afternoon."
"Oh, my dear," said Aziraphale, his throat constricting. "Is there anything I can do?"

Crowley took hold of Aziraphale's upper arm, startling him.

"I'll go over," he said, rolling out of bed. "Ask her if they need food."

Aziraphale felt a wash of relief. "Would you like breakfast? Is it the three of you?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble," said Pippa, her voice so taut it hurt to listen.

"Are you at the house, or have you gone back to the hospital?"

"On our way back there now," she said. "Trevor's driving."

"Three, got it," Crowley said, fully dressed, holding out his hand. "I'll need that."

Aziraphale sighed. "I'm sending Crowley," he said. "I'll follow soon."

Pippa hung up with a whispered thank you, saving him the trouble.

Crowley snapped the phone shut and stuck it in his back pocket, leaning to kiss Aziraphale on the mouth. "You got the worst of it yesterday," he explained hastily, donning his sunglasses. "The least I can do is give you a breather."

"I have some things to do online," Aziraphale said. "I won't be long. A few hours."

"Funny, that's exactly what I owe you," said Crowley, kissed him again, and left.

If Aziraphale had learned anything from Crowley's weekly Skype sessions with Uriel, it was the sheer, brilliant utility of a web-camera over more traditional means of conference-call. It certainly beat getting a crick in one's neck and eye fatigue from staring so long into glowing, nebulous blue.

Aziraphale turned on the computer, went to make tea and toast, and returned with his hands full. He fired off a brief email, mindful not to get crumbs or marmalade down the keyboard, and booted up Skype.

Twelve minutes later, Uriel's number rang through. He answered it.

"You're lucky I've got a BlackBerry," Raphael said, yawning. In the grainy camera feed, his hair was a wild, mussed halo glinting fiery by desk-lamp light, much longer than it had been at the wedding. "And that I had the sound turned on. What's up?"

"Is Uriel there?" Aziraphale peered at the edges of the feed. "I need to be certain—in"

"If she's the one you wanted to talk to, darling, you should've asked. She's out."

"Good," said Aziraphale. "I'd rather she didn't hear what I'm about to ask."

Raphael tapped his nose and winked. "I see. We don't want demon-dear to know."

Aziraphale took a sip of his tea before continuing, and the Archangel made a face.
"You always did have a flair for the dramatic," he said. "Or was that dithering?"

"What do you know about Gabriel's current stance on discorporation?"

"Tricky," Raphael said, scratching his temple. "It hasn't been an issue in the last few thousand years, so I haven't made any up-to-date inquiries. Which goes against procedure every which way, I know, so please don't point that out."

"Wasn't about to," Aziraphale admitted. "My situation's been similar. Neither have I."

"Before you go asking if Uriel knows anything, she's never needed a replacement."

"Fortunate," said Aziraphale, "but unhelpful. Theoretically, what would you guess?"

"My feeling," Raphael confided, "is that Gabriel's been so tight since Himself stopped handing down orders that any one of us would be lucky as to get so much as a toenail out of him. What would be the use in a replacement body if he feels we are, essentially, currently useless? Discorporation? Bam, instant recall. Either that or being doomed to hopping from channel to channel, host to host. Neither one is a thought I relish, as you can imagine, so I keep clear of bullets and reckless drivers."

"Those are easy enough to deflect if one is vigilant," said Aziraphale, uncomfortably.

"Yes, but I have the feeling your theoretical denotes a circumstance in which one has not been. You tend not to worry about yourself overmuch, do you? Perhaps you ought to, given that little incident twenty-odd years ago. Would the boy be as quick to help, I wonder, now he's settled down with a pretty, charming, thoroughly mortal wife?"

"It's Crowley," said Aziraphale. "If anything were to happen when I'm not to hand..."

"Perhaps that woman would help you out again," Raphael said. "Shadwell's tart."

"Would you please just be serious, even for a moment?"

Raphael rubbed his eyes. "Az, I'm always serious. I don't like the thought one bit."

"Then, short of sharing him with some recalcitrant human—which, by the way, was not at all pleasant, I can assure you, having once been stuck in that particular bind—what would you suggest in such a circumstance, however improbable?"

"How can you be sure Hell wouldn't pull him straight down? Do they attach some kind of reel-back mechanism? Not keen on releasing souls once they've got them, you know, not either side. There's the real value of a human body. Autonomy."

Aziraphale's mind spun. On top of it all, Harold would surely pass before night fell.

"Listen," Raphael continued. "If you're that concerned, go to the boy. Raise the issue."

"Lose him," said Aziraphale, disbelieving. "To think that I even could..."

"Hey, there you are," said a familiar voice offscreen. "Waited up for me, huh?"

Raphael fixed Aziraphale with a determined look, reaching to switch off his web-cam.
"I've got to go, darling," he said. "Do what I say for once, would you? Good luck."

* * *

Somber breakfast in the waiting-room had given way to a brief visit to Harold's bedside, from which Crowley had tactfully hung back, lingering in the doorway. There had been tubes and monitors everywhere, and if not for the name on the clipboard at the foot of the bed, Crowley would scarcely have recognized the man had he not been party to the proceedings from ground zero. Harold's skin had taken on a waxy, unnatural cast. His dry, motionless lips were cracked, looked almost purple.

The worst part of it by far was Pippa, who clung silently to her husband's stiff hand while Nicola bent over her father's pillow and stroked his sparse hair, her constant, frantically murmured words an ineffectual litany against hopelessness.

Crowley had turned away and gone back to sit down with Trevor, whose dark eyes and even darker skin, when coupled with his somber, melancholy air, had given him the impression of a living shadow. He'd offered Crowley a cigarette, which Crowley had accepted with murmured thanks and put in his pocket for later. He'd need it.

The four of them had gone to lunch in the hospital cafeteria, during which time Crowley had endured a number of fascinated questions from Nicola with regard to Aziraphale's erstwhile bookshop and how they were finding life in Sussex.

Robert's paternal grandfather, a stern, wise-looking seventy year-old islander—from Haiti, Crowley thought, or perhaps Jamaica—had brought the boy up to the waiting-room shortly after they'd returned from lunch. He'd chattered happily to Crowley about the fact he hadn't needed glasses after all, but that it didn't mean he couldn't have contacts someday. Trevor's father had joined his son, daughter-in-law, and sister-in-law at Harold's bedside. They'd taken Rob in shortly after, but he hadn't stayed for very long. He'd run back to Crowley with a tear-streaked face.

"Pap won't come back once the doctors take him away," the boy had sobbed.

Crowley had scooped Rob up and rocked him, at a loss for words.

"Sometimes people don't when they're old or sick," he'd said. "That's the way of it."

"Will Gran go away?" Rob had hiccupped against Crowley's shoulder.

"One day," Crowley had said, cursing Above, Below, and everything. "But not soon."

"Will you go away?" the boy had asked.
"No," Crowley had said, and hated himself for it.

Now, outside and alone, he'd never needed the blessed cigarette more. He'd only managed to smoke around a third of it when his mobile rang; he fumbled it out of his pocket and almost dropped the cigarette in the process of flipping it open.

"Bloody thing. Angel, I swear I'll get one of those smart-phones soon, just you wait—"

"Crowley?" Uriel asked uncertainly. "What's going on?"

"Oh, what's not," Crowley moaned, taking a deep drag on what was left of his hard-earned prize. "Harold's dying. D'you remember Pippa's husband? Maybe you don't. Anyway, he suffered a major stroke last night, and we were first on the scene. Sophia was there. It's kind of a disaster; she knows...Uriel, she knows."

"All in one day," she said. "Gosh. That's a lot. Are you okay?"

"I'm at the hospital," Crowley replied. "Outside it, rather. Just having a smoke."

"I would ask you if Aziraphale's there, but I already know that he's not."

Crowley took a final puff and pinched the stub out between thumb and forefinger.

"Why do you say that?" he asked, ignoring an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"I came home to Raphael wrapping up a little Skype session with him."

"Is that unusual? Aziraphale's pretty tech-savvy, don't let him fool you."

"It's unusual when Raphael won't tell me shit about the conversation."

"He's not taking it very well," Crowley told her. "That could be the reason."

"What, Raphael's not? Don't make me laugh. He didn't even talk to Harold."

"No, I meant Aziraphale. There's that whole emotional intelligence issue, and..."

"And it's something more serious than that. Before I got to the back room, I caught a few choice words like Gabriel and autonomy and do what I say for once, would you?"

"Damn it," Crowley hissed. "Why!"

"I don't know," said Uriel, helplessly. "That's why I called you. I wanted to know if Aziraphale's been acting strangely, but I guess the answer there is, yeah, sure, he's only losing his mind over the notion that all of his human friends are going to die."

"We're not particularly close to Harold," Crowley admitted.

"It's Pippa," Uriel said. "And it hits close to home."

"And it's the rest of them," Crowley said. "Anathema. Newt. Shadwell and Tracy."
"Mandy and Sophia," said Uriel, not missing a beat. "But what about Adam?"

"That," Crowley said, "is an interesting question, and I'd like to hear your thoughts."

He described the unspoken exchange he'd had with Adam the evening before, as well as the conversation he'd had with the boy some two and a half years ago in a Cambridge Caffè Nero. Which had also been the first time he'd met Sophia.

"I really hate to say this," said Uriel, at length, "but that is ineffability for you."

"I hate you," Crowley said. "Not in general terms, of course, and no offense meant, but in this one painfully specific instance? Without hesitation or reservations, I do."

"None taken," Uriel sighed. "If it's that big a problem, do what you did last time."

Crowley dropped the cigarette stub and stamped on it. "Which is?"

"Go to the boy. You just told me you told him that the conversation wasn't over."

"Yeah, and I also very likely got myself on his black-list by mouthing off."

"That's your real weak spot, sweetie," said Uriel, almost sadly.

"What? Are you serious? What is?"

"Getting in the last fucking word."

Crowley opened his mouth, shut it again, and hung up. As per usual, she was right, and he was done playing silly buggers. And, judging by who was headed across the parking lot toward him at that very minute, he wouldn't have to go far in order to set the proverbial ball rolling, either.

* * *

Aziraphale stuck his hands in his coat pockets, glancing sidelong at Adam. Crowley met them halfway, having pushed off the brick wall and broken into a hurried walk the moment he spotted them. He smelled like smoke and someone else's tears.

"Moral support, is it?" Crowley asked, looking Adam up and down.

"Aziraphale came to find me," Adam clarified, "but we needed to come here."

"Harold won't last much longer," said Aziraphale. "And there's something—"

"You bet there's something," said Crowley, pointing a finger at Adam. "If our favorite godchild
doesn't make a few important decisions, who knows what trouble we'll be in."

Adam pursed his lips, and Aziraphale blinked at him in undisguised horror.

"Do you mean you've...realized, I mean...has it crossed your mind, too?"

It was Crowley's turn to blink at Aziraphale.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, unless we're talking about the same thing."

Adam held out a hand to silence them, chopping the air curtly.

"One at a time," he said, and extended his open palm to Aziraphale.

"I'm talking about you," said Aziraphale, miserably. "Have you given any thought to what might happen if you were to get discorporated at this point in time, as unlikely as that may sound? Please don't look at me like that, my dear. Think about it," he said desperately. "Insofar as we know, you've been cut off. No more...no more bloody-minded stationery department, wasn't that how you once put it?"

"Oh," Crowley said, "my God."

Aziraphale reached for him as he staggered forward, caught him just in time.

"Was that what you meant? And do you have any idea? I spoke with Raphael, but—"

"Neither did Uriel, to be fair," said Crowley, leaning hard into Aziraphale. "Nobody knows anything. It doesn't matter what I was talking about, because it's really all the same thing. Our humans are going to die, and you're going to have to accept that, but what about him? If he eventually chooses to go, what about the rest of us?"

They both turned their heads to stare at Adam, still clinging to one another. Adam breathed in through his nostrils and stepped back from them, shifting his stance. He held his hand out in front of him as he'd done once before, and Aziraphale swore he could hear the same low, faint, ominous hum that had surrounded them twenty-three years ago to the day. Death on the anniversary of rebirth.

"I reckon you've got a choice to make, too," said Adam. "Just like I have."

"Terms," Crowley said, steadying himself, but he didn't let go. "Yours first."

"I'll go," he said. "I'll go when she goes, if she goes first, or not very long after. I'm not really interested in hanging about if she's not here to share it with. Is that fair?"

"Abundantly," said Crowley, indicating that Adam should continue. "And?"

"And everything I've said will hold," said Adam, gravely. "No more messing about."

"You were curiously unspecific about that at the time," Crowley continued, and it was all Aziraphale could do to hold his breath. "Since then, a couple of pretty fascinating things have happened, both of which we could've done without. Well, wait, no—one of them's pretty all right, but it's got worrying ramifications, and as for the other—"
"What happened?" asked Adam, his brow furrowing. "Aside from you getting fired?"

"Laid off," Crowley corrected him. "The other thing happened the morning after your wedding. Michael turned up on the beach with an eye to...hmmmm, what's the expression they're so fond of in gangster films? Sending me to sleep with the fishes."

"Uriel and Raphael took care of it," said Adam. "We agreed that's what they were for."

"For safeguarding the humans, yes," interjected Aziraphale, "but—"

"I wasn't talking about humans when I said security detail. I was talking about you."

"Raphael doesn't put much stock in Gabriel's ability as an organizer, and neither do I."

"Organizer?" echoed Crowley. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

"You may have a point," said Adam, turning his hand a fraction. "As above, so below. Two up there and two down here, that's fair. No moving back and forth, and no swaps, either. That way they can get on with their job and not worry so much."

"Which ones?" asked Crowley, stupefied.

"The ones upstairs, doing what they do, and the ones down here, doing what they do."

"Gabriel and Michael mostly run things with iron, er, fists," Aziraphale muttered.

"Right, so they can go on doing that, but only up there," said Adam, reasonably.

"And the other two?" asked Crowley. "What is their job, exactly?"

"Looking after you two, of course," said Adam, turning his hand another fraction. "Somebody's got to do it if I'm not always going to be here to be doing it, which actually brings me to my next question. How long do you want to stay?"

"I beg your pardon?" asked Aziraphale. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"I don't think so," Crowley said. "When have you ever known him to joke?"

"Hell's out of your hair," Adam told Crowley. "They really are. Can't be bothered."

"None of them?" said Crowley. "Are you sure? Not even—"

"Not even those two," Adam said. "They got awfully interested in each other."

"If you mean more than before, you can stop right there," said Crowley, shuddering.

"As I was saying," Adam repeated, "you've got a choice, and we haven't got all day. Your friend is dying, and his wife needs you there. D'you see? All's fair in love and war, or at least everything will be as soon as you give me an answer."

Aziraphale and Crowley looked at each other for one long, considering moment.
They'll all die, Crowley repeated. Can you bear it?

I know they will, my dear, Aziraphale answered. Can you?

I can bear anything as long as you're beside me, angel. Hadn't you guessed?

Aziraphale felt an endless weight lift, and Crowley was smiling—really smiling.

"We'll stay," he said. "Someone's got to look out for them, the ones we love—"

"—and the ones we will love," Crowley cut in. "Rob's not bad. There's hope for him."

And Sophia's son, Aziraphale reminded him. Someday.

"Right," said Adam, turning his hand in a tight circle.

Not to erase this time, Aziraphale realized, but to seal. Something shook the ground just beneath them; Crowley stumbled, and they clung together for dear life. It didn't last more than a few seconds. Everything settled again, much the same as before.

"Now, what did that do, exactly?" Crowley asked.

"Your favorite," said Adam, grinning from ear to ear. "Miraculous escapes for everybody, and I do mean everybody. You know, should you ever need 'em."

"Yes, oh," said Aziraphale, holding Crowley close. "Yes, I do know."

"Perfect," Adam said, dusting his hands off. "At least till next time. I've got to get out of here; Soph's sick as a dog. We went out with some of her friends last night, even after I told her that wasn't the best idea after what she had at your place."

"What, are you nuts?" Crowley asked. "She's just handed in. Celebration's in order."

"Don't I know it," said Adam, strolling away. "I've made up my mind. Feels great!"

"I should hope," said Aziraphale, glancing upward. "Which window? We'd better go."

"You do realize he looks awful," Crowley said, "and that Pippa's even worse?"

"As you said," Aziraphale replied, "there's nothing for it, but as long as I'm here...?"

"As long as we're here," Crowley corrected him. "Don't forget it."

"Perhaps we'd better take the stairs," said Aziraphale, opening the door. "After you."

Eyes set resolutely forward, Crowley reached back and took his hand.
Penance

Chapter Summary

Stranger things have happened in September.

"That can't be right," said Crowley, staring out the window. "What's today?"

"Friday," Aziraphale replied from the sofa. "Sit with me a while. You're restless."

"No, I mean the date," Crowley clarified, squinting. "I count five of them."

"Crowley, it's the thirteenth. Please, just come here. You'll miss the show."

"It's September," Crowley said, beckoning for Aziraphale to join him at the window. "And sod the show. Who, I ask you, who lays eggs in September?"

"My dear, what on earth are you talking about?"

"The mallards," said Crowley. "They've finally turned up."

"Goodness," said Aziraphale, rising. He bumped his thigh off the armchair in his haste to get past it, cursing under his breath. "It's been two years, hasn't it?"

"No, three," Crowley said, leaning on the windowsill. He reached back and touched Aziraphale's thigh, halting any chance of a bruise through the layer of cotton twill. "Look at them. Balls of fluff on legs. Makes me think of spring in St. James's Park."

"I count six," said Aziraphale, bringing the back of Crowley's hand up to his lips in silent thanks. "They're quite small, a day or two old at most. And just milling about all on their own, the poor things! It's odd of the parents to leave them unattended."

"It's quiet out here," said Crowley. "Safe, remember? I think mum and dad know that. They're probably off looking for food. I saw a few ducks paddling in the sea at low tide last week. We've also acquired a pair of noisy, contentious swans. No cygnets."

"We ought to feed them," Aziraphale replied, already heading for the kitchen. He rustled around in the breadbox, presumably for the croissants left over from breakfast.

Crowley followed him outside, not bothering with shoes. The weather was unusually warm, if breezy, which likely accounted for the ducks breeding out of season. They stood at the edge of the rise, watching the six tiny brown-and-yellow creatures amble through the grass. They pecked fretfully at the sandy soil, and Crowley couldn't help but hear distress in the soft, pathetic peeping sounds they made.

It was to his credit, he hoped, that he'd never dunked a duck as young as these.
"Give me some of that," he said to Aziraphale, reaching for the bag.

"Don't scare them off," said the angel, handing him a squashed croissant.

Crowley crouched in the grass and scooted forward, finally settling down cross-legged when he'd achieved a distance of about three feet. Several of the ducklings had quieted and were looking at him, watching with intense, uncertain curiosity as he flaked off a bit of croissant crust and crumbled it between his fingers.

"Here," Crowley said, reaching out to sprinkle it as near to them as he could.

One of the ducklings stretched its stubby wings and toddled forward to investigate.

_They're so awkward, baby birds_, Crowley thought as he watched it gulp down a flake of crust. The duckling nosed at another piece, burbling to itself as if pleased, and three of the others quickly followed suit, snapping up the remainder of the flakes.

"Those two aren't so sure," said Aziraphale. "Toss some a bit nearer."

"What happened to not scaring them?" Crowley asked, sticking the croissant in his mouth. He scooted forward a bit more, by now less than a foot away from the four that had quite happily polished off his initial offering. They blinked at him placidly, chirping amongst themselves as he crumbled another bit of crust and sprinkled it nearer to the hesitant pair. "Look," he said. "See? There's plenty to go around."

One of the two wayward ducklings sidled up to the croissant-bits and nosed at them with inquisitive deliberation. The remaining one gave in to temptation, scuttling past its more cautious sibling to snag several pieces in quick succession.

The other four, catching on, practically stumbled over each other to get there.

Aziraphale murmured something that sounded suspiciously like _precious_.

Crowley ignored him, crumbling an entire handful this time. He sprinkled it directly in front of himself, folded his hands around what was left of the croissant, and waited. The ducklings, having got coordinated, swarmed the fresh patch of flakes.

"Don't make them fight for it," Aziraphale chided. "They'll gorge themselves."

"Their beaks aren't very well suited to gorging at this stage, angel," Crowley pointed out, unable to suppress a smile as he watched one of them struggle with a larger flake. It quickly gave up. "Not till they're grown, anyway."

"Oh dear," said Aziraphale, and it wasn't till something that was scaly and fluffy all at once scrabbled at the exposed arch of Crowley's foot that he realized _why_. One of the ducklings perched there, wobbling slightly. It squeaked at him.

Crowley tore off a soft, white shred of croissant-innards and held it out.

The duckling gulped it down and climbed unsteadily onto his ankle, tripped up slightly by the hem of his jeans. Crowley reached out instinctively to steady the youngster with one cupped hand. The duckling paused, nibbled on the tip of Crowley's thumb, and decided the curve of his palm was as
good a place as any to huddle for warmth.

"This is ridiculous," said Aziraphale, in faintly amused disbelief.

Crowley heard a series muted clicking sounds behind him, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the crowd of five more ducklings that had scrambled up to cluster around his bare feet and rather clumsily attempt to follow their sibling to where it rested on his calf, still sheltering in the curve of his hand, which he dared not move.

"Um," he managed. "A little help?"

Several of the more athletically inclined ducklings had scrambled their way up almost to his knee. At this rate, there was a very real risk of them falling. He dropped the mangled pastry and used both hands to herd in the soft, nippy gaggle. A few huddled in the space between his thighs and bit off pieces of the abandoned croissant.

"Smile, my dear," said Aziraphale, stepping in front of Crowley. He held the BlackBerry he'd acquired the week before out at arm's length, grinning smugly at the screen. A pinpoint of red light next to its camera lens winked on and off, taunting him.

"If this ends up on YouTube," said Crowley, stroking one duckling's fuzzy head, "you're not getting any for a week. And, as you know, my definition of any is pretty broad."

Guiltily, Aziraphale tucked the phone back in his pocket.
Breathe

Chapter Summary

Recovery, transformation, and an anniversary.

Aziraphale hadn't slept. He sat up, reaching to lay a hand on Crowley's shoulder.

Crowley woke and turned in the rumpled nest of covers, blinking sleepily. Drawn blinds hid the overcast sky; in the dim room, his eyes were the only source of light. "I hear rain," he said thickly. "D'you want me to drive you?"

"No," Aziraphale said, tugging the duvet back around him. "We'll walk."

"You'd best take an umbrella," Crowley murmured. "She hates getting wet."

"Go back to sleep, my dear," Aziraphale told him, leaning to kiss Crowley's temple, and got up. "If I'm gone longer than usual, which may be the case—she was especially rough last week, and understandably so—I promise you we can drive somewhere nice for a late lunch or an early dinner," he added, reaching into the closet.

"We had plans," said Crowley, burrowing grumpily back into his pillow.

Already buttoning his best shirt, Aziraphale stiffened and turned.

"Crowley, I'm terribly sorry. What have I forgot?"

"That sushi place in Brighton. We were going to try it."

"I'll do my best to see to it I'm only gone a few hours."

"Last week, she kept you through till early evening."

"She needed me through till early evening."

"I know," sighed Crowley, sleep settling back into his voice.

"Saturday mornings," Aziraphale reminded him. "It's what you'd call a date."

"Yeah, whatever," Crowley yawned. "Like my Monday nights."

Aziraphale finished dressing and gave his appearance a sidelong glance in the full-length mirror. He looked like he'd lost half a stone, Pippa had told him the week before. That's utter nonsense, he thought. She's projecting, the poor dear.

"You look fine, angel," Crowley muttered into the sheets.
Crossing to his side of the bed, Aziraphale lifted the duvet just far enough to peer at him. Crowley was curled on his side, knees drawn up nearly to his chest. "Please don't just lie there and sulk," Aziraphale entreated him.

"I'll sleep when you're gone," said Crowley. "What are you waiting for?"

Aziraphale bent and kissed him on his stubborn, maddening mouth.

"I love you," whispered Crowley, scarcely audible. "Now, get out."

The ten-minute walk to Pippa's cottage felt more like fifteen; the drizzle was deeply unpleasant, as Aziraphale's umbrella did very little to shield him from side-drafts. Still, he felt a warm flush from those half-hissed words. It was rare for Crowley to say what he had nonetheless unabashedly worn on his sleeve for the longest time.

Since when? Aziraphale asked himself, knocking on Pippa's door. Can you pinpoint the year in which the way he looks at you changed? The month, the fortnight? The day?

"You'll catch your death," Pippa told him, stepping outside as he took her hand.

"Not on your watch, surely," Aziraphale said. "How are you keeping?"

"Dour as ever," she replied, tucking her arm in his. "Shall we go?"

The café was another ten minutes' walk, and, by the time they arrived, the rain had let up. For nine in the morning, the establishment was busy. Aziraphale told Pippa about the ducks while Mandy cleared their favorite table. Newly graduated, she was taking a year at home to sort herself out. She'd begun dating one of the line cooks.

"In his lap, really?" asked Mandy, dubiously, setting a mug of black coffee down in front of each of them. "Hope the parents don't abandon them," she said. "Then, you'd have to adopt the whole lot. I bet duck poo is tough to clean out of carpeting."

The manager, who'd been passing by just then, shot her a disapproving look.

"It's quite all right, dear girl," said Aziraphale. "But your other customers might mind."

"Six mouths to feed!" said Pippa, offering a wan smile. "Imagine that."

"Bastard's lucky I didn't say duck shit," Mandy muttered, leaving with their order.

"Too much bread's bad for them, you know," Pippa told Aziraphale.

"I didn't," he admitted guiltily, sipping his coffee. "What's best?"

"Nicola found this website because Rob likes to feed the ducks near his school, and it says soft fruit is very good, as are live insects. Meal-worms. Crickets. Chopped veg."

Aziraphale made a mental note to add grapes and peas to the grocery list.

"Crowley will be glad of the advice, I'm quite sure."
"He's upset with you, isn't he?" Pippa asked.

"Why would you say that?" Aziraphale replied.

"Your brow creased just now as you thought of him. Oh, please don't give me that look; you play at being ever so dim, don't you? Tell me what you've done."

"I forgot our dinner plans," said Aziraphale, averting his gaze.

"Well, dinner's ages away," Pippa told him, but her lips tightened. "Ah," she said, much more softly, intent on her coffee. "You mustn't worry. I won't keep you today."

"For all his complaining, you must know he'd rather you kept me if—"

"Hush, you," said Pippa, with forced cheer. "You've taken the brunt of this, don't think I don't know it. Whisk him away for a little while. Think about setting a date; I should like another spring wedding very much. Your godson's was lovely."

Aziraphale sighed, opening his mouth to protest, and then shut it again.

"You think Crowley needs a holiday?" he asked instead.

"I think you both do," Mandy interjected, setting a full English breakfast in front of each of them. "Scratch that: all three of you do, but not together. Pip, if you don't eat, I'm telling Rob his gran's a hypocrite," she added, patting Pippa on the shoulder.

Resolutely, Pippa ignored her and forged on.

"You took him where last year, France? Right about this time, too."

"Michaelmas weekend," said Aziraphale, fixing his eyes on the waves.

"The sea makes him moody as much as it soothes him," Pippa remarked. "Get off these cold northern beaches for a change. Go somewhere warm."

Echoes caught and held, endlessly. Aziraphale gave her a look, but softened it instantly; she couldn't have known he'd thoughtlessly said the same thing to Crowley, once upon a time. Even if a bit sunken, Pippa's eyes were oddly clear.

"You get the strangest, saddest look sometimes," she said. "I never know why."

"It's been so very long," Aziraphale told her. "There are times I wish I could tell you."

"Go away with him, you silly man!" Pippa exclaimed, showing some of her usual fire for the first time in weeks. "If not somewhere warm, then somewhere interesting."

"That," said Aziraphale, wryly, picking up his fork, "I'm sure I can do."
Crowley spent a rather dull Saturday morning in his pajamas, curled up on the sofa with tea and Season One of *The Borgias* to keep him company. Dreadful stuff, of course. Bloody. More than a bit upsetting. He couldn't help but wonder if Showtime specialized in hunting down screenwriters with an uncanny knack for getting certain things right, where *uncanny knack* equaled *unholy pact*. He'd seen Rodrigo's brood from a distance, but he'd never got too close. Humans of their ilk were the worst.

He'd felt keenly sorry for Lucrezia, though; the gossip mills had not been kind.

After three episodes, Crowley turned off the television and stared at the ceiling. It was just after noontime, and he wondered if Aziraphale *would* actually manage to peel away, or if Pippa would crash all over again and he'd eventually have to drive down...

The truth was, they'd already tried the sushi restaurant in Brighton. Several times, in fact. They'd decided that the phrase would serve as code for when he wanted to try again, *if* he wanted to try again. And, very recently, Crowley had decided that he did.

Crowley must have dozed off, because he woke to Aziraphale sitting alongside him on the cushion, more off the sofa than on it. Aziraphale's cheek and neck felt damp beneath his touch, as if the rain hadn't quite let up for the return walk.

"Did you happen to check on them?" Crowley asked. "And how's Pippa?"

"The mother's got them hunkered down in that patch of Danish scurvy-grass, safe under her wings," Aziraphale told him. "The drake's on watch at the edge of the garden; I believe he's onto you. Pippa is much improved, as it happens."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Crowley, and then tentatively added, "but, speaking of scurvy-grass, did you know **wasabi** was once erroneously classified as **Cochlearia**?"

Aziraphale bent and kissed Crowley, biting at his lower lip with gentle insistence.

"You needn't belabor the point. If you're sure, I'm more than amenable."

"Prove it," said Crowley, undoing the first few buttons of Aziraphale's shirt.

The bedroom was as warm and dark as they'd left it, so Aziraphale switched on the bedside lamp and then turned his attention back to undressing himself. He did it with an air of unfussed confidence now that made it impossible for Crowley to tear his eyes away. He draped his shirt and trousers over the mirror, and then climbed over the footboard and crawled up the mattress to where Crowley reclined. Crowley let himself be stripped of his nightshirt between kisses, sucked in his breath sharply when Aziraphale's thumbs caught the elastic at his hips and drew his pajama bottoms down. Discarding both garments on the floor, Aziraphale pressed him back into the pillows.

"If you need to stop at any point, dear boy," he said firmly, "we stop."
Crowley closed his eyes and nodded, pressing one thigh up between Aziraphale's.

Aziraphale made a low, appreciative sound and shifted, nuzzling Crowley's throat. Foreplay was Aziraphale's strong suit. Even if not as extensive as this particular instance—licks and open-mouthed kisses from throat to chest to belly that left Crowley a wreck—he'd learned Crowley's weak spots to a fault, and he'd discovered that his hands, his mouth, and full-body contact got Crowley off more efficiently than fucking.

Aziraphale kissed the head of Crowley's cock and wrapped an arm around his waist.

"If the idea's to use the...the rope to...well, I think you're doing it wrong."

"The idea's for you to lie back and enjoy this, Crowley, if you please."

The brush of frayed silk up the underside of Crowley's erection was pleasant, if unexpected. He jumped, but Aziraphale's arm held him securely in place, and he hadn't stopped lavishing attention on Crowley with his mouth, either, which added a whole shivery, thrilling dimension to an otherwise intensely ticklish experience. Crowley wound his fingers in the pillowcase, registering the feel of one loop pulled skillfully snug around the base of his cock. He let out a brief, startled breath. Aziraphale wasn't kissing him anymore, but his hair brushed Crowley's belly as he looped the rope once, twice more, again, and then gave an experimental tug. Crowley opened his eyes, blinking dizzily at the ceiling.

"It feels like it's...more...well, more," he said thinly.

"The skin's stretched taut as a result," said Aziraphale, his breath teasing at Crowley's strained flesh. "More nerve endings exposed, I think, is what you meant." Crowley let go of the pillowcase and scrabbled at Aziraphale's shoulders.

"For heaven's sake, keep doing tha—oh," Crowley moaned.

Aziraphale didn't add any more loops or tighten the improvised cock-ring further, but there wasn't really any need. He sucked Crowley off with the merciless enjoyment of somebody who knew they'd done something bloody brilliant for once.

Crowley came so hard it almost hurt, shouting himself hoarse.

He couldn't do much more than cling while Aziraphale breathed blasphemies into his ear and worked Crowley's pliant hand on his own hardness. Superb, Crowley thought, taking over when Aziraphale was too far gone to be doing all the work. Wet heat slicked his fingers, and Aziraphale's ragged gasps dampened the pillow.

Crowley threaded his fingers in Aziraphale's unkempt hair and inhaled against the side of his neck. It was an irrational fancy, perhaps, but Aziraphale had always smelled wonderful. Even before he'd had cause to realize there was an element of genuine chemistry involved, Crowley had always associated his scent with comfort. "Mine," he said, banishing the tangled mess (ruined rope and all).

Aziraphale rolled onto his back and hauled Crowley along so that he could settle in for as much warmth as he wanted. He twined their fingers together and held them up, studying the rings. Both settings caught the lamplight, winking with sullen, sated fire.

"They're not an obvious match," he said.
"Neither are we," Crowley pointed out.

"I beg to differ, my dear. We've come a long way."

"Try me again later, and you can beg all you want."

Aziraphale pinched Crowley's backside, and then stroked the spot, sighing.

"Pippa says we need a holiday. I'm inclined to agree."

"Not France," Crowley said. "Not this year. I've had enough of their saints."

"If you did want sushi," said Aziraphale, surreptitiously, "there's always..."

Crowley propped himself on his forearms, resting against Aziraphale's chest. "Let's steer clear of Tokyo," he said. "And Fukushima, of course. They say Kyoto's lovely this time of year, what with the leaves. I've never actually been."

"Somewhere quiet," said Aziraphale, thoughtfully. "Yes."

* * *

"God," Mandy said, frozen at the edge of the garden. "I thought you were kidding."

Aziraphale tossed a few more peas into the grass. The ducklings ambled closer, greedily snatching them up. Their mother watched from a safe distance away, head tucked half under her wing, one weary, watchful eye trained on Aziraphale.

"I ought to have shown you the video," he said.

"You recorded it? No way," said Mandy, grinning. "Can I see?"

"I'm sure you know how to play it," said Aziraphale, fishing in his coat pocket. "Ah. Here you are. Leave my emails alone, please. I'll know if you've opened them."

Mandy snatched the phone, thumbs instantly busy at the track-ball and keyboard. "I can't imagine what kind of dark secrets you've got in there, unless it's drunk party photos from those crazy American friends of yours I met at the wedding."

"Uriel is Canadian," Aziraphale said, crouching to offer the bravest duckling a pea directly from his open palm. "Er. Sort of. She lived in Toronto for quite some time."
"Her boyfriend—um—partner, Rafe, is he...?" Her eyes widened a little as the video started playing. "Oh, Jesus Christ. That's just sickening. He'd make a great dad; I've seen him with Rob. Have you guys ever considered adopting?"

"Dear girl, if I knew exactly what Rafe considered himself, I'd tell you," sighed Aziraphale. He knelt and poured more peas from the mug into his hand, and then set the mug aside. He cupped both palms and spread the peas between them, startled at how quickly the youngsters gathered around to eat. "As for adoption, no, it's out of the question. We've got our hands full enough, looking after you and the rest."

Mandy looked up from the video with a smug half-smile.

"I require lots of looking after, do I? I guess you mean Anathema's girls, too."

"And Adam," said Aziraphale, resisting the urge to laugh as two of the ducklings nipped at his wrists, almost as if they thought he required preening. "That boy has been a challenge since the day he arrived on this unsuspecting planet."

"You make it sound like he's a threat to world security," said Mandy, tapping him on the shoulder with the BlackBerry. "Sorry I thought you were exaggerating. They are precious. So's Crowley. Where is he? I wanted to see him before you guys take off."

"Out shopping for the day," Aziraphale told her. "In Cambridge."

"Right, forgot," said Mandy, somewhat crestfallen as Aziraphale spread the remaining peas on the grass, brushed his hands off, and took back the phone. "Sophia's his BFF."

Aziraphale gave her a questioning look, idly noticing that the drake had returned.

"I'm afraid I don't know what that means, inasmuch as I am, as they say, wired."


"Crowley is very fond of you," Aziraphale told her, tilting the girl's chin up. "He always has been. In fact, he warmed to you much more quickly than I did at first. He'll be sorry to have missed you, and when we get home from our trip, we'd be delighted to have you and your young man pop by for dinner. How's that?"

"Do you really mean it?" Mandy asked, her eyes luminous and sad.

"Absolutely," Aziraphale said. "Crowley enjoys cooking for loved ones."

"No," she said. "I mean about him always having been fond of me."

Aziraphale sighed and stepped between Mandy and the drake, who'd begun hissing and flapping at both of them. The annoyed father rounded up his chicks and herded them back to where his mate rested, urging them to forage on the scurvy-grass.

"I knew you'd taken a fancy to him," he said, setting a hand on her shoulder. "I may be oblivious to a great number of things, my dear, but attraction is not one of them. At the time, everything was still so new—that is, what we had seemed so fragile—"
"You fought for him," Mandy said tearfully, "and you didn't even need to. I've never seen anybody fight so hard. It made me hate you, but now I just can't imagine..."

Aziraphale pulled Mandy close and let her sob on his shoulder.

"He's protective of me, just like you are," she hiccupped. "He's going to hate Iván."

"Why?" asked Aziraphale, bewildered, awkwardly stroking her hair.

"I don't know! Because he's dating me! Because he's Spanish!"

You needn't worry about the former, thought Aziraphale, and led her inside for tea.

* * *

"I bet you wish Uriel was here, not me," said Sophia, dubiously. "I think it all looks fine. You can carry off so many different styles." She glanced at the tag on the sleeve of the shirt and flipped it back over in disgust. "Yiiikes. I hope Aziraphale's paying."

"He almost always is," replied Crowley, absently, holding the shirt up one more time and frowning at his reflection. "I don't know; I was always just aiming for what I hoped looked good. It's nice not having to keep up the charade anymore, but now I just wonder if it was the equivalent of a bad Halloween costume. Or Raphael in drag."

"He looks better in drag than in trousers," said Sophia, and leaned on the rack of overpriced sale items. "Did he think he had to dumb his wardrobe down while he was here? I saw the photos from last summer. He rocked those skirts."

"Blue one, grey one, green one?" asked Crowley, flipping between hangers. "They all fit. Everybody's going to be staring at the awkward gaijin anyway, just like last time."

Sophia picked through the rack until she found one in garnet. She held it up under his chin and covered her mouth with her free hand, eyes filled with mischief.

"You're awful," said Crowley. "Just, no. That's not even funny."

"Why did they keep you?" she asked wonderingly. "You were failtastic!"

"You've got through the note-cards, I see," Crowley said, tucking both the green and grey under his arm. "You must be better acquainted with your infamous ancestress."

"I'm going to get you drunk and then have you say that. Ten times fast," she added, dashing to catch him at the till. "Let's have those cocktails again when you get back."
"We'll see," said Crowley, sticking his debit card in the chip-and-PIN machine. "I used to get through about ten in one sitting, but that many would probably kill—" he paused before he could manage to say a human, because the cashier was looking at him quite strangely "—me now. Heh. My tolerance isn't what it used to be."

"Two or three would do me in for sure," said Sophia. "And induce hallucinations."

"Did you take your gap-year in Thailand?" the cashier asked Crowley, tucking the receipt in his bag. "Because I know this place in Bangkok—" he paused and eyed Sophia, winking at her. "Well, maybe not in front of your little sister."

Crowley and Sophia looked at each other, mystified, but by the time they both glanced back at the cashier, they were laughing about exactly the same thing.

"He's my cousin," said Sophia, punching Crowley's shoulder. "You should see his amazing eyes. They're nothing like mine. He got the fantastic cheekbones, too."

Crowley pushed his sunglasses a bit further up the bridge of his nose. "Maybe next time," he told the cashier, playfully grabbing Sophia's arm. "I've got to get her home to the husband, or there will be hell to pay. Quite literally," he added.

* * *

Aziraphale’s BlackBerry alerted him to the arrival of a text-message just as they hit the runway in Dubai. Crowley had slept for most of the seven-hour first leg, although he was currently hunkered down in his seat with his earphones tuned to whatever in-flight music station he found least appalling. They'd given up on watching a film when nearly all of the cinematic features had turned out to be cringe-worthy romantic comedies. Angling the screen away from Crowley, Aziraphale opened the message.

* * *

have you reached the halfway point, darling? is he climbing the walls?

As he'd learned in the past week-and-change, Raphael never bothered with proper capitalization. Aziraphale replied, resisting the urge to make a snide comment.

We're on the ground at DXB, nearly to the runway. No plane-change. He's listening to music.
Crowley turned in his seat and waved at the BlackBerry with a quick, sharp flick of his tongue. Aziraphale gave him a mildly reproachful look, but his heart just wasn't in it.

*feed him or fuck him if necessary, az. good luck.*

Aziraphale ignored the response and deleted it, tucking the gadget away. Crowley looked as cramped and tired as he felt himself; they'd get off the plane and find refreshment in the terminal, perhaps, before re-boarding. Ahead of the final nine-hour stretch, Aziraphale fancied some coffee that wasn't horrid, over-brewed instant stuff.

Crowley yanked out the earphones and wrestled them back into their plastic baggie. He stuffed them in the back-pocket of the seat in front of him, stretching, and then took off his seat-belt. Leaning across Aziraphale's lap, he stared out the window.

"How long till we have to get back on this thing?"

"Two hours. If gate hook-up takes a while, two and a half."

"More than enough time to find a Costa or Caffè Nero or..."

"You'll be spoiled for choice," said Aziraphale. "They've got both of those, and also Starbucks. I looked it up. Perhaps we ought to go in for a local specialty, though."

"Mint tea," Crowley said. The plane hit a rough patch of tarmac, pitching him against Aziraphale's shoulder. Instead of lifting his head, he sighed and let it rest there. Aziraphale stroked his hair, silently cursing Raphael's suggestion.

Fifteen minutes later, they were off the plane and stretching their limbs inside the terminal. The nearest source of what they both wanted was Starbucks, so they settled for a deserted corner sofa. Crowley pulled the lid off his cup and sipped the tea scalding while Aziraphale stirred his café au lait to cool it slightly. Anathema had forwarded him some case-documents to peruse. He'd taken to informally assisting her behind the scenes on tough cases. Much more fun than crosswords, he'd found.

By the time they had to think about re-boarding, Aziraphale was engaged in an idle text-exchange with Anathema. Crowley had fallen asleep with his head in Aziraphale's lap. When Aziraphale shook him awake, he was grumpy and needed the loo.

"Serves you right, nodding off right after a drink," Aziraphale told him.

"One of these days, it'll be you," said Crowley, as he rose to go off in search of the nearest restroom. "It won't seem so funny then, angel. Just you wait." Aziraphale photographed Crowley's annoyed expression and sent it to Anathema.

"Troll!" Crowley called over his shoulder, vanishing into the crowd.

You're really awful, Anathema texted back a split-second later.
Duly noted, Aziraphale replied. Talk to you soon, dear girl.

Between the caffeine and the brief rest, they hit a second wind and decided to drink their way through the remaining flight. This resulted in surreptitious glances from the young couple in front of them. Aziraphale inferred that it was because they weren't accustomed to conversations regarding not only what it was like to literally fly through rough weather over the Pacific, but also proposing what impact current levels of sea-mammal intelligence might have on the continuing economic crisis. After a while, Aziraphale got tired of the stares; he quieted Crowley with a kiss, which sorted the issue right out. The couple were eavesdroppers, it would seem, but not voyeurs.

They both slept soundly through the final four hours of the flight. Crowley was wobbly and a bit worse for wear during their wait to clear customs at Kansai International, so Aziraphale propped him up with a description of where they were staying. He was fortunate he'd been able to make the reservation without cheating too terribly much; he'd done far worse over time than wish illness on unsuspecting parties so they wouldn't turn up. The staff at Mume Hotel would receive a call canceling the previous party's claim on its Hana suite ten minutes before their arrival. Small mercies.

A ninety-minute taxi ride later—neither one of them could be bothered with the train, not after around twenty hours cooped up in a plane—the astonishingly helpful and welcoming staff checked them into their fortuitously-snagged suite without a fuss.

Crowley stood uncomfortably still beside Aziraphale while he spoke to the concierge in fluent (if slightly rusty) Japanese, and he seemed all too glad to escape the bubbly young woman's attention. When they reached the top of the stairs, Aziraphale produced the room-key and did the honors with as much flair as he could muster. Crowley took off his sunglasses and stood staring in the doorway.

"I hope nobody died so we could have this," he said stupidly.

"Nonsense," said Aziraphale, ferrying their luggage inside. "A minor ailment, I assure you." He left their suitcases next to the elegant table and chairs, and then turned to tug Crowley inside. "Five days," he said. "For five days, it's ours, and they'll arrive late and have it for the rest of the time they were meant to stay. No harm, no foul."

"That," said Crowley, eyeing the elegant, screen-canopied bed sidelong, "still counts as messing people about, doesn't it?" He stepped close and worked both hands inside Aziraphale's rumpled waistcoat, tugging until Aziraphale's shirt came untucked.

"Not when your happiness depends upon it, my dear," Aziraphale said.

* * *

Crowley blinked lazily at the cherry-blossom karakami pattern on the ceiling above the bed,
stretching in the luxuriously soft sheets. He rolled over and considered the view at eye-level, struck by how profoundly rare the circumstances were.

It wasn't often he got to watch Aziraphale sleep.

They'd spent the previous afternoon and evening in bed, not even venturing out to explore. He'd expected Aziraphale to suggest that they'd wasted their first half-day, but no such insinuations had been forthcoming. They'd ordered dinner in, and aside from Aziraphale donning a dressing-gown to answer the door and pay for the delivery, they hadn't bothered to dress. Afterward, they'd shared a cigarette on the balcony, admired their view of the Shirakawa River, and retired to make love again.

Uriel had texted him just after midnight: How's the dirty get-away so far?

Not dirty enough by your standards, he'd typed back, and filthy by mine.

Crowley slid an arm across Aziraphale's chest, closing his eyes. There was little he could do to halt the memory, and even less he could do to keep from admitting that this strange, serene country had been where it all started. For him, at least.

"It's beautiful," Crowley said, regarding the plate with wary fascination. "Almost too beautiful. White dahlia, if ever there was such a thing," he remarked grimly.

"There's enough to share," said Aziraphale, taking up his chopsticks, left hand slightly trembling. It was clear he'd wanted to try this for a very long time, and, for them, the definition of a long time was certainly longer than it was for most.

Crowley leaned forward and sniffed the sashimi, right hand hesitating on his own utensils. It was fresh, there was no doubt of it: pulled from the sea that morning. He inhaled again. Beneath the promise of fine flavor, he detected something foreign, something wrong: a terrifying, prescient spike at the back of his throat.

"Don't eat it, angel," he said. "I'm not very sure."

"The chef has twenty years' experience. I hardly think we're in danger."

Crowley looked up at Aziraphale, intently studying his eyes.

Hard to refuse him something so fiercely wanted, especially after what they'd been through scarcely a decade before. The point was to enjoy the world now, wasn't it? Enjoy it while they still had a second lease on existence. That was part of why they'd come. What when you'd nearly lost all of the sushi restaurants in Creation, what was the logical course of action? Get sushi at its source, the most exquisite there is.

The fish was laced with venom; the chef had made his first and only fatal error.

But Crowley was in a position to let Aziraphale have his cake and eat it, too.

"As you will," he said, waving his chopsticks at Aziraphale. "I'll abstain."

Crowley clung tightly to Aziraphale as the recollection subsided, waking him.
"Hush," Aziraphale yawned, stroking Crowley's arm. "Bad dream?"

"Yeah," Crowley said, opening his eyes in relief. "Something like that."

While Aziraphale pottered about in the spacious white-tiled bathroom, investigating the tub and the sinks (Two! he exclaimed) and the electric kettle, Crowley lounged on the bed with his travel guide open, idly flipping pages. He was as proud of his travel-guide library as he was of the rest of his reference collection, and he intended to put *The Rough Guide to Japan* to good use. Failing that, he'd attempt it.

"We could have a look at Nishi-Honganji and Higashi-Honganji first," he said.

The sound of running water subsided, and Aziraphale stepped out of the bathroom, patting his face and neck dry with a fluffy white towel. He was still naked. "Perhaps we ought to take it easy," he said. "Wander the streets, nose through the shops. Get our bearings. Find some nice restaurants to try over the next few days."

Crowley turned a few more pages. At this rate, he'd just want to stay in bed. "Nishiki-Koji Dori is a produce market right in the center of town," he said, skimming the next write-up. "Fresh fish and all sorts. See where your sushi's coming from."

"Weren't you on the lookout for a sake set?" asked Aziraphale, thoughtfully.

"Yes," Crowley confirmed, snapping the book shut. "One too nice for you to break."

"I assure you it was an accident," Aziraphale said, rummaging in his suitcase.

Crowley watched him straighten and turn, clothes carelessly flung over one arm.

"I believe you," he sighed, getting up to join the angel. "At least now."

The produce market was as busy and vibrant as promised, although they'd missed the weekday morning rush by a couple of hours, which meant most of the choicest cuts of fish had gone (snapped up by the local restaurants' astute provisioners, Crowley realized). The pavements were slick with rain-gloss that shimmered attractively in the early afternoon sun. They bought postcards to send Pippa and Mandy, as well as to the Device-Pulsifer, Device-Pulsifer/Young, and Shadwell/Tracy households. Aziraphale pointed out that Raphael and Uriel didn't deserve postcards, having made a nuisance of themselves already via text-message by demanding photos every couple of hours.

The damp air carried a slight chill, so something hot was in order for lunch. "What's in yours, again?" asked Aziraphale, fishing through his *yakisoba*, inordinately pleased when his chopsticks turned up another tender slice of beef.

"Shrimp, scallops, and squid," said Crowley, chewing happily. Next to his plate on the glass-topped table, his flip-phone vibrated.

*Tell Aziraphale I want to see your lunch, too!* wrote Uriel.

*No*, Crowley texted back one-handed, winding noodles around his chopsticks.

*Why don't you just replace that dinosaur already?* she shot back. 
Because it's not broken, Crowley replied.

"Honestly," he said to Aziraphale. "Why do you indulge them? You've spent so much time taking photos you haven't seen a thing firsthand, not even your food."

"Real-time updates in lieu of postcards," said Aziraphale. "Fair is fair."

Come over to the dark side, pressed Uriel. You know you want an iPhone.

I want you to shut up, Crowley texted back, turning off his mobile just as Aziraphale snapped a picture of him mid-bite and sent it off to the guilty parties.

They decided that Kiyomizu Temple wasn't too ambitious a destination for the remainder of the afternoon, as they planned on taking a leisurely stroll through Gojo-zaka and Chawan-zaka on the way. They'd missed August's annual Gojo-zaka Festival, so browsing the pottery-district's shops would be the next best thing. Crowley flitted from shop to shop so quickly that Aziraphale couldn't keep up.

"How do you know what you're looking for?" Aziraphale asked, taking Crowley by the shoulder as he examined an arresting black and brown ash-glazed guinomi with a fascinating carved texture. "You're moving too fast. You might miss something."

"This is what I'm looking for," said Crowley, cradling the piece in his palm. "Isezaki Koichiro, son of the current Living National Treasure, Isezaki Jun."

Aziraphale picked up the piece that had been sitting next to it. "They're not precisely a matched set, my dear, are they?"

"He doesn't make sets as such," Crowley said. "The bottle's separate, too, see?"

Crowley took the second guinomi out of Aziraphale's hand and set it down beside its fellow and the bottle, studying the three pieces appraisingly. Aziraphale went to the till, and, after an exchange with the shopkeeper, grimly handed over his debit card.

"We'll tell Pippa it's an engagement gift," he sighed, "rather than reparations."

Crowley smiled and brought the items up to the obliging shopkeeper.

"That's right," he said sternly, folding his arms. "Call it what it is."

Aziraphale poised the BlackBerry to photograph his purchases being wrapped.

Crowley leaned into the frame at the last second, beaming in satisfaction.

Later, as they explored the temple complex, Crowley tugged Aziraphale into an alcove and stole an unhurried kiss.

After Mont St.-Michel, he reasoned, it was tradition.
The trouble was that there was simply *too much* to choose from.

"No more *fugu,*" Crowley warned over the top of his menu. "Don't you dare."

"It was on my bucket list," said Aziraphale, reassuringly. "The once will suffice."

"Speaking of which, you almost *kicked* it," Crowley muttered. "I fancy the red snapper, salmon, and fatty tuna sashimi. What about you?"

"It *was* delicious, poison be damned," said Aziraphale. "I'll never forget it."

Crowley set down his menu and stared at him rather a bit desperately.

"Can we please not talk about it?" he asked. "I'd like to stay hungry."

"It's over and done with," said Aziraphale, testily. "Your quick thinking won out."

Aziraphale plucked up one delicate slice and put it in his mouth.

*Far too soon for his liking, Crowley's eyes went wide and terrified.*

"*It's lovely,*" he began, swallowing. "Like nothing else you've ever tasted, dear boy. The texture is similar to yellowtail, I'll grant, but—" he paused to put another piece in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully "—it's odd. My tongue's gone numb. Then again, they say that's normal." He picked up three slices in one go and ate them with relish.

"Can you feel anything else?" asked Crowley. "Besides not feeling your tongue—"

Aziraphale reached for his glass of water, taking a swallow. His throat was tingling. He cleared it, noting Crowley's increased agitation. Did he want to try it after all? "Perfectly fine," said Aziraphale, finding his tongue uncooperative. "I'm still breathing."

Crowley rose from his chair and rounded the table, crouching at Aziraphale's side.

"*Listen to me,*" he said, voice low and urgent. "The chef made a mistake."

"What do you mean?" asked Aziraphale, but it came out more like "At ooh yoo een?"

"I could smell it, I should have told you, I shouldn't have let you—sodding hell, you stupid prat, why did you have to convince me there was no harm in letting you—"

Crowley's words were a blur, as was everything else.
Aziraphale couldn't breathe, and he couldn't speak anymore, either.

Crowley pressed one hand to Aziraphale's throat and the other to his stomach, muttering words that would make a memory-wipe of every other party in the restaurant mandatory. By then, everything was burning, including Crowley's hands.

Aziraphale clutched at them and blacked out.

"Aziraphale," pleaded Crowley, quietly, his voice full of anguish.

"You knew," Aziraphale said, his mind catching up. "You let me try it."

"You wouldn't have let me stop you!" said Crowley, bitterly. "And I thought, well, removing that kind of toxin from the system isn't terribly different from removing alcohol-poisoning levels of wine, which we've done loads of times, so I just..."

"Thank you," said Aziraphale, reaching across the table to take his hand.

Crowley let out a pained laugh, grasping Aziraphale's fingers so tightly it hurt.

"For what? Letting you try it, or saving your life?"

"Both, but—no, more than that," Aziraphale replied, slowly. His pulse raced. They both had perfect visual recall, but Crowley's had always been that much sharper, that much more cutting, and to think that Aziraphale had missed what had been staring him in the face all along, what he hadn't really got until he'd had too much to drink and taken a hard, honest look at the wainscot in the back room of his erstwhile bookshop.

"I don't follow," said Crowley, staring hard at the table. He'd folded both hands around Aziraphale's and drawn it up to his mouth, the menu forgotten. His breath skimmed Aziraphale's knuckles, heated and shallow. "You'll have to be a lot more specific."

"The way you looked at me," said Aziraphale, gently. "It was another three years before I managed to sort that out even subconsciously; can you even forgive..." They stared at each other dumbly, neither one of them daring to breathe.

At length, Crowley took a great, shuddering lungful and kissed Aziraphale's hand.

The young, perplexed waitress stepped up just then and asked if they were ready.

"Yes," said Crowley, fervently. "Six thousand times, yes."

* * *
They stood on the small wooden bridge and stared out over the water, entranced.

"Reds and oranges as far as the eye can see," Aziraphale murmured, peering into their reflection just as it was interrupted by the dorsal fins of several koi. "A world on fire."

"The *Rough Guide* wasn't lying, at least," said Crowley, at a loss.

"Neither was the internet," said Aziraphale, taking a photograph with his BlackBerry.

"Put that thing away," Crowley muttered. "Mine's been off since yesterday."

"Yes, and I've not heard the end of it from Uriel," Aziraphale replied.

Crowley curled his hand around Aziraphale's on the wooden railing, tracing a line with his thumb from the underside of Aziraphale's wrist up to the heart of his palm. "Mandy said I'd make a good father? Really? I'm not sure whether I ought to take it as a compliment or whether I ought to be sort of appalled. She *did* kiss me on the cheek."

"That's a perfectly reasonable place to kiss one's father," Aziraphale reassured him. "I think that chap who took you and Sophia for siblings had it much nearer the mark."

"Family," said Crowley, considering their twined fingers, "is a funny thing."

"Odd, isn't it," Aziraphale mused. "To think that we've got one."

Crowley looked up at him, removing his sunglasses, and saw to it that their eyes locked. Best to do it now while his defenses were down (*But haven't they always been?* he wondered) and everything carried with it the weight of their shared world.

"Marry me," Crowley said, turning to face him fully.

Aziraphale sucked in his breath, his hand tightening on Crowley's. "I wouldn't want you to do it simply because Pippa expects it. No authority Above or Below would recognize such a thing. And it's so little in comparison to the recognition I *could* have given you, I mean with respect to my superiors, if I'd only thought to name it in my terms when Adam asked—my dear, I've been *kicking* myself—"

"I don't care one whit," Crowley said vehemently, "for any authority other than those that recognize us *right here in the middle*, thank you *very* fucking much."

"I see," said Aziraphale, turning to face him in kind. "Oh, my love. I *do.*"
Outtake #4

Chapter Summary

Food, sake, sex, and conversation—maybe even in that order.

This has gone too quickly, thought Aziraphale, twisting the cap off the blue bottle.

The good news was, sake rarely required a corkscrew, as the Japanese were blessedly sensible when it came to ease of getting plastered. The bad news was, they were on bottle number four, and they'd planned on taking two of said bottles home. Oops.

"Nigori Rock Sake Cloud," read Crowley, somewhat fuzzily, reaching across the table to take the bottle out of Aziraphale's hand. He squinted at the fine print on the back of the label. "No way," he said. "This stuff's made in Oregon." He emptied the contents into their newly acquired tokkuri, set the bottle down on the floor. He proceeded to fill the darker of the two guinomi, which he passed back to Aziraphale, and then the paler one, which he kept for himself. "Cheers," he said, raising it. "Again. Or something."

Aziraphale tossed it back like a shot, savoring the sweet burn on his tongue. They'd never been much for the drier, lighter, filtered varieties, and he'd read a rather excellent review of this particular sake (in a Japanese magazine, no less, while Crowley had been busy photographing Minzoku Shiryokan from top to bottom with Aziraphale's BlackBerry; the endless stream of images had bored Raphael to tears).

He held the guinomi out for more, and Crowley complied, knocking both sets of chopsticks off the empty wooden platter between them. There was not much left on it except for eel-sauce stains, traces of wasabi, and a pitiful shred of pickled ginger.

"It's quite all right," said Aziraphale, sipping judiciously. "We've run out of toasts."

"And unagi," Crowley lamented, peeling the ginger off the platter. He stuck it in his mouth, chewing for a while with his eyes closed, and then downed his sake shot.

Aziraphale refilled his guinomi and reached to brush a tiny sliver of ginger off Crowley's lower lip. Crowley's tongue darted out, pink and unforked, missing Aziraphale's thumb. They were both reasonably tipsy, and the Hana suite was warm, except for when the breeze stole in through the half-open balcony door. It was their last night in Kyoto; neither one of them intended to waste it.

"Have you seen everything you wished to see, my dear?" Aziraphale asked.

Crowley refilled his guinomi, not quite frowning, and sipped.

"Never," he replied solemnly. "But that's not your fault. Bloody big world, eh?"

"We could travel for a while if you like," Aziraphale told him, collecting the scattered chopsticks and piling them back on the platter. He rose, carried the whole lot over to the door, and set it out in the
hall, guiltily hoping the staff would clear it. "Hop on to New Zealand from here, perhaps? Australia if you absolutely insist, however—"

"Not yet," said Crowley, and Aziraphale turned to find him standing with his arse planted against the edge of the table, tugging ineffectually at his collar. "It's too soon," he slurred, by way of clarification. "Pippa's still too hurt, and I sseem to recall you promised Mandy I'd cook for her and some Spanish blaggard from the kitchens who, by the way, had better speak English fluently, because I can't ssstand..."

Aziraphale patiently unbuttoned Crowley's shirt for him—the grey one he'd bought in Cambridge, understated and elegant—and proceeded to unfasten the trendy Pure Blue Japan jeans he'd bought at a denim boutique in Kansai. Crowley's head fell forward onto Aziraphale's shoulder as Aziraphale fondled him through his underthings.

"Too drunk for this," he muttered, and then sighed in defeat. "Fine."

Aziraphale kissed Crowley's neck and bit his earlobe, pushing jeans and pants both down around his hips. "That's quite easily solved," he said, and two-thirds of the alcohol they'd consumed vanished from their bloodstreams. "I've left just enough, what you might call a pleasant buzz. Although, if I've removed too much..."

He reached for Crowley's guinomi and drank some of what was left in it, and then held the remainder up to Crowley's lips. He drank obediently, tilting his chin up and opening his mouth to tease against Aziraphale's once the cup was safely set aside.

"If you break one of those, angel, so help me," he said, "I'll let you have fugu again any time you want it. Just you watch. I might even laugh at yo—oooh, that's not fair."

"Nobody's keeping track," Aziraphale reassured him, having impatiently got rid of their disarrayed clothing by less-than-traditional means. He knew Crowley wouldn't last long, not after that kind of tease; he was already leaking a warm trail across Aziraphale's belly, using the table for leverage to thrust up as they kissed. "Not anymore," he breathed directly in Crowley's ear, and the shudder that went through Crowley in response was nothing to the words that came tumbling out of his mouth.

"Where," he moaned, "is that godforsaken rope when you need it?"

"When I need it? Or when one needs it, generally speaking?"

Crowley hissed and twisted Aziraphale's wrists around demonstratively, pinning them at the small of Aziraphale's back. "Punishment," he explained. "For moving too fast."

"Under the pillows, I believe," said Aziraphale, helpfully. "Unless housekeeping's made off with it. I'd rather not find it necessary to have a word with the management."

Eased off the edge of the table, Crowley proved tense and wobbly on his feet, so Aziraphale led him over to the bed by both hands. It would have been entirely too easy to pin him down, to kiss and suck and stroke him to release. Aziraphale was content enough with lying side by side for several unhurried minutes, breathing each other in while Crowley's trembling subsided to a manageable level.

Aziraphale found the especially ticklish spot behind Crowley's right knee and stroked it, idly tolerating the exquisite frustration of not being touched. Crowley writhed and pressed flush up
against Aziraphale, his breath escaping in an expressive rush.

That'll do it, Aziraphale thought. That'll do it every damned time.

"What, then?" Crowley asked. "D'you want me to tie you up, or fuck you, or both?"

"The latter," said Aziraphale, a little bit breathlessly. "An experiment, if you like," he added, and it took some maneuvering, but he eventually got Crowley to sit propped up against a pile of pillows with the silk rope unspooled in his hands and in his lap.

Aziraphale knelt next to Crowley and kissed him until he relaxed, loose-limbed, into the pillows; repeating the cock-ring bind took ten seconds, but Aziraphale found it necessary to flick the loops away just as quickly, as Crowley had begun to shake again with the effort of not giving in. Aziraphale shifted to straddle Crowley's lap, his thigh-muscles protesting, and immediately understood how much control it took on Crowley's part to perform strenuous acts in this position even with his hands free.

"Ushiro te shibari," Crowley said uncertainly, steadying him. "Yes?"

Aziraphale obediently crossed his arms behind his back, leaning forward for a kiss.

The rope slithered from between them and insinuated itself in a series of dreadfully complex loops and twists around Aziraphale's wrists. Crowley hadn't even lifted a finger, except to take Aziraphale's face in both hands and kiss him more deeply.

Aziraphale didn't need to look over his shoulder to know that the knots Crowley had used weren't in the book they'd unceremoniously abandoned between the bed and the nightstand back at home. In fact, if they had been pulled any tighter, it would have been painfully obvious, in the most literal sense, that the rope's current configuration had originally been designed to cut off circulation (or, even worse, extremities).

"It's all I could remember in a pinch," said Crowley, gaze lowered, one hand already working its unsteady way down Aziraphale's chest. "I'd rather see it used for something like this than for torture," he said, his fingers abruptly going slick as he stroked Aziraphale. "I swear, it's hard to get the consistency of this stuff right, but I am not getting up to go dig around in your suitcase for that travel-size bottle."

Sucking in his breath at the sharp swell of pleasure, Aziraphale couldn't decide which Crowley wore more attractively: complete and total irony, or nothing at all.

"I believe what matters is that the knots hold," Aziraphale said, shifting his weight cautiously onto his knees as Crowley stroked himself with the hastily summoned lubricant. Even with one of Crowley's hands at his hip, the balancing act would remain precarious until he was...more firmly anchored. Perhaps if he manifested his wings—

"No, no you don't," Crowley said through gritted teeth, positioning himself.

"You could, too," Aziraphale replied, gratefully bearing down to meet him.

The burn of Crowley filling him was far better than any sake, and they both forgot about wings just as quickly as the subject had emerged. Crowley twisted under him with a groan, one arm wrapped tightly about Aziraphale's waist, the other planted firmly against the mattress for leverage. Aziraphale
was torn between kissing him and watching him; in the end, watching won out, and the play of expressions across Crowley's features was worth the minor inconvenience of not being able to touch him in kind. Aziraphale met every snap of Crowley's hips with a thrust of his own.

Crowley folded forward, lips parted on some silent plea against Aziraphale's throat.

Aziraphale buried his nose in Crowley's damp, disarrayed hair, breathing shallowly.

"My dear, if you can just—ah, if you can just hold that thought—"

Irrelevant. He was unraveling faster and harder than Crowley, although Crowley wasn't that far behind, gasping and swearing with wave after wave of it. "Ergh," said Crowley, finally, slumping back against the pillows. "Help."

As the rope fizzled and fell slack, Aziraphale managed to sprawl backwards on his arse between Crowley's parted thighs. He winced at the absolute wreck they'd made of the sheets. The staff would never know, and Aziraphale hoped, if they ever came back, that they wouldn't be saddled with the same bedclothes. He'd always know what they'd done to them, Crowley's perpetually clear conscience notwithstanding.

"Well, don't just sit there," murmured Crowley, hazy-eyed, reaching for him.

Aziraphale went willingly, kicking the rope aside. It would need repairing where Crowley had burned through it, or perhaps he'd just replace it when they returned to England. Crowley wrapped around Aziraphale with a strange, hitching little sigh buried in the crook of Aziraphale's neck. Aziraphale stroked Crowley's hair and rubbed his back, mapped every part of Crowley that he could reach. When he got like this...

"Crowley, please," he said. "I'm listening. Won't you just—"

"Why," said Crowley, his voice muffled, "did it have to take us so bloody long?"

Aziraphale sighed and drew Crowley's hand up to the pillow, kissing his palm.

"Because we are, as you once so astutely pointed out, thick as two short planks."

Crowley grimaced against Aziraphale's shoulder, but at least he wasn't brooding.

"Six thousand years, angel," he said. "That's quite a few rings in the proverbial tree."

"Just imagine how terrible it would have been if we'd been at all competent," Aziraphale replied, hoping that this particular past echo wasn't in bad taste. Judging by Crowley's sudden, uncontrollable fit of delighted laughter, it wasn't.
Beginnings

Chapter Summary

Pride, prejudice, cookery, and snogging abound.

"It's still blooming," Crowley said, abandoning his rolling carry-on in favor of opening the sliding glass door. Aziraphale hastily dropped his suitcase and followed him into the garden; Crowley stopped short in front of the Rosa rugosa, which trembled where it sprawled along the shed wall. "How is it still blooming? November's almost here."

"We're set to have a mild winter," Aziraphale reminded him. "It's still fairly warm."

Crowley crouched next to the flourishing roses, pale fingers turning the soil.

"That stubborn exposed root finally got the message," he said. "Good."

"Uriel's very persuasive," said Aziraphale, kneeling beside him. He reached to thumb one velvety petal, and it came away in his grasp. "Your field guide was right; these buggers spread quite quickly. You'll have to keep after them with the pruning shears."

"Don't tell me how to do my job," Crowley said irritably, but he was suppressing a half-smile. "D'you know," he mused, "that it just occurred to me..." He reached above the waist-high level of thorny branches and placed one palm against the shed, tilting his head just so. "How did you phrase it at the time—said it was very Roman of me?"

Before Aziraphale could respond, his coat pocket chimed and vibrated cheerfully.

"Anathema nattering on about a case?" Crowley asked, rising to his feet, and dusted off his hands. "No, wait, don't tell me. It's Pippa asking how the return flight was."

"Amanda Tomlin," said Aziraphale, reading off Mandy's official label in his Contacts folder as he opened her text message. "She hopes we've had a pleasant return journey, and she'd like to schedule coming over for a meal, as the holidays are coming on and she's not sure how much of next month she'll have off. Thoughts?"

"Bit forward of her, isn't it? I know you invited them and everything, but this place is a tip. And I haven't the faintest idea what to cook for them. He's Spanish, you said?"

"Er, what?" said Aziraphale, guiltily, already typing a response in which he'd begun to say Tuesday the next week ought to be fine. "Oh, you mean her young man. Yes."

Crowley frowned, stepping away from Aziraphale and the roses. He was looking for the ducks, Aziraphale realized, one hand shading his eyes against the bright sunset.

"Does Romeo have a name? I know you must have told me, but I've forgot."
"Iván," Aziraphale said, wincing a little as Crowley attempted a duck-call.

"Iván what? How am I supposed to know what part of the country he's from if I haven't got a surname to go on—aha, look! Here they come."

"I haven't the faintest idea," Aziraphale sighed, joining Crowley at the edge of the garden. All six of the ducklings had crowded around his feet, cheeping expectantly. They were bigger now, but still covered in fine, downy fuzz.

One of them tottered over to Aziraphale and tugged on the hem of his trousers, followed by two of its siblings.

"Sounds incredibly Basque," said Crowley, darkly, crouching to scratch their fluffy heads and let them nip at his wrists. "Bomb-happy rebels, the lot of them."

"Crowley, please remember your manners," Aziraphale sighed, bending to let the ducklings inspect his empty hands. "We can't know that, and anyway, I highly doubt he'd be working abroad in the EU if he harbored separatist sentiments."

"They're bloody hungry," Crowley said, scanning the rise and the scarcely visible stretch of beach beyond. "Where have Mum and Dad got off to?" he asked the smallest of the lot, which just tilted his head at him forlornly. "Look at that coloring starting to develop. They're all girls."

Aziraphale studied the overgrown patch of Danish scurvy-grass until something amiss caught his eye. He left Crowley to distribute some hastily miracled meal-worms and approached the tangle of greenery. There were feathers scattered amidst the leaves.

Feathers and splotches of blood that had dried so dark they seemed black.

"My dear, one hates to be the harbinger of bad news, but I think—"

"Foxes," Crowley said grimly, already cross-legged in the grass with the whole gaggle in his lap, still handing out worms. "Why they didn't take this lot, too? Hey, not so fast," he told the little one. "You'll end up with a belly-ache."

"I suspect it was a pair of them hunting together," Aziraphale said, scratching at some of the blood. "They got one parent each; the young ones managed to scatter and escape. It must have happened last night," he continued. "The poor things."

"There's nothing for it," Crowley said, brushing his hands off. "That's enough for now," he told the ducklings, glancing up at Aziraphale. "They'll have to stay in the shed."

"Not with those dangerous gardening implements, they won't," said Aziraphale.

"Fine. I'll clear it," Crowley replied, and snapped his fingers. "Satisfied?"

"I suppose," Aziraphale sighed. "As long as there's straw and heat-lamps."

"You'd better finish that text," Crowley told him, busy coaxing the ducklings out of his lap and in the direction of the shed (the door of which now stood invitingly open).

Aziraphale had silenced his phone, so Crowley hadn't heard Mandy's response arrive.
"Tuesday it is," he said, feeling only a vague wash of relief. "Plenty of time."

* * *

Late the next morning, Aziraphale was busy frowning at an attachment-laden email from Anathema when a teaspoon full of something that smelled suspiciously like Branston Pickle—but infinitely more tempting—insinuated itself beneath his nose.

"Try this," Crowley demanded, waving the spoon. "Have I got it right?"

"You've got taste-buds of your own, my dear," Aziraphale reminded him, but one look at Crowley's vexed expression was sufficient to prompt him to close the email and obediently open his mouth. The sweet-sour tang of malt vinegar gave way to apple-and-sultana sweetness with a hint of apricot; he detected chopped swede, carrot, gherkin, red onion, cauliflower, and beetroot in the flawlessly textured crunch of it. He caught a stray dollop of the stuff on his index finger and licked it away.

"I used russets instead of pippins," Crowley said. "It's probably too swee—mmm."

Aziraphale swiveled his chair around, fixing the angle at which he'd caught Crowley's mouth, which had been rather awkward. He heard the teaspoon slip from Crowley's grasp and land on the carpet with a soft thump. Crowley slid into Aziraphale's lap.

"Do you think so?" Aziraphale asked, breathing hotly against Crowley's cheek.

"Not really," Crowley said. "I just wanted to see what you'd do."

"I think," Aziraphale continued, "I'd like to feed you some of that myself."

Crowley shivered and squirmed invitingly. "I wouldn't be averse."

Just then, something squeaked and tugged on Aziraphale's trouser leg. Within ten seconds, it was several fluffy, restless somethings squeaking and tugging by turns.

"Crowley, you didn't," sighed Aziraphale, but the appeal was, admittedly, futile.

"I put some grapes in a bowl on the kitchen floor and piled some ratty towels for them to play in," Crowley said, sounding more baffled than annoyed. "They were perfectly content to just eat and chase each other about while I worked."

"And follow you if it suited them, no doubt," Aziraphale muttered.

"Game's up, kids," Crowley told the ducklings, shifting out of Aziraphale's lap with a wince. "Time to go back outside. Don't get too used to this, now."
Flustered, Aziraphale watched the three ducklings that had strayed into the study follow Crowley out at an obedient, wing-flapping dash. There really was nothing for it, he supposed. He got up and followed them to the kitchen, watched as Crowley herded all six out the front door, vanished for about ten minutes, and pointedly returned without them. By then, Aziraphale had managed to inspect the jars on the work-top and the pot on the hob. They'd have enough pickle to give three or four jars away.

"I'd like to give two of them to Pippa," Crowley said, rubbing the back of his neck. "One for Nicola and Trevor, one for Anathema and Newt, one for Sophia and Adam..."

"That'll leave us only one or two jars for ourselves," Aziraphale replied.

"I'll make more," Crowley said. "Granted, this dinner you've arranged for tomorrow—"

"You needn't overstretched," Aziraphale told him, watching as Crowley continued to spoon the mostly cooled batch into jars. "They're not expecting anything elaborate."

"Mandy probably is," said Crowley, wearily. "She tried everything I made for the wedding and then went and raved about it to everybody at work. Did you know the manager has asked me to give the staff some advanced cookery lessons?"

"No," Aziraphale said, startled. "What did you tell him?"

"I said I'd think about it," Crowley sighed. "He said he'd pay me."

Why hadn't I thought of that? Aziraphale wondered. Why hadn't he, for that matter?

He suppressed his excitement and shrugged. "If you fancy the diversion, I suppose."

"I fancy an afternoon with you and as little clothing as possible," Crowley said waspishly, licking some pickle off his wrist. "Not plotting a whole blessed menu."

Aziraphale caught him around the waist and wrested the latest jar out of his grasp.

"We've got all the makings of a proper English ploughman's lunch and high tea to hand. Much easier on you, and Iván will appreciate the cultural gesture, I'm sure."

Crowley turned his head and tilted it until Aziraphale's mouth brushed his cheekbone.

"The only gesture I'd appreciate," he said, "is you picking up right where you left off."

"Duly noted," Aziraphale whispered, kissing the faint blush he found there.

* * *
"Amanda, my dear girl," said Aziraphale, standing back as he opened the door. "How lovely to see you! And your young man, too, of course," he added.

Mandy launched herself at Aziraphale so fast it was a miracle he even caught her. "I'm so glad to see you," she mumbled into his neck. "That bastard sacked me last night."

Aziraphale appealed silently to Iván for help.

"Iván Sagarra," the lad offered, as if in apology, shaking Aziraphale's hand where it rested at the small of Mandy's back. He was brown-eyed, fair-skinned, and had bright ginger-blond hair. Most notably of all, he was half an inch taller than Mandy, who was a tall girl to begin with (she was almost exactly the same height as Crowley, on whom Aziraphale had perhaps a quarter of an inch and which most people tended never to notice).

"The manager," Iván clarified, releasing Aziraphale's hand. "They finally had a—hmmm, pues, how do you say it—a verbal altercation that could not be resolved."

"Your English is superb," Aziraphale told him, and genuinely meant it.

"Fuck him," Mandy said, disentangling herself from Aziraphale. "I don't want to work for an unethical bastard who cheats the new wait-staff out of hours anyway!"

"It's not the same manager, is it, as when we first arrived?" Aziraphale ventured.

"No," she said. "Ed retired about a year and a half ago. He was lovely."

"I regret not to have worked for him," said Iván, stroking Mandy's arm. There was tenderness in the gesture: an awed, delicate affection too fearful to be spoken.

"Do come in," Aziraphale said, gesturing for them to follow.

In the kitchen, they found Crowley fussing with four artfully arranged plates. He didn't turn from placing small pots of pickle at the center of each until he'd nudged the various wedges of cheese and apple back into place, frowning critically at his watch.

"Terminally early, you," Crowley told Mandy, wiping his hands off on the dish towel he'd set to one side. "I thought maybe this one—" he indicated Iván with a nod and a friendly, if restrained smile "—might cure you of it in this instance."

Try as he might, Aziraphale couldn't entirely shift his focus from the pile of tuckered-out ducklings sleeping soundly in a pile of towels in the farthest corner of the kitchen. He wondered if they'd be paddling in the bathtub for the rest of the winter.

"I'm afraid not," Mandy said, returning Crowley's chagrin with a tilted smile, but her eyes almost immediately followed Aziraphale's and went wide. "You didn't tell him what I said that morning when you and Pippa were in for breakfast, did you?"

"Nothing of the sort," Aziraphale sighed. "Foxes got the parents."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Iván told Crowley earnestly, although he stood transfixed and more than slightly terrified of the sharp, appraising yellow eyes. Aziraphale tactfully joined Mandy in staring at the snoozing youngsters.
"They're all girls," she said. "You guys really are outnumbered."

"We'd noticed," replied Aziraphale, and bent to arrange the towels more snugly.

"Have they got names?" Mandy asked, turning her head to listen in on what Crowley and Iván were saying. Her conspiratorial expression faded. "Aziraphale," she said slowly, "how is it that your husband can speak my boyfriend's obscure dialect?"

"No names, I fear," said Aziraphale. "You and your young man might have a crack at it, though, if you like. As for Crowley, well, I'm sure he's mentioned before that he spent some considerable time working in Spain and had reasonable cause to make sure he had Catalan and Basque as well as the majority—"

"You both speak excellent French," Mandy continued, lowering her voice. "I heard you translate for that lady in the café a few months ago, and Crowley just had to add his tuppence-worth, as if hearing just you hadn't been surprising enough..."

"French isn't surprising," said Aziraphale, reasonably. "It's sensible."

Mandy stared at him in curious, quiet wonder, and then the other shoe dropped.

"Do you guys work for MI6 or something?" she asked hesitantly.

"Should I ever have cause to tell you what I did for a living—or what Crowley did for a living, for that matter—I imagine we'd have lost the capacity to surprise each other, and I'd be quite sorry to see that happen. Let it suffice to say that our respective lines of work, which were parallel if not the same, required a great deal of linguistic agility."

"Yeah, but Medieval Latin? Biblical Greek? Oh, yeah, don't look so shocked. I talk to Sophia and the twins on Facebook. You guys are both secret super-geniuses."

Aziraphale glanced worriedly over his shoulder, but he needn't have been anxious.

Crowley was mincing something on the cutting board, in the middle of an explanation that sounded dreadfully archaic in Basque, but which was actually his favored method of preparing watercress sandwiches. Iván watched intently, interjecting every now and again with an eager question. The next thing Crowley said made him laugh.

"I don't know about that," Aziraphale said, watching Mandy cuddle the smallest duckling, which had begun to stir. "We're awfully ordinary in spite of all the rest."

"Not a chance," said Mandy, grinning. "This one's Judith. How's that for a start?"

"Your young man's surname means apple, dear girl. That's how everything starts."
Happy Accident

Chapter Summary

Just because you don't mean it at first doesn't mean you won't eventually.

Paris, Brumaire 1793

The first time Crowley said it, it came easy, because that's what Aziraphale was.

The streets were peaceful, scarcely a patch on what was to come. The truth was, neither one of them knew what had got the populace in a tizzy; suffice it to say that they'd run into each other completely by accident, their respective superiors having handed orders—up and down—for each of them to investigate the unrest.

“It's not the first time America will set a bad example, mark my words,” said Crowley, earning a perplexed look from the shy young man who had just served their wine. The lad clearly didn't speak English, which was an excellent reason for them to be speaking it. “Your people ought not to have incited that little rebellion,” he added, taking a sip of the Chardonnay. “It'll have dreadful knock-on effects. By the way, it's still October, isn't it? I haven't got the hang of this new calendar.”

“It's a bit late for hindsight, isn't it?” asked Aziraphale, sniffing the contents of his glass. “You're absolutely sure this stuff is up to standard? I do so prefer a nice, full-bodied red. And, yes, it's still October. The twenty-third, to be exact.”

“I mean, did you really want to ensure that they'll be pushing around the rest of the world for the foreseeable future? Revolt shouldn't have worked; all the odds were stacked against them, and they knew that. Now, quite frankly, they seem think they're Go—well. Better than everybody else.”

“Britain would do well to mind its own affairs. It's grown stretched, one feels.”

“And that's why your people put a bee in the Colonists' bonnet, is it?” Crowley asked, snatching a brioche from the basket between them on the table. “To unburden England of some ballast? Free up some resources for empire-building elsewhere?”

“Those people are better off on their own,” said Aziraphale, evasively. He passed Crowley the tiny pot of butter, having finished using it on his own pastry. “I thought we were here to, er, catch up, as it were. How have you been?”

Crowley shrugged and made busy with the butter, using too much in the process.

“Same old, same old. I thought it might be smart to steer clear of Spain for a while. Italy wasn't any fun after Signor da Vinci and all that lot returned to dust, so...I went East for a while, and I've been working my way back ever since. Listen, they've got this thing in Japan you're going to love—”

“If you're trying to tempt me,” Aziraphale sniffed, “it won't work. I spent a bit of time there in the—oh, what was it, seventh century?—and didn't find much to crow about.”
“Pity,” said Crowley, grinning. “If you'd only stayed on up through the eighth.”

Aziraphale nodded kindly to the young man as he brought out their parsnip soup.

“What happened, then?” he asked, blowing on a steaming spoonful.

“A Southeast Asian specialty was introduced,” said Crowley, already on his third scalding mouthful (being able to withstand such temperatures had distinct advantages). “I hadn't really had cause to eat raw fish for quite some time, so I was a bit sceptical, but they did this brilliant thing with rice and mirin, and then—”

“Crowley, please,” sighed Aziraphale, stirring his soup. “I'm trying to eat.”

“Trust me on this one, angel,” Crowley said, leaning forward on the table with a suggestive smirk. “You'll like it. It's even better than chocolate.”

Aziraphale's look of discomfort might not have been so bad if the young man hadn't chosen that precise moment to bring out their main courses. He stared from Crowley to Aziraphale and then back again, shoving both plates onto the edge of the table with a muttered Désolé! before fleeing back to the kitchen.

“There's no need for sarcasm,” Aziraphale said, pulling the dish of coq au vin over to rest neatly beside his unfinished soup. “You needn't rub in what you think of my sort.”

Crowley pushed his green-tinted spectacles up into his hair and blinked pointedly.

“I wasn't being sarcastic,” he said. “I was trying to convince you.”

“Call it whatever you like, you old serpent, but it's all temptation in the end. Nothing personal, I assure you. Our arrangement has complicated things, wouldn't you say?”

Complicated? thought Crowley, staring down at his poached sole, which didn't look so appetizing anymore. Bolloked things up, I would have said, but never mind.

“It's more that you didn't like what I called you,” he said. “Am I right?”

Aziraphale paused mid-chew, thoughtfully regarding Crowley.

“Not as such, no,” he admitted at length. “As long as you weren't having a go...”

“When I'm having a go, you'll know it,” he said, picking up his fish fork, “angel.”

**Bombay, July 1901**

The first time Aziraphale said it, it surprised him as much as it did Crowley.

He dashed onto the verandah just in time to escape the oncoming downpour, which was the third such instance of inclement weather since sun-up, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. He brushed
perfunctorily at his suit, hoping he'd got the scattering of droplets before they managed to sink in.

At the table next to the café entrance, a familiar figure cleared its throat.

“You run later and later by the decade,” Crowley chided. “It's high time I invested in some transportation, don't you think? That way, I can collect you on time, and you can have your door-to-door service. What do you say?”

“How often have we been in the same city for long enough, let alone the same country?” asked Aziraphale, sliding into the chair next to Crowley with as much dignity as he could muster. The humidity had caused his hair to wave rather appallingly. He ran a frustrated hand through it, and the result was annoyingly charming.

“Here, don't do that,” said Crowley, batting Aziraphale's hand away. “Let me fix—”

“It's fine,” Aziraphale insisted, scooting back so that Crowley's fingers combed at the damp, heavy air. “Besides, your sense of style is, I often find, markedly lacking.”

“You'll be wearing that suit twenty years from now, won't you?” Crowley lamented.

“Of course,” said Aziraphale, accepting a cup of hot *chai* from the lovely young woman who had approached their table with a tray. “If I manage to keep it in good nick.”

“More's the pity,” Crowley sighed, sipping the spiced, milky tea with relish. “You'll never get the proper vintage look if you don't allow for a little bit of wear and tear.”

Aziraphale ignored Crowley's mystifying statement and regarded the street, which was by now flowing with six inches of water. Children had come out to play in the rain.

“Monsoon season. You couldn't have decided to be sociable during a drought?”

Crowley shrugged, cradling his cup in both hands as he watched the children.

“You have to admit it's got atmosphere. Loads of character. Excellent curries.”

“We'll be stuck here till dinner as it is,” Aziraphale replied. “Is the food passable?”

“A bit rustic, but yeah, it'll do,” said Crowley, smiling. “Try the lamb pathia.”

Just then, Aziraphale remembered something. Guiltily, he averted his eyes.

“You were quite right about the raw-fish thing. It was...”

“You tried sushi?” asked Crowley, his smile blossoming into a grin.

As far as Aziraphale could tell, his expression was genuine.

“...it was, as humans say without a touch of irony, *divine*.”

“Sushi restaurants will never catch on Up There,” Crowley said.

“Nor Down Below, I should think,” Aziraphale sniffed. “Wouldn't stay raw for long.”
“Yeah, and you'd be contending with ice crystals. Condensation. Cloud-bits.”

“That,” Aziraphale said, “must be sarcasm. My dear, come off it.”

Strangely enough, Crowley did. He sat back in his chair, pursing his lips against his cup. Steam from the *chai* fogged his dark glasses, which would've been comical if not for the fact that Crowley had clearly taken issue with something Aziraphale had sai—

Oh.

“It's common parlance these days,” said Aziraphale, trying for nonchalance (and failing appallingly). “Quite fashionable, even. If I can't maintain your particular standard of personal appearance,” Aziraphale forged on, “then I'll try for speech and carriage.”

Crowley relaxed in his chair, apparently satisfied, but he was quiet for a long while.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Aziraphale murmured eventually, signaling for more *chai*.

“I've missed the rain,” said Crowley, hesitantly. “And you.”

* * *

**Paris, October 2006**

“It was around here somewhere,” Crowley insisted. “*I know* it was.”

“We haven't tried to find it for two hundred and thirteen years,” said Aziraphale, scanning the busy street. They were in the heart of the Marais, surrounded by harried students and star-struck tourists. He seemed anxious to move on, as Crowley knew he preferred the quaint art galleries and antiquarian bookshops surrounding Île de la Cité.

“Some establishments manage to remain what they've always been, even if not under the same ownership,” said Crowley, hopefully. “You know, like that restaurant in Salzburg that's been an eatery in one form or another since 803.”

“Your ability to keep track of these things,” said Aziraphale, “genuinely baffles me.”

“It's not my fault you don't bother to pay attention,” Crowley replied, taking hold of Aziraphale's arm. “Look! Over the road. *Crêpes* and other good, proper northern fare.”

“It's rustic, certainly,” said Aziraphale, leaning into him. “Shall we give it a try?”

“They'll have sweet ones as well as savory,” Crowley said, pressing closer. “Sugar and butter.
Honey and myrtilles. Nutella with real Chantilly cream...”

“You,” Aziraphale told him, allowing their mouths to brush, “are positively wicked.”

Half an hour later, they were tucking into what was really a very nice meal, although Aziraphale seemed somewhat on-edge in spite of the fact they’d already consumed several pint-size bottles of Breton and Norman cider each.

Perhaps it reminded him of all that tedious business with Bishop Aubert.

“We ought to head for the coast,” said Crowley. “It’s a lovely drive this time of year. Honfleur, Deauville, Cap Blanc-Nez. You can see home on a clear day.”

Aziraphale made a noncommittal sound, working on his sugar-and-butter crêpe.

Crowley tapped his chin. Clearly, he’d have to try a lot harder now that Aziraphale indulged him in most things from leisurely lie-ins to reading in the afternoon sun while Crowley bullied the garden. And such miraculous indulgences they were...

“Shouldn’t repairs on Amiens Cathedral should be finished by now?” he ventured.

Unexpectedly, Aziraphale reached across the table and took his hand.

“If it's all the same to you, my dear, I'd much prefer the south.”

Crowley took another swallow of cider and laced their fingers together.

“Bordeaux it is,” he said, feeling shivery and content all at once.

Mumbai, July 2012

“It's...clean,” Crowley said, staring at the upper floors of the building as they mounted the stairs onto the verandah. “Far less crumbling and cozy than I remember.”

“They've done a great deal of restoration in the past century,” Aziraphale replied, noting that the table they’d once occupied next to the door had been replaced by a set of elegant wrought-iron chairs. “I knew I oughtn't to have let us watch that film.”

“I liked that film,” said Crowley, a touch defensively. “How often can you say I manage to stay there till the end, never mind your inane chatter, eh?”

“Rather sad for your tastes, I thought,” Aziraphale said, holding the door for him.

“If you think I'm comparing this place to the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel,” Crowley sighed, reaching back to prop it open, “then you've got another thing coming.”

“I'll look forward to it,” said Aziraphale, stepping up to the concierge with a warm smile. “We have a reservation from today up through the fourteenth. Name of Fell.”
“Absolutely, sir,” said the handsome middle-aged woman, her dark eyes gleaming mischievously.
“Before you opened your mouth, I was about to wish you a happy Fourth of July. I can see now that
would have been in poor taste.”

“Told you so,” Crowley muttered under his breath. “Bloody Yanks.”

Aziraphale slid an arm around Crowley's waist while the concierge retrieved their information on
their computer, giving his hip a sharp, affectionate tap. As reprimands went, it wasn't Aziraphale's
most effective. He'd much rather keep Crowley in high spirits, especially if he had another thing
coming, to which he did so look forward.

Crowley turned and pressed closer, resting his chin on Aziraphale's shoulder.

“It's not raining, angel,” he said. “That’s something, isn't it?”

Aziraphale smiled at the concierge and thanked her for the room keys.

“Yes, my dear,” he said, steering Crowley toward the lift. “It is.”
Sometimes *carpe diem* doesn't begin to cover it.

“How's that?” Crowley asked, angling the desk-lamp. “Less grainy, more grainy? Kind of crap, but nonetheless acceptable?”

“Muddled,” Aziraphale confessed. “Not as sharp as it should be.”

Crowley fiddled with the webcam's focus next, studying his own image on the screen where it hovered next to Aziraphale's feed. Briefly, he experienced an unpleasant flashback to his ash-smudged reflection in the Bentley's rear-view mirror.

*That's behind you now,* Crowley told himself, *might as well be forever ago,* smiling apologetically at Aziraphale.

He minimized his feed to the task-bar and ventured, “Better?”


“No, nothing of the sort,” Crowley reassured him, adjusting the volume so that Aziraphale's voice came through the speakers as more than a faint murmur. “The phone hasn't rung since you left.”

“You haven't got the land-line unplugged, have you?”

“No, angel. And my mobile's right here, see?”

Aziraphale squinted and adjusted the feed on his end, resulting in a moment of comically blurred features. “You got bored and went shopping,” he said. “Which model is that?”

“It's an iPhone 4S,” Crowley muttered, tapping through screens till he'd got out of iTunes, and deleted a few errant texts from Anathema (she seemed to be under the erroneous impression that his brainstorming abilities were a suitable substitute for Aziraphale's). “Sixty-four gigs. Doesn't come close to holding my entire music library, but that's a start. I won't touch the 5.”

“Nothing’s been quite the same since Jobs passed, or so I'm told,” Aziraphale said.

“Your lot must have got him,” Crowley mused, setting the phone aside with care on top of Aziraphale's *sudoku* books. “I bet he was in for a nasty surprise when Gabriel unveiled his plans for a network overhaul. Enough to make him wish he'd been less virtuous.”

“I don't know about him, but we'll certainly get Gates,” Aziraphale replied.

“Charitable giving is all well and good, but does it make up for Windows Vista?”

“Come now, my dear. I'd say he more than redeemed himself with XP, 7, and 8.”
“For what it's worth, you're still running XP,” Crowley said, quickly nosing into Aziraphale's My Computer folder. “Conveniently forgot to upgrade this time, did you?”

“What about your philosophy of not fixing something if it isn't broken?”


“Where's your MacBook got off to, then? More battery woes, one fears.”

“Charging in the bedroom. Don't look at me like that!”

Aziraphale smirked at him, teasingly affectionate.

There it was, a sharp twist in the gut: Crowley missed him.

"Where are your kind hosts tonight?” he asked.


“You probably would've enjoyed the cocktails,” Crowley replied. “Why didn't you go?”

“They'd left the desktop booted up, Skype and all. You were logged in, so I thought—”

“For the record, I was playing Minesweeper and contemplating a de-frag. You've accrued so much spyware it isn't even funny. How's Apple sounding to you now, eh?”

“I'd rather spend time with you than while away another night drinking.”

“Ah,” Crowley said, lowering his eyes. “Out for the evening, you say?”

“I wouldn't expect them till dawn,” said Aziraphale, encouragingly.

Crowley rose and drew the curtains, and then sat back down again.

“What time is it over there now? I'm fuzzy on how many hours behind you are.”

“It's just turning nine o'clock. What time is it at home? I'm not entirely clear, either.”

“Almost five in the morning,” Crowley said, idly tugging off his socks.

“Good gracious,” said Aziraphale. “Why aren't you asleep?”

“Couldn't,” Crowley replied, shrugging. “So I came out here.”

“Poor love. Seems to me you could use a little wearing out.”

Crowley felt his cheeks heat, but he couldn't help grinning. He hadn't miscalculated his offhand remark upon how long Aziraphale's hosts planned to stay out. However mystifying he'd found it initially, he'd finally got the seduction game down pat—at least where Aziraphale was concerned, and, quite frankly, that was the only place it mattered.
“There's a first time for everything,” he said, untying the belt of Aziraphale's dressing-gown. He'd thrown it on over his pajamas, because the cottage was rather chilly in the early morning hours this time of year. Aziraphale watched intently as he shrugged it off his shoulders and plucked at his t-shirt. “Although I don't know if skipping the phone and going straight for cyber-sex is advisable.”

“Would you rather we logged off? I could just ring you,” Aziraphale suggested, his voice somewhat muffled, as he was already struggling out of his slipover jumper. For a moment, Crowley found the style-choice baffling given that Aziraphale was currently in a warmer part of the world, but he supposed cold wind and rain weren't unusual even there during winter. “That way,” the angel continued, “you could just nip off back to bed and get comfortable.”

“No, that's all right,” Crowley heard himself saying as he watched Aziraphale discard the slipover somewhere off-camera. He'd scooted the chair he was occupying back just far enough from the desk to give Crowley a decent view from his lap upward, and Crowley supposed he'd better do the same if they expected this to work. He pushed back what he hoped was a reasonable distance, not too far for visibility's sake, and took off his t-shirt. He dropped it on the floor, blinked, and brushed the hair out of his eyes.

Aziraphale had paused in the middle of unbuttoning his shirt to watch.

“Makes multi-tasking a bit difficult, doesn't it, having to watch the screen in addition to stripping off?” he asked, proceeding with the buttons without looking down. “Move a bit closer.”

Crowley scooted his chair forward a fraction, suddenly self-conscious.

“Can you still see...er, well, down below?” he asked, hooking one thumb beneath the waistband of his pajama bottoms, and then thought better of it. He unbuttoned the flies instead, but let the dark flannel stay where it was, stroking himself once through the fabric. His nerve-endings sparked as his eyes drifted up to the screen; Aziraphale, newly shirtless, was watching his every move.

“Yes. And you're every bit as much the prick-tease I'd expected.”

“What does that mean?” Crowley asked, leaning forward in his chair to jab a finger at the webcam. “Eight years of sharing my bed and, I don't know, you'd somehow failed to notice?”

Aziraphale sighed and casually reached down to unzip his trousers, which were...ah. Already visibly strained, and there was the tell-tale flush from chest to belly, too. Crowley's mouth went slightly dry; even as worn and yielding as they were, his pajama bottoms suddenly seemed far too restrictive.

_I'd be in his lap by now_, Crowley thought, brushing the unfastened flap aside in order to give Aziraphale some idea of just how much he was beginning to appreciate this.

“It means you're every bit as much a tease as I'd expect you to be in this particular medium,” Aziraphale clarified, his voice satisfyingly hoarse. “Simply put, you don't disappoint. Of course, you'd be in my lap by now—”

Crowley let out a breathy laugh and stroked himself so Aziraphale could see he hadn't bothered with the usual shorts under his pajamas, dimly aware that his left hand had the arm of the chair in a vise-grip.

“That's a relief, then,” he said, “because I really, ah, really wouldn't want to waste your...”
He lost the thread of what he'd been saying, not least because he couldn't drag his eyes away from Aziraphale simultaneously trying to watch him and shimmy out of his trousers. Just over five thousand miles away, someone else's desk-chair was squeaking and doing its best to scoot out from under Aziraphale's arse while he got undressed. It was funnier than it ought to have been.

“Why don't you try it, Crowley, since you're so keen?” said Aziraphale, huffily, situating himself back in the chair wearing nothing but sedately striped cotton boxers and a pair of argyle socks. He didn't do simultaneously-turned-on-and-irritated terribly well.

Still, Crowley found the entire situation just as hot as it was ridiculous.

“Shortcut,” said Crowley, standing to get rid of his pajama bottoms. “Much easier,” he explained, knowing that everything above his waist was now cut out of the feed, “and you get a bit of a close-up while I'm at it.” He dropped the garment and paused for a moment, steadying himself with one hand on the edge of the desk. Aziraphale was staring glassy-eyed at...well, at whatever he could see, and Crowley didn't doubt that was mostly everything between his thighs and his bellybutton. He palmed the head of his cock and hissed at the contact; he was already hypersensitive, his body eagerly expecting any number of the things that usually came next.

Only none of those things were going to happen, given Aziraphale's physical absence.

“Sit down, please,” said Aziraphale, breathlessly. “I can't see your face.”

Crowley took one shaky step backward and did exactly as he was told. The lacquered wood felt strange under his backside, and while he hoped there weren't any splinters ripe for catching, he also found that he didn't particularly care. What mattered most was the fact that Aziraphale had taken off his socks and was lifting his hips just enough to make getting rid of his shorts easier. Seeing Aziraphale stark naked on a computer screen was...strange. The thought that he was sitting in a house that belonged to a pair of the most shameless voyeurs either of them knew made the situation ten times worse—and, somehow, that much more compelling.

“Can you see me now?” he asked once the angel had got situated.

“Yes,” Aziraphale sighed, both hands restless on his thighs, but the dithering gesture didn't last for long. Eyes fixed on the camera, he curled his left hand around his erection, by now in the same desperate condition as Crowley. His eyes slid shut at the touch, and while it would have been easy to tell him not to do that, to focus, Crowley bit his lip and mirrored the action on himself.

“You'd better wish it was me,” he said, voice faltering as he stroked. “I wish this was you.”

Aziraphale's eyes flew open; it had been the right thing to say, but at absolutely the wrong time. Crowley watched, dumb-struck with fierce fascination and even fiercer desire, as Aziraphale leaned forward to brace himself against the desk and, with a few more unsteady thrusts into his fist, come with a sharp, silent gasp. His own pace faltered a little even as he felt his own climax gathering; the urge to reach out was even stronger than the urge to watch, but what could he have touched except for dense, pixel-lit glass?

What he ached for was a kiss—

He came with one palm braced flat against the monitor and his eyes shut tight.
The white noise cleared eventually, giving way to Aziraphale's voice.

“...at me, my dear,” he was saying gently. “Look at me.”

Crowley swallowed thickly and opened his eyes, letting his hand drop to the desk.

“I don't know about you,” said Aziraphale, already mopping at himself with a handful of tissues, “but I could really use a cigarette.”

“Only if you don't mind this place smelling like smoke when you get back,” Crowley replied, leaning bonelessly forward to rest on his elbows. “Five more days. Can't you leave early?”

“You could've tagged along,” Aziraphale reminded him. “The invitation was open.”

“I know,” Crowley said, clearing the mess he'd left on the chair and on the floor with one distracted thought. “But someone had to stay behind this time. Just in case.”

“Give them all my best,” Aziraphale replied. “I hope Anathema hasn't pestered you horribly.”

“Just a touch,” Crowley said with a wry, tired grin. “Newt's blown something up. First time that's happened in ages, of course, so it's understandably given her a fright.”

“Sleep for a while, my love,” Aziraphale said. “I'll be back before you know it.”

“Three or four days ought to suffice,” said Crowley, yawning. “Don't mind if I do.”
And Pardon'd the Deceiver

Chapter Summary

There's doing it wrong, and there's doing it together.

The suggestion was innocuous enough, in much the same way that nearly everything else Aziraphale said or did was seemingly innocuous. Of course, one had to keep in mind that seemingly was the operative word.

Crowley grudgingly had to admit that love resulted in selective amnesia. He tended to toss it in the same bucket of failings occupied by his fondness for small intelligent animals, well-mannered children, and terrestrial life-forms in general.

“Why don't you come along, my dear?” asked Aziraphale, adjusting his scarf. “Auditioners appreciate an audience, especially when they've got nobody along for moral support.”

“You're asking me?” Crowley remarked, idly flipping channels. He'd heard there was a River Monsters marathon on BBC Two, although he hoped the one about piranhas wasn't on the docket. He curled into the corner of the sofa, wrapping himself more snugly in the quilt he'd dragged out of the closet. It had been a recent gift from Madame Tracy, and while her handiwork left something to be desired, none of the fabric was synthetic, and it was the thought that counted.

Aziraphale wandered into his field of vision, blocking the telly, and bent to kiss him on the forehead. He muttered and tried to squirm away, but only half-heartedly. The end result was Aziraphale sitting down with a huffy sigh and Crowley sprawling across his lap.

“I've got to be there in twenty minutes,” Aziraphale reminded him, ruffling Crowley's hair. “I'd like to watch the others before going myself. Just to see what I'm up against, you understand.”

Crowley rolled over onto his back, one cheek smashed against Aziraphale's belly.

“Then you'd better start walking, eh?” he said with a yawn, cozy enough to sleep.

“I can leave fifteen minutes later than I'd planned if you drive me,” Aziraphale replied, idly trailing his left hand from where it had rested on Crowley's hip down to the folds of quilt bunched between Crowley's legs. “And if you stay to watch, we'll get home all the quicker afterward.”

Hissing, Crowley twisted into the touch with an involuntary jerk of his hips. “Unconscionable,” he murmured, rucking up Aziraphale's jumper to mouth at soft skin. “Preying on unsuspecting souls who've just settled in for some mindless nature programs...”

He got Aziraphale to the theatre five minutes late, smug and somewhat short of breath.

“Won't you stay?” Aziraphale asked, opening the passenger-side door. “It'll be more interesting than four hours of Jeremy Wade. Besides, you've seen every single episode in existence.” Crowley tapped the steering wheel and guiltily chewed his lower lip.
“Dammit,” he said, jamming the Bentley into park. “All right.”

A dozy, kind old lady whom Crowley didn't recognize handed them both thick, stapled packets of A4 paper on their way through the door. He flipped through the pages, lagging a bit behind Aziraphale as they made their way down the stage-right aisle.

The place was dusty and smelled of floor wax, most lights dimmed except for those directly over the proscenium. The building had seen better days, or so the neighbors said, having once been a run-down local cinema.

“Whose idea was it to stage The Tempest in March?” Crowley asked nobody in particular. “And who runs auditions and starts rehearsing two weeks before Christmas, anyway?”

“Someone rather intelligent, that's who,” said Aziraphale, hustling him down the fifth row back and pushing him into a squeaky, uncomfortable seat. “Now, shhh. They're starting.”

The young woman on the stage gave a stammering introduction to the director, the back of whose head Crowley could see perfectly from where he sat. Her hair was salt-and-pepper black, coarse, and wavy; he could discern from her hands on he clipboard that she was past middle age, but nowhere near as ancient as the woman volunteering out front.

The youth reading Ferdinand opposite the girl's terrified Miranda introduced himself far too softly.

“Speak up, lad,” said the director in a thick Sheffield accent. “I don't bite.”

This ought to be worth the price of admission, Crowley thought, chin in hand.

Aziraphale stroked Crowley’s arm, watching as the pair began to read (badly).

Annoyingly enough, the proceedings were amusing to watch. The couple who'd gone first didn't stand a chance, especially not against the blonde Belfast girl and a young dark-skinned man whose unexpected stage presence had the director riveted.

The usual rogues' gallery of local has-beens had also turned out. Crowley, lightly dozing on Aziraphale's shoulder by the thick of it, was sure they'd populate the more ridiculous and doddering roles on offer with suitable aplomb.

They were down to the third-to-last hopeful when Aziraphale shook him awake.

“I'm, er, up in two,” he said apologetically, and gave Crowley a worried grin.

Crowley sat up straight, rubbed his eyes, and abruptly realized—

“Glasses,” he whispered, rising, and made for the opposite aisle. “Shit.”

Aziraphale followed him as far as the back of the theatre, tugging on his sleeve.

“Nobody's paying any attention,” he said, desperately clutching Crowley's hand. “I know there are out-of-towners, but none of them have given us a second glance. I wouldn't worry—”

“Right here,” Crowley said, shaking him off, and folded his arms. “No further.”

Aziraphale sighed and nodded, shrugging out of his coat. He handed it to Crowley, draped his scarf
around Crowley's neck, and agitatedly shuffled the hodgepodge script of scene selections.

“What will you read?” Crowley asked, shifting Aziraphale's coat to the crook of his arm.

“The exchange beginning with Ariel's entrance,” Aziraphale replied, running a visibly frazzled hand through his fly-away hair. “I suspect the director will have to read opposite my Prospero.”


“Are you and your fellow quite finished back there, Mr. Fell?” called the director. She was standing directly down the aisle from them, hands on broad hips, and Crowley could see her face clearly for the first time. She had enviable, striking features framed by wavy, black chin-length hair. Her eyes were lighter than he would have expected, warm hazel-green behind her reading glasses. She smiled at them.

“Ah, er, yes,” Aziraphale said, advancing a few steps in her direction. “I thought we had Miss Weston still to go? Is she not reading for Caliban and one of the nymphs?”

“I let her go early,” said the director. “Lost her voice, the poor thing. She can read for me over the weekend. You were too busy fussing over...” Her steps slowed as she approached Aziraphale, and she walked straight past him, quick eyes fixed suddenly on Crowley. “I don't believe we've met.”

Crowley turned his head to one side and lowered his glance, re-folding Aziraphale's coat.

“We won't have done,” he said dismissively. “I haven't volunteered with the company.”

“Rani, dear girl,” Aziraphale began, “if you insist on badgering him—”

“Look at me,” she said, arms folded, her voice luminous with curiosity.

Crowley sighed and faced forward, chin tucked low, and met her gaze.


Rani reached with her gold-ringed right hand and lifted his chin, smiling kindly.

“It's a pleasure to meet you,” she told him. “Now, get up there and read with your man.”

“Right,” Crowley muttered, draping Aziraphale's coat across the nearest seat.

Aziraphale was already onstage, clutching the script with a hint of nervousness.

Rani followed Crowley down to the front and put a script in his hand, resuming her seat while he climbed the stage-right stairs and realized belatedly that Aziraphale's scarf was still around his neck.

“It's just us,” Rani told them, and Crowley shaded his eyes to squint down at her under the lights' hot glare. “Well, us and Letitia out there on the door.” On Rani's tongue, the conspiratorially repeated word emerged sounding more like oohz: northern, clipped, and intimate. “Right, then! Who's reading what?”

“Prospero, if you don't mind,” said Aziraphale, over-assertively.
“That leaves me with Ariel,” Crowley said. “For the record, I'm not trying out.”

“Maybe not,” replied Rani, winking at him. “But you're reading.”

“Come away, my servant, come; I am ready now,” Aziraphale cut in.

Crowley gaped at him for a moment and then blinked at the script.

“Um,” he said, frantically flipping pages. “Just a minute—”

“Approach, my Ariel. Come.”

“All hail, great master!” said Crowley, irritably, more or less from memory, “Grave sir, hail! I come to answer thy best pleasure, be 't to fly—” he paused, folding back the few remaining pages, and caught up “—to swim, to dive into the fire—” he made a face, because, just, no, his days of doing that were long over “—to ride on the curl'd clouds. To do thy strong bidding, task Ariel and all his quality.”

Down in the front row, Rani made a startled, thoughtful sound.

Aziraphale gave him an unsettled, piercing look, more honest than acted.

“Hast thou, spirit, perform'd to point the tempest that I bade thee?”

Crowley shut his eyes for a few seconds and stood his ground. His next reply was something of a speech, consisting of ten or twelve lines at least, and subservience would not suit.

“To every article,” Crowley snapped, launching into a veritable laundry-list of retorts. “I boarded the king's ship; now on the deck, now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin, I flam'd amazement.” He ignored Rani's sudden snort of laughter and ploughed on. “Sometime I'd divide, and burn in many places—on the topmast, the yards and bowsprit would I flame distinctly, then meet and join. Jove's lightnings, the precursors o' the dreadful thunder-claps, more momentary and sight-outrunning were not; the fire and cracks of sulphurous roaring the most mighty Neptune seem to besiege, and make his bold waves tremble—yea, his dread trident shake.”

“Pick it up,” said Rani, encouragingly. “You can go even faster than that.”

“My brave spirit!” Aziraphale exclaimed, drawing nearer, “Who was so firm, so constant, that this coil would not infect his reason?” The taunt was sly, yet oddly appealing.

“Not a soul but felt the fever of the mad,” replied Crowley, crossing downstage, “and play'd some tricks of desperation. All but mariners plung'd in the foaming brine and quit the vessel, then all afire with me. The King's son, Ferdinand, with hair up-staring—then like reeds, not hair!—was the first man that leap'd, cried, Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.”

He stopped, short of breath, and crossed back to Aziraphale with hesitant steps.

“Why, that's my spirit,” said the angel, gently, extending his hand. “But was not this nigh shore?”

Crowley nodded, not quite smiling. He could easily draw this out.
“Close by, my master.”

“But are they, Ariel, safe?”

“Not a hair perish’d! On their sustaining garments, not a blemish, but fresher than before; and, as thou bad’st me, in troops I have dispers’d them ’bout the isle. The King's son have I landed by himself...”

They easily fell into the exchange of who-had-landed-where-and-in-what-state, for when had they ever found such a thing other than second nature? Aziraphale parried Crowley's delivery of Ariel's proud, eager claims with cool, restrained admiration, although his intrinsic fondness tainted the great magician's reserve with delightful irony.

*We play them mad for each other,* Crowley thought, rattling off the fate of the harbor-beached flagship and Naples-bound fleet. *Constantly in orbit and almost never touching, with words upon words striving for a kiss.*

In his peripheral vision, Crowley could see Rani standing at the foot of the stage with one hand over her mouth: watching Crowley's every move, anticipating what Aziraphale would say next.

“Ariel, thy charge exactly is perform'd, but there's more work. What is the time o' the day?”

“Past the mid season,” Crowley replied, trying for nonchalance, but the phrase was heavy.

“At least two glasses,” agreed Aziraphale, gravely, but with a hint of mischief. “The time ’twixt six and now must by us both be spent most preciously...”

*Oh, sod you,* Crowley thought, *adding an ellipsis where there's none.* “Is there more toil?” he asked innocently. “Since thou dost give me pains, let me remember thee what thou hast promis'd, which is not yet...perform’d me.”

Aziraphale actually gaped at him, and then indignantly sucked in his breath.

“How now? Moody? What is ’t thou canst demand?”

Crowley gave Aziraphale his saddest, fondest smile. In this, there was no pretending, for the memories it was bound to bring down on them both were even heavier still, and, yes, precious.

“My liberty,” Crowley said, finding the taste of it strange even now.

Aziraphale's expression clashed jarringly with the next line, unexpected and moving. “Before the time be out? No more!”

“I prithee, remember I have done thee worthy service, told thee no lies, made thee no mistakings, serv’d without grudge or grumblings. Thou did promise—”

“Dost thou forget from what a torment I did free thee?” asked Aziraphale, softly.

“No,” Crowley said, no longer reading off the page. He hadn't been for some time.

“Stop,” Rani said, and both of them jumped. “You can stop right there, that's quite enough, good night. I've got plenty to think about, no two ways about it. Give me those scripts, lads, and get out of
here. Well, shoo. Off home with you!"

They left Rani to her sudden, fitful brooding as she moved about to collect discarded scripts.

Crowley let Aziraphale whisk him up the aisle with one possessive arm about his waist; they made it to the lobby just in time to give Letitia something to gawk at, so Crowley broke away with a muttered, doubly-intended apology and went back to fetch Aziraphale's coat. They left the theatre in silence, hands in pockets, neither one of them wishing to scandalize the old lady any further.

The drive home consisted of five whole minutes' pensive, torturous silence.

“Well, that happened,” Crowley said, skidding them to a halt in the drive. He got out of the car and released a tremulous plume of breath in the frozen air. “I'm not one for leading roles. Put me in the background as an extra—or, better yet, stick me behind the scenes—and everything’s fine. Shove me out front, though, and that's blatantly courting disaster. You should know.”

“I think,” said Aziraphale, crunching his way around the Bentley (cold sand, grit, and gravel glittering with frost underfoot), “that you sorely underestimate your capacity to captivate.” They made their way up the walk in silence, arm in arm, listening to the sea's constant murmur.

Crowley pinned him against the front door. “If she casts us, angel, so help me—”

“But imagine,” said Aziraphale, framing his face. “Just imagine what we could do.”

Crowley fumbled his key into the lock, twisted it, and they both stumbled awkwardly inside.

“At least for now,” he said, “I'm far more interested in doing than in imagining.”

“My brave spirit,” Aziraphale murmured, drawing him on toward promise. “Indeed.”
No good ever comes of a commendation, neither from Below, nor from Above.

We see death come into our midst like black smoke, a plague which cuts off the young, a rootless phantom which has no mercy or fair countenance. Woe is me of the shilling in the arm-pit; it is seething, terrible, wherever it may come, a head that gives pain and causes a loud cry, a burden carried under the arms, a painful angry knob, a white lump. It is of the form of an apple, like the head of an onion, a boil that spares no-one. Great is its seething, like a burning cinder, a grievous thing of an ashy colour. It is an ugly eruption that comes with unseemly haste. It is a grievous ornament that breaks out in a rash: the early ornaments of black death.

—Jeuan Gethin, Welsh poet, d. 1349

* * *

London, 1 November 1348

The commendation turned up in the guise of a crisp vellum missive from one of Crowley's colleagues in the chancery. Hell hadn't quite got the hang of using Crowley's books to communicate—how easy it would've been for Beelzebub or Dagon or whoever to just rearrange some text on the page while he was enjoying a hilariously bad spot of Langland's latest revisions by candlelight—so they tended to send incorporeal underling demons to possess underling human copyists for purposes of writing out missives, which had the unnerving tendency to appear on Crowley's desk.

He'd been aware of the outbreak for months, in an abstract sort of way. Reports coming in from the Continent were both thorough and harrowing, so Crowley had taken to keeping emergency stashes of honey-chamomile ale and Rhineland white wine on hand.

He broke Hastur's seal with the requisite gesture, fingers seizing uncomfortably.

Three paragraphs into the commendation, both of his hands started to shake.

Crowley dropped the correspondence on his rush-and-lavender strewn floor and reached for his cloak on the door-peg, wondering if he'd regret the walk to Southwark at this time of night.

As it turned out, the streets were empty: every shutter drawn, eerily backlit by tapers.

Aziraphale didn't answer his first knock—or his second, or his third. Just as Crowley prepared, teeth gritted, to kick down the door (not something he liked to do terribly often, as humans tended to
notice and grow skittish around such things as displays of unnatural strength), it swung inward.

“Ah,” said the angel, lifting the brim of Crowley's hat up from his eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Ask you what in Go—Sa—what in the world is going on,” Crowley hissed, pushing his way inside Aziraphale's humble one-room lodging. “I got a commendation for Himself's latest crack at a cleansing by plague. Why'd you do it, eh? Did they tell you the buggers are just breeding too fast for their own good and could sand a thorough cull? No, wait, let me guess—it's got something to do with this explosion of bawdy vernacular literature and a corresponding drop in piety rates, so they've ordered you to sort it all out by killing off at least a third of the population—”

“Half,” said Aziraphale, calmly, closing the door behind Crowley as he ranted and paced.

Crowley stopped dead in his tracks, clenching his outstretched hands.

“What do you mean, half?” he demanded, incredulous.

“One day they'll call it Yersinia pestis,” Aziraphale explained. “The bacteria responsible for this contagion, I mean. I'd always assumed that your people—”

“As I recall, my people didn't create the bloody Garden and all of its various pathogens.”

Aziraphale blanched and made for the cupboard, in which he kept a ready supply of Gascon red.

“Have a drink,” he said, offering Crowley some wine in a wooden tumbler. “You'll feel better.”

“Why don't you offer some to the poor souls starting to puff up with fever and rot?” retorted Crowley, and knocked the proffered cup out of Aziraphale's hand. “See what good it does them?”

Angrily, Aziraphale fetched the vessel, refilled it, and downed half its contents. “I have nothing to do with it! The first news I've had, in fact, comes by way of this nonsense,” he said, shoving a piece of wrinkled vellum into Crowley's hands.

Crowley scanned the terrifyingly elegant script, which could only have been Gabriel's.

“I don't believe this,” he said. “They think we're behind it.”

“Now you're the one talking nonsense. They don't know about our little...er...”

“You don't understand,” Crowley said, handing the vellum back to Aziraphale. “I got a commendation, too, but the major difference is that mine makes no mention of a projected death toll. I don't give much thought to the statistics accompanying human illness, but your boy Gabriel must be a regular aficionado. Does he keep sample cultures to hand for reference?”

“Crowley,” said Aziraphale, suddenly brandishing a chair at him. “Sit down.”

Much to his dismay, Crowley didn't make it to the chair. His legs gave out, so Aziraphale hauled him up by the armpits and settled him in it somewhat ungracefully. He didn't protest when Aziraphale refilled the tumbler and thrust it into his hands. He drank deep and hiccupped, his vision swimming.

“I don't know what came over me,” he murmured, pensively swilling the wine.

“I suspect it's to do with the prospect of losing half or more of your targets.”

Crowley lowered the tumbler and stared despairingly at the angel.

“Targets,” he echoed. “Is that how you think of them?”
Aziraphale sniffed, busy pouring himself a fresh tumbler of wine.

“It doesn’t behoove one to wax sentimental,” he said. “They’re humans.”

“They're complicated,” Crowley shot back. “They're clever.”

“I don't follow,” Aziraphale said, taking a long swig of wine.

“If not for them, we'd have no alcohol, for starters.”

Aziraphale pulled a stool up beside Crowley's chair, lost in thought. “I suppose you're right,” he said at length, and then reached to briskly pat Crowley's knee. “Still, it's their lot to tarry here in sorrow. Part of the Great Plan, et cetera. Ineffable.”

Crowley set his empty tumbler down on the floor and folded his arms. “So it wasn't you and it wasn't me, and it wasn't Upstairs and it wasn't Downstairs, but they'd both like to think they can claim credit. That's just swell. Don't you ever feel stuck in the middle?”

“Dear boy, we are stuck in the middle,” sighed Aziraphale. “Technically speaking.”

“Well, at times like this, I hate it,” said Crowley, flatly. “D'you know what it'll be like?”

“What what'll be like?” asked Aziraphale, neatly finishing off his wine.

“Watching them die,” Crowley continued. “Do you know how they're suffering, these first victims? One of my people at court was in Melcombe when the first case arrived by sea.”

“Dreadfully unpleasant symptoms, I should think,” said Aziraphale, shrugging.

Crowley indicated his left armpit, which was bruised thanks to Aziraphale's manhandling. “The lymph nodes swell and form hard, fever-hot pustules. They burst and ooze, spreading the contagion. Some say it can directly enter the blood, and my guess is they'd be right.”

“It'll be airborne before too long,” said Aziraphale, frowning into his tumbler.

“Either you'd best get on with healing a poor sod or two when and as you can, or leave me to it in peace if you're not so inclined,” said Crowley, rising. “I'm going home. This is giving me a headache.”

“They're the size and shape of an apple,” Crowley said, his hand on the latch, “and as hard.”

Aziraphale covered Crowley's hand with his own, staying it.

“Then fix it,” said Aziraphale, following him to the door, wearing an expression that almost passed for one of concern. “You needn't suffer as they do. That is, we needn't—”

“Stay and share the rest of this bottle, won't you?”

“The next time either one of us gets a commendation, I want to make damned sure we deserve it,” Crowley seethed. “In this instance, no one does, least of all the humans. Where's your mercy now, eh? Where will it be as thousands perish in torment?”

Aziraphale coaxed Crowley's fingers off the latch and set his soft palm to Crowley's forehead.

“We mustn't burn with them,” he said simply, and then stroked Crowley's temple.
“No,” said Crowley, suddenly weary, and carefully side-stepped the touch. “Wine?”

“Wine,” said Aziraphale, firmly, and went to fetch the bottle from his cupboard.

Crowley resumed his seat in the chair, watching as the window taper guttered.
As Above, So Below [Part 1 / 3]

Chapter Summary

As you from crimes would pardoned be,
let your indulgence set me free.

The curt knock jarred Gabriel out of his frankincense-induced reverie.

The small box of whimsical tissue-wrapped coils—Only on Earth, he'd mused—had turned up on his desk amidst otherwise routine interdepartmental post. HORIKAWA, it said, and, beneath that, SHOYEIDO INCENSE CO.

No surprise, of course: Aura Confluence had briefly shifted its focus to Kyoto, followed by a blip in San Francisco, before training its feather-sheathed silver needle back on a tiny coastal village just outside of East Dean.

(Foolish Aziraphale: as if a gift held enough sway to unpin the trace! Of course, a bribe would have required knowledge of the trace to begin with.)

"Enter," Gabriel said, reaching to unhook the needle from its spun-electrum suspension. He twisted it deeper into the shaft, until the needle's gleaming point protruded from the quill-tip of the feather. He put it back. The pendulum obediently swung back and froze over its perpetual nexus on the South Downs of England.

"Good afternoon," said Asmodai, poised nebulous and golden in the doorway. His pupil-less black eyes glinted, glassy and astute under the glare of the chandelier.

"Have a seat," Gabriel sighed, gesturing at the chair before his desk. "The invitation to sit is implied; you need not ever ask my permission."

Asmodai smiled, his regal features taking shape on a face otherwise composed of swirling light and shadow, an expression like slow-spreading poison. The son of mortal King David and Agrat bat Mahlat (fallen angel, succubus, and Duchess of Hell) had returned twenty-four years before at the pleading of his father. There had been a handful of disillusioned in the ranks on each side, and Heaven had offered those from Below with sincere petitions a pardon. There hadn't been many, perhaps ten.

(He had been the only demon of any truly significant rank to defect.)

"I didn't ask," Asmodai replied, drifting forward, "but I'm glad to accept." He flowed through and into the cushioned mauve damask, reaching with idle, tendril-like fingers to spin the needle on its axis. "It still holds, then?" he asked, plotting points on the gilt-and-gemstone inlaid map below the pendulum. "And those filaments from the feathers of the other three that I forged into the needle—they glow true?"

Gabriel nodded at his protégé. Eight years he'd been working with this boy, and he was brilliant.
With Solomon's Mines on his CV, there had really been no contest.

"Red for Raphael, blue for Uriel, and gold for the Principality's lover," said Asmodai, smoothing the unkempt edges of Aziraphale's feather. "Whose idea was it to keep a few pinions from every one of us on file, before humans even dreamed up fingerprinting? It's stellar. Innovation is not solely the province of mankind."

"Did you know him?" Gabriel asked, index fingers steepled against his chin.

Asmodai looked up at him: startling, that pensive, dark star-sapphire gaze.

"I didn't," he admitted, "but Crawly is a much-cursed name in Duke Hastur's demesne. It's rumored that the old man wanted the Serpent's gig, but Dagon rejected his application. Instead, he and Ligur got assigned to Spot-Checks and Liaison. It got them up there—down there—every few centuries. Hastur's jealousy only grew."

"And the Duke's unfortunately dim sidekick?" Gabriel pressed. "Any bad blood?"

"Frankly, Ligur never got the hang of Envy," Asmodai said. "It's too complex."

"You read my briefing, I assume," Gabriel said. "Do you know why you're here?"

Asmodai regarded him with cool, but genuine sympathy. He nodded once.

"Lucifer's brat," he said. "Still meddling, from the sound of things?"

"Michael and I had planned a visit last month," Gabriel sighed. "Nothing serious, you understand—reconnaissance only, a quick survey of all those humans they've collected. There's been a death in the family; we know because your former people have got him. Instead of landing back on that stretch of beach, do you know where we ended up?"

Asmodai shook his head, frowning fiercely at the needle. Its corkscrew streak of gold, almost perpetual in its own right (except when Aziraphale traveled alone), flashed harshly yellow and spiked like barbed wire, resembling a thorn-bearing vine.

"No," he said. "And how often does it do that—turn yellow and throb, I mean?"

"We ended up five feet from where we started," said Gabriel, grimly. "We can't leave."

"How often?" Asmodai repeated, mesmerized as Crawly's filament flashed again.

"Not often," sighed Gabriel, impatiently. "Why? What does it mean?"

"It's a distress signal," Asmodai replied, pursing his incorporeal lips.

"Would you care to explain why this is the first I've heard of such a feature?"

"You said you wanted to know how they affect each other. If they're happy."

"Do you see that content glow on the feather itself, my boy? It's constant."

"It's not the Principality in whom I'm most interested," said Asmodai.
They looked at each other, rising at almost exactly the same moment.

"Do you know," repeated Gabriel, suppressing a shiver, "why you are here?"

"The Former Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Great Beast that is called Dragon, Prince of This World, Father of Lies, Spawn of Satan, and Lord of Darkness has bound you. You can no longer leave this place, doomed to watch what remains of the Garden bloom and flourish from afar while your brother and mine partake of any and every forbidden fruit they so desire in mockery of your plight."

Gabriel felt a surge of white-hot anger. He clenched his fists and quelled it.

Asmodai's ghostlike features solidified further, his glassy gaze turning predatory.

"You can no longer leave this place," he said, smile turning deadly. "But I can."

"You will be issued a body," Gabriel told Asmodai. "Any human shape you wish, you need only picture it." He extended his hands, palms facing upward, indicating that Asmodai should take them. "This authority is mine. What skin will you wear?"

Asmodai's tendril-fingers flowed between Gabriel's, flexed, and became flesh.

Gabriel looked the braid-crowned, brown-skinned being in its wide black eyes.

"You choose a woman's shape," he observed. "Most wise. What shall I call you?"

"I am Asmodai," he said, voice sweet and strange. "But Earth will call me Sarai."

"It's bad enough you've taken your lost love's name. Don't dwell on the past," said Gabriel, pressing a vellum envelope into Asmodai's hands, "and perform the duties I have assigned you. We mustn't fail this time."

* * *

"He's here to see you, sir," said a soft, familiar voice from just outside the door.

"Send him in, Tanith," Dagon sighed. He set down his pen and put on his spectacles.

The office door opened a fraction, revealing one of Tanith's slitted garnet snake-eyes framed by her nearly white skin and a wavy swath of dark hair. It whispered shut again, and when it reopened, Ligur stood there blinking in the dim, smoky cast of Dagon's desk lamp. He shuffled in with a surly air, slamming the door behind him.

"Woss her name again?" Ligur asked, plunking himself down in the crumbling goat-leather armchair
opposite Dagon. "She's pretty. One of them elegant buggers wot still looks almost like an angel. 'Cept for those peepers she's got, of course."

"Never mind," said Dagon, mildly. "She's an industrious worker and prefers keeping to herself." He uncovered the polished obsidian scrying mirror that lay between them on the battered, charred desktop. "Do you know why you've been sent for, lad?"

"Not really," said Ligur, scratching the side of his nose. "Hastur gone and done somethin' without your permission again, has he? You want I should go clean it up?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort," Dagon reassured him, tracing an inverted pentagram with his fingertip on the mirror's smooth surface. He muttered the requisite incantation, scarcely aware of the words. The black plane rippled, turning to viscous fluid that reflected both of their faces with uncanny clarity. "But it is an assignment requiring a great amount of...discretion, you see, at which you're known to excel. Personal interest on my part, not to be reported any higher. Are we understood?"

"Wotcher," said Ligur, with conspiratorial glee. "Dunt nobody else need to know."

"Do you remember this slippery fellow?" Dagon asked, poking the scry with a weathered, yet steady fingertip.

Dagon's stomach lurched in unexpected anticipation, as he had, in the past three years, collected a most startling batch of mental images by that very means. It had become a sort of game, furtive guilt and hope pitted against idle curiosity: he never quite knew what the glass would show him next, and what it had always shown him was simultaneously revolting and wondrous strange.

Admittedly, what it showed them this time was mundane, if vaguely puzzling.

Ligur regarded the moving picture, which was entirely silent, with dim perplexity. "That flash bastard Crawly," he sniffed, as he wasn't so much confused by who he was looking at as what. "Hastur dunt like him one bit, but, I dunno, he's got a nice pen. And a horseless carriage with a phone in it," he added, with a touch of admiration.

"Correct," Dagon said. "But do you have any idea who the girl is?" He squinted at the black-haired young woman who stood before Crowley with strained features and worry in her glance. She'd never appeared in the scry before; he'd only ever seen Crowley with the enemy agent known as Aziraphale, and although Dagon wasn't sure he approved of the relationship, it was rather a relief to know that the lad had been getting on all right since Beelzebub's ruthless mass lay-off back in early 2011.

Ligur shrugged. "Someone he's been temptin'? She dunt look too happy."

"She doesn't, does she," said Dagon, frowning, and it was then that he realized Tanith was hovering apprehensively on the threshold with a singed manila folder in her hand. He hadn't even heard the door open.

"You needed this for today," Tanith said apologetically, holding out the folder. "I tried to give it to you, but then Duke Ligur went straight in, and I didn't want to interrupt—"

"Nonsense," Dagon told her. "Perhaps you can shed some light on this mystery."

Tanith took one look at the quarreling figures in the scrying mirror and gasped. "Sir, that's Sophia
Device-Pulsifer. She's human. Her parents are Anathema Device and Newton Pulsifer, and her younger twin sisters are called Natalie and Janet."

"The witch and the technician," Dagon murmured, studying Sophia's face.

"Sir," said Tanith, hesitantly setting the folder down in front of him. "You'll want to have a look at this. She's not just Agnes Nutter's great-great-great-great—"

"Woss wrong with her belly?" asked Ligur, tapping the scrying mirror. He sniffed the droplet of tarry ooze it left on his finger, and then, quite pleased, licked it off.

Dagon looked up from his perusal of the first page in the folder, blank with shock.

"What do you mean, what's wrong with her belly?" he demanded.

"She keeps clutchin' it like it hurts," Ligur said. "Is she sick or somethin'?"

"She's Adam Young's wife, sir," said Tanith, quietly. "Sorry. I'm leaving now."

Before Dagon could consider thanking her for the indispensable service, she'd gone.

"Who's Adam Young?" Ligur asked. "Wossat got to do with Crawly?"

Dagon snapped his fingers irritably, and the scry instantly dissipated. He wasted no time in shoving the heavy-laden folder into Ligur's unsuspecting hands. "You're to read this briefing and get up there as fast as you possibly can."

Ligur made a face. "Readin' is not what you'd call my strong suit," he said.

"You'll manage," Dagon told him, showing some teeth. "And you'll do as I say."

"Yessir," Ligur muttered, shoving the folder under his arm. "Standard stalk-and-lurk?"


"Just Crawly, or am I lookin' for anyone he spends time with?"

"Crowley and all of his associates, be they human or otherwise."

"There's some that ain't human?" asked Ligur, incredulously.

Dagon sighed and re-activated the scrying mirror. "Look."

Ligur watched Aziraphale, Principality of Earth, strut back and forth onstage.

"They still do them play-things?" he asked, pleased. "Like Shakespeare?"

Dagon squinted at the dog-eared script in the angel's neatly manicured hand.

"Yes," he said, gesturing so that the scry zoomed in, "and it is Shakespeare."

"Dunt look like him," said Ligur. "He had a beard and much better hair."
Dagon covered his mouth and hissed in abject frustration. Olympic-grade lurker and champion spy Ligur might have been, but swift on the up-take he was not.

"Crowley's closest associate," he said. "As for being human, you'll find Aziraphale is anything but. Take care not to cross any of them, but that one especially."

Ligur's expression turned from one of amusement to one of suspicion.

"I've seen him before," he said, slowly, as if in a trance. "Long time ago."

"Don't dwell on it," Dagon told Ligur, clapping him on the shoulder. "Get along now, lad. Do your homework, don't mention it to Hastur, and be on your way, won't you?"

* * *

"You're certain?" Crowley demanded. "I mean, you're absolutely certain?"

Sophia finally sat down on the sofa, her face tear-streaked, and gave a weary nod.

"You know how I mentioned I was feeling sick right after New Year's? I thought I'd just drunk too much out celebrating with Adam and the girls, but that didn't seem right, as I only had a few pints of cider..." She trailed off, staring miserably at the coffee table. "My period hasn't turned up. Three different pregnancy tests, all positive."

Crowley sat down beside her, unable to hide the fact his hands were shaking.

"I know you're not happy about it," he said, "but just think. You've finished the MA, you've got no plans to start a PhD any time soon, maybe not ever, you and Adam have got a nice new flat that's not student accommodation, and—"

"And what?" demanded Sophia, through a fresh burst of tears. "I've got that internship lined up for spring, and it's got the option for transitioning to permanent hire. Who's going to want to keep me if I've got a newborn to worry about?"

"This isn't America," Crowley pointed out, awkwardly putting an arm around her.

"Yeah, and it's also not France! They've got their shit figured out with respect to employment and parenting on the Continent, but Britain's got a long way to go."

_That's your mother talking_, Crowley thought, but he kept his mouth shut. _Also, you'll want to re-check your figures: Britain offers twenty weeks' paid maternity leave, whereas France only offers sixteen. And I should know, having engineered most forms of productivity-cut and resource-drainage in the average human workplace._
"This wasn't supposed to happen," Sophia said despairingly. "We fucked up."

Crowley tried to find a tactful way of saying he'd once got a glimpse of her handbag contents and that he thought he'd seen a contraceptive-pill compact. He couldn't. "I thought you were taking, er, precautions," was what he said instead.

"We were," said Sophia. "But there's that one-point-whatever percent chance..."

"Condoms help," Crowley offered, and then felt just as foolish as when he'd sat translating parts of a Latin sex manual in front of her sisters (only less concerned about what her mother might do to him, although the answer was probably nothing).

"We use those, too!" Sophia snapped. "We're young, but we're not stupid."

_Bloody hell_, Crowley thought, staring past her and out the window. _This kid must really want to exist._

"Why are you telling _me_ about this first?" he asked her. "Shouldn't you be discussing the issue with Adam? He's, er, partly responsible, after all."

Sophia folded her hands together in her lap, altogether too quiet for Crowley's liking.

"So he already knows," Crowley gathered. "Not surprising, given you can both read—"

"Actually, no," Sophia murmured, averting her gaze. "He hasn't a clue."

"Something's very wrong with this picture," Crowley said. "I don't understand."

"We worked out an arrangement of sorts," Sophia explained. "Not too long after that night you fucked up the cocktails and I saw your wings and Harold had a stroke."

_Biggest mistake you'll ever make_, Crowley thought, _but you won't regret it._

Sophia didn't even react to the intentional broadcast; she was seemingly too upset.

"What's this arrangement, then?" he asked. "What are the terms? I hope he's getting better at hashing those out, because he's otherwise something of a generalist."

"We agreed we'd never read each other's thoughts or use our...well, what would you call it, intuition?...to suss out each other's secrets. Sometimes those are important."

"What, secrets?" Crowley considered this. "Depends on the secret, I guess."

"This isn't something I'd like to trouble him with," said Sophia, too quietly.

Crowley produced a handkerchief from his jeans pocket (where there had been none just moments before) and used it to dry her cheeks. He tilted her chin up. "There's something else you're not telling me," he said. "Trouble him?"

Unblinking, Sophia swallowed and slipped a hand into the pocket of her cardigan.

"I need someone to drive me to the appointment on Saturday. You're the only one I can really trust,
and, if I'm not mistaken, you mentioned that Aziraphale has some kind of all-day blocking rehearsal? That way, we'd avoid any awkward questions."

She pressed an ominously folded piece of paper into Crowley's free hand.

"And you came here this evening, because you also knew he'd be out," said Crowley, releasing her so that he could unfold and look at whatever she'd handed him. "Surely you could get Adam to drive you, pass it off as just a routine check-up with your GP—"

His eyes scanned the page, which was a carbon copy. She'd signed it the day before.

"I just want to take care of this quietly," Sophia whispered. "Please."

Crowley cleared his throat, re-folded the paper, and handed it back to her.

"I won't," he said, releasing a single, unsteady breath. "I can't."

"Thought maybe you'd say that," Sophia said. "Think it over, though. Please?"

"You had to've gone to a lot of trouble to arrange this," Crowley sighed. He rose and walked over to the window, setting both hands on the sill, lest they betray his shock. "You must've got an emergency same-day appointment with your GP earlier in the week; I must say, as referrals go, that was fast. Have you thought about this?" he asked. "Really thought about it? Free will isn't entirely without consequences."

Sophia nodded gravely. "It's the wrong time. I don't want Adam to know."

"You've put me in a difficult position," Crowley told her, watching as Judith (by now shortened to Jude) and her sisters foraged on the lawn and flapped at one another over particularly choice pickings. He'd discovered Sophia sobbing at the wheel of Adam's car in the driveway no sooner than he'd let them out of the shed. She must have pulled in while he was busy replacing the straw and adjusting the heat-lamps.

"I know," Sophia said, her voice drifting nearer. "And I'm sorry."

Crowley caught her wrist before her hand could settle on his shoulder.

"Aziraphale will be home soon. I don't want him to see you in such a state."

He heard Sophia swallow as she tugged her wrist out of his grasp.

"Adam's staying in Tadfield from Friday till Sunday," she said. "His sister's back in town again, making a fuss about wanting to see more of her slacker little brother. Show up Saturday morning around ten o'clock if you can. I'll be awake and ready."

Crowley saw her out the door with a kiss on the forehead, although he couldn't bring himself to embrace her or to say another word. He waited till she'd driven away to track down the ducks. He found them paddling in the calm, gradually rising tide.

"Oi, you," he said to Tamar, scooping her out of the water. "Let's see that leg."

The wound—a surprisingly deep laceration about four centimeters long—was healing nicely.
Regular dousing in sea-salt had soundly staved off infection, so Crowley had resisted the urge to heal it outright ("Let nature take its course," Aziraphale had said).

Tamar squirmed and hissed at him, catching Crowley's sleeve ineffectually in her bill.

"From now on, you'd best leave Jemima alone when she's eating," Crowley sighed, running his thumb over what was left of the cut. It vanished in the wake of his touch. "When the diced mango and dried crickets come out, she's not inclined to share."

Tamar waggled her tail happily as Crowley plopped her back in the water.

Meanwhile, Jemima bobbed to the surface with a shrill, indignant squawk.

"Serves you right," Crowley told her, wading out of the rising surf, finding his shoes and trouser-hems sodden. "Biting your sister just for being hungry. Tsssk."

Ruth, Eve, and Lilith (curse Mandy and her twisted sense of humor) dashed after him, flapping salt water everywhere. He paused to pull his shoes off and shake out the sand. They hovered, heads tilted upward, peering at him with expectant brown eyes.

"I can't feed you all the time," Crowley protested, hobbling back into his miraculously dry footwear. "That's what this daily foraging lark is about, you understand. Aziraphale thinks it's time you learned to fend for yourselves. Bit early for that, I thought, but what can you do? Listen, it wasn't my idea. There's no sense in arguing with him."

"Is there not?" asked Aziraphale's amused voice from behind him.

For the first time in centuries, Crowley's blood froze at the sound.

He straightened up, brushing off his hands. "Done letting Rani order you about?"

"It's her job, Crowley," said Aziraphale stepping up beside him. "If I'm not mistaken, that sort of thing is what directors do—good gracious, young lady, how are you?" he asked, crouching to scratch under Lilith's chin. Her sisters, including the three who'd been in the water till a few seconds ago, scrambled to gather around for their turn.

Crowley folded his arms and watched, his stomach clenching uneasily.

"Sophia dropped by," he said before he could stop himself. "She says hello."

"Then I'm quite sorry to have missed her," said Aziraphale, dusting sand off the knees of his trousers as he stood. "What's she up to? Anything of interest?"

Crowley shrugged, staring up the rise. Turf and rushes, scurvy-grass and garden.

Yarrow, he thought bitterly. Isn't that what witches favor? The fairest of all.

Aziraphale set both hands on Crowley's shoulders, startling him.

"My dear, you've caught a chill," he said. "You're jumpy. Come inside."

Crowley tilted his head so that Aziraphale's kiss hit his ear instead of his cheek.
"Right, kids," he said, snapping his fingers. "Back in the shed. Party's over."

* * *

Uriel woke drenched and shaking, clutching her sides as she rolled off the mattress.

"Do you," she began in a quavering voice, "do you ever get those dreams—"

The bedside lamp flickered to life, and Raphael's long arm curled down to fetch her.

"Not the way you do, darling," he said, hauling her into his embrace. "What now?"

Shuddering, Uriel buried her face against his chest and dug her nails into his hip.

"For me, different things," she said. "The deaths of strangers I'll never meet, but who I'm supposed to meet. Bodies in abandoned places. Shipwrecks. The plague."

"Which one? There were a shit-ton of outbreaks, let me tell you."

"Every one, you hoser! But it's not just that."

Raphael arched both wings above their heads, closing them in.

"It's not the others, is it?" he asked, frowning. "Tell me it's not the others."

Uriel lifted her head and regarded him gravely, nodding.

"Not Michael," she said. "He's too busy gambling with those slutty Dominions."

Raphael closed his eyes and did an astonishingly good impression of a human with a headache. What came next, though—the covering of his mouth with one tense hand, his sudden inability to look her in the eye—was genuine, and entirely him.

"Gabriel," he said, voice badly muffled. "What the fuck do you suppose..."

Propping herself up on one elbow, Uriel rolled him onto his back and tumbled down the strong, broad curve of his well-kept wing till she had no choice but to sprawl on top of him. She pried his hand away from his mouth and pressed her forehead to his.

"He's up to something," she said. "It makes these old bones ache. No good."

"The snake's rubbing off on you," muttered Raphael. "First hangovers, now arthritis—"

"Would you listen, dammit?" she pleaded, punching him in the side. "There's a new soul hovering.
The kind I don't get often. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Some confused unborn human whose existence is in question before it's even got started is haunting
your sleep," said Raphael. "What's that got to do with Gabriel?"

"He sent it," she said. "And he's sunk in the most powerful hooks Heaven's got at its disposal to
make sure that poor, confused spirit binds to somebody we know well."

Raphael pulled away and rubbed his eyes with one hand, clenching the other at the small of Uriel's
back. They were both covered in bite-marks; Uriel tactfully didn't mention it, lest Raphael realize
how much the snake had rubbed off on him, too.

"Anathema's daughters," he said. "Please don't tell me it's the naughty twin."

"No," replied Uriel, sadly. "Their big sister's in the crosshairs."

"That makes no sense," Raphael reasoned. "Get the ex-Antichrist's wife knocked up, and then give
her second thoughts? It's not as if he can damn her."

"The second thoughts are her own. The child, however, is a time-bomb. I didn't think he'd ever be so
stupid to try something like this without explicit clearance."

"I'm still lost, my love," Raphael sighed. "Please translate."

"Last time, the kid came from Down There," Uriel told him. "So he's thinking, hey, why not try
again ourselves? If it goes pear-shaped, how much bad can actually happen?"

"Okay," Raphael said, sitting up, unceremoniously dumping Uriel out from the curve of his wing.
"This is tantamount to, I don't know, attempting the whole Messiah clusterfuck all over again. And
look how well that went down."

"Like a lead balloon," Uriel murmured, curling up in a pile of pillows.

"What do you think we should do?" Raphael asked, setting two fingers between her shoulder blades.
She didn't want her wings right now, couldn't abide them, but her muscles rippled beneath his touch,
caught the tingle of warning.

"Have a word with Gabriel," she said. "Find out what he's playing at."

"Out they come," Raphael said, poking her spine. "Let's get this over with."

"I don't want to go," she whispered, screwing her eyes shut.

"No more than I do," Raphael said, narrowly avoiding both of her wings catching him in the face,
"but you know better than to think we can shirk—"

Reality melted around them as she tried to send them both Heavenward with a grudging blink, but a
few seconds later, she opened her eyes to find them lying in a half-naked tangle of limbs and feathers
on the floor next to the bay window.

"What the fuck just happened?" she wondered aloud, shaky and bewildered.
"You just teleported us from the bedroom to the living room," Raphael informed her.

"No, I just tried to teleport us to Gabriel's office," she said, frowning.

"Try again?" Raphael offered, setting his robe to rights and tying it off at the waist. He tugged down her rucked-up tank top and materialized her a set of silk shorts. "Here..."

His wave of intent smacked painfully off the walls, leaving them flat on their backs.

"Why do we always do this shit still half-drunk?" Uriel asked the ceiling.

Raphael sat up and winched in his wings, considering the first streaks of sunrise.

"We're blocked," he said in amazement. "Some kind of barricade between here and there, and it's strong, too. And I'm willing to bet that if we can't get past it—"

"—neither can they," Uriel finished for him, stumbling to her feet, grateful she had her wings for balance. "Oh, holy shit," she said. "That infuriating boy—do you think—"

"I just realized," said Raphael, slowly, "that Gabriel need not set foot here personally in order to cause chaos. He's got an assistant, that infernal creature—"

"His name," Uriel cut in with firm, apprehensive resolve, "is Asmodai."

* * *

Sophia turned from the mirror, twisting the elastic firmly about her braid.

Any minute now, she thought. Any minute now, and he'll be here.

A lonely cup of Lady Grey in her small kitchen (Adam's kitchen, in truth, given that he did most of the cooking for both of them) only wasted ten minutes. She turned her sticky mug upside-down in the sink and wandered listlessly into the living room, where she sat down on the sofa and grew heavy-lidded, drifting. Any minute. The sound of the Bentley's horn was harsh, blaring in the silence.

Sophia started awake, fishing on the floor for her shoulder bag.

"I'm coming!" she shouted, waving at Crowley through the parted curtains.

He didn't look at her, his eyes fixed on something further up the street.

Swallowing the slight, bitter rise at the back of her throat, Sophia shrugged into her coat, shouldered her bag, and dashed out the front door. Just as she spun on her heel, realizing she hadn't locked it, the bolt threw itself with a jarring clank.
Crowley was leaning out of the driver's-side window, which was now open.

"You'll be late," he said. "Doctors don't like that, in my experience."

"What experience have you got with doctors?" Sophia demanded, rounding the front of the car. She opened the passenger-door and slid into the seat. "You never get sick."

"I had to deliver your better half to a convent hospital when he was a squalling brat fresh from the fires of Dis, don't you tell me from not having experience. Buckle up!"

"Oh," Sophia said in a voice rather smaller than she'd have liked. "I'd forgot."

"You're so good at that," said Crowley, absently, driving faster than was necessary.

"Good at what?" she asked, watching the bucolic scenery fly past. Cambridge was unabashedly pretty in winter, never mind the lackluster foliage and endless puddles.

"Forgetting," Crowley replied, handing her a thermos from the seat between them, still not turning to face her. "You humans have got a knack for it. Here, drink up."

"I'm not supposed to have anything. Not till the procedure is done, at least."

"Well, I say you'll be needing this," Crowley insisted, shaking it at her. "Drink."

Sophia took the thermos, removed the lid, and sniffed. Fragrant steam like a slap in the face: Turkish apple tea laced with the bite of bitter herbs. Willow-bark, mugwort...

"Now I see it," she said. "It's hard most of the time, but I see it now."

Crowley made a non-committal noise, but he took his glasses off and hung them from the visor. Vintage cars of this sort didn't normally have visors, but Sophia knew better than to ask where this particular vintage car was concerned.

"Yeah?" he asked, casting her a brief, nervous glance. His eyes burned.

"The one cruelty you mete out with exacting precision," she said.

"And what's that?"

"Irony, of course."

"Listen, this is the last thing I want—"

"This is not, I repeat, not about what you want!"

"Let me finish," said Crowley, in slow, pained tones. "The last thing I want to be doing with my Saturday morning. Aziraphale had asked me to come watch the rehearsal, and Rani wanted to take us out for lunch afterward, but, no, I've gone and begged off. My point is mostly that you had better be damned sure this is what you want, because I'm not ever to be recounted as an accomplice in this, and furthermore—"
"Then you should have said no," Sophia cut in, laying a hand on his arm.

Crowley laughed: high, sharp, and breathless. His left hand clenched, unclenched.

"There's no one else you could've gone to. No one else you could've trusted."

Sophia sat back in her seat and raised the thermos to her mouth, feeling numb.

"What else is in here?" she asked. "What'll it do to me?"

"Calm you," Crowley said. "Dull the pain, induce..." He made a vague, snakelike gesture at the lower half of his own anatomy. "Help things along, if you will."

"I'm sure this violates all of the aftercare advice I'm going to get," she said, "but bottoms up." She took several long swallows of the tea. It was unsweetened, and the fruit-tartness did nothing to mask that telltale hint of yarrow. She'd bleed more heavily in the aftermath, perhaps, but it would clear whatever happened to be left. The drive continued in silence, so she drank some more of the concoction.

It was extremely unnerving, not being able to read Crowley. Sophia flipped on the radio without asking, and, after a few failed attempts at finding a good station, she opened the glove box and rummaged until she found her favorite Velvet Underground album. *Who Loves the Sun* and *Sweet Jane* played without incident, although Sophia couldn't muster the nerve to sing along. A third of the way into *Rock & Roll*, she began tapping the frenetic drumbeat on her knee and stole a sidelong glance at Crowley.

Nothing at all. His expression was a complete, impassive blank.

*Cool It Down* did nothing of the sort for her nerves. She punched the Blaupunkt's *STOP* button and sat back in her seat, swilling the bitter tisane down to mere dregs.

A mile and a half later, still twenty minutes from their destination, Crowley pulled over at a convenient lay-by. In fact, it was too convenient. Sophia was fairly certain there had never been a lay-by in this particular spot before. She knew these roads.

"What now?" she asked, fingers winding in the straps of her bag. "Another lecture?"

"I won't be complicit in this again," Crowley said, and Sophia had the distinct impression he was saying it to anyone but her. "I absolutely refuse. So get out."

Sophia couldn't quite believe her ears. "Come again?"

"Get out," Crowley said, and her door swung violently open, "of the car."

Sophia was ready to just sit tight, arms folded, but Crowley was looking her full in the eyes now with those blazing, slitted yellow eyes of his, and he looked dangerous. *Snake in the grass*, she thought wildly. *Ready to strike."

She fumbled her seat-belt off and clambered out; she stumbled and nearly fell face-first into the damp grit and gravel. She steadied herself with one hand flat against the window-glass, staring in at Crowley with vision blurred and stinging.
"You'll just leave me," she said. "Just like that."

"Just like that," Crowley agreed, replacing his sunglasses. "You've got a mobile."

"Fuck you," hissed Sophia, angrily. "No, really! All that pasted-on cool of yours can't help you now, can it, as lost as you are? You sodding spineless jerk!" She watched him flinch precisely as if he'd been stabbed in the side.

"I'm done," Crowley said, gesturing the ignition to life. He slammed one chelsea-booted heel to the accelerator and yanked the wheel sharply, cutting a wide, burnt-rubber arc around Sophia where she stood.

* * *

Aziraphale was mid-scene with Gwen, the young lady who'd been cast as Miranda, when Crowley slunk into the back of the theatre. Even across the distance and through abysmally dim lighting, he looked pale, pinched, and shaken, hunched into his heavy coat with the collar turned up and his glasses high on the bridge of his nose.

"Focus," Rani said from the front row, just loudly enough for Aziraphale to hear.

Aziraphale took a deep breath and stopped. "Yes," he sighed. "From the top?"

Rani nodded warningly, her lips twisted in that knowing, impatient smile.

Aziraphale kept a weather eye on the back row as the scene spun out. Crowley occupied one of the squeaky, ratty chairs with discomfited grace, black-and-grey python patterned boots propped primly on the back of the seat in front of him.

In spite of himself, Aziraphale thought of the British Museum and smiled.

"Enough for today!" Rani shouted, cutting them off. "You're both distracted."

Gwen fled the stage with a grateful, if terrified See-you-Monday-'bye!"

"My dear girl, thank you," said Aziraphale, and made his way down the stage-left stairs. He felt Rani's eyes heavy on his back even as she shuffled papers and wrestled her laptop back into its ponderous carrying-case, and they lingered until he reached the chair at the end of the row in which Crowley had so tensely, patiently waited. He crouched, leaning on the battered wooden arm-rest, and
nudged Crowley's elbow.

"We don't have to go out. She'll have sense enough to know you're not up to it."

Crowley sighed and turned, his feet dropping to the floor in one sinuous movement.

"We could have lunch without her," he said softly. "Just the two of us."

Aziraphale nodded and got to his feet, reaching for Crowley's hand.

"What shall we have? The café's out of that soup, and it's bucketing down in Bristol—"

"Not ready to go back there," said Crowley, adamantly. "And sushi's too cold on a night like this."
Reluctantly, he let Aziraphale pull him to his feet and kiss his cheek.

Aziraphale nodded. The beach-front café had fallen out of favor since the new manager had fired Mandy for calling him on mistreating the even newer wait-staff. Rani waved at them from the foot of the stage and exited via the opposite aisle.

"There now," Aziraphale said. "I'd told you she'd be reasonable. Let's be off."

"Thai," said Crowley, too vaguely for Aziraphale's liking. "Could use some red curry."

Cause for concern compounded over supper, not least because Aziraphale only managed to get a few glasses of wine down Crowley alongside the Panang curry he ordered instead of the red. He seemed content (although that was not the right word for his demeanor, not by any stretch) to eat and listen to Aziraphale's account of the rehearsal without offering his usual snide commentary. It was outright worrying.

Aziraphale returned from paying the tab to find Crowley staring balefully at a handful of fortune-cookie slips. He'd opened all four that had come along with the bill. He studied the slips of paper for a few seconds longer, and then looked up at Aziraphale.

"Not sure why they bring these," Crowley said. "If I ran this place, I'd take every precaution to distance myself from the tacky Chinese take-away over the road."

"Sound and fury, my dear," Aziraphale said, pulling him to his feet. "Leave them."

Crowley drove them home in silence, keeping almost too cautiously under the speed limit, his hands white-knuckled on the wheel. The Bentley smelled faintly of fruit tea and medicinal herbs. Aziraphale frowned. None of these scents proved comforting.

On arriving home, Aziraphale couldn't bear to wait. He stopped Crowley three feet from where he'd left his boots and coat in a jumble on the kitchen floor and kissed him up against the work-top.
Crowley winced as the back of his head hit the cupboards.

"Sorry," Aziraphale murmured, parting Crowley's miraculously unbuttoned shirt to stroke smooth skin and peaked nipples underneath. "I'm not sure what's got into..."

"Doesn't matter," Crowley mumbled against Aziraphale's mouth, suddenly frantic.

Aziraphale braced one palm flat against the work-top alongside Crowley's hip and sighed, abruptly
weak-kneed at Crowley's warm hand down the front of his trousers. "That day you made supper," he breathed against Crowley's ear, "not too long after we'd got home from the Cape—" he paused, gasping, and swore at the chilly sensation of his trousers, pants and all, being efficiently shucked down to his knees by the twist and creep of Crowley's clever bare feet. "My dear, I hope you know—I wanted—"

"Then take it, angel," Crowley said, unclothed now except for his shirt hanging unbuttoned and the brushed-cotton Red Sox boxers he'd bought in a Provincetown gift shop still inexplicably on him, albeit rubbing and clinging in all the right places.

Unthinking, Aziraphale kissed him so soundly Crowley's head hit the cupboards again, one hand delving between them to unbutton Crowley's flies and coax the tip of his erection free. Crowley whimpered, knees hitching Aziraphale in close by the hips.

"Leave them on," Aziraphale panted, teasing at Crowley's waistband, "if you like."

He'd never tire of Crowley's arms wrapped sinuously about his shoulders, the effortless slithering cadence of each rhythmic, writhing thrust (until, until, until)—

"Aziraphale," managed Crowley, plaintively, his cheek plastered against Aziraphale's collarbone—sticky, yielding, and impossibly flushed—"Aziraphale." Never any missed syllables, not so much as even the hint of a hiss.

Aziraphale bit his lip, drawing deep, furious breaths in the softness of Crowley's mussed hair. He could only hold this pace for so long; he shook with the strain of standing through it, letting Crowley ride the pace he'd chosen for them hard.

Crowley tensed: a perfect armful of awkward grace, his limbs unclenching.

(Not quiet this time, either, no; even less so than at their very first—)

Only rasping now, Crowley's half-words against Aziraphale's shoulder as he came.

Damn you, thought Aziraphale, almost distantly through the surge of it, ages-buried sentiment unbidden, not-quite-pain his body once had shunned and now cared far, far too much to remember. He slumped, pinning Crowley to the work-top and smack against the cupboards, Crowley's belly gone slick with heat as he shuddered. Crowley released a great, shaking breath and let his feet drop to the floor.

Once they'd recovered, Aziraphale led him into the living room. They curled together bonelessly on the sofa—wrists and ankles dangling off, bundled in not nearly enough space—and let Madame Tracy's quilt cover what their scant clothing could not.

Half an hour later, muzzily, Aziraphale lifted his head with annoyance from the crook of Crowley's neck to squint in the direction of a rather unwelcome sound: the doorbell.

"I'll get it," muttered Crowley, yawning, and disentangled himself from Aziraphale's quite determined embrace. Aziraphale rolled over and watched him materialize underthings, jeans, and a t-shirt as he walked still barefoot back into the kitchen.

Aziraphale curled in on himself, idly dozing as he summoned clothes, and listened.
"Hey," Crowley was saying in a tone that could only imply one person, "what brings—"

The sound that came next was a cruel, echoing crack of flesh on flesh.

Mandy shrieked and cursed to high heaven, and Aziraphale reached the entryway just in time to see the girl doubled over, one hand clutched to her chest, while Crowley leaned heavily against the wall with one hand pressed in astonishment to his jaw.

"I think there's been some misunderstanding," he said with pained effort.

"Like bloody hell there hasn't," Mandy snarled, straightening up in order to glare at Aziraphale, but it wasn't long until her eyes tracked back to Crowley. "How could you do that? How on earth could you do that, what when she trusted you to help?"

Crowley's eyes flitted to Aziraphale now, blazing, both fearful and hunted.

"She should have trusted someone else," he said wearily, glancing back at Mandy. He worked his jaw a few times and then pressed the heels of his hands to the junctures of skull and mandible just beneath his ears. Hinge, unhinge, snap. He shook himself.

Mandy was gaping at him, her expression far more angry than afraid.

"I don't care if you're ex-KGB or MI6 or any of that Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy bollocks," she told him. "You don't kick a friend out of the car on your way to the clinic. What the fuck were you thinking? That she could just walk to and from?"

As Crowley stood fretfully chewing his lip, Aziraphale stared at him.

"My dear, I'm somewhat lost," he said. "Would you and Amanda mind—"

"I wouldn't," said Mandy, vehemently, "but he might. Hypocrite!"

"I like to think of it more as sticking to my principles even in a moment of weakness," said Crowley, stepping forward until he stood between them. "I can explain this," he said. "I will explain this," he told Aziraphale, and then added, turning fully to face Mandy, "but first you've got to tell me if Sophia actually—"

"What she actually did is her own fucking business and her own fucking choice," Mandy told him. "All you need to know is that I got her home safe, okay?" Needles, droves of them, pierced and prickled Aziraphale's stomach.

"Dear girl," he said, "if you'd just come sit down and have some tea, I'm sure—"

"I'm not sure about anything," Mandy said, batting Crowley's imploring hand away. "Not anymore. She was raving by the time I drove her home, something about serpents and apples and the whole nine yards. I read Comparative Religion at uni, remember? That particular metaphor didn't take too much parsing!"

_No_, Aziraphale thought, _oh, no. That simply, absolutely cannot be._

"If I may," he said, scarcely thinking, and pulled Crowley out of the way. Next, he took Mandy by the shoulder and tugged her aside, opening the door its full span. "Miss Tomlin, I'm _very_ sorry, but
your hysterics are hardly shedding any light on this circumstance. If you can't be civil, then I'm afraid I must ask you to run along."

"Run along?" Mandy echoed, blinking at him in disbelief. "Run along?"

Crowley had covered his face with both hands, was hissing indecipherable curses.

"A bit of advice," said Mandy, coldly, backing outside with one shaking hand poised accusingly on the doorframe. "Get your misogynistic, biblical shit sorted!" She slammed the door, leaving Aziraphale with nowhere to gape but at Crowley.

"I'm afraid," he said carefully, finding the sound of his own voice thin and strained, "that the young lady has left me with little choice but to ask..."

Crowley stood stock-still, his eyes fixed clear and desolate on the door. In profile, his expression looked cool and far-away, even dispassionate. He did not blink. "She'd got pregnant," he said, distantly. "Sophia had, I mean. Not Mandy."

Aziraphale backed up three steps and set one hand on the edge of the sink.

"The child's a boy," he told Crowley. "That morning I called Anathema, I saw—"

"It doesn't matter what you saw," snapped the demon. "The child is gone."

Their world faltered on its axis just then, tilting beneath Aziraphale's bare feet.

"Whatever you say next," he pleaded, "for the love of anything, do not lie."

In that instant, Crowley looked more lost than Aziraphale had ever seen him.


"Don't know how," he said softly. "Believe it or not, I never have. Not to you."

Aziraphale cleared his throat and lowered his chin, not-so-patiently waiting.

"Fine," said Crowley, with a sigh. He turned it into a sardonic laugh, running one hand distractedly through hair that was by then thoroughly immune to further ruin. "As you like it. I'll break my word to her, and then I'll have told a lie. My very first to a loved one. Here goes: she came to me for help, and I told her I'd keep her secret. Keep it from everyone. From you, from Adam..." He swallowed and stared at the floor, his eyes radiating vivid despair. "Adam's at home for the weekend, and she needed a lift to the appointment. I was not happy about this, I want you to understand, but if she was so determined—free will's a bugger and all that—I at least wanted to make sure she was in the hands of someone she trusted, and God only knows why, but she chose me." Crowley stepped forward without looking up, one hand starting forward in supplication, but he stayed it. "I kicked her out of the car about two thirds of the way there," he admitted. "Left her alone there by the roadside, just like that."

The only sound between them was the complete and vacuous absence of breath.

"I cannot believe," said Aziraphale, at length, too numb at the revelation's prospect to say anything else, "that you could possibly have been so foolish."
Only then did Crowley's anger flare, fierce and terrible in its honesty.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did it again, did I? Went and mistook foolishness for loyalty? Well, I'll tell you something. I'm bloody tired of your moral commentary on this, that, and the other, right up to the point where I'm constantly trying to do the decent thing, and you still haven't got it through your thick ethereal skull that there's no such thing as basic nature. There are only choices, choices and doing one's best in the most utterly appalling circumstances any omnipotent creature in or out of its right mind has ever engineered. She had a mobile phone and enough time to call a cab; at least she had the good sense to call a friend instead. I didn't agree with it, but I wasn't about to judge her. I may have made a mistake, angel, but don't you dare judge me."

"That empty thermos," said Aziraphale, his mind racing. "What did you give her?"

Crowley stared and stopped just short of tearing at his hair, incredulous.

"Nothing that would hurt! Okay, so maybe the tea flavor was uncalled for—"

"I'm sorry, but I've got to think about this," said Aziraphale, rubbing his forehead. Too many crumbling images; too many complex implications. "If you'll excuse me..."

"Excuse you for what?" asked Crowley, anxiously, and Aziraphale could hear him trailing hurriedly after as he made his way out of the kitchen and into the study. "For why? Being a complete and utter prat? Bit too late, really, but I'd take—"

Aziraphale took a single breath, shut the study door in Crowley's face, and locked it.

And as for the hurried footfalls and rummaging sounds that came from bedroom and hallway until a complete, uneasy silence fell, he tried his best not to think about them.

* * *

Snow had begun to fall outside, faint and glimmering on the grassy sand.

Pippa turned from the window, mindful of her hip, and went to the kettle. She'd got used to quiet evenings alone, she supposed, and maybe she even liked them. Much though she wished Nicola would let him, Rob couldn't stay with her all the time; he had school. Pippa poked the tea bag, watching amber-colored tendrils spread.

She pottered back into the living room once it had brewed sufficiently strong and took her usual seat in one corner of the sofa. There wasn't anything decent on telly.

Pippa got out the novels that Aziraphale had given her last Saturday. Not today, though, and not for any Saturdays until the play had was over. She'd promised to come see him, and maybe even
Crowley. He'd been so proud that his young man had assented to understudy Ariel and Sebastian (on condition of not having to rehearse).

Six pages into *Cloud Atlas*, she heard a familiar engine-roar die outside.

*Speak of the devil*, thought Pippa, fondly, and set the daunting book down.

At her current stiff pace, the front door was already open when she reached it.

"You must have needed those keys," she said softly, "to finally have used them."

Crowley stood barefoot and coatless in the doorway, his unkempt hair flecked with ice.

Pippa considered his trembling hands: key-ring in one, overnight bag in the other.

"I won't impose," Crowley began, eyes everywhere but on her face. "That is, only if..."

*He's the right one, bless his heart*, Pippa thought, and felt her own breaking.

"Don't just stand there, you dear thing," she murmured, reaching. *Come in.*
"Here we are again," said Raphael, watching the taxi drive off. "Ass-end of nowhere, England, and the weather's drearier than last time. Is your inner Canadian happy?"

"Fuck off," Uriel said, already wheeling her suitcase briskly up the front walk. "I wear my Canadian-ness on my sleeve, thank you very much. Go Leafs!"

"Deplorable," Raphael muttered. He took up his jilted luggage and followed.

Aziraphale answered the door with the distant, glassy-eyed look of a creature that had spent the better part of a week not indulging its human body's recently acquired taste for sleep in favor of such pursuits as forty-hour reading binges (and indulging its human body's not-so-recently acquired taste for fits of acute, dithering worry).

"Oh, sweetie," said Uriel, falling on him with one of her impressive, uninvited full-body hugs, "why didn't you say something happened? I wouldn't have called staying with Pippa for a few days any cause for alarm, because I know what a rough patch she's been in since Harold died and how fond of her Crowley's grown, but—"

"I wish this were a warm-fuzzy social call," Raphael said, edging up behind her, "but it's not. There's some serious trouble afoot, and we wanted to compare notes."

"Come in," said Aziraphale, disentangling himself from Uriel. "I'll put on the kettle."

Raphael wrestled his boots off and then stood to take in his surroundings, neglecting to take off his coat. The cottage was ten degrees colder than it should have been, and a fine layer of dust had settled on the mantelpiece, which was, disturbingly, empty of any and all usual contents except for three picture frames.

The shot farthest to the left, he didn't recognize, mostly due to lack of context; it showed a half-smiling Crowley, safe behind his sunglasses, leaning casually against a nondescript bridge railing.

The second photograph was a somewhat blurred shot taken at a distance, but unmistakable in its origins (somebody, probably one of the Device-Pulsifer twins, had got a photo of Aziraphale and Crowley dancing to Unchained Melody at their sister's wedding).

The third image was also familiar and far more recent: Crowley standing on a bridge in front of Kyoto autumn leaves, sunglasses off, permitting that smile, the one he just couldn't help but hardly ever showed, to be captured for posterity.

Uriel stepped up quietly beside him, reaching to touch the frame. Behind them in the kitchen, clinking noises indicated that preparations on tea were underway.

"He took it all," Uriel whispered. "Not so much as a shell or a coin left behind."

"The question," replied Raphael, under his breath, "is what Az can possibly have done to make him think running off for an indeterminate period of time was a good idea."

"Your manners leave something to be desired," Aziraphale said, rattling in with the tea tray. "I would
explain why he's gone up the road to sulk, but I fear—"

"Then do," said Raphael, curtly, turning to face him. "No buts, please."

Aziraphale set the tray down on the coffee table and indicated that they should take seats on Crowley's beloved sofa and help themselves. Raphael prepared his cup of Earl Grey in silence, glancing every now and again to Aziraphale. He sat to Raphael's right in the tartan armchair, eyes fixed on the floor, perhaps choosing his words carefully.

"Uriel, my dear, you must know about the child," he sighed. "You would be the first."

"I do," she said, adding a spoonful of sugar to her cup. "Gabriel's doing."

Aziraphale took a shaky breath, nodded, and continued, "And has the nature of this soul, its state, its...whereabouts...changed at all since it entered your awareness?"

"No," she said, puzzled, giving Aziraphale a sharp look. "Why?"

Raphael watched Aziraphale's eyes lose a fraction of their dull, glazed resignation.

"Interesting," murmured the Principality. "Very much so. Thank you for your forthrightness. I suppose now is as good a time as any to explain..."

And he did. In painful, dispassionate detail, he told them what Crowley had done.

Raphael stared into his mug and swilled it, contents cooling before he'd had a taste.

*Something's not right*, sent Uriel, urgently. *The boy's still here, still waiting, still bound to Sophia as strongly as ever. I don't sense the termination, don't sense any physical loss. Is someone broadcasting interference? Are we being watched?*

*You must remember she's a witch*, Raphael sent back, and descended from the only one who was ever clever enough to give us and Hell alike the slip. He turned to Aziraphale and sighed, sipping the lukewarm tea. "First of all, I'm pleased you didn't kick him out. You're correct insofar as leaving the house was on his own initiative, but, second of all, do you even realize the depth of your fuck-up?"

Aziraphale stiffened and said, "Look, what I'm afraid of ought to be obvious. I know full well Crowley wouldn't hurt a flea even if one had him at sword-point, so his last minute bail-out was an admirable attempt at redeeming the situation, but what if it's really true that he just can't help what he is because of the decision he made—"

Raphael set down his teacup and stood, looming his full six feet and two inches. Not a card he pulled terribly often, and not usually with other angels, but the effect was cruelly satisfying. Aziraphale leaned back in the armchair and blinked.

"That's goddamned nonsense, Az, and you know it. He didn't choose what happened; it was thrust on him just as much as the rest of this cock-and-bull Ineffable Plan nonsense was thrust on us. We may not have chosen our initial roles as fully as we could have been permitted, but we've all done the best we can with a stacked hand, wouldn't you agree? No, no, I simply won't let you interrupt, so just shut your cake-hole and fucking listen. And before you call me a hypocrite, I'll do it for you: I distrusted your boy and doubted him up to a point, and, yes, not nice of me to have kept on teasing him for so long afterward. I've been working on that. Our little run-in with Michael last spring was a
bit of a wake-up call; there's an example of an angel who's frankly more rotten at his core than most
demons I've met, and maybe even most humans. Trufax, as they're now saying on the worldwide
web—oh, nice use of our camera and desk-chair, by the by. Know about it? Of course I do, darling,
don't look at me like that. But anyway, getting back on track: I'm as guilty in the past of making
assumptions based on so-called nature according to typology, when in fact it's all down to basic
nature of the soul. Michael's soul? Rotten. Gabriel's soul? Possibly even more rotten, as we're no
doubt going to discover before all of this is said and done. Crowley's soul? Good as gold, and look at
what you've gone and done to him."

Uriel made a tight, discomfited sound, eyes casting wildly about the room. She rose and went to the
window, twisting her head from side to side, and then suddenly her back was to the window, her
bow was drawn, and her eyes were fixed on the ceiling.

"What is it?" asked Aziraphale, on his feet a split-second later.

"Somebody's here," she said. "Very well cloaked, which says to me they're one of ours, or at least
somebody trained by one of ours. We are being watched."

"It can't be Michael or Gabriel," Aziraphale said. "Adam bound them."

"Like he bound us while he was at it," Raphael muttered. He found his pollaxe easily, pulled it from
thin air, and then looked questioningly at Aziraphale.

The Principality shook his head with an air of grave sadness. "Last time I called, it didn't come," he
said. "Wherever it's gone, again, the sword is lost. You saw what happened with the scythe. My best
guess is that I've been sentenced hereafter to make do with whatever's lying about."

The Archangels closed in on either side of him, weapons raised, and waited.

Twenty minutes later, the three of them still stood motionless and waiting.

"Nothing's coming," Uriel sighed, lowering her bow. "At least not now. It's gone."

Raphael frowned and spun the pollaxe like a baton; whistling, it vanished.

"We'll want to be on our guard, and we'll want to keep an eye on the Shambles, too."

Aziraphale had gone to the mantelpiece, resting his forearms heavily upon it.

"I'll go," Uriel said, stepping to place a hand on Aziraphale's shoulder. "I'll stand watch, just like in
the old days. They'll hopefully never know I'm there, and maybe I'll be able to find out if this thing
that's watching us has also got them in its sights."

"Thank you, dear girl," was all that Aziraphale said in solemn reply.

Raphael placed their mugs on the tea tray, hefted it to his hip, and left the room. Dishes were his least
favorite chore, but, right now, he didn't know what else to do. He was elbow deep in unpleasant
green-tinged Fairy suds before he noticed the sleek, well-fed field mouse that was perched on the
windowsill and watching him intently.

"We're awful creatures, all of us two-leggers," he told it. "Don't get involved."
The mouse twitched its nose scuttled off: across the counter, down to the floor, and vanished beneath the gnawed-up bit of wainscot next to the firmly shut front door.

* * *

Invisible within his human skin, Asmodai spread his nebulous fingers—wondrous, how even this shell responded to his habitual transformations with scarcely a thought—and watched. He'd scuttled lithely from the cottage rafters to the biting cold outside (he hardly felt it, although his new body seemed determined to make sure he'd at least noticed) and was now peering in through the kitchen window, rewarded with an eyeful of surly, worried-looking Archangel performing a task so menial as washing up.

Raphael was an interesting one; he'd taken a body considered variant by human standards, but had molded to his utmost advantage. In a nutshell, its metaphysical coding said this: one drop of blood in a human DNA test would show him for an intersex chimera, \(46XX/46XY\). Infamous for effortless fluidity, this one had always insisted on \(he\) for a pronoun even so. As Asmodai would do between himself and other eternals, but while interacting with humans, \(she\) would have to suffice. Secretly, Asmodai had always wanted to try his hand at being a master of disguise.

A sound from behind interrupted his reverie, sending a chill down his spine.

"What's a pretty thing like you doing out by your lonesome?" asked the voice.

Asmodai spun around and bowed low, palms pressed to the frozen ground.

"As you commanded me, Your Grace," he said. "As Gabriel did, if you'd rather."

Hastur took Asmodai by the shoulders and hauled him to his feet, looking him critically up and down. He paced a slow circle around Asmodai, running the hem of the purple wool coat between his fingertips and idly adjusting the patterned silk Hermès scarf knotted at Asmodai's throat. Touched Asmodai's hair, tracing the neat, coarse braids up to where they were knotted together at the crown of his head in graceful coils.

"Not all of us were cursed with fashion sense. Seems you've got it in spades."

Asmodai smiled thinly. "Does it please you, Your Grace? Would it?"

Hastur's unpleasant features softened for the briefest of moments, but a scowl swiftly replaced the befuddled flash of lust.

"Up There's rubbed off on you," he sniffed, wiping his nose on the wrist of his grubby overcoat.
"Twenty-four years you've been undercover, mate. How can you stand it? Gabriel's the worst."
"Revenge is patient," Asmodai said sweetly. "A virtue, even, dare I say it?"

Sighing heavily, Hastur nodded. "Yes, I told you to take your time about it. No mistakes, I said, and bless me if you haven't gone and delivered. Did you bring 'em?"

Asmodai fished in the innermost pocket of his coat, drawing out a packet. "Incinerated on crossing Heaven's outermost boundary," he said, laying the packet in Hastur's outstretched hand. "But perhaps ashes are better suited to your purposes."

"The ones from each of 'em you forged into the trace needle," he said. "Still whole?"

"The only whole feather in its construction belongs to the Principality, if you want to get technical, whereas it's single filaments from the other three worked straight into the needle. Your Grace, I've tried to keep my explanations simple. I know that complex machinery isn't your strong suit. It's not, ah, everyone's," Asmodai added.

"D'you know," said Hastur, thoughtfully, pocketing the packet of feather-ashes, "that you're the only one who bothers callin' me that these days?"

"You are my Duke," said Asmodai, this time favoring a curtsy. "I will obey."

"Nobody Up There suspects your defection was insincere?" Hastur asked.

"Not a soul," replied Asmodai, grinning, white teeth bared. "None I know of."

"Dagon didn't suspect, either, to your credit," Hastur said with satisfaction.

"What's he up to these days? I miss him," Asmodai admitted. "The old task-master."

"Gone soft as an angel's arse," Hastur muttered. "Anything else you got for me?"

"Just a question," Asmodai said. "Discord has been achieved. Further orders?"

Hastur smiled his slow, terrible sharp-toothed smile and vanished.

*I'LL WORK THE CHARM TO WEAKEN THEM*, he said in Asmodai's head. *DESTROY CRAWLY AND SCAR THE REST. STRIKE WHEN AND WHERE IT WILL HURT MOST.*

"Yes, Your Grace," said Asmodai, and decided a stroll on the beach was in order.

* * *

"Royal Flush, read 'em and weep," said Mandy, laying her cards flat on the table. She scooped up the pot with satisfaction. It consisted mostly of pound coins and fivers, but she'd take anything she
could get these days. She missed getting regular tips.

Adam whistled and dropped his cards on the untidy remnants of the deck.

"You've got the devil's luck," he said. "That's a nice haul. One more hand?"

"I have no more pocket change," said Iván, glumly. "Fortunately, I'm with her."

"Maybe in a little while," said Sophia. She'd sat quiet and pale across the table from Mandy, and it was more than she'd said in one breath all evening. "Excuse me," she added, and got to her feet. There was something trance-like about her progress toward the loo, as if she didn't know the way. For crying out loud, it was her own flat.

Adam frowned apologetically at Mandy and Iván by turns. "Sorry about that," he said. "She hasn't been feeling well. I told her we could put off tonight if she was still under the weather, but she insisted you guys come."

Mandy averted her gaze and got up, stretching with a feigned yawn.

"I need a break, too," she said. "I'll go check on her while I'm at it."

Iván shot her a questioning look, but she ignored it and went straight for the bathroom door. Light filtered out from under it, and she could hear Sophia breathing.

"Let me in," said Mandy, knocking softly. "Please, Soph. If you can."

The door swung inward, and, caught off-guard, she stumbled inside.

"I insisted on tonight because I wanted to see you," Sophia said, taking Mandy's hands once she'd closed the door. "I didn't thank you properly for coming to get me."

"You weren't in any state to be thinking about things like that," Mandy insisted. "And even then, you don't have to. It's what any decent friend would have done."

"Don't be so angry with him," Sophia pleaded. "Leave that to me. I'm almost over it, even. If you knew what I know about his past, I don't think you'd blame him."

"You were cursing him every which way when I found you. What's changed?"

"My head's cleared," said Sophia, sadly. "A little. I'm still not sure..."

"You shouldn't keep it if you don't want to keep it," said Mandy, desperately, both hands on Sophia's shoulders. "What with all the stress you've been under, I'd say pregnancy poses a risk to your well-being. Are you still getting morning sickness?"

"No," Sophia said. "Listen, I've been trying to tell you, I don't know—"

"And I don't care about where Crowley's been," Mandy insisted, sitting down on the edge of the bathtub. "All I know is that he did an incredibly shitty thing, leaving you out there like that, and he'd better apologize the next time he sees you."

Sophia sat down beside her, and it was then Mandy realized just how much weight she'd lost over
the nine months since she'd got married.

"If I know anything about Crowley, it's that he'd never hurt anyone if he could help it," she said desperately, wringing her hands. "He makes a hobby of annoying people if he feels it's justified, but he's so subtle about it. Sometimes he'll even use that to get a message across. But hurt people intentionally? That's a rare thing, because he'd hurt himself in the process."

"Pippa tells me he's been camped out in her spare bedroom for five days."

"What? Really? Oh, God, I didn't think he'd be foolish enough to tell..."

Mandy stared at the floor and dug the toe of her ballet flat between the tiles. "He didn't. Not voluntarily, anyway. I drove over there right after dropping you off and gave Crowley a piece of my mind, just assuming Aziraphale would've been in on it or possibly even hoping he'd still be at the theatre, and it...didn't go so well."

Sophia groaned and covered her face, mumbling a string of curses. It was eerie.

"Are you being straight with me when you claim you and Crowley aren't related?" Mandy asked. "You guys seem like the most dysfunctional cousins I ever saw."

"If I could tell you why my family knows him," said Sophia, plaintively, "I would."

Mandy tilted her head and peered into Sophia's eyes, resisting the urge to cry.

"Will you please tell me what's going on here? Not now, but sometime?"

"I can't promise that," Sophia said, "but there's something else I need to tell you."

Biting her lower lip, Mandy closed her eyes until the sting of tears subsided.

"Okay," she said. "Shoot. I've only cut you off like three times anyway."

* * *

"What do you think of this one, then?" Crowley asked, holding out the piece of eight.

Robert took the ancient, sea-polished coin reverently between thumb and forefinger and set it in the palm of his left hand. He cupped his right hand and flipped the silver disc over into it, his dark eyes wide with admiration.

"It's luminous," he said. "I learned that word today. It means very shiny."

"That it is," Crowley agreed, astonished to find that he'd cracked a smile for the first time in six days.
"Maybe when you're old enough you can borrow it for show and tell."

"We only have show and tell for one more year," said Rob, concerned.

"Then you can take it to school next year," Crowley promised. "But not before."

"Cor!" said the boy, breaking into a wide grin. He looked like his mother.

"I've got to put it back now," Crowley said, carefully taking back the coin.

"Where's Gran gone?" Rob asked. "Has she seen it? We should let her."

"Just to check on the ducks," Crowley said. "And yes, she's seen it loads of times."

"Ducks?" said Rob. This was news to him, as Nicola had only just dropped him off.

"Yep," Crowley said. "Out in the sunroom. Would you like to meet them?"

"Are you mental?" Rob asked, hopping excitedly up and down. "Yeah!"

The sunroom floor was strewn with towels; most of them were Pippa's ratty old ones, but some of them purchased just for the occasion. Crowley nudged the boy forward to where his grandmother sat cross-legged in the midst of the heat-lamp warmed chaos.

Pippa had Tamar and Judith asleep in her lap, and she was doling out meal-worms and diced mango to the other four ducks as they milled about her and squabbled with one another over who got to paddle in the roasting pan full of water.

"Six," Rob blurted. "That's more than there are by my school. Do they bite?"

"Jemima does," Crowley said, pointing. "She's the one with the white patch under her chin, see? That's Jude and Tamar in your Gran's lap, and the two trying to get in the water are Ruth and Lilith. The one who's taken her mango under the chair is Eve."

"Then I shan't touch Jemima," Rob said, hesitantly approaching Pippa. "Is she called that because of Beatrix Potter? My teacher read us those books."

"Sharp lad," Pippa said, giving Rob a handful of mango. "Go give that to Lilith."

The boy hesitated, looking at Crowley. "All the rest are Bible names," he said.

"That's right," Crowley said. "How did you know?" Rob's parents weren't religious.

"Pap Garmon tells me stories from his church," Rob said, and went to find Lilith.

"That's Trevor's father," Pippa explained to Crowley. "You met him at the hospital."

"He'll have a thorough education when all's said and done," Crowley mused, and sat down beside Pippa. He scanned the space and frowned away as many messes as he could find while Rob was busy explaining to Lilith that she mustn't eat too quickly.

"It was kind of you to show him your treasures," Pippa said. "I know it must hurt."
Crowley shrugged and let Eve clamber into his lap. She plucked at his worn t-shirt and butted her feathery head up under his chin. Crowley gave her a meal-worm. "Uriel found some of them," he said. "And I found most of the rest."

"You wear grief so ill," Pippa told him. "Why don't you go back and talk to him?"

"Because I want him to realize what he's like sometimes. How much harm he's done."

"He must be hurting just as much as you are," Pippa said, "and just can't show it."

"Oh, sure," said Crowley, rubbing Eve's breast-feathers till she settled down drowsily. "Stand up for him this time, what when you're usually so keen on scolding him."

"Listen, young man," Pippa said, stroking Tamar's back as she started to squeak about Jude's leg poking her wing. "I'll live to see you two married if it's the last thing I do."

Crowley sighed and watched Rob instructing Lilith and Ruth in diving for bits of mango submerged at the bottom of the roasting pan. Neither duck looked impressed. "I'll give him a few more days, much good may it do us both," he finally said.

"That's wise," Pippa said. "Make sure you've got your heads on straight. You've got far more years ahead of you yet than Harold and I had even as a matter of course."

Shaken, Crowley let his eyes dart back to her. If she didn't know, she was close.

"What makes you say that?" he asked, smoothing down Eve's unkempt wing-feathers.

"You're young yet," replied Pippa, and winked at him. "Just wait and see."

* * *

Watching the perplexing scene unfold before him, Ligur was certain of only two things: one, that Crowley had baffling taste in human associates, and two, that those ducks would prove very tasty if roasted (thanks to the careful hand-rearing and choice diet).

He turned away at length and sat down in the frost-rimed grass, heedless of the sand that stuck to his trousers and relishing the freezing sensation of the sunroom's glass-panel window at his back. What should he tell Dagon? That he'd come directly to the first place he'd sensed Crowley's presence and found him bunking down with a sweet old lady and her sickeningly precious grandson?

There had been no sign of the dangerous one with a funny name, and for that, at least, Ligur was almost grateful.
A sudden fluttering and scratching from above jarred him out of his reverie.

"You ain't one of them ducks," Ligur told the red-eyed white dove that landed unceremoniously on the ground in front of him. "That's for sure. Yer name?"

The dove shook itself and transformed: a pretty demoness sat glaring at him.

"I'm Tanith," she said, brushing off her sleeves. "Er, that is—Your Grace."

Ligur shrugged and said, "Nobody calls me that no more. S'just Ligur."

Tanith's wary expression softened, and she held out her stark, pale hand.

"Then it's a pleasure to properly meet you. I mean, unless it's not, in which case..."

Ligur shook her hand and dropped it. She was hot to the touch, fresh from fire.

"Wot you doin' up here, anyway? Did the old man send you to keep tabs?"

"Yes," Tanith said, tucking her chin-length black hair behind her ear. "Well—yes and no. There's an old friend of mine mixed up in all of this business, so I couldn't refuse."

"It ain't Crawly, is it? He weren't friends with nobody back in the day. Never really—hum, wot d'you call it, fit in, as them human buggers say. But he was good at arguin' with the higher-ups. Had a way of seein' inside the hypocrisy of things."

"No," said Tanith, softly, rising to move toward the glass structure on which she'd attempted to land only moments before. She pressed her palms flat against the window and peered inside, steam rising from beneath her fingertips. "It's not him."

"Well, that's him in there, or at least it was last I checked," said Ligur, joining her for a second look. "Dunt know about the lady and the kid. Or them ducks. You looked up lots of stuff and knew that girl in the scry. Who're these ones? Are they important?"

"Phillippa Morrison, known as Pippa. And the boy is called Robert Garmon."

Her breath frosted the glass as she spoke; she wrote something with her fingertip.

"And your friend wot's mixed up in this," ventured Ligur, awkwardly, "is it one of them? One of the humans? Aside from Crawly and the one that's not human, Az-somethin', Dagon didn't mention nobody else tangled up in this business."

"Aziraphale," said Tanith, her eyes never once leaving Crawly as he shooed the ducks and pulled the boy out of the pan full of water and helped the old lady to her feet.

"That one," said Ligur, nodding. "D'you know why he's dangerous? Dagon didn't say."

Tanith turned to look at him somewhat incredulously, cocking her head to one side.

"Do you mean to tell me you didn't read the file I prepared on this assignment?"

"Yeah," Ligur replied. "So maybe you'd better tell me why he's dangerous."
"He's dangerous for the same reason that my old friend is dangerous," Tanith said.

"And why's that?" Ligur asked. "For a smart'un, you speak in circles and nonsense."

"Because they're angels," replied Tanith. "An Archangel and a Principality, in fact."

Ligur let this information sink in, and, a full minute later, decided he didn't like it.

* * *

Aziraphale huffed, lowering his broom. The chase had ended in a stand-off.

"How many more holes have you gnawed in my walls?" he demanded. "Give me one good reason why I ought not to nip right down to Tesco and pick up some rat poison."

The mouse just sat on its hind legs and stared back at him, breathing fast.

"Oh, don't you play that card," Aziraphale said. "What would Crowley say indeed!"

The mouse dropped down on all fours, creeping forward to sniff at the broom.

"Yes, I don't doubt you smell what's left of crumbs from yesterday's scones."

Scuttling halfway up the broom's bristles, the mouse stuck its nose in and munched.

Aziraphale sighed and propped the broom against the wall, crouching to watch.

"Go on, gorge yourself," he said. "Perhaps you'll fall and save me the trouble."

The mouse stopped foraging and climbed up a bit further, until he was at nose-level with Aziraphale. He sniffled the air as close to Aziraphale's face as he could manage.

"My, you're a brave one," said Aziraphale, transfixed. "You always have been."

The mouse tilted its head and stuck out its tiny pink tongue, perhaps a yawn.

"Very clever," Aziraphale told it. "There's no doubt where you learned sarcasm."

Raising one tiny, well-groomed paw to its mouth, the mouse preened itself.

"Pride is a sin, you know. You're no different from the rest of God's creatures."

The mouse sniffed at him, contrarily twitching its fine silver-white whiskers.
"You've grown old," said Aziraphale, in awe. "Is it us? Have we kept you?"

The rodent scuttled back down, from handle to bristles to floor, and sat blinking.

"I don't know what to do," Aziraphale whispered. "I simply don't. Do you?"

The mouse considered this for a moment, and then scampered down the hall.

Raphael wandered out of the study and stood blinking at Aziraphale, his eyes darting sidelong in the direction the mouse had gone. He had a mug in one hand and a notepad in the other, his eyes glinting with something like restrained laughter.

"He's a cheeky fellow, that one," Raphael said at length. "Met him yesterday."

"Crowley's spoiled the little wretch rotten, I'm afraid," Aziraphale said.

"From the look of things," Raphael replied, walking on past, "so have you."

Aziraphale rose and followed, ready to protest, snatching the broom as he went.

* * *

"Now my charms are all o'erthrown, and what strength I have's mine own—which is most faint. Now, 'tis true: I must be here confined by you, or sent to Naples—"

"Stop," said Rani, frazzled, running her fingers through her hair. "I said, STOP!"

"But we've only just begun?" protested Aziraphale, eternally polite and tentative.

"Where's your brain right now, exactly? And, no, can't be in your trousers, because I've seen neither hide, nor hair of your Anthony in over a week. Trouble at home?"

Aziraphale flustered and turned faintly pink, indignantly lowering his script.

"Let me not, since I have my dukedom got and pardon'd the deceiver, dwell," he continued stubbornly, speaking swiftly so as not to be cut off, "in this bare island by your spell—but release me from my bands, with the help—"

"You need more of it than I can give you," said Rani, tartly, and made a few notes. Scattered. Not enough depth of feeling, or maybe the wrong tone. Falls flat. "I don't believe you've pardoned anybody, not for a second. Who's the deceiver?"

"—of your good hands," Aziraphale forged on, and then inhaled, closing his eyes. "Gentle breath of
yours my sails must fill, or else my project fails, which was to...to please. Now I want spirits to enforce, art to enchant, and my ending is despair—"

"Why?" Rani asked, finding herself more affected than she ought to have been.

"—unless I be relieved by prayer, which pierces so that it assaults mercy itself," said Aziraphale, too quietly, but in the right emotional register, "and frees all faults."

"Come down," Rani said, grateful they were alone in the theatre, "and tell me what happened, because then I've got something to tell you, and we'll both need a drink."

Aziraphale plunked himself down in the seat beside her and stuffed his script back into the canvas London Review of Books tote-bag he'd taken to carrying to rehearsal. Out of it, as if in answer to Rani's prayer, he drew a screw-top bottle of nondescript 2012 Beaujolais that had probably been languishing in the bargain bin at Tesco.

"To make a long story short," he said, twisting off the cap, "Crowley and I had a rather impressive row, and he's been hiding out at Pippa's ever since."

"Good place to hide," said Rani, accepting the bottle, and took a long swig. "I'd go to someone like her if someone like you had put me in the doghouse, no question."

"I didn't kick him out," said Aziraphale, testily, and snatched the bottle back. He drank down almost a quarter of it, which Rani might have found shocking if they hadn't already gone for post-rehearsal drinks several times. "He left of his own accord."

"People never do that unless they're hurt. Or fear causing further harm."

"Oh, he's hurt. Indubitably, dear girl. And it's partly, if not mostly, my doing."

On her next turn with the bottle, Rani drank down the equivalent of a glass.

"Then you'd best go fetch him, lad, and kiss and make up and all that, because I've got some grim news. Gregory can only perform Ariel the first weekend of the run."

Aziraphale almost dropped the bottle when she handed it back, blinking stupidly.

"Crowley's our only understudy."

"Yes."

"Not fond of the idea to begin with."

"Mhmmm."

"And I've got to break the news to him," Aziraphale sighed.

"You bet your arse you do," Rani said, patting his shoulder.

They sat drinking in relative silence from there on out, and they even managed to put a decent dent in Aziraphale's miraculously produced second bottle before Letitia caught them at it, made an almighty fuss, and told them to find greener pastures.
As Above, So Below [Part 3 / 3]

The bottle of obscure human intoxicant had appeared in Michael's quarters on the same day that a box of incense had turned up on Gabriel's desk.

Aziraphale's brief note had been somewhat cryptic: *Enjoy in moderation.* Fuck that. The poor sod was a Principality, the old joke went, because he didn't know the meaning of the word.

The bottle completely lacked Roman characters, and the symbols creeping across the label bore no resemblance to anything celestial or infernal. The only certainties were that it was a) far too small for something masquerading as wine, and b) went down about as smoothly as Samael's early earthbound experiments in bath-basin hooch.

Michael drank it in four skeptical gulps, sat coughing until the burning in his throat subsided, and blinked with keen interest as the room began to swim pleasantly.

*Speaking of Gabriel,* he thought, *I ought to pay old bossy-robes a visit.*

The way to Gabriel's office was longer and far more winding than Michael remembered it being the last time he'd gone (and *that* particular meeting had been a disaster and a half, no small thanks to the botched interdimensional travel attempts). He found the door inexplicably closed, so he hammered on it with both fists until it swung open.

"Enter," Gabriel said from his habitual post at the desk. "Oh. It's you."

"What the hell's so compelling that you sit staring at that goddamned needle all day?" Michael demanded, wobbling his way to the chair opposite Gabriel. Operations should really see to those floor tiles. "Give it up. They're on Earth, we're up here, and there's not a fucking thing you can do about it. Isandriel and Galdor keep asking if you'll join us for dice, but I have to keep making your godawful vague apologies."

"Language," sighed Gabriel, but his tone was one of resignation. He leaned forward and sniffed the aether an inch from Michael's nose. "And whatever you've just drunk is, by my nose and by human reckoning, approximately forty percent alcohol."

"Language," sighed Gabriel, but his tone was one of resignation. He leaned forward and sniffed the aether an inch from Michael's nose. "And whatever you've just drunk is, by my nose and by human reckoning, approximately forty percent alcohol."

"Huh," Michael said, momentarily impressed with Aziraphale's judgement.

Gabriel sat back in his seat and folded his hands on top of some parchments.

"What do you want?" he asked. "If this is a social call, it'll have to wait."

Michael shrugged and regarded the needle, momentarily fascinated by the glowing filaments. The unusual spiked pattern in the yellow one had begun to subside, but it glowed with a steady, subdued halo, as did the blue and the red. Aziraphale's feather had nothing of the luminescent whiteness that he'd seen on it once before; it glimmered with a dull, curious silver-grey phosphor even in the brightly lit office.

"Complicated weird-ass gadget," he said, unhooking the needle, testing its protruding point against his left index finger. "So it tells you *what*—no, wait, let me guess, all four of 'em are in the same place at the same time, and the ashy glow and the spiky thing mean Dither-Wings and the Serpent
are having a lovers' spat. Am I right?"

"Bizarrely, yes," Gabriel conceded. "You must have been paying attention last time."

Michael grinned at him. "I have brains, too, you know," he insisted. "I do."

Gabriel, who had been watching the needle with renewed interest, abruptly frowned.

"Put it back," he said. "Your fingers are in the way, and it's shifting—"

"Ow!" Michael shouted, and dropped it on the floor. "It's gone hot."

"Pick it up," said Gabriel, in his This Is An Order tone, "and put it back."

Michael did as he was told, but the endeavor left him sucking desultorily on his fingers while Gabriel leaned forward and watched, with something like confusion or horror (Or maybe it's both, Michael thought drunkenly), as a viscous, tarry black ichor began to ooze from the eye of the needle and flow inexorably downward.

"Not possible," Gabriel whispered. He rose and backed away from the desk, and then, as if only just remembering himself, hauled Michael out of the chair and said, "Run!"

They did, and, once clear of Gabriel's office, the corridor seemed to spin around them. Something flared blinding green, a flash-bulb reaction, and then exploded in a deafening wave of glittering silver and electrum shards from Gabriel's office doorway.

"Shit," Gabriel said, steadying both of them against the wall.

"Got that right," muttered Michael, and promptly passed out.

* * *

Leaning patiently over the scry on Dagon's desk, Hastur admired his handiwork.

Breaking into the old bureaucrat's office had been the easy part, of course. Why Lord of the Files, Master of Madness, and Under-Duke of the Seventh Torment outranked the likes of him and Ligur was, frankly, mystifying. In the Beginning, when the titles had got handed out, somebody had valued the managerial class a bit too highly.

But it wasn't Hastur's place—or anyone's, really—to question the Morningstar.

He flicked the last bit of ash from beneath his thumbnail at the bottom-most point of the glowing pentagram he'd drawn in the surface of the scry.
It fizzled exquisitely, strobed white-red-blue-gold, and a jet of greenish flame knocked him backwards.

Which was how Dagon found him several seconds later as the smoke cleared, on his arse in the middle of the office floor and covered in fragments of goat-leather chair.

"Hello, lad," said Dagon, pleasantly. "Indulging in a spot of pyromancy, are we?"

Hastur rose and dusted off his overcoat, took his best stab at looking dignified.

"All in the line of duty, sir," he said. "Would you like to have a look?"

Dagon stood over the scry, as if attempting to work out what charm had been deployed, and then turned to regard Hastur with a disturbingly neutral expression. "I've sent two into the line of danger, and it would appear you've also sent one."

"Years ago," Hastur said. "What's done is done. Asmodai knew the risks involved."

"You're a horse's ass and a fool," said Dagon. "He'll be facing down two Archangels, a Principality, and a rogue ex-employee. And, what's worse, I don't know whose side Ligur and Tanith will take. If they'll take any side in this odd affair at all."

"Ligur?" echoed Hastur, stupidly. "He's up there? You bastard! What for?"

Dagon sighed heavily and sat down at his desk, brushing away the ashy remnants.

"I wanted to know how Crawly was getting on. Selfish curiosity, pure and simple."

Hastur considered this for a few seconds. Nothing wrong with indulging selfishness.

"How is Crawly getting on?" he asked, before he realized what he was saying.

"You sent Asmodai topside as a mole to destroy him," Dagon said, "and you mean to tell me you don't even know how our erstwhile serpent has been occupying himself?"

"Once a snake, always a snake," Hastur shot back. "Take it from me. I know."

"Your unwillingness to let go of certain likely-hallucinated events puzzles me."

Never mind that the climate in Dagon's office was consistently a few thousand degrees above sweltering; Hastur felt whatever he had instead of blood and sweat run cold. "You sent him up there without fair warning, I'd wager. Does he know?"

"Does he know how dangerous the shamed Principality remains? Yes."

Hastur cast about the office for something to ram through Dagon's windpipe, but there was nothing of any use. He could have used one of the candelabrum as a club, but that wouldn't have been as satisfying as skewering the old fool with something pointy.

"You'd best get up there if you'd like to look out for him, lad," Dagon said.

"What makes you say that?" asked Hastur, uncertainly. "Where are you taking this?"
"Go," said Dagon, waving his hand in disgust. "You have leave. Now, get out."

"Yessir," Hastur muttered, jamming his hands deep in his pockets, and left.

* * *

Uriel had all but fallen asleep in the bay-window nook when someone knocked on the door. She yawned and stretched, double-checking her invisibility ward. She'd always been good at cloaking, but a sleep-hazed human body often meant lowered defenses.

Crowley, passing by with a mug of something hot in hand, spectacularly dropped it.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed, hastily retrieving the mug and waving the mess away. "How am I supposed to explain your presence when Pippa gets back, eh?"

"Wrong inflection," she told him, rising to stretch. "It's _eh_. Come live in Canada for a while, and we'll show you how it's done. Okay, listen: sorry to cut greetings short, but we've got a problem. I'm not invisible anymore, and I can't seem to restore the ward. Do you know anything about counter-charms and stupid shit like that?"

Crowley was frowning at her as if he knew _exactly_ what counter-charm or unspecified stupid shit might be the cause of their present conundrum. He sighed gloomily. "Hastur's good with that sort of thing. Aside from setting things on fire."

"But in order to mess with our metaphysical cores, he'd have to have got his hands on..." Uriel felt her stomach sink. "Oh," she said, running both hands through her unkempt hair and then back as if to touch her wings. "Oh. Fuck fuck fuck shit—"

"Sorry," Crowley said, indicating she should follow him to Pippa's kitchen. "You've lost me. In order to mess with our metaphysical cores, he'd have to have got _what_?"

"I just figured something out," she said, "and the implications aren't pretty. Gabriel's had this...oh, I'd like to say butt-boy, but in reality Asmodai's really just his PA—"

"Asmodai? Gosh. Not that we were close, but I haven't seen him since—"

"Don't interrupt; this will make a bit more sense in a minute. Back when...back when you and Aziraphale helped the Antichrist and all those humans shut down the Apocalypse, there was...a lot of shouting. Lots of trying to figure out who was to blame for what, a lot of questioning, and, above all, a _lot_ of doubt. The Metatron and Beelzebub had a series of talks, and one of several pointless results was that both sides issued an amnesty for any parties on the opposing side who might want either to defect or to come back. A reshuffling of sorts. Allegiances reconsidered, reset button hit. I'm not sure what they thought would come of it, but a very small number from each side crossed over to the
other. Asmodai came back. I'm sure the fact that Daddy Dearest was on our side helped, or I think that's what we were meant to believe."

Crowley was so flummoxed he'd quite forgot his objective was refilling the kettle.

"So some demons went back to Heaven, and some angels went to Hell. Your point?"

"I think Asmodai went as a spy, but as to who sent him, I have no clue."

Crowley dropped the kettle in the sink and leaned weakly on the counter's edge. "This is where I pick up the narrative," he said. "I can tell you who it was. Three guesses, and the first two don't count. Raphael crossed him once. Bad blood there."

"Something tells me the perp has already cropped up in this conversation."

"If Hastur has even the faintest memory of what I did to Ligur, then that's justification enough," Crowley said. "That and he'd just like to see me suffer."

Uriel nudged Crowley aside—he was shaking, useless, no sense in letting him continue under the illusion he had the focus required for making tea—and fished the kettle out of the sink. She dried it with a dish towel, refilled it, and set it back in its cradle. The switch flipped beneath her thumb's pressure with a neat, satisfying click.

"This is nasty shit," she said. "You guys have got to stop this and help us figure out what Gabriel and Hastur have got planned for Asmodai—individually of each other, Jesus fuck—and also figure out if the two-timing creep has got any plans of his own."

"Gabriel will have issued him a body," Crowley said. "I haven't seen any strangers."

"Body or no body, he'll have kept himself on the DL," Uriel said, fetching two fresh mugs from the dish rack. "I'm sure Gabriel has sent him to spy on Aziraphale—" she tactfully omitted the part about Gabriel and Asmodai seeing to it that Sophia had got pregnant in order to produce a vessel to hold some boy-child destined for unspecified glory; Crowley was probably still sore about the situation as it was "—whereas Hastur's two-decade-and-change plan is, as you say, focused on taking you out."

"To the bloody cleaners," murmured Crowley, distantly, and then shuddered.

Uriel snapped her fingers in front of him. "No time for freaking out. Focus."

Just then, with perfect comic timing, somebody knocked on the door.

"Crowley, dear," Pippa called from outside. "You'll never guess who I found on my way home from Tesco! Don't be contrary, now," she said. "Open the door."

Crowley rolled his eyes and made a curt gesture; the door promptly obeyed.

"Mustn't have been locked after all," Pippa was saying to Aziraphale as she ushered him in the door, "I'm so forgetful these days, you see, and I'm sure your young man's got no use for locks at home when you're about to keep a watchful eye..."

She stared at Uriel for a few moments, the unexpected presence not registering.
"I'd neglected to mention she and Rafe are in town," Aziraphale said hastily. "Staying with me, in fact, and of course they wanted to know where Crowley was, so I—"

Uriel gave Pippa a sheepish little wave. "Hi there," she said. "Long time no see!"

Much to Uriel's relief, Pippa's confusion dissolved into a fit of delighted laughter.

"Come here, you," she said, and promptly squashed the breath out of Uriel.

"Always the last to know," Crowley said pointedly to Aziraphale. "As usual."

"My dear, you left before I could say anything. And now here we are."

Uriel disentangled herself from Pippa's shopping bags and stepped in.

"You guys are stupid," she told them, "and Aziraphale wants you to come home."

Pippa set her bags down and straightened up, hands on hips. "Is that so?"

Aziraphale gave a rueful sigh. "I never asked him to go. I needed to think."

"You've had well over a week," Crowley told him, arms folded. "Any conclusions?"

"Not any I should like to air for public consumption, but this much I can say," said Aziraphale, somewhat regretfully, and shifted his stance. "Gregory's unable to perform with us during the second weekend of the run, which means Rani respectfully requires your presence once before curtain-up next week, preferably at the next rehearsal in two days' time. Just a block of twenty minutes or so at the very end will do. She wants us to run the audition scene, just to reassure her we're all on the same page."

Crowley twitched and folded his arms more tightly against his chest. Uriel just wanted to hug him when that kind of body language kicked in, and the absence of his sunglasses just made things ten times worse. He looked so incredibly fragile.

"Are we on the same page?" he asked, eyes fixed unblinking on Aziraphale.

"To the very last," Aziraphale said, reaching for him. "My dear, please come home."

Pippa had busied herself with putting away the groceries, pretending not to listen, but her conspicuous pause to sniffle into a square of paper towel gave her away.

"We'd better go," Uriel said, nodding at the door. "Somebody promised Rafe dinner."

"Better collect your things," Pippa told Crowley, but her intent was aimed elsewhere.

"I'll get them," said Aziraphale, hastily, and made his way into the adjoining room.

"You're good," Uriel told Pippa, fetching her surreptitiously planted coat from the peg.
Iván heard the Bentley before he saw it. He put down the pot he'd been scrubbing (last night's dinner had gone a bit wrong; even chefs sometimes suffered for their art) and went over to the window. Iván recognized two of the three parties emerging from the car, but not the slender, wiry blonde in a houndstooth pea-coat. Her earrings whirled in the breeze, beset by errant snowflakes. He went to the door and let them in.

"Ene maitea, you have company!" Iván called over his shoulder.

"Kabroi, utzi pakean!" Mandy shouted. "I'm still watching this!"

Taking note of the slightly chagrined expressions that Aziraphale, Crowley, and their unspecified hanger-on wore, he wondered at how wise it had been to spend the past six months teaching his girlfriend Basque. She'd taken well to the fact that swearing was all but obligatory, and Crowley (having proved his proficiency in Iván's native language) would certainly know that in response to having been so courteously addressed as My love, Mandy had promptly shot back with Asshole, leave me alone.

"Please come in," Iván said. "She will be a few more minutes."

"Never attempt to separate that girl from her telly," Crowley muttered.

Iván offered his guests coffee and quickly learned that the attractive punk-chic blonde was named Uriel. They chattered aimless pleasantries, although there was a definite air of tension between Aziraphale and Crowley, and given that Mandy had mentioned some kind of fight between them, it wasn't surprising. Uriel was insufferably upbeat.

"I'm afraid we haven't got long," Crowley said at length. "Can you fetch her?"

"Yes, may the devil take her," Iván sighed. "I will. Give me a moment."

On his way out of the kitchen, he wondered vaguely why Uriel was laughing.

"Is it really that important?" Mandy asked, looking up from her laptop when Iván poked his head into the bedroom. "I don't want to talk to them. They're both jerks."

"I think there was some misunderstanding," Iván said. "Just see what they want?"

"Misunderstanding, my arse," Mandy said, but she took off her headphones and got up. "This had better not take long. I'd been looking forward to marathoning all week."

"They have to go soon," Iván reassured her, holding the bedroom door wide open.

He trailed after Mandy into the kitchen, not quite sure if he ought to hang around for what was coming or not. She'd gone to see them a little over a week ago regarding an as-yet unspecified conflict with Sophia, and she'd come back so angry that Iván had feared apoplexy.
Only once she'd calmed down had he been able to get out of her that Aziraphale had said something extraordinarily condescending and that Crowley was a massive douchebag. In an attempt at being helpful, Iván had pointed out that men of their generation weren't necessarily with it, and all that had got him was a glare. He opted for hanging back in the doorway.

Everyone but Uriel ignored him. Her eyes were a pale, sharp grey, silvery in the artificial light. She sounded American.

"Making house-calls?" Mandy asked. "Hey, haven't seen you since the wedding."

"Nice to see you," Uriel said, her eyes briefly flicking away from Iván.

Aziraphale rose and pushed his chair, sighing down at his unfinished coffee.

"To say that I owe you an apology would, I fear, be an understatement."

Mandy nodded and took a step closer to him. "Damn straight it would."

"What I should have said was merely that your approach was unhelpful."

Crowley cleared his throat and cringed with what was clearly contact embarrassment.

"Where's this going?" Mandy asked. "You do realize you can't save face, right?"

"Yes," sighed Aziraphale, ruefully, "and I'm genuinely sorry for having insulted you."

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" asked Uriel, glancing slyly up at him.

Ah, Iván thought. *The American mystery friend comes as a mediator.*

"For him, it's harder than you'd think," Crowley muttered under his breath.

Aziraphale stalwartly pretended he hadn't heard the disparaging remark.

"Can you forgive me, dear girl? We've missed you greatly."

Mandy nodded slowly, but with a touch of distraction; her eyes were on Crowley.

Iván knew she'd been in love with him once; she'd never even tried to hide it. He'd been on shift that afternoon when she'd returned flustered from the kitchen door with a twenty-pound note in her hand. She said she'd sold their last mushrooms to him.

"Please go to her," Mandy said to Crowley. "She has something to tell you."

"I have plenty to tell her myself," said Crowley. "Bihar," he promised.

*Tomorrow,* Iván echoed to himself, returning quietly to the sink while the tension broke and settled into cautious conversation between the four of them. *Tomorrow, I will ask her to explain everything about this six-ways-to-Sunday fucked situation.*
Tanith flew down from her perch in the eaves as soon as she spotted the Bentley approaching a small distance up the road. She had no idea where Ligur was—still lurking about Pippa's cottage, probably—but her more immediate concern was trained on the fact that she'd seen plenty of Raphael through the windows of this particular cottage, but none of Uriel whatsoever. Which was puzzling in the extreme.

She'd felt her old lover, that much was certain. She would never forget.

As a white dove pecking idly in the frost, she watched Aziraphale, Crowley, and Uriel emerge from the Bentley and hasten their way inside. As soon as the door had shut, she shifted shape, cloaked herself, and stepped up to the kitchen window.

Raphael was at the dining-room table, smoking a cigarette and poring over his notebook, but as soon as he saw the arrivals, he stubbed out the fag and hastened to meet Uriel at the door. He hung her coat for her and swung her up in his arms, effortless, as if he hadn't seen her in days.

Visually, they made an incongruous pair; once Uriel's feet hit the floor, it was astonishing to see that Raphael towered over her by nearly a foot.

Her throat clenched as she watched them kiss, and by the time the embrace had degenerated into jibes and arse-grabbing, the other pair had gone missing. *Fuck*, Tanith thought. Sucking in her breath, she walked right through the wall.

From this close, she risked one of the others sensing her presence, but she hadn't much choice. She crept down the darkened hallway until she found the one door with a knife's-edge sliver of light filtering out from under it. Tempted to pass through, she remained motionless where she was with her ear pressed up against it.

"...will have to collect them tomorrow," Crowley was saying. "They'll wear her out."

"As long as Rob's there, I don't doubt he'll see to care and feeding," said Aziraphale.


By placement of their voices, Crowley was stationary on the bed, while Aziraphale moved about the room. She wondered if she'd hear anything not meant for her consumption, or if they hadn't sufficiently forgiven each other for that to happen. The silence was awkward, stretched thin. The mattress dipped, and she strained to listen.

Someone's cool, firm pair of hands caught Tanith by the shoulders.

"Why don't we step through, little sister? See what we can see?"

"You left," she whispered, struggling to turn herself around in Asmodai's unyielding grasp. "You left
twenty years ago. No, more than that. I saw you go."

"You could have come with me," Asmodai said, his eyes warm in the scarcely lit space, almost compassionate. He inclined his head (such a regal beauty, the body he'd chosen) toward the faint voices in the kitchen. "You could have won her back."

Tanith shook her head adamantly. "No, I don't think so. I made my choice."

"But do you see how easily they're unmade?" Asmodai asked, his eyes focused now on the bedroom door at her back. His costly purple wool coat hung open, revealing his shapely, muscular female body clad in a knee-length black cotton dress. His perfume was the height of human arrogance and elegance, and it overwhelmed Tanith's senses as he slid one thigh up between hers. "Those two in there, for example. Think of where they came from, and look at where they choose to be. Who's stopping them?"

"Your bosses would like to," she said tartly, attempting to free herself. "Both of them."

"Serving two masters," Asmodai said, bending to kiss her neck, "has served me well."

"I don't have time for this," Tanith said. "They could sense us any minute. Two cloaking wards in one small space? Uriel's a sharp one. She'll find us."

"They would have found us," Asmodai said, "if not for His Grace's intervention."

"Fuck, dude, you're still on formal terms with Hastur? I guess being away for all that time means you've missed a lot. Nobody even calls Ligur that anymore. And back the hell off, okay? Whatever scent you're wearing is going to make me pass out."

"What are you doing here?" Asmodai asked. "Did the old man in the office send you?"

"Yes," she said, deciding to leave out the fact that Ligur was also on the loose, although Asmodai might very well have sensed him already as it was. "I'm a spy."

"And whose side are you on, sweet spy?" Asmodai replied, releasing her unexpectedly.

"I'm file-gathering for Dagon," Tanith said, straightening her denim jacket. "That's it."

"Is that why you didn't leave?" Asmodai asked. "Is that where your heart lies?"

Tanith stared at the floor, aware that Aziraphale and Crowley had begun to talk again, only in hushed tones and closer together, although there was nothing in that closeness except a desire for comfort. Asmodai would be disappointed, and she was glad.

"If he ever bothers to notice, then, yes, I hope that's how it'll be," she said.

"Hell's finest private investigator in love with her boss," said Asmodai. "How touching. But it doesn't really explain why you were mooning about back there for a few seconds over the holy hermaphrodite and your old flame kissing in the kitchen, now, does it?"

"I don't have to explain myself," said Tanith, defiantly. "Especially not to you."

"There's a battle coming," replied Asmodai, irrelevantly. "Which side will you take?"
"I'm impartial," she said, but her heart wasn't in the words. "I observe."

"Then I will see you there, little sister," Asmodai murmured, and vanished.

Tanith sagged against the door and turned her ear against it once again.

"I never stopped," Aziraphale said, scarcely above a whisper. "Please take my word."

"I never will stop, angel," Crowley replied fiercely. "You already have mine."

Suddenly weary, Tanith slid to the floor and listened till she heard nothing else.

* * *

"Soph, you've got company," Adam said, nodding in the direction of the window.

"I'll believe it when I see it," she said, not bothering to look up from her book.

Adam closed his eyes and focused. They were close, much closer than usual, and drawing nearer by the minute. At Crowley's present driving speed, they'd arrive...

"I give them eight minutes at most," he said, grinning. "Your call."

"No fair," Sophia said, setting the novel down. "You can track them."

"You can get their thoughts at what kind of range?" Adam asked.

"As soon as I can see them," she said. "Where have you been? Asleep?"

Aside from being worried sick about you, nowhere, Adam thought.

Sophia resumed her book and read until the Bentley roared up in the front drive.

"Answer the door," she said curtly, eyes flicking back from the window. "Go finish making tea. The kettle's done heating, or, wait, did you forget you'd put it on? That's tea for four now instead of just us; it would've been for six if they'd brought their guests, but their guests are all fucked out from last night, pardon my language."

"You got that all from just seeing them get out of the car? Ace."

"Ugh, just go," said Sophia, more than a bit smugly. "I'll be waiting."
"Hallo, dear boy," said Aziraphale, beaming as Adam opened the door. "How are you?"

"Pretty good, all things considered. How are you?" he asked Crowley.

Behind his sunglasses, Crowley's expression was unreadable. "Not bad. May we...?"

"By all means," Adam said, holding the door for them. "Tea's ready and everything."

Carrying the tea tray, he led the way into the living room, getting the distinct impression that the pair behind him were, for some reason, about as enthusiastic about this visit as men bound for the gallows. And he wondered. Sophia uncurled herself from the corner of the sofa and sat up straight, but she did not stand to greet them. She gestured for Adam to set the tea tray on the coffee table, which he did, and then promptly took a seat beside her.

Aziraphale and Crowley took the small armchairs directly opposite, neither one speaking a word while Sophia poured four cups of tea and sweetened each one precisely to its recipient's liking. She handed Crowley his cup last, and her fingers seemed to catch and linger on his.

What can possibly have happened, Adam thought, to shatter you all so? Worse still, the news we've got for you tonight, Soph and me, it's...not pleasant at all.

"I'm sorry," Crowley said, reaching for her even as she withdrew, holding his cup one-handed. "I'm so sorry, but I'm asking you to understand. Bad enough I played the enabler once, but a second time? I've been a pawn for too long; I just couldn't—"

"Shhh," she whispered, and took his hand. "You're forgiven."

Crowley sat motionless for several seconds, at which point the glasses came off and he blinked at her—so uncharacteristic, that in and of itself—with vaguely watery eyes. "Just like that?" he asked, voice so quiet and hope-filled it was too much to bear.

"Just like that," said Sophia, gently, but she was somber. "Now, please forget it."

"If I could, we'd be better off. As it stands, I can't, so you have my silence instead."

Whatever this is about, Adam told himself, you'll just have to wait. If she wants you to know, she'll tell you in her own time. He tried to read Aziraphale and Crowley again, but turned up nothing. Were they blocking him by not thinking? No, surely not: he could see the subtle play of emotions across both of their faces so clearly that it might as well have been a pantomime. It was like a candle snuffer had been fitted over them, perhaps, or a bell-jar. He let the supposition pass and took a deep breath.

"We've got some bad news, but Soph didn't want to say anything till she was sure."

"I think I was pregnant," Sophia said, "but not for very long. I'm afraid I lost it."

Crowley's eyes widened ever so slightly, his eyebrows knit in pained confusion.

"You're...you're sure about that?" he asked. "I mean really, absolutely sure?"
"Oh, dear girl," Aziraphale said, abruptly unreadable, "I'm sorry for your loss."

"About as sure as I can be," she said. "I read up on the indications, and then I saw my doctor at the end of last week. She ran a test, and it turned up negative. If anything was there, believe me, there's nothing now. The thing that happened was...gross."

"It'll have been the stress following your studies, no doubt," said Aziraphale, firmly.

Adam watched Crowley. He'd expected that's where the news would hit hardest.

"I don't—" he faltered, pausing to swallow hard. "I don't understand."

Sophia reached across the table for his hands again, stilling them between her own.

"It's all right," she said. "Mandy drove me home. Nowhere else. Just home."

Crowley released a shuddering breath. His smile might have made it seem like silent laughter, but the unaccustomed gleam to his eyes had, improbably, brimmed over. Adam and Aziraphale both watched Sophia touch his cheeks in astonishment.

"I've never seen you cry," she said. "You didn't even cry at my wedding."

"I never did," said Crowley, wonderingly. "Not back in the day. Not even then."

*Some fights, Adam thought, clearing the tray, are best left to those who start them.*

* * *

It was one of the most preposterous things that Raphael had ever seen. And somehow also one of the most compelling, although he would neglect to mention that in his next snidely whispered assessment, because Uriel was about as wrapped up in it as the director-lady down front, and, for fuck's sake, somebody had to be her buzz-kill.

"If the audience is full of little old ladies like the one who left ten minutes ago, this isn't going to go over well at all," he said grimly. "And if there are any sexually adventurous young people, they'll start heckling our unlikely heroes for a kiss."

"Shush," Uriel whispered, waving him off. "That little old lady is the stage manager, and I think she's very sweet. With luck, the chemistry will fly right over their heads."

"Darling, it'll fly somewhere," muttered Raphael. "From your mouth to God's ears."

"Can you hear Crowley backsliding?" Uriel said. "When you put his seventeenth-century diction up
against Aziraphale’s bloody-minded RP, whoa. He sounds like us."

"North America’s your great fossilizer of the English language," Raphael replied. "Of course he's going to sound a bit like us, given the playback loop got stuck somewhere in the former Colonies and just didn’t change much. Also, it makes the jokes funnier, but your average audience member won’t be able to recognize the Jacobean puns."

"More’s the pity," Uriel murmured, grinning at the stage as Crowley slithered his way through Ariel's various methods of scaring those poor Milanese sailors half to death.

The director let them finish the scene in-character, and then she had them begin a quick, noncommittal speak-through that didn’t even last five minutes. Coughing harshly, she waved her arms and cut them off mid-banter.

"That's enough," Rani said, raising her voice only just enough. "I don't know about you two, but I'm well knackered. Got a bit of the lurgy coming on and all. Go home, why don't you, and get some rest. I wouldn't want you catching what I've got."

Crowley raised his hand, which was so ridiculous Raphael had to disguise his laugh as a cough. Uriel’s statement about all of these women bossing them around: it was true.

"Can we stay and finish running it this last time? Just to make sure."

"Be my guest, lads," Rani said, and tossed a set of keys up onto the stage.

Raphael wasn't sure what to make of the wink she gave him on her way out.

Aziraphale picked up the keys and put them in his pocket.

"From the top?" he asked Crowley, reluctantly setting aside his script. "I don't know how you're off-book."

"You're not the one cursed with impeccable memory," Crowley said. "Begin."

As if on command, the house lights flickered, and half of them went out.

"Gladly," said a woman’s low, rich voice over the sound-system. Grating feedback bounced off the walls and crackled weirdly in the stale air. "Little brother mine."

"That..." Raphael turned his head, but Uriel was already on her feet. "That wasn't..."

"Wasn't the director or the stage manager or anybody I'd like to see," Uriel said thinly, her bow already drawn. "Show yourself!" she shouted. "I said, show yourself!"

Raphael looked to Aziraphale across the rows upon rows of seats that separated them. He had his weapon at the ready in less than a heartbeat and moved swiftly into the aisle, just as Uriel had done on the opposite side. They advanced toward the stage.

Crowley had gravitated to the edge of the stage, his eyes suspiciously narrowed. "Who is this?" he asked, his tone skeptical. "It's a nice change from hearing you over the Blaupunkt, but, seriously, I thought our heart-to-heart days were over."
Aziraphale's eyes widened, as if he'd seen something the rest of them couldn't.

"Crowley," he said urgently, dashing forward, "Crowley, get down—!

What happened next happened far, far too quickly, but the figure that caught the crossbow-bolt that had been fired from the light-booth squarely in the stomach was not Crowley. In fact, it was only not Crowley by about four tenths of a second.

Even in the pandemonium that followed, Uriel's disbelieving wail was deafening.

* * *

Aziraphale tried to process what he was seeing, and his first attempt failed.

The creature writhing and rapidly bleeding out in Crowley's arms wasn't anyone he immediately recognized, and she definitely wasn't human. White skin, wavy black hair, eyes shut tight in agony. The tongue that flicked out from between her bloody lips was almost human, but too pointed (Rather like a bird's, he thought distantly). When her eyes opened, they were as vivid an aubergine-red as Crowley's were yellow.

"Do you hear me?" Crowley asked frantically just as Uriel reached his side, dropped her weapon, and fell on the wounded stranger. "Please, who are you, and what was—"

"Tanith," said Uriel, desperately, shredding her pull-over. "Tan, please hold still—"

Aziraphale covered his mouth and met Raphael's strangely terrified gaze. The thing that flew down from the light-booth with three beats of its great wings looked human, but the wings and the otherworldly weapon suggested otherwise.

Two more figures trundled out of the shadows at the back of the house, watching.

"How nice of you to come," said the dark-skinned beauty to the two man-shaped beings. "It's been a while since I've seen you, Your Grace," said the woman-shaped menace, and genuflected. "Your Grace," it repeated, and nodded to the other.

"Asmodai," Aziraphale said, wings manifested, and flew down from the stage. "I name you. Asmodai, son of King David and Agrat bat Mahlat, I charge you: stand down."

"I told you it'd be a good show," Hastur said. "Just like a play, see?"

"Yeah," Ligur agreed, grinning stupidly. "With blood and everything."

"Fuck off," Tanith choked from behind Aziraphale, her voice scarcely audible.
Uriel and Crowley were speaking in low, frantic tones to Tanith and to each other.

"Great party," Raphael told Asmodai. "A little advance warning would’ve been nice."

"Duke Hastur saw to it there’d be none of that," Asmodai said, crossbow at the ready. "Do you think this will end well with two against three? Your lady love’s too distraught over her lady love to be of any use. Fortunately, I'm only here to end one of you."

"You've already done that," said Aziraphale, reasonably, taking a step closer to the creature who had somehow failed to respond to his command. Hastur's doing, perhaps, through whatever type of net-charm or binding he'd cast on them.

"You're not helping, angel!" Crowley shouted over Uriel's increasing distress.

"Collateral damage, that one," said Ligur. "'M afraid it can't be helped."

"Sir," rasped Tanith, urgently, "sir—" her next breath, a gurgle "—the scry."

"What is she doing," Uriel was repeating over and over, "Crowley, what is she—"

"Be quiet," Crowley hissed. "Tanith, hold that thought, you're brilliant—"

There was another bizarre fit of crackling from the sound-system.

Crowley made a strained sound, as if in momentary discomfort. The theatre went pitch-black.

"Let there be light," said Aziraphale, and smiled when it worked. "Much better."

"And let's toast these fuckers," said Raphael. "I'll get the two at the back."

"YOU BLOODY SNAKE!" Hastur howled. "And that meddling, pigeon-brained—"

"The charm's undone," Aziraphale said. "Shall I bind you, or give you a fair fight?"

"I see no weapon in your hand," Asmodai sneered. "Did you lose it somewhere?"

"She's gone, I'm sorry—listen to me, Uriel, get down there, I need a minute—"

"No," said Aziraphale, calmly. "I simply haven't drawn it. I hoped I might talk you out of this, or at least send you back where you came from with a sound lecturing in tow."

Raphael had pursued the Dukes into the lobby; Uriel hovered suddenly beside him.

"I'm sorry," Aziraphale told her softly, never once letting his eyes leave Asmodai. "I should have done more, but I did nothing. How you can bear to stand with me now..."

Uriel didn't respond, but instead trained an arrow squarely on Asmodai's forehead.

"Should've made the trip to shoot you both a year ago, you and Gabriel," she snarled.

Asmodai responded by reloading his crossbow, pointing the bolt at Aziraphale's chest.
There was a lot of muffled swearing and flailing behind them, and it sounded like someone struggling their way out from under a heavy velvet curtain.

"Shall I wait till Crawly can watch and shoot you first?" asked Asmodai, raising his aim to stage-level. "Or let you watch while I shoot the serpent tangled in the arras?"

"I'd rather you didn't shoot anyone," Aziraphale said, setting a hand on Uriel's arm.

"Found one!" Crowley shouted, and then sent something heavy and metallic skidding across the stage. "There's no edge, but for a prop it's got some serviceable heft—"

Uriel dropped the bow and flung herself at Asmodai, arms bloody and wings unfurled.

"My dear, your timing is impeccable," said Aziraphale, and picked up the sword.

* * *

Crowley watched from the vantage point of being sprawled flat on his belly, half under the curtain and half free of it, as Aziraphale lifted the sword and, just like the scythe on the beach, it went FWOOMP. He scooted forward, kicked off the remainder of the heavy velvet, and got to his feet.

From what he could see, Uriel had both arms locked around Asmodai's neck as they lay twisting and struggling, and the crossbow had unloaded its bolt into a chair-cushion and gone harmlessly skidding into the third row.

"Don't just stand there," Crowley told Aziraphale, urgently. "Get him!"

"But Uriel—" Aziraphale gestured at the tussle of arms and legs and wings. "I might—"

"This is ridiculous," Crowley said, and vaulted off the stage. He landed hard on his left shoulder and rolled, felt bones crack and instantly knit, put all of his strength into catching the joint of Uriel's right wing. He struggled for purchase on the concrete floor, finally managing to lever himself into a crouch without losing his hold on solid, feather-covered muscle. "Uriel, let go!" he shouted, pulling on her wing. "Now!"

She did, and the backlash sent her rolling straight into Crowley. By some miracle, Crowley got her down flat, shielded with both his body and his wings, just in time to see Aziraphale—wearing an expression so nonchalant that the action might have been rehearsed—run the blunt sword-point through the hollow of Asmodai's throat.

"Let me go!" said Uriel, struggling, and Crowley sat up so that she could, too. "I want to see—ah, there. Yes. Good," she added, and lay back down again, panting hard.

"Impressive," rasped Asmodai, spitting up blood and whorls of blue flame. He lay pinned by
Aziraphale's borrowed sword, wings gone limp, life draining from his limbs.

"Put him out of his misery," Crowley said, using the nearest chair-arm for support as he got to his feet. "Quickly, because we've got a nutter with a pollaxe to track down."

Aziraphale tugged the sword free of Asmodai's flesh; the sound of it was sufficient to turn Crowley's stomach, but he clutched the arm of the chair and didn't look away.

Asmodai returned Crowley's gaze with serene acceptance, lips quirking in a smile.

You've won, little brother, he sent, now beyond speech. You and the monster you call lover. Remember why we hated them all. Remember for the rest of your days.

Crowley shook his head. "How can I remember hate I never really had?"

Aziraphale brought the sword down sideways, but it wasn't sharp enough to sever the spinal column. Half a dozen clanging blows later, there was more blood than there ought to have been, and Asmodai's head was only partly detached from his body.

"That's enough," said Crowley, and turned away.

Uriel was sitting up again, watching with satisfied, yet slightly sickened interest. She offered Crowley both of her hands, and he pulled her easily to her feet (as unsteady as he felt on his own).

"I let the two stooges get away," Raphael shouted from the back of the theatre, "but the chase was fun for a while! Have you ever seen the short one try to run?"

The four of them watched as Asmodai's body turned to fine ash and promptly crumbled.

Tanith's remains had done the same, scattered down-center on the stage.

"We'd better clean this up," sighed Aziraphale, "or I'll never hear the end of it."

Clean-up was, in reality, much easier than it sounded. Even the blood had turned to dry, powdery ash, and the industrial-grade brooms and vaccuum in the maintenance closet were more than up to the task. Raphael had suggested just miracling it all away, but, oddly, Uriel had fiercely objected. While Aziraphale and Raphael saw to what was left of Asmodai, Crowley and Uriel tended to Tanith's ashes.

Uriel wrapped one small, gritty handful in a strip from her shredded cardigan and pocketed the relic.

Crowley gave her a questioning look, pausing mid-sweep. "What will you..."

"Dispatched by someone from her own side," she said quietly, "so I wonder...

Crowley nodded readily, but he didn't have the heart to mention that he was pretty sure the sort of weaponry both sides were issued as standard kit would just as thoroughly obliterate the soul of one of their own as it would the soul of an Enemy. And there was the whole complicated issue of Asmodai having been registered as one of Heaven's agents in spite of his undercover status as Hastur's spy—

He turned away, frowned, and kept sweeping. More complex than he'd thought; maybe it was worth
asking questions. There were only a few cases of resurrection on the books, and in all cases it had been humans whose bodies had been kept intact.

_Raphael will look into it_, Aziraphale sent unexpectedly. _Healer. His province._

_Even without the ability to go back for supplies? They're stuck here, remember?_

_I do believe we'll find Gabriel very compliant from this point forward, my dear._

_Will you kill him if he doesn't?_ Crowley asked, now gazing down at Aziraphale from his vantage point on the stage. _Maybe you'd better hold onto that sword._

_Asmodai was sent to destroy you_, replied Aziraphale, pained. _What else could I do?_

_What's that binding thing you mentioned?_ Crowley asked, leaning on the broom.

Aziraphale's brow furrowed. _Too much of a risk_, he sent. _Too much of a risk to let live._

_Why did you let me live?_ Crowley asked. _All those thousands of years, why? Not enough of a risk? Some of that weird prescience you've got, perhaps?_

_I didn't know then. I had no clue, my dear, but I know now. Is it enough?_

Yes, Crowley told him, and wanted them to be done with this, wanted them to be through with improvised flaming weapons and scheming ex-coworkers and war.

"The damage won't be noticed," Aziraphale said, fingerling the spot on the chair cushion where Asmodai's bolt had buried itself. "Good as new. Are we finished?"

"You're going to let me sleep for like three days," Uriel said, her eyes sweeping past each one of them, "and anybody who tries to wake me up is ashes, got it?"

Raphael went up to the edge of the stage and lifted her down, as if she weighed nothing.

Uriel's wings closed over her head and Raphael's as her shoulders shook.

Crowley climbed down and went to stand beside Aziraphale, who was fiddling mindlessly with his ring, thumb fussing at the smooth platinum band. The molded glass setting of Crowley's ring had swiveled around to the back of his finger; he used this thumb to push it front-side and wordlessly took Aziraphale's hand.

"I don't think Adam knows about any of this," he said. "Remarkably enough."

"Nor should he," Aziraphale replied, squeezing Crowley's hand. "Let's go."

Crowley was grateful to find the roads clear, even if slick with freezing rain. It was just past ten o'clock at night, far too early given the events of the past hour.

On arrival at the cottage, Raphael carried Uriel inside, readied the sofa-bed with a turn of his hand, and closed the living room off with a pair of folding doors that hadn't been there before, but that Crowley quite liked.
Aziraphale was already in the bedroom, sitting on the edge of the mattress, looking more tired than Crowley had ever seen him.

"I don't know about you," Crowley said, shutting and locking the door behind him, "but I'm not touching the living room or the study for a week if I can help it."

When Aziraphale didn't respond, he climbed hesitantly into Aziraphale's lap.

"So," Crowley ventured, "I think Pippa has a point. I may have overreacted."

"To what, my dear?" Aziraphale asked, wrapping both arms around Crowley's waist so he wouldn't fall backwards onto the floor. "My utter lack of compassion in the face of your quandary, which you handled the best way you knew how?"

"To your needing some time to think," Crowley clarified. "Walking out was a stupid, melodramatic thing to do. But you sounded so cold, and I was upset."

"You promised Sophia you wouldn't speak of this any further," Aziraphale said, pressing his right index and middle finger over Crowley's lips. "Nor will I, my love. I ask your forgiveness, and, as far as I'm concerned, it's already forgot."

"Put that into Prospero's speech," Crowley told him, "and the audience is yours."

"I care very little for our audience," Aziraphale said. "What matters is you."

Crowley buried his face against Aziraphale's neck, wondering if tears would always come so easily now that he'd permitted them once.

"Well, you have me. Don't doubt it, or it's an insult to both of us. You always did, and I didn't know back then, either. What do humans call it? A hunch? Stupid word, hunch. It sounds like slang for—"

Just as Crowley had hoped he would, Aziraphale cut him off soundly with a kiss.

They were both too exhausted for anything elaborate, but this, this Crowley remembered, would remember in lieu of Asmodai's last words. Aziraphale's discarded slipover and hastily unbuttoned shirt; pants and trousers wished away on all sides, helpless movement skin to skin, and Aziraphale's hand just where Crowley wanted it.

"Can't," he was panting now, thrusting into Aziraphale's fist, "won't make it, oh."

"What did you do, I want you to tell me what you did, you broke the charm," Aziraphale was murmuring with mindless adoration in his ear, "how did you..."

Crowley couldn't think till his climax subsided, gasping against Azirahale's shoulder.

"She was trying to get through to Dagon. Dagon's the only person who could've sent her, and he's one of very few people authorized to use a scry for access to and influence on matters pertaining to Earth. Hastur would've had to have used that to work his charm with the pinfeathers Uriel told me about; she thinks Asmodai supplied those to him, which would have been part of his objective in the first place. So, I used the sound system to patch her through to Dagon. Almost didn't reach him in time."
Absurdly enough, Crowley's explanation was at least in part what got Aziraphale off.

"Have I ever mentioned," Crowley said, patiently stroking him through it, "that losing control now and again does you a world of good?"

Aziraphale lay back, finally finished, and tugged Crowley along with him.

"Then see to it that I do," he panted, drying them tidily. "But for now, I think..."

Aziraphale was drowsy in seconds, and Crowley drifted contently, listening to the rain.

"I have to mention it one more time," he murmured. "The child. Uriel said he hadn't exactly gone away, that there was still someone hanging about."

"I know little of these matters," Aziraphale said, "but we will find out in time."

*Time*, Crowley thought, determinedly tugging corners of the duvet and blankets up until he'd managed to close them in a sort of nest. *Time is what we've always got.*

* * *

**Most humans, it must be said, are quite exceptionally stupid creatures.**

**These not-humans, however, somehow manage absolute, flagrant idiocy.**

*He knows these tiles and carpets by heart, knows them cool and plush alike beneath his paws. He knows that set of doors closing off the living room has not always been there, and he finds breaching the barrier no object. He knows the pair sleeping in the sofa-bed will come and go as is their wont. He knows the small blonde one is wounded far worse than the bruises and traces of another's blood still on her arms, knows that the tall red-furred one would sooner perish than see her hurt again.*

*He knows the empty study will fill with books and papers for days on end, that the small parcel next to the computer keyboard containing another not-human's ashes will be the subject of much research and debate, knows that in this relic the small blonde one's grief may either find great solace or come to further desolation.*

*He takes the hole in the wainscot behind the desk, passes through the insulated wall, and emerges in the room in which he's seen the world end and begin many times.*

*He knows the masters of this house are good creatures, knows they will spare him in spite of every halfhearted threat that the stern one might make. He knows that there will always be crumbs for eating and tea-drips for drinking. He knows that no trial can part them for long, knows that the one who chooses to leave will always return.*
He knows he'll be here as long as they remain, and knows that this is Home.
Holika, Twice-Burned

Chapter Summary

Uriel understands the risk she's taking; precedent may be on her side.

Kukkutarma, 2674 BC

Tanith sat alone on an outcropping, watching sunset ignite the glittering sand.

"What are we doing here?" she asked the other swiftly approaching presence.

"If we knew that, darling," it said nonchalantly, "then we wouldn't be here."

Tanith adjusted her shawl, scooting around to face the angel standing over her.

"You look awful in that get-up," she told him. "No wonder the humans are afraid."

The angel dubiously adjusted his peacock-feather-and-jewel bedecked headdress.

"Listen, why all of this ceremony tomorrow? Can't I just dispatch you now?"

"Because the guy from your side who should've been doing this job is far too busy hanging around with the guy from my side who should've been doing this job. Word on the metaphysical street says they're something approaching casual drinking buddies. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that nonsense, would you?"

"I don't know anything right now, other than the last time I saw you," said the angel, who was quite tall, and crouched down to Tanith's level. He—or at least Tanith thought it was a he, as the eyeliner and the rouge made for some confusion—smiled dangerously. "I remember your eyes. They glittered, red stars the whole way down."

"Clever," Tanith said, adjusting her nose-ring, which itched awfully courtesy of some errant sand-grains that had worked their way under it. "But it's not going to work."

Imperiously, the angel frowned at her. "I don't follow. Setting fire to your kind with holy weapons normally does, so what makes you think you know something I don't?"


"Holika," Raphael replied. "That's not yours. Do you know what they'll call this?"

"Mohenjo-daro," she said, staring out across the dunes. "Mound of the Dead."

Raphael sighed. "I meant, do you know what they'll call this particular day?"

"Holika Dahan," answered Tanith, rising, dusting off her skirt. "It still won't work."
The shining trident caught her under the chin, tilting her head upward once again.

"Why is that?" asked Raphael, blue eyes burning coldly under kohl-rimmed lashes.

Tanith took hold of the trident with thumb and forefinger, shifting the weapon away.

"I'm losing my faith in some of this shit," she said. "In time, I suspect, so will you."

Raphael stared at her fingers, which were still poised delicately on the weapon.

"I will destroy you," muttered the Archangel, at least half to himself. "Tomorrow."

Tanith shrugged, letting go of his trident; come pike or pollaxe, it would remain.

"And I'll just wake up somewhere else," she said. "If I can, that is. See you there."

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**East Dean & Environs, mid-January 2014**

"It's a great story," Adam said, taking a sip of his coffee. "Both the Indian legend and this...source version, I guess you could say." The elderly waitress who'd been seeing to them for the past hour had been bored by their initial pleasantries, but now seemed oddly intrigued. "Had Rafe told you about that before, or only recently?"

Uriel rubbed her sore eyes and stared into her sturdy, industrial-grade diner mug. "He told me about this two nights ago, and the night before that was—" she paused and drank a third of her mug's contents, feeling vaguely ill "—is the reason I'm here."

"You might want to start from the beginning, then," Adam said, frowning at her. His adult gaze was piercing in exactly the same way that Crowley had described his childhood scrutiny: penetrating and cool, no quarter and no corners for hiding in.

Uriel stared back at him, her eyes misting. *Read me, you smug bastard; read me, and you'll learn everything. It'll save me the trouble of sobbing in front of our waitress.*

*Do you really want that?* he sent back. *I can see you've got reservations.*

She tilted her chin up, freely offering him her fragile, if unblinking defiance.

Adam's assessment of the past fortnight was quick and brutal; he blinked, just once, when Uriel toppled the vast barricade she'd erected around the parts involving Sophia. And then he sat there for a few minutes, chin perched on his hands, and *stared.*

Uriel was suddenly freezing. She waved the waitress over and pointed to her mug.

"Well, you lot made a mess of that one," said Adam, once the nosy server had gone. "But it could have been a lot worse. No loose ends, I guess. What do you want?"
Uriel uncurled her aching fist and slid a tightly-knotted scrap of fabric across the table, as yet unable to meet his eyes again. She wrapped both of her hands around the mug.

"I can't just keep making exceptions. It's tiresome, and it messes people about."

"You messed us about. And Michael and...and Gabe, come to it. Why did Rafe let those creeps get away? He keeps telling me it was as if he just couldn't bring himself to do to them what..." She swallowed, remembering Aziraphale with the stage-prop sword.

"They're covered from the first time around," Adam said. "In a manner of speaking. Ligur had already snuffed it once, and, if you ask me, he really didn't deserve—"

"Look," Uriel hissed, jabbing both index fingers at him, "how easily you play God."

Adam scratched the tip of his nose and fiddled with a sugar packet, frowning.

"She didn't die when she touched Rafe's weapon," he said. "Why d'you think that is?"

"She did die when Asmodai shot her," Uriel replied. "So just try me, buster."

The erstwhile Antichrist shook the sugar into his mug and stirred thoughtfully.

"Crowley wasn't hurt on the beach, was he? I mean the incident with the scythe."

Uriel shook her head. "Not that I'm aware. It gave him a real fright, though."

"Tanith told Raphael she was beginning to have doubts about what they were doing. Crowley hasn't bought the party line for a long time. You and Rafe eventually came around, too. It's even safe to say my biological dad's admin guy is thinking straight."

"Then by that logic, she shouldn't be ashes," Uriel said bitterly. "She should've been immune to the arrow, and Crowley would have been immune, too, in theory."

"Tanith was his miraculous escape," murmured Adam, which was irrelevantly obvious.

Disgusted, Uriel flung her spoon at him. "What the fuck is your problem? Huh?"

"My problem," sighed Adam, "is that you guys are as good at influencing and changing the rules as I am. Didn't you know that? Every time one of you or a pair of you or the whole lot of you make a decision or a series of decisions, the borders get re-drawn, and I'm as bound by your circles and lines as you are by mine. Or at least I think that's how it works. The evidence would suggest as much. Are you with me so far?"

Uriel nodded at him, chewing her lower lip, and felt suddenly very, very stupid.

"Cor. So, the way this seems to work is...do you use the internet much? Okay, so it's like figuring out who to add to what filters or to put on the permissions list. Who's covered by what, who gets away, who doesn't get away, who needs to stay where—"

"Did you really say no more messing about, once upon a time? I can't imagine."

Adam covered his eyes and rubbed them. When he looked up again, they were wet.
"I had to figure this out all on my own," he said. "I am still figuring this shit out."

Uriel reached, touched the back of his hand, and felt something click into place.

"Tanith believed the arrow would harm Crowley. She didn't know about the beach. All she knew was that Hastur and Asmodai wanted Crowley dead, and that Crowley meant something to me, and so she believed it was a sacrifice that she needed to make—"

"Wow," Adam said, turning his hand under hers till their palms touched. "Yeah."

"Your son," Uriel told him, squeezing his hand, "will not fade if I tell him to wait."

Adam's free hand closed around the scrap of cardigan containing Tanith's ashes.

"It'll be her life," he said. "*Her* second chance, not yours. Whatever *she* wants."

"That," Uriel said with a tearful grin, accepting his handshake, "is why I fight."

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**The Seventh Torment, Indeterminate (but not Too Late)**

Grit against her chin and itching the side of her nose. Across her closed eyes.

Long-ago charred wood against her cheek, familiar and worn. Her hands and wrists supported by chair-arms far more plush and comfortable than the chair her boss had originally provided, her legs extended and crossed, her feet inexplicably bare.

Someone brushed her temple and then, reverently, tucked her hair behind her ear.

Tanith opened her eyes and yawned, one hand flying to cover her grit-coated lips.

"I don't pay you enough for this," Dagon said. "Your contract ended centuries ago."

Stretching, Tanith sat up, grimaced, and studied her ash-streaked face in the cracked desk mirror. She looked pale and exhausted, although she couldn't exactly say why.

"I was dreaming," Tanith said. "About some people I hadn't seen in ages. Literally."

Unexpectedly, Dagon took hold of her hand and tugged it away from her cheek.

"I would never have put you in harm's way if I'd known," he said roughly.

Tanith turned in her chair and smiled at him, taking his other hand in kind.

"Ah, my Holika," Dagon said. "Twice-burned, thrice-cursed, always blessed."

"Let me tell you a story," she said. "We can catch up on paperwork later."
Chapter Summary

Sometimes the best plans of all are plans left (mostly) unmade.

Sophia squinted at the dust-mote flecked sunlight streaming in through the bathroom window, yawning as she did her best to keep her robe from coming apart. The toilet seat was cold, as were the glazed tiles beneath her feet, and she could see through the frosted-glass shower door that the twins' collection of shampoo bottles had escaped the caddy again. Not picking up your bath shit anymore, Sophia thought.

Sophia flushed the toilet, washed her hands, and wandered into the living room. Not even marriage had broken her habit of spending one weekend a month at home. Her parents insisted that, where the twins were concerned, her influence was sorely needed. In Sophia's view, whether it helped or hindered was a different matter.

Anathema had been all too glad to keep Sophia’s bedroom as it was, although Natalie tended to use it more than half the time because she insisted that Janet had a snoring problem. From the look of things, Sophia was the only one awake. The new job had turned her into something of an early riser, which for Adam was a source of endless amusement. Sighing, she lifted a pile of books off the sofa. She peered just inside the cover of the top one, completely unsurprised to find Aziraphale's bookplate.

The kitchen table, as it turned out, was a similar disaster: there were several piles of books, each one taller than the stack balanced perilously in her arms. Two notebooks and three coffee cups indicated that her parents had made a late night of it; she dumped the books in her arms next to her mother's notebook and carried the mugs over to the sink. Two had held coffee, one had contained green tea. She wasn't sure how her father could stand to drink both substances at once, but to each his own.

The kitchen light came on while she was rinsing the mugs under scalding water.

"My daughter the early bird," said a low, sleepy voice behind her, just a beat ahead of the lanky arm that pulled her into a shoulder-crushing hug. "Sleep well, Soph?"

"Yeah, Dad," Sophia sighed, unable to hide her grin. "Just fine. You?"

Newt yawned and ruffled her hair, flicking several gossamer strands straight into her eyes. Irritably, Sophia shrugged him off and brushed the fly-away nuisances back into place. She'd got her father's woefully fine hair, and although hers was thicker than his, she was paranoid that it would one day wear just as thin. She turned the mugs upside-down in the dish rack and turned around just in time to see her bath-robed mother, who was clearly displeased, shuffling and shifting the piles of books.

"Why did you bring these in here? I needed them in the living room."

"No, Mum, you didn't. Those four had been sitting there for six weeks. You've done exactly sod-all with them, the same with the ones at the far end of the table."
"Don't you know better than to cross her?" Newt whispered wryly in her ear, and then went to fetch two of the three mugs she'd just rinsed. "Dearest wife," he added, in louder, more assertive tones, "the cleverest of our clever girls does have a point."

"Oi! Dad, you suck," said Natalie, who stood mostly naked in the doorway and was fiercely rubbing her eyes. "Somebody open the drapes. It's still too dark in here."

"Where's Janet?" Sophia asked, putting the kettle on. "Did she come home last night?"

"No," Natalie yawned. "She was too drunk to leave Mandy's place. We put her on the sofa with a bin handy and left her some water and paracetamol on the coffee table."

"Why didn't you stay with her?" Anathema chided, still inscrutably sorting the books.

"Because I'm always the one who has to take care of her! Let Mandy do it for once. Maybe Iván knows some kind of miracle Spanish back-country mumbo jumbo cure."

"That's uncharitable of you, sweetheart," Newt said, eyes shifting between them.

"Nat, everybody, please shut up," Sophia sighed. "What do you want, tea or coffee?"

"Every woman for herself," Anathema said. "Every man, too. There's no agreement in this house. Just fetch the teapot and the French press. It's a veritable free-for-all."

*It's all downhill since I left home*, thought Sophia, wistfully fond of them all.

They all had English Breakfast except for Anathema, who'd opted for some Ethiopia Sidamo. Janet's job at Starbucks meant a free bag of coffee per week, and the backlog, in Sophia's estimation, was getting ugly. There was no room in the tea cupboard for new stock; it seemed wrong that so many sacks of roasted beans were to blame.

"Let me take some of that stuff over to the cottage," Sophia suggested, pointing to her mother's mug. "Aziraphale makes himself coffee all the time with that hilariously out-of-date contraption in the kitchen. I think he'd really appreciate it."

"Janet's the one you should be asking," said Natalie, peevishly, which indicated that she was more hung-over than she was willing to let on. So much for saving face.

"Janet doesn't drink it," said Newt, flipping the page of his newspaper. "It's fine with me if it's fine by your mother. Take some of those books back while you're at it."

"I'm not finished with them!" Anathema protested. "But, yes, take the coffee."

"You're finished with some of them, dear," Newt said dryly. "Those six-weekers, for instance. Like company, books often long outstay their welcome."

Something in his tone made Sophia dead certain she knew what he meant.

"Fine," Anathema said. "Next time you're headed over there, take those four books, but only those four, and get at least three quarters of that coffee out of my sight."
Natalie was giving Sophia her best *you-sodding-goody-two-shoes* look.

"I have no plans for today, and I've got Adam's car here. I think I will."

"Can I go, too?" Natalie asked sweetly. "I want to feed those ducks."

"Dental appointments," Anathema reminded her. "You and me, two o'clock."

"Balls," Natalie sulked. "Feed them for me, and take pictures. They're getting big!"

Sophia rose and took her mug over to the sink, hastily drinking the rest of her tea on the way. She'd shower and grab a wholegrain bagel for the road. She'd had more than enough of her family for one day, and it was only seven o'clock in the morning.

If she missed the traffic and got creative with the speed limit, she could make it to the cottage in two hours. Crowley could drive it in *under* two, the flash bastard.

"Drive safe," Newt told her, leaning to place his own mug in the sink.

It took Sophia two hours and fifteen minutes to reach her destination, so she was somewhat tetchy by the time she pulled up and parked behind the Bentley in the cottage drive. Three raps on the door produced no result, so she leaned hard on the doorbell. Finally, at the end of her tether, she fished her key-ring out of her handbag and let herself in. As far as she knew, Pippa held the only other spare key.

"Aziraphale?" she called, drifting awkwardly through the kitchen with her armful of books and a plastic Tesco bag full of coffee. She was pretty certain Crowley must be somewhere, probably out in the garden with the ducks, as his transport was very much in evidence. She set Aziraphale's books down on the table and left the coffee beside Crowley's espresso machine, which in truth she'd never seen Crowley use and was sure he left it to Aziraphale on account of not liking anything that gave off so much steam. "Anybody there? Crowley? Don't tell me I made the drive for nothing."

A pair of beady eyes peered at her from the hallway and quickly scampered off.

"You guys have mice," she said wearily, following the tiny, dark four-footed streak to no avail. She peered into the bathroom, paused in front of the door to Aziraphale's study-slash-rare-book-room, and then approached the bedroom. The door was closed; she glanced at her watch. Eleven thirty-four. If Crowley was home and *wasn't* in the garden, he'd be...

She turned the doorknob with tense, exacting care. It made hardly any sound.

The bed was empty, covers rucked every which way, except for the pillow on the side nearest the door—nearest to *her*—where a rather unremarkable medium-sized grass snake lay coiled and basking in a sunbeam that filtered in lazily between the curtains.

Sophia blinked at this curious scene for all of three seconds before she realized what she was looking at. To *know* a thing was different from seeing it, she'd always found: usually the wiser path, and infinitely safer. That didn't prevent her from approaching the bed, for her sense of wonder had always outweighed her tendency toward fear.

"*The devil hath power,*" she quoted, almost in a whisper, "*to assume a pleasing shape.*" The patterned back-scales were smooth beneath her fingertips, shining. "I just never dreamed that shape
was a garden-variety *Natrix natrix helvetica,*" she added, by then on the verge of delighted laughter, "and I bet Prince Hamlet didn't, either."

Sophia backpedaled with a gasp, hit the wall full-force as the creature beneath her palm transformed, displacing everything in its immediate vicinity, herself included. Crowley scrabbled at the bed-sheets, bewildered, not quite covering himself in time.

*What a skinny thing you are,* Sophia wanted to say, but she held her tongue. She only just managed to cover her mouth and think instead: *But also very, very pretty.*

"I thought you'd heard of that thing called knocking," Crowley said, sitting on the edge of the mattress with his arms folded and the sheet draped over everything from mid-thigh to bellybutton (and wrapped around behind). Unblinking, he glared at her.

"In my defense, I tried knocking," Sophia said. "You didn't answer the door."

"You've got a mobile," Crowley said, rubbing the left side of his neck, which drew Sophia's attention to several obvious marks there. "You could have called ahead."

"Get off my case," she snapped. "You gave me a fucking spare key, so I used it."

Crowley sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Well, there's one more feat of occult transformation out of the way. No need to worry about pulling that one in front of you should the need arise. Wings, check; scales, check. Let's see, am I missing anything?"

"Mum says you made your shoes appear out of nowhere one time," Sophia blurted.

"Oh, right," said Crowley, sarcastically, "*clothes.*"

And, just like that, he sat fully dressed on the edge of the bed, wearing a plain grey button-down twill collared shirt and that ridiculously expensive pair of jeans he'd got in Japan, which were breaking in beautifully. He was barefoot, which she'd seen before, but she'd never looked closely enough to notice that his toenails were composed of fine snake-scales that were now as translucent as human fingernails.

Sophia stared at his folded hands, transfixed.

"Do you somehow keep people from noticing that most of the time? Why don't you do it with your eyes? It would've been a lot less awkward than sunglasses. Hey, how in the world did you do it before sunglasses were invented? That's impressive."

"Ways and means," Crowley sighed, absently running his fingers through his hair, which was still badly mussed, and *not* just from sleep. "Masks and such. Hats with low brims. Counting on most humans being relatively unobservant, which they are."

"People notice your eyes all the time," said Sophia, taking a seat beside him. "I mean when you're not wearing the glasses, and some people are even startled or scared. You told me about that airline stewardess. Are modern humans more observant?"

"There's no such thing as a modern human," Crowley said, "and it's really just that I don't bother to count on it anymore. It was so much blessed effort all the time. Besides, I'm in retirement now, so why should I bother? Get back to me when you're this old and tell me if you feel like faffing with
something as trivial as cosmetics."

"I only wear make-up on formal occasions," Sophia said. "But okay, fair point."

"Good morning," said Crowley, belatedly, offering her a sheepishly tired smile.

"Bed-head is a good look on you," Sophia told him, winking. "I'm just saying."

"Eggs!" said Crowley, blushing, and rose abruptly. "I've got duck-eggs coming out my ears. Do your parents want any? Pippa's threatening to pay me for them."

"We'll take some," Sophia said, joining him at the window. She squinted as he drew the curtains back, flooding the room with light. "Free-range. Mum will be happy."

"You're going to give me a bad name," Crowley sighed. "Come on," he said, grabbing her hand, and Sophia let herself be led briskly out of the bedroom.

"Oh, by the way, you've got mice," she told him. "I saw one in the hall."

"We've only got the one, and he's better behaved than the plants," Crowley replied.

"Ah," said Sophia, smirking as she let go of Crowley's hand. "So you let him stay?"

"Yes," Crowley said, sliding the patio door open to usher her out. "Besides, he was here before we were. Survived the previous resident's seven cats and Aziraphale."

"Look at my babies!" Sophia exclaimed, dropping down to her knees as six excitedly flapping ducks, all grown now, made straight for them. "Eve and Jude and hello sweetie-pie!" She scratched Lilith's chin and hustled all three ducks into her lap.

"Where'd you hide them today, then?" Crowley was asking Jemima, Tamar, and Ruth, who all hovered about his feet and fussed at him expectantly. Hands on hips, he shook his head gravely and strode into the shed with the other three ducks hot on his heels.

"Hide what?" Sophia called after him, tugging a bit of her hair out of Jude's bill.

"The eggs," Crowley shouted back. "Each one lays two or three eggs per day, and although I'm finding most of them, I've found evidence that some of the ones they leave outside the shed make a nice breakfast for foxes and the like. Hey, here's another one! Five so far, and, I'm telling you, you'll leave with at least a dozen."

"Always hungry," Sophia said to the ducks, and finally shooed them so she could assist Crowley in his search. They found a total of thirteen perfect, pale-greenish eggs.

"Funny things," Crowley said once they were back in the kitchen, carefully transferring their findings from his tin pail into an empty egg carton. "Mallard egg-shells, I mean. You don't get that color anywhere else. They're sort of a dull olive shade, really."

"They're lovely," Sophia agreed, and then paused. "Where's Aziraphale?"

"Down at the theatre," Crowley said, shutting the carton. "Last night was opening."
"Did you go see it? You're not stepping in as Ariel till next weekend, right?"

"Right, and yes, I went," said Crowley, his tone somewhat grim. "So did the others."

"Still rough going, huh? And how are Uriel and Rafe finding that holiday cottage up the road? You must be fucking thrilled to have them out of your hair."

Crowley turned and gave her the most desperate look she could possibly imagine.

"You really have no idea. I thought I'd never have use of the living room again, much less my sofa. They left scratches in the leather. Scratches. You might as well stop smirking at me and take your smug teasing up the road to that property they've let, because I can tell you it's probably all sex, all the time, which is more than you'll find here. Don't look at me like that; you know it's true. A few marks on my neck and you're snickering like you're twelve, but have you seen Uriel's wrists and arms?"

"Shush," Sophia said, setting a hand on Crowley's shoulder. "I only meant to tease."

"Well, good for you," Crowley said, dumping the parcels of coffee out on the counter so he could place the carton of eggs inside the Tesco bag. He held it out to her.

"I only just got here," Sophia protested. "I'm not leaving this soon. You're going to tell me about how awful opening night was. Did Aziraphale manage to tone it down?"

Crowley sighed and took the empty kettle over to the sink. He filled it.

"And you're also going to tell me how the wedding plans are coming along."

Crowley stiffened, his hand lingering on the tap well after he'd turned it off.

"I'll tell you all you want to hear about the play, but don't ask about that."

"About the wedding? Why not? It's the middle of March now, so clock's ticking. I thought you guys were shooting for late April, just like Adam and I did last year."

Crowley put the kettle in its cradle and punched the button rather too hard.

"Something like that. We haven't fixed a date. As for the play, the local paper says this morning that Aziraphale's a competent and charming Prospero, if a bit stiff, and that the bloke playing Ariel steals the show. The lovers are fine. The rest of the retinue, not so much. The actor playing Sebastian thinks he's funny, but for a role that should be funny, that never works. It didn't work the first time this play was staged, take it from me. We've got a strong Caliban and an even better pair of fools following him about, so that's all right. The tech crew have got to get their act together."

Sophia stared at the steaming cup he set in front of her. The kettle hadn't boiled.

"I'll stay for tea and then be going," she said hesitantly, "unless you want me to come to the show with you tonight. I assume you're going again? Or not. Totally fine if not."

"If you wouldn't mind terribly," Crowley said, sounding relieved. "Leaving, I mean. Aziraphale will be home for a little while before he's got to go back for curtain-up."
Why on earth is something always wrong? thought Sophia, and sipped her tea.

"Crowley," she ventured softly, "I'm not like what you call most humans, am I?"

Crowley bent down, eyes fierce with sudden tenderness, and kissed her forehead.

"Never," he said. "And you know bloody well that I'd have told you if you were."

* * *

Wrong, Aziraphale thought, painting over the patchy spot in the backdrop a second time. We had it all wrong. The pacing was off, entrances and exits weren't tight enough, and Ariel had acted circles around everyone (Crowley wouldn't take the stage for another week yet). He touched up a bare spot about the size of a pin-head. There.

He'd had a pleasant enough morning at home, of course. He hadn't gone for drinks after curtain-down the night before on account of Rani having left right away in order to keep her telephone rendezvous with a relative living in London. On the drive home, Crowley had been pleasant, if somewhat reserved in his commentary. They'd retired early and slept till eight, which was early rising for Crowley of a Saturday, but left Aziraphale a good two hours in which to make it up to him before returning to the theatre to help with the touch-ups he was now finding miserably slow work.

Aziraphale's grip on the paintbrush faltered at the thought of Crowley flushed and responsive beneath him, inside him, not three hours before. He'd have drawn it out longer, he reflected, would have ridden Crowley more slowly if he'd been at leisure.

He sucked in his breath and licked a spot of paint off his thumbnail. The acrid taste brought back a memory equally as vivid and intimate: Crowley bent over him in the blue dusk outside Tadfield Manor, sunglasses having slid far enough down the bridge of his nose to reveal eyes far more concerned than he'd have ever let on.

Someone's hand fell on Aziraphale's shoulder. He cleared his throat, embarrassed.

“So that's what it's like when you're thinking with what's below the belt,” Rani said dryly. “Good to know. Might come in handy next time I catch you distracted.”

Aziraphale released the breath he'd been holding. “Your discretion leaves something to be desired, dear girl,” he said, somewhat huffily in spite of his best efforts to the contrary. “I admire your self-sufficiency and pride in being single, but please do try to understand what it's like for those of us with loved ones who want looking after.”

“He must want for nothing,” Rani remarked, “he must want for nothing.” She studied Aziraphale's handiwork and shot him a dubious glance. “You must be preoccupied, poor lads, what with the wedding. You've waited an awfully long time.”
“We haven't set a date,” said Aziraphale, brushing the matter aside, “but it'll be soon, I don't doubt. You'll be among the first to know.” He sighed, studied the patch he'd been painting, and had to agree that repeating the same few strokes over and over hadn't done much good. “I wouldn't dream of leaving this unfinished. Let me fix it.”

“Are you kidding?” Rani asked, prying the paintbrush out of his hand. “Go home and spoil your Anthony. Don't you blush at me. Curtain-call's six o'clock, so look sharp!”

“Bless you,” Aziraphale said. He returned her warm, dry kiss to the cheek and fled.

Much though he normally enjoyed the walk, he called a cab and made it home in eight minutes instead of fifteen. He checked the garden first, but all he got for his trouble was a thorough tripping-up by six eager ducks. He gave each one of them a shred of hastily miracled croissant (still a guilty favorite they shared) and got enough of a lead to make it through the patio door without any of them following him inside.

Crowley was in the kitchen stirring something doughy and unpleasant-looking.

“I found this recipe online,” he explained, licking a bit of the stuff off his knuckle. “Too savory, damn! It's that thing you liked from the sweet-shop just a few streets away from our hotel in Kyoto, and I don't think the recipe's working the way it should—”

Aziraphale kissed him quiet and got one elegantly arched eyebrow for his trouble.

“Leave it for now. I'll have Pippa fetch us some mochi next time she's in Bristol.”

“Bad day on the set, I gather. Too many divas, not enough paintbrushes?”

“Crowley, by now I'd have expected much better. Don't be cruel; they're volunteers.”

“So are you, but somehow you get a free pass home for a few hours. How is that?”

“Rani understands that my obligations to you are, quite frankly, more important.”

“Meaning she caught you with your head in the—hmmm... ngh. Enough said.”

Copping a feel en route to the sofa wasn't the wisest move Aziraphale had ever made, as it resulted in Crowley going dead-weight and dragging him to the floor on the wrong side of the coffee table. The plush carpeting was finally set to prove its worth.

“Sophia stopped by,” Crowley panted, “with a load of your books and an ungodly amount of coffee.” He sighed and wished his shirt-buttons undone while Aziraphale was busy unfastening his trousers. “I don't know how you can stand the bent pages, angel. I spent forty-five minutes undoing some damage to that—gah, what—”

“I find both your reserve and your cookery devastatingly attractive,” Aziraphale told him, leaving the nipple he'd bent to tease with his teeth in favor of pinching the other between thumb and forefinger. “But I'd prefer to hear about your social call later.”

“Wh—why’s that?” Crowley managed, his back arching involuntarily at the contact. “I like the fact that you've got a real mouth on you. You know. Um. Talkative.”
“I can think of a better use for it,” Aziraphale told him, and abandoned his efforts across Crowley's chest in favor of slipping one hand down the front of his shorts.

Crowley hissed, clutching at Aziraphale. Their remaining clothes vanished, leaving the progress of Aziraphale's hand no mystery to the observer (if they'd but had any).

“How are those called fingers,” Crowley pointed out. “You're doing it wrong.”

Aziraphale gave Crowley's cock a firm, teasing twist and set his lips to the task.

“I don't know, dear boy,” he murmured against the tip. “We'll see about that.”

Although neither one of them said much for the next few minutes, the room was far from quiet. Aziraphale had come to ruthlessly enjoy Crowley's complete inability to stifle (in the crook of his arm or in the palm of Aziraphale's free hand, which he often dragged into place expressly for the purpose) the sounds he made, however hard he tried. Holding him still for more than a few minutes was similarly impossible.

With a groan, Aziraphale relented when Crowley pushed him off and up and shimmied his way down until their bodies fit together comfortably and their foreheads touched. “Impossible to please,” Aziraphale gasped, kissing him hard. “What do you want?”

Crowley rolled them side by side and pressed against Aziraphale's sweat-slick hip.

“Just this,” he said tersely. “That and your hands pretty much everywhere.”

Breathlessly, Aziraphale obliged him. Easy enough, even in the thick of it, to stroke Crowley from neck to sides to buttocks to thighs and back again. He shuddered uncontrollably, whatever he was trying to say lost in the curve of Aziraphale's neck, his release spattering Aziraphale's belly, thighs, and the luxurious carpet besides. There was nothing left to do but follow suit, so Aziraphale did.

"Excitable," he sighed, thoroughly sated, and kissed Crowley's cheek.

"Wound up," Crowley countered, leaning into it, "no small thanks to you."

Aziraphale let his hands rest at the small of Crowley's back, following his breath.

“Rani’s after us for a date,” he said eventually. “Not just Pippa now, I’m afraid.”

“Add Sophia to the list,” Crowley muttered. “Look, all it'll take is ringing up the registrar two weeks in advance. Nagging harpies, the whole lot. We have time.”

Aziraphale pursed his lips, but he couldn't quite bring himself to respond.

Not that stalling wasn't characteristic of Crowley—in fact, he did it all the time, even in matters small and mundane—but in this particular case, it was puzzling and even slightly worrying. He'd been the one to insist on adding a layer of ceremony to vows that were, as far as Aziraphale was concerned, set in proverbial stone ages ago.

“There's the reception to consider, although I won't hear of fairy lights this time.”

“Then we'll have it catered,” Crowley replied, drowsy against Aziraphale's chest. “I'm not cooking
for my own bloody wedding, and Mandy's a guest this time, not staff."

"Are you coming to see the show tonight?" Aziraphale asked, mussing Crowley's hair.

"I'm afraid not," Crowley said. "Uriel's popping by for a Tribe marathon. She liked the episodes I showed her last week, and I think she fancies Bruce Parry. Or wants to determine what that tattoo on his arse is, at least. Google doesn't even know."

"You and your documentaries," Aziraphale sighed. "Perhaps I'll ring Raphael—"

"Unfortunately, Uriel's coming here because he's going over to tend one of Anathema's brats who got so intoxicated at Mandy's last night that she's plastered to the sofa."

"Oh dear," Aziraphale murmured. "Well, then, it's off to the pub for drinks with the cast afterward. Shall I text the location when I know it so the two of you can join us?"

"We'll see," said Crowley, and folded in closer, wings rising for a hesitant stretch.

Aziraphale combed some feathers loose, brow furrowed while Crowley couldn't see.

"So much for Raphael's resignation," he said, but it didn't lighten the mood one bit.

* * *

"Three pints of Strongbow and a chaser consisting of Jack Daniel's, Bacardi, and Coke," Rafe observed, removing both hands from Janet's abdomen in favor of shining Mandy's clunky utility torch directly in Janet's watery eyes. "Well done, darling."

"My insides feel funny," Janet muttered, covering her eyes once he'd set aside the torch. "And empty. I thought I was going to puke again, but I guess that acupressure thing you did kind of worked." She grimaced. "Can you teach Natalie how to do it?"

Mandy watched from the doorway, arms folded across her chest. Good job Iván's working late, she thought. Who'd want to deal with this circus? I don't even.

Meanwhile, Sophia was frog-marching Natalie back from the kitchen, where she'd presumably given her kid sister a lecture covering the basics of Thou Shalt Not Leave Thy Twin Drooling In a Puddle of Her Own Puke All Night On a Well Meaning Friend's Sofa. They stopped in the doorway next to Mandy, watching intently as Rafe gave Janet's arms a vigorous rub-down and then set one hand against the pulse-point of her neck and the other over her heart. There wasn't anything pervy about it, either.

"What's your day job?" Mandy asked. "Are you a nurse or a paramedic or something?"
Rafe turned to look at her, his hands firm and sure on Janet's body. "Doctor," he said with an unforced smile. "For years, darling, so you can be sure I won't kill her."

"You're still young," Mandy replied, feeling confrontational. Aziraphale and Crowley being cagey about what they'd done for a living was one thing, but these screwball friends of theirs being vague about it, too, was quite another. "Why did you quit?"


Ignoring a thoroughly bewildered (and incredibly butt-hurt) Natalie, Mandy took hold of Sophia's arm and hauled her into the kitchen, slamming the door behind them. "Why is your whole fucking family friends with a bunch of fucking whack-jobs?"

"You were friends with a couple of said whack-jobs well before you met my family!"

"All right, fine," Mandy conceded. "If not for them, I wouldn't be friends with you and your sisters. But, seriously, don't you ever find it strange that none of them will go into much detail about where they've come from or what they used to do with their lives before they became insanely wealthy people of leisure? Don't interrupt me; you know they must be loaded if they can afford to travel as much as they do, all four of them. If I've got it right, Aziraphale and Crowley just up and decided one day about nine years ago that they wanted to leave London and move out here on a lark. How much do you think they paid for that place, huh? Beach-front property in this area isn't cheap. Mum raised me all by herself on a council estate outside of Bristol. I've hated these smug bastards all my life, and, look at me, I ended up waiting on them."

"And friends with two of them for how many years, even?" Sophia asked.

Mandy closed her eyes, frustrated, and rapped the work-top with her fist.

"Come November, it'll be nine years exactly. Did I ever tell you how dreary that winter was out here, how hard it rained? The sky was so grey the day they first came. They sat in that table by the window like they always do and stared out at the sea. They had a kind of halfhearted argument that was too quiet for me to hear, and by the end of it, they had each other by the hands across the table. I thought they were lovers already. Everybody did. Can you believe it took them till just before Christmas? How many years do you have to know somebody before you decide to move in with them first and then, only then, decide you might as well call a spade a spade?"

Sophia looked hurt and a little confused: finally, something Crowley hadn't told her.

Mandy shouldn't have felt so smug, but she took a kind of vicious pleasure in knowing that some information about him was still hers. Not hers alone, perhaps, but she didn't really count Pippa. You couldn't hate somebody who knew everything about everybody within a ten-mile radius. Local gossips had certain inalienable rights.

"I'm worried about them," Sophia blurted. "Something's still wrong!"

"Way to change the subject," Mandy sighed. "What do you mean?"

"Crowley's dragging his feet about setting a date. Hadn't you noticed?"

"Not really. He's fickle. There's no making him do anything till he's ready."
"He's the one who proposed! Well, sort of. Pippa guilted Aziraphale into getting him a ring in the lead-up to my wedding, and then I helped Crowley sort out one for Aziraphale, and then they took that trip to Kyoto that seemed like a honeymoon—"

"Even their names!" Mandy seethed. "Anthony Crowley is normal enough, I'll grant you, and I've known enough blokes to prefer going by their surname, but seriously, who has a name like Aziraphale Fell, or whatever the hell his paperwork says? Okay, you get some weird old family names, it's true; that's what he chalks it up to, and to a point, I believe it, because heaven knows your family is ample proof of the same phenomenon. Soph, I just..." She spread her hands helplessly. "I don't know. Something's not right. What if they're war criminals or something? Well, probably not Crowley, but Aziraphale just creeps me out sometimes, the misogynistic twat."

Sophia had gone still. Mandy touched her arm and found her skin strangely cold.

"You're shivering," she murmured. "Soph, you're prickling all over—"

"Janet," she said, turned on her heel, and yanked open the kitchen door.

"She's fine," Mandy said, peering over her shoulder into the living room.

Oddly enough, Sophia's eyes weren't fixed on her smiling younger sister, who now at least had normal human coloring in her cheeks and a fresh glass of water in her hand. A fresh glass of water. Unless Rafe had filled the glass in the bathroom...

Sophia's eyes swept from Rafe's shoulders to the air six feet above his head.

"No matter how many times I see..." she murmured, and then fell silent again.

"We'll get it out of them," Mandy said, patting Sophia's shoulder. "Just you wait."

* * *

Ligur didn't like delivering the post, but he supposed somebody had to do it. He just wished that somebody had been an individual better suited to deciphering letters and sigils than his own impatient self. He squinted at the next envelope on the stack.

"Well, says here you're for Dagon," he told it. "Woss this made of?" he wondered aloud, running his grubby fingers across the smooth, pale surface. It rasped unpleasantly in a way that vellum did not. The ink steamed and bubbled a little, but the neat handwriting remained clear. Something about the slant of it bothered him. "S'not from a quill, is it," he muttered, licking his thumb, and smudged at the letters again. This time, the ink didn't react, although the envelope got a bit soggy. "Huh."

The walk to Dagon's office and apartments always seemed like a small eternity.
In all unfairness, it was. Hell's highways and byways weren't difficult for nothing.

Ligur knocked heavily on the outer entrance, dispirited and out of breath. It took a further indeterminate amount of time for somebody to answer, and when the heavy, ancient door finally opened, it definitely wasn't Dagon's face that greeted him.

Tanith—should he be this pleased to have remembered her name?—smiled.

"Hey," she said. "I remember you. Did that mission of yours turn out okay?"

"Dunno," Ligur admitted somewhat dubiously. "Me an' Hastur got the run-around."

"That's okay," Tanith said. "It happens to all of us. What have you got there?"

"Mail for Himself. Not Himself Himself, 'course, but you know what I mean."

Tanith extended one shapely white arm. She might still have looked somewhat like an angel, but she wasn't exactly skinny like Ligur remembered most of them being. She was only just a little taller than Ligur was, but shorter than Dagon by a head, and her shoulders and hips were both broader than her narrow waist. Some meat on her, Hastur would have said (a phrase for humans who might make good eating).

"Give it here," she said, reaching for the envelope. "I'll see that Dagon gets it."

Ligur started to hand the letter over, but drew it back at the last second.

"You don't live 'round here," he said. "Wot you doin' at work all the time?"

"Oh, I do live here," Tanith replied. "At least now I do. In sin, no less."

Ligur considered this, nodded approvingly, and then handed over the envelope.

"Wotcher. Just makin' double sure," he said, tipping his imaginary hat to her. He'd had a hat once. He'd got it ages ago for one of those excursions Topside, maybe even the time he and Hastur had first seen a horseless carriage. "Give the old man my worst."

"Where did this come from?" Tanith asked, staying him. She'd even gone so far as to step outside, her pale bare feet luminous in the haze. "Did you happen to see?"

Ligur shook his head. "All they do is hand 'em to me, and I get on with it."

"Do you know what this is?" Tanith asked him, the corners of her mouth slightly upturned again. She smiled more than anyone Ligur knew except for Hastur, and it wasn't the same kind of smile. She smiled like only one other person he knew.

"No," Ligur said glumly. "Haven't got the faintest bloody clue."

"It's paper," she said. "Plain, old-fashioned human office paper."

Ligur shrugged and turned to go. He didn't like thinking about Crowley.
Uriel set her glass of wine on the coffee table, flailing at the screen.  
"Pause it!" she exclaimed. "There. Right there. As he's walking away."

Crowley sighed and waved at the screen; the image froze. She felt instantly stupid.

"Sorry, I know, could've done it myself. Okay, so what the fuck are we looking at?"

Uriel watched Crowley squint at the screen. She loved watching him make faces.

"Honest to God, I couldn't tell you," he said, flabbergasted. "I've Googled it at least a hundred times since this series first hit the airwaves, and I swear nobody bloody knows. I've scoured every fan forum you could possibly imagine."

"Next time we go to London, we should stalk him," Uriel said. She'd drunk just enough to think that was a good idea, and also just enough to forget she could have easily paused the DVD herself. Judging by his expression, Crowley wasn't impressed.

"I don't even know if he lives in London," he admitted. "Hmm."  
"You're giving it serious thought," Uriel said, jabbing a finger at his chest. They were on the sofa, and although there had been space between them at the outset, they'd managed to meet somewhere in the middle, companionably shoulder to shoulder. "You want to get a close look at that ink, not least because he's got a cute behind."

"How many times do I have to tell you that humans don't really do it for me?"

"Whoo, finally. Dish!" Uriel cried, slinging one arm around his neck. "Do you think Raphael's hot? He'd kill me for telling you as much, but he thinks you're pretty easy on the eyes. I think he'd do you if there weren't obvious consequences."

Crowley's rapid blinking was as almost as endearing as his pink cheeks.

"That's assuming I'd do him," he said humorlessly. "Which, um, no."

Uriel smirked at him. "Okay. Lacking repercussions, would you do me?"

"At what point did repercussions become shorthand for Aziraphale?"

"Shush, you're spoiling my fun. I asked you a question. Would you?"

Crowley shook his head in disbelief. "How did we get from Bruce Parry's arse to whether I'd shag anything that moves? What's in this wine? I didn't tamper with it."

"So you won't do Bruce Parry and you won't do Raphael. I get it. But that still—"
Crowley snatched the remote control off the coffee table and shut off the television.
"What part of *I am getting married within a month's time* don't you understand?"
"HA!" Uriel crowed. "You set a date, then? Oh my gosh. When is it? *When*?"
Crowley sank back against the sofa and drew his knees up under his chin.
"No, the date's not set. You would have known by now. Not set, but soon."
Uriel turned and regarded him critically, one forearm resting on his shoulder.
"Honey, you *do* know this is some kind of hot mess right now, right?"
Crowley shrugged and gave her a cautious glance. "Why do you say that?"
"You remember how much planning Adam's wedding took. Not inconsiderable."
"This is different," Crowley said. "It'll be a relatively simple affair."
"True, but you're having a reception or *else,*" she told him. "And bachelor parties. You and Aziraphale can't see each other the night before. It's tradition."
"We should just leave the whole affair to you. Spare ourselves the trouble."
"Why are you holding out?" Uriel implored him. "Aziraphale doesn't even know, and although he doesn't seem too fussed, you know he won't stay like that indefinitely."
"Funny, but he stayed lots of other ways for millennia on end. He's got a knack."
Uriel grabbed Crowley's chin roughly and yanked his head around to look at her.
"Your neck's so bendy," she said, and that's when it hit her. "*Oh.* It's like last time, only you can't bring yourself to ask me to strike them down with blight even now."
Crowley twisted away from her and curled up in the far corner of the sofa.
"Nice try, but that's not it," he said. "I can *make* the roses bloom in time."
"Then what the hell's your problem, Crowley? Will you keep him waiting forever?"
"I'm waiting for a reply. A very *specific* reply, one that might not even come. I'll give it a fortnight. I know that's cutting things close, but you've got to trust me on this."
Uriel retreated to her own corner and flopped back against the overstuffed leather.
"You still haven't answered my question," she said, poking Crowley's shin with her toe.
"You still haven't sussed out what's on Bruce Parry's arse," he said, waving the television back on. "You keep your eyes peeled, and I'll go get my laptop."
No wonder they couldn't hold you, Uriel thought. Slippery doesn't begin to cover it.
Always the Bridesmaid [Part 2 / 3]

Chapter Summary

Sometimes the best plans of all are plans left (mostly) unmade.

Crowley studied his reflection critically in the dust-coated dressing room mirror.

He'd seldom had call for wearing cosmetics, much less stage make-up. The effect unnerved him, never mind that he'd done the job himself. His eyes were luminous and strange, stood out more than usual. He rubbed at the liner on his eyelids, but all it did was produce a smudged effect that threw his eyes into even sharper relief.

Aziraphale's reflection hovered at his shoulder, already in full costume.

"Gregory was good, my dear, but you're far better. Remember that."

"I'm not so sure," Crowley said, reaching for the brush and powder compact. Aziraphale got his hands on both before Crowley could dust over the latest round of fussing on his eyelids and did it for him. "The audiences loved him last weekend, and so did the critics." Aziraphale lifted the brush away, so Crowley opened his eyes.

"You'll do," Aziraphale told him. "Remember the look on Rani's face at our audition?"

"It wasn't my audition," Crowley reminded him. "And I was looking at you."

"Terrible of me to have tricked you into it, but I just knew—"

"You didn't trick me into anything," Crowley sighed. "Who's here tonight?"

"Pippa and Robert," Aziraphale said, brushing some powder off Crowley's shoulder. "Mandy's with them. Iván had to work. Adam and Sophia are just a few rows ahead."

Crowley rubbed the corner of his mouth. "What about the others?"

"Uriel convinced Raphael you needed the first two nights of the run without him—how do these young people put it?—creeping on you, so they aren't coming till Sunday."

"His etiquette training is shaping up nicely, I suppose. How long have we got?"

"Ten minutes till curtain," Aziraphale said. "Is there anything you'd like to run?"

Crowley shook his head. "The less I touch this, the better. You know that, angel."

Rani squashed them together from behind, grinning at their combined reflection.

"Break a leg, my lads, and thank you so, so very much for stepping in like this," she told Crowley,
smacking a lipstick-heavy kiss to his temple. "You'll blow Gregory out of the water. If the critics
don't say you've outdone him, I owe our dear Caliban a fiver."

Crowley set his chin in his hands. "Your pocketbook's confidence is touching."

She let go of them and dashed off to hug Miranda and Ferdinand in similar fashion.

"I," Crowley announced, "am about to forget lines I've known for four hundred years."

"Four hundred and two now, isn't it?" Aziraphale mused. "How time does fly."

"You're not helping. Just so you know. Pippa said it's best to point things out."

"Yes," Aziraphale sighed, stroking his cheek, "and I'm grateful." The lights went off and flickered back on, and Rani was shouting something about getting this shite on the road. "It's off to the front with me, I'm afraid. I'll see you out there."

"Wouldn't miss it for the worlds," Crowley told him, and winked. "Go to, go to."

Rani would never believe him if he were to tell her the reason why he'd known these lines by heart since the Year of Our Lord sixteen-hundred and eleven. Back then, he hadn't exactly intended to audition for the role, either. He'd only been hanging around at court because the tempting had been easy and he'd rarely, if ever, had to pay for his own drinks. He missed James the First, true, but he missed Elizabeth even more.

Hastur had turned up for the premiere; Crowley had seen him lurking at the back of the gallery. He'd snagged Crowley afterward for a bit of mockery; although, if Crowley wasn't mistaken, he'd actually rather enjoyed the novelty of the experience.

Caught up in moody reminiscence, Crowley kept to himself until his first entrance.

Aziraphale's eyes brightened as he crept onstage, vivid even under the harsh lights.

"Approach, my Ariel," he said, delivering the line as if filled with the uncertain, simmering excitement of their unplanned audition all over again. "Come."

“All hail, great master!” said Crowley. “Grave sir, hail! I come to answer…”

The show passed in a whirl of quicksilver exchanges and thoroughly unrehersed choreography. Crowley was grateful that the rest of the cast was competent enough to respond in spite of the fact he'd scarcely rehearsed with them more than twice, and Aziraphale stealing kisses and gropes in the darkened wings certainly did a great deal to ramp up the sexual tension of their interpretation. He was sure he'd never before heard isolated instances of sniffing in the audience upon the granting of Ariel's freedom. Moreover, he couldn't remember the role of Ariel drawing so much laughter, and not the kind of laughter he'd got from Hastur. In it, he heard sheer delight.

When the curtain fell and the lights went down once they'd taken their final bows, Aziraphale had to brace Crowley on his feet. He'd spent so much of his existence intent upon pulling strings behind the scenes, mucking about in wet fields at night.

"Were we alone, I would have you right here," Aziraphale whispered in his ear.
"As it happens, we're not," Crowley shot back, "so hold that thought, would you?"

Out in the lobby, freshly scrubbed of his make-up, Crowley scarcely heard what Mandy and Sophia were saying to him, largely because they were both speaking at once and neither one had ceased hanging on his arm (Mandy to his right, Sophia to his left) for the better part of fifteen minutes.

Rani, Pippa, and Aziraphale were too busy being insufferable at each other to rescue him, and Robert was so terrified he'd latched onto his grandmother's legs and wouldn't budge. Adam grinned at him somewhat grimly.

"Was it better than the first time around, d'you reckon?" he asked. So much for having hoped he'd forgot most of what he'd seen when he'd had a rifle through the contents of Crowley's head as an eleven year-old. Adam's memory was astonishing.

"Bizarrely enough, yes," Crowley answered without hesitation. He shook Mandy off, handed Sophia back to Adam, and forced his way over to where Aziraphale was not-so-subtly congratulating himself to both his best friend and his director.

He knelt down and brushed several handbags aside, peering glumly at Robert.

"They never stop wittering away," Crowley told him. "I know how it is."

"There's way too many people here," said the boy. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I," said Crowley, and meant it. "Why don't we go out to the car?"

"Your car?" asked Robert, his eyes widening. "The really weird black one?"

"Don't know that I'd call it weird," Crowley said, extending one hand, "but, yeah, that one. It does look different from modern cars, I'll grant, but it runs ten times better."

"A million times better!" Rob exclaimed, launching himself at Crowley. "Can I drive?"

"No," Crowley said, rising with the boy in his arms. "But you can sit at the wheel."

To Mandy's consternation, between three separate cars, they all ended up at the café.

"I don't care if you're on break," she muttered to Iván, who'd nipped out to greet them. "Just get us a table for eight. You know those fold-out ones in the back?"

"I had not thought of that," replied Iván, and dashed off as quickly as he'd come.

The fold-out tables weren't necessary, as two tables along the back windows vacated almost instantly. It took a couple of new waitresses about ten minutes to clear them.

"You must like being waited on these days," Pippa told Mandy smugly.

"It's nice," Mandy agreed, meeting Crowley's interested glance. "I can't lie."
"Hear, hear!" Rani shouted, tapping her glass of water with a fork. "To the cast!"

"Most of whom aren't here," Crowley muttered, but he raised his glass anyway. Rob, still planted firmly in Crowley's lap, picked up a butter knife and clacked it against the sippy-cup of milk Pippa had produced from her handbag. "To the bloody show."

"It wasn't very bloody at all," Rob reminded him. "Not like that movie you hate."

Sophia managed to spill some of her water all over Mandy's hand, which resulted in ice cubes everywhere. Crowley didn't think he could get away with clearing the mess, so he made do with sending Rob after the nearest wait-staff instead. Cute children were less likely to incur wrath than seemingly late-thirtysomething regulars.

Appetizers and wine worked miracles for their rag-tag party's collective mood.

"How are plans coming along, then?" Pippa asked. "Do you need any help?"

In spite of the warm, lively burden in his lap, Crowley felt suddenly cold.

"Any day now," said Aziraphale, trying for a reassuring tone. "We're ironing out a few last-minute scheduling complications, thank you so much for understanding—"

"You've got to inform the registrar of your intentions sixteen days in advance," said Adam, unexpectedly. "On account of your intentions needing to be posted for fifteen days. I don't think anybody's going to object, least of all me, but there's that."

The whole table fell silent, Adam's level-headed statement snuffing out the chaos.

Crowley's blood ran even colder. "We're aware of that," he said, lying through his teeth, hoping that no one but Adam would know he actually hadn't been. "Very likely late April," he forged on. "There's a month and a half yet. Be patient."

"Some of us are worrying about what to wear," said Pippa, tetchily.

"Some of us are worrying about you guys, full stop," Sophia added.

Crowley put Robert down on the floor and spent the next thirty seconds staring hopelessly at his spinach dip while Aziraphale did his best to salvage the situation. There's no use waiting any longer, he told himself. I should forget the whole thing.

* * *

Duke Hastur was having an exceptionally bad day, not to mention a lonely one.
By most demons’ standards, that was quite an accomplishment. Granted, so was the audio-surveillance charm he’d managed to set up on Dagon’s premises. Appropriately enough, his bad day was courtesy of the conversation he was currently overhearing.

"We ought to get back to him soon," Dagon’s assistant was saying. In Hastur's view, whatever else she happened to be (Slut, he thought), Tanith was a complication. "This affair's on behalf of his humans, largely, and humans don't like to be kept waiting."

"No matter how safe you insist it is," Dagon replied, "we'd still be taking a risk."

"Sir," said Tanith, softly, but her inflection suggested a connotation closer to any of a colorful array of sickeningly affectionate endearments, "he remembers you fondly."

"I remember him fondly, too, St. Peter take us all," Dagon muttered. "Why do you think I bothered looking in on him for all those years, had you do all of that research?"

"They're like us," insisted Tanith, loudly and impatiently. "The only difference is that they've carved out a space for themselves on Earth and we're content to stay here!"

"The Principality," Dagon said. "You're certain that he poses no threat to us?"

"He posed a pretty good threat to Asmodai, but the fucker was gunning for it."

Hastur flinched and covered his eyes, and then furiously recovered himself.

"I'm still not clear on what happened to you," Dagon said at length. "You were missing for what seemed like an eternity, and then there you were, asleep at your desk."

Hastur hunched down in his coat. All he could remember was getting ready for what promised to be a bloody good show (and it had been a long time since he'd treated Ligur to one), and then running from the one Archangel that no demon in his right mind would ever want to cross. Not that demons tended to have right minds.

"Let's not talk about that," Tanith replied. "I told you what I could recall."

At the latter half of the statement, Hastur's ears pricked up. Too uncannily familiar, dreams that seemed like memories and memories that might have been dreams...

"Tanith, dear girl, I want him to be happy," said Dagon, wearily. "Is he?"

"Insofar as those who choose an existence with humans can be happy. But I get the impression from this letter that he'd really like to have us there. Nobody else would know us, and given they only moved to that area about a decade ago, they've got plenty of secrets yet. We can issue ourselves bodies using your clearance, right?"

Hastur studied his filthy fingernails. He’d been wearing this thing since he'd first got it—as many chose to do, even after returning to Hell—and, likewise, Ligur had held onto his. So they hadn't kept their corporations in pristine nick; bodies were fussy things, what with requiring baths all the time and insisting on haircuts. He'd done a pretty good job by sheer force of will, maintaining a bare minimum of presentability. And Ligur always looked very, very presentable, if he had any right to say as much.

Hastur studied his filthy fingernails. He’d been wondering where Ligur was for most of the time he’d been lurking on Dagon's doorstep.
Lurking just wasn't the same without his companion on hand. Dagon sighed heavily, sounding as if he was about to give in to Tanith's nagging.

"The ceremony's not likely to be held in a church, is it? That's the deal-breaker."

"Why?" Tanith asked, just as confused as Hastur felt hearing church and ceremony.

Almost too softly for the charm to carry, Dagon said two words: "Holy Water."

"So don't dip your fingers in the stoup!" Tanith snapped. "It's just common sense. Anyway, I don't think they're the sort to go in for a church, sentimental human friends be damned. I may not know the guy very well, but I like him. A lot. Uriel likes him, and that counts for even more. Please, please don't say anything awful about Archangels. Just deal with it. Our old co-worker's marrying somebody who far outranks her and Raphael, and has been with him for ages besides. Are you actually worried about the presence of Holy Water? I'm pretty sure it's all down to how seriously you take that shit. I've handled angelic weapons and come to no harm."

Once again, Dagon's response was measured and unnaturally quiet. "What you're forgetting is that Holy Water wasn't devised by either side, neither Above nor Below. Human conviction makes it what it is, and human conviction alone."

"Most humans who bless water in order to sanctify it believe demons are a bad thing; therefore, it annihilates demons? Have I got that right, or is it deadly to angels, too?"

"I don't know. But an old colleague of ours insists he once saw it at work firsthand."

Unsettled and fuming, Hastur snapped his fingers. The charm went dead, leaving the scorched air abuzz with Dagon's last words. There were few things worse than hearing oneself talked about, regardless of the light in which one happened to be cast.

"You dunt look too happy," said a voice off to Hastur's left. "Situation normal?"

Hastur turned to Ligur, doing his best to conceal how pleased he was to see him.

"I knew you'd turn up sooner or later," he said. "How about another trip Upstairs?"

"Dunno," said Ligur, hesitantly. "That tall one with the spear, is he still..."

"We won't be alone," Hastur told him. "Strength in numbers. We go when they go."

"Judgin' by what I heard, they're takin' some personal trip for a wedding. No thanks."

Hastur resisted the urge to smack Ligur's head hard enough to take it off his neck.

"Do you realize they got an invitation? Furthermore, do you know who delivered it?"

Ligur's expression went from clueless to clued-in faster than Hastur had ever seen.

"Oh, blimey," he muttered. "That funny white one with the waterproof ink."

Hastur let this sink in for another few minutes, as the pay-off was surely worth it.
Ligur's eyes went round and glassy, repeating one word to himself: *wedding*.

"Does that mean Crawly an' that one angel Dagon says is really dangerous—"

"Yes," said Hastur, gruffly, cutting him off. "But the Serpent's dangerous, too."

* * *

After the show, drinks, and dinner, Aziraphale found himself too knackered (mentally, if not physically) to make good on his curtain-call promise. Which, given Crowley had climbed into bed clothes and all while Aziraphale stripped down was just as well. He was asleep by the time Aziraphale settled in beside him. Easy enough to wish Crowley's clothes away, lest he wake overheated and irritable in the wee hours.

Aziraphale woke just before seven in the morning, feeling well rested, although Crowley was still dead to the world (and waking him before eight was never, under *any* circumstances, advisable). He got up, donned his robe, and went to the kitchen.

Upon opening the breadbox and finding it occupied, he got in a decently long lecture regarding why food-storage areas did not make favorable homes for mice. The little scoundrel got away with a quizzical expression and a belly full of crumbs, as usual.

Aziraphale had just settled down with a duck-egg omelet to watch some breakfast telly when Crowley straggled groggily into the living room and flopped down on the sofa against his side. He let Crowley tuck in under his left arm and burrow against his chest, much though it made effective use of his fork somewhat difficult.

"Why do you watch this drivel," Crowley muttered, yawning. It wasn't a question.

"Because I feel better for keeping up with events in London," Aziraphale told him, waving the volume down a few notches. "My dear, your nightshirt's inside out."

"Not my fault you didn't put me in it properly when you took off all the rest."

Aziraphale set his fork on the plate and gave Crowley's back a thorough rubbing.

"Are you hungry? Our whiskered friend's been kind enough to leave some brioche."

Crowley fumbled the fork off the plate and used it to steal a few bites of omelet.

"Why didn't you add any cheese? I've got that aged gouda you like in the fridge."

"Because you know full well I'm more likely to burn the whole endeavor if I do."

"Noted," said Crowley, and fed Aziraphale the next bite. "Want me to make it?"
"Please," replied Aziraphale, all too gratefully, and hustled Crowley to his feet.

Once the cooking was finished and the coffee brewed (none for Crowley, though: he'd made himself a cup of sencha), Crowley seemed far too hungry for conversation. Inasmuch as taking him back to bed after he'd eaten would be the logical next step, Aziraphale's thoughts turned back to the night before. He frowned into his mug.

"I do hate to belabor the issue," he said, "but Adam made an expedient point."

Crowley looked up from cutting his second full omelet into neat little squares.

"Give it till Monday," he said. "Bureaucrats dislike being bothered on weekends."

"Please don't take this the wrong way," Aziraphale continued, taking a careful sip of coffee as his stomach twisted uncomfortably, "but if you're having second thoughts or if you've got any misgivings whatsoever, now would be the time—"

Crowley dropped his cutlery and covered his face, fingers clawing briefly at his closed eyes before creeping up into his disarrayed hair. He blinked tiredly at Aziraphale.

"It's nothing of the sort. Stupid, really, but the truth is that I thought I was being clever. And before I tell you what this is about, I'd like to reassure you that the party in question has only ever proved himself a decent sort, right up through our recent—"

"Crowley, you're rambling," said Aziraphale, mildly. "Er. What Pippa said about—"

"Telling each other when we're being sod-all useless twats, yes, good, got it! Uh. Right. What would you say if I told you I'd written to my old boss, you know, sort of thanking him for the hand he lent back there in the theatre when Tanith was bleeding out and asking him if he'd, um, consider turning up for an important event."

Aziraphale pressed both hands to his temples. "When you say your old boss, do you mean—" he paused, struggling to find words "—that is, dear boy, I assume you mean your immediate supervisor or some other individual nearer your own former station."

Crowley slumped in his chair and took a few slow, moody bites of his omelet.

"I mean that I asked Dagon if he'd at least consider coming to the reception."

"Oh," said Aziraphale, overwhelmed as unexpected relief washed over him. "Well, I should think there's no harm in that. He's been slow to RSVP, is that it?"

"It's not even like it was a formal invitation," Crowley said. "I just..."

On time for once, the Saturday post slipped through the front door and skittered across the floor tiles. Aziraphale went to fetch the whole lot, having caught sight of Hell's uncannily familiar stationery almost as soon as it had emerged from the slot.

"Yours, I believe," he said to Crowley, holding out the oversized vellum envelope.

Crowley's hands were shaking badly enough that it took him several tries to gesture the seal open.
"What news?" Aziraphale asked. "Is it Dagon's response, or is it something else?"

Crowley dropped the letter in his lap and shrugged, clearing the envelope off his food.

"He says that he's giving it serious thought, but that he can't make any promises."

Aziraphale experienced a decent pang of guilt on top of his second wave of relief.

"Take comfort in the fact that it's not a flat-out refusal," he said, "and that we can finally contact the proper authorities and start planning the reception."

"Today's the Ides of March. If we call in Monday, we can arrange for the registrar to perform the ceremony as early as April Fool's Day. What, angel? Don't look at me like that! It's true. April first is the sixteenth day after notification; we'd be in the clear."

"What about the twentieth?" Aziraphale suggested. "That'd still be a week earlier than the date Adam and Sophia chose last year, and I'm sure your roses will be blooming."

"April twentieth is Easter Sunday," Crowley said. "Now who's playing silly buggers?"

"Then it's April Fool's, Easter, or somewhere in between. Take your pick!"

"Or we could just be sensible and go with the twenty-eighth. No? Why not?"

Aziraphale reached across the table and took hold of Crowley's hands.

"Because Pippa would rather not wait so long, and neither would I."

Crowley got to his feet and moved around the side of the table, letting go of Aziraphale's hands only when climbing into Aziraphale's lap demanded it. "I'd sooner risk foolishness than Rob demanding dyed duck-eggs as decorations."

"Wisely chosen, my dear," said Aziraphale, and simply held him there for a while.

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Anathema shifted in her seat and let her dress shoes fall off. She'd never liked intermissions much, not least when the play in question benefited from tighter pacing when executed in one fell swoop. She grabbed Newt's arm and checked his watch.

"They should have resumed five minutes ago," she said. "I wish am-drams knew it's their job to
show the professionals how things ought to be done, i.e. *on time."

"Shhh," Newt replied. "This company's cheeky enough to get above themselves."

"This rarely happens at home," said Uriel, patting Anathema's hand. "I'll take you to see a few shows in Toronto sometime. You'll be so pleased."

On Uriel's other side, Raphael leaned forward and wagged his finger.

"She'd have you believe Canada's a haven of hyper-punctual propriety, but don't believe her for a second. It's all lies. Come visit San Francisco! We'll teach you not to mind chronic tardiness. Patience —by which I mean *marijuana*—is a virtue."

"In your world, *resignation* must actually mean *gone homeopathic,*" Uriel said. "Just keep your mouth shut. You're scaring all of these proper British old ladies."

"The *play's* scaring all of these proper British old ladies," Newt amended cheerfully. "I think it's bloody well refreshing, don't you? Keeps the pensioners kicking."

"Rearrange the letters in *subtext,* and off you go," Anathema said. "Now hush up, all of you. The lights are coming down, and I don't want to miss this anagram."

One of the ladies in front of them, belatedly getting the joke, stifled a giggle.

"I'm getting to like this country," Raphael whispered to Uriel. "What if I don't want to go back? Could you stand to leave me here? I'll send you postcards and McVitie's."

"Shut it," Anathema hissed. "For now, I'd rather hear the arses onstage."

The lady in front of them giggled again, *not* at Stephano and Trinculo.

"It's a losing battle, my love," Newt whispered. "Arses and... *subtext*?"

"Oh God, we're going to get thrown out," Anathema choked under her breath, laughing so hard that struggling to keep silent was hindering her ability to breathe. In the lobby afterward, the lady who'd sat in front of them bought Anathema a drink.

Newt, finding this hilarious, retaliated by buying one for Anathema's benefactress.

"He's a keeper, darling," Raphael told Anathema, hanging casually on her shoulder.

"Three daughters later, he'd better be," she said, clinking her glass against his.

Aziraphale and Crowley turned up forty minutes later, both back in their street clothes and ever so slightly red in the cheeks. At first, Anathema thought it must have been on account of scrubbing off the stage make-up, but a closer look at Crowley revealed a certain endearing sheepishness that only public displays of affection could prompt.

"Well done, you two," Newt said, raising his glass. "That ought to please the press."

"It did!" Rani crowed, coming up behind her leading gents with two glasses of red wine. "Drink up, lads, you've earned it, and I won my bet! I'd take them on the road if I could. Ditch the rest of the lot
and up the budget, if you know what I mean—"

"I do, but don't let them hear you," Anathema said, indicating a number of other cast members still milling about with friends and lamenting the fact that their show was finally over. She glanced from Crowley to Aziraphale, grinning. "Er—hear, hear!"

Rather than rise to the praise and deflect it with false modesty, Aziraphale glanced at Crowley, who reached inside his coat and produced three envelopes. With eyes lowered, half smiling, he handed one to Anathema, one to Rani, and one to Uriel.

Anathema worked her thumb under the flap and tore it. "If this is what I think..."

Uriel was already shrieking and hugging Crowley to death, whereas Raphael had worked his way around the crowd so that he could offer Aziraphale a handshake. Anathema leaned back against the bar next to Newt and glanced up at him.

"Matrimony's no picnic. Should we tell them what they're in for?"

Newt covered his smirk too late; Anathema was already laughing.

"Aside from lots of subtext, you mean?" he asked wryly.

Come second round, the lady bought drinks for them both.

* * *

Madame Tracy signed the check with a neat flourish and handed it over.

"For your trouble over these past few months, Ms. Hodges," she said.

"I've seen ledgers in a much worse state," said the accountant. She was sharply dressed, if a bit no-nonsense for Madame Tracy's taste. "In a previous life, I ran a conference-and-retreat center for corporate types. The premises needed massive renovations, and sorting out the finances? It was a nightmare. There'd been a fire."

"Ledgers literally in a worse state, then, I gather," said Madame Tracy. "How dreadful! To be honest with you, love, I know that Mister S did the best he could given limited staffing and other obstacles. Admirable, how he cracked on for so many years!"

Shadwell muttered in the adjoining room, indistinct over the sound of the telly.

"I've rarely seen such creative bookkeeping," Ms. Hodges agreed. "Inspired work."

"Stay for a cup of tea, won't you? Tell me how a sharp lass like yourself ended up out here in the middle of nowhere. You remind me of my niece. She went to Cambridge."
"It's a long story," said Ms. Hodges. "Maybe some other time. I used to be a nun."

"Good thing you got out, pretty thing like you," said Madame Tracy, winking.

Ms. Hodges didn't comment, but thanked Madame Tracy for fetching her coat and left.

"Witch-wumman, if ye ask me!" Shadwell bellowed energetically. "Workin' wiv numbers an' all, a member o' the fairer sex? Accountancy? Hah! Sorcery, the lot. Mark me."

"That's nice, Mister S," Madame Tracy said, taking his three-quarters empty pint of Guinness and replacing it with some water. "I'll go out and check the post, shall I?"

"Hmph," Shadwell said, eyes sidling back to the telly. "Nun, my arse. Sorcery."

Having the Witchfinder Army's accounts finally laid to rest was, to say the least, a weight off Madame Tracy's shoulders. She put on her slippers and hobbled down the front walk; there weren't many days her knees didn't act up anymore, but the pain wasn't as fierce today. Small mercies, she told herself, and opened the mailbox.

Once she'd carried the day's haul inside (always heavy of a Monday), she dumped a handful of take-away flyers in the trash bin and was left with a small, unassuming cream-colored envelope addressed both to herself and to Sergeant Shadwell.

Recognizing Aziraphale's distinctive handwriting on sight, she opened it.

She read the contents of the card twice, set it on the table, and gasped.

"Mister S! Oh, what surprising news. You'll never guess."

"Wedding or funeral," he said with dry clarity. "Which?"

"Wedding," she said. "I think I just won our little bet."
Always the Bridesmaid [Part 3 / 3]

Chapter Summary

Sometimes the best plans of all are those left (mostly) unmade.

Adam knocked on the cottage door. He could hear the others shuffling and clearing their throats behind him, entirely too uncomfortable to be delivering what was essentially really great news to a pair of old friends whom they all wished well.

Crowley opened the door, briefly looked pleased to see Adam, and then sort-of-frowned when he saw Sophia, Mandy, and Iván clustered ominously on the stairs. "Hi," he said, a bit less cheerfully than usual. "Did I miss something?"

"Nope," Adam said. "We're just here to offer our services, that's all."

Crowley sighed and opened the door wider, holding it so they could file in.

"Services?" he asked, returning Iván's apologetic salute. "To what end?"

"Soph and I figured we owe you one, so we'll take care of the decorations and all that stuff," Adam explained, nodding to Aziraphale as he belatedly wandered in. "Neither of us is as brilliant when it comes to cooking as these two, though," he continued, indicating Mandy and Iván, "so they're going to sort out food for the reception."

"As in cook it," Iván clarified. "If I may have the honor of using your kitchen."

"Nonsense," Aziraphale said. "We can just hire externally. You're all our guests."

"Crowley, would you talk some sense into him?" Sophia pleaded. "We want to do this."

"Both of us have proved ourselves competent enough to use your appliances," Mandy pointed out, tugging Iván in by the waist. "We'll even clean everything up afterward."

Adam squeezed Sophia's hand to reassure her, and then beamed at Crowley.

"You just worry about getting the ceremony set up and leave the rest to us."

Crowley muttered something that sounded a lot like bloody Antichrist Mind Tricks and shuffled over to put on the kettle. "Fine," he said. "You might as well stay a while. We don't have any food allergies to consider, at least not that I'm aware, but we've got a lot of eccentric preferences. I'd rather not leave the hors d'oeuvres menu to chance."

"I'll grab us some pens and notebooks from the study," sighed Aziraphale, resigned.

For a wedding planning session, Adam reasoned, it was pretty relaxed. Just like it should be, he thought approvingly, and got up to add more hot water to the teapot.

Crowley and Iván had retreated to the safety of refrigerator and work-top, and were actually mocking things up in tiny sample batches as they went, some of which made their way over to the table where
Adam, Sophia, and Mandy sat talking decoration logistics with Aziraphale. Adam listened in on the cooks' conversation every once in a while; Basque wasn't much more difficult to pick up than any other language.

"I wouldn't have thought to do it like that," Iván was saying around a mouthful of puff-pastry. "You've basically turned that soup recipe into a savory tart. David still really wants you to come give us lessons. He's serious, and he'll pay you well."

"I'll think about it," said Crowley, evasively, and bent to check the progress of whatever they'd most recently popped in the oven. "Take the rest of those other ones over to the peanut gallery, would you? Sophia can eat her weight in anything."

"Hey, I understood what you just said," Mandy cut in. Her Basque, if still somewhat accented, had got formidably good. "Are you calling my bestie a glutton?"

"I'm implying that I've never seen anybody eat so much and gain so little, relatively speaking," Crowley said, switching back to English for Sophia's benefit. " Seriously, kids, where does it go? Is her stomach hooked up to a black hole somewhere?"

"There's nothing wrong with a healthy appetite," Aziraphale said. "Or an efficient metabolism." He turned to Sophia and told her, "You're in politics now, so you've got to keep up your strength. Don't listen to them, dear girl. You eat whatever you like."

"I'm only an intern," Sophia muttered into her teacup. "But thanks. I do, and I will."

"You'd better," said Adam, teasingly. "I don't like my girls as skinny as Pepper does."

"Oh!" Mandy said, waving her pen at Adam. "Are they coming, all your old friends?"

Crowley was making desperate No, I don't think so! gestures at Aziraphale.

"Nah," Adam said. "They've all got stuff on, but I bet they'll send cards and such."

Iván cursed a rapid string of Basque and yanked open the oven. "Whew."

"Nice save," Crowley told him, and stuck the tip of his knife into whatever kind of bread it was they'd just rescued from burning. Satisfied when the steel re-emerged clean, he cut up the bread and sent Iván around the table with pieces for everybody.

"No fairy lights?" Mandy was saying, moving down her checklist. "Are you sure?"

"Positively," Aziraphale said. "It's bad enough I've assented to Mardi Gras beads."

Adam watched Crowley's expression turn from placated back to horrified.

"You've assented to what, angel?" he demanded, stalking over to the table.

"That's the sweetest thing, you know," said Mandy, in an unusual tone of voice.

"What is?" several of them asked all at once, Iván abashedly trailing behind.

"How you call him that," she said to Crowley. "Angel. It suits him, but what an unlikely endearment these days. It's kind of a sickening cliché when other people use it, but not at all coming from you." She gave Aziraphale an oddly penetrating look.

"I can't even recall when I started," said Crowley, too hastily, busy removing an armful of preserve
and pickle jars from the refrigerator. "Ages ago. Now, all right, you're going to want to try this one on the bread first and then follow up with this..."

Adam sat back and frowned, studying Mandy out of the corner of his eye. She'd gone back to perusing her list, but her body language suggested she wasn't in the least bit satisfied with Crowley's answer or with Aziraphale's refusal to even comment.

**Soph was right**, he thought. **She's suspicious. We'd best keep an eye out.**

"So, bachelor parties!" Sophia exclaimed, gracefully changing the subject. "Pippa says she's talked you into having separate ones, honoring tradition and all that."

"Yes," said Crowley, forever charmingly put-upon, "although I don't see why. It's not exactly your average bride-and-groom situation, so I hardly see how it applies."

"Who's hanging out where? We can't all be both places at once," Mandy said.

"I should think everyone will have to choose," said Aziraphale, cautiously.

"Actually, the two of you should get to choose," Adam said. "It's only fair."

"Then I'm claiming you lot," Crowley said, in a sweeping gesture around the table that didn't include Aziraphale. "Evening of the thirty-first, right here. I'm making those cocktails Sophia's been talking up since autumn. We'll have better music, of course."

"I have to work," said Iván, somewhat stricken, "but I will be here the next day."

"Then I claim Uriel on Crowley's behalf," Sophia said. "He's already down a body."

"How can you be so sure she won't stay with Rafe?" Aziraphale asked, mildly stung.

"She'll be here for the cocktails," Crowley said. "And for Bruce Parry's bottom."

"If you're talking about that stupid tattoo again, I know what it is," Adam said.

Everyone dropped what they were doing and **stared**, which was the intended effect.

"Spit it out," Mandy said. "I want details. Crowley does, too, because he's a creeper."

Crowley stiffened, snatching Mandy's notebook away. "Let me see that. I am **not**—"

"How do you know?" Sophia asked, blinking at Adam in surprise. "Fess up."

"Brian's mates with somebody who was in the Marines with him. Not telling, though."

Everyone groaned and went back to what they'd been doing, their curiosity thwarted.

"Uriel will get it out of you," Crowley told Adam on his way back to the oven. "It will involve lots of alcohol and even more hitting on you, and it will not be pleasant."

"Tell her I can't wait," said Adam, grinning smugly. "Your party will do."

Purely on principle, Sophia hit him upside the head with her notebook.
Ligur inclined his head and sidled closer to the wall. He could hear voices.

"Crowley's going to be so pleased," Tanith was saying. "You have no idea. I flew recon yesterday while you were sorting that batch of Immortal Soul agreements. Plans for the reception are in full swing, and they're even having separate bachelor parties."

"Somehow, I don't think we're invited to the parties," said Dagon, with regret.

Ligur turned to Hastur, who was sat with his back against the wall and his legs splayed out in front of him. He'd got tired of listening some time ago, the poor sod.

"D'you reckon we ought ter go up ahead of 'em?" he asked. "They're talking about bachler parties or somethin'. I ain't never heard of a bachler. Wossat mean?"

"It's a nonsensical human courtship tradition," Hastur intoned. "It means nothing."

"Yeah, but see, I could stake out one party an' you could stake out the other."

Hastur sat up and tilted his head at Ligur, sporting the beginnings of a nasty, conspiratorial smile. *That* was the kind of smile Ligur liked. In fact, it was probably just any smile on Hastur, full stop, that he liked. Hastur's sharp eye-teeth always showed, no matter what. It was downright bloody fetching, if you Ligur had anything to say on the matter. Especially if Hastur's teeth actually *were* covered in blood.

They weren't right now, but parties meant humans, and humans meant *food*.

"You just might have a point for once," Hastur said, tugging Ligur down to sit beside him. "Even if we can't strike directly at the heart of the matter, by which I mean the happy newlyweds, we can surely...*infiltrate* the proceedings by other means."

"An' then get to 'em that way," said Ligur, helpfully, scooting much closer. "Cor."

"Shhh," Hastur said, turning his head to the wall, twisting his hand so that the charm's resonance doubled. "Let's see if there's anything else worth our while, eh?"

Ligur didn't know how Hastur had got so good at charms, but he liked that, too.

"We'll go to the reception, Tanith. *Just* the reception, and then we leave."

"It's all taking place at the cottage. The ceremony itself will take all of five or ten minutes, vows and signatures and a kiss, big whoop. The reception follows immediately after. We might as well go for the whole shebang, don't you think?"

"She knows interestin' words," Ligur whispered. "Looks like plans 'ave changed."

"Indeed," Hastur whispered back. "The slut is, as I feared, a complication."

"I thought we was just goin' up to watch," Ligur replied. "Fer old times' sake. It ain't every century somebody from the ol' office ties the knot, so maybe we ought ter—"
Hastur frowned at him, and that wasn't nice at all, so Ligur shut his gob.

"What I had in mind was more of a prank. A prank of which we may not foresee the circumstances. There may be collateral damage. Just like the theatre, remember?"

"Hmmm, yeah," said Ligur, dreamily. "Blood an' guts an' the like. Wot 'ave we got to do, then? Pranks need settin' up, an' I know set-up, if you don't mind my sayin'."

Hastur's smile widened, dangerously pleased, and Ligur felt his stomach flip.

"You got reasonably familiar with that cottage Crawly calls Home, correct?"

"Yep. Inside, out, an' in between. They've got ducks in the garden shed."

"There's an item in Crawly's possession that might prove useful," Hastur said, sliding an arm around Ligur. "You know those plants? It's the thing with the nozzle he uses to water them."

"Right," Ligur said, cozying up to Hastur as much as he dared. "Green, innit?"

"That's the one," Hastur said. "Now, here's what else you've got to do..."

The rest of what Hastur described sounded massively dangerous, but Ligur prided himself on a modicum of creativity. He told Hastur he'd see what he could do. Hastur snarled and told him that had better mean he sodding well would.

Ligur nodded eagerly and, ready for the proverbial kill, caught a startled Hastur by the lapels.

"Yer gonna owe me," he said, and, ignoring the horrid flutter in his stomach, licked Hastur's lower lip. "Seein' as I'm takin' an awfully big risk."

Hastur snarled again, like he meant to strike, but instead kissed Ligur like he was a man gallows-bound. Which he just might be, given what Hastur had asked of him.

"You fucking stupid bastard," Hastur panted. "I'd have done it anyhow."

"Then what are we waitin' for?" Ligur demanded. "Pay up front, or else."

And Hastur did. For hours and hours, long into the interminable night.

* * *

Uriel frowned at her reflection, and then turned to look at Raphael.

"What on earth is this? You've dressed me for a bad '80s prom night."

"Hush now, darling," he said, pulling her in for a kiss. "It suits you."

"Blue sequin tube dress, my ass," she said. "If they laugh, you'll pay."
"Rumor has it that Tanith's charming young savior is in possession of some information you'd like," Raphael said. "Why not go and get it from him?"

"I won't stoop that low," Uriel replied. "Sophia's a nice girl, and I like her."

"Suit yourself, darling. All that's between you and that tattoo is stubbornness."

"If he won't tell Crowley, then there's no way he's telling me. Fuck off."

"I'm about to," Raphael said, rising from the edge of the bed. "Pippa's a stickler for punctuality, and, out of deference for Mrs. Device-Pulsifer, I'll deign to be on time."

"So Newt and Anathema will be there," Uriel said. "Who else is Snoresville bound?"

"Madame Tracy and her pet Witchfinder, would you believe? I'm going to have fun."

"You're holding out on me, aren't you. Don't lie. Anyone else I ought to know about?"

"That saucy Pakistani director," said Raphael, grimly. "What's her name, Rani?"

"Ahaah!" Uriel exclaimed, grinning, and threw one of the feather boas Raphael had pulled out of the closet around her neck. "She's got a crush on you, sweetie!"

"Don't remind me," Raphael sighed, swaggering over to the dressing table. He leaned over Uriel's shoulder and reached for his eyeliner, briefly touching up the already meticulous job he'd done earlier. "Be good, my love," he said, and kissed her cheek.

"Wouldn't dream of misbehaving," she said, and smacked his ass. "Get out of here!"

Raphael walked backwards out of the room, his eyes fixed on her till the very last.

Lacking anything else to do, Uriel made a number of gratuitous and glittery additions to her make-up until she heard a familiar car-horn blare out front. She shoved her iPhone down the front of her dress, dashed out of the bedroom, and practically tripped out the front door courtesy of the stiletto heels Raphael had stuck her in.

"That's, um, interesting," Crowley said as she slid into the front seat next to him. He put the car back in gear and swerved out into the road. "The sooner we get back, the better. Adam and Sophia turned up early, so I mixed a couple pitchers of that cocktail in advance. She's got two in her already, and, when I left, she was starting a third."

"I'm already sick of these shoes," Uriel said, pulling them off and tossing them in the back seat. "Fishnets are dress code, right? I hope there's no duck shit to worry about."

Crowley's eyes flicked sideways again, looking her up and down a second time.

"As I said," he muttered, failing to maintain a neutral tone, "interesting."

"I guess that answers my question," sighed Uriel, watching the scenery whiz past.

"Look, you are attractive," Crowley said consolingly. "I just don't want to sleep with you. One relationship's enough bloody work; I have no clue how you and Raphael kept it together for so many years while you were having it off with humans on the side."

"Practice," Uriel said. "Trial and error. Lots of mistakes, and I do mean lots."
"My mistake was waiting too long to act. It's a good job Aziraphale made his move."

Uriel waited until Crowley had pulled up in the cottage driveway and killed the ignition to lean over, yank Crowley around to face her, and kiss him full on the mouth. She'd take this trophy the one and only time she could, lay her curiosity to rest. He used human strength to try and pull away; she used monstrous strength to hold him fast.

A minute later, once she'd released him, Crowley swiped his fingers across his lips.

"And just look at you now," Uriel told him, affectionately proud. "Getting married."

"Um," Crowley said, and waved the passenger door open. "Get out of my car."

Uriel dashed after him up the front walk, finding it difficult to match his pace.

"I didn't mean anything by it!" she said, staying his hand on the doorknob. "You know I didn't, and you know I was teasing you the other night. We're good, right? Crowley?"

In spite of the fact he wasn't wearing sunglasses, his expression was completely unreadable. A moment of deliberation passed, at which point he cracked the ghost of a smile that looked nervous, but actually wasn't, because he bent and kissed her back: a warm, fond, familiar press of his lips against hers that lasted several seconds.

"Of course we are, don't be daft," he said, and opened the door. "After you!"

Apparently Sophia had been watching out the kitchen window, because she had braced herself against the kitchen sink, pink-cheeked, applauding as they walked in. "Hey, now, I didn't know it was that kind of bachelor party!" she exclaimed.

"Well, it wasn't, but now it might as well be," Crowley said. "Where's your husband?"

"In the loo," replied Sophia, tipsily, stepping up close to him. "Why do you ask?"

"Because if you're going to kiss me, too, I suggest you do it before he gets back."

Uriel was impressed with the girl's gumption, because Sophia somehow managed to lay it on him even heavier than she had managed to do herself. More out of surprise than anything else, Crowley caught her around the waist and accidentally ended up dipping her a little on account of the fact she'd gone slightly limp in his arms.

"Okay, that was weird," she said, furiously rubbing at her mouth when it was over. "That was weird, right? If you don't think that was weird, then I'm going to die."

Crowley steered her over to the kitchen table and sat her in the nearest chair. He went and drew a glass of water from the tap, which he brought back and put in front of her. Uriel, having helped herself to a glass of the cocktail, took the chair next to Sophia's.

"Yes, it was weird, and here's what you're going to do," Crowley told her, tapping the rim of the glass. "You're going to drink one of these for every alcoholic beverage that passes your lips, are we clear? I'm not calling Raphael over here to sort you out."

"Pity," Sophia said, grinning her face off as Adam strode back into the kitchen.

"Both cats got the canary, I see," he said good-naturedly, and went over to pour himself a cocktail. He shook the unopened bag of novelty mini-umbrellas at Crowley.
"Be my guest," Crowley sighed, taking a seat on the other side of Sophia. "Go ahead and open them. Fetch me a drink while you're over there, won't you?"

Adam poured a second cocktail and stuck an umbrella in it, as well as in his own. He carried both over to the table and, in a move that made Uriel choke on the sip she'd just taken, bent over and planted one on Crowley with as much aplomb as his wife.

"What?" he said to Uriel, grinning. "Why should you two have all the fun?"

"Why indeed," Crowley muttered, making quick work of nearly half his drink.

While Uriel, Crowley, and Adam polished off their first round, Sophia sat complaining about how the water rule meant she'd be running to the loo all night. Mandy and the twins arrived while Adam poured seconds (leaving Sophia out) and Crowley pulled a tray of prawns, cheese, vegetables, and homemade pickle from the fridge.

"You started without us?" Natalie asked Crowley, mock-affronted. "What gives?"

"We brought music!" Janet exclaimed, waving her iPod. "Where do I plug this in?"

"Okay, you two, the sound system's in here," Mandy sighed, dumping her overnight bag and the twins' next to Adam's and Sophia's. "I'll show you. It's not that hard."


Uriel concealed her smirk while Crowley glowered daggers at Sophia.

"I beg your—wait, what?" Mandy asked. "Kiss Adam? Or do you mean—"

"She means kiss the groom," Adam explained. "We've all had a go."

"Oh, that I'd like to see," said Mandy, sarcastically. "You fucking liar."

Without skipping a beat, Sophia punched a few buttons on her mobile and played back the footage. Uriel hadn't even realized she was sober enough to have thought of such a thing, much less that she'd actually managed it without the rest of them noticing.

Mandy's eyes went round as she watched. She cleared her throat, beckoned to the twins, and led them into the living room.

"News flash!" she shouted over the first blast of Bad Romance. "I kissed him before any of you lot ever did, so suck it!"

Uriel hid her laughter behind her hands. She'd picked the right place to start off her evening.

Meanwhile, Crowley had out his iPhone and was composing a text message.

It was addressed to Aziraphale, and it read, quite simply, HELP ME.

* * *
Raphael passed his half-smoked cigarette to Anathema and winked. There was no way Pippa hadn't noticed there wasn't just tobacco in it, and she didn't seem to care. She took a long drag and held it in for a while, coughing slightly on exhalation.

"Easy does it," Newt said, patting her on the back. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Piss off," said Anathema, brightly, sticking the cigarette in his mouth, "or join in."

"Pass that along, would you?" Pippa asked, gesturing for it once Newt had finished sputtering. "I haven't had that stuff in forty years. Maybe it'll help my arthritis."

"I guarantee that it will," Raphael said, stealing a sidelong glance at Aziraphale. He'd gone slightly pink at whatever Madame Tracy was saying to him, and he'd been texting Crowley for the better part of the evening. Some of the texts had contained phrases like I don't think the others will permit it and I'd really like that, too.

Pleased with himself, Raphael leaned over, the better to read and to listen.

"I always did wonder, ever since we met," Madame Tracy continued, swirling the wine in her glass with a sigh. "You were far too refined, of course, and then there was your lovely boy. Oh, don't blush so; you know that he is! What a prize, just look at him."

What do you mean by 'snogged'? Aziraphale typed, all the while sipping on his own wine and humming noncommittally at Madame Tracy as she forged boldly on.

"I don't suppose you'll tell us what he's like between the sheets," Rani interrupted, having grown more and more blunt as the evening progressed. "What with this being your last night of freedom. Out with it already, lad! Inquiring minds and all that."

Aziraphale regarded Raphael with a cool, vaguely annoyed glance and turned his BlackBerry over. "I don't see how that's your business," he said to Rani, tartly, raising his glass for a sip of wine, "or anyone else's, really, so kindly shove off."

"I'll tell you all you like about this one," Anathema said, indicating Newt with a single jerk of her thumb. "His idea of seduction's doing it smack in the middle of a tornado."

"But it wasn't my idea," Newt protested. "You practically threw yourself at me."

"See?" Anathema demanded, several glasses of wine and the remainder of the cigarette gone. "Men. You can't trust a word of it, so what's the use in asking?"

"Sweetheart," Newt whispered, stroking the back of her hand. "You're drunk."

"Glad somebody noticed," Anathema said. "Pippa, have you got any gin?"

Raphael rolled a fresh cigarette, lit it, and passed it across the circle to Pippa.

"All yours, darling. Don't let anybody take that away from you, understand?"

"Oh, I shan't," said Pippa, taking a long, leisurely drag. "Not for the world."

Shadwell staggered in from the sitting room and warily regarded them one by one.

"What're we gettin' into, then, that's stunk the whole place up to high heaven?"
"If only," Raphael said wistfully, offering Shadwell a spare he'd tucked behind his ear for safekeeping. "I wouldn't mind driving good old Gabriel to a fit of histrionics."

*You're rather lucky I'm past that sort of thing*, Aziraphale was typing.

Madame Tracy chuckled at Raphael. "What an odd sense of humor you've got!"

Shadwell harrumphed at the cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, and wandered off.

Raphael tapped Aziraphale on the shoulder and then gestured at the BlackBerry.

"What in God's name do you think you're doing? This is your party, not theirs."

"In case you hadn't noticed, I've never been much use at this sort of affair."

"Which is why you're clandestinely arranging another?" Raphael asked.

"Uriel's been busy tonight," said Aziraphale, nonchalantly, "or so I hear."

"I'd expected as much," Raphael replied. "Has she got Adam to fess up?"

"It's his regimental insignia," Aziraphale insisted. "You know I'm right. Given the general color scheme and shape, that's the only reasonable assumption."

"Again with the endless tattoo debate," Anathema said, raising the gin and tonic Raphael had surreptitiously materialized beside her. "To Bruce Parry's bottom!"

"I'll drink to that," Rani agreed, raising her glass. "It is a nice bottom."

*Also tell Uriel she's at the wrong party*, Aziraphale typed. *My dear, how soon?*

Raphael snatched the BlackBerry from him. "I'm not supposed to let you leave."

"Let me guess: Uriel's not supposed to let Crowley leave the cottage, either?"

"You assented to a human wedding," Raphael said. "You can't see him till tomorrow, so there's nothing for it. Come on, let's have more wine. Join me for a smoke?"

Between Raphael's closed hands, Aziraphale's BlackBerry buzzed insistently.

Aziraphale gave Raphael a desperate look and proceeded to finish his wine.

"I don't know what anyone else thinks," Raphael said, rising, "but throwing this gadget in the ocean is beginning to sound like an excellent idea. How about it?"

Aziraphale scrabbled to his feet and grabbed Raphael's arm. "Are you insane?"

Raphael turned the BlackBerry over and read Crowley's latest text: *Twenty minutes.*

"Uriel would very much like to see you," Aziraphale said. "And some others here."

Raphael chewed his lip thoughtfully and texted Crowley back: *I'll be there.*

"Yes, into the sea with you," he told the BlackBerry, and then winked at Aziraphale.

To a chorus of cheers, Raphael dashed out the back door with Aziraphale in pursuit.
"Thisss song," Crowley said to Janet, dancing along beside her, "is not sssso bad."

"Oh my God," Mandy groaned from somewhere across the room, which had begun to swim pleasantly, "he moves much better than I do, and he's hardly even got hips."

"Yeah, but he's still awkward in comparison to those three," Uriel whispered loudly. "Where'd they learn that kind of choreography? I doubt Anathema taught them."

"Probably the music video," Mandy sighed. "And to think, before tonight, I'd have told you I really love Alejandro. Fucking Lady Gaga, spoiling my fun. Absolutely naff."

Crowley let Sophia tug him away from the twins and danced with her instead.

"Is somebody getting this on video?" Adam asked from his seat on the sofa.

"If you're not, nobody is," Mandy said glumly. "I promised Soph I wouldn't."

Out of the corner of his eye, Crowley saw Uriel pull something from her dress.

"Oh no you don't," he muttered, diving across the coffee table a bit too late.

The ensuing scramble got Crowley up close and personal with a lot more of Uriel's anatomy than he'd ever intended to experience, but he finally got hold of her iPhone and slithered off the opposite end of the sofa, victorious. He checked the time. Only fifteen minutes till the rendezvous, and he hadn't even planned his escape.

"I'm afraid," Crowley said, "that this device has got to be made an example of."

"You could just make an example of those three over there and have done with it," said Mandy, and woozily got to her feet. "Sorry, I don't feel that great. Back in a sec."

Uriel caught Crowley's wrist in an urgent vise-grip. "What are you doing?"

"Getting the hell out of here," Crowley hissed. "Jusst try and ssstop me."

"You're pretty drunk," she told him. "You know that, right? He probably is, too."

Sophia killed the music and dashed unsteadily after Mandy. "I'll be right back!"

"Touching how they look after one another, isn't it?" Adam asked wearily.

Uriel spent the next few minutes unsuccessfully trying to wrestle her phone back off of Crowley, but she just wasn't fast enough or flexible enough. Mandy wandered back into the middle of the room looking rather peaked, firmly propped up by Sophia. She had Crowley's plant mister clutched in her right hand and was waving it at him.
"I hope your plants like puke," she said dazedly. "Can I borrow this?"

"Sure, knock yourself out," Crowley sighed. "Iván's orchids will thank you for it." He stuck Uriel's phone in his breast pocket and patted it. "We're going for a walk. If Uriel behaves herself, this fine piece of tech won't end up at the bottom of the Channel."

Too late, Crowley felt a slim hand work its way into his back pocket and out again.

"HOSTAGE CRISIS!" Natalie shouted, waving Crowley's iPhone over her head. She jumped up on the coffee table and flicked through several screens before Crowley could even react. "Oooh, look at this! He's been sexting his hubby-to-be. Just thinking about you over there is driving me mad, can't you get away for just a little while—"

Adam caught Natalie around the waist and yanked her kicking and screaming down onto the sofa. He took the phone out of her hand and tossed it back to Crowley. "Now give Uriel's phone back, too," he said, "or that video clip's going viral."

Crowley took it out of his pocket and handed it over. "Spoil my fun," he said.

Janet ran to Natalie's aid and helped her to sit up between Adam and herself.

"I think that our kind host needs to do some kind of penance," she said.

Sophia steered Mandy back over to Aziraphale's armchair and planted her in it. Mandy was hugging the plant mister like a teddy bear. She still looked woefully disoriented.

"Tell us about how you and Aziraphale got together," Natalie said. "And I don't mean the whole cutesy we-bought-a-house-together version, I mean real details."

Crowley shot an accusatory look at Mandy. "What have you been telling them?"

"Oh, I couldn't say," she said faintly. "Stories. Remembrances. Just how long it took you guys to decide that fucking each other was a good idea, for example."

Crowley took a long-suffering breath, and then decided he'd put a nail in this coffin once and for all. Might've been the alcohol talking, but it was worth a shot.

"Spot on, excellent memory," Crowley said to Mandy, and then let his eyes drift back to Natalie. "It took a month or so. Let's see, real details. He's great with his hands and even better with his mouth, and I should like to join Adam in registering my preference for a partner with more substance than, say, this one right here," he added, patting Uriel on the shoulder. "Now, as I said: we're going for a walk." With that, he turned the pat into a full-on grasp and hauled Uriel out of the room. He didn't stop till they'd reached the back entrance, and, fortunately, she'd kept up. "You're not to hang about," he told her, slamming the sliding glass door behind them. The night air was cool, a welcome breath of salt across his skin. "I won't be half surprised if Aziraphale's got Raphael in tow, seeing as you two have been appointed de facto best men and guardians of our virtue. Ergo, I'd advise the two of you to head back in one direction or the other and not to answer any questions. How's that?"

"Peachy," Uriel sighed, shaking Crowley off. "Let go of me. I can walk. I've been your stay-sober-and-keep-the-kids-from-poisoning-themselves bitch for long enough this evening. I'm going to Pippa's whether Raphael's come out for this excursion or not."

"That's fine by me," Crowley said, trudging through the sea-rushes and scurvy-grass and down over the rise. The beach was deserted and peaceful, scoured stark by low tide. He hadn't bothered with shoes, so the damp sand felt good between his toes.
Uriel swore and picked her way along behind him, struggling out of her fishnets. "Sweetie, you're really drunk," she implored him, catching up. "You're so drunk you told a whole room-full of twentysomethings about your sex life, do you realize that?"

"At least right now, I don't care," Crowley said, scanning the expanse ahead of them. He could see two figures standing about twenty yards off and could hear the faintest nonsensical snatches of their conversation on the chilly breeze. "Maybe it'll do them some good. Anathema will probably thank me for continuing Natalie's education."

Uriel waved both arms wildly in the air. "RAFE, GET THE FUCK OVER HERE!"

The shorter of the two figures shook its head; the taller one waved back.

"We'll be there before you know it," said Crowley, and suddenly they were.

"Somebody cheated and sobered up a bit," Raphael said disapprovingly.

"I suppose next you'll say I cheated by not getting drunk in the first place," Aziraphale said, already reaching for Crowley. "There, there, my dear, what have they done?"

"It was terrible," Crowley said, his voice muffled in the crook of Aziraphale's neck. He furtively bit the spot just beneath Aziraphale's collar, flicking his tongue across the reddening skin. Aziraphale smelled wonderful, tasted wonderful. He wanted—

"Crocodile tears, wah," Uriel said, insinuating herself behind Aziraphale's back for the express purpose of flipping Crowley off. Then, she turned furiously to Raphael and said, "We're going to take so much flak from Pippa and Rani for this..."

Raphael, grinning widely at Crowley, didn't even seem to care. He grabbed Uriel as if she weighed nothing—to be fair, she really did—and swung her up over his shoulder. She hammered on Raphael's back with her fists. "Bastards! I didn't approve this!"

"You boys have fun," Raphael said, turning to bear Uriel off in the direction of Pippa's house. "Be sure to return to your respective festivities when you're finished, now!" Crowley wasn't particularly listening to him by now, and neither was Aziraphale.

"What were you saying," Aziraphale panted, "about wanting to shag me senseless?"

"I'm afraid that almost got read aloud," Crowley said, already most of the way out of his shirt and determinedly working on Aziraphale's, "but it is, nonetheless, quite true."

* * *

Hastur sneered at the predictable and thoroughly human scene unfolding.

Cloaked from mortal eyes they might have been, but not from his. He'd tailed the Archangel and the Principality from the old woman's home, only to discover an unexpected windfall: Crawly and the other Archangel likewise out for a late stroll.
Crawly's absence from the cottage meant that Ligur ought to have ample time.

All else having been set in motion, for now, Hastur was simply content to watch.

He supposed that Crawly's mortal flesh was desirable enough, contingent upon its being empty of Crawly first, but what he couldn't wrap his head around was Crawly's shocking display of lust toward the rather unremarkable angelic corporation he'd pinned to the sand. Aziraphale, Guardian of the Eastern Gate, had let himself go. Defiling an angel was an enviable task for any demon worth his salt, and therein lay the trouble. Crawly wasn't worth his scales, much less his borrowed blood's salinity. He'd gone and fallen in love, grown attached to a sworn Enemy. Learned to trust.

The latter, in Hastur's book, was the rankest offense he could possibly imagine.

Hastur paced a slow, wide circle around the pair coupling languidly in the sand. He'd expected the pace might remain frantic, had been looking forward to Crawly being made to beg or debase himself in some other exquisite fashion, but the quiet, compelling reality of this display confirmed what Hastur had long ago decided. He should have been the demon for the job, not this sorry excuse for a snake. He finally sat down a little ways off and watched them finish. Sickening, to endure so much selflessly apparent devotion, but he found that he couldn't look away.

The breeze picked up, colder than before, and blew Crawly's hair into his unchanged, unrelenting yellow eyes as he bent over a boneless and willingly prone Aziraphale. "I hate to admit that Raphael's right," he said, "but we should be getting back."

"We could stay here till dawn," replied Aziraphale, yawning. "They'll all have passed out by then. We can slip in before any of them wake up; they'll be none the wiser." Crawly kissed Aziraphale fiercely, and the angel's arms locked about his shoulders.

"I admire your underhandedness," he said, "but we're playing this one straight."

"Oh," murmured Aziraphale, smug, brushing sand off Crawly's cheek. "Hardly."

Hastur got up and stalked away, kicking several limpet-shells strewn in his path.

He'd seen enough to last an eternity, and they'd somehow made him miss Ligur.

* * *

Aziraphale found knocking on his own front door nothing short of peculiar.

Sophia, a vision in gold who looked nonetheless worse for wear, admitted him.

"Good morning," said Aziraphale. "I trust you all had an enjoyable evening?"

"Oh, er, yeah," she said. "Wait till you hear. I hope you guys did, too?"

"They're all still freshening up, but Pippa and Rani will ferry them over shortly."
Sophia put a mug of tea in Aziraphale's hand and smacked her forehead when Janet screeched from the bathroom, "Where in the world did Mandy put the curling iron?"

"Mandy's gone up the road to Mass!" she shouted back, and then gave Aziraphale an apologetic look. "And on a Tuesday morning, I ask you. Catholics, what can you do? She ought to be back any time now."

Aziraphale and Sophia chatted at the kitchen table until the twins emerged: also wearing gold satin, the two of them already festooned in Mardi Gras beads. Natalie couldn't quite meet Aziraphale's eyes, about which peculiar behavior Aziraphale wished he could say he knew far less. Janet looked shockingly chipper for a girl who couldn't hold her drink. Someone knocked on the door, and Sophia ran to answer.

Mandy looked lovely in a knee-length blue taffeta dress, her late-spring freckles having blossomed overnight. She squinted even once she'd got inside, as if the light hurt her eyes, and she clutched her handbag nervously to her chest. Aziraphale surreptitiously wished away her hangover. She gave him a sharp, befuddled look.

"Hi," Mandy said. "Can I just sit in the living room until this show's on the road?"

"Honest to God, I drank more than you did," Sophia muttered, and whisked her off.

Aziraphale pursed his lips, about to ask a question when Sophia returned, but another flurry of knocks sounded. The twins just stared at him, so he went to answer them himself. What he got was an armful of Anathema and the rest in full procession, right down to Uriel and Raphael helping Madame Tracy and Shadwell along at the rear. The house was crowded, and the registrar wouldn't arrive for thirty minutes.

"Where's Crowley hiding?" Uriel asked Sophia. "Did he remember to give it to you?"

"Of course," Sophia replied, turning to Aziraphale. "That reminds me: hand it over."

"Oh!" said Aziraphale, and twisted the ring off his finger. "Sorry. I had quite forgot."

Sophia slipped it on her left middle finger. Crowley's ring was already on her right.

"Makes me wish I'd dug around up there and tried you on years ago," she said to it.

"Pardon my daughter's covetousness," Anathema sighed, laying a hand on Aziraphale's arm. "It suits you through and through. Nobody else could have worn it."

"Mum, get in here and help with our hair!" Natalie shouted from down the hall.

"You'd better go, dear girl," Aziraphale said. "I can hold my own, I assure you."

Anathema left the room, which meant that Sophia and Aziraphale were alone. All of the rest had gone into the living room, where the ceremony was going to take place in front of the mantelpiece. Crowley's collection was really a joint collection, Pippa had pointed out, and she loved the photo of them dancing at last year's reception.

"Are you nervous?" Sophia asked, just as Pippa bustled in with a few empty mugs.

"I see no reason why he shouldn't be," she said, coming to join them at the table.

"I'm more than ready," Aziraphale said. "If only to have some peace and quiet again."
“You're not planning on taking a honeymoon, are you?” Pippa asked. “You've traveled a great deal in recent months. I imagine you're both still knackered from Japan.”

Aziraphale hummed noncommittally. He'd keep the road-trip a secret.

Pippa went on at great length about how lovely New Zealand was this time of year until Aziraphale couldn't take it anymore. He wandered back the hall, stopped before the bedroom door, and leaned close enough to listen. Beyond, there was eerie silence.

He stood there for at least five minutes, until someone else knocked on the front door.

The registrar was a young Irish woman in officiant's robes with a binder in her arms.

“I found these two out here waiting,” she said, indicating the couple behind her.

Aziraphale studied the tall man with salt-and-pepper hair, a well-lined Mediterranean face, and serious hazel eyes. The pale woman on his arm had wavy, chin-length black hair; her fashion sense and carriage were Continental, but something in her features and the shape of her brown eyes likely indicated European and Asian ancestry.


“Thank you for this hospitality,” said the tall stranger, and shook Aziraphale's hand.

The woman with him took Aziraphale's hand next, pressing it between her own.

“I got him here in the end, the old curmudgeon. Hello again. I owe you thanks.”

“No, dear girl,” Aziraphale said, leading Tanith ahead of Dagon and the registrar. He paused with her in the entrance to the living room and looked at Uriel where she sat on the sofa beside Madame Tracy. “I owe you an apology, and I ask your forgiveness.”

“Look at everyone,” Tanith murmured in tearful amazement. "You have it.”

Aziraphale retreated to the kitchen no sooner than she'd rushed to sit by Uriel.

He found Sophia and Mandy adjusting wreaths of flowers in each other's hair. Mandy sucked on one of her fingers, giving Sophia's crown of roses one last tweak. Crowley stood behind Mandy, plucking fretfully at the hellebores garlanding her hair.

“Are we ready?” Aziraphale asked, his throat tightening. “The registrar's here. So are your old friends,” he told Crowley. “You'll be pleased to know they made it after all.”

Sophia swatted at Mandy's hands and wove in a hellebore that was trying to escape.

“Water the plants!” Mandy gasped. “I told Crawly I would. I'll meet you in there.”

“For heaven's sake,” Aziraphale muttered, but held out his arm to Crowley all the same. “Let's go in, shall we? Sophia, collect Mandy once she's finished.”

Everyone applauded when Aziraphale and Crowley entered the living room. The registrar was waiting in front of the mantelpiece with the binder open in her arms, and Dagon had found himself an unlikely seat between Shadwell and Newt.
Aziraphale tried not to dwell too terribly long on the irony.

“Where are your groomsmaids?” asked the registrar. “We ought to start. I have another appointment in forty minutes, but I'd like to stay for a bit afterward.”

“Iván arrived just now with a load of stuff ready to pop in the oven,” Crowley said, indicating the shy, slightly out-of-breath young man where he'd stolen a seat next to Janet. “Please do stay for champagne and some nibbles. He's worked hard.”

“Sorry!” Sophia exclaimed, dragging Mandy in by the wrist. “So very sorry.”

Whether it was that the plant mister remained in Mandy’s free hand, which trembled as it slowly rose, or how unaccountably dazed her expression remained—

*I told Crawly I would, she'd said. I'll meet you in there.*

Aziraphale blinked in almost the same instant as Adam jumped to his feet.

The fine mist that hit Crowley in the face resulted in little more than an irritated expression. He wiped his cheek and said, “Hey, look, I appreciate a joke as much as the next person, but you could've thought this through. And been more subtle.”

Mandy shuddered, eyes rolling back into her head, and promptly passed out.

Adam rushed forward to help Aziraphale catch and lower her to the floor.

“Looks like somebody partied a bit too hard,” said the registrar, awkwardly.

“I'm so, so sorry,” Sophia said again. “I can't even begin to tell you—”

Aziraphale rose, grabbing Crowley's hands before anyone else could interrupt.

“I do,” he told the registrar firmly. “I absolutely take this man to be my husband.”

Crowley opened and shut his mouth, confused, but wisely decided to comply.

“So do I,” he said. “Er, take this man to be my husband, I mean. Yes. That.”

Adam had moved Mandy off to one side, where Raphael was looking her over.

“The rings, Soph,” he hissed, gesturing to his wife. “They need the rings!”

“Oh!” Sophia exclaimed. “Oh, God. Sorry, again, so so so sorry...”

She twisted both adornments off her fingers and handed them to the registrar.

“You're going to have to help me out here,” said the woman, holding them out.

Aziraphale, hardly skipping a beat, put the gold-set glass signet on Crowley's finger.

Crowley studied his hand. “It felt pretty odd without that there, I have to say.”

Sophia elbowed Crowley. He cleared his throat and picked up the platinum ring.

“You're not allowed to take this off ever again,” he told Aziraphale, putting it back where it belonged. “Just so you know. Uriel says you'll lose it if you do.”
Never mind that Hell had just made one last attempt on Crowley's existence, and never mind that Mandy was currently undergoing thorough post-Exorcism repair at the hands of an Archangel perfectly suited to the task. Never mind that Dagon and the former Antichrist crouched next to Mandy on the floor, the latter turning his palm against a threatening otherworldly presence that none of the rest of them could see.

Dagon set one weathered, proud, and almost fatherly hand on Adam's shoulder.

“You two as well,” said the boy. “Stay down there if you know what's good for you.”

Aziraphale kissed Crowley while he had the chance, as he'd vowed he always would.

* * *

"Ooh, gracious!" Pippa exclaimed, backpedaling as she lowered her camera.

Rani clapped her on the arm, pulling her into a hug. "Think nothing of it."

The weather had warmed up just enough since earlier that it made sense to take the reception outside, and Pippa was glad of it. The Mardi Gras beads were tacky in her opinion, not a patch on those lovely fairy lights, but everyone seemed to be having fun collecting and swapping them (not to mention fashioning necklaces for the ducks).

Iván would have been stuck serving hors d'oeuvres on his own, the poor lad, if Sophia and Adam hadn't stepped in to help. Mandy was laid out in the bedroom, full of painkillers with an ice pack on her head. She'd revived only a short time before, much to everyone's relief. She'd told Mandy she ought to have avoided any party at which the twins might coax her to binge. Pippa hoped she'd learned her lesson.

Pippa felt that she had got quite good at taking pictures. She strolled about snapping candids until everyone had eaten their fill and the glasses of champagne had begun to circulate. Anathema had her MacBook set up already in the grass, putting together a playlist. She'd done such a wonderful job last time, Pippa had thought. The correct version of Unchained Melody crackled out from her speakers.

Nobody knew she'd been the one to take that photograph last year using Janet's phone, least of all the photograph's unwitting subjects. She'd just given it to them as a post-wedding token, explaining that one of the girls had emailed it to her.

Pippa accepted a glass of champagne from Adam, thanked him, and had a sip before handing it back. A number of couples had already got up and begun to dance. She knew a prime opportunity when she saw one.

Raphael sat in the sand smoking a cigarette, as ever, watching Uriel and Tanith in a world all their own. She'd have felt sorry for him, except he was smiling at them, and that old boss of Crowley's was sitting right next to him and sharing the smoke.

Click.
Madame Tracy had bullied Shadwell into having a dance, and although it looked like they were having a difficult time of things, Pippa could imagine what a dashing thing Shadwell must have been in his youth. She thought of Harold and closed her eyes.

*Click.*

The twins were sat off to one side with their father, busy clicking photographs with their phones and flicking sand at each other. Newt was intently watching his wife.

*Click.*

Pippa stood in the middle of what passed as the dance floor by now. They were a rag-tag bunch, but they were *her* rag-tag bunch, and she edged her way carefully around Tanith and Uriel (who waved, the dear girl) to find the dearest of them all.

She didn't know if the fact that Crowley was in a dapper-looking white coat almost like the one Iván was wearing held any significance, only that she thought it was a curious choice. Aziraphale's coat was black, a long-tailed antique cut, and there was a duck-egg blue silk handkerchief tucked in his breast pocket. They didn't match. Unlike last time, it was Aziraphale who had *his* head on Crowley's shoulder.

Pippa raised the camera as the pair of them spun a few steps closer.

Crowley caught her eye and smiled.
"Will you look at that," Raphael remarked, the first words he'd spoken in half an hour, and passed the cigarette stub back. They were on their fourth or fifth. "Six thousand years gone in the blink of an eye. Decades, centuries' worth in change, even. Did she ever mention us?" he asked, turning those cool, unblinking blue eyes on Dagon.

"No," Dagon said, taking a drag long and slow enough to draw out the rest of the tiny fire's life, ash and all. He swallowed thoughtfully, spit out the ragged remnants of paper, meeting the Archangel's tilted, are-you-kidding-me grin with one of his own. "She's a private one, Tanith, not much for small-talk. Not till all this wedding business cropped up, at least. Not till I realized what a complete and utter fool I'd been."

"I wonder if They know," Raphael said softly, "what a fine mess They've made."

"I don't give a damn, old boy," Dagon said as the music died down. "I just get on with things. I've got people to worry about, order to keep. Just like you've got your hands full with that lot," waving one nicotine-stained hand. "Do you think you'll go back?"

"What, up there?" Raphael asked, waving at Uriel, who had Tanith in tow and was heading straight for them. "Couldn't even if I wanted to, darling. Rules are rules, and our young Adam's a strict one. Now, if you mean back to America, that's another matter." He stood up and folded his arms, businesslike. "Uriel, my love, the old man here poses an excellent question. Are we going back to the good old US of A?"

Uriel glanced at Tanith, who'd let go of her hand and sat down by Dagon.

"Are you telling me you like it here that much?" she asked. "You'd stay?"

Dagon watched Raphael attempt a casual shrug, and then said to Tanith, "Where's Crowley gone?" Aziraphale was helping Anathema pack up her laptop and speakers. Sophia and Adam were busy helping Madame Tracy and Shadwell back into the cottage; the dancing seemed to have worn them out. "I'd like a word with him."

"Last I saw him," Tanith said, "was about five minutes ago. He had a duck under each arm and the other four following him, so it must be their bedtime. Check the shed."

"We don't have to decide now," Raphael was saying somewhat testily.

"You're not selling that gorgeous house," Uriel told him. "I won't let you."

Dagon started to rise, but Tanith briefly stayed him, both hands on his arm.

"Don't scare him," she said. "Today of all days, please don't. He's happy."

Dagon kissed the top of her head and got up, brushing sand off his trousers. "It would be thoughtless
of me not to congratulate him," he said, and picked his way up over the rise to where an orderly riot of greenery was just on the edge of spring bloom. He noticed that the roses along the shed wall had got a head-start, bright pink and fragrant. The door swung inward at Dagon's touch, rustling the hay-strewn floor.

Crowley crouched amidst six ducks in various stages of settling down for the evening, handing out wriggling hard-shelled worms and bits of crumbled fruit hors d'oeuvres. "It's a special occasion," he explained without looking up, "so they're allowed."

"Much more of this, my boy, and you'll have a proper smallholding," Dagon said.

Crowley glanced up, startled, and got to his feet. "Sir," he said, tugging hastily at his rolled-up shirtsleeves and casting about for his jacket, only to find two of the ducks had bedded down on it, "sorry, I hadn't really expected—uh, that's to say—"

Dagon clapped him on the shoulder. "You hadn't expected me to come?"

"Not so much that," said Crowley, sheepishly; his returning of the gesture was both awkward and earnest. "It was that, um, the last thing you'd heard from me was..."

"That memo's still pinned to my wall, I'll have you know. I'd like to think I did."

Crowley blinked at him stupidly. "I'm sorry, you'd like to think that you what?"

"Learned," Dagon said, and patted Crowley's shoulder again before letting his arm drop back to his side. "I won't pretend to understand what you love about this place, but you were the best innovator we ever had. This environment let you thrive."

Crowley rubbed his neck and averted his eyes. "You should've sent someone who wanted to come," he said, "but I don't think I'd have ever forgiven you if you had."

"Forgiveness isn't a requirement. Your eternal grudge would have been enough."

Crowley squinted at him, his eyes a liquid-gold gleam under the artificial light.

"You sent someone who'd grow," he said. "Who'd change. How did you know?"

"That's what managers are for," Dagon said, bending down to greet an inquisitive Jemima, who'd got up and started nibbling on his trouser-leg. "Identifying potential." Crowley leaned against the shed's back wall, fingers splayed against the rough wood.

"Then you'd have had some inkling," he said, "that obedience isn't really my thing."

Dagon looked up at him, still stroking Jemima's soft breast-feathers with his knuckle.

"But curiosity is," he said. "And dedication, after your own fashion. And wonder."

"Can I ask," said Crowley, baffled, "how the likes of you and me got where we are?"

Dagon tucked Jemima's feet under her, arranged the surrounding straw like a nest.

"My boy, there never were answers," he said, brushing off his hands. "Just questions."

"Was it better than boredom? Better than staying as we were, better than burning?"

"Oh, come now. We'll always burn, won't we, but it's a different kind of burning."
Crowley lowered his eyes and glared at an inquisitive Lilith, faintly blushing.

"Well, I'm glad you've got her," he said. "That ought to make life more interesting."

"Listen here, my boy, because I'll only ask once," Dagon said severely, finding it unexpectedly difficult to maintain an even tone. "Is the angel good to you?"

"That's not a sensible thing to ask. Not very sensible at all. He's been a right git to me sometimes, and I've been no better to him. Maybe you're after a different question?"

Dagon sighed and tried again, because, as ever, Crowley had made an excellent point.

"Could this have gone differently? That is to say, did you have any other choice?"

Crowley pushed away from the wall and stood up to his full height in front of Dagon, which meant he had to lift his chin to look Dagon in the eye. Only Hastur could do that without additional effort; blast him, but he and Ligur needed a serious talking-to...

"Of course," Crowley said. "Loads of them, but I chose to ignore all but one."

Content, Dagon nodded and clapped him on the shoulder again, and Crowley smiled.

"You'd better go and find him, then, lad. Patience isn't a virtue with that one."

* * *

Sophia tottered outside and sat down on the front stoop. The world was spinning; she'd done a terrible job of treating her hangover, and she'd just come from checking on Mandy, who was asleep again in the bedroom with a worried Iván at her side.

Adam joined Sophia on the steps, sighing heavily as he settled beside her. "I've got to help Iván get her out of there and into the car. She can't stay here tonight; something tells me they'll be wanting their bed back. What do you think?"

Sophia regarded him blearily in the falling dusk, rose petals drooping in her eyes. "I'm drunk," she said. "Like, really, hopelessly drunk. I want to throw up, but I can't. I might have to drink more just to accomplish that, d'you know what I'm saying?"

Adam grimaced and put a consoling arm around her, staring down at their feet.

"I want to know what happened," Sophia said. "It wasn't just how much she drank."

"No, but intoxication gave the guy who possessed her an easy way in," Adam said.

"What the hell was up with the plant mister? Why did Aziraphale look so scared?"

"Do you know what Holy Water does to demons? Never mind, I s'pose you don't."
Through the muddled haze of her thoughts, Sophia considered this and shuddered.

"But his face didn't melt or burn up or anything. He just looked really annoyed."

"Aziraphale transformed the water," Adam said. "Un-sanctified it, if you like."

"I don't think Crowley believes in that kind of thing anymore, so maybe...?"

"But humans do, Soph. Humans believe in it a lot. They bless the water."

"Adam, reality check. We're humans, too, and we don't. Not all humans."

"But enough humans," he said. "Enough for us not to know, for even me not to know, and I'm not about to go testing it on them. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I'm going to throw up," Sophia said, twisting sideways into the grass, and did. Adam steadied her until the fit passed. Her mouth tasted awful, but she felt better.

"I've got to go help Iván with Mandy," he said. "Will you be okay without me?"

"Yeah," she said, using his arm to lever herself up. "I've got to find Crowley."

Demons could die. Angels could die. Humans had to go believing things and they—

They'd all die, and Crowley and Aziraphale wouldn't, assuming Holy Water didn't work on them as long as they didn't believe it would, or maybe that was wishful thinking—

She ran straight into Pippa on her way around the side of the cottage, shaking.

"Dear heart, what's the matter?" Pippa asked, rubbing Sophia's bare shoulders.

"Where's Crowley?" she croaked. "I've really got to find Crowley. Where's he gone?"

Pippa frowned at her. "He's just come out of the shed, got the girls all tucked in."

"Good," Sophia said, and stumbled away from Pippa, leaving her high heels behind.

Crowley was next to the roses, untangling something from the bushes' glossy leaves. Aziraphale was standing a little distance off with her mother and father and Rani. She didn't know where the twins had got off to; they were probably down by the sea with the Archangels, trying to see who could drown whom. It didn't really matter.

"Crowley, we're going to die," she said plaintively. "We're all going to die, but as long as nothing stupid or impossible happens, you and Aziraphale won't. Crowley!"

Crowley wound the string of silver Mardi Gras beads around his wrist and stood up, regarding her with an expression he would've liked to come across as unreadable, but Sophia knew better. His eyes shimmered too much for him to be all right.

"That's right," he said hesitantly. "Hadn't you worked it out already? Harold was—"

"Harold was really all about Pippa," Sophia said. "We weren't that close to him."

Crowley stared at the beads on his wrist. "It doesn't lessen our loss. Or hers."

Sophia felt sudden anger seize her. She wanted to smack him, make him see.
"You'll still be here when we're all gone and this planet's just a garden again."

She'd hit him all right, sunk the proverbial blade right where it needed to go.

"What, exactly," said Crowley, brokenly, "in the world would you have me do?"

"I don't know!" Sophia sobbed, aware now of just how wet her cheeks were and how difficult it was to speak through the fire in her chest and in her throat. She dug her toes into the grass and fisted her hands in her dress, tugging till the threads hissed.

"I can only stay," Crowley told her, haltingly, as if human language had grown difficult. "Can only keep watch, can only accept loss, can only love. You're such strange creatures, both of you, shedding precious questions like so much dead skin."

Not a single one of the sibilants clipped this time, nothing of his snake-like expression spared. Someone else had her by the shoulders as Crowley approached, someone familiar and terrifying, someone whispering There, there, dear girl and It's all right.

"Oh, sssure," Crowley sighed. "Send her to dreamland. That'll solve everything."

"I haven't got any better ideas, my dear, and she's really grown quite agitated."

"Do it quickly," Adam said from somewhere off behind them, "and give her here."

Sophia tore herself away from Aziraphale and fell forward into Crowley's arms.

"You," she whispered. "Since she trusted you, I'll keep on trusting you, too."

Crowley kissed her cheek, took the roses from her hair, rocked her to sleep.

Why? she sent as she slipped under, her head gone heavy on his shoulder.

* * *

"Hodges, you say?" replied Aziraphale, politely. They'd only just managed to get Adam and Iván on the road with their respective somnolent cargoes, and Anathema had also chosen that moment to depart with her husband and two younger daughters in tow.

"Yes," said Madame Tracy, pleased to have related this news, however trivial. "Anathema knew all about the place that burned down, said it used to be a convent, and then I remembered that Mary said she'd once been a nun. Such a nice girl."

Aziraphale remembered the young woman he and Crowley had hypnotized with sudden clarity. Sister Mary, and Crowley had recalled the Latin only in translation. "It's certainly good to know she's, er, carved out a stable existence for herself."
"It's not easy being a woman on one's own," said Madame Tracy, "and I should know. Look at all these bright young things, what opportunities they've got! My niece Petula's a barrister, you know, and just look at our Sophia, all grown up and in politics! Mary said she's off on holiday somewhere next month—somewhere in South America, I think? Mmm, yes, Brazil. Wouldn't that make a lovely trip, Mister S?"

"Not at our stonkin' great age it isn't, wumman," he muttered, and then turned to Aziraphale. "Yer young man's waitin', ye great southern pansy. Best look to 'im!"

"Good night, both of you," said Aziraphale, wearily. "Please give Folkestone my best."

Rani was much more difficult to coax out the door, but Raphael and Uriel convinced her that going out for a late supper with Tanith and Dagon was worth the pursuit.

"Be responsible," Aziraphale told Raphael. "None of your shenanigans. I've had enough for one day, thank you very much. The damage remains to be seen."

Raphael gave him a mock-salute and closed the door behind all five of them.

Aziraphale sagged against the work-top, taking in the abrupt silence. The only sound came from the left-hand sink basin; on closer inspection, he spotted the mouse crouched behind a mug that Adam and Iván hadn't got around to washing. It was lapping at some errant water droplets, drinking and washing its whiskers by turns.

"Where have you been?" Aziraphale asked. "Not so much as a shred of regard for our big day, is it, except for the leftovers? You might have had the decency to attend the ceremony, or to buy us some time by scrambling up Miss Tomlin's arm as a distraction. Granted, you're right, she may not have noticed, not with a demon sat in her skull. You're off the hook this time, but a little due diligence wouldn't go amiss—"

Crowley peered in from the hall just then: half undressed, completely bewildered.

"It's our wedding night," he said, "and you're stood there talking to a mouse."

Aziraphale looked him up and down—delectably bare feet, unbuttoned shirt hanging low off his elbows, forearms taut across his abdomen in an attempt to hold up his trousers—and realized that there was, indeed, something wrong with this picture.

"He's not just any mouse by now, though, as you're so fond of pointing out."

"I'll just go back in there and continue starting without you, shall I?"

"Do you know how easy it would have been," Aziraphale said with some difficulty, "how frighteningly easy it would have been—at so many different points in time, no less, and I'll declare Barcelona the starting point—for you to have had me if you'd but said the word, if you'd but given any sign at all that you were interested?"

Crowley's mouth fell open a little, but all he managed to say was, "Barcelona?"

"Five hundred and twenty-six years," said Aziraphale, "out of six thousand and eighteen. That's not a long time to want something, is it, in the grand scheme of things—er, I mean, to want someone—but I can't help but think of what you told her, dear boy, what you told both of them, how life isn't nearly long enough, not even yours. I can't help but lament how much time I wasted, but if it took you as long as Tokyo and the fugu to sort your head out, then it wasn't really time wasted so much as time in which I often dismissed you out of frustration and, in doing so, hurt you—"
Crowley stepped from the shadowed hall into the low-lit kitchen, letting his shirt fall.

"Two thousand and two—that's Tokyo—I hoped you'd really start to get the hint, and it turns out you did; nineteen ninety was the first time I let it show at all, but it couldn't be helped, what with the circumstances; let's call everything from nineteen hundred through at least the nineteen-eighties a sequence of failed flirtations on an incredibly grand scale, because, let's face it, that's a lot of war-related trauma and social progress. It was hard to watch Oscar Wilde do his level best to get at you, but I also wonder if it was hard for you to watch Leonardo da Vinci try to get at me. That's a lungful, isn't it? My point is that both of us had plenty of offers, plenty of chances, plenty of choice, but we weren't having any of it, weren't having any of them, wouldn't you agree?"

Crowley had given up on trying to hold his trousers shut. It was distracting.

"Do you mean to tell me they never once thought of putting you up to it with intent to cause harm," said Aziraphale, "never once handed you the opportunity on a platter? Quite a blow, I'd have thought, tempting one's Enemy to the point of seduction."

"Nah," Crowley said. "I never particularly liked the idea, and besides, that's Hastur's division, not mine. You should see him pick away at the clergy—well, no, you needn't look too hard," he added, wincing. "It's all over the papers these days."

Aziraphale steered Crowley back into the bedroom, seeing to it that the door was firmly shut and locked behind them (never mind that the guests were gone and the mouse could easily slip in by other means). Shadwell had given him orders.

"How long, dear boy?" he asked. "How long did I keep you waiting?"

Crowley wriggled impatiently out of his trousers and stretched.

"This time, only about twenty minutes," he said, reaching out.

"Very funny," Aziraphale said, undressing. "You know what I meant."

Crowley extended both hands this time, drawing Aziraphale down to him.

"I liked you from the start," he said. "I wouldn't have talked to you if I hadn't, and I didn't even care that my joke went down harder than its subject matter. You listened like the girl had done, and you also had the courtesy to make conversation. What made you different was that you didn't leave, didn't run off and cower in the forest and never speak to me again, shouty voice Upstairs be damned."

"Oh, Crowley," Aziraphale said. "That isn't funny. That isn't funny in the least—"

"It's not supposed to be funny," said Crowley, breathlessly, when they stopped kissing for a little while. "It's supposed to be honest, and anyway, I'm not asking you to be funny, either. You're funny enough without trying, take it from me."

Aziraphale sighed, stroked him from ribcage to thigh and back up again.

"Then what are you asking, my dear? And won't you give me an answer?"

"I can't remember the exact moment it started, so I can't help you. What I'm telling you is that I'd have waited forever," Crowley said, "and that I never want it to end."

Aziraphale twined their fingers and bent closer, until their foreheads touched.
"All else around us will end in time, make no mistake about that."

"I know that," Crowley said. "But not today, at least, and not soon."

"Should we have come to nothing, our atoms disassembled—" Aziraphale paused, dizzied by the thought of it "—I'd have loved you even then. I would have stayed."

"That's all right, then," Crowley said, "but it's a good job we got out in one piece."

"Which time?" asked Aziraphale, finding his eyelids heavy.

"Every time," Crowley said, yawning. "Ngh. Um, I think..."

Neither one of them stayed awake long enough to complete the sentence, and that was all right, too.
Miraculous Escapes

Chapter Summary

This is a kind-of-crossover with the *Gatsby series* I wrote recently; otherwise, you can screen that out and take it as just an excuse to finally write about *Eldanis's Prohibition USA* sketch, as that's valid, too.

**Boston, 11 February 1932**

"How," asked Crowley, tipsily squinting into his glass, "did thisss get here?"

"This establishment?" Aziraphale replied. "Eighteenth Amendment, I expect."

"Nonono, I mean this," Crowley said, careful to rein in his tongue, and waved the champagne flute under Aziraphale's nose. "S'not from around here. Look." He tapped the ornate insignia etched into its side. "Hotel Astor, Times Square. Long way from home, eh?" He cast a suspicious glance at the pair occupying the table next to them; the dark-haired one kept glancing in Crowley's direction whenever he hit sibilants.

"Stolen," lamented Aziraphale, having reached the point where despairing of humanity was his preferred theme. "Don't stare. They're trying not to stand out."

"With a suit that shade and a state of inebriation that advanced, they're bound to," Crowley said. "Just think about it. We're not the *spectacle du jour* for once."

"I don't know, my dear," Aziraphale mused. "We might give them a run for their money, or in the very least shift some attention away so that the poor things can conduct their tryst in peace. Their government doesn't make things terribly easy."

Crowley goggled at him. "Let me get this straight—you disapprove of humans stealing glassware, but you'll let their flagrant buggery and shameless bootlegging pass?"

Aziraphale scooted his chair closer to Crowley's and refilled both of their glasses.

"It's in our own best interests to let the alcohol slide, wouldn't you agree?"

"In which case," Crowley said, casting an uneasy sidelong glance at Aziraphale, who was rather temptingly warm and solid and nearer than usual, "we'll prove far more beneficent than the local law enforcement would if they knew about this place."

The angel gulped down some wine and grimaced. "We'd best help them drink up."

"Were you expecting better?" Crowley asked, grinning behind his hand. "That was distilled in a bucket." Out of the corner of his eye, as liberal with the interpretation of shapes and angles as his vision had waxed, he couldn't help but notice that the fairer-haired one in outlandish pale pink was now paying much closer attention. The cut of his suit was ten years out of date, and his expression was rather distinctly haunted.

Wobbling a little, Aziraphale picked up Crowley's glass and raised it to eye level.
"Red wine's rather attractive in the hollow stem, wouldn't you agree?" he cooed.

Crowley rubbed his eyes, replaced his glasses, and snatched back the wine.

"Whatever you say, angel," he muttered, and drank it all in one swallow. At least that way he could use the ensuing head-rush as an excuse to lean closer, the better to let Aziraphale's shoulder prop him up. He set down the empty glass and inclined his head, nostrils flaring intently. Aziraphale smelled of expensive pipe tobacco and that evening's unexpected rain. The window just above their table was open a fraction, admitting a cool breath of air in the otherwise dim and smoky jazz-laced cellar.

"Do you suppose they're happy?" asked Aziraphale, loudly enough to suggest he was truly soused, startling Crowley out of his reverie (he'd grown mildly entranced, watching the way the men's hands constantly touched without ever quite touching).

"What, those two in particular, or humans who fornicate generally speaking?"

Aziraphale hesitated, and then refilled his glass—without using the bottle to do so.

Fortunately, the men were too deep in their low, cocooned conversation to notice.

"Those two," Aziraphale said, gesturing vaguely, "and others like them. You know."

Crowley felt his heart choose that moment to start triphammering, an unearthly staccato muffled by his all-too-earthly flesh. "They look happy," he hazarded, parking his cheek against Aziraphale's upper arm. In any other circumstances, he'd already have scooted as far away as his conscience would permit. "Don't they? Mean, it can't be all bad, can it, liking somebody elsse well enough to share air and ssspit and—"

Borne in on the breeze, a cacophony of sirens fractured the musicians' improv.

"Fuck," Aziraphale hissed, casting wildly about for their fifth and only remaining bottle of wine. Dislodged from his cozy stupor, Crowley staggered to his feet and drunkenly surveyed the chaos.

His conclusion was not much different from Aziraphale's.

"Chair," he said, attempting to snap his fingers. "Up to the—the—that thing, the window, now!" He stumbled backward against the one he'd been sitting in, twisted his body, grabbed the arms, and slammed it up against the wall hard enough to splinter the back. "Aziraphale, you stupid—get up there—wait, wait, what are you—"

Aziraphale had confiscated an extra bottle of wine from a nearby abandoned table.

"If we take the evidence with us," he said maniacally, "then maybe the police—"

"Go, go, go," Crowley ordered, wrenching the bottles out of Aziraphale's grasp. While Aziraphale made an unsteady start of climbing onto the chair, Crowley instinctively turned to glance at the couple they'd been watching for the better part of the past hour. They'd almost fought their way to the door, lost in a gaudy, well-dressed crush of inebriated bodies. Strained at arms' length, they were finally, finally hand in hand.

You'll get out, thought Crowley, fiercely. You'll get out, and the cops won't find you.

"Crowley," said Aziraphale, from somewhere above his head, "I don't think..."

"Right, hey, I've got you," Crowley said, because all it took was one step back to where he'd started, with both bottles of wine cradled in one arm and his other hand braced—unintentionally, he told
himself—against Aziraphale's backside. "Open it the whole way and climb out—yes, yes, good—and I'll hand you these like so—"

Crowley never did find out who had him by the ankle; Aziraphale hauled him clear of that perilous dangling like it was no effort at all (and, for them, Crowley supposed dimly, the alcohol beginning to wear off, it wasn't). He collected himself and stood.

A persistent, misting rain had settled in, refracting the combined streetlamps and police spotlight to an eerie, steadily strobing glow. He blinked; his vision swam green.

"Come on, my dear," said Aziraphale, hefting the wine, and grabbed Crowley's hand.

Crowley turned from the lights and followed: did not look back, held on for dear life.
Nightingale and Thrush

Chapter Notes

The date of 26 August 1990, the day on which the final scenes of the novel (and also this story) are set, has been fixed using two factors: one, the novel was published in 1990 and is thus taken by myself and most GO fans to be happening in that same year, and, two, the paintball retreat held by Mary Hodges is actually cited in-text as taking place on August 20-21. Aside from the novel's first section set in Eden (In the Beginning) and its second section set in 1979 at Adam Young's Birth (Eleven Years Ago), the remaining sections are named by the days of the week they're occurring: Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. In 1990, the 20th and 21st fell on Monday and Tuesday. We may safely assume that the retreat bled into a third day, Wednesday, which is of course the day on which Aziraphale and Crowley turn up at Tadfield Manor in the middle of the paintpall battle to interrogate Ms. Hodges. Page numbers given below reference the British hardcover first edition from Gollancz.

Sunday Evening: 26 August 1990

1.

*And perhaps the recent exertions had had some fallout in the nature of reality, because, while [Aziraphale and Crowley] were eating, for the first time ever, a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square.*
—p. 262

Crowley was livid. No: Crowley was annoyed and maybe even slightly furious, but it was rather difficult to be actually livid when one was in one's second upscale restaurant of the day eating excellent food in (for the most part) good company.

Still, it rankled a bit that he could no longer blame Aziraphale's basic nature for the fact that he'd promised Madame Tracy and her so-called young man a ride back to London and supper after they'd finished fearing for their lives at Tadfield Air Base.

Granted, Crowley had never really believed much in basic nature in the first place.

"We thought you'd forgot," Madame Tracy was saying to the angel, dabbing her lips after another sip of red wine that Aziraphale had, unbeknownst to her, transmuted into yet another laudable late nineteenth-century Beaujolais. "It's all well and good we had the motorbike, of course, but it would have been lovely to share the ride back. So kind of you to call this afternoon and collect us! This wine's just gorgeous, love."

If Aziraphale's wings had been manifest, he'd have been preening. "We're regulars here," he explained, and his hand covering the back of Crowley's for the briefest of moments against the crisp
tablecloth caused Crowley to start. "We've tried almost everything on the list, dear lady, so if there's anything that strikes your fancy..."

"I'd steer clear of the Duckhorn Vineyards '84 Merlot," said Crowley, recovering himself. Aziraphale so rarely offered or invited touch that Crowley's skin was still buzzing; he hadn't felt anything like that at the Air Base, had he, the two times (oh, yes, he'd counted) he'd impulsively touched the angel's arm, his hand?

There'd been a third time, of course, at the end, when Aziraphale had signed for the sword and then helped Crowley to his feet. Gentlemanly of him, Crowley had caught himself thinking, and had squashed the notion before his cheeks had gone pink with it.

"I dunnae aboot no wines," muttered Shadwell, "ye backgammon-playin' southern—"

"Mister S, that will be enough of your cheek! Mister Fell and Mister Crowley very kindly got us out of a spot of bother last night, and now they're paying for dinner. Manners."

*That takes the dating of his slur repertoire back to the eighteenth century,* Crowley thought, swallowing half his glass of the house white. *I ought to be impressed.* Strangely, what he felt instead was the urge to let his arm brush Aziraphale's.

"What will you do now that you've taken retirement, Sergeant?" Crowley asked.

"Oh, it's all been decided," gushed Madame Tracy. "We're in the market for a nice little place somewhere outside the city, just the two of us. I've been skimming estate agents' leaflets, and there are some lovely cottages for sale. We're popping out for a stay in Folkestone, Kent next week to look at a few. Off to find our very own Shangri-La."

"My sincerest congratulations to you both," Aziraphale said, refilling his own glass and Madame Tracy's. Shadwell covered his pint of Guinness with one suspicious, grubby hand, and Crowley shook his head, still cradling what was left of his white. He'd give in eventually, but not yet. Maybe after the humans were gone for the night. Abruptly, he found he wanted to be sober for this, wanted to remember...

"What about you?" Madame Tracy asked him. "Any plans on your horizon?"

"Er," Crowley stuttered, his gaze dropping conveniently into his glass, "well. I hadn't exactly given it much thought, you see, as I've got a perfectly nice bit of property in Mayfair, and who in their right mind would give that up when—"

"I've got the bookshop in Soho to look after," Aziraphale cut in, too quickly for comfort. "You're quite welcome to stop by, of course. Any time at all."

"He keeps odd hours," Crowley supplied, and he could feel the weight of Aziraphale's glare against the side of his neck. "You might try knocking 'round the back."

"Bah," growled Shadwell. "Light-loafered pillow biters, the both o' ye."

"Not to worry," said Madame Tracy, reaching across the table to pat Crowley's hand exactly as Aziraphale had, "I wouldn't dream of intruding. I always call ahead. And you ought to take your time, absolutely take your time. We've had years, old sillies like me and Mister S. No sense in rushing, bright young things like you."

Aziraphale's expression was a fairly inept impression of not quite understanding what was going on. Crowley, on the other hand, made busy drinking, because there was no way in Creation he could
fake his way out of blushing six ways to Sunday. And it just happened to be Sunday. The last of his wine burned all the way down.

"We'd discussed traveling for a while," said Aziraphale, mercifully preventing the necessity of response on Crowley's part. "A grand tour of sorts. There are so many places we've not seen in—er. Not seen in ages. I should like to see Africa again. South America, perhaps. We've neglected the Pacific of late. New Zealand. Japan."

"Australia," Crowley said into his glass, which he'd just filled with Beaujoulais.

Aziraphale cleared his throat. "So much to see, so little time. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Tibet," offered Shadwell, in a rare moment of sincerity. "I always did wan' tae go."

"To new beginnings, then," said Madame Tracy, raising her glass. "To us."

"Yeah," echoed Crowley, light-headed as Aziraphale raised his glass and took Crowley's hand. "To, um—to that. Exactly what she said. And a happy..."

Aziraphale's hand was gone just as quickly as before, but that didn't matter.

(What mattered was that it would surely come again, and perhaps even stay.)

2.

_The Them hesitated. Loyalty was a great thing, but no lieutenants should be forced to choose between their leader and a circus with elephants. They left. The sun continued to shine. The thrush continued to sing._ —p. 266

Adam found that there was only so far he could run, what with a soggy apple core in his back pocket and his legs gradually tiring on him. Dog had taken up a pitiful, begging refrain some dozen or so yards back, and although the orchard's owner was no longer in hot pursuit, his father, thanks to an inevitable phonecall, _would_ be.

He doubled back, scratching behind Dog's ears on the way, for Jasmine Cottage. He was badly out of breath by the time he reached Anathema's doorstep, and Dog was limping slightly—probably because he'd plowed paws first through a patch of stinging nettles as they'd come clear of the field and cut through the hedge.

"Sanctuary!" Adam called, hanging on the door knocker. "Anybody there? Let us in!"

The door opened, but it wasn't Anathema who stood peering down at him. The stern young man in glasses _was_ quite plain, Adam thought, but there was something more to him—the pale Welsh eyes, the sardonic lines at one corner of his mouth—that made you pay attention. That face had what Adam's mother would call _character._

"What's this, then?" asked Newton Pulsifer. "Anathema! That Young boy's here."
"Well, don't just stand there," called Anathema's voice. "Ask him in for supper."

As he stepped inside and Newt closed the door behind him, Adam realized with no small amount of discomfort that he'd interrupted a rather meager meal indeed: Anathema's habitual miso soup augmented by take-away from Tadfield's only Chinese eatery (which, some months ago, had not even been Chinese-owned, but Adam had thought it ought to be, and, within weeks, it had been). Dog whined, doubtless able to smell Newt's chicken lo mein. Adam was more partial to General Tso's himself.

"Just a minute," said Anathema, rising from the table. She was barefoot, wearing an oversize bathrobe over her pajamas, and bustled about the kitchen opening cupboards and drawers at random as if she couldn't remember where anything was. Guiltily, Adam wondered if that was his fault. She finally produced a box of dog biscuits from under the sink with a triumphant Aha! Dog's tail thumped the floor.

"I knew I'd got some," she explained, bringing the box over and shaking a few of the treats out in front of Dog. "For the next time you stopped by, although at the time I had the oddest feeling there wouldn't be a next—" She cleared her throat and gestured at Adam. "Eat with us. There's more than enough to go 'round."

"Thanks awfully," said Adam, drawing the apple core out of his pocket, "but I'm afraid I just had some fruit. I s'pose I could sit and talk a while. There's no harm in it."

Newt took the apple core off Adam's hands and threw it away before coming to join Adam and Anathema at the table. He cleared his throat and glanced sidelong at Dog, who was gnawing away at the biscuits with intermittent satisfied growls.

"I suppose your father's not terribly pleased with you right now," he said.

"You're right," Adam agreed. "I reckon he wouldn't be, what with all that ridin' around last night and now me runnin' off like this when I'm meant to stay in the yard. I'm sure ole Picky saw me run on by the church an' called him up. That's why I can't ask for sanctuary at the church, you see. I figured maybe witches can offer sanctuary as well as anybody. Not that you're a witch," he added, fixing his eyes on Newt.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry," said Anathema, raising the soup bowl to her lips for a sip of miso. "He might be some kind of wizard. One who breaks things for the greater good."

"There are no such things as wizards," said Newt, but his heart wasn't really in it.

"Or witches?" Adam ventured, taking a crab rangoon at Anathema's insistence.

"Ah," said Newt, winding noodles around his fork. "They just might exist."

"I know they do," Adam agreed, "an' I think it's wicked. The Witchfinders will come lookin' one day, just you wait, but it won't be them findin' you exactly, I mean not so much as you all finding each other." He squinted at Anathema's face, shut his eyes, and then opened them again when the shivery, stunned flash of knowing was too much to bear. "Oh," he said. "I reckon there's things you'll find out sooner or later."

Anathema was smiling at him, and not in that tired, patronizing way most adults did.

"I think we've all found each other already," she said, "and that's a good start."

"I don't think anybody's going to find us if we stay in this shack," Newt said.
"You won't stay for long," said Adam. "I know all about you two. You'll go far."

"Not too far, I hope," said Newt. "Mum's in Dorking, and getting on in years."

"I meant you'll do lots of things," said Adam. "Important, interestin' things."

"But I doubt we stay here," said Anathema, frowning, and got up again. She went over to the fireplace and scraped around in the glowing embers with a poker, fishing out a scrap of charred paper. She scanned it, frowned at it, and tossed it back in the fire. "At least I don't think we stay here, but damned if I can make sense——"

"Come back to the table," said Newt, "and eat with us. Your soup's getting cold."

Anathema came back to the table, frowning, eyes lingering wistfully on the hearth.

"Don't worry," said Adam, and took her hand between both of his. "You'll see."
Chapter Summary

The Imagine Hastur Ficlets

The headers appearing before each ficlet are posts from the imagine hastur tumblr. I started filling them like prompts one morning out of sheer boredom, mostly because I'd stumbled across the blog and the posts had me giggling like crazy, and, as I went along, they acquired a kind of plot-arc (or, if not that, at least an emotional arc) in their own right. They seemed to like being set in CoT 'Verse, so I went with it, and, at one point (as you'll see), the blogger even cheekily posted a prompt that acknowledged what I was doing. I don't doubt the blog will keep posting, but, for now, I've wrapped these up.

1. imagine hastur riding a bus
Ligur stared thoughtfully out the window, then tapped the glass.
"Oi! Is this where we get off, then?" he asked his companion.
Hastur shrugged as the bus ground to a halt at Victoria Station.
"As good a place as any," he said, and reached for Ligur’s belt.

2. imagine hastur wearing heels
"Dunt know about this," said Ligur, shifting from one foot to the other. "They made ’em for fashion, you said, and not torture?" He kicked out of the shoes and shuddered, which is really the closest he could get to a shiver in their present environment. "Nasty things."

"Where’s your sense of adventure?" Hastur sneered, toeing into one shoe and then the other, striking a pose that was intended as parody of those skinny humans on the…the…railway? The correct term had thoroughly gone out of Ligur’s head, and little wonder.

"If that’s what yer after, try the leopard-print ones," Ligur said.

3. imagine hastur watching a disney movie
Ligur tilted his head thoughtfully. “I dunno, it may come right. She’s got a lot goin’ for her, even bein’ mute and all. Them big expressive eyes.”

Hastur threw scorched popcorn at the screen. “What have her eyes got that those nice fresh ones I brought up from the Eighth Circle haven’t, eh?”

"They inspire romantic musical numbers, for one," said Ligur.

Hastur brooded his way through Kiss the Girl, wondering if he ought to have brought the poor, unfortunate soul—good expression, that—and just done the extraction in front of Ligur. At least
then there’d have been some accompaniment.

Fortunately, Ligur didn’t expect a boat ride, and the ratty sofa didn’t tip.

4. imagine hastur trying to outsmart an automatic door

Whoosh. Hastur peered cautiously into the air-conditioned interior.

"I can’t find the wires," said Ligur, warily. "Wouldn’t trust it if I were you."

"Well, I’m not you," said Hastur, watching the glass panel glide open again. He stepped aside to let a human pass from within (not as if the bugger could see them anyway), watched the glass slide shut, and then gestured to Ligur. "I’ve got the shape of it now."

He stepped forward and smacked nose-first into the closed panel.

Ligur didn’t manage to hide his snort, and didn’t run fast enough, either.

5. imagine hastur watching ligur getting dressed

It wasn’t so much the feeling of being watched as the way the air in the room changed (insofar as the boiling point had any capacity to shift).

"Quit lurkin’ and show yerself," said Ligur, pausing, and let his shirt hang open. "Pervy git. If a tumble’s what yer after, just say so."

Hastur emerged seamlessly from between the ash-streaked curtains, eyes glowing muted vermilion in the dim, vaulted bedchamber. The place wasn’t much to crow about, but it had been home for so long—

"Turn around," he rasped, grasping Ligur roughly by the shoulders. "No messin’ about. Bloody prick-tease, that’s what you are."

The rest of Ligur’s clothes lay forgotten: home was what you made of it.

6. imagine hastur bleeding

"Hey, c’mere," Ligur said, and drew a ragged, greying handkerchief out of his trouser pocket (which required a lot of fishing around in the piles of clothes at the foot of the…well, let’s call it a bed).

“You’ve got some—”

“’S nothing,” Hastur insisted, fingering the livid slashes between his ribs with satisfaction. “Better work on the depth next time. Or else.”

Ligur considered this, dabbing at the cuts anyway. “They was always tellin’ me to trim my nails. Back then, I mean. Up There.”

Hastur ran the sharp tip of his index finger from the curve of Ligur’s jaw down to his collarbone, swiped the fresh black-red trail it left, and licked Ligur’s blood off his thumb. "Don’t you dare," he hissed, rolling them back into the stained pillows.
7. *imagine hastur imitating crowley*

"That was good," said Ligur, clapping. "You nailed ’im. Just better hope he weren’t listenin’ or nothing. I heard ol’ bossy-boots upped his surveillance after we—"

"Dagon is distracted," sneered Hastur, "and the least of my concerns."

"All right, then," said Ligur, expectantly. "Go on and do another one."

"Who’d you have in mind?" asked Hastur, flattered. "Just name it."

"Not so much an *it* as a *he,*" Ligur mused slyly. "You know who."

Hastur bristled and spat. "I wouldn’t stoop so far as to give him the honor of even my cruelest mockery," he insisted. "You ask far too much."

"Please?" Ligur begged, and, curse him, *batted his singed eyelashes.*

Hastur sighed and kicked off his shoes, likewise discarding his clothes in a sizzle of hot, stale air. He hated this part most of all: shape-shifting, the sense that he’d been crammed into a space too long and narrow for even someone of his not inconsiderable height.

He crossed the floor and wound his way up Ligur’s leg, slid across his lap (felt wrong, that part, wronger than anything Hastur had ever done, and that was saying a *lot*), and finally up Ligur’s chest so that he could wind in a murderous strangle-hold around Ligur’s neck. He flicked his forked tongue at Ligur’s earlobe, tempted to sink in both ineffectual fangs.

"Is thissss what you wanted?" hissed Hastur, scornfully. "Are you *happy*?"

"It’s just," gasped Ligur, in mild asphyxiation, "snakes are so *cute,* ain’t they?"

8. *imagine hastur visiting america for the first time*

Amidst the carnage—fresh blood, melted ice cream, and shredded Baskin-Robbins uniforms—Ligur licked the back of his sticky, no-longer-manifest-as-maggots hand in satisfaction. "How many flavors was it s’posed to be?" he asked. "Thirty-one?"

"More," said Hastur, wiping his chin with a napkin from the miraculously untouched nearby dispenser. "They forgot to count the employees."

9. *imagine hastur at a gatsby party*

"What d’you mean Crawly ain’t here?" shouted Ligur, casting about wildly. He couldn’t hear over the racket all of the humans were making—he was at present jammed in the midst of a bunch who’d decided making party hats of their empty martini glasses was a great idea—and Hastur was getting progressively more cross. "He likes parties. You said so."

Hastur pushed his way through the throng hemming them in, past Ligur and the tall young woman standing with the awkward young man who were being watched by the very person for whom they were searching (humans were stupidly unobservant, the lot of them), and surveyed the chaotic scene.
below from his new vantage point at the railing.

"If he isn’t here now, he’ll be here later," Hastur sneered, and then turned to lock eyes with the host-turned-voyeur for the briefest of moments. "He’ll have orders, of course. The question, as always, will be what he chooses to do with them."

10. **imagine hastur meeting irisbleufic**

"Dunt see why," Ligur mutters. "Rather plain, ain’t she? Looks kind of sad. Why’s she just ignorin’ everyone else like that? I’d be people watchin’ if I was human." She’s distracted: swift greyish eyes, blown-about short red hair.

Just as Hastur decks him a good one, hisses for him to keep quiet, the girl’s eyes flick up from her phone and lock on both of them, fingers still tapping keys on the screen. She deletes something, rewrites it, and then regards the negligible space between Hastur’s and Ligur’s subway-car seats as as if it’s no more than empty air. Chews her lip, deletes.

"Because we’re more real to her than they are," he says.

Not quite smiling, she flips Hastur off, continues to type.

11. **imagine hastur feeding ducks**

"You sure it’s safe, gettin’ this close?" asked Ligur, hesitantly. "Just ’cause I was here the once for a week or so keepin’ an eye on things don’t mean I recommend hangin’ about as such."

"You said they looked tasty," Hastur reminded him, peering over the garden hedge at the six unassuming ducks foraging amidst the vegetation. "That’s reason enough for me to believe the endeavor is, shall we say, worthwhile."

Ligur gave him a disapproving frown. "I think it’s just ’cause yer wantin’ to get back at—"

"Silence!" Hastur snapped, pushing his way through the hedge and into the grass. "What did you say they like?"

"Fruit an’ bugs mostly," said Ligur, hanging back. "Meal-worms. Crickets an' all sorts."

Effortlessly, Hastur produced a handful of maggots and took a step closer to the ducks, who had all looked up and were regarding him with blank, yet wary eyes. “While I keep them occupied with these, you grab a couple, got it?"

Ligur just grunted, not budging an inch.

"As per usual," Hastur sighed, crouching to extend his teeming hand into the ducks’ midst, "any job worth doing, I’ve got to handle myself."

"Look out for that ‘un," warned Ligur as the bravest of the lot hissed and approached Hastur. "She bi —"

What happened next was too swift for Ligur to ascertain, save for the obvious fact that Hastur was now covered in a vicious flurry of hissing, quacking waterfowl. "OW!" Hastur roared. "Get in here
and get them off me, you sod-all good for nothing—"

"Nuh-uh," said Ligur, unwilling to budge. "They've got teeth, ducks."

12. imagine hastur crying

"C’mon, lay off it," said Ligur, awkwardly patting Hastur’s shoulder. "It weren’t so bad as all that. You got that nippy ‘un back pretty good. Singed her bossy pinfeathers right off, I reckon. Crawly won’t like that one bit."

Sullenly, Hastur shrugged him off. The stuff oozing from the corners of his eyes certainly looked enough like tears to fool your average human, but Ligur wasn’t human. He also liked to think he wasn’t average.

"If you don’t lay off that poncy fussing," Hastur growled, "I’ll feed you to those bleedin’ useless flappy monsters next time, just see if I don’t."

"We could get some of that organic mango from Tesco’s," said Ligur, evasively. "Makes ’em fight up a right storm. You ought ter see."

And whatever else he might be, he definitely wasn’t a fool.

13. imagine hastur winning a contest

Hastur studied the trophy. It looked like it might be made of bone, blackened, and the plaque was made of something dull and shiny that had been hammered flat. There were dark flecks in it. He squinted at the inscription in the gloom. Some weather the Seventh Torment was having.

"Filling material," said Dagon’s pretty assistant, helpfully (he’d never deign to think of her as anything but that). "Extracted from the molars of gluttons."

"I thought we was here because we was in trouble," said Ligur, and sniffed as he studied the inscription. "This here says he’s done Service to the Realm. Wossat?"

"It means Dagon is going to keeping a very close eye out," she said. "You are in trouble. What gave you the impression you weren’t?"

"Wishful bloody thinking," Hastur snarled, yanking Ligur after him by the collar. "Let’s get out of here. I fancy a glutton or two."

14. imagine hastur dancing

"Didn’t sound hard," Ligur muttered under his breath, bending to dust off the scuffed tips of his boots. "There’s no call for steppin’ on yer partner’s toes. I’m leadin’ next time."

Hastur folded his arms and sneered. “I’d like to see you try.”

Ligur fiddled with the volume knob on the battered, fried-out radio—Hastur grudgingly had to admit his companion was getting the hang of anything involving wire—and held out his hand. “Old, this ’un, at least by human standards.”
There was far too much mincing and sashaying for Hastur’s taste, and, this time, his toes were the ones that got repeatedly stepped on. It made him cross. But he got a kiss for his trouble at the end, so that was all right.

15. imagine hastur being happy

"Can we try it just once the way you say you saw ’em do it?" Ligur implored, panting, his lower lip fetchingly split. "Without the scratchin’ an’ bleedin’ an’ such?"

"Why the hell would you want that?" Hastur demanded, flipping him over, but his stomach felt fluttery. "That pansy nancing about’s gone to your head, eh?"

"Sounds different, is all," Ligur managed, but the words dissipated in a squeak when Hastur lightly pinched his nipple. "Feels funny without yer nails. Oi! That tickles!"

Hastur had to agree. It did tickle, at least most of it, especially the part where feathers got involved. His wings, unaccustomed to the contact, shuddered and spread.

"What’re you grinnin’ for?" Ligur demanded afterward, passing back the dogend. "It weren’t nothin’ special. Nice enough if yer into that kind of thing, I s’pose."

Hastur grunted, took a long puff, and pitched away what was left of the cigar before slinging an arm over Ligur’s side. He promptly drifted to sleep, and did not dream.

16. imagine hastur cooking

"I don’t understand it," said Ligur, baffled, licking scalding oil off the tip of his index finger. "It turned out just fine Up There when Crawly did it. I saw. The humans all ate it, and they didn’t even die. Defeats the purpose, if you ask me."

Hastur took hold of the skillet and flung it across the room, narrowly missing Ligur’s head in the process. He glared at the minced up bits of onion, garlic, and chili pepper sizzling on the floor tiles. He’d followed that recipe to the letter.

"Next time, we are not shopping at bloody Tesco," he seethed.

Ligur decided he’d best keep his gob shut about mango this time.

17. imagine hastur baking

Ligur licked the mixing spoon and hummed. "S’more like it."

"Takes long enough, if you ask me," said Hastur, drumming his fingers on the hob. He emphatically was not stealing glances at the dimly lit oven window just below. "Too fussy by half, and a waste of those crinkly paper things besides."

"Dunno why you’ve got to bake it," Ligur said. "Tastes fine as-is."

"Salmonella risk," Hastur sniffed. "A petty mortal concern, all told."
"Good job them eggs was free-range," said Ligur, and licked some more.

18. imagine hastur in a female corporation

"Change back," Ligur muttered, prodding both mounds of surplus flesh again with dubious fingertips. "I dunt know what to do with ’em. They’re too soft."

"Your lack of creativity," Hastur sneered, "is concerning." He shifted under Ligur’s weight, legs spread, finding his current shape a novel excursion. "And with this?"

"Sure, but them things are still...there. Mockin’ me, I tell you."

Hastur sighed and shapeshifted, rolling Ligur onto his back.

"Better?" he countered, with a pointed thrust of his hips.

"Nah," said Ligur, almost lovingly, "yer the absolute worst."

19. imagine hastur painting a ceiling

"I’m pretty sure that’s not the color I gave you," said a dreaded, familiar voice from the foot of the charred scaffolding. "In fact, there’s a world of difference between Provençal yellow and—um—coagulated human blood. Charming."

"I did the mixin’ myself," said Ligur, somewhat crestfallen. "Yer boss don’t like it?"

"Um," Tanith said again, grimacing. "He’s your boss, too. And, for the record, I’m the one who doesn’t like it. Although I doubt he will, either."

"Your precious imported pigment," said Hastur, "or, should I say, down-cycled pigment, cannot withstand such temperatures as—"

"Hacks, dearest," Dagon called from the next room. "Never mind them."

"You’re lucky I’m an especially dab hand at transformation on an atomic level, buddy," Tanith seethed at Hastur. She stalked out, but not before mouthing sorry up at Ligur.

"I like her," said Ligur. "She’s real nice, that ’un. Regular keeper."

Hastur didn’t think twice about up-ending the bucket on his head.

20. imagine hastur in a corporation smaller than crowley (or ligur)

"If I were bein’ honest—not that I’d want ter be, mind—that ain’t doin’ it fer me," Ligur admitted as he stared down at Hastur. "Not much more’n that time you tried—"

"So much for adventurousness," Hastur sneered. "What next?"

"It’s just," said Ligur, grinding his toe into the ashy dust underfoot, unable to meet Hastur’s eyes as he shifted back to his full height, "I like bein’ able ter—well—"
Hastur snagged Ligur by his filthy collar and slung him over his shoulder.

"Point taken," he said gruffly, and wanted to add *So do I*—but didn’t.

21. *imagine hastur trying to learn the tango*

"This is workin’ about as well as before,” observed Ligur, frustrated, stopping mid-stride. “You ’ave no sense of timin’ whatsoever.”

"Maybe it’s because you haven’t got a rose in your mouth," said Hastur, sarcastically. "At least you’d keep bloody quiet, and I could *concentrate.*"

Ligur grinned: slow, wide, and terrible around the stem suddenly clenched between his teeth. A thorn snagged his lower lip, pierced it, sent a dark trickle of blood down his chin.

"Er," said Hastur, somewhat distractedly. "From the top?"

22. *imagine hastur in world war two*

The farmhouse was abandoned, from the look of things, its shutters hanging wide, windows smashed. Hastur advanced through the early morning gloom, squinting at the intact cellar doors.

The shape hunkered down in the weeds beside them stirred and raised its head, revealing the gleam of startled yellow eyes through the mist.

"Fancy meeting you here," said Hastur, with nasty delight. "Keeping watch, are we?"

"Er, hi," said Crowley, sheepishly, and waved with one filthy, tatter-gloved hand. "Yeah. You know me. Always, *ah*, vigilant.”

Hastur bent down, palms flat against the damp wood, and sniffed. “Looks to me like you waited too long,” he said. “Smells dead.”

"That’s just the dog," explained Crowley, hastily. "The soldier’s been stuck down there for three days. I think there are also a few chickens."

"Scared out of his bloody mind by now, I imagine," said Hastur, turning back to the snake. "His platoon’s long gone. Time to move in for the kill, eh? Didn’t think playing cat-and-mouse with ’em was your style."

Crowley sniffed and rubbed the tip of his nose, which was raw and pink with the cold. “Let this one go,” he said.

If Hastur hadn’t known better, he’d have thought that was a tone of pleading in Crowley’s voice. “Why should I?” he countered.

"He’s somebody’s grandfather," replied Crowley, a bit too quickly. "Er. I mean—"

"The boy’s twenty-three if he’s a day," Hastur sneered.

"I know," Crowley forged on, somewhat desperately, "but he will be. Think of it as…um, as looking after your future returns.”
Hastur grinned and set his palms back against the wood. The doors rattled as the rusty bolt inside threw itself open.

"About time he came out, then," said Hastur, "and found some French whore to fuck."

"He’s already got a girl at home," murmured Crowley, irrelevantly. "Leave him to me."

Hastur slunk off, watching as the other demon huddled back down in his ill-fitting gear with a shiver.

23. *imagine hastur discovering tumblr*

*Tap. Flick. Type. Tap. Scroll. Type.*

They’re watching the girl on the train again, mystified by the kaleidoscope of color and text cradled in her left hand. Hastur shifts in his plastic seat and glances sidelong at Ligur. "All for this," he says. "Frittering away her life on that gadget."

"Dunno," replies Ligur, and shrugs. "S’interesting, kind of."

"Bloody snake," Hastur mutters. "Was it worth it in the end?"

The subway car rattles to a stop. *Harvard Square*, it intones.

The girl rises as the door slides open, and brushes past them.

"Every minute," she says, pocketing the phone. *Every word.*
Four Archangelic Flashbacks

Chapter Summary

These are all set pre-"The Walls, the Wainscot, and the Mouse" and were all written as responses to reader requests over on LJ.

1. Getting in the Way

"Shhh," whispers Uriel, and then, in German, "you will not feel this way for long."

The soldier's pale eyes are fever-glazed, blank. His filthy hand clutches at hers, slick with mud and sweat. Uriel glances upward, searching the jagged patch of sky. There has not been gunfire for hours, but it might change at any moment.

Others are watching her with curiosity, their looks too exhausted to be contemptuous.

Meanwhile, the soldier squeezes her hand, his breath rattling high and shallow. The sickness has reached his lungs.

"A dozen will be ill by morning," says the red-haired soldier beside her. His uniform ill becomes him, and his forget-me-not eyes are not the same without Parisian mascara.

"Be quiet," Uriel hisses, stroking the soldier's forehead. The fever is rampant, now, tearing him through. She almost says, "This one will be dead by morning," but thinks better of it. Once, briefly, they lapsed into French, and he understood it.

"Are you an angel?" he asks, lips cracked, voice rasping.

Uriel glances away from her companion and down at the soldier, silencing him.

"You are feverish," she says, keeping her voice low. "What makes you say that?"

"You are too beautiful," he whispers, the phrase broken by a cough, "to be a soldier."

Uriel ignores the snort from beside her, stroking the back of the soldier's hand.

"I am no different than you," she says, and knocks on her helmet.

Unexpectedly, the soldier lets go of her hand and reaches up, one filthy fingernail scratching at her cheek. Uriel freezes, fascinated, as he picks away something long and shimmering. At the sudden sting under her helmet, she realizes what he's found.

"You," rasps the soldier, his smile faint and distant, "are not a boy."

Uriel catches his hand, which falls, trembling, into her lap. Carefully, she rummages in the first-aid kit that lies open between her and the red-haired soldier. It is several moments before she locates the scissors. She hands them to her companion.
"Any loose hairs that you see," she whispers in French. "Quickly."

Raphael's features crumple, pained.

"But darling, your natural wave is to die for—"

"I don't care," she hisses as he makes the first cut. "It'll be all the rage next decade."

In her lap, the soldier's head has fallen to one side. Gently, she closes his eyes.

2. All Yesterday's Parties

"I can't believe you ever wore this," Uriel said in disbelief. The garment she was holding up wasn't recognizable as either a top or a bottom, and it wouldn't cover even half of one's important bits in either case. It was covered in bright orange sequins.

"I don't believe I did," mused Raphael, draping a few evening gowns over his arm. "That belonged to, oh, what's-his-name. The one with the heels."

"That only covers three quarters of your yearly guest-lists since 1920," Uriel sighed, dropping the thing back on Raphael's closet floor. At least he never used mothballs. Everything smelled of lavender.

"On the contrary, darling," said Raphael, holding one of the gowns up under Uriel's chin. "Since 1790 at least. Now, be a good girl and strip down, would you?"

3. Fair Game

With shaking fingers, Uriel raises the fag to her lips. It's not the best rolling she's ever done, but there's more weed than tobacco, so that's all right. The first hit goes straight to her head, and she doesn't bother to dampen the effects.

"Jesus, what is this shit?" she asks, reclining hazily in the chaise.

Raphael smirks, pleased with himself, and reaches up to snatch the fag before she drops it. He's always preferred the floor. Biggest seat in the house, he says.

"Wouldn't you love to know," he replies, taking a cool, casual drag. "It's been a little side-project of mine. I've found that botany is an agreeable pursuit." Without turning his head, he reaches up with his free hand and twines his fingers in Uriel's unkempt hair. "Dreadful. What are you putting in it these days? Superglue?"

"Fuck you," Uriel mutters. One long drag and several second-hand lungfuls and she's already too dizzily relaxed to say much else. She tries to dislodge Raphael's fingers from her hair, but suddenly
he's looming over her and the fag's back between her lips.

She sucks, hard, and tastes cinders.

“That's my girl,” Raphael purrs, plucking away what's left of it. He leans to kiss her, deep and hungry, and, strangely enough, Uriel doesn't feel like pulling away. She wraps her arms around his neck and shifts on the chaise, fixing the angle.

“No,” she says. “You're my girl. I thought we had this sorted.”

“Sorted,” echoes Raphael, nose wrinkled, with pseudo-British diction. Uriel wonders if she really sounds like that. “You've been spending too much time in London, darling.”

“The company's better, I'll say that,” she taunts, hauling Raphael onto the chaise. It's satisfying to see his eyes widen, as if he's forgotten her strength is equal to his.

“Sorry, but I never did like snakes,” he sighs, nuzzling her neck. The bite that follows is rough, enough to make Uriel yelp in surprise. She'll let the bruise blossom.

“Tough shit,” she says. “Now, about this little science-fair project of yours...”


“I like you better,” Uriel says. She's getting uncomfortable and impatient.

“Better than the snake and his poor, besotted keeper?”

“Fuck you,” she repeats—and, well, she'll do just that.

4. Sunday Morning

Uriel isn't accustomed to houseguests. Her Toronto apartment, in which she barely spends any time at all, is ill equipped to deal with such a demanding presence as a pansexual intersex Archangel feeling somewhat out-of-touch with his feminine side.

She roams the sitting room listlessly, plucking up half-empty bottles of American microbrew and wondering if she's this bad when she's crashing at his place—or even in London. Most certainly not. She sniffs one mostly-full bottle of Magic Hat #9, frowns, and chugs it.

_Hair of the dog_, Aziraphale always says, cheerfully. _Hair of the dog that bit you._ Her hangover doesn't seem to respond, so she dumps the armful of bottles, twelve in total, unceremoniously into the sink.

"Sexy," observes a sleep-muddled voice in the kitchen doorway. "But it falls a little too far. The point's to show off your shoulders, not your armpits."

Uriel squares her shoulders and adjusts the bathrobe she'd carelessly thrown on, turning to face him with a look of challenge. "I admit I was going for function, not style. Do you have any idea what a mess you made?"
Raphael shrugs, casting a nonchalant glance over his shoulder. He's standing there wearing—well, nothing.

Not that this is unusual. In fact, it would have been far stranger if he'd even bothered with such a formality as underwear. He hardly bothers with them anyway, which makes clubbing a tad...interesting.

"Your carpet's stain resistant, darling. Beer is a cinch. Now, if you'd had those wine-loving English heathens drinking till all hours—"

"Shut your mouth," says Uriel, irritably, and fills the kettle. "We're having tea."
Actions We Might Play

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale and Crowley feature in the fourth section of this Hamlet-centric crossover; however, since their section of it is both CoT-verse and readable on its own, I'm transplanting it below so that you don't have to click over to the full multi-fandom piece.

2003

Aziraphale stared moodily into his wine as Crowley sighed and waved off the telly.

"It was quite an excellent production," he said. "Would they had done it on stage."

"He got to do it live in plenty of other arrangements," said Crowley, setting his wine down on the coffee table so he could count productions off on his fingers. "Title role when he was a mere sixth-former at Edinburgh Fringe, Laertes opposite O'Toole at the National Theatre in sixty-three, on tour in the title role again in seventy-nine, up to and including a performance at the Kronborg in Helsingør—"

"I had no idea you'd followed Jacobi's career with such interest, my dear," said Aziraphale, attempting to feign nonchalance (and failing rather appallingly). "That brings us up to the filming of what we've just seen, no doubt."

Crowley nodded, retrieving his wine. "Nineteen eighty. Almost makes me feel old."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Aziraphale, polishing off his wine. "We can't be made to feel old." He fished through the agitated murk of his thoughts for words he knew would suit the purpose. "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

"Then that must go for you and me as well, eh?"

Aziraphale watched Crowley take a cautious sip.

"I'll have you know that's not funny," he said.

"Of course not," agreed Crowley, drunkenly. "It's only the best-known bloodbath in all of Western literature and performance art, unless you count anything by Tarantino—"

"Leave it to you to gloss over the point," Aziraphale sniffed. "You've missed it."

"Not really," said Crowley, standing up, and offered Aziraphale his hand. "The real tragedy lies in the failures of communication, the isolation between family members, the mistaken assumptions with regard to who bears whom genuine affection. Love, even, if you like." He got them out in the open and stood Aziraphale in front of the coffee table, and then placed himself opposite Aziraphale. "For my money, what we're seeing is a brilliant young man who, in addition to being deeply grieved by his father's death, isn't free to openly love whom he'd like. Don't look at me like that, angel. I'll prove it. First of all, those so-called love letters..." Crowley wrinkled his nose. "You can't tell me the prince would write like that if his heart was in it. No, he's desperately afraid of displeasing his mother, so off he goes writing trite nothings to the girl Mummy so dearly hopes he'll marry. Meanwhile, she and his
uncle can’t even get it right when it comes to with what friends—or, as the case actually stands, friend—he keeps the closest counsel. So, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to it. Do you follow?"

Aziraphale’s brow had knit so fiercely, and without his express consent, that the muscles of his forehead actually hurt. "I think so. Now, if only our actor of the hour had been free to carry that stroking of Horatio’s cheek to its logical..."

Crowley cleared his throat and straightened, eyes closed, his swift nervous hands clenched on his lapels. "I’ll demonstrate, shall I? Line: Laertes, his very last. Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet: mine and my father’s death come not upon thee, nor thine on me." He opened his eyes and gestured toward the floor, indicating that Aziraphale should kneel. That being accomplished, Crowley knelt, too, reaching urgently for Aziraphale’s shoulders, using them to steady himself. He blinked, having lost his sunglasses some time ago, half-lidded and uncertain.

"Heaven make thee free of it," prompted Aziraphale, under his breath. "I follow thee."

"I am dead, Horatio," Crowley muttered, sagging nearly to boneless weight, giving Aziraphale little choice but to catch him by the elbows and hold him up. "Wretched queen, adieu! You that look pale and tremble at this chance, that are but mutes or audience to this act, had I but time—as this fell sergeant, death, is strict in his arrest—" at that, Crowley seemed to falter with some genuine remembrance, some recollection that drew his bright eyes wide in something like terror "—O, I could tell you..." The trail-off, Aziraphale hadn’t been expecting, no more than he’d expected Crowley to take that moment and stroke his cheek with all of the sincerity they’d just seen, no, perhaps more. He laughed, short and wistful. "But let it be, Horatio. I am dead; thou livest. Report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied."

_He remembers the lines, thought Aziraphale, amazed, every word, as clearly as I do._

Instinctively, he covered Crowley’s hand with his own and pressed it more fully to his cheek, inclining his head to the gesture so that his lips brushed Crowley’s palm. He ignored the way Crowley jumped, tried for the briefest instant to turn away.

"Never believe it," said Aziraphale, with quiet resolve, and reached for Crowley’s glass on the coffee table. "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane: here’s yet some liquor left."

And Crowley was terrified, then; Aziraphale wouldn’t have known the look if he hadn’t seen it so lately (Almost exactly a year ago, he thought), if he hadn’t had to bear it before the world contained in that tiny Tokyo restaurant had gone black—

"As thou’rt a man," Crowley hissed, shaking him, "give me the cup: let go! By heaven, I’ll have’t." His expression softened again, yellow eyes flickering, and said with pitch-perfect regret, "O good Horatio, what a wounded name, things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me. If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, absent thee from felicity awhile, and in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain to tell my story."

Aziraphale closed his eyes. _March afar off, and shot within._ "What warlike noise is this?" he murmured on Crowley’s behalf, and then, on Osric’s, "Young Fortinbras, with conquest come from Poland, to the ambassadors of England gives this warlike volley."

Crowley sucked in an unnecessary breath and wound both arms around Aziraphale’s neck, hanging on him now without reserve, gasping warmth into Aziraphale’s collar. "O, I die, Horatio," he muttered, faint laughter rising again in his throat, manic and strange. "The potent poison quite o’er-crows my spirit. I cannot live to hear the news from England, but I do prophesy the election lights on Fortinbras: he has my dying voice. So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less, which have
solicited." He tightened his hold, abruptly let go, and trusted with perfect, inebriated insistence that Aziraphale would catch him, cradle him, turn his face up so that they stared hazily at one another as if for the very first time. He ran his fingertips across Aziraphale's lower lip, the gesture exquisite in its excess, and said, "The rest is silence."

Dies, thought Aziraphale, unable to turn off the stage directions embedded in his recollection courtesy of many centuries' rereading, and caught hold of Crowley's hand as it fell limply away. "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, and—"

"Stop," Crowley said, but he didn't open his eyes. "See under point, not missed."
My Afterlyfe for a Hammer

Chapter Summary

Written for edna_blackadder in the 2013 Good Omens Holiday Exchange. Dear recipient, I went with the first of your three prompts—Aziraphale/Crowley, something autumnal and spooky—because I never could resist the opportunity to write a ghost story (and old habits die harder with me, I’ve been told, than they do with many). Happy Holidays to everyone!

April 1655

John Device removed his hat and stepped across the threshold, although it wasn’t much of a threshold anymore, not as such, as the upper three-quarters of the doorframe had been entirely blown away. So had most of the roof.

A fine layer of ash crunched beneath the soles of John’s shoes as he approached the singed, battered table. He ran his fingers across the well-worn wood, easily finding the spot in which he’d carved his initials with a cheese knife when he was young.

*JSN*, he’d put, but his mother had wrested the knife out of his hand, hacked out the *N*, and put *D*. Foresight, perhaps—or just bloody-minded insistence that John’s father remain part of his life in the only way the man really knew how.

He always came to see John on holidays. There was that.

John shivered and set his hand on the Book: that foul, accursed tome. It had been the last straw, perhaps. He’d begged his mother not to send it to press. If not for brazen, printed proof, she might at least have remained a healer and an eccentric.

Next to the Book, there was a box, and on top of that, a letter.

He did the only thing that there was left to do: he opened it with shaking hands, and he read.

*Deareste John,*

*Bastarde though yowe be, nonetheless I leave yowe thif. Convey the bocks untoe somme Lawyers, scumme though yowe may think them alle. My Will must be Done. I neede never reminde yowe what will Come if yowe doe notte. My love to yowre Father, the daft olde foole. Telle him my answer is still Noe. Perchance I may see him again, Here or There—it matters notte. Be goode now, and yf not for me, doe it for yowre Child. Below, yowe will find a Name. This man owes me a tidy Sum, and he will Pay by my reckoning. Give somme to the Clerk, for he struggles sore. And with thatte, my Sonne, I schalle say no more.*

*Yowre dotynge Mother,*

*Agnes*
Part of it explained a lot, certainly. Maud had been ill of a morning or three this past fortnight.

Anger rose in John as abruptly as his grief; the whole place ought to be cinders, he thought fiercely, Book and table and all. He went over to the ruined hearth and found the makings for tinder, just enough charred wood to set a pathetic blaze.

Smoke stung his eyes as he worked, and on that, at least, he could blame his tears.

He went over to the table, took hold of the Book, and stacked it on top of both box and letter. He carried them resolutely over to the hearth and stood staring at the breeze-fanned flames for a moment. Curse his mother and his childhood both: grit and dust, gone.

Just as he bent to place his burden on the makeshift pyre, wind buffeted the ruin around him, and he heard—

“MY AFTERLYFE FOR A HAMMER, BOY! WAS THE POYNT NOTTE CLEAR?”

John shivered and clutched the Book, box, and letter to his chest. Once he’d got a grip on himself, he stuffed the bundle in his satchel and, with blurred vision, cast about the room for anything else he might take. His mother’s library in the shelves on the wall, precious, a small fortune—obliterated, not a scrap or spine surviving but the one he carried.

“Yes, Mum,” he muttered, and, from behind him, as the wind fell abruptly still, he heard a clink.

A single roofing nail skittered across the floor and bounced neatly off the toe of his shoe.

John picked it up and, pocketing the last of his mother’s legacy, walked out of the ruin.

October 1757

“No more, George,” said Constance Plashkin, “to the devil with you, for aught I care,” and slammed the door.

“Tough break, Mister Cranby,” offered Connie’s neighbor in passing. “Women spit brimstone, ain’t it the truth.”

“Get out of my bloody way, Amos,” muttered George, and swept out into the muddy, storm-blown street.

The relentless wind was picking up, and the deluge showed no sign of stopping. George had hoped he’d find shelter for the night in Connie’s bed, but she’d cooled to his advances since Michaelmas last. Home was two miles on, and there wasn’t a carriage in sight. Cursing under his breath, he rounded the corner at the end of the lane.

George had been with the firm for twelve years. The offices were close, five minutes’ walk at most, and although he’d just left there and wanted nothing so much as a warm fire and his own bed, he’d find his spare cloak and the stoup of whisky under his desk suitable companions until the gale blew over.

To Hell with Connie: he could pay for his own drink now, what with his debts all clear.
He thumped up two flights of stairs and fumbled his key into the lock, struggling to open the heavy door. Damn the ague in his creaking bones, but he wasn’t getting any younger. His left arm ached.

Finding his office too drafty for comfort (the fire wouldn’t stay lit, no matter how he tried), he took whisky, his spare cloak, and a fistful of candles to the store-room. It was the smallest enclosed space on the premises, windowless, and, between the burn of one thing and another, would warm quickly enough.

Hunkered down on the floor by candlelight, he’d drunk three or four long pulls by the time his glazed, swimming eyes drifted up to the shelves and lit on the Box. They’d had it for a donkey’s years, since time out of mind. Strict orders not to open and all that rot, but what of them? He’d be stuck till morning. Might prove good sport.

George took another swig of whisky and staggered to his feet, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He held one of his candles up to the box and squinted at it, prodding the ancient twine. It fell away like cobwebbing beneath his touch, and it was simple, really, to set aside the candle and lift the Box down from its perch.

A quick rummage within its shadowed depths turned up an ancient letter with its wax seal still intact. He set the Box down and turned the letter over in his hands. The ache in his arm intensified, spiked when he saw what was written there in a spidery script:

*To One Mr. George Cranby, Esq., Nosey Goose & Drownt Ratte*

So the whole sordid business was meant for him, then. He’d best open it.

No sooner had he got past the part where the writer seemed to know about the money he’d got from Connie—and what he’d done with her these several years past, *snatch-pastry* indeed—than the door, which he’d shut behind him, creaked and swung open.

“Mr. Redfearn, sir, I can explain—” he slurred, and fell silent as he turned and saw who stood there.

In the dimness and shadow, thanks to his drunken confusion, he might have taken the handsome middle-aged woman for Connie—something similar about the lines of the mouth, he supposed, and the vivacious dark eyes.

The figure took a few steps forward, sniffed, and eyed the two candles: one on the shelf and one on the floor, both guttering dangerously. She bent and pinched out the one at his feet, and then stood, grabbed the remaining one off the shelf, and thrust the flame in his face.

“It ys notte tyme for the Book to burne,” she said. “Notte yet. But as for *yowe*—”

George watched as, too stupefied and pain-ridden to move, she blew out the candle, set it aside, and then, rummaging in her apron pocket, pressed something slender and cold to his lips. It tasted like iron, like blood.

The pain and the flames both engulfed him, the blackness fading to an even deeper void.
June 1928

“Arthur, come to bed,” Rosemary pleaded. “It’s hot as blazes, and you’ve smoked enough for one day.”

Arthur waved her off and stayed where he was, which was in a chair on the front porch with a stack of paperwork in his lap.

He’d intended to see to its contents earlier, when he’d got home from the office, but it had been too lazy an evening to do anything but sweat his way through dinner and then retire back outside, where at least some air stirred, with his pipe and some ale. He tamped down a fresh wad of tobacco and waited until his wife went back inside.

He’d been in the store-room to perform a routine inventory. He’d found everything on his predecessors’ list exactly as it should have been, plus two burnt-out candle stubs that had rolled back under the rickety shelving framework. He’d had to step out briefly, as the dust had set off his asthma for a spell. When he returned to finish his task, there were two items left to tick off: the original Robeys’ bequest to the current Robeys’ offspring (not to be awarded till they reached their majority), and the Box.

Arthur hadn’t opened it intentionally; the twine was damaged, and the lid had jarred loose when he dusted it off.

He ought to have left the envelope inside, but he’d glimpsed the letters: To One Mr. Arthur By—

“Bychance,” he’d read off, removing the parchment, stupefied. Notte Nosey, and Sorrye, Too.

Not knowing what else to do, he’d replaced the lid on the Box and stuffed the letter in his jacket. Now, safe at home with his wife gone to bed, Arthur cracked the wax seal with jittery fingers, but not before setting his pipe alight and taking a few strong puffs for courage. This particular blend always took him back, made him remember...

The writer of the letter seemed to remember, too, although how that was even possible flat-out escaped him.

Over and over, he read: lest the Worlde knoe the true Events of June 7th, Nineteen Hundred and Sixeene.

Down in the dusty lane, not a stone’s throw away, someone stood very patiently watching Arthur. As he began to lower the letter and shakily inquire if the woman was lost, she stepped through his front gate, soundlessly mounted the porch stairs, and came over to stand beside him with both hands on her ample, skirt-and-apron covered hips.

“Hotte as blazes indeed,” she said. “I see it’s been left it otherwyse as it is. But how could yowe—?”

“I was frightened,” said Arthur, pleadingly, his voice wrecked. “And if I hadn’t got out of that trench...”

The woman harrumphed her disapproval, but she handed him something from her pocket and set her hand on his shoulder.

“To remember them by,” she said, “and to remember me, too, if ye’ve any sense.”

The woman tramped her way back down the stairs and disappeared into the heat-streaked dusk.
Arthur held the nail in his palm—ancient and pitted, but so similar to the ones they’d used—and wept.

**August 1990**

They were, for the hundred-oddth time (hundred and thirty-second, by Crowley’s count) since this whole Antichrist business had started, well on the way to soused. They’d started drinking over lunch at the Ritz, and they’d seen no reason why they should stop when they got back to the bookshop, which shouldn’t have been there any more than the Bentley should have been extant, let alone operational.

“Bloody strange turn of events, if you ask me,” Aziraphale concluded drunkenly. “All of it.”

“Well, now there’s the question of what we do,” Crowley pointed out. “Isn’t that sssoo?”

“Ease off the port, my dear, or I’ll not have the foggiest idea what you’re saying before long.”

Crowley bit his tongue, sucked in his breath, and continued, “I’m not messing about. I’m serious.”

“Much better,” said Aziraphale, approvingly. “And, yes, one does wonder what we’re now meant to...ah...”

“That’s all been sorted for you, hasn’t it? Snazzy new stock,” Crowley managed, his tongue uncooperative. “Look, this is hard; will you just let me speak?” He let the hiss creep back in, watched Aziraphale’s cheeks redden, but whether it was the fortified wine or some other form of consternation, Crowley couldn’t say. “The Prophecies burned in the Bentley. Now we’ll never know —”

Out in the front room, the doorbell jangled; both of them jumped.

“We’re closed!” shouted Aziraphale, irritably. “Mostly! Who’s there?”

“I think it’s nobody,” said Crowley, moodily, and reached for the bottle.

Aziraphale smacked his hand. “Oh, as if you’d ever set stock in one of ours!”

“I don’t think she’d sworn herself to either side, actually. Never met her. Did you? Give me that!” Surrendering the bottle, Aziraphale slumped in his seat. “Whoever it was, I think they’ve gone.”

“The boy’s only eleven, after all,” Crowley reasoned. “Must’ve forgot to lock the door for you.”

“I shall have quite a lot of money if the market recovers,” said Aziraphale, slowly, with a renewed measure of shock. “Quite a bit indeed, dear boy. Whatever shall we do with it? The mind boggles.”

“I was just trying to ask you that same question, although, might I add, I was politely leaving the money out of it,” Crowley snapped. “If they’ve—” Crowley gestured surreptitiously at the ceiling, and then the floor “—decided to sod off and just leave us to our own devices, no pun intended, we really do have a staggering choice to make.”

“Why’s it got to be one big choice?” asked Aziraphale, shakily refilling his glass. “Why not lots of little ones?”
“Whatever,” said Crowley, turning toward a movement off to his left. “Fine, lotsss of little—what.”

They both stared at the personage standing next to the table. It was holding a book out at arms’ length.

“Do yowe have this in harde-backe?” asked the woman. “Somethyng right sturdie for the returne trip.”

Crowley ducked under the table, trying to hide, and hissed in pain as he bumped his head in the process.

Unexpectedly, Aziraphale caught Crowley’s hand as it scrabbled at the edge of his chair for purchase.

“Er, no,” said the angel, his voice anything but steady. “That one only arrived in softcover. Take it.”

The specter made a grumpy, dissatisfied noise, but she tucked *Biggles On Mars* under her arm.

“I schalle leave it for my grandchilde,” she said absently. “Or three. Now, yowe Two must get busy.”

“B—busy doing what?” Crowley stammered, poking his head out from under the table, which meant leaning partly across Aziraphale’s lap with Aziraphale’s hand still clutched in his own. It was somewhat awkward.

Something dropped to the floor with a faint *plink* and rolled under the table next to Crowley.

“Livynge,” said the woman, impatiently. “Or learning howe to doe so. ’Tis noe concern of myne.”

By the sound of things, Aziraphale had snatched the port and was chugging it straight from the bottle.

Crowley picked up the roofing nail and thought, *The lack of a hammer really drives it home.*

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**December 2005**

“Are they down?” Anathema asked, soaked to her elbows in washing-up suds.

“The young ones, anyway,” said Newt. “Your precocious eldest is reading.”

“Under the duvet with a torch, no doubt,” Anathema said, handing him a tea towel. “At least it’s a normal tale of young adult derring-do printed on pulp that won’t last a decade. Thanks to my reading material, Mum used to find bookworms in the sheets.”

“I don’t think they survived the torching,” said Newt, grinning as he dried dishes, “so we’re safe.”

They finished tidying up the remnants of dinner and chatted about the girls’ performance at school, and how glad they were that the holidays were finally upon them (no more early morning runs for a couple of weeks, at least). They retired to the living room to read for a while: Newt had his newspapers, just like always, and Anathema had a *New Aquarian* backlog and texts pertaining to her latest degree (money being no object, thanks to the Device fortune, she quite fancied trying her hand at law) for company.
At a quarter till ten, Newt rose and stretched. “Are you coming to bed?”

“Not this minute,” said Anathema, engrossed, turning pages, “but soon.”

“Right,” Newt replied, and bent to kiss her forehead on his way out.

Anathema liked the quiet of winter evenings; she switched off all of the lamps and let the fairy lights along the mantelpiece bathe the room in their quiet off-white glow. As an afterthought, she lit a candle and set it on the coffee table in front of her. She’d only just dug into her case textbook when the flame guttered and made as if to go out.

Anathema could’ve sworn she’d seen a shadow, but she was forever seeing shadows and auras and such.

“Leave me alone, you daft old bat,” she said fondly. “I’m busy for a change, can’t you see?”

Something toppled off the edge of the mantelpiece, tangled in the fairy lights, and then dropped to the flagstone hearth with a delicate clatter.

Anathema sighed, set her book aside, and went over to retrieve the offending item.

Much later, just before slipping under the covers beside Newt, she pulled a shoebox out from under the bed and tossed the nail in with four hundred years’ worth of its fellows. Agnes was a predictable ghost at best.

She’d get a hammer one of these days and use them, but not yet.
Chapter Summary

This series has been on hiatus since December last year, so I thank readers both old and new for their patience! This particular non-flashback story has been in outline form and constantly evolving since August last year, and it's thanks to discussions with ida-pea and my partner that the conundrum Mandy handed me has come unstuck sufficiently for this to be written. Because I have no idea how many installments this series will ultimately have, I'll only ever project the chapter-count as far ahead as I can definitively see. This is Part 1 of this particular story; expect Part 2 to appear in late July or early August. If it seems I'm thanking you too much for your patience, dear reader, I assure you it's because these guys are grateful, too! It's been a long time since I've been passionately involved in two fandoms at once (while RL grows progressively busier and more complicated).

Crowley wiggled his toes against the kitchen tile and regarded the unwieldy pile of luggage they'd accrued in a slapdash, blink-of-Aziraphale's-lazy-eyes job of packing. For his money, they'd be better off still in bed at this hour, but wedding-night intimacy deferred till the ungodly hours of morning had been better than none at all.

He skipped over the pair of suitcases and tapped the neatly stowed tent with the side of his foot, raising one eyebrow at Aziraphale. "Roughing it between the scattered bed-and-breakfast reservations you've made, are we?" he asked warily.

Over at the table, Aziraphale bristled slightly and picked at the remnants of their breakfast, but did an admirable job of recovering himself. "One thought the point of a road-trip to Cornwall might include patronizing a few of the many excellent campgrounds along the way, however—"

"Your one might," Crowley sighed, tired of repeating himself these many years gone, "but my one had promised use of said tent to the house-sitter in our absence. She wants to set it up next to the shed and keep the girls company for a night or two. Tamar will never let her sleep."

"Are you quite certain," Aziraphale asked, "that she's had enough time to recover? House-sitting might not be the best idea given what she's just been through. Duck-sitting is another matter altogether, and entirely too stressful if she hasn't got enough rest. It happened yesterday, my dear."

"Well, she's been texting me all morning," Crowley replied, shrugging. "Chipper as anything, doesn't seem to remember much other than getting trolled the night before. All's well, et cetera."

"Then again," Aziraphale sighed, "perhaps she could use some time away. That boy does coddle her so, and she may be feeling a bit stifled. Come over and help with these scones, won't you?"

"She's already agreed to do it, so the tent stays behind," said Crowley, firmly, and strode back to resume his seat. "Deal with it, angel. There's no way I can leave a whole flock of tame, trusting ducks to chance, unless you'd like me to try talking Pippa into keeping them in her sunroom again?"

"Alas, no," replied Aziraphale, cringing, and spread some more clotted cream on the half-scone he'd been guiltily nibbling. "We mustn't have her chasing them about, not as bad as her hip's been."
"Then come to terms with Mandy dropping by here in a couple of hours for a primer on how much of the refrigerator's contents she can eat, where she can sleep, and what to do if certain nutters still renting the holiday cottage up the road show up one evening and try to talk her into a party."

"She'll stay tonight, then?" asked Aziraphale. "And get up at some ungodly hour to see us off?"

"We're not leaving at seven," Crowley hissed, snatching the cream. "Over my discorporated consciousness are we walking out of here that early. It's not high tourist season; the coastal roads will be fine! When was the last time you saw a traffic-jam on the A259 through Seaford—"

"Crowley," said Aziraphale, taking back the cream and spreading some on the other half of the scone for him, "your tea's getting cold. Drink up so we can go rest a while before she arrives."

There was something so warm in his tone, so inviting, that Crowley finished not just that half, but the entirety of another besides. They chatted idly about places they'd like to stop along the way even if it meant taking the occasional detour—Dartmoor, Merlin's Cave, St. Michael's Mount (for tradition's sake less than the alternative, after France and the spring that had followed).

The impatient brush of Aziraphale's stockinged foot against Crowley's instep rushed them along.

"You're only fussed about the house-sitting because it means you can't keep me under the covers the rest of the day," Crowley sighed, willingly letting himself be tugged down the hall. "Yeah?"

"Yes," Aziraphale murmured, pulling him close as they reach the bed. "I'd like to have you again without grains of sand getting in the way, much less nosy lower-ranking colleagues..."

"You do know they're going to show up and talk her into a party, right?" Crowley asked, wrestling Aziraphale out of his slipover jumper before starting on his buttons. "Raphael's going to insist on his gauche American alcohol, and Uriel will resurrect her crusade with intent to find out what's on Bruce Parry's bottom. Don't you want to know what's on Bruce Parry's bottom?"

"Hush," said Aziraphale, tartly, and yanked Crowley's t-shirt up and over his head as soon as he could get both hands in edgewise at Crowley's hips. "The only bottom in which I've got any interest at present is yours. Now, if you'd be so kind, I need you to lift—mmm, yes. Lie down."

Finding oneself seated on the edge of the mattress with one's trousers around one's ankles whilst Aziraphale knelt and took one's cock in his mouth certainly counted as a time far too late to say such a cautious and pragmatic thing as What if she turns up early? Crowley gasped, letting himself fall back into the wrecked nest of covers, and did everything in his power to make it last. Failed.

"You're either the best or the worst, I don't know which. Get up here," he babbled, his mind not yet clear, and tugged insistently at Aziraphale's shoulders. He did them a quick favor by miracing away the remnants of their clothing, which earned him Aziraphale's hum of approval as he kissed Crowley and tangled their legs together. There was nothing new under the sun, he knew, not here and not for this; that was perfectly fine.

Aziraphale whimpered, begging—so Crowley delivered.

"You ought not to think so ill of your hands in comparison to mine," murmured the angel, afterward, combing through Crowley's hair. "They get the job done. More than competently, I should say."

"Mmm, bed talk," Crowley said, lightly pinching Aziraphale's backside. "Oh baby. That's hot."

"Your cheek at a time like this is positively insufferable, and don't you even dare point out—"
"You're the one who said it, not me," Crowley pointed out, with unrestrained glee. "You just—"

The doorbell rang, scattering any thoughts either one of them had been harboring in the direction of a brief nap. Crowley would have liked a nap before facing down their guest. He would’ve felt better about telling her that her boyfriend wasn’t to use the kitchen as a culinary laboratory in their absence, for starters, without anyone to hand who can miraculously stop fires, except, oops, that’s not exactly a thing he can say. Not to this one. He got up and reassembled his clothing from firmament: neater than before, less laid-back and debauched. He glanced through the blinds.

"It's only the post," Crowley sighed. "I might as well go out and move the car so it's arse-end nearer to the front door for ease of carting out that stuff; we can't very well cheat on all the packing."

He kissed Aziraphale, who’d taken to grumbling as he got dressed the old-fashioned way, and retraced their steps down the hall and back through the kitchen. No sense in bothering with shoes; it wasn't as if the postwoman would think ill of him for that.

Crowley stepped outside and found the weather breezy, if pleasant, and then made his way down the stairs and across the gravel.

"Don't pretend you haven't missed a bit of barefoot action on the old accelerator," he told the Bentley as he yanked open the driver's side door and slid behind the wheel. He closed the door and started the ignition with a gesture, shifting into gear, beginning to back out into the road.

Going less than three miles per hour, Crowley hadn't expected the quiet thud, much less the barrage of obscenities he could hear perfectly even though none of the windows were down. He cringed.

Mandy wheeled her bike around him into the driveway, panting, and leapt off before she'd even come to a stop. She'd lashed her overnight bag to the basket in front, it would seem, and didn't have any reservations about letting it hit the ground. She banged on Crowley's hood.

"That will have been your front tire, won't it?" he said nervously, rolling the window down.

"If you'd been going any faster, you'd have run me over," Mandy seethed. "What the hell?"

"Um," said Crowley, and threw the Bentley into park. "I was planning on backing in so getting our things into the boot would be easier, but it's not really necessary, is it, Aziraphale and I can just—"

"Newlywed brain-fuzz, head in the clouds," she said, leaning to press a mock-kiss against his cheek. Her eyes lit on the packet sitting on the passenger seat, and she made a grab for it. "Is that—"

"Our itinerary, yes," replied Crowley, handing it to her. "Aziraphale's a stickler for lists."

Mandy flipped through the ring-bound octavo, tracing highways with her index finger. "From East Dean to Land's End," she teased, lowering the map. "Isn't there an Edgar Wright film about that?"

"No film I've seen, at least not yet," said Crowley, snatching it away. "And there's no end, either."

"Can't you guys just use the GPS on your phones like normal people?" she asked, setting her chin on the back of her hand. "I had a friend who drove out there from London once, though, and she said it played all kinds of havoc with the sat-nav. Sophia says it's ley lines. What are those?"

"Things extant enough for us to be using paper means instead of digital," Crowley confirmed, opening the door and jiggling it to dislodge Mandy from her resting place. "You don't look like you've got a terrible lot in that bag of yours. Is that enough clothes for a week or longer?"
"Yeah, it'll be fine," she said, dashing over to retrieve her bike and walk it to a safer location alongside the porch while Crowley locked up the car. "Iván said to call him if I need more, and he'll bring them over. Do you care if he stays a night or two, by the way? Work's riding him hard, what with all the extra shifts he's been picking up, but he's got at least one day off while you were gone."

"Of course we don't mind," said Aziraphale, and Crowley looked up to see him on the porch with their luggage as if he'd been there the whole time, which, in fact, he definitely had not. The risk inherent in making such an abrupt appearance, even behind the back of a human not in the know, was staggering. "We won't have you lonely, of course, and the tent's at your disposal as promised."

Mandy whirled around, her back to Crowley now instead of to the porch. "Aren't you stealthy," she said, and Crowley would've given anything to see her expression. "Need any help with those?"

"Dear girl, that would be marvelous," said Aziraphale, beaming as she went to give him a hand.

Crowley sighed, kicked at a piece of gravel, and unlocked the car with a gesture while Mandy was distracted. He wondered how much longer the charade would hold (for any of them, at that).

* * *

Mandy woke with a start, warm in her pile of blankets on the pull-out bed. She hadn't even known the sofa could do that prior to crashing on it a few nights ago with Sofia in the wake of Crowley's stag do, but it was comforting to know they'd at least considered the eventuality of guests. She fumbled her phone off the arm of the sofa, flopping back against the pillow.

_Thursday, 3 April 2014, 9:52 AM._ Mandy rubbed her eyes and put it back. They'd been gone for twenty-four hours.

She dozed for another half an hour and got up when she couldn't ignore her bladder any longer. She'd only used the bathroom on the main hall a handful of times before; she'd usually erred on the side of using the larger one that was only accessible by way of the bedroom, which, confirmed by a quick jiggle of the knob before backtracking to the loo, had been locked. She pissed, flushed, and washed her hands, taking a moment to splash her face and blink at herself in the mirror. She squinted—dark hair, light brown skin, blue eyes, faint freckles already emerging with the late-spring sun—and smudged her finger down the glass when turning on the lights made no difference.

"What the fuck," she said, smudging the layer of dust between her thumb and forefinger.

"So they mostly use the other bathroom, Mandy told herself, stepping back to strip out of her camisole, pajama bottoms, and knickers. _Big deal, they forget to clean._ Naked, she turned to open the closet and pull out one of the towel-washcloth sets she'd been shown the day before. She clutched the linens to her chest and ran her fingers along the edges of all three shelves, came away with her fingertips coated once more.

"Gross," she said, brushing it off on the top of the hamper before setting the towel down there. She clutched the washcloth to her chest and shivered, tugging the shower curtain back. The bottom of the tub was gritty with disuse beneath her feet.
She washed quickly, trying not to think terribly hard about the fact that the bar of soap in its dish had never been used, or that the shampoo and conditioner from Boots, two neatly lined-up bottles, had still maintained their safety-seals intact. One by one, she’d violated them.

Once dressed, she made her way to the kitchen to plunder the fridge for juice and some of the glass-potted French chocolate yogurt that Crowley liked so much. On opening the breadbox for one of the scones she’d been told she’d find there, she got something of a fright.

Calm, beady eyes stared back at her.

"I guess Soph wasn't lying about you," Mandy told the mouse, held in amazement by the fact that it went right on eating. "Bold and brash as you please. What am I supposed to do with you, mate?"

The mouse finished its scone-crumble, politely cleaned its paws, and scuttled out of the breadbox. It ambled along where the work-top met the wall until it was forced to turn a corner, at which point it darted along the back of the sink and down the wall next to the front door.

Mandy had never noticed the hole in the wainscot till now. *I'd block it*, she thought, *except Crowley'd kill me.*

She opened the blinds and ate a quiet breakfast at the dining-room table; it felt quite odd having the seat across from her unoccupied, so she imagined Iván grousing about vermin the same way he groused about them turning up in the café kitchen.

At least she’d found a scone untouched enough to eat.

By now, Mandy was itching to explore the rest of the house, without anyone constantly hovering at her shoulder, but it would have to wait a bit longer. She was already late giving the girls their morning feeding. If they weren’t still shut in the shed, they’d have stormed the cottage door. She fetched their perpetual container of diced mango from the fridge, found the tub of meal-worms in the under-sink cabinet, and went outside in the nearest footwear to hand (Crowley's flip-flops).

"Hey, back," Mandy muttered, opening the shed door to a flurry of scuttling and low, eager quacks.

She sat down in the grass and tapped the lids of the containers; Judith and Tamar flapped out and huddled in her lap, nipping lightly and eagerly at her wrists. She’d never imagined it would be possible to hug ducks, but she kissed the top of one feathery head even as the other tucked under her chin and started nibbling on the collar of her t-shirt. Jemima, Eve, Ruth, and Lilith filed out warily, but as soon as they realized Mandy had begun doling out mango, they nipped at her ankles and toes.

"Oi, be nice!" she scolded, refusing to relinquish a piece of mango until Jemima ceased gnawing on one of the flip-flop straps. "You're just as mean and greedy as ever, Jems. What's with that?"

Mandy gave up and let the whole lot swarm the container of mango so that she could spend a few minutes fishing a handful of meal-worms out of the sawdust in the tub. Judith gave up on the mango fracas first and wandered over with her head tilted shyly. Mandy gave her one.

"Jude, what a good girl," she sighed, stroking the duck's soft head. "Your daddy's proud."

Lilith came over and lightly bit Mandy's denim-covered shin, so Mandy gave her a worm. Before long, all six were looking for live hand-outs, so Mandy handed worms out one by one until each duck had got four or five.

"Off to the grass now, ladies," she told them after a while, once the novelty of petting and scritching wore off. "You can't have forgot how to forage. Shoo."
Mandy put what was left of the mango away, stuck the meal-worms back under the sink, and cleaned off her clothes. There was no further sign of the mouse, and she felt restless, listless; she peered out the window to check on the ducks, straightened up her bed, and went back into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. She found Aziraphale's most recent Telegraph crossword unfinished on the table, so she knocked off a few items and wondered if he'd notice when they got back.

She had a week or more to finally nose around this secret-laden place, what was she waiting for?

Mandy left her tea and Aziraphale's crossword unfinished on the table. She spent an hour in the living room with an eye toward oddities amidst Crowley's mantelpiece stuff-collection and in the DVD cabinet, but the most she could determine from the former is that he had the devil's own luck when it came to beachcombing (and the most she could determine from the latter was that their joint taste in movies was dorky as hell).

She put everything back exactly the way she'd found it.

There wasn't much to be done about the locked bedroom, although she couldn't recall ever having seen anything above and beyond clothes and scattered books and CDs lying around any of the times she'd walked through it to use the loo. There was the study, that strange office-space with its climate-control and shelves upon shelves of Aziraphale's rare books. She wandered from the bedroom door to the door of the study and tried to open it. Also locked. When they'd given her a quick breeze through the house with instructions two days before, they hadn't said anything about these rooms being off-limits, much less planning to lock them. Mandy jiggled the knob till her wrist hurt.

"You've got something to hide, I know you have," she said aloud to the walls, "the both of you."

There was no use in ransacking the kitchen, because she knew she wasn't going to find anything except crockery and cookery nonsense. As unlocked rooms were concerned, that left the computer room just off the living room, so she wandered in there to have a rummage through the desk. More of Crowley's CDs seemed to live in every available nook and cranny, as well as any number of unlabeled DVRs.

The drawer was full of the usual nonsense: rubber bands, paper clips, safety pins, erasers, and so forth. She recognized which scrabbles on the notepad in front of the computer screen were Aziraphale's and which listless doodles were Crowley's. She started up the computer only to find it password-protected. Do you have the password? she thought, remembering the scene in Foucault's Pendulum where Casaubon cracks Abulafia.

No, Mandy typed, but it didn't work.

She turned the computer off in frustration and flipped through the notepad. Its contents were so mundane as to reduce her to tears; there were dates, phone numbers, shopping lists, and even teasing love-notes back and forth. She flipped a few more pages, ready to give up, when something just a few pages from the start caught her eye.

The entire page was covered in symbols she didn't recognize, although the handwriting was immediately recognizable as Aziraphale's. He knew some dead languages, sure, but something like that amidst an otherwise mundane miscellany?

Mandy studied the page for a few minutes before taking a photograph with her phone. She flipped back to the page on which the notepad had been open, set it back at its original angle on the desktop, and then flipped through her contacts list until she hit Sophia. She selected the photograph she'd just taken, inserted it in a text-message, and then typed, What do you make of this?
Can't talk much, I'm at work, Sophia texted back. I think you've been jotting down code.

Come on, you twat, Mandy replied. You should bloody know that's not my handwriting.

And you expect me to know whose it is off the top of my head? Sophia wrote. WTF?

I'm house-sitting for your mom's gay besties this week, remember? Wanna come snoop?

Oh God, Aziraphale's gonna kill you. You know he's a puzzle hobbyist. It's just a cipher.

Soph, please come over tomorrow, Mandy pleaded. This might be our only chance. The bedroom and the study are locked, but something tells me you might know where the spare keys are. They trust you and all that shite. Seriously, I want to know what they were before they came here.

I don't know about any spare keys, Sophia replied several minutes later. This just isn't right.

Then if not spare keys, Mandy forged on, I know your mum taught you how to pick locks.

Sophia's next response didn't arrive till half an hour later, well after Mandy had settled down to watch some reruns of Whose Line Is It Anyway? She picked up her phone and read, Fine, but I can't come till Sunday. If you so much as leave one thing out of place, they'll know. Trust me.

"That's not what's scary," Mandy said aloud. "It's what you might know, but aren't telling me."

* * *

"Crowley," Aziraphale whispered, carefully shaking him. "My dear, I do hate to wake you."

Crowley kicked ineffectually at his shins and rolled away, stealing the down-stuffed duvet while he was at it. "Then don't," he muttered, burying his face in the pillow. "Too early for a Saturday."

"It's nearly ten o'clock," Aziraphale pointed out, setting one hand in the warm spot between Crowley's shoulder blades, imagining his wings folded in tight. "You'd wanted to be on the road."

"I'd wanted to be just as we are, thanks," Crowley replied, rolling back to face Aziraphale, rather pathetically rubbing his eyes. "I can only take so much of trudging over rocky, sheep-infested hillsides to indulge your love of moody literary landscapes. We're leaving when I say so."

"Inasmuch as yesterday's destination was at my behest," Aziraphale reminded him, "today's is, need I remind you, at yours. I daresay you won't find the shelling terribly worthwhile, but the view—"

"Oh, see, Dartmoor had quite the view," said Crowley, sarcastically, and kicked off the duvet. "Very picturesque, I will grant you, but I am never getting those shoes clean again. No, don't argue. It's like your thing, with the—the what-was-it, paint on your shirt. I'll know it was there, right?"

Momentarily annoyed, Aziraphale considered snapping back at him, but Crowley's expression was just so sleepy and muddled and endearing that there really wasn't any appropriate response except for kissing him soundly.
"We'll miss breakfast," he said afterward. "You'll be cross with yourself."

"We're in Okehampton, and our destination's only about an hour from here," Crowley said, but he sat up and stretched with one sinuous snap of his spine. "I'll be cross with you if we don't get to spend at least half the day down there. I haven't gone since the fifties at least, and I miss—"

"Which fifties?" Aziraphale interjected, slipping out of bed while Crowley crossed the room to squint at himself in the vanity mirror and scowl till his bed-head cooperated. "Terribly vague."

"The ones of which you're so fond," he said gloomily, but a smile played at the corners of his mouth as he started to dress. "Come on, angel. They've got porridge and damson jam downstairs."

Crowley's psychic snooping of the culinary sort had nearly always been worth its weight in leisurely morning lounging when they'd traveled in the past; they'd avoided a good many lackluster breakfasts courtesy of its employment. However, homemade damson jam at a rural bed and breakfast was not a thing at which either of them felt inclined to sniff, so they spent an hour eating and chatting with the proprietress before departure. She seemed sorry to have had Crowley as a guest for only one night, what with the cracking suggestions he'd given her for future preserves.

According to the next segment of their map, the drive to Boscastle promised to be bucolic and uneventful, so Aziraphale suggested swinging by the remains of Okehampton Castle. Crowley made a token attempt at protest, but he nonetheless demanded that Aziraphale direct him to it before they got too far off course. After parking the Bentley and convincing the English Heritage docents on the desk that their memberships were not in fact out of date (Aziraphale made a mental note to be more careful in future), they spent half an hour wandering the grassy ruins. They were nothing so spectacular as Rievaulx or Fountains, but worth nosing about and photographing all the same.

"I never had any cause to be here," said Aziraphale, wonderingly. "Not in all my long years."

"I must've passed by once," Crowley said pensively, hands in his pockets. "Looks familiar."

"The guide says it's haunted," Aziraphale mused. "Not even most abbey ruins can boast that."

"Will that have been Hugh de Courtenay or his descendants? Lived to a ripe old age, that one, just like his father," said Crowley. "Successful military career, pretty wife, dutiful kids. Buried beside Margaret in Exeter Cathedral. That was a lovely effigy; I saw the commission. Not them, surely."

"It'll have been the ones who fell out of favor with Henry the Eighth," said Aziraphale, tucking the guide in his back pocket. "First Marquess of Exeter, I believe. So much bad blood with the crown."

"Well, sure," said Crowley, setting his hand against one rough, sturdy patch of stone wall. "His second wife was a Catholic. D'you think that chop-happy lunatic was just going to let it go?"

"Papists are such a handful, isn't that always the way of things," Aziraphale sighed. "I do hope our Miss Tomlin will keep herself out of trouble while we're gone. That scare was quite enough."

"Wasn't her fault," Crowley insisted, sitting down in the grass, and leaned back to stare up at the sky. "She got drunk, and Ligur was lurking. She can't have known she was prime possession material. Uriel and I couldn't have detected him that night, not with Hastur's rampant sorcery."

Aziraphale sat down, too, working an arm around Crowley's shoulders, leaning them back together against the rough masonry. "She'll have needed the time to herself," he said. "I do believe that."

"She'll have needed the reassurance of trust, too," Crowley said, tilting his head so that it rested against Aziraphale's. "Unless she's got no feelings of guilt whatsoever; in which case, good on her."
"One would've thought you'd approve of guilt," replied Aziraphale, tone making it clear that he had, indeed, finally got the hang of understated sarcasm. Still, in that moment, he sounded so young.

Crowley shook his head. "No, that'd be you these days," he said. "It's a frequent indulgence."

"As is forgiveness with you," said Aziraphale, softly, and they watched the clouds for a while.

The remainder of the drive was quiet, but not because of any genuine strain. Pensiveness was a condition they could scarcely avoid these days, what with all that had happened. Crowley flipped happily from one radio station to another until Aziraphale tapped his shoulder and pointed at the road-sign indicating they'd got quite close. Crowley switched it off and sat forward, squinting.

"It's all charming shops and whatnot up here above the cliff-drop," he said. "We'll want to nose through those first, I suppose, unless you'd just like to head down to the cave, find a place to spend the night afterward, and do your retail damage tomorrow. I'm flexible. Don't look at me like that."

"The pictures suggest you'll find more pebbles than shells," said Aziraphale, relinquishing the brief tease. "I hope you won't be terribly disappointed. Try to enjoy the ambiance and the view."

"Weren't you paying attention earlier?" Crowley groused. "I always do. Let's park the car."

There was access to the steep, winding footpath at the farthest end of the village, and Aziraphale couldn't help but imagine that Anathema had come here as a student to pay her respects to whatever arcane force held sway over this craggy stretch of coast. Crowley was quiet again as they picked their way down the access road, although it leveled enough for a local dairy to have parked its mobile ice-cream stand.

While Crowley was busy trying to give directions back up to the village to a pair of German tourists, Aziraphale inquired after the day's flavors and found vanilla infused with French lavender and local honey more than acceptable. He bought two cones and handed one off to Crowley once he'd got done speaking in clipped, apologetic consonants to the grateful young men.

They'd finished eating by the time they reached the desolate, lovely cove lined with boulders, many of which they'd had to clamber over for the last of it, and shallow tide pools. The cave loomed some distance to their left, cool and forbidding, so Aziraphale let Crowley pick around in the gravel for a while before suggesting they ought to move on.

Crowley held up a fragment of pink granite. Storm and current had worn it smooth, reduced it to the facsimile of a heart against Crowley's palm.

"Who's drumming and chanting in there?" Crowley asked, squinting ahead. "Looks dire enough to begin with, all damp with the wind groaning through. We ought to've brought our own witches."

"Next time we shall, perhaps," said Aziraphale, taking the stone, tucking it in his pocket. "I'd like to poke inside even if you aren't keen. We haven't got long till the tide comes back in."

Crowley wrinkled his nose as they walked on, although Aziraphale knew it had more to do with getting his shoes more wet than they already were.

There weren't many others in the gaping, smoky crevasse; the incense somebody had set burning in the misty half-gloom was heavy with aloeswood, so different to the patchouli Aziraphale had been expecting.

Crowley breathed it in and picked his way through the sodden, sandy gravel bottom to run his fingers along the algae-rimed wall.
"Atmospheric," he said, rubbing the traces of green between his fingertips. "Primeval."

"So heavy all of a sudden. Tell me what you're thinking," said Aziraphale, coming up behind Crowley, setting a hand on his shoulder. "I assure you there aren't any restless ghosts here."

"Not human ones," said Crowley, turning to face him. "Do you remember the first storm—"

"And the place to which we'd fled for shelter," replied Aziraphale. "Yes, my dear. Keenly."

"I'd never liked discussing the weather before that," sighed Crowley. "Never till I met you."

* * *

"I somehow doubt they gave you express permission to do this," said Sophia, kicking out of her espadrilles, going immediately into a crouch to meet the two ducks who waddled up flapping like they were thrilled to see her. "Jude, baby girl," she said, stroking the duck's back. "Are you being good to your sisters? What's got you and Tamar inside? Is Jems being a bitch? Aw, bless."

"These two are the best behaved," Mandy explained, coming to greet her at the door. "They let me get the handkerchief-nappies on them. Clever, huh? I saw this lady with a goose on YouTube—"

"Wait, so you've had them indoors more than just today?" Sophia asked, grinning. "How long?"

"A little under twenty-four hours," Mandy said. "I brought them in last night, and they slept at the foot of the pull-out bed all cuddled up next to my feet. I don't really mind changing them."

Sophia sighed, hugged Mandy, and bent down to pet the ducks again. "Have you had breakfast? I'm starving. Bit late for breakfast, though. Why don't we go out for brunch? Is Iván working?"

"Yeah," replied Mandy, going over to rummage in the fridge for yogurt and non-duck-allocated mango. "He said if he catches my arse down there he'll kick it. Only in sexy fucked-up Basque."

"Let me put the kettle on," said Sophia, fetching a pair of mugs down from the cupboard. There was something warm about being here with a friend who wasn't Aziraphale or Crowley, something conspiratorial and companionable that she hadn't felt since school. "Unless you want coffee?"

"Leave the machine alone," Mandy replied sternly. "Crowley said it's off-limits. I just think he doesn't want to have to clean it when they get back, because I can't clean it worth a damn."

"I prefer tea anyway," said Sophia, fetching down the canister of Irish breakfast. "It's a dreary morning, wouldn't you agree? This'll be bracing. We should probably let the girls back out when we're done eating, though, so they can go down for a swim with the others. They like the rain."

Even after they'd got a full spread of tea, yogurt, fruit, and scones starting to go a bit stale, the ducks refused to bugger off and play with any of the toys Mandy had left in the towel-pile in the middle of the kitchen floor. Sophia chewed her scone thoughtfully, returning Judith's baleful stare at the foot of
her chair while Mandy suffered similar attention from Tamar. They probably wanted mango.

"Yeah, let's let them out and feed them before we get to work," Mandy said, sipping her tea.

"I hope you realize what you're proposing to do is technically illegal," Sophia warned lightly.

"Correction. What you're going to do on my behalf is technically illegal," Mandy replied. "You're forgetting where I come from, Soph. Mum had it rough. My dad, whoever he was, probably had to support her by pinching a fiver here and there, at least until he disappeared."

Sophia swallowed her bite of yogurt and regarded Mandy sadly. "I always wanted to know if you had your father's surname or your mother's. I mean, I know your mum's Gemma Tomlin, but did she keep your dad's name or is it her own name or—"

"No need for strangers," Mandy sighed, patting Sophia's hand. "My parents weren't married. Tomlin's my mum's name, and she said it'd bloody well be mine, too. I don't know anything about my dad except his first name was Harry, or at least that's what she called him, and his mum was from Manchester and his dad was from Ghana. She won't tell me his last name. I think she's afraid I'll go looking for him. She thinks he's in Africa or something, but I'll bet he's in Manchester."

"Do you want to know his name?" Sophia asked tentatively. "To go looking for him? My mum's good at that kind of thing, you know. She sometimes...finds people for other people."

"Yeah, probably for a price," said Mandy, deadpan. "I love you guys, Soph, but no thanks."

"She wouldn't charge you," said Sophia, quietly, lowering her eyes. "God, I didn't mean—"

"Let's worry about what your mum taught you to do involving doors and locks, shall we?" Mandy asked, whisking away their empty yogurt pots, and then came back to set their two partially eaten trays of sliced mango on the floor in front of the ducks. "Eat up, and then it's outside with you."

Sophia's stomach had clenched during their conversation over brunch, and it hadn't ceased for even a moment since they'd come outside and had begun to dole out meal-worms to the starving avian masses. Jemima was meaner than ever, but she couldn't bring herself to scold a hungry creature whose instincts had kicked in and whose sisters had got to spend the night in a cozy bed while she'd been stuck with hay.

Sophia tossed a worm, and Lilith caught it before it touched the ground.

"Can we define what it is you're hoping to find?" she asked, gravely regarding her friend.

"Back when you were...when your thing happened," said Mandy, swallowing, "I told you we'd get to the bottom of this, didn't I? They've made amends, sure, but they were dicks to you, and I haven't forgot. There's something not quite right, can't you feel it? Nine years I've known them, and not a change in the way they look, not a word about what they used to do in London."

"Aziraphale talks about his shop all the time," Sophia sighed. "We know it existed."

"That's shite, Soph, and you know it," Mandy sighed, brushing off her hands, putting the lid back on the worms and the fruit. "It must've been a front. Crowley mutters about accounting and whatnot, but do you reckon even for a moment that he'd have been happy in a profession like that?"

"I think he was sort of a yuppie and that he's still a massive dork," Sophia offered wryly.

"Plenty of yuppies were gangsters and all that," said Mandy. "Ask my mum. She knows."
"Mandy, your mum isn't here," sighed Sophia, following her back inside, "and we're about to break into a room full of incredibly valuable antiquarian books. If we damage anything, we're fucked."

"I've put everything else back just the way I found it," said Mandy, sticking the tub of worms under the sink, handing the mango off to Sophia for putting away. "I've had a lot of practice."

"What do you mean everything else?" Sophia asked. "I thought it was just the notebook."

"Nah," said Mandy, grabbing Sophia's wrist and leading her back the hall. "I've been through everything that isn't nailed down. It's all boring as hell except for the notebook photo I sent."

"Listen, I—" Sophia stopped short, torn between loyalties, as her phone buzzed in her back pocket. "Just a sec," she said, retrieving it.

Crowley had sent a text. It read, Does your mum like pottery?

Of course she does, Sophia typed back. What kind of question even is that? Also, why do you ask?

"I must say, his timing's uncanny," said Mandy, stopping them in front of the study door. "What're those pictures of? Oh, let me see! Wait, they're asking you which weird piece of Cornish tat they should get for your mum? I don't know. The blue. Can you honestly go wrong with blue?"

Mandy says blue, Sophia added. She says hello. I came over to keep her and the girls company.

I was thinking green, but Aziraphale says blue, too, so, what do you know. Outnumbered.

"Crowley, suck it up," Mandy sighed, tugging impatiently on Sophia's sleeve. "Can we...?"

"Yes," Sophia murmured, sticking her phone back in her pocket, and reluctantly pulled the wrought-iron tool out of her other one. "Don't ask what this is. Nobody in my family even knows what this is. The same ancestor who made Crowley's ring made it. It works for everything from picking locks to toenails to teeth. Please don't ask me if it's been cleaned. Mum doesn't even know."

"You lot are bloody strange," said Mandy, folding her arms. "Really live up to your name."

"It is, in the truest sense of the word, the original device," replied Sophia, and took hold of the doorknob with one hand while applying the straight pointed end with the other. "Bottoms up!"

After three passes with the straight end and four jiggles with the curved one, the door gave in.

"Oh my God, you lot are wizards," Mandy breathed, pushing Sophia inside. The air in the study was stale and didn't so much as stir with its faint perpetual chill. She turned on the lights.

"Witches, actually, but never mind," Sophia sighed. She stared at the wall-to-wall shelving units from about chest-height upward on all sides, not a single inch of which weren't crammed with a crumbling spine that looked like it had been pilfered from Special Collections at the British Library.

Sophia's pocket buzzed again, so she pulled her phone back out. Green! it said. I defy you all!

I don't think mum will mind, Sophia typed just as Mandy pulled a huge book down. She cringed.

"I can't even read this," said Mandy, wonderingly, running her fingers over the tooled leather cover as she carried it over to the archivist's book-rest on the desk. "It's Latin, right? Soph?"

"Yes," said Sophia, hastily, dashing over to hover at Mandy's shoulder while she took a seat. "It's a medieval sex manual, that one, if you really want to know. Crowley translated some extracts for my sisters once, and they had a meltdown. Mum wanted Aziraphale to tutor them."
"I'm surprised it wasn't Crowley who had the meltdown," Mandy muttered, using Aziraphale's bookbinding bone to carefully turn pages.

Sophia relaxed a little; where had Mandy learned this?

"He was drinking at the time, or so I'm told," she replied. "I'm sure that worked wonders for his disposition." Her phone vibrated in her hand, so she glanced at it. You seem distracted, yeah?

Yeah, she texted back to Crowley. M's trying to teach me how to play a new card game.

You don't like card games, Crowley replied. But I know you play because the others do.

"I can hear you tap-tapping away," Mandy sighed heavily, closing the book. "I give up on this one. And even if we find the cipher somewhere in here, it's not like there's going to be a decoder."

"You're right about that," Sophia sighed, somewhat relieved. "And in any case, it's Enochian."

Mandy squinted at her. "This is some of your mum's new-agey bollocks, right? But why—"

"You know she and Aziraphale collaborate on research for her cases for shits and giggles," Sophia forged on, tugging Mandy to her feet, and pushed the chair back into place. "Sometimes the cases are sensitive and they want to keep clients' information confidential, so they use that script."

"Where the fuck does it come from? Did they make it up?" Mandy asked, sounding both intensely convinced and deeply, profoundly disappointed. "I mean, it rings a bell with like—Dee, yeah?"

"Yeah, John Dee and Edward Kelley," Sophia said. "That's right. Wanna go boot up Wikipedia? It's a regular Elizabethan soap opera, if you want to know the truth, what with the wife-sharing—"

"And here I'd spent most of my life convinced history about old white blokes was a waste of my time," said Mandy, putting the book back in its place. "Let's look up this script and see what the notebook page says. Unless you—Soph, can you read it?" she asked hesitantly.

"No," said Sophia, and that was true. "We'll have to look it up," she said, stomach sinking.

Twenty minutes later, with Sophia sat in the computer-room desk chair and Mandy perched in her lap, they'd written out the contents of the notebook page in Roman alphabet. Sophia would have called it complete nonsense, but she knew better.

It looked like Hebrew written out as best one possibly can using a drug-trip alphabet that might have had a shred of divine influence if somebody Upstairs had let themselves have a sense of humor that day. But she doubted it.

"This doesn't make sense," Mandy sighed. "This isn't anything unless it's more code."

"I think you're right," said Sophia, and found that she at least didn't have to fake her discouragement. Her phone went off again.

It was Crowley saying, Please behave?

Mandy leaned back and wrapped Sophia's arms around her middle. "Hey, we tried."

Sophia considered the transliteration. She breathed in, closed her eyes, and saw.

A prayer, she thought. It's an angel's prayer on the day he learned what he might lose.
"I don't know what they're up to," Crowley sighed, tucking away his phone. "Angel?"

Aziraphale patted him on the knee as he turned the key in the ignition.

"My dear, just drive," he sighed. "It's nigh on noon, and I haven't the faintest whether we'll make it out to the Mount today unless the tide's with us when we arrive. We've got a reservation nearby, so it's not much bother."

"I mean, Sophia seemed distracted," Crowley continued, pulling out of the parking space and into the road, "and Mandy didn't start tag-teaming all. There's something wrong with this picture."

"The card-game story's as plausible as anything," said Aziraphale. "What's that new one that's popular now? Something about Humanity? Uriel would drag Raphael out to play in a pinch."

"Speaking of which, why haven't they been badgering us nonstop for photos?" Crowley asked.

"Because I threatened them soundly before we left," said Aziraphale, cheerfully. "We mustn't have a repeat of Japan, now, must we? You're so much more relaxed when your phone's dormant."

The drive to Marazion, said the next set of maps, should take an hour and a half. It would place them in excellent geographical stead for getting to Land's End whenever they felt like it, and Crowley wouldn't have to do as much driving till they decided they were ready to head home.

Crowley brooded until they stopped for lunch, still concerned about what their house-guests were getting up to, but Aziraphale managed to ply him out of it by ordering a bottle of white wine and enough mussels to feed Sophia on a rough day. One bottle gave way to two, and Crowley's tongue loosened considerably—although not in the direction Aziraphale had hoped, that he could tell.

"They're both nosy," Crowley slurred. "Nosy as anything, take it from me. Two faces of Eve."

"I don't doubt they'd be flattered to hear you say so, but we mustn't be too hard on them after what happened," sighed Aziraphale, patting his hand. "Let them have the twins over if they ask."

"They'll let the ducks have run of the house," Crowley sighed in resignation. "Wait and see."

"I showed Miss Tomlin a heart-warming YouTube video I thought she might also find useful."

"Oh Lord, the goose in a nappy," Crowley lamented, gesturing for more wine. "Just swell."

"Shhh, Crowley," Aziraphale cautioned, filling his glass halfway. "Your sibilants are showing."

"Well, let 'em," Crowley muttered directly into a swig. "You didn't mind that time on the ferry."

"You weren't worrying out of your mind on the ferry when you ought to've been having fun."

"I am having fun," said Crowley, emphatically, sloshing a bit of wine as he gestured. "Fact!"
"Then think about what a fine beach you'll shortly have at your disposal," said Aziraphale.

"They'll rummage through my shells," Crowley whispered, suddenly lucid. "Your books."

"That will be quite enough to drink," said Aziraphale, gesturing for the waiter. "Check?"

Crowley forced himself to sober up enough to drive the remaining forty minutes. The inn into which Aziraphale had booked them was sickeningly picturesque (the pièce de résistance of accommodation), so they dropped off their baggage first and had a pleasant, sleepy go of breaking in the bed. They weren't going to make low tide before the Mount closed; there was no use. The hours till sunset were best spent naked and indulgent, although they ventured out at sundown.

"Ace," said Crowley, sticking his hands in his pockets as they kicked their way barefoot across the strand and looked out at Mont St.-Michel's twin in delicate facsimile. "Let's go tomorrow, first thing."

"It's just as well," said Aziraphale, distractedly; when Crowley turned to look at him, he was engrossed in typing on his phone. "I've given what you said some thought. Perhaps we ought to check in."

"Let me guess," said Crowley. "You're having Anathema and the twins traipse out crash their party."

"No, far worse," sighed Aziraphale, nodding at whatever response had just come in. "The others."

"They'll get drunk and the ducks will run amok in nappies and Cards Against Humanity will become the entertainment du jour," sighed Crowley, leaning to read Uriel's text. "Tomorrow, it said.

Thank you, dear girl, Aziraphale responded with relief. Please give your odder half my best.

"I shouldn't have said that about your books," sighed Crowley, taking Aziraphale's arm. "I wasn't thinking. Furthermore, I was drunk. Aziraphale, we locked the study. I give in; let's not fuss."

"More the fool I," Aziraphale said, staring across the water, studying the Mount backed by a spectacular sunset, "for believing such a simple measure as lock and key might keep the daughter of a witch and a techno-shaman out of temptation's way."

"Mandy isn't fully fluent in Latin or Koiné Greek," Crowley replied, letting himself be dragged to a halt. "Or the various other languages you've got in stock. By the time you get to Middle and Early Modern English, none of it's especially incriminating."

"No," Aziraphale sighed, tugging him in close. "And Sophia can only translate legal terms."

"And some liturgical texts," Crowley offered. "Whereas the twins are a dab hand at biology."

"You're terrible," Aziraphale sighed, kissing Crowley's cheek. "Positively dreadful, dear boy."

"There's got to be a silver lining," Crowley said. "If I do my best not to dwell, then you won't."

"Then let's sit," Aziraphale replied, "and indulge your fondness for meteorological small-talk."
The sound of Raphael's phone going off on the nightstand vibrated the whole way through Uriel's teeth. She groaned and knocked it on the floor, but the low hum, muted only somewhat by the carpet, persisted. Raphael nosed at the back of her neck; she reached back and smacked him.

"Dude, I'm exhausted," she muttered flatly. "Can't you just, I don't know, go fuck yourself?"

"You're only tired because you want to be," Raphael reminded her. "Should I answer that?"

"They must be on their second or third dial by now," Uriel yawned. "Might be important."

"It's Monday afternoon, darling," said Raphael, rolling half on top of her, reaching down to skim the carpet with his fingertips till the phone came at his bidding. "You know it can only be one person."

"I hope it isn't business," she sighed. "It had better not be. Can't let them out of my sight for—"

"Hello there, stranger," said Raphael, bringing the phone up to his ear. "Snake got your tongue?"

Uriel smacked his ass and shoved at him, but he stayed put, crushing the breath from her. "If you're rude, it's going to become business," she hissed. "Crowley's probably thrown some kind of strop—"

"Oh dear," Raphael murmured. "Dear, dear me. Twenty-something jezebels tearing up the cottage, whatever shall we do? Saints and Ophanim defend us. Az, would you cut the roundabout crap? Of course we'll go over. Right. Mmmhmmm. I understand. Your precious goddamn books. Haven't you considered training the ducks as guard dogs?"

Uriel lifted her head in dismay when she thought she heard Crowley's voice in the background: ...and my stuff in the living room, d'you... She sighed and let it fall back against the pillow, meeting Raphael's amused expression with a come-hither smile.

Maybe she could be persuaded after all.

Raphael hung up and threw his phone back on the floor, attacking Uriel's neck with feather-light kisses. She shrieked and tried to twist away, but he shifted his weight and pinned her flat. "We'll have to be quick," he said, bumping their foreheads together. "Do you think you can manage?"

"It's all fun and games till somebody takes his fucking time getting off," Uriel wanted to say, but Raphael's mouth was sweet and eager, and there was nothing in the way but tangled sheets. He had always been unfairly talented with his tongue and his fingers, merclessly so, and she wondered on her hazy, shuddering way down from climax if he'd ever been so cheeky as to offer Aziraphale pointers. Not that it mattered now she'd rolled them over and gone to town sucking him.

They rolled out of bed still breathless and laughing when it was over, fished for clothes on the floor and ended up wearing each other's skirts.

"To hell with the unspoken dress code," Raphael said, tugging her out of the room. "These young ladies are very progressive."

They motorbiked the five miles in record time, Uriel clinging to Raphael's middle for dear existence as the wind rushed by their helmeted heads. Going without wasn't worth the odd looks from disapproving locals.
"You'd better ring the bell," said Raphael, screeching to a halt in the driveway. "Less threatening."

"You're a brat," Uriel told him, but she was already off the bike and halfway to the porch. She left her helmet at the foot of the steps and approached the door with Raphael only a few steps behind her. She rang the bell once, waited, tapped her fingers against her thigh, and then knocked.

"Why so nervous?" Raphael whispered. "They're just meddling kids. There's nothing to see here."

"In case you'd forgotten, meddling kids are always how it starts," she said, and the door opened.

"Oh my God, hi," said Mandy, and Uriel was somewhat surprised to find Sophia, hovering at Mandy's shoulder, was still there. There was a four-inch height difference between them, and it never ceased to strike her as fitting in such an unlikely pair of friends. "Come right in, yeah?"

"You've taken to owning the place," said Raphael, shoving Uriel forward. "Don't mind if we do."

"I guess this'll be the inspection," muttered Mandy, under her breath; Sophia shot her a brief glare.

"Aziraphale thought maybe you'd be stir-crazy by now and would want some company," Uriel explained, accepting the seat across from the one Raphael had already taken at the small breakfast table. "But I can see you're well entertained. There's no work today?" she asked Sophia.

"I'm only an intern," Sophia reminded her, carrying a bowl of fruit over to the table while Mandy was busy sorting out a tea tray. "Bad of me, probably, but I called in sick. I haven't before."

"You probably need the break, darling," Raphael told her, passing the gala apple she's selected from one hand to the other until, Bob's your uncle, it was a russet. Sophia gasped, startled; Uriel kicked Raphael's foot under the table as Mandy arrived with the tea tray. "Smells divine. Lavender?"

"Yeah, it's that adulterated Earl Grey Aziraphale's got a thing for," Uriel said, accepting the cup Mandy proffered once she'd set down the tray. "It doesn't overpower the bergamot. I like it."

Mandy and Sophia didn't bother with the spare chairs; they dispensed with civility and sat down on the floor, cradling their mugs like guilty children. There is something going on, Uriel thought, but I'm just not sure what. The most immediate circumstance became obvious a few seconds later when Mandy leaned back, patting the floor, and a pair of ducks waddled in from the living room.

"Ducks in diapers," Raphael drawled, watching Sophia feed each of them in turn tiny, pinched-off pieces of pear. He bit into his apple thoughtfully, tilting his head at Mandy, who was studying him.

"I suppose you'll be making the rounds," she said. "Off to see Pippa next? She's stir-crazy."

"Maybe," Uriel cut in before Raphael could say anything smart. "Haven't seen her in a week."

"I'm afraid we haven't been up to anything interesting," said Sophia. "Just a load of gossip."

"There's nothing I like better," replied Raphael, smiling fit to give Crowley's most serpentine lip-curl a run for its money. "Of whom have we been talking, I wonder?" he asked, his accent imitation falling as flat as ever. "Not Mr. Parry as of yet, surely. We're far too sober for that."

"I'm not in the mood to drink," said Mandy, pausing to gulp down around a third of her tea, "although if I was, I guess I'd be in bloody good hands with you around, wouldn't I?"

Uriel averted her eyes and stared out the window while Raphael set down his mug.
"Overconsumption-related ailments are some of the oldest on this earth," he said.

"Which means we've had a long time to come up with antidotes and treatment regimens, yeah, I get it," said Sophia, too hastily, but Mandy was too busy settling both ducks in her lap to register her friend's tone. At least she seemed oblivious; Uriel found that, with these two, it was hard to tell.

"You ought to be grateful," Mandy replied lightly, looking up from her armful of carefully preened waterfowl. "That's your kid sister we're talking about. She might've had alcohol poisoning."

"How are the lovely terrors themselves?" Raphael asked, thoughtfully extracting a russet seed.

"Going mental," Sophia sighed, setting her empty mug aside. "Ready for Easter hols to start."

"They have a week or two yet, poor girls," said Uriel, and got up. "Do you mind if I use—?"

"The loo?" Mandy supplied, tugging a strand of her hair out of one duck's beak. "Go for it."

Raphael shook his head at her. You wicked creature, he sent. The spy who loves me.

Takes one to know one, hoser, she thought back, leaving the room. Leave it to the pro.

Uriel tried the bedroom door first, knowing she ought to find it locked. It was. She sighed and backtracked a few steps, turning to set her hand against the study door. It pushed open as easily as if her bidding had been a stray breeze; she slipped inside too quickly to allow for even the possibility of one of the girls mistaking her movement for anything other than entering the bathroom.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," she whispered under her breath. "Witch-brats, ugh."

Not a volume in the room appeared to have been displaced, not so much as a single tome gone amiss. There were other things she could see, though, things that human eyes not belonging to the likes of Anathema Device and her kin simply wouldn't register. Finger-smudges in the slight layer of dust along the edges of shelves, foot-scrapes in the weft of the carpet. These, she smoothed out with a thought.

They couldn't have learned anything from their nosing, not with the single volume they appear to have taken down, however—there were few other smudges indicating human touch. She set the dust-motes to rights just as she'd done with the carpet, exited, and locked the door.

"That was quick," said Sophia, on her feet with a disgruntled duck under each arm. "Come with?"

"Sure," she said, regarding Mandy and Raphael, who were now seated at the table and chatting.

Outside in the garden, they were greeted by a stiff breeze and the other four ducks. Uriel watched Sophia set their sisters down, wondered if the others were capable of feeling jealousy at such preferential treatment. Neither of the ducks flinched as she removed the handkerchiefs; she wrinkled her nose and left them where they fell in the grass. She stood, brushing off her hands.

"No sense in taking care of them now, really," she sighed. "Crowley will see to it, won't he?"

"You need to start being careful with that one," Uriel sighed. "She wants to know. Badly."

"Wants to know what?" asked Sophia, defensively, folding her arms and staring out to sea.

"What her kind hosts are," Uriel replied, setting a hand on her shoulder. "What we are."

"You mean Rafe and yourself," the girl murmured. "No. You mean you and Raphael."
I sense your unborn son every waking moment, Uriel thought. Why must you be cruel?

Sophia shivered and closed her eyes. *I am not ready to hear this, not ready to hear you.*

"Truer words never said," Uriel replied, squeezing Sophia's shoulder before easing off. "And you will not hear me in your thoughts again until your dying day, witch-daughter, unless you will it."

"I'm afraid for them," Sophia whispered, unblinking. "I'm afraid for all of you. Don't stay long."

"What, here?" Uriel asked, laughing. "On this dour island? Rafe would have a fit. No, not long."

"If you stay too long, you know who they'll fear for," said Sophia. "They fear for her already."

"Pippa's not dying," Uriel insisted, tilting her head to regard the ducks that had taken to milling aimlessly about their feet in search of hand-outs. "Not yet, no matter what Crowley might think."

"Would you tell me the truth if she was?" Sophia asked. "Maybe not. You know I'd tell him."

"I will never lie to you," Uriel promised, miracling a handful of torn-up croissant. She scattered it in the scurvy-grass and watched the frenzy with trepidation. "Extend me the same courtesy?"

"Of course," Sophia said, holding out her hand for some pastry. "I couldn't even if I wanted."

"We'll leave you to snooping," Uriel replied, "for all the good it'll do. I've re-locked the door. Don't pick it again. Your friend has either given up by now, or she's already found her answer."

"Send her out here," sighed Sophia, accepting Uriel's embrace with resignation. "Tell her to bring out the mango and worms. I think these sweet ladies are going to eat my ankles if she doesn't."

Uriel stalked back inside the cottage, slid the plate-glass door shut behind her, and found Raphael enduring a sequence of duck-and-Iván photos while Mandy leaned over his shoulder with her phone in hand.

"Okay, we're out of here," she said. "Word on the street says Herself expects a visit."

"We made up that shite," Mandy sighed, stepping away from him. "Stay? We'll get take-away and raid the wine rack. Four heads are better than one; maybe we'll crack the arse-tattoo mystery."

"Then Herself shall have one," said Raphael, rising. "Miss Tomlin, please accept our apologies."

"Has he gone native, then?" asked Mandy, frowning at Uriel in earnest. "I don't think I like this."

Uriel embraced her before hustling Raphael out; his fingers entwined with hers were sticky, and she wondered where the apple-seeds had gone.

They didn't speak for half the ride, as brief as it was, and as they approached the Shambles, Raphael slowed his speed to nearly half.

"You found something," he shouted over the wind in their faces. "I don't know how—"

"We've got to get Aziraphale back," Uriel replied. "I know what she might have seen."

"Do your duty," Raphael muttered. "It's why we're here. You've been putting it off."

*I didn't lie to Sophia,* Uriel insisted, closing her eyes tight. *But you're not lying, either.*
It's such a pity, darling, Raphael thought back. Just when I was starting to like it here.

* * *

Aziraphale stepped up next to Crowley in front of the white painted signpost on its concrete mount, squinting at the various locations and distances cited. The sea and rocky down-slope beyond it cut sharp through the sunlight, ethereal in the fading midday gleam.

Crowley sighed. "Always New York," he muttered, tugging off his sunglasses. "Only three thousand-odd miles?"

"We've not spent much time there in the grand scheme of things," Aziraphale mused. "Not as such. My memories of points north are far fonder. I can't help but think of Boston—"

"I'd rather not think of the raid," Crowley said, shoving his hands in his pockets, idly strolling forward, past the signpost and the edge of the rough-shod pavement and onto the patchy, sand-riddled grass. "It's all well and good we had a close call, but for the humans it was closer."

Aziraphale followed him until they were standing where grass met jagged rock and precipice, breeze-buffeted sand and grass whipped dizzily on toward vertigo. The waves were restless, a clouded cerulean churn. He coaxed Crowley's right hand out of his trouser pocket and curled his own around it. They considered the water for a while in haunted, shared recollection.

"We ought to have spent more time out at the Mount," said Aziraphale. "I rushed you on."

Crowley shrugged. "A bit tourist-addled for your taste, wasn't it? I didn't terribly mind."

"It's quieter here," Aziraphale replied. "Early days yet, not quite high holiday season."

"You'd have fancied the fireworks, then?" Crowley asked. "Like the good old days?"

"There have been more displays of pyrotechnics over time than I would care to count," Aziraphale sighed, edging closer. "And you had it right about the old days, my dear. Quite, quite right."

"What? Did I?" asked Crowley, hesitantly, turning to face him. "Right in what respect?"

"Those days were, not to put too fine a point on it," said Aziraphale, "rather the opposite."

Crowley smiled and caught Aziraphale by the jumper. "That's the real wedding-present, is it? Admitting your rosy retrospective on all that suffering wasn't on point? Romantic, angel."

"I had rather hoped that's what this destination might prove to be, yes, if you'd permit it."

"Nobody Down There gave me fair warning. If they'd known what a smooth talker—"

Crowley's phone went off in his pocket; he sighed and eased off, took it out to answer.

"Hallo?" he sighed. "Soph, hi, listen. We're having a bit of a moment here, and—"
Aziraphale watched in horror as what little color Crowley had drained from his face.

"What? What?" he demanded, clutching the phone against his ear, and he twisted away when Aziraphale tried to draw him closer. "Yes, I'm listening. Yes. Yesss. I heard you the first time," he whispered, a chilling, venomous hiss. "You called who? Oh. Oh, right. Soph, listen, I'm—Soph, sorry, I—" He cut off mid-sentence and stared at Aziraphale, eyes luminous with dismay.

"My dear, hush," said Aziraphale as gently as he could manage, reaching out. "Give it here."

"Aziraphale, just listen, it's all right," said Sophia, sounding far more collected than Aziraphale would have expected given the fact Crowley was breaking down before his eyes. "Pippa had a fall; it's Rafe and Uriel who found her, they'd literally just gone to drop by after stopping by here. Rafe called the ambulance while Uriel called me. It's all right, probably just a broken hip, but they've got to do X-rays and blood tests and all that. Nicola said she's coming up with Rob tomorrow."

"Then it all sounds very well in hand," said Aziraphale, evenly, and Crowley lunged at him, grabbing at Aziraphale's wrist, his close-cut nails digging in sharp as fangs, to take back the phone.

"You'll have to pardon him," said Crowley, shakily, glaring fit to burn a pair of pinholes in vellum. "Not terribly with it where emotions are concerned, you understand? Never mind, you know that better than a lot of people do. Right, we're getting out of here. Yes, we're leaving now. Why? Why even though everything's fine? Because it's bloody not fine!" he shouted down the line, and Aziraphale could actually hear Sophia's dumbstruck silence. "I'm the driver, so it's my way or—"

Aziraphale caught Crowley around the waist, regretting the force to which he'd been reduced to using, and wrestled the phone back out of Crowley's hand. "We'll get there as soon as we can, but this one's forgetting how many hours off we are. I fear we'll need to stop for the night."

"You idiot," Crowley hissed, lashing out again, but Aziraphale held him fast. "You ssstupid—"

"I should've rung your phone instead," said Sophia, quietly. "God, I'm so sorry. Aziraphale?"

"Dear girl, I'm here," he said as reassuringly as he could manage. "What can I possibly do?"

"Pray," said Sophia, releasing her breath in a tremulous rush. "That, and get him home soon."

Aziraphale hung up before Crowley, having freed himself, could claw it out of his hand again. All he could think to do was drop the phone, raw instinct kicking in. Crowley was fire-eyed and feral, wounded, furious. It was a good job no one else was about, at least not for many yards' distance down the trail along the outcrop; Aziraphale caught him by the arm and dragged him down on the dusty, scrub-covered incline.

For humans, the drop might prove fatal, but they had wings if need be. Crowley stopped fighting after several seconds, and the impact of landing against a cairn left by sentimental tourists crushed the air from Aziraphale's lungs. They huddled where they lay, shaken.

"I'm sure they're down on this sort of thing these days," said Crowley, numbly. "Grounds for an ASBO, I imagine. This isn't even really a domestic; I'd put it more in the realm of…of…"

"Don't," Aziraphale whispered, gathering Crowley close as he folded in against Aziraphale's chest, trembling with what felt like wordless sobs. "Love, won't you listen?" he asked. "She's alive."

"Of smiting," Crowley continued, glancing up wild-eyed, wiping his nose with one bony fist. "Righteous smack-downs, as they say now. All sorts, just like that. Knew you still had it in you."
"Crowley, be quiet," Aziraphale pleaded, hauling them into a sitting position, dusting them both off with a strongly directed thought. "We'd best be off if we're to find a place to rest for the night."

Crowley swallowed, nodded, and blinked at him. "Got it. I'll drive till midnight. 'S nothing."

"You will not," said Aziraphale, and hauled him bodily back up to the pavement where the sign-post stood in its paint-peeled, unfathomable glory. "You'll drive till evening, and then we'll stop."

"Guess we attracted some gawkers, eh?" said Crowley, nervously, and gave the assembled crowd a cheery wave. "Um, hi. Sorry about that. Tiff with the old ball and chain, what can you do?"

Aziraphale wiped the lot of them without so much as giving a second thought to what Gabriel's radar might register (at least none aside from hoping it would cause him the grossest annoyance conceivable). Crowley staggered aimlessly, as if drunk, so Aziraphale kept an arm around his waist the whole way back to the Bentley. He opened both car doors with a wave and helped Crowley inside.

Crowley seemed to start from his reverie as soon as his hands hit the wheel. He sighed.

"Heigh ho," he sighed, resigned, turning to Aziraphale as he clambered into the passenger seat. "Can't be worse than last time, can it? Or the time before that? The world's always ending."

"My dear, just drive," said Aziraphale, swallowing bile, and set a firm hand on Crowley's thigh.

They drove for three hours straight, hitting traffic that held them up just outside of Exeter. Crowley was flagging: fingers listless, restless; face pale, sunglasses still tucked away in his pocket. Aziraphale touched his shoulder, squeezing gently. Crowley turned his head with a sigh.

"I know, angel," he said. "I know. We're not getting anywhere. Pull out the map, find something."

The Bendene was easy to locate, brightly-lit, and cozy. They were assigned a well-appointed single room with a queen-size open canopy; dinner was the farthest thing from Aziraphale's mind as he peeled Crowley's blazer from his shoulders, slid it down his arms and let it drop to the floor.

Too human, this need for closeness, for comfort, for warmth, and still Aziraphale knew he wouldn't trade it for even a shred of eternity.

Crowley shivered his way through their scalding shower, no matter how tightly Aziraphale held him. Even under the covers, he was fitful.

"Crowley, please," Aziraphale said, rubbing the smooth skin of Crowley's back; he imagined bright scales alight in the sun, and then envisioned even brighter wings. "Rest now. Sleep if you can."

"Can't," said Crowley, tersely, nosing into the curve of Aziraphale's neck. "Please make me."

Aziraphale closed his eyes, threaded his fingers through Crowley's hair, willed lassitude to take his limbs with each deep, laboring breath they shared. "There you are," he murmured. "Dreamless."

He passed the hours unmoving, vigilant while Crowley slept. He kept his phone close, opening his eyes when it lit up against the pillow near midnight. Raphael's text flashed on the screen.

Surgery, it said. Right side, two pins. You ought to have known. P.S. The girl's a problem.

Aziraphale blinked at the phone. It typed at his bidding, Is Nicola there? Where is Sophia?

Sophia went home. Can't miss another day of work. Nicola's at the Shambles with Rob.
Good, Aziraphale sent back. *Surgery tonight or in the morning? Or happening now?*

*Completed thirty minutes ago, Raphael replied. She's resting well. The girl, Az. Trouble.*

Aziraphale sighed, biting his lip; one mustn't put off the inevitable. *What did Amanda find?*

*We don't know, Raphael wrote back. But we can guess you'll know much sooner than not.*

Aziraphale closed his eyes tightly, gathered Crowley closer, and pointedly didn't respond. Much to his chagrin, he'd never been the praying kind except when desperate times called for measures of same. And while he didn't set his existence at a pin's fee, whether proverbial or literal?

Phillippa Morrison's life—utterly and unreservedly, without question—he *did.*

* * *

Air between the partitions stirred: a faint, cool gust of arrival. Pippa opened her eyes.

"Well, there you are," she said, smiling, but found her throat raw. "Honeymooners." She tried to wiggle her left fingers and found that Crowley's hands were quite firmly clasped around them.

"Nah, not anymore," said Crowley; he lifted her hands to his mouth and kissed them. "Hey."

"We came just as soon as we could manage," said Aziraphale, beaming at her. "Sophia, Uriel, and Rafe were so kind as to keep us apprised of the situation. You'll be on the mend in no time."

Pippa sighed and regarded them fondly. They'd pulled up a pair of those dreadfully uncomfortable plastic chairs—or had that been Nicola and Rob before leaving her side earlier that morning? She hoped they were back at the house sleeping, the poor dears, and she hoped Mandy wasn't too lonely.

"Mandy's holding down the fort, you know," said Pippa. "Still at yours, won't even leave her post."

"She ought to have come along with Sophia to see you," Crowley muttered. "Why didn't she?"

"*Sophia* didn't, either, you dear thing," Pippa told him, smoothing her sheets. "They have lives."


Crowley stroked the back of Pippa's hand and set it at her side. "Shall we nip up to the house, grab anything for you? I imagine Nicola and Rob must want lunch if they're awake. We could—"

"Let the poor angels sleep," Pippa sighed, feeling rather tired herself. "I ought to crack on, too."

"Yes, dear girl, rest," said Aziraphale, tugging Crowley to his feet. "We'll come back tomorrow."

Pippa watched them halfway to the door, at which point Crowley turned around and looked at her.

"We'll come back later today, for that matter, if you're bored," he said. "Just have somebody ring."
"Mandy could use your company about now," she sighed, yawning, and found her eyelids heavy.

* * *

Mandy huddled in her nest of blankets, staring at the text that had lit up her phone screen.

_We got the news and we're back, _Crowley wrote. _We've been to see her. She's tired, is all._

_That's good, _Mandy typed, a cold knot forming in her stomach. _You'll be home soon, then?_

_In about ten or fifteen minutes, yes, _Crowley replied. _We're just now leaving St. Richard's._

"This is happening," Mandy told herself, sitting up, and shed the covers. "You're awake." Whether she meant Pippa's injury or the moment she'd been dreading for almost forty-eight hours, though, she couldn't say. Probably both. She stripped the sofa-bed and folded it away, and then went into the bathroom to wash her face. The dust was gone, but it would return altogether too soon.

_And now you know why_, she thought, terrified, staring at her reflection. _What you found._

Mandy dressed quickly, shoving her Moleskine in the back pocket of her jeans; she'd gone back into the study and had an additional snoop late Sunday night after Sophia had fallen asleep. She'd almost dropped the priceless manuscript when she'd discovered the first inscription, had continued book after book after book till she'd rounded up no fewer than _five_ such examples. She couldn't have got away with more of a survey than that, but she'd be willing to put her money on more.

She waited at the kitchen table with the notebook in front of her, played fitfully with the cover elastic until, as the Bentley pulled up in the driveway, it snapped. She didn't move from her seat even though she knew it would have been polite to go out and help with the luggage.

_The likes of them don't need it_, she thought, and her eyes began to sting. _Not from the likes of you._

"Gracious," said Aziraphale, several minutes later, holding open the front door while Crowley clattered into the kitchen with nearly all of their baggage in tow. "The place is spotless," he said, and that's when Mandy made the mistake of looking up from her hands to meet his eyes. "Dear girl, what's the matter? You mustn't fret. We've just seen her; she's all right."

Mandy stood up slowly, clutching the Moleskine to her chest. She advanced toward Crowley, who'd stopped dead in the middle of the kitchen floor; he set down the bags slung over his shoulders and dropped the wheelie suitcase he'd been towing by its extendable handle. As Mandy crossed from carpet to tile, flinching at the change in temperature beneath her toes, she couldn't help but notice he had on his sunglasses. She didn't stop till she was inches from him, reached up and gently took them from the bridge of his nose. One-handed, she tucked the arms behind her ears and let the glasses hold back her bed-mussed hair. Crowley's eyes were alight with panic; they _burned._

"You've got a lot to answer for, mate," she told him, shoving the notebook against his chest so that he had no choice but to take hold of it. "You both do, actually," she amended, catching Aziraphale's unblinking grey-blue gaze over Crowley's shoulder. "They start four or five pages in. Sorry about
"I'm sorry?" said Crowley, stupefied, but he already had the Moleskine open and was flipping pages with shaking fingers. "You want me to—what? Why? These are just—"

Mandy set her lips in a grim line as the color drained from him and his eyes tracked over the page, but it was no use. There were tears streaming down her cheeks. Aziraphale was still looking at her, and he still hadn't blinked.

"Out loud," Mandy said. "So your husband can hear. He'll be interested."

Crowley's eyes flicked up briefly to meet Mandy's, stricken. "You never listen, do you?" he asked. "Even when you know it'll come to grief."

"My dear," said Aziraphale, resignedly, "I think you ought to do as Miss Tomlin asks."

Mandy swallowed and nodded at him, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "I'd only have loved you the more if you'd been honest from the start," she pleaded. "I was young, I knew how to forgive—"

"To myne olde friend Azerafel, with Beste wishes," read Crowley, quietly. "Michel de Nostredame."

"Please consider our position," said Aziraphale, with sudden, startling, deceptive gentleness. "Nine years ago, we arrived here as strangers. But we hoped to stay."

"Sophia knows, doesn't she?" Mandy demanded. "And her parents, too. Maybe even her sisters."

"Yowe were a riote, Messr. Felle," Crowley read, and his diction changed the way it changed whenever he spoke Basque or French or any other language, went taut and perfect. "I wolde notte have got through thys drafte. Ursula Southeil." Crowley squeezed his eyes shut. "Er, that'd be Mother Shipton to you," he clarified, switching back to modern English. "Mad old bat."

"Sophia does," Aziraphale sighed, moving forward not to comfort Mandy, but to take Crowley by the shoulders. "And her parents, too, but not her sisters. I'll leave that decision to Anathema."

"That still doesn't tell me what you are," Mandy whispered, furious and frightened, her eyes blurring afresh. "Deathless, for sure. I don't think you faked this. I looked at gospels and codices and bollocks in one of my religion seminars. Marginalia's telling, yeah? Old ink doesn't lie."


"Stop," Mandy sobbed, clapping both hands over her mouth. "That's enough. Please stop."

Crowley lowered the notebook and looked up; his eyes glittered, and Mandy's own ink on the pages ran wet. "You never listen," he said. "Can never let it rest, eh? Never go without a taste."

Before Aziraphale could open his mouth again, Mandy let her hands drop and stared into the slitted pupils as if seeing them for the very first time.

Mandy's breath failed her, but she spoke regardless. "Have I lost my soul?" she asked. "Are we mortals that easily bought, even more easily sold?"
"Your soul, insofar as I'm aware," said Aziraphale, taking the notebook out of Crowley's hand before he had the chance to drop it, "is still very much your own. You'd not pledged it to his former employers, I'm rather sure, nor had you taken much stock in the baptism bestowed on you in infancy in spite of semi-regular attendance at Mass. I cannot speak for you. Neither of us can."

Mandy left the room so she wouldn't smack Crowley right upside his sharp, beautiful cheek.

She gathered her clothes and the few books she'd left scattered around the cottage and shoved them in her overnight bag. She came back out and found Crowley sitting on the floor with his knees drawn up and his face buried in his hands; Aziraphale knelt beside him, one arm about his shoulders, murmuring almost inaudibly. He looked up to consider her with an air of sadness.

"I don't know what to do," said Mandy, helplessly. "With this. What am I supposed to believe? And who would even believe me if I told them? What would you do if I did tell?"

"We'd be gone before you even knew to go looking," said Aziraphale. "And I'd erase the memory of every last soul in this village and its environs if that's what it would take."

"You'd do that without saying goodbye?" Mandy demanded. "If what's what it would take?"

Crowley laughed bitterly, and then said something that sounded like We'd best not unpack.

"Simply put, I'd do anything to keep him safe," said Aziraphale. "He's been through enough."

Mandy's mind hadn't finished ticking through the myriad implications, and, in that moment, it stumbled across the worst one of all. Pippa wasn't dying, no, not yet—but even so—

"Uriel, Rafe," she said, tasting the words anew. She touched her mouth, flooded with the memory of bile and poison, swayed toward the counter and held herself up. "They're…"

"Yep," Crowley sighed, rubbing at his eyes till they were a red-rimmed mess. "Afraid so."

"And all those human souls," she said, making for the door; she jammed her feet into her shoes so as not to make even more of a fool of herself. "Stuck above, trapped below—you get to gad about here for the rest of eternity, I guess, which is all well and good, but what about them?"

Crowley slid free of Aziraphale's grasp and shifted, crawling toward her. "Listen, it's—"

"Damned right it's complicated," Mandy hissed, opening the door. "What about Harold?"

Aziraphale opened his mouth, indignant, as if he had an answer, but Crowley shot him a look that would've turned even Medusa to stone. The angel stood up, dusting off his trousers. The angel.

"Harold isn't here," Crowley told her, still on hands and knees. "Not a ghost. He made a choice."

"Ghost?" Mandy echoed, backpedaling. "Who said anything about ghosts? Then where is he?" Her mind whirled; Up or Down, Heaven or Hell, did any of it matter? Did Pippa even know?

"Give me your word you'll hold your tongue," said Aziraphale. "Promise you'll sleep on it."

Mandy took another look at Crowley on the floor—prostrate, in supplication as he reached for her—and twisted the doorknob so hard it hurt her wrist. She nodded as she left, didn't look back.
Crowley woke up in his own bed—stretched, yawned—and morosely stared at the ceiling.

The warm presence beside him was too slight to be Aziraphale; its strong, slender arm slid across his chest and pulled him close. Uriel didn't have much chest to speak of, but she was soft. Crowley twisted in her embrace and buried his face against her tank-top covered collarbone.

"It's noon," she said kindly, ruffling Crowley's hair. "You were out cold. Good, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Crowley muttered, lightly kicking her shin, "but, unlike humans, I have to wake up and remember. I assume you've been filled in on the weirdness? Wait, no. You knew about it."

"I knew she'd been nosing around," said Uriel, "and I also knew Sophia had tried to stop her in spite of having broken into the study on her behalf. I understand why she did. The bluff almost worked."

"Don't want to leave," Crowley whispered, clinging. "Where's Aziraphale? How much time—"

"Nobody's leaving," Uriel replied, smoothing his hair back down. "He and Rafe are with Pippa."

"At St. Richard's, you mean?" Crowley asked. "Doing a spot of surreptitious patch-up?"

"Nothing so miraculous as to tip the doctors off, but I expect so," said Uriel, sounding guilty.

Crowley sat up and twisted sideways, bracing himself with one arm, staring at her. "You wouldn't have known anything about that, too, would you?" he asked. "Next time, how about prevention?"

"She'd already gone down," said Uriel, stricken. "A shot across the bow is a shot across the—"

"Bugger that," snarled Crowley, and got out of bed. "If I'd known what an unredeemable headache—"

"You can't convince me you wouldn't have bothered," Uriel said, following him over to the dresser where he stood yanking some jeans and a t-shirt out of the middle drawer. "You love humans. It's in your nature; it's just what you do. Fuck, dude, for real. You do it even better than the rest of us."

"That was the real punishment, I think," Crowley replied, so flustered that he was struggling to get the shirt over his head, so Uriel guided his arms through the sleeves and yanked it down for him. "Make me tempt the poor, endearing sods to eternal misery why don't you," he railed.

"You don't have to worry about that anymore," Uriel said, holding out her arm so he could use her for balance while he struggled into his jeans. "You just have to worry about making sure they don't suffer the same fate so many of us did for so long. I mean, at least Rafe and I had each other from the start. I can't really say the same for you two. You were both in the Garden, but that wasn't the start for the likes of us. I can't even remember the Beginning Beginning," she said. "Not anymore."

"I need to ask some administrative questions of people Downstairs," Crowley said, taking a moment to straighten his shirt in front of the full-length mirror. "You want to sit in for the conference call?"

"Why not," Uriel sighed, so Crowley took hold of her hand and dragged her out of the bedroom.
It was sunny outside, windless; there was an infuriating, placid beauty to the clear sky overhead. Crowley didn't let go of Uriel's hand until they reached the Bentley. He opened the driver's side door and indicated that she should climb inside.

"After you," Crowley said, and helped her up. He left the door open and climbed in beside her, tapping nervously at the steering wheel once he'd settled.

Uriel folded her hands and looked at him expectantly. "How do we do this?" she asked.

"You mean how do I do this," Crowley sighed, tapping the radio until it crackled to life. Never mind, I'll find someone like you, Adele sang. He made a face and twisted the knob a fraction to the right. I wish nothing but the best—WHOA, WHAT ON EARTH. WAIT. WHO IS THIS?

"Wow," Uriel said, blinking at Tanith's perplexed interjection. "I guess they did miss the point."

"Don't knock it till you've tried it," Crowley said. "It's worked all this time. Hey, um. Hi."

AW, CROWLEY! said Tanith, her smile nearly audible. DAGON'S BEEN WONDERING ABOUT YOU. HOW'S THE HONEYMOON? CAR TRIP, RIGHT? YOU HAVEN'T RIPPED EACH OTHER'S HEADS OFF, I HOPE? GOSH, I'M SO JEALOUS. I REALLY LIKED CORNWALL.

"Nice to know you and Dagon got to see a bit while you were up here, I guess," said Crowley, awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Listen, d'you remember the girl who got possessed?"

AMANDA, said Tanith, brightly. I REALLY LIKED HER, TOO. NICE BOYFRIEND. PATIENT.

"She, um," said Crowley, and Uriel put a hand on his arm. "She asked me about Harold Morrison."

AH, Tanith sighed, and some static punctuated her exhalation. THAT WASN'T LONG COMING.

"Can't you find him and look after him?" Crowley asked, digging his fingernails into the leather upholstery. "Surely the old man needs a butler? A footman, perhaps? What about a gardener?"

NOTHING GROWS HERE, CROWLEY, said Tanith, wistfully. SURELY YOU REMEMBER THAT?

"No," Crowley murmured, and Uriel's hand tightened painfully at his wrist. "No, I had forgot."

Just then, the crunch of gravel shocked both of them out of their radio-transfixed reverie.

Mandy stood next to Crowley's open door, arms folded across her middle, bike abandoned not far off. "I remember her," she said, pointing in vague disbelief. "That voice. She was at your…"

"That's Tanith," Crowley sighed, unable to meet her eyes. "We go way back. Former co-worker."

I'VE ONLY EVER HEARD GREAT THINGS ABOUT YOU, said Tanith, reassuringly. HI THERE.

"Sweetie," said Uriel, reaching across Crowley's lap to grab Mandy's hand. "Do you understand what's going on here? Even a little bit? Do you know why Crowley's done this?"

"I heard you mention Harold," Mandy said, swallowing hard. "That's all. I mean. So he's…"

IT BOILS DOWN TO CHOICES, AMANDA, Tanith explained. YOU CAN'T THINK ABOUT IT AS GLORY OR DAMNATION, FULL STOP. I KNOW THAT'S NOT WHAT YOU'VE BEEN TAUGHT YOUR WHOLE LIFE, BUT YOU JUST CAN'T. IT'S NOT SO BAD DOWN HERE, AND IT'S ACTUALLY KIND OF TERRIBLE UP THERE, DEPENDING ON WHO YOU ASK.
OUR FORMER BOSS, MY—LET'S CALL HIM MY PARTNER NOW, I GUESS—DID A NEAT THING BACK WHEN A THING THAT I THINK YOU STILL DON'T KNOW ABOUT HAPPENED, AH, DO YOU KNOW ABOUT NINETEEN-NINETY? Mandy shook her head mutely, so Tanith went on, RIGHT. YOU WEREN'T QUITE BORN. THEY'D BETTER FILL YOU IN ON THAT. ANYHOW, THERE WAS A LOT OF CHAOS AND PERSONNEL RESHUFFLING AND SOME, WELL, LET'S CALL THEM PEOPLE, DEFECTED IN BOTH DIRECTIONS. IT WASN'T JUST US.

Crowley blinked at the radio. "Wait, general amnesty meant amnesty for everybody?"

"The more I learn about shit Down There, the more I understand..." Uriel trailed off.

Mandy tried to pull her hand out of Uriel's grasp, but something on it flashed and caught Crowley's attention. He grabbed it and held it fast before she could withdraw it from under his nose.

"Ow," she muttered. "Crowley, let go, what the hell, is this lady seriously saying—"

"I'M SERIOUSLY SAYING THAT ANGELS, DEMONS, AND HUMAN SOULS ALIKE HAD THE OPTION. NEVER UNDERESTIMATE BEELZEBUB AND METATRON, OKAY? SMOOTH TALKERS. THE HILARIOUS PART IS HOW FEW PEOPLE ACTUALLY GOT UP AND WENT. WE'RE CREATURES OF HABIT, ALL OF US, WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO IT. HOME IS WHERE YOU HANG YOUR HAT, Tanith said. I'M JUST GLAD MY MAN STAYED.

"When were you going to tell me about this?" Crowley demanded incredulously, turning Mandy's hand over between his own. She wore a modest, brilliant solitaire bezel-set in white gold. There was a continuous succession of alternating blue and white pinpoints around the band.

"Fuck you!" Mandy said, yanking her hand away, faintly blushing. "It happened last night."

"He didn't even ask permission!" Crowley shot back. "That takes a lot of nerve, eh? Indarra."

"Bai," agreed Mandy, softly, admiring her ring in the sunlight. "He's strong-willed, all right."

"Oh my God," said Uriel, bouncing in her seat. "That means we'll stay a while longer at least! Raphael loves weddings, but don't you dare tell him I went and ruined his I'm-too-cool-for—"

"DID ANYBODY HEAR A DAMNED THING I JUST SAID?" Tanith cut in, annoyed. CROWLEY?

"Sorry," Crowley sighed, abruptly finding he couldn't control the smile tugging at his lips.

"I didn't mean to be rude," Mandy said, directly addressing the radio. "Hey, so. This is awkward, but while you're here, can I ask you a question about what happened last week? At the reception."

Crowley sucked in his breath, pinching the bridge of his nose, but he waved them on anyway.

SURE, Tanith replied. YOU PROBABLY HAVE A FAIR TO DECENT INKLING ANYWAY.

"Somebody was in my head, huh," sighed Mandy, resigned. "Somebody who hated Crowley."

"It was self-defense!" Crowley insisted. "In my shoes, I don't doubt you'd have done the same."

"Oi, budge over," Mandy sighed, squeezing into the Bentley next to him, pulling the door shut. "Can that happen again?" she asked Tanith. "Am I gonna have to teetotal for the rest of my life?"

NOT WITH THAT LUMP IT CAN'T, she replied. WE'VE GOT A LID ON HIM. BESIDES, HE'S GOT HIS OWN PIECE OF TALL, DARK, AND NASTY TO KEEP HIM OCCUPIED.
"Gross," said Uriel, and shot Crowley a pleading look. "I'm never getting rid of that image."

"Can't we all just go for a drive or something?" Mandy asked, clutching the steering wheel, biting her lip as she glanced sidelong at Crowley. "I slept on it, and I don't like what an arse I was to you."

"But we've been arses to you on more occasions than I can count," said Crowley, gloomily.

"Knock it off," said Mandy. "Seriously, where are the keys to this thing? Pippa's bored."

"She called you?" Crowley asked. "And, er, about that. Keys. There aren't any, really."

"Yeah, come on," said Uriel, tapping her bare feet impatiently. "The guys are still there."

"The guys," Mandy remarked in amusement, elbowing Crowley. "You do know you're one of the girls, right? Sophia says next time we're doing make-up and hair and grooming the ducks."

NOW WHO'S BEING GROSS? asked Tanith, facetiously disgusted. LATER. OVER AND OUT.

"Are we all right?" Crowley asked Mandy. "Listen, I mean it when I say you mean the world—"

"Dance at my wedding like you promised," replied Mandy, grinning hard, "and we've got a deal."
Matters of Inconvenience

Chapter Summary

The five prompts that I've batched together to form this piece have come from spacedudebenny (Crowley gets a speeding ticket he can’t magic his way out of), quetzalpapalotl (I’d like some A/C acting godpaternally toward Adam), firesighn (Maybe a cat takes a shine to the mouse, but not in the way Crowley expected?), seji and the-oxford-english-fangeek (Aziraphale and Crowley watch Pacific Rim), and linda3m (naked swimming, wine). I’ve done my best to write these as readable without having read the rest of the series, but know that they’re very definitely set right in the wake of World Without End. Structurally, this intentionally parallels an earlier chapter, Creature Comforts, right down to each piece featuring a Del Toro film.

1.

Late April and already bucketing rain. Peevishly, Crowley gripped the steering wheel, blinked the windshield wipers into working double-time, and laid hard on the Bentley's horn as a trendy Volkswagen hybrid approaching from the opposite direction veered too close.

With impeccable timing, his mobile started to blare Bad Romance. He fumbled for it on the vacant passenger seat and narrowly missed dropping it before he got it up to his ear. "Hallo, yeah. Almost there," he told Mandy before she could speak. "Can you sit tight?"

"It's a bloody monsoon out there," she replied, "and I haven't got my umbrella. Thanks for doing this. If Travis thinks I'm going to cover shifts every time they lose a sous-chef, he's got another thing coming. Iván's still sore he's stuck on till ten and couldn't drive me home. You're a lifesaver."

"I haven't got all day," Crowley told her, experiencing a wash of relief as the café lights finally loomed in sight through the sodden, misty gloom. "It's already six, and Aziraphale insists we've got to watch some new program or another on antiques about which we already know everything."

Mandy was quiet on the other end of the line for a few seconds before she said, "That's creepy."

"All in the line of duty. I'm pulling in," Crowley told her; he hung up and dropped the phone.

He pulled up as close to the front entrance as he dared, and it wasn't half a minute before Mandy came barreling out and yanked open the passenger-side door. She got water everywhere as she settled beside Crowley and shook out her hair. He grimaced, fished a handkerchief out of his pocket that had certainly not been there just a moment before, and handed it to her.

"I don't remember you carrying one of those," Mandy said, mopping her face. "Do you?"

"I carry lots of things," said Crowley, wishing away some droplets she'd got on his arm.

"You made it appear," she said wonderingly as he jammed the Bentley back in gear and roared out into the road. "Produced out of nowhere, just like that. An honest-to-God magic trick."

"You should ask Aziraphale to show you his sometime," muttered Crowley, realizing only too late
how fast he'd been going as ominous lights and an irritating siren caught up with them. "D'you think we can outrun this guy?" he asked Mandy, pensively; she gaped at him in horror.

"Pull over, you git," she said, smacking his arm. "You had it coming one of these days."

Crowley sighed, slowed to a speed sufficiently conducive to pulling over and parking on the sand- and-grass shoulder. The police car pulled up smoothly behind him, and Crowley drummed nervously on the wheel until the officer—earnest, thirty-something, and female—stepped up to his window. Mandy gave him a nudge, so he rolled it down and lowered his sunglasses a fraction.

"Hi," he said brightly, offering the policewoman a brittle grin. "Did I miss the signposting?"

"You've never paid one of these in your life, mate, have you?" Mandy said under her breath.

"Ten miles per hour over the limit," said the officer, disapprovingly. "And in this weather?"

"There's a first time for everything," sighed Crowley, and hoped whatever identification he'd willed to manifest in the wallet he'd just drawn from his pocket was in keeping with the times.

2.

"I thought the trailer looked pants," said Rob, entranced, his wide eyes fixed on the massive robot currently engaged in combat with an even more massive monster. "But I told you, didn't I? This film's wicked. Okay, wait. Be quiet for this part. I want you to see it. Crowley, look!"

Aziraphale glanced sidelong at Crowley, who, to Aziraphale's right on the sofa, had the overenthusiastic lad scrunched in his lap. To Aziraphale's left, Pippa leaned hard on the arm of the sofa, chin in hand, looking so impossibly and utterly bored that Aziraphale might cry.

"I'm looking," Crowley reassured him, tightening his arms around Rob's middle. "Neat."

"Crimson Typhoon isn't neat," said Rob, indignant. "It's the best Jaeger of all. Watch!"

"I should like to know why it's got a third arm and the others haven't," Pippa muttered, leaning into Aziraphale so that her elbow subtly poked his side. She'd recovered swiftly from surgery, although her hip remained stiff; she'd grudgingly taken to using a cane at the physical therapist's insistence.

"You can't have three arms on all of them," Rob explained. "It's hard to find three people who can drift, you see. But the Wei triplets can, so that's why. Shush up, Gran. You'll spoil it."

"I already know how this ends, I fear," Aziraphale said, pushing back against Pippa's elbow playfully with his own. "The blond chap survives against all odds and then gets the girl."

"Whuh!" Rob exclaimed, clutching Crowley's hands tight over his heart as Crimson Typhoon went down in the wake of its strange adversary's assault. "That's not fair, is it? Losing the best one."

"I'm afraid I know how this ends for someone who deserves much better," said Crowley, softly, his voice tinged with regret.

Aziraphale glanced at him sidelong, but Crowley's eyes remained riveted, unblinking, on the screen. Crowley knew a thing or two about blind, reckless bravery, and it didn't take much guessing as to
where he'd affixed his loyalties this time around. He finally looked at Aziraphale, tight-lipped.

"You poor dear," Pippa said, reaching for him across the back of the sofa. "I know what you're on about. Don't you worry. It all comes right for those two, you'd be surprised. Not like those novels where you watch the ones you love most lose the ones they love most. Have a little faith."

"Be quiet!" Rob hissed, tugging on Crowley's forearms. "You're missing the best parts!"

"If I remember correctly, you approved of the resolution on the last one we watched from this director," said Aziraphale. "Bravely done, you thought. Happy endings of a sort, remember?"

"This ending had better well be happy," Crowley insisted, "because brave is what they are."

3.

At the sound of the doorbell, Crowley shuffled through the kitchen, yawning, to have a gander out the window at who could possibly be hanging about their doorstep at ten o'clock on a Monday morning. Aziraphale was in the living room, too engrossed in his Telegraph to follow suit.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said Crowley, knocking on the glass, and Adam waved hesitantly. He let the curtains fall back into place and dashed the short distance to the door, beckoning the young man inside. "It's too humid for June," he said. "Come in before your hair's worse off than Aziraphale's."

"My dear, I heard that," said the angel, giving an exaggerated yawn as he wandered, daft slippers and all, into the kitchen. "Adam," he said, smiling benevolently. "Will you join us for tea?"

"Yeah, of course," he said, walking past Crowley with a distinct slump in his shoulders. He didn't stop till he'd taken Crowley's habitual seat at the dining table. "That's what I hoped you'd say."

"You must be at a loose end, what with Sophia off working all hours," Crowley said, joining him.

"She loves the internship to pieces," said Adam, glancing over at Aziraphale, who was busy with the kettle, to include him in the conversation. "And she's got loads of new friends. She's out a lot."

"You're more often the homebody than not," Crowley agreed. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"Nobody said there was," said Aziraphale, all saccharine sympathy; Crowley rolled his eyes. "Why don't you spend the day with us? Crowley could use a hand with shed repairs, and then—"

"What he means to say is," Crowley clarified, "if you don't mind duck-wrangling, you're welcome to stay as long as you like. Tamar pitched a fit last week and blew out two heat-lamps."

"Surely you don't have them turned on in weather this nice?" Adam asked. "Risky, that is."

"No," said Aziraphale, finally rattling over with the tea tray, "but they are, nonetheless, there to be shattered if one of the more temper-prone fowl gets her feathers in a twist. Crowley spoils them."

"Says the idiot who feeds them pastry when he thinks I'm not looking," Crowley said. "Traitor."

"I thought it was Jemima who causes the trouble," Adam replied. "That's what Soph says."

"The whole bloody gaggle's a handful," Aziraphale muttered, setting a mug in front of him.
Crowley helped himself to one of the other mugs before Aziraphale had the chance to serve. "This one's just bitter about the lack of grand-chicks thus far, you understand," he hissed under his breath.

"You're dreadful," said Aziraphale, and went to fetch the third chair. "Positively wretched."

"Just like the old days, isn't it?" said Adam, offering them in turn his lopsided grin. "Cheers!"

4.

"What on earth is that—that creature doing here?" Crowley demanded, freezing in the doorway.

Aziraphale beamed at him from the sofa, and the sleek Snowshoe kitten perched in his lap twitched both ears inquisitively forward as Crowley entered the living room. It purred loudly, pawing at his knee as he took a seat beside Aziraphale.

Crowley's expression wasn't terribly encouraging.

"This was Nicola's idea of a surprise for her dear old mum, was it?" he asked dubiously. "She just couldn't stash it with Mandy or somebody else, could she? Doesn't she know we've got—"

"Oh dear," said Aziraphale, watching helplessly as the kitten bolted to the floor with its ears laid back and its lithe body hunched low against the carpet. "There," he breathed. "Along the wall."

"That's exactly what I was afraid of," said Crowley, frantically getting back to his feet. Either the kitten would bolt or the mouse would bolt if he got between them, or at least Aziraphale hoped that's what would happen. He situated himself between the two creatures, hands on hips.

The kitten eyed the mouse inquisitively, and then looked up at Crowley. It sat back on its haunches and licked its front paw for a few idle seconds before lowering its head to peer back at the mouse.

"He's far too young to hunt," said Aziraphale, reassuringly. "He wouldn't know what to do with it even if he'd got it. Come here," he said, patting his lap, leaning forward to tug the kitten's tail. "That's enough excitement for now, and we'll take you to meet your mother this evening."

Crowley's eyes were fixed on the mouse, as it hadn't so much as twitched a whisker.

The kitten crawled forward, stance low, and slipped past Crowley as if ashamed. Before Crowley could scoop it up, his utterance of horror turned to one of dismay as the kitten rolled over on its back and gently pawed upside-down at the much smaller creature now crouched mere inches away.

"That's ridiculous," Crowley told the kitten, "and assuredly beneath your dignity."

The mouse twitched its pink nose in agreement, scuttling forward to sniff one of the kitten's silky ears. The kitten purred loudly, wriggling, and managed to lightly bat the mouse's side.

"He's also too young to know that," said Aziraphale, dryly. "My dear, leave them to it."

5.
Crowley shoved his sunglasses up into his hair and put his arms behind his head, slitting one eye to watch the exchange that was about to take place not far from where he was sunning himself. Hesquirmed on his oversize beach towel, skin prickling faintly as the breeze ghosted over him.

"Today's a big to-do in America, isn't it?" Mandy asked Raphael, dusting sand off the back of her bathing suit as she got to her feet. "Independence Day. And here you are, in the Old Country."

"Not exactly," said Uriel, busy folding up the blanket on which they'd been sitting with Aziraphale for most of the afternoon. Evening had begun to fall, casting the sea in dark, pensive silver.

"Oh," said Mandy, abruptly, understanding what she'd meant. "Yeah. That's pretty far off."

"We like it much better here, darling," Raphael reassured her. "Sunlight, atmosphere. Air."

"Get up, you lazy-ass," Uriel said, tapping Crowley's foot with her own. "Say goodbye."

"Goodbye," Crowley yawned, covering his mouth with his hand; she kicked him again.

"Can I hitch a ride with you guys?" Mandy asked. "I bet three can fit on that bike."

"You'll do no such thing," said Aziraphale, striding up from, well, whatever he'd been doing out in the water. A spot of swimming, by the look of him; would wonders never cease. Crowley opened his eyes a bit wider, the better to appreciate the so-seldom-publicly-exposed bits of him that the otherwise dowdy swim-trunks left on display. "Your young man's on his way, remember?"

"Spoil my fun," Mandy groused, pulling on her shorts. "See you later," she added, gathering up her towel without any regard for stray sand, dumping it in her bag. "I'm going to wait up at the house."

"We'll wait with you," said Uriel, shoving her feet back into the ridiculous rhinestone flip-flops she loved so much. "Get your lazy ass up," she said to Raphael, swatting his shoulder. "Let's go."

Raphael got to his feet and stood over Crowley for a moment, winking down at him. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he said mischievously. "Which is, of course, anything most decent people would given that set of instructions. Oh, you cad. Surely that's sunburn rather than blushing?"

"Move along," Aziraphale said, shaking out his spectacles, placing them primly back on the bridge of his nose. "I'll deal with this unseemly character, not to worry. See the young lady off."

Crowley rolled onto his belly and buried his face in his arms; the action shoved his glasses even further back. He listened to the protracted rounds of farewells until drowsiness took hold of him again, luxuriating in the last flare of warmth from overhead as the clouds briefly cleared.

Aziraphale plucking the sunglasses off his head was what woke him an indeterminate amount of time later. "There's wine, Crowley," said the angel, coaxingly. "They left some of that nice red."

Crowley sat up, rubbing his eyes, and then accepted the bottle Aziraphale pressed into his hands. "Can't be the good Zin, can it?" He took a curious, if approving gulp. "My my. Such generosity."

"Easy, dear boy," said Aziraphale, huffing slightly as he dropped to sit beside Crowley on the towel. "Can't be the good Zin, can it?" He took a curious, if approving gulp. "My my. Such generosity."

"I don't give a damn if it's the last on earth," Crowley muttered, snatching the wine back with enthusiastic greed. These days, of all sins, he could at least be buggered with that one. He drank again, tilting his head back till the back of his throat burned with it. He choked, wiping his mouth.
"You've left so little," lamented Aziraphale, and finished it off. "Whatever shall I do with you?"

"Make sure there are no humans snooping about before you do, for starters," Crowley suggested.

"Mmm," Aziraphale agreed, tracing the line of Crowley's jaw. "You haven't gone for a swim."

"My skin's dry," said Crowley, peevishly, but he leaned into the touch anyway. "Salt's no good."

"I think," murmured Aziraphale, leaning in close, hooking both index fingers beneath the waistband of Crowley's swim-trunks, "that you might be persuaded to some of that risk-free exhibitionism of which you're so fond. Although if it happens I'm wrong, please do correct me..."

Crowley wobbled to his feet, suddenly in a hurry; he let Aziraphale, who'd got up on his knees, tug the single offending garment down and off his hips. Using Aziraphale's shoulders for balance, he stepped out of them. Aziraphale sighed in approval, running his palms down Crowley's thighs.

"I thought we were going to swim," Crowley managed, knees buckling as Aziraphale leaned in and pressed a warm, open-mouthed kiss just beneath his navel. "Last time I checked, this isn't—"

"Do be quiet," Aziraphale replied, letting his tongue dip low. "The sea can wait a bit longer."
West-Enders

Chapter Summary

This 5 + 1 piece is for calicovirus, to whom I promised this several months ago. The Dowlings and Nanny Ashtoreth put young Warlock through a battery of musical-viewings for his cultural edification; meanwhile, many rows back, Aziraphale and Crowley shadow the proceedings (whilst Statler-and-Waldorfing their way through). This can be read as a stand-alone; the first five sections are flashbacks to West-End show dates for which Aziraphale and Crowley were present during the '70s and '80s, and the sixth section takes place a month after the events of Matters of Inconvenience (today, in fact). Something to tide you over.

Friday, 30 November 1979

"It's a bit much, one feels," Crowley whispered loudly, eyeing the lively action onstage with no small amount of distaste, "bringing an infant to the theatre. He's bloody three months old."

"Hush," murmured Aziraphale, raising his opera glasses. "Gracious, it was never like that."

"Of course not," Crowley sighed, leaning heavily on the box-edge, peering down at the Dowlings in the front row. "Not but what I didn't try to tempt her to it, of course. But that's never been my—"

"Not your forté, my dear; no, of course not," said Aziraphale, distractedly. "Must she simper so?"

"Potiphar's wife was never your successful stealer of hearts," Crowley muttered. "So in that, at least, our intrepid composer's guess is accurate. Or ought I to give credit to the librettist?"

"Warlock's a well-behaved child," Aziraphale said, lowering his glasses. "Divine influence, you see, in evidence from the off. Pull an innocent babe straight from brimstone and what do you—"

Crowley bristled. "Just because he hasn't spent the whole first act so far squalling doesn't mean—"

"I fail to see why technicolor is relevant," Aziraphale mused. "Such dull shades in comparison to the genuine article. Don't you remember? A marvel of both dye-work and tailoring, if you ask me."

Crowley buried his face in his arms, groaning as audibly as he dared. "It's about buzz-words," he said. "How many times have I got to explain this concept, angel? It's about style, about being hip."

"If I'm not mistaken, that word's on the way out," replied Aziraphale. "Aren't we onto something else? You would know much better than I, dear boy. That costume on the girl's less than flattering, although I must say the young man wears what, er, little he does with a certain panache."

"Lord, Crowley thought before he could stop himself. Your eyes are everywhere but where I'd—"

"I suppose it can't have lasted," said Aziraphale, as the sound of infant wailing pierced the air.

"Oh, of course not," Crowley replied, hastily changing the subject. "The political situation had grown intolerable, untenable. His character was bound to be called into question sooner or later."
"Come off it, you old serpent," Aziraphale chastised. "It was all sorted in the end. Just desserts."

"Your people's idea of just desserts is wanting," Crowley said, raising his voice over the racket as Mrs. Dowling, now the target of a myriad nasty looks, thrust Warlock at the bodyguard and sent both baby and servant packing up the aisle with the nappy-bag over his shoulder. "Deplorable."

"His own flesh and blood sold him into slavery. Surely you can't get behind that sort of thing?" Aziraphale prompted, elbowing Crowley. "I mean, what with your own situation, I daresay—"

"Be quiet," Crowley hissed, shoving back as hard as he dared. He tried to tell himself it was basic snake-nature kicking back in, that eternal longing for warmth rather than infernal heat, but the truth was somewhere nearer to the human desire for contact than he would have liked. "I like this song."

"You've never heard this song," Aziraphale replied. "Mr. Dowling's quite engrossed, isn't he?"

Close every door to me indeed, thought Crowley, and watched, riveted, for better or for worse.

Monday, 11 May 1981

"I haven't the faintest idea what's going on," said Aziraphale, not bothering to whisper. "She's being taken up into—the aether? Heaven? Are we meant to surmise some manner of feline theology?"

"Have you read Eliot or not?" asked Crowley, peevishly. "This wasn't in his verse, so clearly we're dealing with some rogue narrative contamination on the part of the librettist. What the hell—"

"Language," Aziraphale murmured, squeezing Crowley's wrist. "They're only three rows ahead."

Crowley swallowed, his breathing gone funny. "I don't know," he said. "Aside from the nonsense of stringing a bunch of character-verse together in continuity reminiscent of an acid trip, I quite fancied the bits of Grizabella's aria filched from Prufrock. Wonder Boy might have done worse."

Aziraphale stiffened in his even stiffer seat. "Surely you haven't taken to calling Lloyd Webber—"

"I'll call him whatever I damned well want," Crowley muttered. "Seeing as he's one of yours."

"I say," Aziraphale murmured, running some swift mental cross-checks. "I suppose you're right."

"He's done a right botch-job when it comes to set pieces on the subject of religion," Crowley sighed. "I'm as irritated as the next person entrenched in the system, don't get me wrong. How's he doing with the belief systems of the four-legged, though? Inquiring minds and all that. I'm curious."

"He's doing well enough that our toddler of interest is entertained," Aziraphale replied, glancing sidelong to where a tearful Mrs. Dowling was seated with her two year-old son cradled in her lap. "She's brought her child to opening night, sans husband," Crowley observed. "Even gutsier still."

"It was Francis's idea, you know," said Aziraphale, leaning hard on the arm of his seat, not having noticed until that moment that Crowley's arm had also been occupying the same space. "This whole program of cultural exposure for the lad's edification. I was entirely in favor, you understand."

Crowley gawped at him, fairly tossed the wine gums. "Let me tell you, Ashtoreth insisted—"

"Another zero-sum game," said Aziraphale, reasonably, and companionably patted Crowley's arm. "We can't possibly have known our agents would suggest the same thing. It's win-win, my dear."
Crowley took his turn to stiffen, carefully shrugging off Aziraphale's touch. "I guess you're right."

"It's to be expected," said Aziraphale, mildly. "I doubt I've ever been aught. Well, you know. Er."

"The curtain call's coming up," Crowley replied. "And Mrs. Dowling will head for the stage door."

"Would you like to go, my dear?" Aziraphale teased. "Give the composer a piece of your mind?"

"I might do, at that, if it'll get me close to the boy," Crowley muttered. "I'm under orders."

"Have they told you to check up on his growth?" asked Aziraphale, anxious. "Take stock?"

"Nah," said Crowley, vaguely, and rose to applaud the cast, "but I'm curious. Aren't you?"

**Tuesday, 27 March 1984**

Crowley pinched the bridge of his nose till his sunglasses rode up and dug in. They staggered out of the theatre after Mr. Dowling and son, both of whom were avidly chattering. The wine gums hadn't been distraction enough; more's the pity, the blasted things didn't even contain alcohol.

"Let me get this straight," he said, gesturing wildly. "Humans on skates. Pretend they're trains."


"Roller skates," Crowley repeated. "I can't even manage riding horseback, and these idiots have got their performers traversing the stage on wheels. What's the world coming to, I ask you?"

"It's a step up from Potiphar's wife, you've got to give him that," said Aziraphale, somewhat defensively. "The theme tune is catchy. It'll stay with the younger crowd, mark my words."

"The boy likes it, sure," said Crowley, nodding at the angel in frustration. "Keen. He and his school chums who've also been fortunate enough to see it will jabber till Kingdom Come. What then?"

"I suppose they'll come back for more," Aziraphale ventured. "Joseph or CATS, do you think?"

"I'd sooner let my child watch CATS than Joseph, thank you very much," Crowley snapped. "Assuming I had a child, of course. We're fortunate he was so young for Joseph, otherwise—"

"I doubt he'll have been impressed by the likes of Mrs. Potiphar," said Aziraphale, dubiously.

Crowley let his scowl deepen, shifting his focus for a moment from Aziraphale's infuriatingly endearing prattle to father and son still engaged in conversation at the crosswalk. Amazing and sickening all at once, how easy humans found it to discuss passions dredged to the surface by art.

"Angel, if I catch you humming bits from this atrocity 'round the bookshop, so help me—"

"You've heard worse," Aziraphale threatened. "You didn't mind Memory awfully, did you?"

"Not as such, but don't you know this specimen is be-bop?" asked Crowley, in mock horror.

"The Brightman girl is lovely," Aziraphale said. "One can hardly blame him. That voice."

"It's not the voice he's after, angel," Crowley sighed, shuddering slightly. "Potiphar's wife."
"I should like to see what else is in store," Aziraphale forged on. "Not just a dancer, that one."

Just head of them, Warlock pointed wildly at at storefront, so his father acquiesced, following him inside. Crowley hooked his arm through Aziraphale's, shoved his hands deep in his blazer pockets, and gave up. He tried not to think about the disapproving looks that this got them.

"That duet wasn't so bad," he admitted. "If no other song, it'll have staying power. Only You."

"I'll hum that under my breath, shall I?" said Aziraphale, almost coy. "Wait for you to join in?"

Crowley let go of Aziraphale's arm and glanced over the road. "No," he said. "Don't. Please."

**Sunday, 15 June 1986**

"Nearly seven years old," murmured Aziraphale, watching the boy stare riveted at the man singing alone on the stage from behind the safety of his opera glasses. "He's taking this rather well."

"What an idiot," Crowley muttered, his tone suggesting it was a good job Aziraphale couldn't see his expression. "He could've ended it by now. Any number of times, even. Easily."

"Dear boy, it's about sticking to one's principles," Aziraphale said, noting with pleasure that Warlock had gone so far as to sit forward and peer up at the stage with worshipful eyes. "Seeing it through."

"If you ask me," Crowley hissed, "he's a right prat. He knows he hasn't got free will, not really. He's let Valjean become his jailer. One day, that'll be classed as this thing called epic fail."

"It's an epic failure indeed," said Aziraphale, wistfully, "considering what he's about to do."

"Can't say as I'm enjoying the number," Crowley replied, "but I can't begrudge him peace."

"Oh, hush," Aziraphale murmured, finally lowering his glasses. "It's the loveliest song yet."

Then, only then did he turn his head and notice the gleam of unshed tears in Crowley's eyes.

**Tuesday, 14 February 1989**

"This is some kind of punishment, isn't it?" Crowley whispered. "Chaperoning, angel. The absurdity of it. Couldn't we have just left it to the help? He won't be ten till August, and the girl's eleven if she's a day. I doubt you'll see action beyond hand-holding through that lens of yours."

"It's Valentine's Day," Aziraphale said. "The scheme's rather sweet, don't you think? So good of the parents to step aside. There's the usual men in dark glasses at the back, but it can't be helped."

Crowley rested his arms on the box-edge, staring dejectedly at the prosenium; he'd quite liked that chandelier effect during the overture, creaky old thing flickering to life as it rose from the stage. "Sure," he said, "because nothing says true love like the unrequited affections of a sociopath."

"Must you be so nasty?" Aziraphale chided, lowering his opera glasses. "There's enough tension by this point as it is; you could cut it with a knife, as it were, and literally, too. That poor young man."

"Idiots get what they deserve for dashing off into damp cellars unarmed," Crowley pointed out.
"So you've got it in for all of them, I suppose?" Aziraphale snapped. "All but Christine, I gather?"

"She's spineless," said Crowley, grimly, and turned his face toward the opposite wall. "Not entirely the victim she's been painted, either, you see. She has a choice to make, and she'll blow it."

"How do you know so much about the ending?" asks Aziraphale, suspiciously. "Did you read the more ruthless reviews? Get a tip straight off the librettist's desk, perhaps? Inquiring minds."

Because this is the only way anything ever ends, Crowley thought, blinking as rapidly as he dared, trying to convince himself it was because of the pyrotechnics. The only way ever, and I hate it.

"My dear, are you quite all right?" Aziraphale asked, setting his hand on Crowley's shoulder. Never, Crowley thought bitterly. Not till some bloody ending somewhere finally comes right.

Thursday, 14 August 2014

Aziraphale shifted on the sofa so that Crowley could curl into him. He groaned into Aziraphale's neck even as the credits rolled, pummeling Aziraphale's shoulder with his fist. Aziraphale had several guesses as to the cause of this tantrum, all of which were very likely correct.

"Minnie bloody Driver!" Crowley shrieked. "I know she'd have been past her prime for this now, but Rosemary Ashe has never had an equal, not in any production I've ever heard of since—"

"There there," Aziraphale soothed, rubbing Crowley's back, taking advantage of the perfect opportunity to kiss along Crowley's sharp, lovely jaw. "At least the girl was insipid and the rest of the casting equally uninspired. The only true purpose of this adaptation is mockery, so have at it."

"D'you promise the Les Mis adaptation is going to make it all up to me in spades?" asked Crowley, plaintively, but he showed rather a lot of interest in nuzzling his way from the spot just beneath Aziraphale's ear down to the uncharacteristically exposed dip of his collarbone, so that was all right.

"The cast can actually sing, for one," Aziraphale replied. "Or at least they've done an excellent job of making them sound as if they're competent. Of this much, Anathema's firmly reassured me."

Crowley mumbled vaguely against Aziraphale's shoulder; the end of his phrase sounded like Stars.

"I asked after that number in particular when she screened it," Aziraphale sighed, picking at Crowley's trousers with lazy interest as Crowley rucked up Aziraphale's shirt. "Are you in the mood?"

"Maybe not for that, not right now," Crowley admitted, "but for an ending like this? You bet."

"Because this is the only way anything ever ends, Crowley thought, blinking as rapidly as he dared, trying to convince himself it was because of the pyrotechnics. The only way ever, and I hate it."

"My dear, are you quite all right?" Aziraphale asked, setting his hand on Crowley's shoulder. Never, Crowley thought bitterly. Not till some bloody ending somewhere finally comes right.
Any Other Name

Chapter Notes

Encouraged by a prompt from ajcrawly—Crowley's middle name: what it is, where it comes from, something like that?—this piece is actually somewhat overdue, as Crowley's middle initial is a topic Mandy's had stuck in her inquisitive craw for just about as long as the curiosity she finally and so bravely forced to satisfaction in World Without End. Given that the most recent installments of this 'verse have finally synced up internal fic-events with our real-life calendar again (for a while, RL was 2013 and I was writing stories in this 'verse set in 2014), this piece is another one that I can say is happening right now, as in just a few days ago. This is a New Year's story, 2014 flipping over to 2015, and Pippa's out to prove she's an excellent fancy-dress party host.

31 December 2014, 6:49 PM

Crowley didn't want to get up. Leaving bed was, in fact, so low on his list of priorities at that very moment that he'd dispensed with breathing altogether. Aziraphale's footsteps came in for a second attempt, stealthy across the carpet, and Crowley coiled himself more tightly in the unkempt sheet-and-duvet nest in which he'd selfishly hoarded a few scattered feathers. Precise fingers kneaded into the layers of blankets, finding Crowley's ribs, gently prodding. Crowley shivered.

"You'd best get the old lungs up and pumping again," Aziraphale sighed. "We'll be late."

"You had them pumping just fine half an hour ago," Crowley muttered into the pillow-slip.

"Are you sure you won't consider matching, my dear?" asked Aziraphale, almost plaintively.

Crowley sat up, a veritable living cocoon, his breath returning in an indignant huff. He regarded Aziraphale's ensemble with as much dignity as he could muster, but the effect was likely lost owing to the impressive, wavy mess that was his hair.

"The party theme is Hollywood Romance, angel. That hat becomes you even less well than your stage-magic number, which, for the love of anything holy, you are not to dig out of the closet by way of a replacement. I forbid it. That polka-dot necktie is in no way an improvement over your habitual tartan, and I also regret to inform you that facial hair, even in the form of a small and well-groomed mustache, is not a thing in which you are to indulge again. Ever," Crowley concluded, studying Aziraphale's face in mild horror. "If we were going in for a Sherlock Holmes kind of deal, you'd make a suitable Watson, but, honestly, Rhett Butler?"

"One thought you'd have enjoyed the chance to be unconventional for a change," Aziraphale sniffed, adjusting his necktie, although Crowley couldn't help but notice that the mustache had already vanished. "Hollywood Romance indeed; Gone With the Wind is a classic. How well will your little ensemble go over, might I add, without benefit of a gold-painted floozy on your arm?"

Crowley disentangled himself from the covers and climbed out of bed, fixing his hair with a thought. No time for a shower and proper human-style coiffing, after all, as much as he would've liked that; in one fluid, broad-yawned stretch from toes to fingertips he drew his costume atom by atom into place upon his person. He couldn't hope to look much like Connery or Moore, really, not with his eyes and
his features as they were, but he'd proudly dispense with the sunglasses of an evening when all of the assembled had, by now, come to prefer him without them. He smiled.

"How is anyone to know you're not simply yourself in evening-dress?" asked Aziraphale, critically, although his eyes couldn't seem to settle on any one part of Crowley's now-clothed anatomy except for his face and his backside by turns as he directed Crowley to spin with a fussy twirl of his index finger. "I very much hope there isn't a gun in your pocket, lest we forget how that turned out."

Crowley drew the unloaded Walther PPK (7.65mm/.32 ACP) out, aimed it at the floor, and clicked off a few imaginary rounds. "Spoil my fun, why don't you," he said. "This is the same model Hitler used to off himself, did you know that? Would you deprive young Rob of his history lesson?"

"I would deprive you of the chance to remind Adam of anything even remotely having to do with certain past events in which we nearly cocked everything up past the point of mere bollocking," Aziraphale grumbled, and Crowley was momentarily impressed at how thoroughly his angel had given in to the urge to curse. "Then again, he had minimal contact with the Manor, I'm sure, between birth and retrieving the information from your wayward brain. Carry on, dear boy."

Crowley tucked the firearm back into his jacket, vindicated.

"Me in a southern-belle dress is decidedly different from me in a kilt, got it? I didn't refuse your matching proposition on the basis of having to wear a skirt, however, I want to make sure we're clear on that. I refused your offer because I bloody hate _Gone With the Wind_ and happen to think Scarlett O'Hara deserved exactly what she got. Did you ever try reading the novel? What am I saying, of _course_ you did, and you probably loved it. Next time we're completely off our faces, I'm going to roll out the bird-and-mountain metaphor, only this time it'll be _Gone With the Wind_ you won't have finished watching."

Aziraphale gawped at him in abject horror. "Crowley, you _wouldn't_. That's just the sort of thing—"

"Just the sort of thing my former people would do if they but had the capacity for getting creative, I _know,_" said Crowley, and grabbed his enthusiastically ringing mobile off the nightstand (Mandy's ring-tone had recently been switched from _Bad Romance_ to _Born This Way_). "Hallo. Has Pippa assigned you the task of rounding up stragglers? I understand we ought to have been there ten—"

"Adam and Sophia just got here, so he and Iván are setting up the bar," Mandy said, raising her voice so as to be heard over the chaotic bustle of Pippa's dining room. "They look ever so handsome in your idea of retro waiters' jackets, thanks for the fashion tip, but why would you give them a free pass out of costume-land? They're fucking _relieved_. I guess they'll pay for it by making cocktails all night. Speaking of which, Soph is already drunk, and she says you make this thing—"

"Hah, gotta go," said Crowley, collapsing under the weight of Aziraphale's disapproving, not-so-southern-gentlemanly stare. "See you in five, okay? Ciao." He hung up and pocketed the phone.

"We are positively going to regret turning up at this party," Aziraphale said. "I can already tell."

"Hey, but _no_," Crowley said, wagging a finger in Aziraphale's face. "I can't wait to see what your co-workers—who're still malingering in that holiday cottage up the road, by the by—will wear."
Crowley rang the doorbell and stepped back, already nervous. Aziraphale removed his hat and held it primly to his chest, at least looking dashing enough to pounce minus the horrendous headgear. *Later,* Crowley told himself, and put on his closest approximation of a debonair expression as the door swung open. He'd noticed the rented motor-bike in the driveway a moment too late.

"*Willkommen, bienvenue!* Welcome!" exclaimed Raphael, winking in a flash of perfect black eyeliner and what a precious few of the humans would *assume* were flawlessly applied false lashes. He stepped out, perfectly balanced in stiletto heels, and took Crowley by the elbow. "Sally, darling," he called, and Crowley could hear Aziraphale muttering behind him at having been upstaged, "Mr. Bond is here!"

Uriel came in from the dining room as Raphael led them inside, her *Cabaret* costume every inch as flashy and impressive as her partner's. "Oh, look at *you,*" she said, winking at Crowley as she passed him up in favor of inspecting Aziraphale's clothes; she took Aziraphale's hat out of his hands and set it on his head. "I *declare,* sir, as you've lost your lady-friend of late, I might just fancy—"

"Canadians should never try that accent, like, *ever,*" said Natalie, doing the worst valley-girl impression Crowley had ever heard, taking Crowley's arm as cool as you please. "Oi, Honey! Solitaire!" she shouted in the direction of the dining room. "Get your arses out here!"

Aziraphale stared at Natalie as if he ought to comprehend what was going on, but seemed to fall short. Uriel-as-Sally-Bowles pouted and hung on his arm while Raphael-as-the-Emcee leered happily; meanwhile, Janet-as-Honey-Ryder and Sophia-as-Solitaire—Sophia, heart-stopping, *resplendent* as Solitaire—filed into the room and clustered around Crowley as best they could.

"Miss Trench," Crowley stammered to Natalie, turning to blink at the other girls in turn. "Gosh," he said to Janet, blinking at how utterly *odd* it was to see her as a blonde, "you've dyed your hair."

"Mandy and I helped her with that," whispered Sophia, up on tiptoe, leaning close, and it was a wonder she didn't get lipstick on Crowley's earlobe. "At least we'll be able to tell them apart."

"Don't you just make the *loveliest* picture," said Pippa, and if Crowley had thought Sophia guilty of stealing the show, then he was sorely mistaken. Pippa moved gracefully now with her cane, having grown accustomed to it (and less resentful) in the many months since April; she was perfection itself in her black sleeveless knee-length dress with a dark green silk scarf knotted at her throat. "Poor Mr. Bond won't know where to look, will he, ladies?" she asked, adjusting her pearl earrings. Lois Maxwell herself hadn't looked half so charming, and Crowley had seen *everything.* "Hmmm?"

"Pip, for the love of God, don't torture him," Mandy said, striding into the room shoeless and barefoot, wearing a yellow-and-green satin princess dress with her tiara askew in her pinned-up hair. She had Robert on her hip, and the boy clung to her with both green-fleece-covered arms. There was a crown on his brow, too, and some of his curly hair had escaped his frog's-head hood. "We've got enough problems now that his cover's blown. Oh, Aziraphale, they are sorry."

"No they're not," Uriel whispered, elbowing Aziraphale in the ribs, which only made him redder.

"If it isn't Naveen and Tiana!" said Crowley, cheerfully. "You lot look *splendid,* take it from—"

"This is your game, is it?" Aziraphale asked, staring at all of them in turn; Raphael shrugged and went over to fiddle with Mandy's laptop on the coffee table until the music had gone from sixties-Broadway-themed Spotify to seventies-Bond-themed Pandora. "Refuse to match because you've got the whole Bond-girl brigade lined up at your beck and call? Low, Crowley. *Very* low indeed."

"Why is it low?" Rob asked Mandy, and Mandy just shrugged, bouncing him. "He's very tall."
"Darling, I'd have been your Scarlett," said Raphael, sashaying back over to Aziraphale as some of the assembled, the twins and Mandy and Rob most notably, dispersed. "You need only have asked."

Uriel smacked him. That got laughter all around, especially from Rob, who found obvious slapstick easier.

"Never seen you after hours, Moneypenny," quoted Crowley, shifting Sophia off his arm so he could embrace Pippa in sheer relief. "Out on some kind of fashion assignment, dressing to kill?"

"You skipped my line," Pippa whispered in his ear, smearing it with lipstick where Sophia had failed. She let go of him and stepped back, beaming. "Thank you, James," she quoted in answer.

Mandy set Rob down, tucked his hair back into his hood, and gave Crowley a contemplative look.

"That actually reminds me," she began, tilting her head, "I've been meaning to ask—"

The doorbell rang, and when nobody budged to answer it, Sophia marched into the room with another glass of wine in hand; she'd dispensed with her shoes just as Mandy had done, although she still wore black sheer stockings. "Coming through!" she slurred. "That'll be my parents."

"Here's looking at you, kid," said Newt, in the worst Humphrey Bogart impersonation Crowley had ever heard, as Sophia let him in.

Anathema peered over Newt's shoulder with a smirk; she looked shockingly dapper in uniform, and she'd even managed to get Captain Renault's mustache right.

"She pulls the look off better than you, angel," Crowley remarked, and Aziraphale's scowl deepened.


"I could tell you a thing or two about his pants," said Anathema, winking, and Newt-as-Rick took off his hat in order to hide his face in it. "But I'm not nearly soused enough yet. Waüter!"

Both Adam and Iván came trotting with wine-glass bedecked trays, and Crowley had to admit a certain smug satisfaction in seeing the tables turned. It hadn't been Adam's birthday party, but still.

10:32 PM

"You've done a bang-up job on the bar," Crowley told Iván in Basque, and then continued in Spanish, "I mean really; Pippa hasn't even got a bar in this room, and here you've brought in this...er, this thing...and stools. Stoolssss and the lot. Nine yards. Or is it fathoms? Eh—"

"I hate to tell you," said Iván, in amicable, much-improved English, "but you lisp when drunk."

"Don't you worry," Adam told him, turning around as he dried a lately washed glass with one of Pippa's starched blue linen napkins. "He's always been like that. Comes with the territory."

"What is the territory, beyond that he's your godfather?" Iván asked, pouring Uriel another shot when she leaned on the makeshift bar and snapped her fingers with a wink. "Something else?"

"The territory is that those two—" Adam gestured pointedly at Crowley, and then across the room at Aziraphale, who was engaged in some manner of research-related tête-à-tête with Anathema at Pippa's dining-room table "—can drink loads because they've got stomachs like, oh, what was it in
that *Blackadder* show? Concrete elephants. Anyway, they can *drink*. Rafe and Uriel, too."

Crowley buried his nose back in his martini glass and tipsily congratulated himself on having delivered the *shaken, not stirred* line without losing his composure. Uriel wriggled on her stool so that it tipped closer to Crowley's and settled with a *bump*, almost spilling both their drinks.

"How many of the humans left in our present company," murmured Uriel, drunkenly, "*don't* know our secret—yours and Aziraphale's, mine and Rafe's?" She lowered her voice even more. "Not that we're fucking in our respective pairs, of course, who *doesn't* know that, but I mean—what we *are*?"

"Keep it down," Crowley hissed, and then leaned closer. "More than you'd think. Newt knows, but he prefers not to be confronted with it. The twins don't know, *unless* Anathema's told them, and neither do Rob, Iván, and Pippa. I guess that's a grand total of, er, what, five? Yeah."

At that moment, the doorbell rang. Uriel turned in her seat, craning her neck to see who it might be, but Crowley didn't need to be told twice when he heard Raphael's disturbingly on-pitch sung greeting and Rani's delighted Sheffield-tinged crowing in response. Raphael mustn't have done that good a job of keeping her in check, because she barged on into the dining room and, from the sound of it, death-hugged the *fuck* out of everyone in her path, Aziraphale and Anathema included.

"I stand corrected," Crowley muttered under his breath. "That brings the tally to six."

"What have we got here?" Rani asked, coming up behind Crowley and Uriel. She squeezed them so abruptly with her broad, spread arms that their shoulders knocked together. Crowley grimaced at the splash down the side of his glass while Uriel indifferently licked the side of her hand. "The gang's all here, is it? *Nearly* all here, I should say. Where's that lovely Tracy woman and her lad?"

"They were invited," said Newt, from the far end of the bar, startling Crowley out of his inebriated hyper-focus on Aziraphale's heartwarmingly obnoxious partner in am-drams related crime.

"What happened?" Uriel asked, sounding genuinely disappointed. "Would've liked to have seen them."

Newt-as-Rick-Blaine, by now as drunk as his film counterpart on a bad night (and twice as surly), shook his head sadly into his whisky and said, "Madame Tracy said it's because her niece Petula is in Barbados visiting some of their cousins and wanted them both home so they could all Skype-chat for New Year's, but I know the real reason's that Shadwell is poorly. Has been for a while now."

Crowley felt a cold, familiar fist close around his heart. He'd felt it the day Pippa's husband, Harold, had died; he'd felt it back in April when he and Aziraphale had been on their road trip and got news of Pippa's fall. *Not this*, he thought. *Azrael, it had better be you again. Uriel, so help me, if you've come here and settled to start taking them, making ghosts of them one by one—*

*You scaly, uncharitable bitch,* Uriel thought back, intercepting his inner monologue too easily. Both of them were plastered; ergo, both of them were broadcasting a more or less open channel.

Aziraphale paused in the midst of whatever he was saying to Anathema to glance over, worried.

"*Now* we're talking," said Crowley, aloud, with forced relish. "There's no better way to spend New Year's Eve, is there, than dwelling on the misfortune of *absent* friends?" he asked dryly.

"What he means to say is that he's sorry," said Uriel, reaching to pat Newt's hand. "*I am.*"

"That's unfortunate," Rani sighed, shrugging it off as she let go of them and went to claim one of the stools to Crowley's left. "Barkeep, what have you got that's full o' bite? I'm thirsty."
While Adam and Iván tag-team recited the evening's cocktail, wine, and spirits list, Mandy and Sophia straggled over (both barefoot now, both with hair unpinned) to surprise-hug Rani in a gracefully, if tipsily coordinated attack. Rani turned and kissed each one of them in turn.

"Ask Crowley to make you the thing," insisted Sophia, emphatically poking Rani's upper arm with her index finger. "The thing with the date-palm paste and the who's-a-whatsit from Gomorrah."

"Aye, right," Rani said, without missing a beat, and mouthed thank you at Adam as he handed her a gin and tonic. "Maybe next round, love. How's that fancy greasy-pole internship of yours?"

"Close one," Uriel whispered, elbowing Crowley as she downed her bourbon. "Nice save."

Crowley frowned into his martini; he no longer particularly wanted it. He glanced in the direction of the dining-room table as he rose from the bar, in halfhearted hope of salvation in the form of Aziraphale and Anathema, but neither one of them was there any longer.

Rob sat in one of the chairs, regarding his sippy-cup as if he knew its contents weren't quite the same as what everyone else had.

"How's your drink, then?" Crowley asked, sobering up a touch. "It looks much better than mine."

"It's apple juice from Sainsbury's," said Rob, matter-of-factly. "Yours smells funny. Mine doesn't."

Crowley nodded, shoving his drink across the table. Janet, now in nothing but a passable facsimile of Honey Ryder's iconic white bikini, snagged it as she swaggered past. She winked at Rob.

"D'you know what, Crowley?" asked Pippa's grandson, solemnly. "I reckon girls are weird."

"I reckon people are weird, full stop," said Crowley, flatly. "Couldn't agree with you more."

1 January 2015, 12:00 AM

Crowley was about to creep out of Pippa's bedroom, where he'd been for the better part of an hour with an exceedingly sleepy Rob, when a roar drifted back the hall from the dining room. He blinked, scarcely shielding his immediate area of influence in time. Rob slept on, undisturbed, but Crowley thought dismally to himself, Shit shit shit! I've gone and missed midnight, that does it—

As he slipped into the hallway, closing the door behind him, Mandy stepped out of the shadows, giving him a fright. Her tiara was gone now, and the top layer of her costume stripped. "I've been meaning to ask you this forever," she said softly, an eerie echo of earlier when she'd been cut off by the Device-Pulsifer parents' arrival, "but is what your middle initial stands for?"

"Is what it stands for?" replied Crowley, blinking muzzily. "Sorry. You mean the J?"

Mandy nodded once, emphatically, as much in her cups as Sophia. "Anthony J. Crowley."

Crowley leaned back against the wall, sighing, folding his arms across his chest. "Guess."

"Bond," she recited. "James Bond. You're such a hopeless fanboy, yeah? It must be James."

Crowley gave a slow nod, but he said, "I'd chosen it long before. Bond was just coincidence."
Mandy's eyes went round, luminous; her mind, recalling Comparative Religion at uni, lit up.

"St. Anthony of Padua? Born Fernando Martins in Portugal, eleven ninety-five. Patron saint of lost items, lost faith, and lost people," she said. "James, son of Shelomit and Zebedee, one of Christ's twelve disciples. First to be martyred, James the Great. Santiago de Compostela. St. James's Park."

"Too, too true," said Crowley, quietly. "I was just James first-name variants for a while, as you've probably guessed. Iago, Iacobus, Jacob, the lot. Anthony got tacked on post-thirteenth-century when it seemed like middle names were going to continue to be the done thing. That was a fantastic bit of foresight, too, because the world in which we find ourselves now loves enigmatic initials."

"James," said Mandy, quietly, stepping as close as she dared. "Anthony James Crowley, I—"

Help, Crowley thought, momentarily hypnotized by Mandy's pale stare. Uriel, anybody, this is—

"There you are," called Raphael, flicking every light-switch as he came down the hall. "Would you look at the time. Somebody's cross, young man," he said to Crowley, and Mandy shrank back.

"I can only imagine that he is," Crowley sighed. "I had to put Rob to bed. Where's Aziraphale?"

"Thanks," said Mandy, belatedly, and fled in the same direction from which Raphael had arrived.

"There's no leaving you alone for any length of time with young ladies of a certain persuasion, is there?" Raphael asked, dusting off Crowley's lapels. "Living up to tonight's assumed namesake?"

"She kissed me once," Crowley said. "I have to say, since she's engaged now, I'd rather hoped—"

"Everyone's kissed you at some point or another, or so the rumor amongst the rabble goes. To your credit, they've said you're mostly unwilling. Such a faithful companion to our dear Az, aren't you?"

"Robert was bored and tired," Crowley repeated, "and he looks up to me. I stayed till he slept."

"I don't doubt your virtue, darling," replied Raphael, sounding almost disappointed. "Never for an instant. Now, let's get you out of these clothes—" he snapped his fingers before Crowley could protest "—and into something slightly more becoming. Ah, there. Much better. How's that?"

Crowley blinked at Raphael, who now wore the James Bond get-up (miraculously tailored for a frame as lithe as Crowley's, only taller). He glanced down at his feet, which felt pinched inside the ill-fitting stilettos; he kicked them off and staggered back against the wall, annoyed that he had to tilt his chin up to look Raphael in the eye. The Emcee ensemble was markedly chillier garb. Crowley glared at Raphael and said, "Some fairy godmother you are. Now I'm bloody cold."

Raphael worked his bare feet into the discarded stilettos, sighing with satisfaction. He loomed over Crowley, appraising, and leaned in too close for comfort. "God in heaven," he sighed against Crowley's mouth, and Crowley could smell the Jack Daniel's on his breath, "but you're pretty."

"Save it for Sally," sighed Crowley, pressing a chaste, dry kiss to Raphael's rouged lips, and slipped from between the Archangel and the wall. He staggered into the garish light of the dining room, where almost everyone raised their glasses or applauded him or, in Rani's case, cat-called as he made his way to the living room. He opened the front door and stepped onto the frigid concrete of Pippa's front porch.

The chill hit him like a slap; Raphael's fishnet stockings itched.
Aziraphale, seated on the edge of the porch with his pipe, looked up in dismay, a flawless smoke-ring dissipating before his disbelieving eyes. He made as if to get to his feet, but Crowley snaked one shoeless foot up the angel's shin and pinned him in place with five carefully splayed toes against Aziraphale's knee. The fishnets bothered Crowley's toenail-scales, too. Aziraphale continued to stare.

"Rafe implied you wanted to see me like this," Crowley sighed, scrunching his toes against the fabric of Aziraphale's outdated trousers. "Looks like he's right. I'm telling you, though, Cabaret!Scarlett isn't crossover I could've pulled off with a straight face. I would've laughed all night."

"I'd hardly have expected otherwise," sighed Aziraphale, taking Crowley's hands for balance as Crowley settled awkwardly in Aziraphale's lap. "**Gracious**, that can't be comfortable."

"It's not," said Crowley, grimacing. "Neither the outfit, *nor* hard-angled pavement at my shins."

"Miss Tomlin has asked you her question, no doubt," Aziraphale remarked, wiping Pippa's lipstick off Crowley's ear with one thumb and Raphael's smear off his lower lip with the other. "**Dear me.**"

"It's a game, haven't they said?" Crowley muttered. "See if you can steal a kiss from the Serpent."

"By any other name," murmured Aziraphale, fondly stroking Crowley's cheeks. "You and your roses," he continued, "and your beach-finds and your cookery and your *ducks*. Anthony James."

"Here's a secret," Crowley whispered, tilting his head even closer. "I like it better when it's you."

Aziraphale set his pipe aside so that he was no longer in danger of tipping ash down Crowley's **décolletage**, but not before Crowley had managed to snatch it and steal a puff. He set his hands back on Crowley's cheeks and said, "It's two thousand and fifteen. Ten years, Crowley."

"Nuh-uh, *much* longer," Crowley scoffed, setting his sheer-gloved hands on Aziraphale's coat-covered arms. Without the ridiculous antebellum hat, Aziraphale *did* look startlingly handsome. "But if you're counting from the moment we shacked up, *fine*, it'll be a decade come November."

"Frankly, my dear," replied Aziraphale, "I don't give a damn," and stole the soundest kiss yet.
It's All Fun and Games

Chapter Summary

For my Tumblr-follower readers, who have been waiting several chapters for this.

27 January 2015, 8:02 PM

"Easy," Crowley instructed, cross-legged on the carpet with a piece of popcorn held out at arm's length, glancing sidelong at Rob to make sure he was watching. "He's braver than ever, incorrigible git that he is, but it's still possible to scare him off. Okay, you little monster, come and get—"

"I hope you're joking," said Rob, sounding somewhat concerned, and crawled forward on all fours to offer his own piece of popcorn to the mouse. "You aren't very scary-looking to me," he told it.

The mouse twitched its whiskers thoughtfully, skittered forward, and politely took Rob's popcorn.

"Sure," Crowley said. "Spurn your oldest friend, your only defender in this world, why don't you?"

"I can't believe you encourage that spoiled beast," Mandy said, coming in from the living room with a small, scuffed Tupperware box under her arm. "Okay, people, we're on a schedule!" she shouted, and the hum of several lively conversations happening simultaneously throughout the cottage ceased. "I need somebody to help me get these extenders into the dining-room table. Adam? Hey, where the devil is Sophia tonight?" she demanded as Adam came in from the study with a chagrined-looking Uriel on his heels. "And Raphael? At this rate, we're short two cracking players."

"Soph had to work late," Adam explained, "and then she's heading to her parents' house at nine."

"Rafe's out and about," Uriel said, fiddling with her heavily waxed hair. "Where's Iván tonight?" She eyed the table appraisingly, glancing over her shoulder into the living room, through which she'd just strolled with Adam. Pippa was still watching something on telly with Aziraphale.

"You wouldn't," said Crowley, waving to catch her eye; meanwhile, Rob squealed, startling everyone. The mouse had climbed into his trembling, outstretched palm to get several pieces of popcorn he'd placed there in careful arrangement.

"Iván's getting paid time and a half to cater somebody's bat mitzvah," said Mandy, raising her eyebrows at Adam, who in turn raised his at Uriel. "I don't know, squirt looks distracted enough, and we haven't got much time," she reasoned. "Pippa's got a strict bedtime edict for him from Nicola."

Uriel snapped her fingers, raising her arms into a casual, expansive stretch as Rob looked up. "Then let's get this show on the road," she agreed, and when Rob glanced back at Crowley, his expression one of amazement because the mouse hadn't left his hand, Crowley couldn't help but notice that the table was conveniently in its extended state, accompanied by many extra chairs.

In the next room, the sound of the telly died down, and Pippa came shuffling in guiltily, sans cane, with Aziraphale trailing patiently behind her. "What's all the fuss, then?" she demanded. "Time to play your game? I've been looking forward to this, you know. One cannot live on sudoku alone."

"Right," Mandy instructed, helping Crowley tug Rob to his feet, both of them careful not to dislodge
the mouse, who seemed quite happy to remain perched on Rob's arm so long as the lad kept providing him with popcorn (Crowley had the sinking feeling he'd be on miracling-away-rodent-poo-duty for the remainder of the evening). "Everybody grab a seat," she said, snatching the popcorn bowl while Crowley led Rob over to the table and got him situated in one of the end chairs.

"Where on earth do you store all of these?" Pippa marveled, permitting Aziraphale to pull the chair caddy-corner to Rob's right elbow for her. Crowley gave him the oh-Lord-heal-this-bike look, and Aziraphale glanced back with one of his more irritated variations on come-off-it-you-old-serpent. "Eight chairs! Where were these during the nuptials we've held here? Forget your own head next."

"I said we'd be glad of them one day," said Aziraphale, crisply, and sat down to Pippa's right. "I'd rather like to think that day has come," he said, preening; Crowley sat down opposite him just to be a nuisance within easy footsie-reach, indicating that Mandy should sit at his left hand.

Uriel took the seat to Crowley's right, caddy-cornering Rob's left. "Is he old enough for this?"

"I'm going to be seven in June," Rob said matter-of-factly. "Mum lets me watch grown-up shows 'cause they're full of nonsense. I 'spect this game's just like that, isn't it, Gran?"

"That's right, Rob-my-lad," said Pippa, winking at Adam as he took his seat to Aziraphale's right, completing the arrangement (save for the empty far-end chair, although Crowley doubted the mouse would voluntarily relocate to it any time soon). "Pay us no mind, or laugh if we sound silly."

"You always sound silly to me," Rob insisted, letting the mouse crawl into the breast-pocket of his collared school shirt. He dropped in a few pieces of popcorn as an afterthought, patting gently.

"All right, listen up," said Mandy, raising her voice, opening the Tupperware box to reveal six stacks of square-shaped white cards, one stack of which had black marker-hashes scrawled on the reverse. "My deck, my rules, tight schedule. We're going to play twenty hands; I've randomly pre-selected nineteen of the twenty black cards, all of which are single-blank statements, with the exception of one two-blank statement that I thought would be good fun." She counted out the top twenty marker-hashed cards and set them in the middle of the table. "Rather than the usual ten cards each and drawing each time you use one up, I'm dealing each of us twenty-one cards. What you get at the start is what you have to work with for the entirety of the game, no buts." She paused when dealing brought her to Rob's seat. "Hey, Adam, d'you reckon we should have..."

Wonderful, Crowley thought, regarding Aziraphale's worried expression. Corrupt the minor.

"Rando Cardrissian rule, brilliant," Adam said, reaching across the table to put Rob in control of the likewise home-printed Kickstarter instruction sheet. "Rob, you and your new friend have got a really important job, yeah? What you've got to do is flip over one card from that pile in front of you on every turn. Don't look at them, because what's on them isn't important till they're flipped."

"All right," said Rob, shrugging, not making eye contact with Adam, busy stroking the mouse.

"Rafe's going to be sorry he missed this," said Uriel, regretfully. "Who's the first card czar?"

"I am," Mandy said, almost finished dealing. "We'll go clockwise around the table, got it?"

"This is so exciting," said Pippa, happily, and helped herself to some popcorn. "Let's start."

Mandy nodded, finished dealing, and broke the unwieldy tower of white cards back down into a set of smaller stacks in the Tupperware box. She sat down and reached for the stack of black cards at the center of the table, flipping over the one on top. "What's the most emo?" she read off.
Morbidly curious, Crowley perused his hand while everyone except Rob did the same. It was shaping up to be a whole passel of what Mandy liked to call *hell cards* (as in *going to*), and it would be just his luck, wouldn't it? *Classist undertones, A defective condom, The Underground Railroad, Drinking alone, The American Dream, Dead parents, Bling, Dry heaving, Embryonic stem cells, Lance Armstrong's missing testicle, My inner demons, Grave robbing, The violation of our most basic human rights, John Wilkes Booth, Elderly Japanese men, Not reciprocating oral sex, The South, Saxophone solos, Opposable thumbs, Harry Potter erotica, and Bees?*

At best, he might stand a chance at actually winning, and at worst, he'd scar poor Rob for life. In the case of this particular black card, he decided that *Drinking alone* and *My inner demons* were too literal and not exactly true, so he played *Grave robbing* with a confident flourish. Those damn Victorians and their medieval-armor lust.

"Fucking hell, you guys," said Mandy, flipping the cards that had been played in addition to Crowley's: *Science, The folly of man, Passive-aggressive Post-It notes, Finger painting, and Ghosts.* Aziraphale looked rather pleased with himself, and Pippa was chewing her lip. Adam and Uriel both seemed smug, Crowley doubted that *Grave robbing* stood a chance in bloody *Eden* at winning against this lot. Mandy picked up the Post-It note card and waved it. "Who played this? Ace!"

"I did," said Adam, with restrained pride, as Mandy handed him the winning cards. "I wish I was kidding, but Soph does this around the house, and it is *serious business,*" he said with mock solemnity. "I reckon it's an in-joke by now. Thanks," he said, grinning at Mandy.

"I thought *Ghosts* would take it for sure," Uriel muttered. "You ought to see the poor sods."

Crowley narrowed his eyes at Aziraphale. "You played *Science,* didn't you? Newton, is it?"

"You had as much contact with Sir Isaac as I had, if not more," Aziraphale sniffed, but he brushed his sock-covered toe along Crowley's bare instep in appreciation. "You were *Grave robbing,* yes?"

Crowley nodded gloomily while Pippa exclaimed, "I may be new at this, but I was certain *The folly of man* was the way forward. Dear me, Robert, that means you must've played *Finger painting* on behalf of our furry friend. A nice and well-behaved card, don't you think?"

Rob nodded absently, letting the mouse crawl from his wrist to his elbow. "Who's next?"

"Adam's card czar," said Mandy, and Adam flipped *During sex, I like to think about ____ ?* to a hum of soft laughter around the table. "Poor Crowley," she consoled. "*Grave robbing* was close!"

"This sucks," Crowley announced, narrowing his final choices to *Harry Potter erotica* and *Saxophone solos* before playing the latter in a fit of pique. If that didn't annoy Aziraphale, nothing would. The remainder of the white cards around the table went down with shocking swiftness.

Adam flipped the remaining white cards and blinked at them, clearly trying not to laugh as he read them out: *50,000 volts straight to the nipples, The clitoris, The penny whistle solo from "My Heart Will Go On," Natalie Portman, and An Oedipus complex.* Rob made a perplexed face at the latter, silently sounding it out, and Crowley could only infer that's the one he'd peeked at before flipping it.

"As much as I'm torn between sax solos and the penny whistle," he said consideringly, "I'm going to enforce a tie-breaker and go with the Oedipus complex. Who played that? Anyone? Bueller?"

Rob eagerly raised his hand, apparently excited to know he'd accidentally impressed an adult.

While the boy took the mouse's Rando card for safekeeping, Pippa muttered to herself about Miss Portman being a perfectly attractive young woman; Mandy supposed aloud that the clitoris might
have been a bit too honestly literal. Crowley and Uriel high-fired one another over their appropriately ridiculous musical responses, a split-second after which they both stared at Aziraphale in horror. He flipped 50,000 volts straight to the nipples back into the Tupperware box, glaring.

"That's one use for a weapon like that, I guess?" said Adam, under his breath; Mandy went purple.

"What gets better with age?" Aziraphale read off the black card he'd just selected, by way of declaring himself card czar and clearly the only creature at the table paying proper attention.

Crowley considered playing Drinking alone before deciding the literal route might be both best and sufficiently snarky to make a point. He played Elderly Japanese men and watched Mandy closely as she shuffled through her hand with brows fiercely knit. Everyone else had already gone.

Aziraphale continued the prim-and-proper act as he read the other cards off one by one: Daddy issues, Pterodactyl eggs, Getting naked and watching Nickelodeon, My vagina, and Unfathomable stupidity. He didn't crack up, which disappointed Crowley, although he did blink rapidly and purse his lips over the last three. The angel announced, as if put-upon, "I suppose it's watching whatever telly one wishes to watch, and in whatever state of undress one sees fit.

Pippa crowed in triumph, leaning to kiss Aziraphale's cheek as she took the cards from him. Rob clapped off-rhythm, turning his head to let the mouse, on his shoulder, curiously nose at his cheek.

"I was sure the pterodactyls had it," said Adam. "Oh well. Who played Unfathomable stupidity?"

Rob waved his hand in the air, pointing at the mouse. Mandy smiled grimly, pointing to Daddy issues, and said, self-deprecatingly, "I would know." Crowley grudgingly fessed up to Elderly Japanese men and got amiable boos from around the table. Everyone, everyone, looked at Uriel.

"What?" she demanded, shrugging, and winked at Crowley. "It totally does. Just ask Raphael."

To a chorus of groans and Rob asking What's so funny? several times before giving up, Pippa selected the next black card, cleared her throat, and regarded each of her fellow players with relish.

"I drink to forget blank," she announced, putting on a gorgeous, falsely dour tone for the purpose.

Crowley let his toes creep idly up Aziraphale's ankle, considering his options, pleased to see Aziraphale squirm in his seat. Drinking alone was redundant, if ridiculous in surrealist fashion; John Wilkes Booth and The (American) South, while excellent options and accurate, weren't likely to win with anyone but Aziraphale, who wasn't card czar anymore. He was down to Harry Potter erotica (he'd gone and took a look now and then, and had always instantly regretted it) and My inner demons. He considered Pippa-as-card-czar and threw down My inner demons. He couldn't help but notice that Uriel looked disgusted and everyone else looked varying shades of troubled.

Pippa read the cards as solemn decrees, never once losing her composure: Tentacle porn, Former President George W. Bush, Civilian casualties, Guys who don't call, and Stormtroopers. She handed the latter back to Rob and said, "Tell the mouse I'm dreadfully sorry." Crowley sat back in his chair, eyes narrowed, watching her unhurried deliberation while everyone else began to sweat. You're not as clueless as you look, he thought.

"Dear heart," said Pippa, finally, handing Crowley his card along with the black one, "I know."

Blushing furiously, Crowley pocketed the cards like the hard-won treasure they were, and then proceeded to watch, astonished, as Pippa flipped each white card correctly back at the person who'd played it: Tentacle porn at Aziraphale, Former President George W. Bush at Mandy, Guys who don't call at Uriel, and Civilian casualties at Adam. She tilted her head at the young man
"A long time ago," said Adam, slowly, "I used to worry about stuff like that. Quite often, actually."

"Complete throw-away on my part," Uriel sighed, folding her arms. "Nothing to see here. Pffft."

Rather a close call, wasn't it? Aziraphale asked, catching Crowley's eyes with a wistful half-smile as Crowley took his turn as card czar and flipped the next black. He's haunted by the knowledge of what damage was caused, what lives were lost, before he set things back to rights. He still is.

Tentacle porn, angel? Crowley shot back, more to avoid dredging up memories than anything else, and then read off the card, "In a world ravaged by blank, our only solace is blank." He added, "You'll put the first one on the bottom and the second one on top of it if you know what's good for you. Believe me. I'll read your cards in the wrong order given the slightest opportunity."

"No shit, Sherlock," Mandy muttered under her breath; at the end of the table, Rob giggled.

Crowley gathered the responses, planning to read them with due ceremony. "In a world ravaged by Emotions, our only hope is Jibber-jabber. I buy it, but it lacks je ne sais quoi. In a world ravaged by AXE Body Spray, our only hope is Lumberjack fantasies. Nice, but something of a mixed message? In a world ravaged by Geese, our only hope is Flying sex snakes. Okay, who played that?" he demanded, scanning the table for a guilty expression, but seven blank pairs of eyes stared back at him, the mouse's included. "In a world ravaged by The World of Warcraft, our only hope is Being a motherfucking sorcerer. Were I still in my mid-eighties-to-early-nineties gaming phase, I'd be all over that." He took a deep breath, preparing to read off the two serious contenders. "In a world ravaged by White privilege, our only hope is Brown people," he read approvingly, and then, "In a world ravaged by Justin Bieber, our only hope is Dying. I like how you people think. Can I declare a draw?"

"Jesus, no," said Mandy. "That would be against my house rules. Just pick one."

"He's not in your house," Rob pointed out. "We're in his house, so he can do that."

"Thanks," Crowley said, waving the two winning sets. "Out with it. Perpetrators?"

Aziraphale and Pippa raised their hands; Mandy's jaw proceeded to hit the tabletop.

"Before you go getting any ideas," Crowley cautioned, handing the sets to the winners at random, "I don't want to know who played which. It'd spoil my fun. Maybe I'll take a stab at guessing later."

"I played Geese and Flying sex snakes," Adam volunteered, sounding slightly glum. "I tried."

"And a good try it was," Pippa consoled him. "Dear Rando had Emotions and Jibber-jabber."

"Can't even win as a motherfucking sorcerer," Mandy sighed, high-fiving Uriel. "Lumberjacks?"

"Yep," said Uriel. "My hand blows. Those were my only throw-aways that had a chance in hell."

"Seeing as I'm not there anymore, they didn't really," said Crowley. "Someone pass the popcorn?"

The next few hands passed in a blur of hilarity. In a turn of astonishing bad luck, Mandy's second stint as card czar produced How did I lose my virginity? as the next black card. Crowley played Bees? with his eyes firmly closed to the rest of the options in his hand, somehow winning against Aziraphale's tongue-in-cheek Waiting 'til marriage, Pippa's well-intended Dental dams ("You did say you experimented at uni, didn't you? I hope you did so safely!"), Adam's sex-toys-and-great-
taste-evocative *Shiny objects*, Uriel's deadpan *Masturbation*, and Rando's *Overcompensation*.

Adam's second stint as card czar pulled *Why am I sticky?*, and, true to mid-game form, responses waxed cutthroat. Aziraphale won with *A Super Soaker full of cat pee*, appealing to the boy's residual nostalgia for his days with the Them. Meanwhile, Uriel lamented that *Multiple stab wounds* wasn't clever or gory enough, Crowley remained sure that *Harry Potter erotica* was the correct answer as long as one assumed they were talking about Adam in his teens, Mandy and Pippa griped to each other about the ineffectiveness of *Wet dreams* and *Pulling out*, and Rando kept both whisker-twitchy and mum about his inscrutable play of *Silence*. Rob was having a blast.

Aziraphale executed his second turn as card czar in better stride than his last, taking Pippa's theatrics as an example. *But before I kill you, Mr. Bond, I must show you ____* tripped off his lips far more seductively than it ought to've done, or perhaps that was because he was looking right at Crowley while he said it. Crowley was so flustered that he couldn't decide between *Classist undertones* and *Not reciprocating oral sex*, so he played the latter just to get back at the bastard. Pippa's *A can of whoop-ass* beat all contenders; Crowley now suspected Aziraphale and Pippa of being deeper in cahoots than usual. Adam complained loudly that his *Extremely tight pants* or Mandy's *An uppercut* ought to have won. Uriel despaired of her choice (*A mating display*), while Rob and the mouse remained untroubled by the part they'd played in conveying *Smallpox blankets*.

"I'm the czar again!" exclaimed Pippa, gleefully, overturning *What will always get you laid?* with a saucy wink. She didn't read the card aloud, but everyone got right to work on their selections.

"Haven't won a fucking hand," Mandy lamented, shuffling cards. "Damn my limiting the pool."

"Hey, neither have I," said Uriel, giving her a sympathetic frown. "Time to play dirty, my friend."

Crowley hoped he might win with *Opposable thumbs*, because, honestly, getting laid without those was actually kind of difficult. He was almost sure that *My humps* or *A sea of troubles* might appeal to Pippa's stealth sense of humor, or even *An erection that lasts more than four hours* or *Picking up girls at the abortion clinic*, but somehow it was Mandy's *Making a pouty face* that came top.

"My humps, as it were, wouldn't suffice?" Aziraphale asked, casting Pippa a sidelong glance.

"Nor my opposable thumbs," said Crowley, shrugging. "Takes all kinds, doesn't it, angel?"

Mandy did several victory-dance laps around the table to the tune of *Bad Romance* on Crowley's iPhone (pilfered expressly for the purpose) while Uriel indignantly realized she'd been *skipped* in the first card-czar go-round and declared it a stroke of good fortune that she'd had an additional chance to win (but to no avail). Her first go at being czar resulted in *What's a girl's best friend?*.

"I don't know what this one means," said Rob, tossing *Genital piercings* face-up on the table.

After reassuring the boy that he didn't *need* to know just yet, Pippa won with a ballsy, straight-faced play of *Vigilante justice*. Adam was a close second with *Vehicular manslaughter*, and Pippa even went so far as to rank the rest in order of strength in her regard: Mandy's *Attitude*, Crowley's *Bling*, and Aziraphale's extremely inspired choice of *A vagina that leads to another dimension*.

"You ought to've won," Crowley whispered; that got him warm toes all the way up his thigh.

For his next czar-ship under the banner of *What will I bring back in time to convince people that I am a powerful wizard?*, in a moment of vain sentimentality, Crowley chose Uriel's *Shapeshifters* for the win even when faced with the likes of Rando's *Serfdom*, Adam's *Boogers*, and Pippa's *Hope*. Aziraphale and Mandy got soundly castigated for their predictability (*8 oz. of sweet Mexican black-
tar heroin and Crystal meth respectively). The mouse, having attempted to sneak off, had been lured securely back with further offers of popcorn and mango from the ducks' stash.

Mandy's third rodeo as card czar, in felicitous alignment with her degree in religious studies, brought down When Pharaoh remained unmoved, Moses called down a plague of ____ . Adam freely admitted that his Mouth herpes was as much a throw-away as Rando's Horse meat and Uriel's Grandma. It was down to Crowley's Dead parents (entirely true, given how many of the firstborn taken in the most grievous of God's scourges on Egypt were adults with children of their own), Aziraphale's My genitals ("Nice sword euphemism, angel!") , and Pippa's The Jews for the win.

Unsurprisingly, with such deftly astute cultural and political acumen on her side, Pippa won.

Rob yawned, catching Crowley's attention. Pippa's grandson had the mouse cradled in both hands: a warm, sleeping ball of ashy silver fur cupped up against his cheek. "Are we done yet?" he asked.

Mandy glanced at the time on Crowley's phone, surrendering the gadget back to its owner. "We got through twelve rounds," she said. "That isn't half bad. One more for the road, though?"

"Hell yes, one more for the road," Uriel insisted. "I've only won a single goddamn hand!"

"Excellent," Mandy said, offering Aziraphale his choice of the remaining eight black cards at random. "Our final card czar commands," she said, tossing the others in the Tupperware box.

Aziraphale read off the card, sounding as if he might choke, "What's there a ton of in heaven?"

"Before you play," Mandy announced, "count your remaining white cards. Due to my raging fuck-up on the limited-hand front and on skipping one of Uriel's czar turns, some of you will have eleven cards left, and some of you will have nine or ten. If you don't have eleven cards, draw till you do."

Adam, Uriel, and Pippa took this for the fantastic news it was, and drew cards accordingly.


"My dear, do us a favor and please just play your card," sighed Aziraphale, closing his eyes.

"Whatever," Crowley agreed cheerfully, snaking his toes up Aziraphale's trouser-legs, curling all ten suggestively against his calves. He threw down Drinking alone, face-up, without a second thought.

"Ooh, burn!" shouted Uriel, playing Flightless birds. "Mine's the worst joke ever. The. Worst."

Rob flipped Raptor attacks nonchalantly off the Rando pile. "I've seen this movie. It's the best."

Mandy drew right index finger and thumb across her lips. She tossed down Friends with benefits.

"This is a hell card, right?" asked Adam, hopefully, playing Dead babies. "I'm sorry. Really sorry."

"Good Lord," said Pippa, lamenting. "I'm done for." She played Free samples, bowing her head.

Crowley nudged Aziraphale's calves with his feet, which hadn't budged. "Angel. Psstt. It's time."

Aziraphale opened his eyes, considering the conveniently face-up options at his disposal. He disposed of Flightless birds and Raptor attacks without so much as blinking. Uriel launched into a silent fit of rage, and Robert stroked the sleeping mouse, whispering it was all right, they'd tried.

"Dear lady," said Aziraphale, waving Free samples at Pippa, "correct. But you've won enough."
"God fucking *damn* it," said Pippa, crisply, earning a wide-eyed look from Robert. "Shush, you."

"Very clever," Aziraphale told Adam, flicking *Dead babies* back at him with flawless fingernails.

"But it wasn't enough," said Adam, knowingly, and dropped the card in the Tupperware box.

Aziraphale considered the remaining two cards and held up one in each hand. "An impasse."

"Oh, come on!" Mandy exclaimed. "Don't do the merciful two-winners thing. That's not *you.*"

Aziraphale tilted his head at her, his blade-bright eyes glinting dangerously. Crowley shivered.

"Much though it pains me to deprive you of your second win of the evening," said the angel, "I must beg to differ." He flipped the card at her, and then saluted in deference. "Paradise produces more enemies than not, I fear, keen student of the ages though you are." He looked to Crowley.

"Enemies or soul-mates," Crowley agreed, claiming back his card and the black card to boot. "Very few cases in between. Hang around long enough," he said, inclining his head, "and you'll see."

"Cut that shit out," said Uriel, snapping her fingers their faces. "C'mon, count up. Who won?"

"Hand in your shit, or forever hold your peace," said Mandy, indicating that everyone should hand her the proof of their winnings, including Rob on behalf of Rando. "Thank God the mouse *didn't.*"

"We're not naming him Rando," said Crowley, sternly. "Just so you know. I absolutely forbid it."

"Me, Mandy, Uriel, and the mouse won a single round each," said Adam. "We don't even count."

"Then it's between Crowley, Az, and Pip," replied Mandy, brusquely, counting piles of cards. Several seconds later, after counting only two piles, her eyes flew up. "News flash," she said. "Az two, Crowley *three.* It's down to our favorite yellow-eyed weirdo and the grand old girl herself."

*Weirdo?* Crowley thought, but abandoned his brief quibble in order to watch Aziraphale's snit.

"Pippa wins with four!" Mandy exclaimed, grinning. "You never should've granted the draw," she chided Crowley, tapping the side of his foot with her toe. "You would've tied with her for the win."

"I have a confession to make," said Pippa, meekly. "I play that *Xyzzzy* clone online with strangers."

"Eh," said Crowley, trapping Aziraphale's foot between his. "I'll take the consolation prize instead."
Chapter Summary

For this anon, who had no idea they were requesting fic in addition to the inventory.

*Epitonium scalare, August 1780*

Before he could quite help it, Aziraphale yawned, fanning himself with the auction program.

"Come out for the day, won't you, dear boy," Crowley parroted under his breath. "It'll be fun."

Aziraphale elbowed Crowley in the ribs, hoping the action might go a long way toward wrinkling Crowley's flawlessly embroidered coat. "Perhaps it would be fun if they'd just get to the books."

"Heh, I don't know," said Crowley, appraisingly, tilting his bidding card with a flourish so that the auctioneer took notice. "That's a fine specimen of a—what is it? I wasn't paying attention."

"*Diminutive* is what it is," Aziraphale muttered, squinting at the white object the auctioneer held between thumb and forefinger, perusing the program. "Precious wentletrap. Fine condition."

"Oh," said Crowley, unexpectedly, "I get it. Naturalism and collecting are all the rage amongst nobility. Leave it to humans to find a way of profiting off bits and bobs of G—earth's creatures."

"It says here such illustrious figures as Johan de la Faille and Cosimo de' Medici had one," murmured Aziraphale, taking interest. "*Courtesy of old Georgius Rumphius's D'Amboinsche Rariteitkamer.* Such a quaint volume. Would they had an unscathed copy of that on offer instead."

Crowley scratched uncomfortably under his damp cravat. "Hold on, angel. What did I bid?"

"Forty pounds," said Aziraphale, noting that Crowley's eyes behind his round, smoky quartz eyeglass lenses had gone wide. "As much as gentlemen such as ourselves might pay to keep tidily appointed rooms for a year. What do you pay for your current accommodation, one wonders?"

"Forty pounds," Crowley repeated, almost angry enough to hiss, "for a ruddy blessed sea-shell?"

"It says here," said Aziraphale, idly enjoying his companion's misery, "that Dutch collectors have gone so far as to pay a small fortune. *Hundreds* of pounds, my dear, when you work out the exchange rate. One might even say that, for an idle jibe, you're getting off lightly. A bargain."

"Sold!" exclaimed the auctioneer, striding jauntily down the aisle so as to show off the quality of his well-cobbled heels. "*To the gentleman in the, ah, avant-garde spectacles. Your gastropod, sir.*"

Crowley leaned forward, squinting at the shell being held mere inches from his nose, and Aziraphale wondered why it wasn't simply being laid by for collection and payment afterward. The stir around them, however, made it obvious: this was a *curiosity*, and the auctioneer wanted to let the crowd know what an unparalleled opportunity they'd let slip through their fingers.

Something else was happening, and that was the change in Crowley's expression.
"Delicate," he said, reaching to brush one exquisitely-ribbed whorl. "Uncanny."

"Regrettably, it was not live-taken," said the auctioneer, turning the shell so Crowley could see the absence of its operculum. He lowered his voice and added, "Will you pay now, sir, and save us the trouble after? Your eyes. I’m afraid one of the ladies in the row ahead has lodged a complaint—"

Aziraphale bristled, dipping his hand into his coat for show, producing the requisite cash.

"Such a shame," he told the auctioneer, "but we really must be going. And here I had been so very much looking forward to your offerings of a more literary bent. I had quite hoped to bankrupt myself on your Breeches Bible, but what hope can one have for the quality of your printed matter when your manners suffer an affliction far more grievous than my friend's? Crowley, let's—"

Crowley snatched the shell out of the auctioneer's hand, closing it in his fist gently as a prayer.

"It better not have been taken live," he snapped, swishing into the aisle. "I'll pay three times the starting bid on your damned Bible; send it wherever this fop—" he indicated Aziraphale with a wave as he started toward the exit "—tells you to send it. Which I expect will be his tip of a bindery."

With that, Crowley sauntered out, leaving both Aziraphale and the auctioneer utterly speechless.

"Master Fell, sir," stammered the auctioneer. "I did not—that is, if I'd known you were here—"

"It's of little consequence," said Aziraphale, and produced a slip of paper from his other pocket.

*Lyncina aurantium*, May 1827

"The sea air will do us good, so you said," Aziraphale groused. "It's quite bucketing down."

"I never promised you perfect weather," said Crowley, tugging Aziraphale in beneath the umbrella as they navigated the narrow streets of Lyme Regis. "Neither did the Man Upstairs, at that rate."

"That's enough of your cheek," said Aziraphale, pulling his coat tighter about himself. "An excellent example of what got you into trouble in the first place, no doubt. Where are we going?"

"This way," said Crowley, stolidly ignoring the barb. "Have you been following the papers? That Anning woman and her brother have opened a fossil shop. Can you imagine? Joke's on them."

"They'll make out like bandits," Aziraphale replied, dashing out from under the umbrella, taking shelter beneath the awning. "So-called prehistoric lizard bones have taken London by storm."

Crowley closed the umbrella and shook it out, propping it against the storefront. "Shall we?"

Mary didn't turn to greet them as they removed their hats and stepped inside. At least Aziraphale assumed it was the proprietress, for she was deep in conversation over an ammonite specimen with another young woman, probably a tourist, who had an eager five or six year-old girl by the hand.

"What if the joke's that they're not a joke?" Crowley pondered aloud, holding up a polished belemnite spear for Aziraphale to inspect. "What if these once lived and breathed and *swam*?"

"Then there were once denizens of Creation far stranger than your ilk," said Aziraphale, testily.
"For my money," said Crowley, taking up a nearby wicker shopping basket that had been abandoned by some other patron, and set the belemnite in it, "this chunk of dirt, rock, water, and whatever else must've had stuff on it during the experimental phase while we were all stuck scurrying about gossiping and planning and wondering what the hell He was playing at. And then, Bob's your uncle, all those crawling, running, plodding, roaring things with weird teeth look kind of pointless. Bam, dispense with the lot. Cataclysm. Ice, fire, illness, doesn't matter. Game over, start again."

Aziraphale frowned and picked up a seashell that had decidedly not turned to stone. "It's not for us to question what was going on back then," he said, critically studying the tiger cowrie, "or what's going on now. Best not to speculate, I always say. Ineffability is a bugger, but what can you—"

"I don't think our hostess appreciates your turn of phrase," said Crowley, inclining his head at the black-clad shop owner, who was glaring at them. The tourist had covered her daughter's ears.

"See to it you don't drop that," Mary told Aziraphale, her eyes flashing. "It came from half the world away. Costs a pretty penny, and it isn't even of an age with the rest of my stock."

"The prettiest of them all, do you think?" mused Aziraphale, idly. "Is it rare, this one?"

"Not as rare as gold type," she said, turning back to the tourist. "Like your friend's eyes."

Crowley blinked behind his spectacles, which were by now almost fifty years out of date.

"How is that possible?" Crowley muttered under his breath. "I've only ever seen mottled—"

Aziraphale held the tiger cowrie up to the light, and then folded it between his hands. He blinked, parting his fingers, and Crowley gasped.

Aziraphale had seen the native ceremonial necklets that had come back from Fiji. That color existed all right, albeit never so luminous, never so changing as Crowley's eyes. Muted and buttery, but striking. Dusk-eyes, unhurried, sleepy. Unworried.

Crowley gaped at the transfigured cowrie in Aziraphale's grasp. "Mistress Anning, your latest shell-shipment hid a gem amongst pebbles. I won't let this mountebank cheat you. How much?"

Mary turned back to them, annoyed, but her demeanor changed when she saw the shell. "I'll tan Joseph's hide for not having noticed," she said (ah, yes: her brother and business partner). "Let me see," she said, coming over, tourist and daughter forgotten. "Can you pay more than a museum?"

Aziraphale watched Crowley bite his lip. He'd done it out of spite, of course, just to watch Crowley, with new-collector fervor, pay hundreds, but it occurred to him that was too-harsh retribution for foul weather on an admittedly last-minute outing. The demon heaved a sigh.

"Nearly as much," Crowley said. "Maybe. We don't even know what you ask for the tigers?"

"I'd ask as much as a bit of backbone from one of my ancient sea serpents," said Mary, studying Crowley's face, "but there's a kindness about you, a care your friend lacks. What's your offer?"

Aziraphale cleared his throat, offering the shell to Mary. "Wrap it up, dear lady. We'll have it."

"An order to wrap merchandise isn't an offer," she said, smirking. "You with the eyes. Well?"

"Angel," said Crowley, defiantly lifting his chin. "This is several birthdays' penance at least."

Aziraphale bristled at Crowley's brazen use of the word within earshot of mortals, but he was the one
to blame. "Ten pounds," he said evenly, not letting Mary take it from him just yet. "Agreed?"

"Twenty," she countered, tugging lightly. "This isn't our regular fare. We don't know how well the rest will sell, and God knows if we'll see another as rare as this. Twenty or you'll have naught."

"Ten each," Crowley said, already at his bill-fold. "We're agreed indeed. Forget the birthdays."

"Twenty," Aziraphale said, producing the full sum from his coat pocket. He was so adept at finessing minor miracles, or so Crowley had reminded him on numerous occasions, that he'd got it into his head to perhaps master the way humans went about faking the genuine article on stage.

"You're a strange sort," said Mary, taking the shell, and went to wrap it. "Stranger than him."

"Hear that?" asked Crowley, in a whisper. "Haven't got a patch on you. Wonders never cease."

"I'll have your ten quid or several bottles of wine, whichever comes first," Aziraphale told him.

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**Charonia tritonis, July 1956**

"Here's a neat thing I've learned," said Crowley, conversationally, bending to roll up the cuffs of his infuriatingly trendy denim trousers. "It's a lot more fun if you go looking for them yourself."

"This town isn't exactly, er, known for its shelling," Aziraphale sighed, toeing distastefully out of his shoes, glancing about to make sure none of the sundry humans were watching before miracling away his socks. "It's known for academics, the picturesque cathedral ruin, and *perhaps* haggis."

"You like haggis," Crowley reminded him, cheerfully swinging his pail. "Low tide waits for no one," he said, tugging at Aziraphale's wrist. "Let's go down. Yes, the water's freezing, but—"

"Somehow I doubt they want to be disturbed," Aziraphale replied, inclining his head at the pair of young men already shuffling along in the shallows. One of them walked with a cane. The other had something in his hands, was turning it over and over in the sunlight, marveling at it.

"I don't care how small this beach is," said Crowley, marching down to the water's edge. "Fine, be a spoilsport. No wonder the Scots love you," he said, already mucking about in the saturated sand with one scaly-toed foot. "*Hmmmm*, limpets. Always damaged limpets. I'll die of boredom."

"I *told* you we ought to have gone to Scarborough instead," Aziraphale called after him. "The tide pools there hold all sorts, or so I've heard. Since when did St. Andrews yield up wentletraps?"

"Wrong part of the world for those," said Crowley, idly. "And, if you recall, I already have one. Your rare finds here are altogether different. I'll lower my standards, though. Anything that's not a limpet, not broken, and otherwise looks interesting," he said, "I'll take it. So look sharp."

Aziraphale sighed in defeat, shuffling down to the surf, straggling along behind him. "Is there anything particular you're looking for, my dear? Describe so that I can—*ah*. Know what I'm after."

Crowley wasn't listening. He'd dropped to a crouch in order to investigate what the young man in glasses had placed back in the water before he and his companion had moved on. He pointed.

"Sand dollar," he said. "Still alive, look at it. They burrow quickly, don't they? Clever thing."
"That doesn't answer my question, Crowley," Aziraphale sighed. "What ought I to look for?"

"Pelicans' feet, purple topshells," sighed the demon, rising. "Anything but bloody limpets."

Aziraphale watched the young men ahead of them, who were progressively vanishing down the strand. They leaned on each other, paused leisurely, shadowed silhouettes against the sunset. He looked at Crowley next, noticed the way his hair started to wave when it got too long, catalogued any number of inconsequential things: one damp hand stuck in his back pocket, the other carelessly swinging his pail, the way the breeze caught his collar. He looked peaceful, looked human.

"If you could have anything for your collection, any shell in the world—?" Aziraphale wondered.

Crowley paused in his progress, shrugging, glancing over his shoulder at Aziraphale. "That changes depending on the day. Sometimes I think Americans don't know what they're on about, going after that spotted one everybody raves over in Florida. I'm more for architecture and shape than I am for color, although I'll go in for exceptional monochromatics, don't get me wrong." He swallowed and looked away, perhaps as haunted by the memory of Lyme Regis as Aziraphale was. "There's one they call Triton's trumpet I have half a mind to go after. Elegant, spired, rippled tans and browns. Predatory Indo-Pacific mollusk, feeds on the crown-of-thorns starfish. What? I read, angel."

Aziraphale thought of the shell guides he'd hoarded in the years since Crowley's bizarre hobby had taken hold, thought through pages and pages of images and text. Triton's trumpet, *Charonia tritonis*, yes. Those starfish were eight-armed venomous terrors, if he remembered rightly.

He bent and scooped up a handful of wet sand, sticking in his thumb to grit along the curve he'd summoned from memory. *No operculum*, not live-taken. He found the spire with his index finger, poised the shell between that and his thumb; he rinsed it thoroughly. Elegant and out of place.

"For all that we cheat humans, cheat ourselves, cheat each other," Crowley observed, sloshing up to stare at it longingly, "conchological pursuits lead to a new level of underhandedness, isn't that so?"

"You were quite right," said Aziraphale, and put it in Crowley's pail. "The thrill of the hunt."

*Placopecten magellanicus*, March 2011

Improbably, Aziraphale noted, Crowley was *shivering* by the time they got home. He'd spent most of the walk jettisoning various of the pail's contents until only the scallop shell remained. While Crowley skulked off to the bedroom to change, Aziraphale rinsed it off in the kitchen sink.

"The coloration's especially vivid," Crowley said minutes later, wandering back in while Aziraphale pondered the freshly dried specimen in his hands. "I haven't seen bright burgundy like that before."

"Shall we add it?" Aziraphale asked, handing it to Crowley. "You'll run out of space before long."

Crowley didn't respond. He took the shell out of Aziraphale's hand and wandered out to stand before the mantelpiece, so Aziraphale followed him at a respectful distance. Crowley didn't take kindly to meddling in his careful arrangements and rearrangements of the objects over time, so Aziraphale watched patiently while he considered several spots amidst the unlikely assemblage of riff-raff, some of it precious beyond reckoning, before setting the shell next to his piece of eight.

"I've forgiven you for slipping off like that, you know," said Aziraphale, setting a careful hand on
Crowley's shoulder. "Whatever business you had, I shan't question it. Did you find answers?"

"Insofar as Adam Young ever gives answers, yes," said Crowley, softly. "I told you as much."

"This world's precious to all of us," Aziraphale replied. "This second chance. I understand now why these shards of earthly existence, human and non-human alike, mean so very much to you."

Crowley turned and tilted his head, not quite smiling. "You know it's also because of the auction, don't you?" he said, touching the precious wentletrap lightly. "This habit's dear to me because it's something for which I can actually and concretely blame you. It stands as proof that you tempted me, angel."

"Just like I tempted you here, I suppose," Aziraphale sighed. "Out of London's vast, thriving heart and into the windswept expanse of this coastline. Six years, dear boy. Have you been happy?"

Crowley set his hand in Aziraphale's open palm, leaving his first shell acquisition where it sat. "I've been ecstatic, thanks," he said, "never mind that you can't scrub dishes to save your life."

Aziraphale drew Crowley's hand firmly up to his lips and kissed it, full of gratitude and hope.

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**Scaphella junonia, February 2015**

"It was the most extraordinary find," Aziraphale told Pippa, sipping his piña colada. "Improbable. One might even say impossible. If any of the Whydah coins were left behind, which, knowing the sea-floor, undoubtedly some were, they'd most of them be far too buried in muck to wash up."

"What he's trying to say is that he's got the devil's own luck," said Crowley, swimming up to the edge of the pier. He hauled himself up with far more grace than any human, sitting so that his feet dangled in the lapping water. "That was a fantastic trip, though. Provincetown, Massachusetts. Three years ago." Crowley stretched, returning Uriel's wave; she was swimming toward the pier. "You know he found that piece of eight from the Reijgersdaal right in our backyard? Early oh-six."

"Not long after I'd met you," said Pippa, with a knowing wink. "Not long after you'd moved in."

Uriel was now treading water at Crowley's feet; Aziraphale watched with no small trace of amusement as she tickled Crowley's ankle, causing him to jump.

"Ten years ago, come November," she said. "If you guys don't throw a big ten-year housewarming anniversary party, we'll do it for you." She glanced over her shoulder; some distance away, Raphael, in a snorkel mask, had resurfaced. "He likes it here so much," she said, lowering her voice. "We'll stay till Christmas."

"Why not just close up shop in North America and move, at that rate?" asked Aziraphale, mildly.

Crowley and Uriel both gave him sharp, pained glances. Pippa was lost in her crossword again.

"Assuming I could get the clearance," said Uriel, vaguely. "But work's funny like that." She clapped one wet hand over her own mouth and narrowly dodged Crowley kicking her in the face. "So!" she exclaimed, snapping to catch Pippa's attention. "How do you like sunny Sanibel Island? If it's boring you, I could share more about the Provincetown trip. I was there. I found something awesome for
"Crowley, too." She scrunched up her face. "Spirula spirula. Ram's horn shell."

"That's the curly white one, isn't it?" asked Pippa, setting her puzzle aside. "Well, there are two that fit that description, but I know the difference; the wentletrap's the one that started it, which I know you bought him at auction against your better judgment," she told Aziraphale, elbowing him in the forearm, almost spilling the drink they'd been passing back and forth. "The other all-white one."

"That find wasn't as improbable as she's making it out to be," Crowley said, disgustedly scratching a flake of skin off his sunburnt nose. "Ram's horns are uncommon in New England, but not rare."

From about ten yards off, Raphael was waving wildly with both hands, his snorkel mask pushed up into his fiery hair. In one hand, he had a black mesh bag that rattled suspiciously, full of what Aziraphale suspected was full of a pirate's hoard in biological treasure.

"Hey!" he shouted. "What's that one the locals and tourists alike go absolutely bananas over? The spotted one!"

"Juno's volute, better known as just junonia!" Crowley shouted back. "They're ugly, but rare as hen's teeth! If you're going to find one, you'd better hop on a Mexican fishing trawler and head deep into the Gulf! The ones that wash up, when they do, are almost always damaged!"

"Oh dear," said Aziraphale, handing the piña colada back to Pippa. "That's a challenge."

"You've gone and done it now," said Uriel, smacking Crowley's shin. "Just watch. He'll—"

Raphael set his mask firmly back in place, smirked, and slipped underwater without even taking a breath.

"If he drowns, so help me, it's on your heads for not stopping him," Pippa sighed, waving the drink at Crowley and Uriel in turn. "Hasn't he got enough for one day? That's a good beginner's haul."

Uriel smiled indulgently at Pippa, and then pulled herself up onto the pier beside Crowley. "I think I should tell you something," she said. "Rafe's not interested in collecting shells. Not in the least."

Aziraphale knew what was coming, but it was still completely worth watching Crowley mull over this statement and then start to chew on his lower lip. Uriel reached for one of the towels they'd piled under Aziraphale's and Pippa's folding chairs and dried her hair. Crowley sighed.

"It's like the painting all over again," he said. "I really hope he likes it hanging over our sofa, because heaven knows Aziraphale doesn't. He calls it an eyesore on a regular basis."

"As long as you still like it, he doesn't care where you put it," said Uriel, squinting out across the water. She plucked Crowley's sunglasses out from under Aziraphale's chair and put them on.

"I don't like how long he stays under," said Pippa, frowning. "I know you said he's an athlete and all that, a very fine swimmer with excellent lung capacity, but one does worry. Reckless boy."

Aziraphale refused the drink when she tried to hand it off to him. "Drink up. He'll be fine."

Crowley was staring out just as far as Uriel was, undoubtedly seeing more than Pippa could.

"If I'd had half the courage you lot have, I'd have done all this and much more when I was young," Pippa sighed. "Harold was always one for sticking close to home. I never thought about what we'd missed."
Right at Crowley's feet, Raphael surfaced without warning. Uriel lightly kicked his shoulder.

"Scare us to death, why don't you," said Aziraphale, feigning shock, even allowing his heart-rate to convincingly escalate so that Pippa patted the back of his hand. "Any luck out there in the deep?"

Raphael untied something from the belt-loop of his swim-trunks and tossed it into Crowley's lap.

"Your dowry, darling," he drawled, which got him another kick from Uriel. "Better late than never."

Crowley emptied the contents of the bag: four fighting conches, two banded tulips, five arrow dwarf tritons, a pair of angels' wings still connected by ligature, three loose turkey wings, enough Antilles glassy bubbles and ribbed cantharus and buttons to form an overbrimming handful.

"I can't accept these," he said weakly. "You could sell them to the tourist shops back in East Dean."

"Don't stop there," said Raphael, poking the bag with his index finger. "You missed some, I think."

Aziraphale rose and took the bag from Crowley's lap while Crowley was busy turning the tulip shells over and over in his hands, apparently fixated on the pleasing shape. Pearls before swine, Aziraphale thought, sitting back down. He removed the last two shells, running index finger and thumb along their rough lips, filing them down to smooth perfection. He handed the pair to Pippa.

"Those aren't ugly by far, dear heart," said Pippa, weighing one vivid junonia in each palm.

Crowley turned and glanced over his shoulder, clearly suppressing a grin. "Then have one."

Uriel gave Aziraphale an pleading look, kicking at the water. "Swim with Rafe. He's bored."

Aziraphale stood, letting his unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt fall onto the chair. "Perhaps I shall."
1 April 2015

Aziraphale kicked peevishly at the covers, turning to the next page of Pippa's latest novel recommendation. He glanced at Crowley, who had decided around four o'clock in the morning that dozing facedown in his pillow was the way forward. He hadn't drawn a proper breath in hours.

It wasn't that early twentieth-century Americana was dreadful, not as such. It was that the book was taking its bloody time getting off the ground, and that he theoretically had much better things to do than wonder whether this particular Midwestern windbag had anything insightful to say upon the subject of determining what to do for one's spouse upon the occasion of one's first anniversary.

(Aziraphale stolidly ignored the corner of his mind that insisted on running the actual numbers.)

Setting Pippa's book on the nightstand, Aziraphale leaned over and gave Crowley's shoulder an experimental prod. Crowley twitched and, rolling onto his side, took as many of the covers with him as he could manage. Well, that settles it, Aziraphale thought, satisfied. Out for the count.

Rose petals this time around would've been overkill from an aesthetic point of view (or at least that's what Uriel had said), so a trip out front to check which hellebores were looking peaky proved infinitely more profitable. Three different shades scattered across his hastily scrawled note would hide a multitude of sins, chiefest of which was that he'd used his most careless shorthand.

Aziraphale adjusted the duvet about Crowley's temptingly exposed shoulder upon leaving.

* * *

Iván was sweeping the front stoop of his flat when Aziraphale skidded to a shaky halt in the duplex driveway. There was something of a perpetually shock-stricken air about the young man to begin with, Aziraphale had always found, but he'd never appeared more so than in that moment.

"I did not know you were much for sport," he said judiciously, watching as Aziraphale removed his helmet and perfunctorily lowered the kickstand. "This is as good an exercise as any."

"Good morning," said Aziraphale, as cheerfully as he could manage in spite of the miasma of terrible ideas that had once been his calm and orderly mind. "Is our dear Amanda sleeping?"
"No," Iván said, propping the broom against well-kept siding. "She's lounging in front of the telly."

"May I trouble her to step out for a moment?" Aziraphale asked. "Or, failing that, may I come in?"

Iván grinned, made a delicate two-handed gesture that said Watch this, and opened the door. He shouted what was, at first, an incomprehensible string of Basque into the flat; Aziraphale's innate capacity for translation, as little-used as it was these days, kicked into overdrive.

*Hey, lazy lover mine, Iván said, or something similar enough. Your other best friend's better half is here!*

"Oh, that's ace," Mandy groused, coming to the door in her bathrobe and flip-flops. "We get a Wednesday off for once," she continued, peering out into the yard with both hands wrapped in curmudgeonly fashion around her mug, "and who comes calling but the least fun bloke on earth?"

"Your affection, dear girl, is humbling," sighed Aziraphale, stepping up onto the porch to offer her his hand.

Iván stepped aside, snagged the broom, and resumed sweeping down on the pavement instead; Aziraphale helped Mandy cross the threshold onto her own WELCOME mat without losing her balance. "Drinking off the dregs of our industrious young man's catering profits, are we? Tsk."

"Oi, shut it," she said, attacking Aziraphale with an assuredly hung-over hug that got Yorkshire Gold all over Aziraphale's shirt and blazer. "I know why you're here. Soph's rubbing off on me."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean," Aziraphale protested, kissing her cheek. "However—"

"This isn't Benny & Joon," said Mandy, yawning, shaking tea-droplets off the arm of her robe while Aziraphale surreptitiously miracled away his own damages, "so I won't pop down there on your behalf to pick up fancy mushrooms or reserve Chardonnay or whatever our favorite nutter wants."

"Our favorite nutter, as you aptly put it," Aziraphale replied, "is dead to the world. What I'd rather hoped is that you'd offer me guidance on the matter of culinary reciprocation. Nothing more."

Mandy finished her tea and shoved the mug in one of her robe's spacious pockets, considering.

"For fuck's sake," she said. "Just get him some flowers—you know, the live kind with roots still attached, maybe an orchid or something—and don't zone out when he natters at it for an hour."

*Quite right, Aziraphale thought, exchanging bemused, dubious glances with Iván. Times change.*

* * *

If you couldn't cheat once in a while, then what was the sense in owning a bicycle, anyway?

"Cor," said Adam, grinning, always chuffed to see an old friend. "Did you fly the whole way?"

"Lovely morning for taking in the fresh air, wouldn't you agree?" Aziraphale said, setting his helmet on the coffee table while Adam dashed to the kitchen and put on the kettle. "Where is Sophia?"
"Working all the hours God gave," Adam called back. "Where else? D'you want sugar or honey?"

"Neither, for once," Aziraphale replied. "Quite frankly, I'm lost. I haven't the foggiest what to do for Crowley. I haven't got his talent for cookery, so a multiple-course extravaganza like the one he pitched for me a few years back is right out. Miss Tomlin suggests flowers, but I'm inclined to guess she's not thinking clearly and won't be thinking clearly for some hours yet. Any ideas?"

Adam carried in the tea tray and set it next to Aziraphale's helmet, rubbing his stubbly chin.

"I reckon he's no match for a ghost orchid," he said. "It'd be worth cheating to see him try!"

"I'd rather steer clear of plants, thank you," replied Aziraphale, testily. "Overdone, one feels."

Adam shrugged, sat down next to him, and poured them two overbrimming cups of tea.

"Then don't go out of your way," he suggested. "Look for what's hidden in plain sight, yeah?"

"I'm afraid your inscrutability has very much gone amiss this time 'round," Aziraphale sighed.

"There was that time you bought him some really posh wine when we made that field trip to Vinopolis at Borough Market," Adam said. "Surely you haven't drunk it yet, have you?"

"Ah, my dear boy," replied Aziraphale, delirious with relief. "You did turn out all right."

* * *

Aziraphale would've preferred the local gourmet shop to Tesco Express, but, due to an unfortunate turn of non-April-Fool's-related events involving power loss, it was closed. He approached the entrance to Tesco with the same wariness one might reserve for entering Waterstones.

Not being the one who normally did the shopping, Aziraphale wandered for a while until he'd got the shape of what was located where. He dawdled in front of the produce case, picking up a bag of spinach, and then tossed it aside in favor of inspecting a package of carrots. They couldn't possibly rival Crowley's homegrown ones, of course. Just as Aziraphale was about to toss them back where he'd found them, somebody tapped him on the shoulder. He dropped the carrots, startled.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Pippa said, patting him on both arms, and then came around to stand beside him. "Taking over the cooking for once, are we? I'm sure he'll appreciate it, poor sleepy thing. I popped by just a bit ago, and he told me he had no idea where you'd gone. Looked rather lost, if you ask me." Pippa lowered her voice, leaning hard on her cane, and extended one hand to poke the carrots for emphasis. "Between you and me, dear heart," she said, lowering her voice with an edge of conspiratorial reproach, "I think he believes you've forgotten."

"Nonsense," Aziraphale sniffed, folding his arms. "It's not unheard-of that I should be off making the rounds if he hasn't got anything better to do than have a lie-in." He eyed the orange-and-purple variety pack, noting the ORGANIC label. "They'd have proved mediocre anyway."

"They've got some lovely miniature phalaenopsis up front," said Pippa, tapping the side of her nose,
"if it's something spring-like you're after. Those pale yellow-greens and speckled purples."

"Adam suggested the elusive ghost orchid," Aziraphale admitted, "although I daresay that variety might prove difficult fare in times—and in premises—like these."

Pippa scoffed, but Aziraphale could tell she was trying her best not to laugh. "Surely he's mentioned fancying something more approachable?"

"He wouldn't mind some type of lady's slipper," Aziraphale sighed, "but I've not been able to find one of those for either love or money."

"Well, you've got plenty of both, there's no doubting that," said Pippa, cheerfully, and took his arm. "Be a love and help me find the light-bulbs, won't you? I'll help you improvise in return."

"That, dear lady," replied Aziraphale, happily, "is the best idea I've heard all day. Lead on."

* * *

Aziraphale hadn't intended for his grocery run to become a heated-debate lunch meeting wherein he most certainly did not start a fight with his other best friend regarding the merits (or lack thereof) contained within Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Pippa departed before coffee, tartly suggesting she was tired, so Aziraphale was left to wrangle both the café tab and two perky potted miniature *phalaenopsis* alone. They didn't fit in the bicycle basket, so he miracled them home.

He walked into the cottage to find Crowley studying both colorful appearances on the table.

"Don't know about these," said the demon, tugging Aziraphale's ratty dressing-gown up and over his exposed shoulder (an act recognizable as one of casual spite). "They've suffered cold damage."

"They were the best I could do, Crowley," sighed Aziraphale, dropping his lone plastic bag of actual foodstuff purchases on the floor. "These looked like the healthiest of the lot."

Crowley grimaced and nodded, approaching the Tesco bag barefoot, poking it with his toe.

"Please tell me it's a selection of cheeses and jams, angel," he said. "I'll love you forever."

Aziraphale kissed him by way of distraction, didn't dare let go of him until he'd successfully retrieved the requisite bottle of Sauternes from the wine-rack, uncorked it, and got it in a pair of suitable pair of Baccarat glasses. They were the white-wine receptacle design called *Massena*, which Crowley had been pining after in the Old Bond Street store the last few times they'd gone to London. You could only do so much on the fair-play shopping front when push came to shove.

"It is," Aziraphale confirmed, nipping Crowley's lower lip, "and if you don't, I'll be devastated."

Crowley side-eyed the spread on the counter, which now included all four cheeses in orderly array and all three jars of jam open with spreaders at the ready. He closed his eyes, humming contently.

"I wasn't lying," Crowley said. "Berry Brothers *did* call the '01 ethereal. Are you ready for this?"
"As long as you don't go sampling the cheeses first, all shall be well," said Aziraphale, releasing him so he could go fetch both glasses. "Your infernal Ossau-Iraty ought to pair ever so well."

"There's nothing demonic about sheep's milk," Crowley protested, accepting his measure of Château d'Yquem, "dozy though ewes may be. What shall we drink to? Another few millennia?"

"No," Aziraphale replied, raising his glass. "To our first year wedded, and to our first ten here."

Crowley nodded, caught the edge of his coveted glass beneath one sharp eye-tooth, and smiled.
Chapter Summary

Cards Against Humanity redux, as promised, with Raphael and Newt in the player line-up. Inasmuch as this is intended as comedy, there's some actual plot-furthering stuff in here, and it ends on a rather unusual note.

18 April 2015

"We've been over this before," sighed Aziraphale, tapping his slightly overlong fingernails against the work-top, peering into the shadowed depths of the breadbox to the accompaniment of idle chatter from Crowley and Anathema as they arranged optimal seating. "That is not your place of residence, regardless of what you must convince yourself those delectable crumbs are saying."

"You're taking the wrong approach, angel," Crowley offered, wandering away from having just placed the last chair at the head of the table. "Just make some popcorn, and he'll come out."

"I thought we'd promised Miss Tomlin we wouldn't eat whilst using her generously-donated cards," replied Aziraphale, clucking his tongue, tapping the counter one more time for good measure. "You'll be one extremely disappointed rodent, what with the absence of kernels on the floor."

"I won't tell if you won't tell," Anathema said, dusting off her hands. "All set!" she called in the direction of the living room. "You'd better get out here and deal. The natives are getting restless."

Pippa came in with her cane dangling over one forearm and Newt hanging off the other. The poor young man looked frightfully disappointed that they were no longer watching Antiques Roadshow; in truth, Aziraphale regretted having left them in favor of set-up, as Lowther Castle was, he thought, a splendid locale for kicking off Series 37. One day, he'd convince Crowley they ought to go—

Get your blessed snuffboxes appraised? thought Crowley, cutting in with a snort. Not on your life. There's no need for that kind of nastiness, Aziraphale scolded, but his heart wasn't in it. Imagine—

Aziraphale didn't get the chance to convince Crowley that getting the Bentley appraised on live television might well prove the crowning glory, because an impatient volley of knocks descended upon the front door in that precise instant. He sighed, brushed past Anathema with a murmured apology, and answered it. Uriel shook two bags of crisps right in Aziraphale's face while Raphael continued to rap his fist against empty air. They'd obviously got drunk before turning up.

"Paprika and Prawn Cocktail!" Uriel exclaimed, shoving her obnoxious Walkers loot into Aziraphale's bewildered grasp. "I'm addicted to these things. Gotta start buying in bulk."

"Dear Lord, Az," drawled Raphael, leaning forward to study Aziraphale's fingertips, which had dug into the crinkly packaging, "are those cuticles I see? Whatever would your manicurist say?"

Uriel, reconsidering, snatched back the crisps and dashed inside to greet Crowley with a hug.

"You absolutely reek of scotch," Aziraphale sniffed, yanking Raphael inside by his shirt-front.
"Isn't it nice to have everyone back in the same room?" Newt sighed, waving at the arrivals.

"All right, let's not dally," said Pippa, rapping her cane against the edge of the table. She'd already taken a seat, second from one end with her back to the sliding glass doors, so Aziraphale finished shaking both bags of crisps into bowls and carried them over. He claimed the seat to Pippa's right while Uriel hastily slid into the one to Pippa's left (the better to get a head-start on snacking).

Newt took the seat at the head of the table, glancing to Uriel at his right hand and Anathema at his left. He picked up the note-card that bore Crowley's handwriting and read off, "Card czar?"

"Yup," Crowley said, stubbornly plonking himself down in the seat directly across from Aziraphale, already snaking ten bare, restless toes across the tops of Aziraphale's stocking-covered feet. "Whoever claims that chair gets to be the first czar. Looks like it's going to be you. Keen."

"He's a CAH virgin, guys," said Anathema, smirking. "I've played with the girls and Mandy."

"What's the low-down?" asked Uriel, crunching. "Set number of rounds? Play till we drop?"

"Set number of hands?" Raphael protested, watching Pippa open the tupperware bin and remove a small, banded-together stack of black cards. "That's no fun, is it, kids? My vote's on till we drop."

Aziraphale cleared his throat, snatching another paprika crisp. "Hush," he chided, earning himself an eye-roll from the Archangel. "Dear lady, please continue," he said, shivering as Crowley out-and-out propped his heels on the bit of chair available between Aziraphale's spread thighs.

"Last time, we had a child to worry about, so we only played twenty hands," said Pippa, removing the rubber band from the black cards before giving them a thorough shuffle. "This time, we're playing thirty. Between the thirty cards, there are thirty-three blanks. I had a third party by the name of Iván do the counting." She set the black cards in the middle of the table, positioning them precisely between the two bowls of crisps, and then pulled seven banded-together packets of white cards out of the bin. "You've got thirty-three cards each. There'll be no fresh draws and no swapping-out of duds permitted. Just like last time, what you've got from the start is what you've got to work with."

"Bring it on," said Uriel, gleefully unbanding the packet Pippa tossed in front of her. "Booyah!"

Raphael considered Anathema immediately to his right and Crowley immediately to his left, opting to shoot his rubber band at Crowley's shoulder instead of Anathema's. "Do your worst, Pulsifer."

"I don't think it's possible to do one's worst when one is drawing a card," said Newt, slowly, and did. He squinted at what he'd flipped off the pile, one-handedly removing the rubber band from his stack of white cards. "Alternative medicine is now embracing the curative powers of—blank?"

Aziraphale made a critical study of his cards, trying to ignore the fact that Crowley was nibbling demurely on a prawn-cocktail crisp whilst considering his cards and wiggling his toes in a rather careless fashion. Aziraphale shifted in his chair, narrowing his potential answer-choices down to Natural selection and A live studio audience. He didn't know Newt as well as he might, not even after all these years, as withdrawn as the fellow could be. The latter response had once proved true for Aziraphale; he'd never felt more free to speak his mind than when he'd been sitting behind the eyes of that televangelist so many years before. On the other hand, Newt was practical.

"Cards in, folks," said Anathema, gathering everyone's plays while Newt obediently shut his eyes. Aziraphale tossed Natural selection across the table; Crowley finished his crisp and played, too.
Raphael whistled, tossing down his own card. "Tough call, tough call," he sighed. "And you?"

"I ain't telling you shit," Uriel replied, handing her card directly to Anathema. "Deal with it."

"Tra-la, there," Anathema said, handing the stack of answers to Newt. "Now do your worst."

Newt frowned and laid out the answers instead of reading them aloud; if he hadn't been briefed on standard protocol, at least nobody was of a mind to call him on it. Aziraphale watched his card appear first, followed by Poor life choices, Not wearing pants, A thermonuclear detonation, Hot people, and Nicholas Cage. They all watched Newt struggle to maintain his composure, and Anathema reached down to pull an oversized flask out of her threadbare Waitrose tote-bag.

"Gracious," said Pippa, watching Anathema take a swallow. "Expecting a haul, are we?"

Anathema passed the flask to Newt, who was gesturing emphatically. "Oh, you know it."

Newt chugged an eager mouthful and coughed. "Why'd it have to be gin?" he lamented.

"Because it's tradition with you two, or so I'm given to understand," Aziraphale sighed.

"No dragging skeletons out of closets," said Crowley, testily. "Is your mind made up?"

Uriel looked like she was so pleased with herself she might burst; Raphael kept mum.

"It's going to have to be Poor life choices," Newt sighed, nodding glumly. "Because."

"Thanks, sweetheart," said Anathema, sarcastically, leaning to plant a kiss on his cheek.

"That's no bloody fair," Pippa insisted, but she winked at Newt. "Givin' it to your girl."

"You played Hot people," said Newt, grinning at her. "Nice try, but I was young then."

"Well, he's definitely got beginners' luck," Uriel muttered. "So much for Nicholas Cage."

"I rather fancy not wearing pants," said Raphael, in his terrible imitation of Aziraphale's accent, and then gave a flustered Newt his most lascivious look. "You should try it more often, darling."

"Hey, thanks for sharing," interjected Crowley, "only, you know, not. Mine's the detonation."

Newt regarded Crowley with a dour, pained expression. "I appreciate the sentiment, but. Er."

"I suppose natural selection's fallen out of fashion," Aziraphale sighed. "Who's the next czar?"

"Me!" Anathema announced, snatching the flask from Uriel, drawing a card. "What's that sound?"

Wonderful, Aziraphale thought, morosely considering his options, taking a modicum of comfort in Crowley's teasing toes. Truly, my dear, this is the worst assemblage of options I've seen since the last time we played. In truth, his options weren't as dire as all that; he briefly considered playing My sex life on the off-chance anyone had inferred Crowley's under-the-table antics. However, The glass ceiling, Morgan Freeman's voice, and The Devil himself were all much better options.

If you don't play the Devil, Crowley thought loudly enough for Uriel and Raphael to hear if they were of a sober enough mind-set to do so, I'll cock-block you for passing up a sterling opportunity.

Fine, Aziraphale shot back, sliding the card in front of Anathema. And she'll remember, too.
Once all the cards were in, Anathema settled in and cleared her throat, prepared to show her husband how it was done. "What's that sound?" she asked dramatically, if a tad drunkenly. "Preteens," she read first, and then said sadly, looking straight at Pippa, "although not anymore. And Silence, Newt, oh really? I'm not falling for your attempt at deadpan irony." She proceeded to glance straight at Uriel, waving the next card, and continued, "Another goddamn vampire movie is not even up for discussion, because, Christ, don't start with me on Natalie and that very subject." She threw the next card at Raphael, demanding, "New Age music? Really? What year is this, nineteen-ninety?" She frowned hard at the next option, letting her eyes flick back and forth between Crowley and Aziraphale several times before settling on Aziraphale as she handed him The Devil himself with grave ceremony. "You almost gave me the slip," she said to Crowley, adding, "Lady Gaga is indeed what that sound is, at least in my house."

With a pleased wiggle, Crowley's toes wormed their way deeper into Aziraphale's crotch.

Raphael drew the next black card with unabashed glee. "Why do I hurt all over?" he read.

"I could tell you the A-to-Z on that one," Uriel muttered, taking another pull from the flask.

Aziraphale considered German dungeon porn and Fingering before settling on Penis envy.

It was all for naught, of course; Aziraphale's choice was the first card to be scoffed at and tossed right back in his face. Crowley and Uriel got to high-five each other when it turned out their vindictively literal plays of Raptor attacks and Multiple stab wounds respectively failed to win Raphael's favor. Pleasing, really, to see Raphael completely flummoxed as to who had played the final remaining responses, all of them zingers: Pretending to care, A bitch slap, and Anal beads. Newt, Anathema, and Pippa were all wearing neutral expressions, although they all broke down laughing when Raphael threw up his hands in exasperation and chose Anal beads at random.

"My first win," said Newt, cheerfully, "and I suspect it'll be my only. I'll cherish this always."

"Your turn, dear boy," prodded Aziraphale, trapping Crowley's bony ankles between his knees.

Crowley squirmed, drawing a black card. "Blank! Betcha can't have just one," he announced.

Aziraphale chewed his lip. The Rapture, Shapeshifters, Lumberjack fantasies, A murder most foul, and An M. Night Shyamalan plot twist would each appeal to Crowley for a different reason. Because there was no obvious stand-out, he chose Lumberjack fantasies for grammatical soundness.

"Okay, first off," Crowley announced, once he'd sorted through all of the options, holding up Powerful thighs for everyone to see. "Who played this?" Crowley's eyes narrowed as Raphael, cool as you please, raised his hand. "Thought so. Bad joke. The worst, in fact, in the history of ever. You lose at life," he said, throwing the card so hard it bounced off Raphael's chest. He waved Lumberjack fantasies next, and Aziraphale contritely nodded. "Has a nice ring to it, but hasn't got enough depth," Crowley said, handing the card back to him. "Bees?" he asked, grinning when Uriel, her lips back on the flask, meekly waved one hand. "Same drill: nice and silly, but lacks oomph."

Crowley's eyes went slightly wide at the next two cards, and they all had to wait about five minutes for his ensuing fit of laughter to die down. "The Pope! God! Oh, how right you both are," Crowley gasped, wiping his eyes, handing them back to Pippa and Anathema respectively. "History for the win. That leaves us with this joker right here," he said, waving Synergistic management solutions at Newt, "because, you're right, I can't, and I didn't."

"Gosh," Newt said, accepting the black card with reverence. "Does this mean I'm winning?"

"Yeah," replied Anathema, gratefully accepting the flask when Uriel passed it. "Somehow."
I've got to up my game, Aziraphale thought, taking his first turn as czar. "What would grandma find disturbing, yet oddly charming?" he read off the card. Ah, of course I'd get something like that.

On a whim, he deferred to Pippa's obvious, venerable insider knowledge and let her walk away victorious with Tasteful sideboob. Newt loudly lamented the failure of Flying sex snakes, which shocked everyone; Uriel decried her choice of Genghis Khan as a hopeless throw-away. Crowley insisted that Elderly Japanese men should've been the right answer, whereas Raphael actually seemed rather furious that Road head hadn't been enough to secure him his first win.

Anathema regarded her lonely choice of Stephen Hawking talking dirty and shrugged. "Eh."

Pippa, in high spirits, drew the next black card. "Coming to Broadway this season," she said, "it's Blank: The Musical." She set down the card, primly folding her hands. "This one'll be cracking!"

Can we cut our losses, drop out now, and just go have sex? Crowley pondered, and Raphael actually choked on the long, gulping swig he was in the process of taking from Anathema's flask.

Not if you ever want to hear the end of it, we can't, Aziraphale thought back, deciding that German dungeon porn just might be worth the gamble in this instance. Steady on, he thought to Raphael.

That's easy for you to say, Raphael retorted, shaking the flask, surreptitiously topping it up.

Hey, somebody's gonna notice you've switched the supply from Anathema's in-house preference of SW4 to your own goddamn snooty insistence on Hendrick's, Uriel protested. Also: mmm, sex!

Her inspired play of Poorly-timed Holocaust jokes as a stand-in for The Producers earned a response of "That already happened, love!" from Pippa, but it got laughs all around. Aziraphale's dungeon porn didn't win, either, but that was fair enough. Crowley's Extremely tight pants gambit also failed, as did Raphael's gutsy offering of Balls. Anathema's Unfathomable stupidity was a near thing, but Newt, once again floored, won it with Licking things to claim them as your own.

"It was a throw-away," Newt admitted. "That, and it reminded me of those old Witchfinder names."


Uriel clapped her hands. "My turn!" she exclaimed, drawing a card. "Aw, man!" she grumbled, and then held up What will always get you laid? so everyone around the table could silently read it.

My feet pretty much anywhere on your person will always get me laid, thought Crowley, watching with ruthless enjoyment as Raphael shuddered and swiped the flask from Pippa. How about it?

Mind your manners, replied Aziraphale, distractedly, and focused on choosing his response. Crowley's toes had worked their way up to his belly. He'd take his chances with Vigilante justice.

It didn't work. Neither did Crowley's terrifyingly literal Battlefield amputations (as a nod to her tag-teaming with Raphael back in the day) or Pippa's ambitiously over-hopeful Being a motherfucking sorcerer. Raphael's cheekily literal Doin' it in the butt and Anathema's snarky Friends with benefits likewise went down in flames.

"Newt, you're a genius," Uriel gushed, handing him both Seduction and the black card.

"Honestly," he replied, mystified, drawing another black card, "I'm hardly even trying." He squinted at what he'd chosen, daunted at the prospect of being czar again. "Blank is a slippery slope that leads to blank. I guess that must mean you use two cards? Yea or nay?"
"Yea, verily," said Raphael, in moody contemplation. "This is war, darling."

Given Newt's so-far demonstrated taste for sly, brutal realism, Aziraphale chose Racism and Police brutality. You didn't often get to make a tailor-made play such as that, he couldn't help but think.

Pippa must have been thinking the same thing, because she played The terrorists and Spontaneous human combustion. Neither Aziraphale's choice, nor hers won, but they drew horrified gasps.

Crowley almost won it with Repression and Assless chaps, but his effort was ultimately futile.

Likewise, Raphael's superb The folly of man paired with A sea of troubles sank just as quickly.

It was down to Uriel with 50,000 volts straight to the nipples / A time travel paradox and Anathema with Drinking alone / Getting drunk on mouthwash. As helplessly as Newt was giggling at his wife's contribution, he gave it to Uriel. She did a drunken victory-lap around the table.

Anathema, nearly as intoxicated as Uriel and taking her second turn as card czar, put an end to Uriel's jubilant shenanigans by barking out, "What's there a ton of in heaven?"

Aziraphale gave up and swiped the flask from Crowley, who'd been nursing it for the past few minutes. Vikings was the card Aziraphale settled on after some deliberation, because there were, but if Anathema was too trollied to recognize his honesty, well, that ultimately wasn't his fault.

Newt got outright shot down and booed for his choice of Daddy issues. If only he'd known why.

Pippa tried her luck with Ghosts and, although it earned her a snort of laughter, wasn't successful.

Anathema glared hard at the three remaining cards, over which she was struggling not to laugh, or to cry, or possibly both. Crowley's Classist undertones, Uriel's Civilian casualties, and Raphael's Destroying the evidence were neck and neck and neck. Aziraphale was genuinely stumped.

"Guys, don't hate me," said Anathema, "but this one's totally going to Raphael. Fuuuuck."

"It's about time," Raphael snapped, curtly swiping the next black card. "This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang, but with—blank." He groaned. "Dull!"

Between The inevitable heat death of the universe and Morgan Freeman's voice, Aziraphale quite feared he'd need to choose the latter. He slid it face-down across the table.

"Here we are," said Raphael, gesturing with great solemnity. "The results. Scientology, no," he said with a sardonic twist of the lips, handing the card back to Pippa, "much though I dig it." He grimaced at the next card. "Pac-Man uncontrollably guzzling cum, holy Mother of God, are you a five year-old?" he asked, tucking the card down the collar of Crowley's t-shirt. "A death ray, A vagina that leads to another dimension," he continued, handing the cards off to Uriel and Anathema with a modicum of respect. "Excellent sentiments, both, but I think neither." Raphael held up Not reciprocating oral sex, pressing one index finger to his lips, cringing as he handed the card to Newt, who winced when Anathema punched him hard in the arm. "But this," said Raphael, setting Morgan Freeman's voice in the middle of the table, "this is an inspired piece of work."

"We've each taken one for the team, as it were," said Aziraphale, saluting as he claimed his due.

"Oh, is that how this game's gonna work?" asked Uriel, her eyes narrowing, glancing conspiratorially at Crowley. "Then I temporarily defect," she continued, pointing at Crowley. "I'm with him. Let's make it—" she thought for a moment, considering the one human at the table who still technically wasn't in the know, but Aziraphale had his doubts even about that—"the Low
Blows against the High & Mighty. You guys are the High & Mighty, in case that wasn't clear."

Crowley sighed, drawing a black card, as it was his turn as czar. "I wash my hands of this," he said, "but, what the hell, I'm in." He regarded the three humans, each in turn. "What's your team name?"

Pippa opened her mouth to speak, but Anathema beat her to it. "The Middle Ground," she said sarcastically. "And three against two against two in all directions gives you lot terrible odds."

"Especially since we've got Mr. Player of the Hour," said Pippa, indicating Newt. "We've got a jump-start lead thanks to his four wins. And we've got two other wins between us besides."

"I like those odds," said Raphael, slyly. "So, what's on the line? Let's make some wagers."

"If we win," Uriel declared, "the High & Mighty have to keep the rest of us supplied with those scones Aziraphale's so good at baking. No letting his sole talent in the kitchen go to waste."

"Don't forget how well he operates my nightmare of a vintage coffee machine," Crowley added.

"Coffee and scones for a week, done," replied Raphael, shaking Uriel's hand across the table, and Aziraphale shot a helpless glance at Crowley, who just shrugged. "If we win," he said thoughtfully, looking to Aziraphale for inspiration. "Seeing as you're our surety, what do we demand?"

"Dinners for a week from him," said Aziraphale, indicating Crowley. "Two-course, wine inclusive."

"Don't you worry," said Uriel. "I'll study up on being, whatsit, your prep assistant or something."

"That's not reassuring," Crowley sighed. "Quick, you three. If you win, what have we got to do?"

"Fix a bunch of shit around my house and Pippa's," said Anathema, and Newt cringed, hiding his face behind his hands. "It's not often you get the chance at skilled fixer-upping for a song."

This has turned into quite the risk, Aziraphale thought to all three of his compatriots. We'd best up our game. He tilted his head at Raphael. Surely you can do better with what you've got?

Want to trade hands, old man? he shot back tartly. I don't see you kicking much ass, either.

"Time to shut up and play!" announced Crowley, brightly. "Blank! Good to the last drop."

Aziraphale slid Dying of dysentery face-down across the table at Crowley, because he abided in hope that it had been waiting this whole damn game to be deployed in such a fashion. He performed a quick thought-scan as everyone else played—he was overdue for some cheating, after all—determining that Pippa had played Erectile dysfunction, Uriel had played The Blood of Christ, Raphael had played Throwing a virgin into a volcano, and Anathema had played Wet dreams.

Crowley gathered the white cards up, shuffled them thoroughly, looked at them, and blanched.

"Do I spy conditions in which heightened stakes have upped everyone's game?" Raphael sneered.

"I hate you all," Crowley announced, waving Dying of dysentery everyone. "Who played this?"

"Thank you, my dear," said Aziraphale, snatching the cards out of Crowley's hand. "Indeed so."

Aziraphale drew the next black card. "Onward," he said. "A romantic, candlelit dinner would be incomplete without blank." Crowley glared, as if he'd orchestrated this to rub salt in the wound.

The white cards that came in were Sexual tension, Chainsaws for hands, Dropping a chandelier on
your enemies and riding the rope up, Leaving an awkward voicemail, Mutually- assured destruction, and Opposable thumbs. Each was such a spectacular play in its own right that Aziraphale dithered for about a full minute, surreptitiously chewing on his right thumbnail. He chose Sexual tension, because sometimes the simplest, most sarcastic answer was the most elegant.

"Thank you, angel," said Crowley, energetically snatching the cards out of Aziraphale's grasp.

Uriel let out a victory whoop and, instead of doing laps, jumped up on her chair and danced.

Pippa, the next czar, read off, "Blank! It's a trap." She was pleased at having got the reference.

Raphael and Anathema were both incensed that their answers (Stormtroopers and Heteronormativity) didn't beat out Crowley's stunning play of Serfdom. Uriel couldn't complain too much that her answer of Object permanence didn't win, as Crowley was on her team. Aziraphale was mildly put-out that his Waiting 'til marriage didn't sweep the deck, although he almost felt sorry for how glum Newt looked that a response as clever as Hope hadn't netted him another win.

"Moving on," said Uriel, loudly. "It's a pity kids these days are all getting involved with blank." Just as she set down the black card so everyone could consider it, Raphael slid his white card in her direction, and Uriel scowled, flipping it over right away. "Hormone injections? Seriously?" she demanded, discarding it. "That's terrible. Go sit in the corner and think about what you've done."

Raphael shrugged, looking pleased with himself. "We can't all be so fortunate, can we?"

Uriel mustn't have been in the mood to fuck around, because she similarly discounted Anathema's The World of Warcraft and Newt's Wearing underwear inside out no sooner than they'd been played. "I understand that you two are parents and all," she said, "but it's no excuse for sucky answers."

"I think my luck's taken a down-turn," said Newt, glumly. "I'm not the great asset you thought."

"Charming, dear lady, as ever," said Aziraphale, stiffly, and slid Sexting face-down toward her.

The other two cards that came in were Agriculture and Justin Bieber. Uriel looked utterly torn.

"I actually don't know which of you jerks played which," she said, picking up Agriculture. "But I like this one a lot, because, ew, all those precious little hipsters with their organic gardens and—"

"Keeping it in the family," Crowley said, snatching his victory away from her. "Thanksss!"

"I know you played Sexting," Uriel said to Aziraphale, patting his hand. "A valiant effort."

"Master Bieber has finally failed me," Pippa sighed. "Don't tell Rob I'm down on him."

Newt, as next czar, flipped the black card reading What's my secret power? After a thirty-second collective laughing fit, the table pulled itself together and made swift plays. Aziraphale half wondered if Anathema would punch him in the teeth for playing Fingering, but when it came down to the reveal, she actually gave him a double thumbs-up, thereby scarring him for the remainder of eternity. Pippa played AXE Body Spray and pitched the table back into hysterics, although Newt was sitting with his arms folded, surveying the remaining white cards he'd just flipped. A tribe of warrior women, Self-loathing, Crystal meth, and A really cool hat were the remaining contenders.

"As much as I love whoever played the tribe of warrior women, because, between my wife and my
daughters, that's true," he said, "and as much as I wish I had a cool hat, I don't actually own a single one. Between self-loathing and crystal meth, I'm going to go with wishful thinking. Meth it is."

"Gimme!" said Uriel, happily, and held out her palms so that Newt could deposit her winnings.

"I played warrior women," Crowley confessed, "because I know that schtick better than most."

"Blank!" Anathema shouted as segue, tipping the much-adulterated gin flask. "High five, bro."

Crowley had waxed suggestive again under the table, so Aziraphale decided to chastize him by playing My sex life face-down. That was the first card Anathema flipped, followed in succession by Bitches, Figgy pudding, Doing the right thing, The Jews, and The Chinese gymnastics team.

Anathema studied her options and said, "Those are some sad-looking throw-away plays, guys." She gathered them all up and tossed them in the Tupperware bin, except for My sex life. "I absolve everyone of fessing up to what they played except for this piece of sass right here. Who?"

Aziraphale raised his hand, pleased, while everyone else groaned and Crowley looked smug. Raphael didn't seem happy to be czar again. "War! What is it good for?" he read impatiently.

Aziraphale couldn't make anything in his hand except Rehab work, so he played it. Even in the face of such stunning options as Land mines, Raping and pillaging, Catapults, and Explosions, Uriel's response of The violation of our most basic human rights took the round by a landslide.

"Thanks, babe," she said to Raphael. "I can taste that cappuccino and those scones already."

"Don't mention it," Aziraphale sighed, gathering up the dud-cards, tossing them in the bin.

Crowley flipped the next black card, ever a czar worth watching. "Swell," he said, chewing his lip as he scanned what he'd drawn. "You're going to love this. What never fails to liven up the party?"

Aziraphale finally got rid of A live studio audience because he was sick of looking at the damn thing. Crowley flipped the rest of the white cards one by one: The gays, Robert Downey Jr., BATMAN!!!, Nazis, and Friendly fire. He stared at the last one for a long time, eyes glassy.

"The rest of you can go home," he said in defeat, waving it around. "Fess up. Now."

Anathema sighed, sharing in his reluctant memory. "Sorry about that. I'm the worst."

Pippa was watching both of them thoughtfully, too distracted to drink from the flask.

"Aaand it's my turn," Aziraphale cut in, shattering the moment. "Why am I sticky?"

"These," said Aziraphale, flipping the cards one by one with slowly mounting horror, "are largely disgusting." He surveyed Flesh-eating bacteria, Necrophilia, Pulling out, Half-assed foreplay, and Gloryholes with abject dismay. He picked up Sniffing glue. "This wins by default, as it were."

"Why, thanks, Az," said Raphael, taking the cards. "So nice of you to notice we need a boost."

"My answer was accurate," said Crowley, in a teasing whisper, digging his toes in suggestively. Aziraphale wasn't certain whether he ought to hope it was Pulling out or Half-assed foreplay.

"Before I kill you, Mr. Bond," Pippa read out in a terrible attempt at imitating a Russian accent, "I must show you blank." She picked up the flask and actually took a drink this time, draining it.
"No more booze," said Anathema, firmly, and took back her piece of hardware. "We're cut off."

Aziraphale played *My vagina*, because he felt that mastermind-type villains in possession of said anatomical feature didn't turn up *nearly* often enough. *My relationship status, Fear itself, Overcompensation, and Queefing* all made strong showings, but *My genitals* certainly made Aziraphale raise his eyebrows. Pippa considered her options carefully, finally settling on *Fear itself.*

"We're back in business," Newt said, collecting his winnings with satisfaction.

"I should like to know who played *My genitals,*" said Aziraphale, "because I played—"

"You played *My vagina* for the same reason Crowley played *Queefing,*" said Anathema. "I played *My genitals.* Note that I do not specify what kind of genitals our theoretical villain has. Points to me for egalitarian ambiguity."

"Okay, cut the more-PC-than-thou crap," Uriel interjected, taking her next turn as czar. "Here is the church / Here is the steeple / Open the doors / And there is blank," she read off. "In the absence of alcohol, wow me."

Aziraphale supposed his answer of *The Rapture* could never have hoped to win against Crowley's flawless sense of theatrics: *The entire Mormon Tabernacle Choir* had, indeed, been one of his more ludicrously excessive innovations when it came to his lifelong hobby of making the LDS look ridiculous. Pippa, Raphael, Anathema, and Newt looked discouraged that their alarmingly literal answers (*The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bling, A stray pube, and Altar boys*) hadn't won.


Aziraphale played *A murder most foul* as both throw-away and vindication. Crowley's answer of *Chutzpah* was strangely heartbreaking, whereas Raphael's response of *Natalie Portman* sent Uriel into a fit of jealous rage. Pippa defended her choice of *Being on fire* as the only thing in her hand that had remotely made sense, whereas they were down to *Electricity* and *My collection of high-tech sex toys* without knowing which person, Anathema or Uriel, had played which.

But Newt knew. "I'm willing to sacrifice sharing TMI for the greater good," he said, handing his wife both the black card and *My collection of high-tech sex toys.* "If Heaven exists, that'd be it."

"Moving on from that utterly disgusting show of sentiment," Anathema sighed, drawing the next black card, "here's a palate-cleanser I'm sure we can all get behind. What's my anti-drug?"

Aziraphale watched in horror as Newt slid a white card to Anathema right away, only to have it flipped over immediately, revealed as a vengeance-play of *Emotions,* and disqualified. Aziraphale slid *Science* face-down toward Anathema with what he hoped was a proper amount of humility. Aziraphale thought that *Harry Potter erotica, The clitoris,* and *Women's suffrage* were all fine answers, but Crowley somehow won with *Alcoholism.* Alongside the flask, it abruptly made sense.

Raphael never seemed to like being czar. "In that same vein," he said, "I drink to forget blank."

You could have heard a pin drop as Raphael flipped the white cards in slow procession; even Crowley's persistent toe-teasing slithered to a screeching halt. As if Aziraphale's answer of *Being fabulous* wasn't going to prove insult enough, *Mouth herpes* and *Getting really high* and *Whipping it out* were each reasonably insulting in their own right. *Keanu Reeves* wasn't going to stand a chance, but the last nail in the coffin, the final card to be flipped, was, unbelievably, *A micropenis.*

Raphael regarded them all with a cool, sweeping look. "So much depends on who is culpable."
"You know I just meant it in good fun," Pippa protested, spreading her hands. "Matron's honor."

Raphael dropped his scowl, which had been quite convincing, and burst out in hysterics. "Take it," he gasped, sending both cards spinning across the table at Pippa. "That's some nerve, darling!"

Crowley scowled, possibly because his thunder had been stolen, but it became obvious that it was because the black card he'd drawn would leave him vulnerable. "Why can't I sleep at night?"

There were several attempts at lighthearted answers from parties in the know: The inevitable heat death of the universe (Aziraphale's own contribution, hopefully over-the-top enough to prove harmless), Tom Cruise, and Same-sex ice dancing. Aziraphale strongly suspected Anathema and Newt of playing Ethnic cleansing and Stalin, although he couldn't be sure which of them had been behind which. Crowley stared balefully at everything laid out in front of him and chose Geese.

"Close enough," he said, "because, let's face it, Ducks isn't a card. Was it you?" he asked Pippa, handing her the cards uncertainly. "If it was, then bless you. We're surrounded by terrible people."

"It was," said Pippa, primly, and patted Crowley's hand as she took the cards. "You poor thing."

"Hey, asshole," Uriel cut in, clearing her throat. "Have you forgotten we're playing teams here?"

"Moving on," said Aziraphale, as cheerfully as he could. "What is Batman's guilty pleasure?"

Vehicular manslaughter was such a fantastic answer that Aziraphale chose it on-sight; he'd watched the Nolan films with Crowley, Pippa, and Rob in their most recent spate of movie-nights and realized, horrified, that he'd just given Pippa another win. Natural male enhancement from Uriel, A Super Soaker full of cat pee from Crowley (at this, Pippa valiantly defended her precious, mouse-loving Tom's honor; she'd named the kitten after Mr. Hiddleston at Mandy's instigation), Helplessly giggling at the mention of Hutus and Tutsis from Raphael, Genital piercings from Anathema, and A balanced breakfast from Newt had never really stood a chance.

"I hope you're grateful for that winning streak I had early on," Newt muttered. "Can't hack it."

"I forgive you," Pippa said, selecting the next black card. "I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought," she read dramatically, "but World War IV will be fought with blank."

Aziraphale went with Oompa-Loompas, because, one, throw-away, and two, probably good soldiers. Estrogen, the next card Pippa flipped, was a risky answer, but possibly true; The Amish also sounded decently plausible. Passive-aggressive Post-It notes and Sean Penn were the answers Aziraphale would've had the most trouble choosing between, but Pippa went with Tentacle porn.

Crowley accepted his winnings with minimal gloating. "We may sweep this yet," he told Uriel.

"I'm up as czar, so you'd better be ready to win us another," Uriel said, spreading the remaining face-down black cards in the pile, finding, to everyone's unblinking horror, that there were only three rounds left to the game. "Yeah, dude," she told Crowley, swallowing, "you'd better make this count." She picked the top card, and then read, "I got 99 problems, but blank ain't one."

Aziraphale swore, playing An M. Night Shyamalan plot twist before he could change his mind. Uriel flipped the other five white cards (A tiny horse, Dead babies, A cooler full of organs, Being marginalized, and Horse meat) in quick succession and shrieked, "What's wrong with you folks?"

"We're down to dregs is what's wrong," sighed Crowley, gloomily. "Is it a no-winner round?"

"We can't afford a no-winner round," Uriel said with desperation. "Did you play Dead babies?
Because I'm pretty sure that's not one of my problems. Or A cooler full of organs? Because, let me tell you fuckers, those two things are, in fact, sometimes one of my, oh, I don't know, 99 million——"

Crowley covered his blush-swept face in embarrassment. "Er, about that cooler full of organs..."

"I'm gonna give this to the Shyamalan plot twist, yo," Uriel sighed. "Ain't got one of those."

"Dear girl, you have no idea how deeply I appreciate your discretion," replied Aziraphale.

Raphael grinned wolfishly. "You've got flair when it counts, Az. I'll give you that much."

"Great, this is a dull penultimate statement," Newt sighed. "During his childhood, Salvador Dalí produced hundreds of paintings of blank. Hey, did anyone see Midnight in Paris? I thought——"

"Adrien Brody was rather good, yes, we know," said Anathema, impatiently. "Just play, guys."

"New rule for these last two rounds," suggested Newt, unexpectedly. "We play our cards face-up, and the czar, even knowing who played what, has to judge on merit rather than using team-think."

"I like that," Pippa admitted, "but even merit is subjective. What's merit to me is disgrace to you."

"That's the point," Newt said. "Judge on merit according to you, just like normal, unless I've misunderstood the fundamentals of this whole game? We're looking for what makes the most sense in context, or what makes us laugh, or what makes us cringe in that hurts-so-good kind of way?"

Anathema waved her hand. "He's a natural," she said, and played Christopher Walken face-up.

Raphael played Centaurs, Uriel played Pterodactyl eggs, Aziraphale played Laying an egg (so much for originality), and Pippa played Boogers.

Crowley hesitated, and then played My humps.

Aziraphale gawped at Crowley's card. "That would mean..." He paused. "Surely not, my dear."

Whether it was the late hour or the fact he'd had enough gin to get tipsy, Newt began to giggle uncontrollably. "Ahahahah, oh, I'm, ahahah, I'm sorry. That's ace. Yeah, you win."

Aziraphale regarded Crowley with vague, mistrustful uncertainty while he took his winning cards.

"Nah, it's not true," said Crowley, winking at Aziraphale. "But thanks for thinking maybe it was."

"Thank you for clearing that up," Aziraphale sniffed. "One would've been hard-pressed to believe such a claim to begin with, seeing as you, well, haven't really got humps as such, have you?"

Pippa wrapped her knuckles on the table. "Oi, you lot. Knock it off. Last round, let her read."

Anathema inhaled gratefully, perhaps in an attempt to sober up. "Make a haiku," she muttered.

Aziraphale did some quick mental calculations. By the math, they each ought to have seven cards left; he had seven cards left, at any rate, and he intended to make prudent use of three of them. He played William Shatner / Full frontal nudity / The glass ceiling with absolutely no regrets.

"What the eff!" Uriel exclaimed, laying her own composition of Gandhi / Praying the gay away / My soul. "Betcha never knew he had a thing for starship captains, did you?" she asked Crowley.

"I wouldn't say that," said Raphael, laying down Goblins / Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II / Riding
off into the sunset. "Crowley's a sharp young man, isn't he, and Aziraphale's a gentleman of taste."

"You're going down," Crowley said, playing My inner demons / The Force / Sweet, sweet vengeance.

"I probably am," Newt said, laying down Arnold Schwarzenegger / Seppuku / The penny whistle solo from "My Heart Will Go On" in abject shame. "Throw-aways at the very last. Oh, woe."

Pippa shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "I quite fancy James Kirk, too." She constructed her haiku off the cuff, choosing three cards from her hand seemingly at random: Grave robbing / Picking up girls at the abortion clinic / An Oedipus complex.

"Make my day, why don't you," Anathema sighed, studying the disaster of verse on display. "Hey, why not," she finally concluded. "I'd snog him, too, given half a chance. Aziraphale, you win."

"Traitors!" hissed Crowley, and, indeed, vengefully shoved his haiku down Raphael's shirt.

"We had a good run," Pippa sighed. "Count your black cards, dear hearts, for reckoning."

"Five," said Aziraphale, proudly, tossing his winnings in the bin. "Rafe, where do we stand?"

"I've got a mere two," Raphael scoffed, "so that puts the High & Mighty at a total of seven."

"Three," Uriel offered, tossing her own pile in the bin after counting. "Crowley, save us!"

"Eight," said Crowley, slyly, handing his cards to a disbelieving Uriel. "We're at eleven."

"This isn't looking great for us," Anathema admitted. "I only won three rounds. Fail."

"I won five when all was said and done," said Newt, hopefully. "That puts us at eight."

"Don't look now," said Pippa, "but I won four rounds. If I'm not mistaken, that's twelve."

Damn it all to hell, Crowley thought, shoving his heels hard into Aziraphale's stomach, knocking the breath out of him. Now the four of us with miracling abilities have got to go around performing snappy modifications to the Shambles and to the Device-Pulsifer residence. One of these jobs poses a distinct problem, do you follow? I sure hope you know your way around a hammer.

"I need the loo like nobody's business," Anathema announced, hightailing it for the hallway.

"That makes two of us," Newt agreed, trailing after his wife at a slight, zigzagging amble.

"My love, let's clear the table," Raphael suggested to Uriel, taking up one forgotten bowl of crisps. "It seems to me we're in for some bickering, and I'm not willing to get stuck in the crossfire."

With both humans and Archangels gone, Aziraphale and Crowley were left staring at a tired, if satisfied-looking Pippa. Her hair had lost some of its wave, but her eyes remained the same: piercingly bright. Crowley yawned, a seemingly genuine reflex, and she patted his hand.

"Run along to bed, you dear thing," she said. "Besides, I need a word with your man."

"You're welcome to it," said Crowley, rising. He cast Aziraphale an inviting glance.

Aziraphale began, "If it's regarding what renovations you shall require, rest assured—"

"I'm not as thick as all that," said Pippa. "One of these days, the joking has got to stop."
"Until such time as explanation is expedient, if ever," replied Aziraphale, getting to his feet, because clean-up was best left to his colleagues, and the humans could fend for themselves, "good night."

On his way to bed, he passed Newt, chagrined, and thought he heard some scratching in the wall.
Eden, The Beginning

All in all, if you had asked Crawly what he thought of the weather thus far, he'd have told you that it hadn't been half bad for beta-test mode. And if you'd asked him what beta testing was, he'd have demurred and claimed it had been a slip of the tongue. Quite easily done with a forked one like his, you see. And if you could be bothered to get the hang of immortality, you might live long enough to become a beta tester.

Instead, the dark-skinned, sharp-eyed human sighed, insistently repeating, "I said, I'm hungry."

"Er," said Crawly, uneasily coiling and uncoiling and re-coiling on his branch. "That's nice?"

"Not very," said the human, brushing long, shining wavy hair back from their forehead. "It's this sort of—of—gnawing, nasty, impatient feeling in my belly. Or at least I think it's my belly. It could be my liver for all I know; it's not as if I've had time to commit all this shite to memory, yeah? Says who Adam should get to have all the fun naming? Anyway, there was another word for it that sounded more dignified. Stomach, that's it. Distract me with a story? My stomach hurts."

Crawly regarded the human with the disquieted expression of someone who's just learned there's another term for one of the irritating, yet enjoyable parts his newly acquired body has so far had to offer.

"Well, then, you'd best get cracking on that right away," he suggested amicably, winding his midsection carefully around a leafy juncture so that he could extend the front half of his body down and stare straight at the human's inquisitive face. "There's that thing one does, you know—where you find the least olfactorily objectionable organic matter convenient to your vicinity and put it in your mouth. Sometimes cutting's required, sometimes not, although I should say smaller bites are best if you're lacking a dislocatable jaw, because if you should choke yourself now—"

The Angel of the Eastern Gate, who'd up till that point been politely pretending not to eavesdrop from where he'd been leaning with his sword (currently not flaming, as it tended to do at night) several tree-trunks off, cleared his throat and said, "There would be hell to pay. Quite literally."

"Now, that's not on," Crawly pointed out, stiffening. "They've not even had the chance to learn the difference, so how can you claim accidental expiration at this stage would result in damnation?"

"The difference between what?" asked the human, arms folded across their chest. "Who're you?"
"I'm Aziraphale," the angel told them, and then frowned at Crawly. "I see you've met, ah. Well."

"This one's the Serpent," replied the human, "unless there's more, in which case he's a serpent."

"Yesss, there are more," said Crawly, peevishly, "but I think you'll find them far less talkative."

"I'm Eve," said the human, brow furrowed, "although I think Eva has a much better ring to it. Or Evan, don't you think? Anyway, I'm Eve, and I don't like my name that much, and I'm hungry."

Aziraphale cleared his throat again, taking Eve—Eva/n?—by the arm. "Listen, dear girl," he said, his tone saccharine, "I just passed a lovely shrub that seems to bear some manner of edible berry."

"What's a girl?" asked Ev(e)/a/n. "And what's a berry? Is it a kind of fruit? I know about fruit."

Crawly pulled a face. "It wasn't the brambles, was it? Blackberries? Vines full of vicious little spikes. Your know-it-all friend sustained quite a thorough scratching the other day, and their fingers were stained purple to boot. I mean, it's all well and good if you like that sort of thing. We've got some varieties of tree here I think you'll find more civilized. Also, what should I call you? I'm having a naming crisis that's on par with yours, and, by the by, a girl—woman, really—is, for no rhyme or reason I can fathom, intended to function as the female of your species. Possibly. Might entail childbearing, might not. The alternative would be boy-slash-man, male of the species, et cetera. Even then, I'm oversimplifying. Lots of variations yet to emerge from the gene pool. You'll learn lots of things about yourselves He doesn't even know are there."

"Adam calls himself a man," said Ev(e)/a/n, dully, "because that's what bossy-boots Up There's been calling him. Bossy-boots calls me woman, but what does he know, what when I don't even know? I don't feel like I'm what they are, so maybe she this and what's-her-problem that is all right in the short term, but—Eve. Call me Eve. It's a better name than Adam, and it'll do for now. I'm still hungry."

Aziraphale tugged gently at Eve's arm. "As I was saying, the blackberries are right this way."

"You might try the pomegranates," Crawly suggested, inclining his head at the tree adjacent to the one he was perched in. "Chock-full of antioxidants, and they'll be all the rage several millennia from now. Juice, flavored water, yogurt, tea beverages, the works. Bit seed-heavy, though."

"The skin looks dusty," said Eve. "Thick. Like they're too much effort." She pulled away from Aziraphale and stepped toward the end of the branch around which Crawly had wrapped himself, one brown finger extended. "What's that?" she asked, pointing at an unassuming mottled fruit.

"Ah," said Crawly, regarding the small, golden-brown apple. "That'd be a russet. One of the least flashy varieties of your type of fruit thus far known as apples in common parlance, but looks can be deceiving. They've got flesh white as snow, and they're sweet as anything. Take it from me."

"What's snow?" asked Eve, dubiously. "Is it sweet, too? Fruit tends to be, that much I know."

"Then have the pomegranate, go on," said Aziraphale, nervously. "It's tart. Try something new."

"Although there's something to be said for knowing who you are and what you like," said Crawly.

"You can toss the blackberries and pomegranate seeds together," Aziraphale cut in. "Fruit salad!"

"Salad?" asked Eve, plucking the russet right from under Crawly's nose, taking a bite. "Do tell."
"And the Worst Parenting Award goes to Himself," said Aziraphale, dismally, taking another sip of pilfered palm wine. "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds, and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them." He drank the wooden tumbler down to all but dregs and passed it back to Crowley, who looked as if he might be feeling a bit seasick. "Wasted opportunity for discipline, you see."

"If you ask me, it's not just the humans who got up his nose on this one," Crowley muttered, finishing off the liquor, tossing the tumbler hard against the nearest barrel; at this impressive display of temper, Aziraphale flinched. "Some of your, oh, let's call them associates, got a little too friendly with the locals. Just how long do you think it's going to take that strain to work its way out of the bloodlines, eh? Eh? Oh, wait, never mind: kill 'em all off with a stonking great flood and it's no longer an issue, am I right? Am I?"

Aziraphale glared at the man-shaped creature lounging against the barrel across from him. It was more difficult to dismiss Crowley when he was like this, more difficult to see him as less than kind with his expressive hands and high cheekbones and striking yellow eyes. At the same time, it was—It was nice to be like this, to shed dove-guise and snakeskin alike and simply be themselves.

"This stuff's rather good," said Aziraphale, patting the barrel at his back, changing the subject. They'd been cooped up out on the water for so long that even fighting to break up the monotony now seemed like an absurd idea. "It's aged well, don't you think? Pity it's the last on earth."

"Shem's a better hand at distilling than his brothers because he's open to suggestion," said Crowley, crawling around on all fours till he'd located the tumbler. He held it up and, with a rare blink,miracled it full to the brim. "In here, you've got sap from not just Phoenix dactylifera and Borassus aethiopum, but also from Cocos nucifera." He took a sip and passed it to Aziraphale. "Verdict?"

"Sublime," sighed Aziraphale, and drank half of it down. "Will those species survive, I wonder?"

"You're the one who went flap-about after that useless raven last week," Crowley said. "You bloody well tell me. Did you spot anything out there, or is it still ocean as far as the eye can see?"

"Noah's to send me out again tomorrow," said Aziraphale, reluctant to surrender the cup. "There'll be greenery this time, or at least that's what He says. What shall I bring back? It's rather a delicate message that needs conveying, don't you think? I doubt I'll find much in bloom, let alone—"

"Go for what's common," said Crowley. "Go for what you see in abundance that's also something useful. Given that resentment you're harboring, I'd have suggested a twig from the genus Malus, but I have an inkling that the family Rosaceae will continue to get us all in enough trouble down the line as it is. What? Apple trees are in the same hereditary milieu as rose bushes; didn't you know?"

"Fruit-bearing over flower-bearing, perhaps?" asked Aziraphale, averting his gaze from Crowley's sudden, manic intensity. "One wants the suggestion of life, after all. Sustenance. Nourishment."

"The former don't happen independently of the latter," Crowley sighed. "Generally, the latter leads to the former. Just hunt down a palm frond or an olive branch, why don't you? That would suffice."

"I suppose you're right," Aziraphale agreed, accepting the cup. "Let's not overcomplicate matters."

"He'll send you out a third time, the old drunkard," Crowley warned. "If you want to respond with a message beyond misinterpretation, the ultimate coast's-clear, you'd be wise not to come back."
"It would serve him right," said Aziraphale. "Serve both of them right. Dear boy, what about you?"

"I'll stay a while longer," said Crowley, letting his head fall back against the barrel. "Slither ashore once it's obvious the humans have better things to do than take a head-count. Keep to the desolate parts, see how the plants are coming on until mankind's had the chance to sufficiently repopulate. How much do you want to bet they'll start bossing around growing things and creeping things alike at the earliest opportunity?"

"You've become something of a hobbyist, haven't you?" said Aziraphale, and drank to beginnings.

**Rome, 301 AD**

Crowley leaned heavily on the balustrade, squinting out over a city lit by lamp-wick and torch-sconce alike. He was bored out of his skull, if you wanted to know the truth, but it would have been rude to tell the hostess as much. He'd fled to the balcony with a glass beaker and a two-thirds filled decanter he'd lifted from one of the serving-boys' trays. So far, it hadn't proved a very good party.

A burst of activity behind him merited an eye-roll and snagging of the decanter at his feet. Licinia's insufferable friends have little to discuss but Diocletian's recent Edict, and the men Decius brings around are little better. Crowley's only their household cellar-master (the better to inspire Gluttony in both mistress and master of the house, and their myriad friends); as such, he holds his tongue, and none of the guests question the share he spirits away. Quality control, at least, they understand.

"Aha, there he is, brooding thing," Licinia said, her shadow falling across Crowley. "I don't know what it is, but I've had the feeling for positively ages you two might get on. Aziraphale, this is—"

"We've met," said Crowley, not turning to look at them, focused on refilling his beaker instead. "It involved that Aventine dive we mustn't mention and the price of Santorini red. Leave him here."

"My," remarked one of Licinia's friends, probably the hairdresser with terrible taste in eyeliner and prostitutes, as they shuffled off. "Those are intimations of shared history if ever I heard any."

"Hardly!" Aziraphale called over his shoulder as he strolled up beside Crowley against the balustrade. "We're regulars at the same collegium, nothing more. A dive, Crowley? Really."

"They were cutting the Mavrathiro with water and tossing in sapa to boot!" Crowley lamented. "That's degrading wine that's sweet to begin with, and then contaminating it with lead. Do you have any idea what these meth-lab sweetener options are doing to people? I suppose you might, given you've adopted the latest fashion," he added, sparing Aziraphale's fingernails an appraising glance. Much to his annoyance, he had to admit that they looked nice. "I mean, there's no way insanity by way of cookpot burn-off is your defense."

"What have you got there?" sniffs Aziraphale, ignoring Crowley's tirade and pointing at the beaker. "Something too fine for sharing with the mob, no doubt. Your purse assuredly suffers the most."

"Assyrtiko, one-hundred percent unadulterated," said Crowley, slyly, nudging the decanter with his toe. "What's that you've been sipping on all evening, Decius's risky shipment from Burdigala?"

"I'll leave you to your white if you leave me to my red, thank you," replied Aziraphale, crisply.

"There's no phylloxera on Santorini, you know," said Crowley, conversationally, snatching
Aziraphale's wine away from him. "No trace of clay in the soil there, so the parasite can't thrive," he explained, taking a sip of the faintly vinegary stuff. "Whooo-eee. Give the slaves some of that for scrubbing Licinia's bed-pan, it'll work a treat. What'll Decius try next, swill from Iberia?"

"Why must you be so vulgar?" sighed Aziraphale. "They're kind enough to employ you, what when heaven knows you have no need of a side racket. If only they knew who really fills your coffers."

"Dis and the whole Stygian lot, a-fucking-men," Crowley agreed. "Did you know that lot Down There can't keep track of which culture calls them what half the time? Hilarity frequently ensues."

"God-fearing people have had a hard time of it here in recent months," said Aziraphale, softly, but with an undertone suggesting Crowley ought not to write him off. "Surely your lot could be persuaded to ease up on the Emperor a bit. Perhaps dial his prejudices back a bit, as it were?"

"Diocletian's prejudices are nobody's but his own," said Crowley, moodily, and set aside his beaker before reaching down to snag the decanter. "Here, have some of this," he said, and filled Aziraphale's cup with the Santorini white. "You'll feel better, or at least you will for right now. Whatever happens in the morning, well—depends on whether you remember to sober up."

Konya, 17 December 1273

Aziraphale sat smoking on the balcony, undisturbed except for the servants' comings and goings. He'd been little more than a friend to the master of the house, certainly, and his presence was hardly a prerequisite to any of the sick-bed or eventual funeral proceedings. He puffed rose-flavored shisha and said nothing to the girl who came to collect his enameled tea-glass, nodding as she left.

"What did I say about Rosaceae?" asked Crowley, pensively, not thirty seconds behind with a fresh tray. He set the service down on the woven rug between their nests of cushions and regarded Aziraphale with a wan expression. "I'd never have pegged you for a devotee of Nicotiana tabacum. That's Solanaceae, though. Nightshades. I suppose your sickly-sweet Rosa damascena flavor will temper..." He trailed off, resuming his seat next adjacent to the angel. "Cardamom," he said.

"I do hope you mean the tea," Aziraphale sighed, reaching for the nearest glass. "Honey?"

"Not this time," Crowley said, claiming the other glass. "They've used the last of it in his medicine, perhaps to ease his passing. There's nothing to be done now. Not even the promise of all your theological sparring could bring him back. Have you seen how poets die? It's depressing."

"How dost thou know what sort of king I have within me as companion?" Aziraphale recited, blowing briefly on his tea before chancing a sip. Cardamom, exactly as advertized. "Do not cast thy glance upon my golden face, for I have iron legs. They pass with a measure of dignity, wouldn't you say? After all he's seen and endured, inevitably last words such as those seem almost tame."

"For a man who lost his heart twenty-five years ago, sure," Crowley allowed, gesturing to the girl as she entered again, indicating that she should bring more for them to smoke. "It's self-assured to say the least. Either grief drives them mad, or they internalize it and get on with things. It's forgivable if some of that ends up on paper, but, as I mentioned before, it's depressing."

"Why must you always play the cynic?" demanded Aziraphale, offering Crowley the pipe's mouthpiece. "The life of Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī will end soon enough, and, with it, his misery. Surely you can't be thinking of where he'll go; that's over and past, chosen long ago."
"I worry for where he'll go," said Crowley, slowly, "because I worry for who he'll find waiting there. Or, rather, won't. I haven't kept up on this with your level of, shall we say, personal interest, but I'm up to speed now; I've been reading his archives for hours. I want you to know that if it turns out Shams Tabriz is anywhere but in the afterlife to which our friend is headed, I'll never forgive you for not seeing to it that they had even that as a last ineffable mercy. Aziraphale, I swear it."

Startled, but refusing to give Crowley the satisfaction, Aziraphale watched his companion take several angry drags on the hookah and blow smoke aimlessly at the sky. The girl came back with a box of tobacco that smelled more of mint than their current fare, and Aziraphale thanked her.

"You don't know where his old friend has gone?" asked Aziraphale, at length. "Are you behind on the books, on who's got contracts with whom? Do you begrudge me having got to our dying friend first?" He pauses, and Crowley's anxious eyes flick to meet Aziraphale's gaze. "I'm sensing the projection of some separation anxiety on your part. Dear boy, do you think me that cruel?"

"I think you lot are terrible when you want to be," Crowley admitted, radiating relief as he exhaled the last of their rose-infused smoke at the sunset, "but not when sentiment guarantees you've won two of the finest writers this corner of Creation's ever produced for your own ranks. Let us all be thankful that you've got a selfish streak a fathom wide and that your pride's not far behind it."

"I wouldn't have seen them suffer more than they've suffered already," said Aziraphale, mildly, and patiently cleaned the pipe for their next round. "No sooner, in fact, than I would have seen you."

**Marseille, 1534**

Crowley entered the physician's house only once the last candle had burned low, soundlessly removing his mask. He retied the stiff linen laces and hung it on one of the pegs next to the door. He had done a spot of lurking in the alley around the corner until he had seen Doctor Serre leave with his pale-haired apprentice, a slender grey-eyed young woman who looked human enough to the casual observer, but no: those trapped in eternity can spot their own. Crowley knew better—

"And so Michel sleeps," breathed a quiet voice behind Crowley, "while his great master takes the witching-hour shift. He may be face-down in his manuscript, but he seems peaceful enough."

"The girl," whispered Crowley, curtly, turning to face Aziraphale. "Who the devil is she?"

"One of my people," Aziraphale replied. "No concern of yours. She sees to some they can't save."

"That's Azrael's work, I thought," muttered Crowley, distractedly, scratching the back of his neck.

"Most of it is," Aziraphale agreed, and glanced at the sleeping human. "But some of them are bound for a fate far different than Above or Below. Surely you remember that. It is written."


"If you think she's risky," Aziraphale sighed, reaching to pinch out the candle's feebly glowing wick, "then you should see who else is on field duty. I'd steer clear of them if I were you."

"What are you doing here?" asked Crowley, peevishly. "Come to cozy up to the young prodigy while he's yet fresh in his grief at having lost both wife and children to the Plague, have you?"
"What are you doing here?" Aziraphale countered suspiciously. "Come to coax his candle-flame back to life and torch this whole priceless library of cures while Monsieur de Nostredame sleeps?"

Crowley intently studied the man's sleeping face: his sweat-stained, slipping cap, his herb-littered sleeves, his ink-stained fingernails. Even in darkness, he could see the apothecary unhindered.

"That old monster Rondelet expelled Michel from the doctoral program for his love of plants," he told Aziraphale. "For learning how to use them to save human lives. For using them to save lives." He reached for the ceramic vessel sat precariously next to Michel's elbow and picked it up. "Do you even know what these are? What they do? They're pills, Aziraphale." He waved them under the angel's nose. "He prescribes the taking-in of fresh air and clean water for his patients, and then he gives them these. Petals and hips of roses, green-cypress dust, resin of lign aloe, clove, calamus, and iris. *Rosaceae* again, and *Iris florentina*. Keep your Archangels. I'll stick to flowers, thanks."

"She would like you, I think," said Aziraphale, quietly. "My friend who's out and about with Serre. If she could see past what you are, but that's something that can never quite be helped, can it?"

Crowley set the rose-pills back down and touched Michel's face. "He will marry again. Know happiness, have children. Ones God can't take, can't touch. In recompense, his soul is ours."

"In exchange for unholy knowledge?" asked Aziraphale, bitterly. "For tasting forbidden fruit?"

"Not my idea," said Crowley, squaring his shoulders. "Not *originally*. I learned from the best."

**London, 1600**

Aziraphale leaned in the doorway, rapt. The damp wind blew at his back, and *still* the thought of stepping into that crush of bodies turned him.

Burbage was in rare form, never mind a trifle old for the role, and as for the man at this moment bodily restraining him on the stage, *well...*

"Unhand me, gentlemen!" Burbage hissed at Will, who staggered back pale as death in scholars' robes two decades too late to be those belonging to Horatio (had he but *existed*). "By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me," he continued. "I say, away!—Go on. I'll follow thee."

"I hear Alleyn's playing Laertes," Crowley whispered loudly, sidling up to Aziraphale with a friendly elbow stuck right in the angel's ribs. "Won't that work a treat, eh, what with him and Burbage at each other of late like wolves? I can't wait till the graveyard scene, that scuffle—"

Infuriated, Aziraphale took Crowley by the arm and yanked him out into the settling dusk. "You *would* turn up at a time like this, wouldn't you, what when the text's been done over with some of Will's best revisions to date? Do you have any idea what the poor chap's been through these past few years, what with losing the boy and now his father's health declining month by month?"

Crowley tugged free of Aziraphale's grasp and adjusted his cap, folding his arms stiffly across his chest. "I'm aware I'm about to have my heart ripped out, yes, so I'm trying to keep things light."

"Seeing as we're missing the encounter between Hamlet and his father's ghost, you're missing a fine ripping-out indeed," sighed Aziraphale. "But, never you fear, there's more to come. Shall we go back in?" He squinted at Crowley's features in the dim light. "Crowley, what's the matter?"
"Deptford's the matter," Crowley blurted, jabbing both index and middle fingers firmly into Aziraphale's chest. "Yeah, seven years ago, fine, but while we're pointing out old wounds..."

Aziraphale pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand and removed Crowley's fingertips from his person with the other. "What Marlowe's death has got to do with this, I cannot possibly imagine."

Crowley blinked at him several times, which was just one more hint that the demon meant business.

"D'you honestly mean to say you don't know why I've never forgiven your people for that? It ought to've been him in the limelight tonight, not Burbage. No, for—for the love of Go—Sa—ngh, Aziraphale, dammit, look. Eighty-five through ninety-two, and then, a year later, Kit's gone. Seven glorious years they had, mucking about Denmark and the Low Countries. They were the Tragedians, don't you see, and what a prison London must have seemed thereafter?"


"You and your fondness for Anne," Crowley spat. "She was happy with the children."

"You'd have seen Kit and Will happy with each other. Seen them run, seen them damned."

"That and more," said Crowley, yanking Aziraphale by the arm in his turn until they were back inside and facing the stage. "Look now at what is, but imagine what could have been. Watch."

"Swear by my sword," said Burbage-as-Hamlet, "never to speak of this that you have heard."

"Swear by his sword," echoed whatever apprentice they had mucking about beneath the stage.

"Well said, old mole, canst work i' th' earth so fast?" demanded a convincingly delirious Burbage. "Hah. A worthy pioneer! Once more remove, good friends," he added, dragging Will by the hand.

Aziraphale averted his eyes, abruptly finding Burbage's performance distasteful. Heavy, overdone.

"Kit would've led him like a lover, even in the onset of madness," Crowley sighed. "I said, watch."

"O day and night," murmured Will, pale above his milk-white collar, "but this is wondrous strange."

"And therefore as a stranger give it welcome," said Burbage, resolutely. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in, in—in our philosophy. But come..."

"Your philosophy, your philosophy," Aziraphale hissed. "Of all the lines he could've—"

"Of all the lines he could've what?" Crowley demanded, getting a few nasty looks from spectators occupying the back-most tier of seating. "Flubbed? I like it better that way, personally."

"You would," Aziraphale sighed, sagging into Crowley's touch. "Kit would have done, too."

Crowley side-eyed him appraisingly. "You wouldn't still happen to be hanging about the printers' stalls in Chancery Lane and offering unsolicited help with the proofs, now, would you?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," snapped Aziraphale. "None whatsoever."

"Rosemary," Crowley insisted, his breath suspended, leaning in kind. "Pray you—remember."

Pray you, love, Aziraphale thought, restoring the word he'd left out. Crowley, you know I will.
"Tricky thing, *Artemisia absinthium,*" said Crowley, holding his glass up to the lamplight. He'd got the louche as near as he could to perfect; lacking sunlight, they'd have to make do. "There!"

"You ought to stop," Aziraphale chided, snatching the glass out of Crowley's hand, slopping a little down the side. He absentingly licked the back of his hand, sucked on his dampened cuff, and Crowley found himself strangely transfixed. "You've had enug. *Enough.* You've positively had oodles—"

"I'm not the one who's lost control of both tongue *and* fine motor skills," Crowley sighed, snapping his fingers to miracle the other empty glass full. He took a long swig, closed his eyes, and swallowed. The air of the room seemed too thin for as murky as it was. He blinked at the angel.

"'M not the one *staring,*" said Aziraphale, belligerently, and tapped his glass against Crowley's.

"It can cause convulsions when consumed in too great a quantity," Crowley continued. "Or kidney failure. Promise me you'll sober up before that can happen, because I *like* this body you've had since, what, thirteen hundred? Pasty in comparison to past fare, I'll grant, but those eyes suit you."

Aziraphale frowned at his waistcoat and poked the buttons. "S'not too *round,* you don't suppose?"

"What's round got to do with anything?" Crowley demanded. "Here, look, since around the same time I've been even paler than you. Makes *my* eyes less of a shock when they're exposed than my other skins did, don't you think?" He tilted his tinted glasses down the bridge of his nose.

"*Your* eyes," said Aziraphale, moodily, staring into his glass. "Nothing wrong with those, no matter the skin. Immaterial, my dear. S'the eye of the beholder. Humans are so frightfully easy to scare."

Crowley took his glasses off and set them on the table, clearing his throat. "We're alone enough back here, aren't we? The blessed nosepiece pinches something awful. "To wormwood. Cheers."

They drank down what was left in their glasses until there was nothing left to do but stare at each other.

"Look who isn't up to spit—*speed*—on fashion for once," said Aziraphale. "You got that coat in, what was it, the seventeen nineties? Yes, mine *too,* but that's beside the point. Even the glasses."

"It's jussst," said Crowley, the full force of what he'd drunk knocking into him all at once, "I couldn't let you go out looking like thass. Like that. By your lonesome. At all. Not *done.*"

"Eighteen sixty," Aziraphale pronounced drunkenly, "was *quite* the big year. I shall miss it."

"If by *big* you mean *dire,*" Crowley lamented. "Not all my scolding was sufficient to save the Carménère vines down in Médoc from *oidium* and *phylloxera.* It's the saddest botanical loss since native Chablis, take it from me. We'll have to wait till the former turns up in South America more than a century from now. God only knows how it's going to *get* there. I hope it's been smuggled out already. And, I should warn you, South American wines? Are largely going to be *shite.*"

"Why do you cling to plants if they vex you so?" asked Aziraphale, in a moment of lucidity.

"Because it's in, you know, my basic nature," said Crowley, sarcastically, and left it at that.

"I think it's wonderful you've found a horticultural calling in life," Aziraphale pressed on.
"Oh, but why?" Crowley asked. "Spare me your moss—mock sincerity. We've all got our little fixations in order to pass the time, haven't we? I've begun to dabble in mechanical engineering, too, for what it's worth. What have you got to dabble in, I mean besides books and overconsumption?"

"I was sincere," said Aziraphale, offended. "And you said, what's roundness got to do with—"

"It's got nothing to do with anything," sighed Crowley. "Overconsumption's a hobby we share."

"Look at you," Aziraphale murmured, removing the spectacles he sometimes wore for effect in much the same way Crowley wore his shades as perpetual armor. He tucked them in his pocket.

Crowley glanced from his chest down to his lap and back up at Aziraphale. "Difficult, angel."

"Then I'll look for you," said Aziraphale, and refilled their glasses by pointing at them. "Drink."

Wormwood, wormwood, Crowley thought. "Thankss for that First Folio wording, by the by."

San Francisco, 28 November 1978

Aziraphale sat on the park bench and waited, squinting indeterminately at the delicate, bidi-like rolls of leaves in his dry, creased palm. He ought to have known better than to have accepted such a thing as a parting gift, but Raphael did nothing by halves. He was off to Hong Kong for a while, he'd said; Uriel was off the deep end again (depressed as fuck had been his exact wording).

"I can't stay in this city right now, darling," he'd said several hours before. "Not given what's just happened. It's just sickening, Az. All that hard work, all that progress, and for what?" He'd taken the questionable cigarillos out of his leather-jacket pocket, folded them into Aziraphale's hand, and walked off. So much for having arranged for Crowley to show up and meet them for a truce.

"Is it the good stuff?" asked the demon, tapping Aziraphale on the shoulder. He leaned over and studied the blunts, sniffing thoughtfully. "Indica, sativa...oh, keen. That's Purple Kush."

"I wouldn't know," Aziraphale sniffed, handing one of them over to Crowley. "Our evening's shot to hell as it is, and wouldn't you know, so we might as well just get blasted out of our skulls."

"He's a coward," said Crowley, coming around to sit beside Aziraphale on the bench. "Always."

"Surely you don't mean the man for whom this city grieves," Aziraphale said. "That's uncharitable."

"No, I mean your Archangel who owes me an apology some centuries gone, thank you very much," sighed Crowley, sticking the blunt in his mouth. He lit it with one careless brush of his index finger, and then took Aziraphale's out of his hand, put it in Aziraphale's mouth, and did the same.

"He's proud and stubborn," said Aziraphale, taking a drag so fierce that it stung his throat as it filled his lungs, and coughed. "But never a coward, Crowley, you must know that. He did his job."

"It's all any of us ever can do," Crowley sing-songed. "Our bloody jobs, and then humans die."

"Harvey Milk will be remembered as a martyr," said Aziraphale, consolingly. "Even a saint."

"What, is that how your people will keep him on the books?" Crowley asked, pulling off his sunglasses so that his eyes were now their only source of light in the Buena Vista twilight.
"It's how humanity will keep him on the books," said Aziraphale, and felt his head beginning to swim. "As it should be, in due course. Progress here is slow, politically and otherwise."

"You've learned nothing since Khoy," Crowley sighed, taking another drag. "Or Deptford."

"Or Marseille, I suppose," Aziraphale retorted. "Lost lovers, lost children and wives—why do these cases matter to you so very much, my dear? Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. They chose to toil upon this earth, to consign themselves to grief. You above most creatures should remember this."

"Why should I?" asked Crowley, with false flippancy. "I'm smoking pot here, not rosemary."

"Oh, very clever," Aziraphale replied, blowing smoke in Crowley's face. "Sarcasm conquers all."

With ponderous deliberation, Crowley took one more puff before making a big show of pinching out the blunt—slowly and neatly, careful to eradicate all traces of ash—before pocketing it. "I'd stop sucking on that if I were you," he said. "Either you'll fall asleep or go on an eating spree."

"I'm supposed to feel happy on this one, aren't I?" said Aziraphale, desperately, before following Crowley's advice. He stared at the pinched-out blunt in his palm. "I don't think it's working."

"How can you feel happy when there are forty thousand people gathered down at City Hall?"

"We ought to feel happy. This is a defining moment, as it were. People will learn something."

"This lot always learns too late," Crowley said, staring into the dark. "And, really, so do we."

Aziraphale reached over and patted Crowley's hand. "I know a place near here. We could go..."

"Drink it away since smoking it away clearly didn't work?" Crowley suggested, half smiling.

Aziraphale nodded, unable to speak, because the pins and needles coursing through his veins had lit his nerve-endings on fire; he could squash this in an instant, prevent himself from feeling the effects of the drug, but Crowley's eyes were a vision, incandescent; he was helpless to look away. He imagined those eyes in a darkened room, imagined Crowley naked and pale and willing by scant light through the curtains.

(He imagined wrapping Crowley in his arms. Heaven help him, he imagined.)

"Drink it away?" repeated Crowley, uncertainly, and touched Aziraphale's shoulder. "Aziraphale?"

"Yes," said Aziraphale, shakily, and got to his feet before offering Crowley his hand. "Let's do."

**Home, 2015**

Crowley stood on the porch while Anathema backed her truck into the driveway, critically eyeing its precious cargo. The tree in the back looked to be a dormant, year-old dwarf with its bare roots tarpaulin-bound. When Anathema had said she knew a reputable nursery, he'd given her enough money for both tree and petrol and left her to it. That had been several weeks ago.

"Hey there," she said, finally hopping out of the driver's side door. Her clogs hit the gravel with a crunch, and her straw hat fell back and down her shoulders, held in place by its lanyard. Her chin-length hair was shot through with the subtest traces of salt and pepper, and Crowley still hadn't
grown accustomed to the fine smile-lines that now adorned her face. "We're right on schedule."

"None of the girls could come today, I take it?" Crowley asked, strolling down to meet her with his hands shoved deep in his pockets. "Not even your son-in-law? We could've used the help."

"Young people have lives, my friend," said Anathema, winking, letting down the back of the truck. "I hate to disappoint you," she said, "but they didn't have a Roxbury like you wanted. The Yanks can keep 'em and go hang, that's exactly what Rufus said. He reserved you this Egremont."

"At least it'll self-pollinate," Crowley sighed, stepping up to pat the trunk. "I'm not sure which cultivar came first as it is—Roxburys were first recorded in the New World in sixteen forty-nine, whereas we first find Egremonts on the books here in eighteen seventy-two. Who knows."

Anathema elbowed him in the ribs. "You wanted the Roxbury because it's the earliest for which we have evidence, don't you? Next time you try to pretend Aziraphale's documentation fetish hasn't rubbed off, I so won't believe you. Where is he, anyway? Inside watching bad telly?"

"The earliest for which I have evidence is the russet tree I bloody sat in—er, climbed—back before you were so much as a fragment of a sliver of an iota of a sparkle in Eve's eye. To this day, I'm not even sure what name they really wanted; they liked the sound of Eva and Evan, did I ever tell you? The awful secret is that these fruits all taste nearly the same, at least to me, ur-russets and Roxburys and Egremonts." Crowley went over to the window and banged on it. "We have guests, angel!"

Aziraphale came outside cheerfully enough, but not without catching Crowley around the waist for his trouble. "My dear girl, how good to see you," he said to Anathema, somewhat preoccupied pressing a kiss to Crowley's cheek. "One fears he didn't just threaten to send you on that nursery errand. Who's come with you? Are the girls or your husband about? Please tell them to come in."

"Nah," said Anathema, grinning. "In Crowley's estimation, this tree counts as the other guest."

"Don't talk about it where it can hear," Crowley hissed, but he didn't pull away from Aziraphale. "It'll develop an inflated sense of self-importance, and where will I be then?"

"You'll have an apple tree as uppity as your rose bush," Anathema said. "Cousins in crime."

Crowley groaned. "Perhaps we oughtn't plant it out back after all. What about here in front?"

"The hellebores won't mind," Aziraphale reassured him. "Would you two like my assistance?"

"No," replied Crowley, and, overwhelmed by sudden fondness, set a hand to Aziraphale's cheek before kissing him on the mouth. "Make up a tea-tray, would you? Even though it's May and the weather's fair enough for a spot of planting, it's chilly, so your blessed cocoa wouldn't go amiss."

Anathema watched Aziraphale head back inside, and then gave Crowley a knowing look.

"Of all your inhuman talents," she said, "I envy you the eternal honeymoon period most."

"Hey, I like regular sleep," countered Crowley. "That one in there makes it, um. Difficult."

"Boo-hoo, too much sex," said Anathema, and Crowley blushed to the roots of his hair. "Let's get this gnarly sucker unloaded, peel off the tarp, and raid your gardening arsenal for a pair of spades."

"That," said Crowley, grinning, wrapping his hand around the nearest branch, "sounds like a plan."
This contains a number of flashbacks to both novel-timeline and series-timeline. For not-a-space-alien, who wanted to know how the hell Crowley got that Holy Water into his flat in the first place. The more I thought about it, the more hilarious the first answer to come to mind seemed (although this piece didn't remain hilarious for long). You can't send lesser minions of Hell to do your bidding when they can't handle the contraband, either, so you've got to consider the other resources at your disposal.

24 February 1981

Crowley had the art of staycationing down to a science. In fact, he'd perfected it to such an exacting degree that he was quite certain he didn't want to go letting on such a thing existed for a few more decades at least. Immaculate trial and error, he reasoned, were moral imperatives.

Still, he did have to venture out of the flat if he fancied his favorite take-away. It was too close to home for delivery, and, anyway, he'd been home so little of late that he'd actually begun to miss his lately taken Mayfair flat. It was down a quiet side street in an even quieter building, and the lady who lived below him was a reasonable, sympathetic middle-aged sort.

Crowley had scarcely got through the front door and halfway up the stairs when he realized that something was off. Said something carried the whiff of brimstone and made the fine, lately-shorn hairs at his nape stand on end. He hadn't scheduled this house-call, and, to the best of his recollection, neither had Dagon. He wiped his forehead and fumbled his key into the lock.

"I suppose you'll have found the spare key under my mat," Crowley sighed, stepping into his shadowed living room. "I don't appreciate that. It's for Harriet to water the plants while I'm out."

"Havin' a slow year, are we?" Hastur asked, his sneer glinting knife-like in the dark. "Some fancy Australian buyin' them newspapers? A royal wedding? Is that the best you can do?"

"Listen, you know about Murdoch," said Crowley, eagerly, spreading his hands in supplication. "He's one of theirs. Now, the pay-off on will take some time, but you've got to trust—"

"He keeps askin' we ought to do that," Ligur mused, scratching his chin. "Funny thing, innit?"

"It's not funny, thought Crowley, desperately, casting about the room for something, anything that might make a serviceable weapon in a pinch. It's just good sense. It's supposedly us against the entire blessed Heavenly Host, and here you are rattling my chains like a pair of second-rate Tottenham toughs. And you wonder why they chucked us out?"

"His Lordship," said Hastur, emphasizing the title to a spine-tingling degree, "grows restless. He wishes to know how his offspring fares at the hands of mere mortals. Anything to report, Crawly?"

Crowley swallowed, offering his guests the reasonable approximation of a laid-back, cheerful grin. He tracked through his too-sharp recollection of his latest West End outing with Aziraphale. Joseph two years ago had been worth the laugh, and the child hadn't done much more than shriek in his
mother's arms; they had tickets to see *Cats* in May, and the Dowlings would once more be in attendance if Crowley's source of intel, the nanny, was correct.

"Please tell *Him,*" said Crowley, with what he hoped was sufficient deference, "that His son has, from a tender age, begun to cultivate a taste for the finer things. A taste for *excess.*"

Ligur scratched his chin with filthy fingernails, considering this. "You mean like whorin' an' such?"

Hastur snorted at him. "The child is, unless I'm misrememberin', just two years of age. Doubtful."

"Never underestimate the value of an early and eclectic musical education," Crowley said.

"Music hall tripe ain't quite what He had in mind, you see," replied Ligur, with reluctance.

As Hastur took a menacing step forward, Crowley dropped his take-away bags on the floor. "In fact, it's so far from what He had in mind," said the Duke, looming over him, "as to be a waste."

"But waste is what we're all about!" said Crowley, brightly, grateful of his sunglasses as Hastur backed him bodily up against the wall. He could feel the da Vinci cartoon's frame biting into the back of his skull; he'd have to think quickly if he didn't want this to end in a thrashing. "It's a bloody waste of time, don't you see? Every moment the kid's sat in front of mindless musical-theatre drivel is one moment he won't be sat in Bible study with that insufferable tutor."

Ligur made a low, hesitant noise, tapping Hastur on the shoulder. "He's got a point, dunt he?"

Hastur snarled, seizing the lapels of Crowley's coat. "Tell me more, Serpent," he commanded.

Crowley screwed his eyes shut, grateful that Hastur probably wasn't bothering to look past his tinted lenses. "The show that my agent, Ashtoreth, arranged for him to see last year, for example," he said, choosing his words with care. "It was wholesale butchery of sacred text. *Appalling.*"

"Hmm," said Hastur, and it was a good job Crowley couldn't see his expression. "And?"

"The one we've got lined up for May is a doozy," Crowley vowed. "Talking beasts fit only for keeping company with witch-kind, and absolutely no plot-line or intellectual value to speak of."

Ligur whimpered, sounding curiously envious. "Hastur, I'm thinkin' we ought ter arrange—"

"Name of the composer?" Hastur asked, and Crowley opened his eyes. "Be quick about it!"

"Lloyd Webber," said Crowley, solemnly, blinking to clear his vision. "In both cases."

"Mad as all Bedlam," Hastur mused, showing jagged teeth again. "We shall have him."

"Yes," Crowley agreed, injecting every last ounce of camaraderie he felt into his tone.

Hastur released Crowley's lapels, shoving him back into the picture frame. "Very well."

Crowley rubbed the back of his neck, appealing to Ligur with a smile. "Keen," he said.

Once they'd gone, shuffling out into the hall whilst muttering between themselves, Crowley threw off his sunglasses and whirled to inspect the da Vinci. It hadn't sustained any damage, but it was crooked where it hung, so, still trembling with fright, Crowley adjusted it with exacting care.

*If these intrusions are set to become routine,* he thought, *I've got to up my game.*
Crowley frowned at the stack of shimmering coins in his hand. He plucked them up between thumb and forefinger again, dropping them contemplatively back into his palm. They had decent weight to them, he'd give HM Treasury that much, but he was all too familiar with the effects of time on currency. They'd wear down to a dull, matte shade of brass and become commonplace.

"We shall make do, of course," Aziraphale sniffed, picking up one of the coins in order to inspect it. "There's little to be done for the vulgar phasing-out of gold and silver. In with the new, as they say."

"Give that back," Crowley sighed, snatching the pound out of Aziraphale's grasp, pocketing the whole handful. "The point of today isn't just to spend these. It's a matter of home security."

Aziraphale shoved his hands into the pockets of his camel-hair coat almost sulkily, side-eyeing Crowley before glancing up at the shop awning under which they were standing. "Surely you haven't got any practical use for a safe," he sighed. "Not to keep the Crown's latest monetary endeavor secure, of that much I'm positive. You detest gaudiness, my dear."

"True," said Crowley, leaning back-first into the front door to push it open, "but humans will eat these up just like they've always done. Give them a new class of shiny round things and watch—"

"What's put it into your head, anyway, this notion of yours?" Aziraphale asked, casting about in dismay. He likely wouldn't know the storied history of Milners Safe Company unless it hit him over the head in the form of a rare gilt-bound tome. "There are certainly a lot to choose from."

"I've had a couple of house-calls, you might say," Crowley admitted, absently spinning the dial on a temperature-controlled model, "from less-than-savory characters. You're acquainted with them, I believe, although it's literally been ages since you and yours have had the pleasure."

"Ah," said Aziraphale, frowning till the furrows in his forehead grew so endearing that Crowley had to avert his gaze. "I've had an unpleasant time or two with those fellows, quite right."

"And this, actually, is where your expertise comes in," admitted Crowley. "I need something."

Aziraphale's frown deepened, so Crowley had little choice but to stare. "I don't follow."

Crowley sighed, tilting his sunglasses up just far enough to look Aziraphale directly in the eyes. "There's only one thing under heaven I could possibly hope to use in self-defense, and it isn't your long-lost sword," he said helplessly. "Think about it, angel. I'm begging you."

Unnecessarily, Aziraphale sucked in his breath. "That's playing with fire even for you."

"You'd need only deliver it to me," Crowley reassured him. "Pop it in the safe, slam it shut."

Aziraphale's expression went from one laced with grave misgivings to one fraught with outright pain. "Even if it were in my power to do so," sighed the angel, "I wouldn't. You'd get hurt."

"What do you mean even if it were in your power to do so?" Crowley echoed dubiously.

"Holy Water is the province of humans," hissed Aziraphale, impatiently. "You know that."

"Actually, I didn't," Crowley said, rubbing his forehead in annoyance. "That's downright inconvenient. So you can't just, I don't know, run some from your tap and piff?"
"I could certainly reverse the properties of already-sanctified water by rendering it equivalent to tap water," said Aziraphale, irritated, as if that, too, ought to have obvious. "But, simply put, no. That operation is, if you like, both above and below my pay-grade."

"You lot are completely starkers," said Crowley, turning back to the safe he'd been inspecting. The temperature controls were fascinating, and although it didn't have certain other properties he might find desirable, this particular top-of-the-line model would certainly do for a start.

Aziraphale heaved a sigh, stepping so close that their shoulders touched. "If I may be so bold, I'd like to offer a...suggestion," he said slowly. "For there's no harm in offering advice to a lost soul such as yourself, is there, if the ultimate goal is toward said soul's edification?"

Crowley grinned in spite of himself, spinning the dial a few more times. "I'm listening."

"If you still happen to have that covert network of agents on call—you know, the one about which you're forever playing your hand so close to the chest—why not enlist their help?" Aziraphale asked, shrugging, his shoulder giving Crowley's a companionable bump. "I feel no shame in admitting that I have, er, done very nearly the same with mine. Human agents often prove useful.

"I'd kiss you for this, just so you know," said Crowley, and then thought better of it. "Only if I were so inclined, of course, and only if it would sufficiently convey the depth of my gratitude, which—" He cut himself short, cursing his weakness. "It wouldn't, because, as you're so fond of reminding me, I have no idea what that is." He inspected the safe's price-tag, finding about what he'd expected. "Hey, angel? That's some pretty low thinking, by the by."

Aziraphale shrugged, letting his shoulder brush Crowley's again. "I may play the consummate fool, dear boy," he said lightly, "but I can assure you that the ruse ends there."

13 June 1985

It was another two years until Crowley got around to implementing Aziraphale's suggestion, not least because he'd been experimenting with the temperature controls' applications in the realm of food storage. Ultimately, the fuss of having to remove his beloved da Vinci from the wall just to dial in his combination for purposes of fetching a few grapes was not worth the fuss.

Crowley had sucked it up and got his hands on a state-of-the-art refrigerator instead.

He had also done away with the temperature-controlled safe from Milners and replaced it with one from a company that focused solely on supplying lock-boxes to the nuclear industry, because he wasn't about to follow through with a plan that was, quite frankly, terrifying if he wasn't actually equipped to cope with potential fall-out. So the new safe had gone in.

Crowley studied his reflection in the archival glass covering the sketch, adjusting his bow-tie. It wouldn't do to turn up to that evening's opening of A View to Kill, to which he'd purchased a pair of tickets in the foolish hope that Aziraphale might go with him, in any old get-up.

The angel had declined.

There was no sense in making a covert house-call prior to said Bond-film viewing, either, if one did not consider the economy of killing two imaginary birds with one emphatically metaphorical stone. Crowley left the flat before he could think better of what he was about to do; the Bentley, wearing its decade-out-of-date wind-screen transfers with pride, conveyed him swiftly to his destination.
Crowley patronized the corner shop occupying street-level, as was his wont. It was under new ownership since the last time he'd paid a visit; Lalith and Yasmeen Rajit were an absolute improvement over who'd been in charge before. Crowley asked a few circumspect questions about the tenants they'd inherited before paying for his plant fertilizer and making his way upstairs.

"An' who might you be?" demanded a gruff, unfamiliar voice from behind the door of the dingy second-floor hall. "Ain't nobody's business who's in and who's out, so ye may as well—"

"Your predecessor will have mentioned me," Crowley said, attempting to sound threatening.

There was a string of muttered curses followed by the sound of several bolts being thrown.

"Aye," said the shaggy-looking, malodorous personage as he opened the door. "Come in."

Spot in the carpet that sucked at one's shoes, check. Mildew-ridden wallpaper and brittle, mystifying maps and charts tacked up all over the walls, check. The headquarters of the Witchfinder Army hadn't changed since Crowley had last bothered to turn up, which had been twenty years back.

And the man he'd dealt with then had been only slightly less unpleasant.

"I can see that you're, er, still fighting the good fight," said Crowley, lingering next to the least filthy thing in the room, which was the desk next to the door. It had one clean corner where it appeared the post was continually being settled and shifted in order to make room for more post, none of which had been opened in quite some time. "You could do with a clerical assistant, though," he remarked. "Either that or call one of your ranks in from the field and give them a demotion."

"Ach! We're strained to burstin' as it is, what with the Forces o' Darkness rearin' their ugly heads at every turn," said the Witchfinder Sergeant, who was, at a guess, in his thirties, but had clearly seen better days. "I'd sooner send myself out after 'em, bless their souls, but then who'd man the trench?"

Crowley seemed to recall the surname Saucepan somewhere on the list of WA recruits he'd been given somewhere back the line, but he held his tongue. An appellation like that didn't necessarily mean the bearer was unfit for field service.

"You might consider a secretary, that's all I'm saying," he forged on, attempting to maintain a winning demeanor. "Mister—er, Sergeant—"

"Shadwell at yer service," said the Sergeant, saluting in a desultory fashion. "An' you, well—I know who you are," he continued almost reproachfully. "Ah've heard stories."

"Yes, er," said Crowley evasively, "we mustn't be too quick to judge, eh? I have a favor to ask."

"Favors 'round here don't come cheap, so ye'd best be willin' to raise the wage," Shadwell replied. Crowley nodded readily. "Three times your going rate for the task I set before you. Are we agreed?"

Shadwell gnawed on something Crowley couldn't discern, perhaps the stubbed-out end of a fag.

"Aye," he said with some reticence, scratching his beard. "That'll do. What's yer poison?"

"Holy Water," said Crowley. "One of those thermos flasks full of it. And I mean to the brim."

Shadwell blinked at him. "What d'ye take me for? Thick as thieves with them Papist sods?"

Crowley sighed, rubbing his eyes behind his sunglasses. "Four times your rate, how's that?"
"Ye drive a hard bargain," said Shadwell, gruffly, "but, times bein' what they are, I accept!"

25 August 1990

Even in retrospect, safe at home with a borrowed Jeep parked out in the street where the his poor, beloved Bentley ought to be, Crowley couldn't parse the particulars of what had happened. He'd acted on instinct—well, that and a decade's premeditation—from the moment he'd been threatened by Hastur and Ligur to the moment there'd been no thread more palpable than one Mr. Young having arrived at the Airbase to shout at his wayward, throughly mortal son.

(Or at least Crowley hoped that Adam had chosen to renounce his powers for good.)

He shifted on his white leather sofa, not even having bothered to turn on the lights. There was a mess waiting for him upstairs in the office, and he didn't want to think about it. He ought not to have offered to drop Aziraphale off at the bookshop; instead, he ought to have brought Aziraphale here to assess the damages. The angel would have said something sensible, perhaps, his usual halfhearted, yet strangely comforting attempt at a there-there, and he'd have made the scorched, wretched smear that had once been Ligur, Duke of Hell, vanish beyond reckoning.

Crowley leaned forward, elbows on knees, and set his chin in his hands. He might be sick.

After a few minutes of sitting there with his eyes closed, he composed himself, took off his sunglasses, kicked off his ankle boots and socks, waved on the lights, and got to his feet. There was only so much running you could do before you had to own up to the frankly dreadful thing you'd done.

No matter how bad somebody is, thought Crowley, grimly, there's always someone worse. He marched barefoot up the stairs, waving the lights on ahead of him.

To Crowley's dismay, all that was left of the once sickening, gelatinous mess was now a four-foot circle of fine and powdery ash ground into his beautiful cream-colored carpet. After several seconds frozen on the spot, he got down in a crouch and brushed at the gritty remains, pinching some of it between thumb and forefinger. It had the consistency of ground artist's charcoal.

"Dust to dust," Crowley murmured, sprinkling it with a sigh. "Even this, so you shall be."

He got up and went over to his desk, studying the papers he'd left scattered across it. Some of them were handwritten, his most careful reports on regulation parchment with garden-variety India ink. He picked up the nearest, the one on which he'd been resting his elbow—right hand, trigger hand, bearer of the deadly weapon itself—during the fateful encounter. Some ink in the middle of the page had been smudged by Hastur's handiwork, which had also got Crowley's suit wet.

He regarded the thermos flask and tongs on the corner of his desk, seized by a shudder. There was the bucket, of course, sitting not far from the circle of ash; he wouldn't touch it till morning, because even if it had mostly dried out, there might still be residual droplets. He didn't know what contact with such a small quantity might do. All he'd ever heard were stories and legends, after all, until the moment he'd done the unthinkable and rendered Ligur the sole property of oblivion.

Can I bear this? he wondered, reaching for the flask before he could think better of it.

He turned the receptacle over and over in his hands, finding it dry as a bone. He regarded the tongs and abandoned PVC gloves, rejecting their resumed use almost instantly. He'd deserve whatever burn he got, surely, for risking this inspection. He sucked in his breath and, with shaking hands,
unscrewed the cap of the flask. He peered inside, nostrils flaring at the damp, uncanny scent.

A thin film of Holy Water still coated the interior, and a trace amount had pooled in the bottom.

Crowley felt something cool bead against his right index finger where it pinched the rim of the cap. Instinctively, he dropped both flask and cap on the carpet, wiping his hands hastily on his rather worse-for-wear jacket, fleeing to the bedroom. Sleep, that was what he needed now. Rest.

Sweat or water: he wasn't about to ask which it had been, or why he'd survived this intact.

2 April 2014

Crowley started awake, breathing hard. He hadn't dreamed of what had happened over a decade ago, not in some time, not knowing what he knew now: Adam hadn't renounced his powers, and he'd set everything to rights. And that decision had, the day before, at the wedding, come back to bite them all spectacularly in the arse. Crowley rubbed his eyes, rolling to face Aziraphale.

It was infuriating how soundly his angel slept. So many years of foregoing the pleasure simply in absence of actual need had always struck Crowley as illogical in the extreme. He snaked one hand up from beneath the covers and reached, stealthily, to brush back the few greying waves plastered to Aziraphale's forehead. He bit his lip, considering the careworn lines there. Had they deepened?

Crowley sat up, stretching, knowing he wouldn't be worth another decent wink. He slipped out of bed quietly, rather appalled to find he'd managed to lose only his trousers and that Aziraphale hadn't lost much of his clothing at all before they'd passed out from sheer, relieved exhaustion. He stripped out of his shirt and went for one of Aziraphale's dressing-gowns, preferring to haunt the kitchen in a state of dishabille befitting the morning after one's wedding night even if nothing more strenuous than badly-needed sleep had occurred. It was the principle of the thing.

Emerging from the hall, he couldn't help but pause at the entrance to the living room. They hadn't cleaned up the mess of having had guests in and out for days on end; there were empty and not-quite-empty glasses on every available surface. He studied his collection of curiosities on the mantelpiece, satisfied that it hadn't been tampered with, and then tilted his head at the floor—

The plant mister lay exactly where Ligur-in-Mandy's-skin had dropped it when Mandy passed out.

Crowley dropped to a crouch, examining the implement with a sense of dread. No matter how hard ethereals and occults and humans alike may have tried to escape it, history did repeat.

I'll be damned if I run this time, Crowley thought, reaching for the mister. It's my mess.

With the still-half-full mister cradled in both shaking hands, Crowley got to his feet and strode to the kitchen. He was tempted to stare out the window, to consider the early-morning mist rolling in off the grass, to wonder what his feathered girls were up to out in the shed. He kept his sight-line firmly fixed on the item in his grasp, concentrating on the cold tile beneath his bare feet.

A pair of beady eyes and twitching whiskers waited for him, tempting his eyes to the windowsill.

"You again," Crowley said, taking the mister in one hand so that he could grab the nearest tea towel and wipe down the edges of the sink for propriety's sake, for the routine of it. "What's wrong?"

The mouse scurried down from its perch to hunker beside the hot-water tap, intently regarding him.
"Yes, well," Crowley sighed, setting the towel aside. "I've made my bed, and now I've got to lie in it." He took a deep breath, grasping the top of the mister with his right hand, unscrewing it.

The mouse licked its paw, launching into a polite fit of grooming. However, it didn't look away.

"At least you'll have been here, eh," Crowley said, drawing the lid and its attached pipe cautiously out of the bottle before dropping it carelessly in the sink, "in the event it's to ashes I must return." He tipped the bottle, pouring the remainder of the water—rendered harmless by Aziraphale's meddling or not, whether Holy or otherwise altered—down the drain. An errant splash hit his thumb, a challenge left too long unanswered.

Crowley dropped the empty bottle and, returning the mouse's steady gaze, defiantly licked it away.
The First Storm

Chapter Summary

This scene from Eden first appeared in *Survivors' Guilt / For All the World* way back in the day. Since it applies as backstory to both that stand-alone set and to CoT, I thought that pulling it into context as a flashback here would be wise. Refer to #41 and #42 (*World Without End*) for the relevant resonance; this is subtitled *The Fall* in SG, but its retitling here will prove familiar.

**Eden, The Beginning (Slightly Later)**

It was a dark and stormy night, and nobody was enjoying it.

The ground, newly sodden, was so cold that it made Crawly's scales ache. If he hadn't been able to see in the darkness, he would've been done for. The streams had filled to overflowing, and he preferred to avoid being washed away. After all, he wasn't such a large snake, and he didn't like getting wet unless the sun was on hand to dry him.

Thunderstorms, as far as Crawly was concerned, were a bad move on His part.

Somewhere, far off in the forest, the humans were probably huddled under a convenient crag of rock, warming their hands and stretching their frozen limbs by the fire. Now, there was something he'd give anything for, except he couldn't find the angel anywhere, and even if he could, the angel had given the bloody sword away.

Bloody, Crawly thought. *Rather a good swear.*

In front of him, the grass felt damp, as opposed to outright sodden.

Curiously, he flicked out his tongue, then glanced upward. Perhaps He had something of a sense of humor after all, and was inclined to put convenient rock crags in the Garden where there hadn't been rock crags before. Or maybe somebody else was more practical than Crawly had initially given him credit for.

"Sssomebody there?" he hissed, momentarily chilled by the echo of his own voice.

The rain pattered loudly, dripping off the leaves and long grass.

Crawly slithered closer, shivering as he glided through a puddle. He paused for a moment, feeling the shape of it. It wasn't so much a puddle as a foot-sized indentation in the mud, and it was relatively fresh.

"Hallo?" he asked again.

"Go away," answered a familiar, miserable voice. "There's no room."

"I'm quite small, in case you'd forgot," Crawly persisted. He edged closer to the overhang and found it even drier still. He smelled the burnt-out remnants of a failed fire, and he could see a shape lying stretched out at the back of the cave, its wings stretched out long, pale, and luminous behind it. "You
won't even know I'm here."

"That's ridiculous," said the angel, intent upon facing the back wall. "I already know."

Gathering his courage, Crawly slipped inside, glad to be out of the storm whether he was welcome there or not. He shook himself as well as he could manage.

"What I mean is, you can pretend I'm not here," he explained, much less wet than before, but still cold. "I'll be quiet, and then—"

"Somehow, I think being quiet isn't your strong suit," replied the angel, rolling over unexpectedly. As his wings collided with the ceiling, he winced, winching them in.

"Well, nobody's perfect," Crawly said reasonably, flicking his tongue out in the cool air. The angel smelled warm and clean, which seemed unfair, considering they had been squelching about in the same storm and lying about in the same dust.

"You least of all," said the angel with distaste, squinting at him. "Though I suppose you are awfully small, and you've up till now been very polite, so I suppose—"


"There's no call for that," said the angel. "If you're going to turn nasty, just forget—"

"Face it, angel," said Crawly, yawning so that his fangs were visible. "We're stranded."

The angel's pinched expression grew pained.

"No," he said in a tone much braver than he looked, "we're stationed."

"Really?" asked Crawly. "Where?"


Crawly rolled his eyes.

"Why?"

"Well, the humans—"

"The humans got a one-way ticket out," Crawly reminded him. "Thanks to you."

"And you," said the angel, stiffly. "The point being?"

"We're not stationed in Eden anymore," Crawly said, certain of that if nothing else. "As long as there are no humans here, why should we stay?"

The angel blinked at him, as if he hadn't given it any thought.

"I suppose not," he sighed, and lay down again, ruffling his feathers.

Crawly shivered, feeling very alone. Restless, he uncoiled himself, instantly regretting it. He wasn't just cold anymore; he was freezing. He watched, enviously, as the angel shifted to get comfortable, folding his soft, warm-looking wings about himself.

Unthinking, Crawly sighed.
"It's your own fault," said the angel, tartly.

"What is?"

"That ridiculous skin you've got on. As bodies go, you could've chosen more wisely."

"I didn't get to choose," Crowley hissed, irritated.

"Oh, I'd say your choice is quite distinct."

"I didn't mean to," said Crawly, quietly.

Pity was all he could hope for.

"Not everybody did," said the angel, unexpectedly. He rolled over, mindful of his wings this time, and peered at Crowley curiously. "They haven't taken anything from you, have they? Down There, I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"Abilities," explained the angel, propping his chin on his arms. "Powers. Talents. If they haven't stripped you of those, you could do something about—er."

"Not that I'm, ah, suggesting—"

Crawly closed his eyes and thought of what he could remember, and what he remembered was Heaven. He'd had wings, then, and limbs.

He'd had eyes, too, and a face.

"Oh dear," said the angel, the words quick and tight.

Crawly stretched his limbs and opened his eyes, finding the angel crouched and wary, his torn and mud-stained robe nearly falling off his shoulders. He spread his wings and watched the angel's mouth drop open. It was even more satisfying than being dry.

"That's—not possible," whispered the angel, harshly.

"On the contrary, you told me it was," said Crawly, grinning. He tucked his tongue between his teeth, realizing he must've been fond enough of it to have kept a few of the original specifications.

"Thanksss, angel."

"Don't call me that," snapped his companion—no. Adversary. "I had, said Crawly, studying the cave. The roof was a lot closer than he remembered it, and he realized that it was actually quite a small space. If he reached out, he'd be able to touch Aziraphale's arm, or even the tip of his wing. Not that he wanted—"

"What am I supposed to call you?" Aziraphale asked unexpectedly.

"I don't know," said Crawly. "I had a name. It was—"

Crawly froze.
"Yes?"

"I don't remember," Crawly whispered.

"Well, it seems to me you had a name back when we had our little chat—"

"That wasn't it," said Crawly, beginning to panic. "It's just what they dubbed me Down There. It's not as if I liked being called—"

"What was it, Crowley or some such?"

Crawly opened his mouth, then closed it, thinking for a moment.

"No," he said, turning the sound of what the angel had said over in his mind. "I mean—yes, that's it," he said, tentatively.

"It's not wretched, really," Aziraphale said, almost consoling. "I imagine there are worse names for a demon to have."

Demon. Coming from somebody who was still in with Upstairs, it was an insult.

"You're no gem yourself," he said sourly.

"One does one's best," said Aziraphale, huffily, and turned his back again. "So, Serpent, if you would so kindly excuse me, I'd—"

"That's Crowley to you," he hissed, and turned his face to the storm.
The Knowledge of All Things

Chapter Summary

"The knowledge of all things is possible."
—Leonardo da Vinci

Florence, 15 July 1515

The Piazza della Santissima Annunziata was unassuming, Crowley had always thought. Its drab flagstones and sedate, low-lying arches reflected a certain piety, he supposed, which was highly prized by the friars who called themselves Servi di Maria.

As he made his way past a few beggars clustered at the foot of the statue, he wondered idly if he'd have any holy men to contend with on entry. His old friend had taken rooms in the friary and turned them into a workshop.

At the entrance, which had been permitted to hang open in defiance of the sweltering heat, he very nearly ran face-first into a nun. She was young, perhaps twenty, and had nervous hazel eyes. Cringing inwardly, Crowley made the sign of the cross and let her pass.

The nun's manner eased somewhat.

She'll have been seeing her lover, Crowley thought, sighing as he passed by a rough-hewn wooden bench and some fraying tapestries, looking for the staircase his friend had outlined in his missive. One of the brothers, I don't doubt. Brave girl, risky business. Well done, Hastur. The friars weren't the sole residents of these premises, as they'd taken to renting out rooms for profit.

Crowley found a staircase set into the wall, shadowed and secret, at the end of the hall. A heavy curtain hung across it; he might have passed on by to take the next turning if not for having failed to resist the temptation to peer behind it. He felt his way up the stairs, pushing his tinted glasses, which his friend had designed and built for him some decades back, up into his hair. His eyesight remained best suited to darkness, as it always would. This troubled him less than it once had.

Crowley encountered another curtain at the top of the stairs, and then an antechamber with an open window that shed ample light on a closed wooden door. He knocked on it, clearing his throat. The last time he'd been in Florence, his friend had lived elsewhere in the city. This felt strange.

"There he is," said Leonardo, admitting Crowley without preamble. "The prodigal one returns." He'd aged dramatically, more eccentric than ever. "Eleven years, Antonio," he chided, "and you write me to ask if I have anything with which you can decorate. Have you recovered from Spain? Last I saw you, it had been..." He trailed off, scratching his beard. "Sixteen years. You'd gone back to England for a spell, and then you'd come here. To much of rain and memory and plague?"

There's no recovering from that, Crowley thought, permitting the old man to crush him in a heartfelt embrace. For sixty-three, there was fire in him yet. "What happened while I was away?"

"My mother died in ninety-five. The funeral cost a small fortune, rest her soul, and so far from
"Gosh, I'm sorry," Crowley said, removing his glasses from his hair, turning them in front of Leonardo so that he could perform inspection. "She was Turkish, wasn't she? Arab? That's far from home indeed." O Allah, Caterina is under Your care and protection, so protect her from the trial of the grave and torment of the fire, Crowley thought, recalling a fragment of the Du'a, converted to Christianity though she'd been. Indeed You are faithful and truthful. Forgive and have mercy upon her. "Your handiwork is flawless," he chided, surrendering the glasses to inevitable tinkering repairs. "Your idea of nostalgia is pretty refined," Crowley said, approaching the sequence of fire-breathing monsters painted on panels cut from Lombard poplar. Oh, these winged dragons and wyverns are too much, Crowley thought, admiring the shining, subtly-shaded scales and wild, glassy flame-colored eyes. "What's the meaning of this? Bird-watching as basis for the fantastical?"

"There's no shame in tracking the flight of a sparrow," muttered Leonardo. "But, to a point, yes."

Crowley straightened up and passed the next two canvases by; they were birds instead of monsters, elegant yet ultimately uninteresting in comparison to the final two works. Crowley studied the portrait, which featured a noblewoman seated in front of an open window. The landscape stretching behind and below her was detailed to a fault. Crowley backed up and squinted at the ink-on-vellum sketch, immediately drawn in. Some intricacies, paint simply couldn't convey.

"I suppose it would trouble you to hear I've fallen in love," Crowley sighed. "What is this?"

"Who is the operative pronoun," Leonardo said. "Lisa Gherardini. Till she got married." Crowley could hear him tweaking something with his pliers. "Pour us some wine, would you?"

Crowley nodded and went over to the table against the wall, his eyes leaving the sketch at the very last second. He focused on pouring wine from the cold silver ewer, finding it a delicate translucent yellow in the pair of glass beakers at his disposal. He carried them over to Leonardo, setting one next to him on the work-top, glad to have an open window with full sun exposure at his back.

"I want the sketch," Crowley said, raising his beaker for a toast. "I'll pay your next year's rent."

Leonardo set down the pliers without looking up, took hold of the beaker Crowley had filled for him, and dinged it absently against the one in Crowley's grasp. "Done," he said. "Try these."

Crowley set down his wine and put on the glasses, squinting through them, finding not much had changed—except, perhaps, that they no longer slid down the bridge of his nose when he scrunched it. "The glasses or the painting?" he asked. "Thank you. I hadn't realized they were damaged."

"Both," replied Leonardo, grinning, and set aside his own curious work-spectacles. "You like it?"

"More than I ought," Crowley admitted. "The sketch is superior to the painting in every way."

"I got her bloody smile right in the roughs," he told Crowley, sipping his wine, turning from the sun home," said Leonardo, releasing him, peering into Crowley's eyes. "Medicine has yet to find physic enough for this, I gather? My friend, I'm sorry to hear it. Has my sorry solution withstood use?"
streaming through the window to regard the works side-by-side, "but it went all over the place when I painted it. Her husband had a few things to say about it when I delivered it, but, like I tell him, Signor del Giocondo, apart from you, who's going to see it? Anyway...explain this helicopter thing again, will you? Last time we met for a bite to eat, it's all you talked about. I haven't forgot."

"Wait, when you delivered it to him?" asked Crowley, mystified. "What's it doing here?"

"I wasn't happy with it, either," Leonardo replied. "I said I'd see what I could do about the smirk."

Crowley wandered back over to his new acquisition, studying it with fond pride. "She looks demure here," he said. "Hopeful, at peace. I need more of that." He turned to the painting. "She's a tease here, however. A tart. You've thought that's just the kind of thing Signor would want."

Leonardo shrugged, wandering over to refill his beaker. "I'm not the one you'd want to ask about what gentlemen want from the ladies," he said, shrugging. "My Francesco is traveling. He sends his apologies, as he would have liked to have met you. He came along two years after you left."

"That's the Melzi boy," Crowley said. "He'd be Count now? Marrying up is smart, or so I'm told."


"What's wrong with marriage?" asked Crowley, evasively. "Some people like that sort of thing."

"Marriage is putting your hand into a bag of snakes in hope of pulling out an eel," Leonardo said. "Even if there was something between us," Crowley sighed, "a serpent's all he would get."

Leonardo took Crowley's beaker and refilled it, shaking his head. "You'd prove one of our rarer monsters, my boy," he said, handing the vessel back. "Your tenacity is lamprey-like at worst."

"Is that meant to be a compliment?" Crowley asked, taking a swallow. "They suck blood."

"What I mean to say is, you'd never be dislodged unless you wished it," Leonardo clarified. "I'm the sort you'd want as a sharp-toothed hanger-on, is that so?" Crowley ventured.

Leonardo shrugged, winking at him, and went to pack up the sketch. "I could do far worse."

And I could love you, perhaps, Crowley thought, but losing you, I couldn't stand.

"Enough of your doom and gloom, Antonio," said the painter, placing the sketch carefully between a pair of thin, beveled panels. "I can still hear your stomach growling a yard off. Let's do lunch."

"Yes, that's a fine idea," Crowley said pensively, watching him wrap the priceless cartoon. "Let's."

Home, 15 July 2015

"Unbelievable," Aziraphale murmured, scrolling through his Twitter feed. "These photographs!"

"You're missing them on telly," Crowley pointed out, shifting where he sat curled against Aziraphale's side, gesturing at the screen. "Up-close and personal. Look at those peaks."

"Icy mountains eleven thousand feet high," said Aziraphale, in amazement, and then set his phone aside in order to look up. "Craterless, frozen plains on Pluto and canyons on Charon. Wonders upon
wonders, my dear. Just think of how far they've come. What else will they find?"

"They didn't even know Pluto existed until nineteen-thirty," Crowley muttered, waving off the televlision as BBC's news anchor moved on to another topic. "Gross oversight, if you ask me."

"When we were their age," said Aziraphale, deciding to crash-test his own version of a joke he'd seen in passing, "Pluto wasn't a planet. It hadn't yet drifted into the Solar System's orbit."

"When we were the collective average age of humanity," Crowley replied sourly, "this planet wasn't even a planet yet. Not funny, angel. Stand-up comedy isn't your calling, either."

Aziraphale shifted on the sofa, debating whether to push Crowley away or pull him closer. "Who's to say astronomy mightn't have been yours?" he suggested. "But you chose botany instead."

"And cookery," Crowley added, his eyes drifting to the wall above the telly. "Lest we forget."

Aziraphale regarded the da Vinci sketch, and then turned his head to look at the modern American abstract monstrosity hanging above their heads.

"You might even have made a formidable art dealer if your taste hadn't been so dreadfully eclectic. What do you see in that draft?"

"Peace," Crowley said absently. "Grace. Virtues you couldn't possibly understand."

Aziraphale smiled, well past the point of taking offense, tipping Crowley back into his lap. He ran his fingers through Crowley's hair, realizing it had grown longer and begun to wave again, peering down into Crowley's wide, unreadable yellow stare. "What is it? You must miss him."

"The knowledge of all things is possible, he used to say," Crowley murmured. "The knowledge of all things. We're the closest thing to all-powerful, all-knowing immortals this planet currently has—well, you and me and those two silly buggers up the road—and we don't even know everything. Meanwhile, humans are photographing uppity asteroids in loving detail."

"He'd have liked to know, I don't doubt," said Aziraphale. "Your old friend. An incalculable loss."

Crowley sighed, shrugging, turning his head so that Aziraphale could scratch the base of his scalp.

"Leonardo had views on everything from the cosmos to fossils to mechanics to—to anything, Aziraphale. You couldn't possibly imagine. Why you wasted your time on his rival is beyond me. Michelangelo always did have a chip on his shoulder. Just couldn't keep up."

"You might've spared him that nonsense about flying machines," Aziraphale said. "Had he lived longer, he'd have gone mad trying to work them out. What was it, a bird passing overhead?"

"This writing in such a distinct manner about the kite seems to be my destiny, because in the first recollection of my infancy it seemed to me that, while I was in my cradle, a kite came to me and opened my mouth with its tail," Crowley recited effortlessly. "Yes. I read his notebooks."

*Destiny laughed as she came to my cradle*, Aziraphale thought, reminded of a song that Uriel loved and had once played for him. *Know this child will be able.*

"I'm sorry for your loss," he offered, disentangling his fingers from Crowley's hair, stroking Crowley's cheek. "I never sent my condolences. His passing affected you more than that of many humans we've known."
“Da Vinci and Escoffier and the whole lot,” Crowley murmured. "What difference does it make?"

"Our love is what makes the difference, as you're so constantly reminding me," Aziraphale said, brushing his fingertips across Crowley's lips. "You'd do well to remember that yourself, dear boy."

Crowley smiled faintly. "My boy, he used to call me. But never my dear, angel. Not like you."

"Didn't I read that he'd once said matrimony was tantamount to reaching into a bag of snakes?"

"Oh, that and loads more. Yeah. Told me I reminded him of a lamprey once. Charming."

"Better a lamprey than an eel," Aziraphale insisted. "I'd rather you use your teeth in self-defense."

Crowley rubbed his eyes, sat up, and turned to look Aziraphale straight in the eye. "Do I, then?"

"Endlessly," Aziraphale told him, returning Crowley's smile. " Appropriately, even. And how."
This flashback can be read as a stand-alone. I had intended to have the next longer story set in the present-continuum of this universe ready for posting today, August 26th, but 72 hours of high fever prevented me from getting the head-start I'd have needed over the weekend. This is, however, something I've been meaning to write for some time given an object in my possession, which many of you have now seen. Happy Almost-Apocalypse in this, the year of GO's 25th Anniversary, all!

London, 26 August 1888

It was a hot, fume-filled afternoon in Holborn Circus, but Aziraphale wasn't paying the heat any mind. Why should he, what when, for him, sweating was no more an imperative than breathing?

Still, one must keep up appearances: Aziraphale withdrew a duck-egg blue silk handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket and dabbed at his forehead. His gesture must have been convincing, because the lady crossing the road from the other direction even as he made his way for the opposite curb nodded in sympathy as she fanned herself beneath her elaborate bonnet.

He nodded in kind.

Excessive, one felt, tapping into Garrud's shop with a silver-topped cane that had been fashioned by one of his competitors across the city. Aziraphale tucked it behind the propped-open door as he breezed inside; he did so prefer to spread his business around when he was able, for many of these craftsmen had any number of mouths to feed. Insofar as he knew, Mr. Garrud had none.

He rang the dusty counter-bell with a brisk tap of index and forefinger. "Er, hallo?" he called.

"I shan't be a moment!" called the silversmith, his voice muffled within. "Polishing, you know!"

"Oh, yes!" Aziraphale agreed readily, raising his voice in cheerful kind. "Engraving's the devil.

"And I suppose you'd know, dandy that you are!" replied Garrud, in high spirits. "What news?"

Aziraphale examined his fingernails, guiltily wishing away one stubborn cuticle. "Whitechapel is still the talk of the town, one fears. They've made neither head, nor tails of that poor girl's death."

"Nor will they!" Garrud pronounced, and the buffing wheel went on at full tilt. "The bastard."

"General opinion is inclined to link this occurrence to May's equally unfortunate happenstance," said Aziraphale, choosing his words carefully, brushing his nails on his lapel, "but I doubt affinity."

"Why would you say that?" Garrud asked, scarcely audible to human ears as the wheel whirred to a halt. There was sudden tapping and muttering, the faintest sound of metal upon metal refusing to catch and hold. Aziraphale strained to catch the click of it, frowning. "Violent bugger's got a taste for it now. There'll be more blood ere the month's out, that I can promise. His sort's tweaked."

That's humans through and through, Aziraphale thought, but he said nothing, wondering what Crowley would have to say in the matter. Wisely, Crowley was asleep. With any luck, he wouldn't have one of his wake-up-hungry-and-expect-a-lunch-date episodes any time soon.
"That's awfully quiet," Garrud observed, finally emerging from the back-room workshop with a chamois cloth clasped between both large hands. "Even for you, as I live. You've got an opinion on everything. When you turned up a month-and-some back, sir, you fair talked my ear off."

"I wouldn't speak further of the dead," Aziraphale said. "Or risk speaking ill of them, come to it."

Garrud nodded, wiping his filthy, starched sleeve across his brow. "We must pity them, those who turn against God for their bread. Even the meanest creature under London's eaves must prosper."

"Judge not, lest ye be not judged," Aziraphale agreed, straining for a glimpse. "May I see it?"

"For its completion a week overdue, I beg pardon," Garrud sighed. "I'll dock a shilling, eh?"

"That won't be necessary," Aziraphale demurred, stepping closer, the scent of grit, polish, and Garrud's nervous sweat filling his nostrils. "Let me see it, you silly man. Please."

"Your specifications were vague beyond the initials, sir," said Garrud, reluctantly unfolding the chamois, proffering his open palm in the shop's low light. "The scroll-work waxed delicate as I tooled it—why, there's no telling. I'd not wreck symmetry for the sake of a change, surely you—"

"Delicacy is much undervalued by some," Aziraphale murmured, eyes widening as he took in the piece. "One might take the C for a B, but the art with which you've interlocked these capitals requires a deft touch." He held out his hands, accepting the commission. "With hands such as yours, no small feat." Aziraphale popped the lid with his thumbnail, satisfied with the hinge, inspecting the gilded interior. "Hallmarks all in order. Lion rampant indicates sterling nine-two-five; leopard uncrowned signifying London, in use eighteen twenty-two to present; date-letter R, current for assay." He nodded, satisfied. "And your mark, just there. WFG."

"William Francis like my father before me, rest his soul," Garrud said. "There shan't be a third."

"Give it time," replied Aziraphale, gently, snapping the snuffbox shut, finding the lid wouldn't quite catch. It took him several tries to snap it tight. "That'll be the flaw in your weave."

"No matter how I bully that lip, sir," declared Garrud, bristling, "it won't catch at the first pass."

Aziraphale pocketed the snuffbox as Garrud reached for it, proffering the remainder of Garrud's fee with his free hand. Never mind that he hadn't actually reached into his other pocket to retrieve it. Maskelyne advised frequent, casual practice, but cheating now and again never hurt.

"I'd have it no other way, dear boy," he insisted. "Not now that I've seen it. The damage is done."

"It's a gift for someone you hold dear, perhaps?" asked Garrud, pocketing the cash. "Some lad?"

Aziraphale blinked at him, biting his tongue on the invective he'd memorized for use against those who might pry.

"Ah," he said, studying Garrud from top to toe, wondering why he'd not caught it before, what when Aziraphale kept such company as this in circles decidedly more literary. "No. It's for myself, that I might think of one I might wish to see more often than I do at present."

Garrud nodded, his watery hazel eyes drifting street-ward. "I wish you luck, sir. See you don't lose him. There's many London will lose in days to come, those as have none who'll love them."

Aziraphale muttered his good-byes, too astonished to offer up further commentary. He nearly stumbled into an errand boy in his swift retreat. Forgot to blink, forgot to sweat, forgot to breathe.
For my losses to come, Crowley, Aziraphale thought, in the hope you shall not be one of them.
Garlands

Chapter Summary

14 February 2016, as experienced by usual and unusual suspects alike.

Chapter Notes

The next long story is, ridiculously, still in progress. Lucky for me, though, it was slated to be set in 2016 (as far as in-story time) even when I started it back in August last year. I realized that I haven't actually done any explicitly Valentine's Day themed pieces in this series, although there's that one section of West-Enders that's set on 14 February 1989 and that one section of Inventory that's set in February 2015 (it just so happens that it's set on Valentine's Day, but I didn't bother to specify). Aside from those, I've had a marked lack of establishing any kind of celebratory tradition between Aziraphale and Crowley—or, indeed, for any of the many couples now populating this universe. That changes starting right now. As a bonus feature, I'm introducing some next-story-pertinent plot development kick-offs in here. I'm embarking upon a busy year; I beg your patience.

14 February 2016

"Hey, loser," Mandy said, dropping a handful of venue pamphlets in Iván's lap. "Clock's ticking." She sat down beside him on the sofa, bumping his elbow. "Are we still shooting for early next year?"

"You know my grandparents can't travel," Iván sighed, sifting through them in his lap, taking another uneasy sip of his strong coffee. "Too old. We'll have to have another ceremony in Eibar. My aunts, uncles, and cousins will also come." He offered Mandy the mug. "Hau bukatzean?"

"Er," Mandy replied, setting it aside on the floor. "I will not finish this for your sick arse."

"I could not be more sorry you ended up looking after me on a day like this," Iván said quietly. He set the pamphlets down on the end-table, reaching for his box of tissues instead. "Fucking flu."

"There's the spirit," Mandy said approvingly, scooting closer in spite of Iván's fever-weak effort to push her away. "I shouldn't have let you drink so much caffeine, yeah? Let's switch to tea."

"What about our friends?" Iván ventured, blowing his nose loudly. "Their beach worked well."

Mandy frowned at him, snagging a fresh tissue, handing it to him. "Ez dute eskaintzen."

"That's true," Iván agreed, "but if you mention we have a date in mind, they will offer."

"I'm not going to take advantage, mate," Mandy said, slapping one hand to Iván's forehead. "Here we go again. Been feeding you aspirin instead of chocolate-covered strawberries all weekend."
Shockingly pale beneath his freckles, Iván grinned. "Valentine's rain-check, maitea?"

"Where's the zapper?" Mandy asked, digging around in his nest of blankets. "Let's watch telly."

"On the floor," Iván answered miserably, lower portion of his face buried in snot-ridden tissues.

"That's seriously disgusting," Mandy told him, finding what she was after. She clicked the ON button in a hurry, and then waved her hand at the bin. "You have a whole box."

"House of Commons," Iván groused, but he did as he was told. "Zara larriak? Really?"

"Hey, don't blame me," said Mandy, tossing the remote control on the floor. "Blame Sophia."

* * *

"This is the worst, most disgusting shite ever," Sophia said, nonetheless humoring Adam as he steered her along the pavement with both hands on her shoulders. "You know that, right? First you say, oh, sure, let's park in some uni lot I no longer have clearance for, it'll all be fine, and then you're like, hey, honey, put this on as a blindfold before we get out of the car, nobody'll notice!" She blinked against the satin of Adam's tie. "The parking lot thing gave away our location, by the by," she added sweetly. "I also know the drive by heart. We're in Cambridge."

"You're babbling a lot," Adam observed, and she could practically hear his smile. "Nervous?"

"Yeah, because you have terrible taste in high-end restaurants," said Sophia, smirking. "And anyway, there aren't that many them in this town. You know I'm not fond of the selection."

"One step ahead of you, Soph," Adam agreed, veering her around a sharp turn. "Trust me."

Sophia flared her nostrils, breathing in deeply. "I recognize the smell of that greengrocer."

"I'm not going to be able to hide from you where we're going," Adam sighed. "Not for long."

Sophia stuck both hands in her skirt pockets. "Witch-wives are trouble," she singsonged.

"I'm much worse than a witch," Adam teased. "How'd you take it without blinking?"

Sophia shrugged, throwing her shoulders back proudly. "None of that shite surprised Mum."

"Nothing surprises your mum," said Adam, darkly. "Okay, listen. We're getting close."

"I'm impressed you haven't run me smack into anybody," Sophia remarked. "Must be crowded."

"For a Sunday evening, yeah," Adam conceded, "but I'm behind you. We're not walking two abreast. I'd think the crowd appreciates that." He kissed the top of her head. "Ready?"

"Thrill me, Mr. Young," Sophia said, removing her hands from her pockets, reaching back to undo the knot. "What's it going to be? Falafel and shawarma at our favorite hole-in-the-wall place?"
"Not quite that, exactly," Adam said, bringing them to a stop, batting her hands away so he could
untie the blindfold himself. "It's still a sit-down sort, but I think you might just approve..."

"Rainbow Café," said Sophia, turning so he could see that she hadn't even opened her eyes. "You
shouldn't have." She went up on tiptoe and kissed him. "Did you mine Crowley for details?"

"Not really," Adam said, shrugging. "You were the one who told me all about that afternoon. What I
did was ask your parents about all the times they visited you at uni and where you liked to eat out the
most. They said you wanted to go to Rainbow almost every single time."

"I wonder what Mum and Dad are up to tonight, anyway," Sophia said. "C'mon, let's go inside!"

* * *

"Are you...sure about this?" Newt asked, down on his knees, rummaging in the games cupboard. They hadn't played Anathema's request in so long that he wasn't even sure the falling-apart box
dating to sometime in the seventies had survived the move from Jasmine Cottage.

"I used to kick your butt every time," replied Anathema, cheerfully, "so why should I stop now?"

"Mercy? Common decency?" Newt suggested, crestfallen as he located the vintage Scrabble set at
last. He tugged it out from beneath Scattergories and Taboo. "Out of the goodness of your heart?"

"Nah," said Anathema, setting up the dining-room table. "But pity, I think I can manage."

"Does that mean we're not going to play after all?" asked Newt, but his hopeful tone wasn't sincere.

"Not a chance," replied Anathema, cheerfully. "Get that box up here, all right? Clock's ticking."

"On what?" Newt asked, getting to his feet, strolling over to join her. "The twins coming home?"

"They won't last two hours on a double date," Anathema sighed. "The last time Nat thought this was
a good idea, Janet came home shrieking about how she was tired of not telling anybody she doesn't
like boys. Nat didn't speak to her for a week for not having confided sooner."

"I hope that isn't a sign we've gone wrong," Newt admitted, pulling the revolving board carefully out
of the box, positioning it between them on the table. "As parents, I mean. You have to wonder."

"She knows we would never have given her grief," Anathema said, shaking the bag of letter-tiles. "I
honestly think it's that university-age humans don't like parents nosing around in their business."

"University-age humans," Newt snorted, sticking his hand into the bag when Anathema offered it to
him. "You make them sound like an entirely separate species. To you, I'm willing to bet they are."

Anathema shrugged. "I earned my B.A. at sixteen, but my real first experiences with uni kicked in
from then till nineteen, almost twenty, while I was a postgrad. I found it a steep learning curve."

"Sometimes I forget I'm married to a verifiable genius," Newt said, setting his tiles up in alphabetical
"My father always said I ought to be grateful for having inherited Mum's pragmatism."

"No stereotypical absent-minded professor type, you," Newt agreed. "Who goes first?"

"Have at it, darling," said Anathema, smirking again. "I'm willing to give you a leg up."

"You've been hanging around that lanky, rakish redhead a bit too much, haven't you?"

"Rafe's easier to drink with than you are," Anathema told Newt. "Doesn't fall asleep after one shot."

"I hope to God he's showing Uriel a bloody good time tonight," Newt said. "For everybody's sake."

* * *

"Does your idle threat of some several weeks ago," asked Raphael, idly blowing smoke at the ceiling, his head swimming, "still hold? Because we're both to blame for this...lethargy, one feels."

"One feels," Uriel parroted back at him, giggling maniacally, accepting the joint when he passed it over. "Oh, dude, can you even hear yourself? Do you know who you sound like?"

"Like one poncy-as-hell motherfucker up the road, one imagines," said Raphael, lazily. He turned his head, entranced by the rustle of his pillow-case, blinking at Uriel. "How high are we?"

"I didn't acquire the shit this time, so it's all on you," Uriel replied, blowing smoke in his face. "Isn't it, like, the Feast of St. Valentine or something? And aren't we supposed to, I don't know, celebrate or whatever?" She rolled onto her side, scooting closer, knocking their knees together.

Raphael took the joint away from her, taking one last, long drag before vanishing it into thin air. "What could possibly be your idea of a good time," he ventured, "aside from this?"

"Sex," Uriel said, poking Raphael in the belly. "If I was sober, anyway. I forget how it works."

"You," replied Raphael, deadpan. "Forget how sex works. Amazing. Should we review?"

"Shut up," Uriel muttered, closing her eyes. "I mean more I just don't wanna move at all."

Raphael pushed at Uriel's shoulder; she flopped onto her back without the slightest resistance. "I don't believe anybody said anything about you having to lift a finger," he clarified.

Uriel made a face at him. "Pinkie swear," she said, holding up one hand, littlest finger bent. "Because I just know you're gonna bitch come morning about how I made you do all the work."

"It's work I'm thrilled to do," Raphael said reassuringly, sliding over her as neat as you please.

"Such a loaded word these days, thrilled," said Uriel, beaming up at him. "You jerk."

"No disrespect intended, my treasure," Raphael murmured, wondering if his grammar in their long-
lost native tongue had fled his neurons. "Or have I mistakenly called you some type of waterfowl?"

"Christ, you're a sappy stoner," Uriel responded in English, catching his lower lip between her teeth.

"Do you suppose," Raphael ventured at length, after a thorough kiss, "they give any thought to this holiday below-decks, as it were? Seeing as the saint in question was pretty fond of your girl."

"Tanith was so good at Undercover Ops, I mean," Uriel sighed, "so good. Shivers."

"I'd pay decent money to observe Valentine's Day in Hell, darling," replied Raphael. "Fact."

* * *

"But I want to go," insisted Tanith, indignant, tossing the folders on Dagon's desk. "It's been too long! There isn't even any risk attached to this mission. Standard S-and-L, you said!"

"I've already assigned one of Baal's trainees," Dagon said, stacking the scattered contents back into a neat pile with his curt gesture. "The matter is closed, Tanith. I won't put you back in harm's way."

"Better not let any of the higher-ups hear you talk like that," Tanith scolded. "It's counterintuitive."

"You're right, there'd ultimately be no harm in it," Dagon replied. "At least in theory. But if there's anything I've learned, it's that theory doesn't account for the unexpected. Given that planet's otherworldly population at this point in eternity, I've come to...expect it."

"Humans have a platitude for that," Tanith reminded him, taking a seat on the edge of Dagon's desk, legs uncrossed. "What'd you do, adopt that as policy, too? Thanks to your boy Crowley?"

Dagon's eyes flicked up from pensive contemplation of the unopened files, locking onto Tanith's.

"That got your attention, didn't it?" Tanith asked, drawing her legs up onto the desk, scooting over till she could shift the files and situate herself cross-legged in front of him. "You must miss him."

"Not as much as I would have missed you," said Dagon, "if that clusterfuck hadn't resolved itself."

"We'd all have been screwed if not for the boss-man's kid, face it," Tanith sighed. "Small mercies."

"Now who's going to be brought up on charges of right-minded discourse?" Dagon chided, framing her face with both rough, burn-scarred hands. "We can't afford to give ourselves away."

"Crowley taught you how to give zero fucks," Tanith said, "and I'd learned long before that."

Dagon brushed at Tanith's cheeks with his thumbs, unblinking. "I fear for you without cease."

"Mmm, now," Tanith said, breaking into a smile, teeth bared, "fear, they'd be down with."

"I don't understand why some operations continue, mine above all," Dagon admitted. "Meddling is off the table, broadly speaking, but surveillance is not. We still keep watch over our own."
"Nobody's going to fire you, old man," Tanith reassured him, planting a kiss on his forehead.

"Fortunately, I'm under no obligation to put those two knuckleheads back on any jobs, either."

"Happy Valentine's Day," Tanith said, resting her cheek against Dagon's temple. "I like that one."

"Hastur liked causing no end of trouble for it," Dagon reminisced. "Lust, the whole nine yards."

"Wonder if he's off pouting," Tanith replied. "There's no downer like the kibosh on your trade."


Hastur stalked into the great hall, instantly displeased with what he saw. Which, in and of itself, was pleasing, but he attempted not to dwell on that. "What the Ninth Circle's goin' on in here?"

"Well, seein' as it's some fancy saint's day Upstairs, one wot's got to do with Lust an' all that—"

Ligur paused to rearrange the dry, singed flowers he'd been fussing with "—well, I thought—"

"Thinkin' is not what I keep you on hand for, last I checked," Hastur sneered, wrinkling his nose at the rustle of parched, brimstone-dusted leaves and stems. "Dead roses? I hate—"

"Dead as doornails," said Ligur, proudly, stepping back to admire his handiwork. "Sweet, innit?"

Hastur resisted the urge to torch the banquet table in its entirety. "What are you playin' at, then?"

"You was always fond of today," Ligur said coyly, advancing. "Messin' with all them humans..."

Hastur had both fists wound in Ligur's lapels before he could even blink. "Hm. And?"

"An' I thought, never mind it not bein' my strong suit, maybe you'd want ter..." Ligur winked.

"Get," Hastur snarled, "to the bleedin' point." He kissed the smirk right off Ligur's face.

"Heh," mumbled Ligur, casually, biting Hastur's lip till it bled. "Mess me about instead."

Not for all Crawly's flowers in his sorry, ruined Eden would I trade you, Hastur thought.


Crowley dashed inside, hissing frost, slamming the sliding glass door behind him. "Angell!"
"Kitchen!" Aziraphale called, his tone infuriatingly mild. "Kettle's on, my dear. I've been waiting."

"The cold's killed everything, nearly, and I mean everything," Crowley called, shedding his coat on the sofa as he passed by it. "So much for an early spring! I hear America's got it better."

"So the groundhog says," replied Aziraphale, side-eyeing Crowley, who chucked a tea-bag into his favorite mug and helped himself to hot water. "If you'd only taken a seat, I'd have done it for you."

"I'm perfectly capable of brewing tea," snapped Crowley, strolling over to curl up in his usual chair.

"Feet off the floor," Aziraphale said, setting his newspaper aside. "I've given everything a scrub."

Crowley kept his suddenly-bare feet parked on the edge of his chair, shoving his knees harder into the table's edge. "Then I'll scrub them again later," he muttered into his mug. "Hallo to you, too."

Aziraphale gave him a gentle, yet exasperated look. "You know I'd hoped we'd be on the road—"

"Yeah, yeah," Crowley sighed. "Off to the proverbial races. I got distracted. I'm sorry."

Aziraphale snapped his fingers, summoning some champagne out of storage. "If you'd rather..."

Crowley downed his tea quickly, wiping his mouth on his cuff. "Now you're just taking the piss."

Aziraphale eyed the Moët & Chandon, his expression smug. "Whyever would you say that?"

"I deserved it, whatever," said Crowley, dismissively, waving the silverware drawer open. He made sure the corkscrew skidded to a halt on the table in front of Aziraphale. "You're doing the honors."

"I'm afraid today won't hold a candle to last year," said Aziraphale, ruefully, working on the tinfoil. "That island off of Florida was lovely, and your collection intake was quite superb."

"Not as superb as the 1780 auction haul," Crowley said as Aziraphale handed him some champagne in one of his prized glasses. "Wentletraps flood the market these days, but I couldn't care less."

"You're running out of space," Aziraphale chided, holding up his glass. "Soon, I shall have to insist you begin selling the run-off on eBay. Either that or commission someone to build more shelving."

Not with Harold gone, Crowley thought, raising his glass. That'd be sacrilege.

"I understand that you can't get the man you'd like for the job," Aziraphale sighed. "Crowley."

"Were you going to propose a toast or something?" Crowley asked. "My hand's getting tired."

"Not if less is more, dear boy," Aziraphale said, resting his glass against Crowley's. "To what?"

"To a year without troubles like the one's we've recently had," Crowley said. "To absent friends."

"I shan't argue," said Aziraphale, quietly, savoring his first sip. "Our friends in Kent especially."

"Why do you say that?" ventured Crowley, swallowing cautiously. "Know something I don't?"

Aziraphale shrugged, assessing the lip of his bubble-fretted glass. "We see them the least, is all."

"Enough," Crowley said, letting his feet drop to the floor, shifting in his seat until he'd scooted his chair right up against Aziraphale's. "Happy Valentine's Day, angel. Drink up, and let's go eat."
"Best bundle you up, Mister S," said Madame Tracy, bustling into the room with an armful of spare duvet. "DailyMail.com says tonight's set to be Britain's coldest in four years. Isn't that dreadful?"

Shadwell shifted in his armchair as she dropped the bundle directly on top of him. "What d'ye mean, wumman?" he grumbled, burrowing his way to the surface. "I didnae ask—"

"Of course you didn't," replied Madame Tracy, warmly, arranging the duvet up around his neck and tucking it under his chin. "But we both know your circulation isn't up to snuff, there's a love."

Shadwell clicked the DVD he'd been watching onto PAUSE (something from America, about aliens and attractive FBI agents, in which Madame Tracy could never muster much interest beyond the attractive part). "There's no use in remindin' me, aye. Why're ye so tardy?"

"Well, I'd mentioned that lovely Rani woman had popped 'round for a visit this afternoon," explained Madame Tracy, amiably. "She's a tricky one to pry off once you've got her in the pub."

"Galentine's Day," Shadwell muttered under his breath, starting the film up again. "Devil's wiles."

"Now, Mister S," Madame Tracy sighed, tugging the far end of the duvet down over his slipper-covered toes, "none of that. While I appreciate your having caught up on modern telly, it's—"

"Nae politically correct an' all that rubbish, harlot, aye," Shadwell grumped. "M'sorry."

"I'm ever so lost on this one, love," Madame Tracy confessed, getting back to her feet with mild difficulty (her hip, wouldn't you know), "but I'd be tickled pink for a spot of Parks and Rec."

Shadwell paused the DVD again, clearly hesitant to surrender Mulder and Scully without putting up a fight. "I dinnae aboot that," he said. "It's not my fault ye weren't here for the finale t'other night."

"Mister S, you know it's not polite to watch items of joint interest without me," Madame Tracy told him, settling in on the sofa, adjusting her curlers and bathrobe. "Shall we flip a coin?"

"I forbid ye to go gettin' up again, what wi' this dreadful chill that's come on," Shadwell huffed. Madame Tracy smiled to herself. "Be my Valentine, then, and put the handsome agent back on."

Shadwell resumed the film, loudly clearing his throat. "That other friend o' yours has it right."

"Which one, love?" Madame Tracy asked, wishing she'd thought to make popcorn. "Dear Mary?"

"The one that's buggered off to Brazil every five minutes God gave, aye, these two years an' more!"

"How has she got it right?" asked Madame Tracy, momentarily distracted. "Oh. Warm climate?"

"Ye've got more brains than ye let on," Shadwell allowed. "O' course, there's her young gent, too."

"Never a truer word," agreed Madame Tracy, fanning herself. "And to think he's come here!"
Bundled from head to toe in more pieces of clothing than he’d have ever dreamed of owning as a young man, Jaime Hernez watched his breath roll in the frigid air. He looked up at the stars, entranced, and thought about his children an ocean away. His son was twenty-nine now, and his daughter was twenty-six; meanwhile, his ex-wife was happily micro-managing their lives.

Jaime had been twenty years old when he’d decided to quit facilities maintenance and attend night school.

(That tree he’d helped escape its glass prison in the shopping center: a wake-up call, if you like.)

Jaime walked to the end of the brick driveway, running his fingers along the prickly, neatly-clipped hedge separating it from the next semi-detached house's front drive, but he never once looked down. He knew these constellations by heart, but, on this small, strange island, some of them went by different names. In comparison to what his grandfather had taught him, all the names were different.

Jaime's grandfather had died when Jaime was ten, far from both his people and his forest.

The constellations Jaime was seeing now had never turned up in February back at home. He'd read about winter in the opposite hemisphere, but he'd never dreamed he'd live to see it. Feel it.

Behind Jaime, the front door opened and clattered shut again. Mary's footsteps clacked behind him.

"You'll catch your death of cold," she said in her daily-improving Portuguese. "Come back inside."

"Stay a while, meu bem," Jaime replied, catching her hand. "You have a different sky here."
Backward Glance

Gomorrah, 2298 BC

As Crowley would soon learn, Sodom was already ashes by the time he realized the thunderous
tremor that sent his cocktail flying meant he ought to grab the tavern-keeper's wrist and get her out of
dodge.

“What's happening?” Anat demanded, one of her long, glass-beaded necklaces snapping as she
attempted to twist out of Crowley's grasp. She was strong, but not strong enough to escape being
hauled bodily over the bar while Crowley hissed apologies. “Sir, for the love of—”

“If you don't hold still,” Crowley said, painfully aware of his rising panic as he caught Anat against
his chest, “there won't be anything left to love. Can you stand up? Good,” he instructed, shakily
setting the tavern-keeper on her feet, taking her hand. “Now, instead of holding still, hold on.”

The real terror of the situation, at least in that moment, wasn't Anat's widening amber eyes as the
ceiling timbers began to shake and shed splinters before igniting. It was that Crowley had never
attempted the only maneuver currently at his disposal whilst in physical contact with a human. The
result could be disastrous.

“This might hurt!” he shouted above the fleeing patrons' cries, shielding himself and Anat in the
circle of his suddenly-manifested wings just as the timbers above them shuddered and gave.

In the nothingness between the spot in which they'd just been and the spot in which they landed,
hard, on sand and scree amidst swirling dust, all that Crowley heard was Anat's despairing scream.

“No more of that,” Crowley coughed, rolling away from her, giving himself a cursory pat-down
inspection before having a look at his companion. “Your hair's a fright, but we made it out alive.”

Anat coughed, touching the bleeding cut on her cheek. “What the fuck,” she demanded, struggling to
her feet, throwing off Crowley's hand when he offered it, “was that?”

Crowley lifted his chin, nodding at the two not-so-distant bonfires visible over her shoulder. He was
too drained to speak, much less explain what in Go—Sa—Somebody's name was going on.

“What have we here?” asked an unfamiliar voice from behind him. “Another who'd look back?”

Anat froze, her eyes darting helplessly to one side, but she didn't turn her head. “Sir, please.”

Crowley glanced over his shoulder, turning to squint at their interrogator. As the wind died down, he
could just about discern the tall, flame-haired figure leaning casually against a lone rock formation
that had somehow survived the firestorm. It had something like an elaborate spear in hand.

“Nice wings,” Crowley said, indicating the stranger's impressive span. “So, was this one of yours?”

“You've got them, too,” Anat pointed out, in too much shock to do anything except state the
obvious.

The angel, who was decidedly not Aziraphale in some kind of tarted-up corporation, patted the pillar
against which it had been leaning. Crowley didn't care for the predatory look it gave Anat.

“Keep those pretty eyes trained straight ahead, darling,” said the angel, “or you'll end up like Edith.”
“I don’t understand,” Anat whispered, her eyes fixed on the angel as it approached her. “Who is—” Her gaze drifted back to Crowley, accusing. “Come to it, even, who the hell are you?”

“One of your regulars,” said Crowley, brightly, dashing to Anat’s side, taking her hand in a manner that he hoped came across as reassuring. “I’m insulted, if you really want to know,” he added, swallowing.

“Just because I see your face once a week doesn’t mean I give a shit,” Anat said between gritted teeth, but she squeezed Crowley's hand just as tightly as he was squeezing hers. “Who is that?”

“At a guess,” Crowley sighed, looking the angel up and down as it paused in front of them, “trouble.”

“Aha,” said the angel, leaning right into Crowley's personal space. “Old Az wasn’t lying, was he?”

“Maybe not to you,” said Crowley, shuddering as the angel tipped Crowley's chin up with one perfect, intrusive index finger, “but I could tell you a thing or two about, er, Aziraphale and the art of fabrication. You do mean the Principality, right?”

“Accounts differ as to whether that title suits him any longer,” said the angel, lips quirking, “but yes.”

“You're gods?” blurted Anat, quicker on the up-take than she looked. “And who’re Az and Edith?”

Before Crowley could answer her question, the angel tilted its head toward Anat, entirely too curious.

“What's a lovely girl like you doing with this yellow-eyed hellspawn? Aziraphale is an old friend of mine, Edith used to be human until the Almighty turned her to salt for caring more about the fate of her daughters than the advice my colleague Uriel over there—” the angel jerked its head toward the horizon, where Crowley noticed several fleeing figures, one of which also had wings “—gave her, and my name is Raphael. We're not deities, but close guess. Any questions?”

“What have you done to my city?” asked Anat, her lower lip trembling as blood from her cheek spilled onto it. She squeezed Crowley's hand harder than ever, impressively standing her ground.

Raphael clucked his tongue, turning his attention back on Crowley. “You're not even curious what I meant by hellspawn?” he asked, scrutinizing Crowley's features. “Fetching, though, is he not?”

“If this winged creature who saved my life is hellspawn,” said Anat, “so are you. I see no difference.”

Raphael made another disapproving sound, bringing the point of his weapon down against Anat's exposed throat. “You'd do better than to equate a demonic footsoldier with an Archangel,” he said.

“My grandmother used to say she knew lots of gods,” replied Anat, “and all of them were bastards.”

Crowley squeezed his eyes shut, sure it was curtains for both of them—but instead, Raphael laughed.

“I'll spare you, darling, seeing as your soul is clearly no concern of mine,” he chuckled.

Crowley opened his eyes just in time to see Anat spit a red-tinged mouthful right in Raphael's face. “Her soul's not my concern, either, if that's what you're implying,” he said. “Free will and all that.”

Raphael brought the point of his weapon just shy of the spot on Crowley's chin he'd touched with his
finger, sending a tremor of visceral horror down Crowley's spine. The proximity *burned*.

“Get thee behind me,” Raphael commanded, “and see to it you spare this misguided woman's life.”

“Already did,” Crowley gasped, taking several steps backward, dragging Anat with him. “You, on the other hand, threatened her with mineral transformation should she so much as glance behind.”

Raphael shouldered his weapon, turning his back on them, heading toward the fleeing humans.

“No *idea* why Az thinks there's hope for you,” scoffed the Archangel, just loudly enough.

“There's no hope for any of us,” Anat sobbed, collapsing in Crowley's arms. “Oh, my *city!*

“Find a new one,” Crowley said, restoring her beads, “and don't you *dare* stop making those cocktails.”

**Home, 30 November 2016**

In Aziraphale's absence, Crowley could think of no better pursuit than mixing himself a drink and carrying out pastry-focused experiments related to Mandy's upcoming wedding. Pippa's Snowshoe, Tom, had escaped the house, and she'd rung insisting she needed help rounding up the wily feline.

Crowley licked lavender-and-white-chocolate flavored batter off the back of his spatula, dropping onto his heels in front of the oven, where he'd just placed a tray of muffins. “You'd better rise,” he warned.

The sound of a motorbike roaring up in the front drive was the last thing he wanted to hear at a time like this, but he got to his feet, fetched his glass from the counter, and marched out onto the porch.

“That helmet looks *fetching* on you,” Crowley told Raphael as he dismounted from the bike, throat seizing a little at the intense bite of lemongrass his next swig delivered. “Really keen.”

“Shove it up your arse, darling,” said Raphael, blithely tucking the helmet under his arm. His diction had improved to the point that Crowley no longer felt the need to tell him to just stick with *ass*.

“Why the visit?” Crowley asked, taking another swallow of the cocktail for fortitude, getting more of the date-palm and nutmeg this time. “Did Uriel decide to sleep through today's nasty weather?”

“It's raw,” Raphael agreed, striding up to the porch, “but the rain's clearing up. No, Uriel's off for a spot of cat-catching at the Shambles. Which is where dear Az has gone, am I even wrong?”

“Nuh,” Crowley mumbled into his glass, eyeing Raphael's black leather ensemble. “So, what's up?”

Raphael's expression was somewhere between a smile and a smirk. “Special delivery for you ahead of the holidays, so do me a favor and never say I've slipped in this endless business of apology.”

“The painting from Provincetown was enough,” Crowley reassured him. “Aziraphale pisses and moans about it hanging there above the sofa at least twice a day. It's the gift that keeps on giving.”

“Glad to hear it,” Raphael said, snatching the glass away from Crowley just as a red truck emblazoned with the name of a familiar nursery pulled up behind the bike. “Christ, what's *in* this?”

“I'd tell you to ask Anat,” replied Crowley, returning Jaime's friendly wave as he got out of the driver's side, “but she's long gone. I doubt you remember her. Since when's Mr. Hernez working for
“Rufus?”

“Since that former Satanic nun girlfriend of his convinced Rufus he had both an exceptional green thumb and the know-how to manage deliveries,” said Raphael, watching Jaime roll up the back. “Of course I remember her, darling. Who could possibly forget eyes like those?”

“She’s the genius behind what you’re drinking,” Crowley said, taking a few barefoot steps up the freezing front walk, “in case you missed that part.” He squinted at what Jaime was tugging down from the vehicle, opening his mouth to offer help just as Raphael caught the back of Crowley’s shirt.

“I asked him to find a Roxbury to go with your Egremont,” said the Archangel, nodding sidelong at the apple tree in the yard, “and that’s exactly what he did. Had it shipped all the way from Massachusetts, so you can just consider it a belated extension of the painting if you like.”

“It’s St. Andrew’s Day,” Crowley said, too overcome to offer a direct response. “Patron of those inclined to musical performance of the vocal sort, isn’t that right? D’you know Anat’s name meant—”

“Singer or to sing,” Raphael sighed. “My Hebrew’s as good as yours. Don’t pretend.”

“Too late,” said Crowley, swiping the drink. “Hey, thanksss. Now I’ve got an orchard full of reminders, and just look at what those ungrateful buggers have gone and done at the polls.”

Raphael took Crowley’s free hand, squeezing it hard enough to shake them both where they stood.

“Don’t give up hope for them,” he implored, his voice low and harsh. “Not yet. You’ve taught me that much.”

“Trying my best,” Crowley replied, lacing his fingers with Raphael’s, “but I’ll have a chat with Adam anyway.”
"[T]he coexistence of normality and bottomless cruelty explodes our ordinary conceptions [. . .]."

—from *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, by Hannah Arendt

1 December 2016

Crowley stared out the sliding glass door, pondering the frigid dusk just beyond the patio light's reach. He wrapped his hands around what must have been his third or fourth cup of tea, shivering. No amount of fiddling with the ancient, yet efficient thermostat had helped, not in weeks upon weeks. Twenty-three since the Brexit clusterfuck; scarcely *three* since America had gone off the rails.

“They're about to appraise a snuffbox similar to that job I commissioned,” Aziraphale called cajolingly from the living room, patting the well-worn leather of Crowley's sofa. “Won't you come see?”

“I'm expecting company, remember?” Crowley called back, the gloom in his tone, for once, entirely genuine. “Best just to sit here till he turns up. Make sure those foxes aren't skulking about the yard.”

“They'll scatter as soon as the car pulls up,” said Aziraphale, yawning. “I wouldn't worry, my dear.”

“Yeah, his engine could use some work,” Crowley sighed, tugging Madame Tracy's quilt tighter about his shoulders. “But you know our godson. Nostalgic, fond of leaving things exactly as he finds them.”

“If you ask me, all that rattle and grind is just for show,” Aziraphale remarked. “Not unlike your—”

“Vintage engines require authenticity,” Crowley cut in, examining his fingernails, biting away a fleck of scale-like cuticle. “A 1979 Wasabi rescued from the scrap-yard and kept running out of pride in the quirky improvements one foisted upon it as little more than hellspa—excuse me, as a *child*—is hardly vintage.”

“Oh authentic?” Adam ventured, breezing through the front door without so much as a by-your-leave.

“That too,” Crowley agreed, waving at the espresso machine as Adam strolled past it. “Coffee? Tea?”

“Whatsoever you're having, thanks,” said Adam, grabbing a mug from the cupboard above the machine before continuing on his way to the dining-room table. He sat down diagonal to Crowley, tipping his mug in Crowley's direction, and said, “Will you do it the old-fashioned way?”

Crowley took the mug, set it in front of Adam, and passed his hand over the top. “Nope. The lazy way.”

Adam swirled the suddenly steaming contents, taking a tentative sip. “Could use more milk, I reckon.”

“Ungrateful brat,” sighed Crowley, fondly, and fixed it. He peered into his own, frowning at the
lukewarm contents before surreptitiously reheating them to a temperature just shy of scalding.

“These chats been going well, d'you think?” ventured Adam, hopefully. “Helping keep you sane?”

“Listen,” Crowley said flatly, tapping the tabletop, “since summer, since everything, I swear...”

Adam chewed his lip, taking refuge in a longer swig of tea. “It'd be wrong of me to mess things about.”

“Yeah, but have you seen the news?” Crowley demanded, his tone bleak. “I mean, have you?”

“S'all we talk about these days, the news,” Adam said, displaying the first trace of genuine anger that Crowley had seen in him since...well, since. “I'm tired of the news. It's all I hear at home, too.”

“Ah, well,” Crowley conceded, feeling sympathetic in spite of himself. “It's all you would.”

“I've got a sneaking suspicion what this is really about,” Adam sighed, apparently finished with his tea, “and it hasn't got anything to do with your usual concerns about my dreams or subconscious thoughts.”

“One can't be too careful even now,” said Crowley. “You were my responsibility, and, to an extent, you still are. At least that's how I look at it. Wouldn't do to find out you've still got some funny ideas about world domination you can't quite put to rest. So, you know, thankksss for humoring an old serpent's paranoia.”

Rapping the tabletop lightly with his knuckles, Adam brightened. “Still not clear on the nature of evil, are we? What if I were to tell you I'm as sure as you were back in the day that I'm not?”

“Oh, I'm still sure,” Crowley said, half smiling, “or you'd likely have vaporized me on the spot, eh?”

“There's no sense in vaporizing people,” said Adam, reasonably. “Not even meddlers like you two.”

“Here's a question,” Crowley began, shoving his mug forward to join Adam's. “Wouldn't you say the world's more diabolical than ever, and that without benefit of any nudging from either of us?”

“From either you or Aziraphale?” asked Adam, puzzled. “Seems to me you canceled each other out.”

“No,” Crowley corrected him. “From either me or you. Let's face it: for those few days, precocious occult seedling that you were, you meddled with humanity most intimately of all.”

Adam folded his arms across his chest and gave Crowley a reproachful look. “People aren't plants.”

“Indeed not, but you'll ride this flaming metaphor as far as I'm inclined to take it,” Crowley hissed, “because I've been here a hell of a lot longer than you have. Thesis, based on present worldwide evidence: humans are far, far more evil than good. They'd rather belittle, mistrust, and legislate the slaughter of each other than get down to the business of being their brother's keeper. Am I right?”

“Looks that way for the moment, doesn't it,” said Adam, keeping his voice curiously neutral.

“Shame.”

“That's just the trouble, isn't it?” Crowley exclaimed, thumping the table. “They haven't got any.”

“Actually, I think it's shame that drives them,” said Adam, softly, studying his hands. “Shame they haven't done better, I s'pose is what I mean. Shame leads to self-loathing, and self-loathing leads to —”
“Sin?” Aziraphale interjected from the living room. “Adam, take a look around. We're past it.”

Crowley nodded, morose. “Seems to me the angel's got a point. We're on the brink of atrocity.”

“You speak as if you count yourselves amongst the ranks you used to influence, what when you've sworn off messing people about,” Adam reminded him. “I know what you did, but why did you? You could've just dusted your hands. Fought with instead of against the Devil if I'd let him come. All of this human-brewed evil you detest would've been wiped out. Piff. Game over.”

Crowley closed his eyes, listening for a reaction from Aziraphale, but it didn't come. He sighed.

“Whatever else you get up to, you buggers still have a choice. When will you use it wisely?”

“Is that what you did?” Adam countered. “Back when you decided to step in and muck up the Plan?”

“I'd like to think so,” said Crowley, earnestly rubbing his temples. “I really, really would.”

“I'd certainly made no end of poor choices up until that point!” Aziraphale asserted loudly.

Adam considered Aziraphale's words. “Can't say I disagree. It was a step in the right direction.”

“What he means,” Crowley clarified, “is that we tried to start making up for it all. We're still trying.”

“And here's what I mean,” sighed Adam, spreading his hands. “We're all trying, same as you and Aziraphale. We get it wrong sometimes. Deeply, awfully wrong. Like now.”

“He has a point, Crowley,” intoned Aziraphale, nonetheless chagrined. “We're all of us flawed.”

“Flawed enough to not see the wrong in spurning our neighbors across the Channel?” demanded Crowley. “Flawed enough to not realize the leader of the free world's just shy of pulling a Fourth Reich? Call me an alarmist, but we have literally seen this before.”

After a long, uncomfortable moment of silence in which Adam went a bit pale, Aziraphale relented.

“Too true, dear boy,” he sighed heavily, turning off the antiques program. “Too, too true.”

“I stand by what I said about shame,” Adam said quietly. “It leads to self-loathing, and nothing good ever comes of that. And anyway, evil's only evil because it stands in such contrast to everything else, which is mostly good. At least I'd like to think so, or else I gave the universe up for nothing.”

Aziraphale wandered in from the living room, half-drunk mug of cocoa in hand. “It's past your bedtime, young man,” he said, raising one warning eyebrow at Adam. “No ifs, ands, or buts about it.”

Adam nodded glumly, rising. “What's my thirty-seven years to your six-thousand-odd, anyway?”

“I've had enough of this planet,” Crowley said. “Or at least enough of this blessed year on it.”

“I'll say,” replied Adam, saluting as he made his way to the door. “You've sprouted a few grey hairs.”

Later, Crowley checked the dusty bathroom mirror, cautiously inspecting his hairline. So he had. And—heaven help him, sense of faint dread aside—he didn't feel the need to change them back.
Regulars

Chapter Summary

This story originally appeared in 2010 as a stand-alone on LJ, just like *The Walls, the Wainscot, and the Mouse*. An especially insightful reader pointed out to me that this piece is really just background on moments in their life between the novel's span and moving out of London in 2005, so I'm bringing this home. You can find the stand-alone posting [here](#).

Mayfair

Harriet turns down the telly for a few seconds, straining to listen. She knows the sound of those footsteps by heart, partly because the young man who makes them has been living in the flat upstairs for about ten years now. The reason she really remembers them, however, is something she couldn't put her finger on for a very long while, but eventually figured out, and she's proud of that fact. He has the lightest, quickest footfalls she's ever heard: soft and smooth, as if he's scarcely touching the ground.

She's seen him a goodly number of times, too. He's usually dressed in fine shirts, dark trousers, and a nice jacket, but can't hide the fact that he's all angles, really quite thin. In spite of that, his movements are graceful—swift, serpentine.

When they're getting home at the same time, which isn't often, he always holds the door for her, wearing a sheepish smile. He's handsome, Harriet supposes, in a starved-James-Dean kind of way, although she still doesn't know what color his eyes are because he's forever wearing an expensive pair of black sunglasses. She knows they're expensive because her son used to wear an identical pair.

(He was wearing them when he died at the wheel of his beloved sports car twenty years ago.)

Harriet asked his name once, about six months ago, when she helped him up the stairs with an armful of potted plants. He'd paused for a few seconds, fumbling his key into the lock, as if he wasn't accustomed to using it.

"Anthony," he'd finally said, hastily scooping up the pots. "Pleased to meet you," he'd added, using his back to brace the door open behind him as he retreated into the flat, "and thanksss."

The lisp was sort of a shame, Harriet thought. She wouldn't talk much, either, what with how cruel others could be.

Harriet might have worried for Anthony, taken him for one of those lonely, depressed corporate sorts prone to eventual suicide, but he seemed to have something resembling a social life. About a year after he moved in, he started bringing somebody home every other week or so.

In truth, he wasn't at home all that much; Harriet couldn't help but wonder if he spent most of his daylight hours (and his nighttime hours, too, several times a week) wherever his guest lived. She knew it was always the same person because the footsteps that accompanied Anthony's up the stairs were always the same: deliberate, laden with consideration.
There's no way it could have been a lady-friend, not with footfalls like that.

Today, it's the same set of accompanying feet. What's unusual is, this is the third time in a week, and they seem to be coming and going together.

She's never seen Anthony's mystery guest, though she's heard their voices drifting down through the ceiling at odd hours, quite faint, engaged in animated conversation. She knows that they drink quite a lot of wine, because Anthony's recycling bin is always full to the brim with glass bottles, which are always washed with the labels carefully removed. It's a pity, that, as she'd really like to know what they're drinking.

(Anthony has good taste, just like her son. Some of the bottles look even older than she is.)

Harriet switches off the telly, listening as the door upstairs opens and the two sets of footsteps make their slow way across her ceiling.

She supposes she knows what's happening, in an abstract sort of way. She's heard about people like this, of course—in the newspapers, magazines, sitcoms, everywhere. As a believing Catholic, she's not sure it's right. At least she was sure when she'd stopped speaking with her son.

Now, what she is sure of is that anything keeping that nice young man from an untimely death can't be wrong.

**Soho**

Gavin uses the alley behind the bookshop because it's safe, convenient, and the bookshop is hardly ever open. *Well.* It's inhabited, anyway, as he can see lights in either the flat above it or through the back-room window on most nights.

An older chap owns the place. Glasses, greying fly-away blond hair. Gavin's only caught him coming in the back door once or twice, always mumbles a hello or a good evening and makes sure to keep his arms covered. The gent always smiles politely, returns the greeting, and goes in.

Anybody else would have reported him, even here. People don't seem to remember what it means to mind their own fucking business. On nights when he's careless, too high to think of anything except how good it feels, he leaves sharps behind, but they're always gone when he returns.

Somebody else could be taking them, he supposes, using them, which is really fucking stupid, not even he does that, but still. He doubts it. He thinks the bookshop owner disposes of them. Bless the bastard.

Gavin got a right scare the first time the guy called Crowley came knocking 'round the back. He had been just blasted enough that, with those dark glasses and his furtive demeanor, the guy looked like he might have been hired by somebody to whom he owed a considerable amount of money.

Instead, the guy had slid his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose, just a little, blinked (it was the light from the upstairs window, that or the smack, that made his eyes glitter like Carter's first glimpse into Tut's tomb), and said, "Who're you? A customer? He's not open."

"I'm nobody," Gavin had said, defensively, still a bit creeped out. "Who're you?"
"Crowley. Listen, is anybody home in there? You seem like you might know."

"Light's on upstairs," Gavin had said, shrugging. "Of course he's not open."

Crowley had snorted, half smiling. "Tell him I called."

As usual, Gavin didn't remember much after that and woke up on that very spot the next morning with a pounding headache and an old tartan blanket draped over him. He almost knocked over a half-cold cup of tea that was sat at his elbow in the dust.

That had been at least a couple of years ago. He knows now that Crowley normally uses the front door and that he and the bookshop owner spend long hours drinking and arguing about really daft shit. Or at least it sounds like arguing. It might just be healthy debate. Gavin can't tell if they're lovers or enemies. Whatever they are, there's genuine affection involved, and it gives him the warm-fuzzies.

He's the only junkie in Soho with a pair of guardian angels. He hopes they'll stay.

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**The Ritz**

Lapsang Souchong and Earl Grey are back. Rashid has been the one fielding that weekly, sometimes bi- or tri-weekly order, since at least '87. They usually order their tea and their food separately, never opting for one of the Afternoon Tea offerings.

Just as well, Rashid thinks: those are kind of a rip-off, and they'd get boring if you were dining in the Palm Court several times a week—which these gents frequently did. What's unusual to start is that neither one takes milk with his tea, at least not when ordering his usual. Sometimes, when Lapsang Souchong becomes Darjeeling and Earl Grey becomes Rose Congou, milk enters the equation.

It's the opposite of what Rashid would have expected, but then, the opposites-factor is what makes these two regulars so interesting.

There's their looks, for starters. Rashid likes to imagine the slightly older-looking gentleman is a retired lecturer from one of London's many universities, or perhaps a senior curator at the British Museum, and that the younger one is a celebrity in disguise. He knows the younger one's name is Anthony J. Crowley. It's usually his credit card they use to charge their indulgences.

When they're in the mood for wine, Lapsang Souchong becomes a well-aged French red, whatever they have in at the moment, and Earl Grey becomes a dry German white. Beaujolais and Riesling.

If Rashid wanted, he could probably find out what Lapsang Souchong's name is. He's served them often enough.

Even though he knows Crowley's name, he still prefers to think of the twitchy young man as Earl Grey. He's never seen what's behind the sunglasses, but it's been an item of burning curiosity amongst the staff for years.

Today, Sunday, there's a sense of rightness and quiet. Outside, he hears birdsong that reminds him of home. Rashid drops sugar cubes in each tiny glass bowl—refined white for Lapsang Souchong, demerara for Earl Grey—and readies the tea tray for delivery.
Ruth doesn't mind the competition turning up on her doorstep. On the contrary, she quite anticipates it, because Mr. Fell never pays her a visit unless he intends to buy. She's been meaning to visit his shop in Soho for years, but she can't seem to work up the nerve. She's heard he keeps odd hours, and it's not the sort of place she'd like to go after dusk. So, she lets Mr. Fell come to her.

She took over the shop when her husband passed on. They'd had no children—never wanted any—and their marriage had been long and happy.

Ruth thinks of the shop as her husband's legacy, shelves full of letters and stories he's telling her from wherever he's gone, some of which she'll never get to read because they sell before she manages to reach them. She's only halfway through the inventory, and new books come in by the week. It's getting difficult to keep track of what she's read or not read, but she manages. The poetry section is her favorite, because those books don't sell as well and are likely to stick around for far longer than the rest.

Mr. Fell is interested in antiquarian items—old Bibles and religious treatises—but he occasionally brings along a friend, this good-looking younger chap whose name starts with a C, who has an interest in poetry. Or at least Ruth assumes he has an interest in poetry, because he stands there flipping through book after book in the section with intense interest while she and Mr. Fell exchange gossip and trade secrets (granted, it's more of the former than the latter, as Mr. Fell doesn't actually seem to know the first thing about running a bookshop with an eye for turning a profit).

Sometimes, C will take his time looking through a book, as if he's reading page by page instead of just skimming. He's a quick reader, regardless; she's certain he's read almost every book in the section by now. On one occasion, she could have sworn he looked disappointed to discover that she'd finally sold the signed first-edition of Michael Smith's *Times and Locations*. An obscure title, certainly, but worth having.

It had taken her about thirty seconds to remember that Mr. Fell had been the one to purchase it, about a month ago.

It had also taken her far less time to realize how fond of the lad Mr. Fell truly was. He'd steal sidelong glances, as if concerned that they were leaving him out. C always tended to read on, oblivious, but he'd steal longing glances of his own the moment Mr. Fell was no longer looking.

Today, Mr. Fell has decided to purchase a new scholarly edition of the Wycliffite Bible. Before wrapping the book, Ruth takes a piece of shop stationery—*From Maddow Books, With Compliments*—and scrawls, simply, *Tell him*.

She slips it inside the front cover and says, "That'll be twelve pounds, then."

If secrets had market value, then Geoffrey MacGregor would be a very wealthy man.

As it stands, he's not. He's chief gardener and has been for nigh on forty years now, although he doesn't tend to dwell on that, as time is irrelevant when you're fairly happy with your job and know
that your employers know you're the best in the business. Also, he's not afraid of the pelicans.

Maintaining the grounds of a large royal park, you see a lot. In fact, you see a little of everything, even some things you wish you hadn't seen.

During the day, it's mostly the usual—loud teenagers with piercings in odd places and substances they ought not to be using in public, couples snogging away on picnic blankets as if they think they've landed a private room at the Ritz, and so forth.

Nighttime attracts considerably more interesting characters, which sometimes necessitates ringing the police.

It's not entirely sordid, of course. In fact, that's why Geoffrey's stuck with it for so long: he loves the park and all its inhabitants, even the bloody pelicans. He loves the swarms of Asian and Italian tourists with their incessantly snapping cameras, the subdued middle-aged French couples arguing as they smoke on the bridges, the schoolchildren brought out for a romp in the middle of a museum-ridden field trip.

Two, he loves in particular, because they've been coming ever since he started.

When Geoffrey does consider time in conventional terms, he will grant that forty years is a long time. He will also grant that, although the strangers who pass through each day are almost too many to count, he never forgets a face as long as it shows up a second or third time. Likewise, those faces age, just as his own has, although he rarely looks in the mirror anymore. He can see himself in the water clearly enough.

The two he's thinking of can't be thought of in conventional terms, because they don't age. In fact, not even their clothing has changed all that much; but then, they're the sort to dress in a manner that the fashion industry would probably call timeless. Dark trousers, white shirts, and jackets never go out of style. Neither do tweed and tartan, regardless what his Mary might have said up till her dying day.

Forty years. Forty years they've been coming, these two men, at least once a week (and sometimes more), and never has either of them appeared to have aged. The younger one sits somewhere around a handsome thirty-five, Geoffrey supposes.

His companion might have ten years on him, but it's a graceful decade if it's a day.

They normally stand on one of the bridges, idly tossing bits of baguette or tea biscuit down to the waterfowl. Sometimes, of a Sunday, they stake out a bench and don't leave for hours, sipping tea from a thermos or whisky from a flask. Unlike the stuff the teenagers bring in, whisky, in Geoffrey's view, doesn't count as contraband, so he's inclined to let them be.

In forty years, he's never said a word to them, and they've never spared him a glance. Some folks, he reckons, are best left alone; they're timeless, and he knows how the fairy stories go. He'll watch over them, though, until the day he's gone.

He knows they'll still be here, talking, feeding the ducks, and loving each other as much as he's come to love them.
Mandy picked up what was left of her pasty and gave Crowley a strange, sad smile.

"Dance at my wedding," she said, and then looked to Aziraphale. "Promise."

— CoT #16: Beginners' Archaeology

Uriel hung up and set her phone face-down on the coffee table, glancing out the window. Not that she could see anything at this hour, what with midnight having crept up on her during Crowley's two-hour rant about the latest conversation he'd had with everybody's favorite ex-Antichrist.

"Are you sure I can't bring you some of this?" Raphael shouted from the kitchen. "It's such a shame we don't use these painted bowls Aziraphale handed over when you expressed a liking for them!"

"You want to use the bols de chocolat for cocoa instead of eating cereal out of them?" Uriel asked, tugging listlessly on her left earring. Her body's low-grade silver allergy was probably the cruelest joke the universe could've played on her, aside from whatever wrongness was afoot. She hadn't heard Crowley so worked up in a long time; something felt off.

(If political climates in Britain and America weren't proof enough, then she didn't know what was.)

"That's the idea," Raphael said, coming in with one brimming bowl balanced precariously in each palm. "They hold almost twice as much as our largest mugs, so this is a win-win situation."

"Why the long face, darling?" Raphael asked, reaching out to brush Uriel's cheek with his thumb.

Uriel shook her head, bringing the bowl up to her lips. "Weirdness. I've been trying to shake it."

"Are you homesick?" Raphael asked, his expression darkening. "I hate to tell you, as bad as things have gotten here, I have the feeling they're about to get a lot worse back there."

"Crowley agrees," she said, taking another slow sip of cocoa. "He's distraught. Adam didn't help."

"Well, of course he didn't," replied Raphael, as if this came as no shock. "The boy's three years off forty and barely knows how to handle the metaphysics of his own existence. The whole damn planet was a much easier proposition when he was eleven and didn't have baggage yet."

"Please don't tell me you're calling Anathema's girl baggage," Uriel muttered into her sleeve, eyes darting toward a sudden, suspicious movement outside. "I might have to smack you."

Raphael winced, preoccupied with sucking down about half the remaining contents of his bowl.

"What in creation gave you that idea? Darling, no. I mean the kind you get just living."
“Sorry,” Uriel said, watching Raphael's eyes crinkle fondly, like they always did, at her Canadian diction. “I didn't mean...” She shivered as another shadow passed. “Can I ask a favor?”

“You're gearing up for a busy night, aren't you,” Raphael sighed, getting to his feet with bowl in hand. He rose, came around the sofa, kissed the top of her head, and went back to the kitchen.

“That's what I'm afraid of, yeah,” Uriel admitted, listening as he rinsed out the bowl. “Turn in without me. Watch something on TV. The harder you're snoring when I come to bed, the better.”

“It's a shame,” Raphael called back, yawning, his footsteps heading for the hall, “because I might've been convinced to let you try some of that shit from the book you've borrowed.”

“Shibari can wait,” Uriel said, too softly for Raphael to hear. She continued to sip her cocoa because she was at a loss for what to do as the shadow fell across her. “Hello, old friend.”

I DIDN'T REALIZE CHOCOLATE HAD THAT SIGNIFICANT AN EFFECT ON CORDIALITY, said Azrael, stepping up close behind her. LONG TIME NO SEE.

“I got busy,” Uriel sighed. “We all did. There was an awful lot to not-remember in a hurry.”

MORE RECOLLECTION SEEMS TO BE IN EFFECT THAN ABSENT-MINDEDNESS.

“Oh, for sure,” Uriel agreed, swallowing a bitter laugh. “This island doesn't forgive and forget.”

Azrael set his hands on her shoulders. IT IS TIME FOR THE FIRST OF THEM TO GO.

Uriel shivered and shivered, could not for all eternity stop shivering. “I don't understand.”

He sighed, or at least seemed to sigh. THE HUMANS YOU’VE COME TO LOVE BEST.

“That's...” Uriel leaned forward, bracing herself against the coffee table. “That's not why I'm here.”

THINK OF IT AS SUB-CONTRACTING, Azrael continued. YOU'RE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, AND I'D LIKE TO USE UP SOME OF THE HOLIDAY I'VE ACCRUED. His bony fingers twitched. I'LL...OWE YOU ONE, he added, rendering the words foreign, devoid of warmth. THE SOUL IN QUESTION WILL NOT GO GENTLE.

"Then this is what I ask," said Uriel, without hesitation. "Not Pippa. I won't be the one to take her when the time comes, not even if she plans on hanging around. That's gonna be all you, buddy."

Azrael's fingertips beat staccato against her collarbone. I ACCEPT. FAIR IS FAIR. He withdrew one hand, reaching into his robes to produce a scroll, which he placed on the table.

The document neatly unrolled itself. Uriel glanced down at the name and date, pursing her lips.

“Why right on the tail of New Year's? Seems like a lot of fuss just after the holidays, doesn't it?”

BECAUSE IT IS WRITTEN, Azrael replied. DO NOT QUESTION INEFFABILITY.

“Ineffability, my ass,” Uriel muttered, but by the time she'd grabbed the scroll and attempted to hand it back over her shoulder to him, both the document and her dreadful visitor had vanished.

“What was that about your ass,” Raphael called from the bedroom, “and do you care to repeat it?”

I hate this, Uriel thought, leaning forward on her elbows, raking her fingers through her hair. I hate my existence and this fucking planet and every life-form contained in it.
Raphael wandered back into the living room, predictably naked, but his expression was one of sheer, helpless alarm. He went directly to the spot behind Uriel, setting his hands exactly where Azrael's had been moments before. His snarl was low and threatening.

“If that nosy old fuck with the dramatic cloak still thinks he's your substitute line-manager—”

“It's no use,” Uriel cut in, watching several tears drip from her chin into her cocoa. “This has been a long time coming. They hate Adam because they can't touch him, so they'll always go after what he loves. Who he loves. And they'll make us suffer because we've joined his cause.”

“Hell's well in hand,” Raphael murmured, wrapping his arms around her. “Why the Horsemen?”

“Not sure I'd call Azrael one of them when it comes down to it. Even I'm a face of Death.”

“Yes, darling,” Raphael replied, nuzzling the shell of her ear to no purpose other than comfort. “And you're the only face I'd want to see if my time ever came.”

“Don't know whose face I'd see,” Uriel whispered, her fingers stiff on Raphael's forearm.

* * *

“Oh, how lovely,” Aziraphale remarked, shuffling through the stack of envelopes and postcards he'd just collected from the mailbox. “There's one here from dear Mrs. Godreau,” he said, raising his voice, slamming the door behind him. “Are you even listening to me, Crowley?”

The cottage's name-plate rattled, so Aziraphale drove the screws in tighter with a thought.

“Yeah!” Crowley called from the living room, where he was still engrossed in the telly. “She must be, what, ninety by now? Still in the flat right below my old one, is she? We're overdue a visit.”

“So it appears,” said Aziraphale, double-checking the return address as he tossed the rest of the stack aside on the kitchen counter. He tore into the envelope without bothering to summon his letter opener from the computer desk, eagerly opening the card. “It's got festive geese on the front.”

The sofa thumped, propelled momentarily backward by the force with which Crowley had launched himself off it. He dashed into the kitchen, latching onto Aziraphale's shoulder to peer over.

“They're festive on account of the ribbons 'round their necks, I suppose?” he ventured dubiously. “I ought to've thought to do that with the girls on Christmas Day. Would've worked a treat.”

“Which set of girls?” asked Aziraphale, archly, spreading the card wide so they could both read its contents. “I shudder to think, but the feathered ones might've taken it better than the human ones.”

“Regular wonder we got them all here for their gifts on Boxing Day,” Crowley said, snaking his arms around Aziraphale's waist. “Her handwriting gets worse by the year. Decipher that for me.”

“It says, Holiday felicitations to my friends of yesteryear! Until we meet again, Harriet.”
“New Year’s is three days away,” observed Crowley. “Let’s go as soon as the hangover wears off?” “Pippa said this one's BYOB,” Aziraphale said, enunciating each letter. “On account of her pills.” “We've got to get her on painkillers that play well with booze,” Crowley remarked cheerfully. “She assures me the entirety of the Device-Pulsifer-Young contingent is coming, as are the rest of the usual suspects. Mandy and Iván, Mary and Jaime, young master Rob, and even our perpetual nuisances up the road,” said Aziraphale, pensively. “Madame Tracy and Shadwell declined.” “Tracy says this weather makes a hermit of the old scoundrel,” Crowley said. “Direct quote.” He gave Aziraphale’s middle a brief squeeze. “Ah, there’s what’s left of my test cupcakes,” he said, satisfied, tongue darting out to taste the shell of Aziraphale’s ear. “Delicious.” “If your catering contracts weren’t going so well, I’d punish you for that one,” Aziraphale sniffed. “Perhaps that godforsaken white jacket is your true calling in life after all.” “It’s not my fault I wear it so well,” said Crowley, aiming for coy, but his tone was far too breathily distracted. “S’not my fault you look fetching in that hideous jumper Pippa gave you, either.” Aziraphale sighed, dropping Harriet’s card on the work-top. “Only if you don’t insist on giving the girls run of the house like last time. I’m convinced banning them from the bedroom won’t prove much use in the long run. Tamar will have worked out lock-picking before long.” “Do you see me making a break for the shed?” Crowley ventured, lightly sinking his teeth into the back of Aziraphale’s neck. “I’m convinced Jude’s unexpected...er, expecting...is keeping all the aunties busy. Where, I ask you—where—did she find a drake this time of year?” “Same place their ill-fated mother found one in bloody November?” Aziraphale squeaked, shivering as Crowley pinched at his nipples through the cotton-wool blend. “Crowley...” “Hmmm,” Crowley remarked, letting one careful, curious hand dip south. “Are you—?” “No, alas,” Aziraphale murmured, tugging Crowley's hand up to his lips, kissing it in apology. “Won’t you stop fussing?” Crowley asked, swaying them where they stood. “‘After all the trouble you’ve taken to get me off the rocks where Pippa's concerned, heaven only knows—” “It isn’t just her,” Aziraphale said, rubbing agitatedly at Crowley's faintly rope-burnt wrists. “Look, I'm getting better at this kinky stuff,” said Crowley, shyly. “And you like it.” Aziraphale nodded reluctantly, turning just enough in Crowley’s embrace so they could kiss. “I'd rather leave a few more days before tying you up again,” he admitted. “Let those heal.” “I could heal them if I wanted,” Crowley pointed out, this time slyly. “So could you.” “Your sarcasm leaves nothing to be desired,” Aziraphale conceded, backing him up against the counter, satisfied by the resulting gasp-thump. “You may get little out of me today, my dear, but that doesn't mean...” “I really,” said Crowley, already scrabbling palms-first at the countertop behind him with elbows awkwardly bent, “really ought to go check on the food situation out there. And.” “And nothing,” said Aziraphale, settling decisively on his knees, unbuttoning Crowley's superbly
worn-in Japanese denim. “You'll permit me five minutes' indulgence?”

“Can't say whether I'm flattered or concerned that you think I'm a suitable chaser to cupcakes,” Crowley muttered, sucking in his breath as his fingers crept shakily into Aziraphale's hair. “Ah. I just. I really. Think. Aziraphale—”


“I hate you so much,” Crowley panted, scrabbling backwards at the doors until he'd swung them out far enough to use the lower corners for purchase. “So, so unbelievably much I—*angel!*”

“I could get used to savory afters,” said Aziraphale, glancing up at him through lowered lashes.

* * *

While Aziraphale neglected shedding his coat in favor of hugging Pippa to death, Crowley hovered awkwardly behind him with a fresh tray of cupcakes in hand. So much for arriving on time.

“Hey!” Rob shouted, barreling past Aziraphale and his gran, latching onto Crowley. “You're late!”

“It couldn't be helped,” Crowley said, setting his free hand on the boy's head. “I wanted to time the baking so that these—” he brought the tray down so that Rob could inspect his handiwork “—would still be warm when we got here. Would you mind tasting one for me?”

“Cor,” breathed Rob, releasing Crowley's legs in favor of grabbing a cupcake. “What's in these?” he asked, making an uncertain face around the gooey mouthful he'd immediately taken.

“Lavender and white chocolate,” Crowley said. “Which is not so much actual chocolate as a cocoa-butter-derivative type confection, but I imagine you're not fussed about the particulars.”

“I'm particular,” Rob insisted, stuffing the remainder in his mouth. “Lavender is flowers.”

Unable to parse the statement as obvious feedback, Crowley decided to interpret it as a positive.

“As long as you like it, that's all that matters,” he reassured the boy. “Do you want another?”

Rob shook his head, crumpling the wrapper up between his palms. “Mum says I can't spoil my supper, even though she and Dad aren't here. They like to be *alone* on New Year's.”

Crowley surrendered the cupcake tray to Pippa, relieved that Aziraphale had finally let go of her.

“Rob, won't you hang Crowley's coat, there's a darling,” Pippa said, patting Crowley's cheek as she carried the tray off toward the kitchen. “And how are we today?” she called over her shoulder.

“Worse for wear,” Crowley yawned, surrendering his outer layer to Rob. “Haven't slept much.”

Aziraphale gave Crowley an I-can't-believe-you look; Rob, meanwhile, had already dashed off.
“Dear me,” Pippa called from the kitchen. “We can't have you missing your beauty sleep, can we?”

“Never said it was a bad thing,” Crowley replied, smirking at Aziraphale. “Needed another hobby.”

“I can't take you anywhere,” hissed Aziraphale, under his breath, steering Crowley by the shoulders into Pippa's living room. “Do try to keep the marks under wraps, won't you?”

*Under the cuffs and under the collar, Crowley thought, catching sight of the twins and a young woman he didn’t know on the sofa, is the first place half of this lot will look.*

“Speak of the devil,” Natalie gushed, hopping to her feet. “We were just telling Dani she's got your dancing skills to look forward to. Once we're all drunk later, anyhow.”

Janet rolled her eyes and nudged the young woman next to her; the two of them got up in tandem.

“This is Dani,” Janet said, beckoning Crowley over while Aziraphale pretended not to be disgruntled about the fact that Natalie was now hanging off his neck with a happy squeal.

“Pleasure's all mine,” Crowley said, pushing his sunglasses up into his hair, because if this was the only human in the house who hadn't seen his eyes, they'd best get that out of the way.

Dani's lips parted in faint surprise, her tiger's-eye irises dilating. “You're Crowley?” she stammered.

“I take it the gossip mills are running par for the course,” he sighed, shaking her hand. “Yes, why?”

“They told me you had weird eyes, too,” Dani said, indicating her own. “I've got this gold-stripey thing in the brown, see?” She grinned. “I'm Janet's girlfriend, in case she's too chicken to say.”

“Oi,” Janet muttered, arms folded tightly across her chest. “I was just about to tell him! Lay off!”

“Charmed, I'm sure,” Aziraphale cut in, peeling himself free of Natalie. “How did you two meet?”

“School,” said Dani, unclipping her fine braids before sweeping them up again in a different configuration. “This one here never raises her hand in class. Made me dead curious.”

“That's not how I trained you,” Crowley reminded Janet. “Do you remember that time when—”

“Yeah, blimey, that medieval sex book!” Natalie said. “Crowley's better than a graduate tutor.”

“I heard all about the sex book,” said Dani, eager to avoid hearing the story in duplicate.

Crowley endured another five solid minutes of hugs and greetings before he and Aziraphale managed to carve out some space for themselves on the sofa. Janet and Dani escaped to the floor.

“Girls, girls, girls,” Anathema sighed, curled in one of Pippa's armchairs, already well into a glass of wine. “Newt and my son-in-law are even more outnumbered than they were before.”

“Where are they, anyway,” Crowley asked, longing for a drink. “Your eldest and your other half?”

“Adam's got them tied up on a mistletoe hunt,” Anathema said, “as per Pippa's wishes. Futile.”

“True enough, the shops will be picked clean,” replied Aziraphale, with feigned disappointment.

“Don't think you're getting off so easy this year,” Crowley muttered. “I'll summon some if I must.”

“I could’ve cut you a sprig from the nursery,” said a voice to which Crowley still hadn't fully
acclimated, its owner striding into the room with a brown paper bag. “Who wants party poppers?”

“Those don't come till later!” Mary insisted, rushing up behind Jaime to snatch the bag from him.


“I'm insulted!” Mandy shouted from the kitchen, finally content to break her silence. “Assumed I wasn't here, yeah, because you didn't spot me hanging about the telly with those lazy-arses?”

“Maybe concentrate more on what you're doing...?” said a voice tentatively identifiable as Iván's.

“Don't make me come in there and supervise you,” Crowley threatened. “What's cooking?”

“None of your beeswax!” Mandy shouted back, but it was unclear whether she was addressing her fiancé or Crowley. “Your help would be superfluous. I already run a kitchen with my eyes shut.”

“Your mouth's another matter,” said Pippa, which got a snort from Iván and a scoff from Mandy.

Crowley scooted over, his thigh pressing hard into Aziraphale's, in order to make room for Jaime next to him while Mary took the bag over to a curious Anathema for inspection. “Long day?”

“Very much,” said Jaime, smiling. “I could not get away from the plants as early as planned.”

“They'll stall at all costs,” Crowley agreed, vaguely aware Dani was watching him. “Bastards.”

After a few more minutes of commotion, Rob dashed in from the bedroom with a toy helicopter in hand, insisting he couldn't hear the movie.

Crowley ended up with a lapful of fidgeting primary-schooler while they all did their best not to lose the plot of Elf.

After a while, Mandy wandered in from the kitchen and sat down at Crowley's feet. She tugged at the hem of Crowley's trousers while Rob dropped his toy and started playing with her hair.

“We've gotta talk,” she mouthed, glancing over her shoulder at Crowley. “Ditch the kid?”

Crowley nodded, feeling his stomach sink. “Aziraphale, d'you think you could take Rob for——”

“Come along,” said Aziraphale, shifting Rob from Crowley's lap over to his own, earning a gasp from Mandy when Rob didn't release her hair soon enough. “Let them go have a look at the food.”

Mandy got up, pulled Crowley to his feet, and dragged him out—still clinging tightly to his hand.

Crowley followed her down the hall, remembering the time Raphael had trapped him and swapped their fancy-dress ensembles. Rob's bedroom door was ajar, so Mandy pulled Crowley inside.

“Those canapés must be in serious trouble,” Crowley remarked, frowning at her. “What is it?”

“I need to know if I'm going crazy or whatever, and I figure you're a good judge of that,” she said. Crowley nodded slowly. “After all we've been through, yeah, the odds are quite in your favor.”

“Valentine's Day at the cottage,” said Mandy, in agitation. “We scheduled that. We did, right?”

“I can indeed confirm that yet another wedding is scheduled for that date,” Crowley said.

“My wedding,” Mandy said, as if trying to convince herself of this fact, and Crowley felt his stomach
sink even lower. “The one my mum's coming down for and everything.”

Crowley set both hands on her shoulders, shaking her gently. “You have nerves. It's normal.”

“I haven't got nerves,” she said, her head snapping up. “I've got...” She frowned, squeezing Crowley's wrists, causing the rope-burns to sting under his cuffs. “Concerns.”

Biting his lip, Crowley raced through every possible meaning of that statement. “About...the date?”

“No,” said Mandy, quietly, letting her hands drop to her sides. “It's just, Iván's family haven't RSVPed, although he reassures me they are coming...” Her frown deepened. “He's vague. He won't say exactly how many people that is, or—look, it's rude! You need numbers!”

“We can accommodate however many,” Crowley reassured her. “Don't make it your concern—”

“Last time there was a wedding at yours, some demon wore me like a bridesmaid's dress,” she snapped. “Things tend not to go well when I'm involved, all right? It's some kind of curse.”

Crowley drew her close, wrapping his arms around her without hesitation. “That's a lie. And I know lies when I hear them. I might not have been good at my old job, but I'll have you know...”

“I'm worrying about nothing,” Mandy whimpered, clinging to him. “But I'm just so frustrated. He's gone all breezy as you please—oh, yeah, family's gonna show up, so many to choose from it doesn't even matter who—and here I am with just Mum, nobody else to—”

“We've discussed this,” Crowley said, resting his chin on top of her head. “I'll give you away.”

Mandy laughed, sniffling against his shoulder. “I know. We'd better get back out there, or Az'll think I'm trying to steal you away again. Is he all up in knots about it?”

“He's worried about the fairy lights and a lack of anything blooming,” said Crowley, deadpan.

“Knock knock!” said Raphael, loudly, barging into the room without warning. “Oh,” he intoned, covering his throat with one poised hand. “I had no idea I was interrupting—”

“Shut up,” Mandy groused, shoving Crowley away from her, wiping her nose on her hoodie sleeve.

“Wedding woes,” Crowley said, instinctively stepping between Raphael and Mandy. “Not now.”

“I wanted to wish the bride-to-be a Happy New Year, darling,” said Raphael, looking Crowley up and down, “but since you're standing in the way...” He planted a messy kiss on Crowley's cheek.

Crowley rubbed at the spot, eyes screwed shut, listening as Mandy let Raphael hug her tightly.

“If there's a party in the bedroom, why am I not invited?” Uriel asked, raising her voice in the hall.

“Let's get out of here,” Mandy said, tugging on Raphael's hand. “Soph and Adam will arrive soon.”

“Sure, wrap it up and leave me hanging,” Uriel retorted, peering inside, lighting up when she spotted Crowley. “Hiya. Is that Rafe's lipstick plastered to your face already?”

Crowley rolled his eyes, pushing past Mandy and Raphael, who were snickering. “Guess.”

“No, really,” said Uriel, tailing Crowley as he exited the room and made a bee-line up the hall.

“Yes, really,” Crowley retorted. “Your other half has a thing for one-upping everybody who's
managed to get their mouth on me, what else is new.” He paused to glance at her just before they reached the living room, startled by the dark circles under her eyes. “Sleepless wives' club, eh?”

“Fuck you. Takes one to know one,” she countered, grabbing one of Crowley's wrists, winking.

“We would really love to get a game of CAH going,” Raphael announced, tugging Mandy past them excitedly. “We've now got the UK and US editions in a Bigger, Blacker Box.”

Dani's eyes flicked briefly to Mandy, and then back at Raphael. “You've gotta be joking, right?”

“There's hell cards, and there's genuinely offensive cards,” Mandy said. “We got rid of the latter.”

“Don't get rid of the hell cards!” Sophia shouted, coming in the front door with Adam and her father in tow. “Hell cards are the best, trust me. Sorry we're late. There was no mistletoe anywhere.”

“Can I play?” Rob begged, escaping Aziraphale's lap for purposes of attaching himself to Crowley.

“Your gran might have a thing or two to say about that,” Crowley cautioned. “Pippa, I—”

“It's no use, love,” Pippa replied, still in the kitchen with Iván. “He's taught his friends to play.”

“Then that settles that,” Crowley sighed, swinging Rob up in his arms. “Are you up for it, angel?”

“I'm up for anything that involves trouncing you soundly,” said Aziraphale, with taunting precision.

* * *

Mandy was so drunk—by the time three rounds of Cards Against Humanity, more food than you could shake a stick at, and ignoring BBC's 2016-to-2017 transition coverage on the telly in favor of gratuitous kissing was over with—that Iván literally had to hold her up to walk inside once they got home. She yawned and sagged into his shoulder, toeing out of her silver-sequinned ballet flats.

“You shouldn't have overdone it,” Iván said, shrugging out of his coat. “We work tomorrow.”

“Yeah, but,” Mandy said, bracing herself against the wall until the entryway had stopped spinning. “This year's gonna be fuckin' shite, yeah? Except for the wedding, so I might as well—”

Iván was already barefoot and in his shirtsleeves, giving her an inscrutable brow-knit frown. He had a way of expressing condescension without even speaking, and sometimes she wanted to bash his face in for it. He'd gotten weird about stuff he'd never been weird about before, like Mandy's occasional overindulgence in—well, now that she thought about it, in just about anything.

“We're in trouble,” he said, “and you know it. In the eyes of the government, you don't make enough money to support a foreign spouse. Between the two of us, we barely make—”

“You're being an arse and just about ruining my New Year's,” Mandy told him, yawning. “How many bloody times have I got to tell you, it only applies to non-EU—”
“Keep your voice down,” whispered Iván, urgently, steering her away from the door. “The neighbors might report us. You know they came knocking that one time because of your music.”

“I think they came knocking 'cause of your face,” retorted Mandy, shaking him off, heading to the bathroom. As she fumbled for her toothbrush in the dark, hitting the light-switch with her elbow, she realized she was having a hard time remembering why she even wanted—

Iván wandered into the bathroom after her, phone in hand, eyes fixed on the screen as his lightning-swift thumbs tapped the onscreen keyboard. Lately, he'd been texting more and more.

While he reached for his toothbrush, Mandy gave his phone a brief sidelong glance. She couldn't make out the other party's name, but the entirety of the conversation appeared to be in Basque. She was nearly fluent now, but without a clear view, she couldn't make out more than the odd word here and there: lonely, hurry, and why.

“Crowley says it doesn't matter how many people come,” she said around her toothbrush. “So I don’t care which of your family members are making the trip. As long as it's some of them.”

“That is a quantity I can promise you,” said Iván, distractedly, toothbrush in hand, still texting.

“Having a good conversation with somebody back at home?” she asked, spitting into the sink.

“A cousin of mine you have not met on Skype,” Iván explained, finally tucking his phone in his back pocket, reaching for the toothpaste. “He might try to make it in February. How is that?”

Mandy shrugged, shedding her clothes perfunctorily. “A cousin is some family, yeah.”

Iván didn't even turn to look at her while she bent over to turn on the bathtub spigot. “Mmm.”

_I'm still in love with this idiot, God knows why_, she thought, feeling bile rise in her throat as she pushed back the shower curtain and wobbled ankle-deep into hot water, _but he's out of love with Britain and everything in it, maybe even me. Cousin, my arse._

“I'm heading to bed, _ene maitea_,” said Iván, loudly enough for Mandy to hear him over the rush of spray and shampoo suds in her ears. “If I don’t, my head will pound as badly as yours.”

“What the fuck _ever_,” Mandy whispered under her breath, rinsing out her hair. She wanted nothing so much as to dry off, tug into a flannel pajama set, and drive over to the cottage. She'd done that once or twice in the past several months when Iván had been a dick to her.

Crowley had always come to the door in those silly Marks and Sparks pants and some worn-out tee or another, let her in, and settled them on the sofa with some late-night movie or American reruns.

Setting her palms against the chipped tile and rotting grout, Mandy heaved until she was sobbing.

* * *

“Wild party,” said Sophia, dully, having thus far been unable to roll out of bed. She covered her eyes
with her forearm, groaning. She'd seen the clock. It was well past two in the afternoon.

Adam's footsteps echoed down the hall, too spry and chipper for a guy who'd drunk as hard as she, Mandy, and the twins had. “This ought to help with your hangover,” he said, his weight coming down on the bed next to her, something cold settling on top of her head with a crunch.

“If that's a bag of peas, I don't want it,” Sophia moaned. “I don't trust Tesco's freezers to be clean.”

Unable to get at the top of her head, Adam patted the compress. “Wrapped it in a tea towel.”

“Oh. Well, that’s all right, then,” said Sophia, smiling in spite of herself. Everything was dark and throbbed intolerably, but the chill running from her forehead to her crown was pleasant. “Is this a trick you learned from my mum, or are you just making do in a pinch?”

“I learned this from my mum,” Adam admitted, settling back against the headboard hard enough to make it rattle. He had something crinkly in hand, probably the newspaper. “Better?”

“It certainly isn't worse,” Sophia allowed, wriggling her eyebrows against the pressure. “S'nice.”

“Good,” Adam said, letting one hand creep over to take hers under the covers. “Glad I'm useful.”

“Your usefulness is both charming and inventive,” Sophia informed him. “Bugger.”

“What, Soph?”

“Work tomorrow.”

“Yeah, and your dad expects me back to help him finish that freelance network-setup nightmare.”

Sophia felt her chest clench involuntarily, wondering if it was the nausea or the surge of anxiety.

“I can't articulate this,” she told Adam hesitantly, “but I've been trying. Work...isn't great.”

“They've been paying you for a while now,” Adam reminded her, squeezing her hand. “Most interns aren’t as lucky as you were, getting taken on like that. I reckon you're just nervous.”

“There's no path to advancement,” said Sophia, ashamed of how small she sounded. “I've checked the org charts six ways to Sunday. I'm in a dead-end position.” She swallowed the lump in her throat, hating herself for what she was about to attempt. “Adam, I wish—”

“We've been over this so many times,” Adam said softly, setting aside the paper, scooting down so he could lie alongside her with one arm draped across her middle. “I don't grant wishes.”

Sophia felt her chest constrict again. She hiccupped, feeling her hot tears soak into the tea towel.

“I've been writing on the job,” she confessed. “Stories, poems, anything. I'm a failure.”

“Your creative stuff's better than the PR you do for 'em,” Adam murmured. “You know that, right?”

Frightened, Sophia nodded, remembering how Mandy had shrieked and hugged her when she'd made her first sale to a literary magazine around six months ago. She'd made more sales since.

“Meanwhile,” Adam continued, curling in tighter on himself, nuzzling mopily into her tank-top covered belly, “I've got a godfather—godfathers, really—who can't seem to stop remindin' me the world's on its way to hell in a hand-basket. As if they expect me to do something.”
“Somehow, knowing you don't grant wishes for powerful immortals, either, makes me feel better.”

“We aren't the only ones with problems. I'm worried about Mandy, if you want to know the truth.”

Sophia shoved the bag of peas off her head, levering herself up on her elbows. “You noticed, too?”

Adam sat up, his hair endearingly tousled, rubbing his stubbly cheek. “Last night. There was that thing where she pulled Crowley out of Pippa's living room for a talk,” he said with reluctance. “She only confides in him when she doesn't want to worry you.”

“They don't come over anymore when we invite them,” said Sophia, chewing her lip. “Mandy says Iván's turning into more and more of a homebody. I feel so bad I've been going out with her whenever she asks.” She rubbed her temples, flopping back against the pillows. “Ugh.”

“I don't really mind,” Adam replied, looming over her, eyes wide and soft. “You're an ace friend.”

“Don't know how long she and I can afford to drown our sorrows in drink, is all,” Sophia admitted.

Adam swooped down, kissing the tip of her nose, her eyelids, her forehead. “Maybe just head up the road to Crowley next time,” he suggested. “Those date-palm cocktails appear out of thin air.”

Sophia groaned, swatting him off, hauling the bag of peas back over her eyes. “Don't remind me.”

* * *

It had been a week since New Year's, and Jaime still hadn't stopped pining for Crowley's cupcakes. He'd tried to coax the recipe out of Aziraphale's diffident husband several times before he and Mary had left Pippa's, but Crowley had told Jaime something different each time.

“Google it. I swear it's one of the first things that came up.”

“Oh, er, you know me. Trial and error is my middle name.”

“Aziraphale was messing around and found it on Pinterest.”

Determined, Jaime had applied himself to scouring both Google and Pinterest. And, while he'd attempted no fewer than five batches from four different sets of instructions in seven days' time, none of them had turned out quite the same way as what he'd tasted at the party.

“That man is the devil in human skin,” Mary told him as they sampled Jaime's sixth attempt.

Jaime shrugged, licking buttercream icing off his fingers. “None of these have been terrible.”

“If you don't give this up, I'll gain a stone before January's out,” Mary sighed, washing her hands.

Jaime brushed his own off against his faded canvas trousers, stepping up behind her at the sink.

“You've grown too thin since we met,” he said. “You lost more than a stone in three years.”
Mary nodded, turning off the tap, humming at the feel of his touch against her hips. “We've been busy beavers ever since you suggested we do our own landscaping,” she told him fondly.

“Too much running around planting things, not enough eating,” Jaime agreed pressing his cheek against her hair. He opened his eyes, staring out the window at the lightly frosted grass.

“It'll be spring soon,” Mary pointed out. “You could quit the nursery in another couple of months. We'll have saved up enough by then. Go into business for ourselves. I'll handle the maths.”

“I would like nothing so much as to be business partners with my clever partner,” Jaime agreed.

Mary's fingers crept from Jaime's wrist to press against his jaw, trailing steadily toward his temple.

Their land line rang loudly in the drip-drip-drip punctuated silence, startling them both.

“Hold that thought,” Jaime said right in Mary's ear. “I will go get it, and after I do that...”

“That's what you always say,” Mary sighed, nonetheless sounding happy. “You'll talk their ear off.”

Jaime wrested the outdated hand-set from its cradle on the wall. “Hello, Hodges and Hernez?”

“Listen, I hate to bother you at home,” said Crowley, unmistakable on the end of the line, “but we're in a bit of a bind. Aziraphale's insisting on flowers for February. You just know the rugosas won't comply. I've forced them into a spot of early blooming before, don't get me wrong—er, heat lamps and whatnot, tricks of the trade, you get my drift—but that was April, and this is February. I wouldn't even push the hellebores into blooming that early, and—”

“Hellebores sometimes bloom in February,” Jaime said reassuringly. “We may have a warm snap.”

“Your faith in our mercurial weather is heartening,” said Crowley, thinly, “but I'd rather hedge my bets.” There was a faint tapping sound, perhaps Crowley's fingernails. “Can Rufus do weddings?”

“My employer does not like short notice,” Jaime said. “Under a month and a half is pushing it.”

“Look, if it makes you feel any better, I'll come in and help,” Crowley sighed. “I've got a real green thumb, you've said so yourself. You're forever wanting to know what my secrets are, whether it's cookery or growing things, so...maybe I'll make it worth your while. Tit for tat?”

“Throw in showing me how to do the cupcakes,” said Jaime, ruthlessly, “and you have a deal.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” replied Crowley, indulging his flair for the dramatic. “Terms accepted.”

“It's always a pleasure doing business with you,” Jaime laughed. “How are the apple trees doing?”

“Nothing amiss,” Crowley said tautly. “I'm holding my breath on the Roxbury's first crop, though.”

“Your collection of New World plants is very specific,” Jaime remarked. “Are you a Red Sox fan?”

“I've never cared all that much for the various types of hitting-things-with-wooden-sticks they do in North America, but you might try talking to Uriel about hockey. Ciao,” said Crowley, hanging up.

Jaime rejoined Mary at the sink, carefully reinstating his hands against her hips. “Where were we?”

“Hodges and Hernez,” Mary mused, shivering as he kissed her neck, “has a very nice ring to it.”
“Budge over a bit, now, there’s a love,” said Madame Tracy, having just got a plate full of brussels sprouts and bacon situated on a TV tray in front of the sofa. “You’ve become a regular sprawler, Mister S. It’s a good job I’m going out for the day—there’s no room!”

“De’el take ye,” he muttered fondly into his chest, scooting over all the same. “Smells divine.”

“There’s some more of both on the stove,” Madame Tracy continued, shifting the tray closer to him now that he was in alignment with it. “Getting up might be good for your circulation.”

“Aye, mebbe,” Shadwell agreed, grinning at her, taking up his fork with one trembling hand. “And just where d’ye think yer goin’, done up to the nines like a Shoreditch strumpet?”

Madame Tracy fetched her handbag from the armchair, rummaging in it for a mirror. She checked her lipstick, satisfied that what she saw in the mirror matched Shadwell’s characteristic assessment.

“Lovely Amanda’s wedding is in a fortnight,” she reminded Shadwell. “We got the invitation just before Christmas, remember? Those dear girls asked me along for the dress hunt.”

“Age an’ infernal experience, aye,” he agreed reasonably, mouth full. “Ye’ll sort ’em right out.”

Ignoring just how much more pronounced the tremor in her husband’s hand seemed, Madame Tracy sat down beside him, handbag clutched to her chest. “I’m awfully proud of the children,” she sighed. “Truly. Never had any of my own, of course, aside from keeping Petula.”

“Between you an’ Pippa an’ those southern pansies,” Shadwell observed, turning his head to regard her in a moment of unadorned sincerity, “they’re covered for spoilin’ of the grandparental sort.”

“I’d always rather fancied the notion of grandchildren,” said Madame Tracy, “but Petula can’t conceive, of course, and she never was interested in marriage to begin with. Looks like it all worked out for us in the end.” She patted Shadwell’s thigh. “Start in on them sprouts, love.”

“Petula’s a lucky one,” Shadwell remarked after several long seconds, as if he’d finally put together the pieces of a jigsaw. “Havin’ you after her parents disowned her an’ all. When was it she…”

“Seventeen when she told them,” Madame Tracy said. “Twenty-one by the time I’d scraped together enough to help with the transition. She’s on better terms now with her mum.”

“Ne’er much liked yer sister,” Shadwell remarked gruffly, spearing a sprout. “But, aye, fine.”

Madame Tracy beamed at him, startled a second later by the sound of the doorbell. She got up.

“That’ll be my ride,” she told Shadwell, tugging one of her handmade throws off the back of the sofa, tucking it across his lap and down over his shins. “You behave yourself, now, Mister S.”

A pair of impatient fists lightly hammered the front door. “Oi!” Mandy called. “You ready?”

“Just wait a moment, dear!” she shouted, patting Shadwell on the shoulder as she moved away from him. “I’ve got to use the loo before we go, won’t be a tick!”
Madame Tracy dashed to the bedroom, heart racing, and pulled her tarot deck out of the top drawer. After a perfunctory, pragmatic shuffle, she let her sudden flare of anxiety serve as the question. She flipped three cards onto the bedspread, frowning at what she saw in the startling sequence.

_The Fool. The Hierophant. The Hermit, reversed._

“How can I leave you alone for even a moment?” she murmured fretfully, gathering them back. She put her deck back in the drawer, taking a moment to fix her smudged eyeliner. “Coming!”

She emerged to find that her living room was now populated by Mandy, Sophia, and—Adam? The young man sat next to Shadwell on the sofa; the girls stood next to the door.

“It’s aboot time,” Shadwell said squinting at her. “Keep these lovely lasses waitin’, why don’t ye?”

“Good afternoon, Madame Tracy,” said Adam, waving politely. “Thought I’d keep the Sergeant company, if it’s all the same to you? Soph reckons I’ve got the dress sense of a horse.”

“Dunno,” Mandy said flatly. “I might look right fetching in one of them blanket-things.”

“He’ll be grateful of your presence,” Madame Tracy told Adam, and then went to join the girls.

“Let’s get on with it,” said Sophia, jangling the keys in her right hand. “Bargains wait for no man!”

“Nor no wumman, neither,” Shadwell grumbled. “Away wi’ ye, harlot. We’ll see ye come supper.”

*Thank you,* Madame Tracy mouthed to Adam once Shadwell’s eyes were back on the telly.

* * *

Aziraphale tried pushing the thumb-tack between the fine, braided wires comprising the fairy-light strand, only to have it wobble and flip between the wall and his thumb. He swore.

“That’ll hurt,” Crowley said, rushing over from where he’d been busy checking each element of the flower delivery Jaime had made half an hour before. He gazed up at Aziraphale from the foot of the ladder, hands outstretched. “Let me see,” he said, tongue darting distractingly between his lips.

Aziraphale turned, extending his hand—pinprick-bloodied thumb first—for Crowley’s inspection. Crowley took Aziraphale’s hand in both of his own, licking the spot before pressing his lips to it.

“Was that _really_ necessary,” Aziraphale sighed somewhat shakily, not even making a question of it. Heat blossomed in his gut, reminding him of the time he hadn’t even been able to concentrate on set-painting for thoughts of Crowley, but little else happened.

Crowley’s eyes flicked up to meet Aziraphale’s, half-lidded and tempting. “Is _anything_?”

“Are the flowers in order for tomorrow?” Aziraphale asked, stroking Crowley’s lower lip with the
miraculously healed pad of his thumb. “I won’t stand for mishaps. Not given what we owe her.”

“Yes,” Crowley insisted. “Jonquils, gladiolas, lilies, tulips. Cheat on those and have done with it.”

Aziraphale sighed, letting Crowley help him down the ladder. One forceful thought banished it to the back corner of the shed, where, no doubt, Lilith would resume her preference for perching on the lower rungs. Lights strung themselves about the remainder of the cottage without complaint.

“I’m not convinced Monday the thirteenth is any better than Friday of same,” he confessed.

Crowley shrugged, forearms draped over Aziraphale’s shoulders, leaning in achingly close.

“Not an auspicious day for decorating, clearly,” he remarked, nuzzling Aziraphale’s cheek, sucking in his breath when Aziraphale tugged their hips flush. “What’s the matter? You’ve been having… difficulty lately. Is it something I’ve done? Something I haven’t?”

“It’s not for lack of desire,” Aziraphale huffed, determined to make it up to Crowley just like he’d been doing for weeks. “Or for lack of trying. You know that, my dear.”

“Better tell me what’s going on,” Crowley said. “I can only endure so many stoic blow-jobs.”

“I’m distracted,” Aziraphale admitted, stroking Crowley’s hair, wondering if he’d killed the mood completely. “Concerned, one might say. About Amanda most of all, but Raphael seems to think there’s something Uriel’s not telling him. Secrets amongst Archangels—lovers, no less—bodes ill for us all.” He groaned resting his forehead against Crowley’s. “And there’s Pippa.”

Crowley nodded, thumbing along Aziraphale’s lower lip, mirroring Aziraphale’s action of moments before. “You’ve told me a thousand times what we’ve got to do,” he said gently. “For them, for us. For everyone. Nobody said it was going to be easy, least of all you.”

Aziraphale let his head drop to Crowley’s shoulder. “My efforts are hardly sufficient, one feels,” he whispered, fanning his fingers at Crowley’s shoulder blades. “You were always better at this.”

“Better at what?” asked Crowley, disbelieving, his mouth warm against Aziraphale’s neck.

“Being what we are,” Aziraphale insisted, clinging to him so hard that they both forgot to breathe.

An insistent knock at the front door startled them apart, left them blinking wordlessly at each other.

“I’ll get it,” Crowley said, taking Aziraphale’s face briefly in both hands, leaving him with a kiss.

Pippa let go of Crowley, leaning on her cane. She stepped up to Aziraphale, unnervingly close.

“You look as if you’ve seen a ghost,” she said, imploringly cautious. “Whatever’s the matter?”

Aziraphale licked his lips, noting the way that her eyes narrowed—which was the way they’d been narrowing for nigh on a while whenever she happened to notice details and timing were amiss.
“Perhaps we ought to do the flowers now,” he said, putting on a reassuring smile. “No harm in it.”

Behind Pippa, Crowley made a perplexed face at him. “But why do that when we could go eat?”

Pippa smiled sweetly, as if to back Crowley up. “There’s no harm in it. All those corners you cut.”

*She’s onto everything,* Aziraphale thought. *And she should’ve been the first we told.*

“I’ll just, er, leave you two a moment,” said Crowley, awkwardly, “and go feed the girls. You’d better have thought up someplace to go by the time I get back. *Maybe* not the usual.”

Aziraphale nodded, watching him fetch the meal worms and some diced papaya from the fridge. Shoving the sliding glass door open with his shoulder, he wandered outside barefoot, not even bothering with flip-flops and a coat. So much for Aziraphale's duties as mindful spouse.

Pippa shuffled past Aziraphale and helped herself to a seat at the dining-room table. She watched Crowley open the door to the shed, besieged by bills and wings before he'd even got the door shut.

“You're about to discover the joys of grandchicks, or so I hear?” she asked conversationally.

“Within a week or two,” Aziraphale confirmed, coming over to sit down beside her. “Yes.”

Pippa set her hand over Aziraphale's as soon as he'd settled at the table, her eyes imploring.

“What it is,” she said steadily, “whatever you're afraid of, I should like you to know—”

The frantic waving of Crowley's arms caught their attention. He hung halfway out of the shed's re-opened door, wild-eyed, mouthing something that Aziraphale couldn't quite make out.

“What?” Aziraphale asked, knowing full well Crowley couldn't hear him. “What on earth—?”

Crowley made a frustrated face, which caused Pippa to laugh. He disappeared inside the shed, reappearing in the doorway several seconds later with something dull-olive colored in hand. He made an incredible show of pulverizing it in his fist, sprinkling the shards outside the shed.

“Oh, good heavens,” Pippa said, getting to her feet, heading for the door. “The babies are here!”

“So much for dinner,” Aziraphale sighed, but he was already returning Crowley's manic grin.

** * * * **

“This is unreal,” Raphael said, remaining just inside the shed door, careful not to step in the ducks' mess of straw. “I'm standing here in my *best* dress, and you're mucking about in a suit.”

“I've got to make sure they're all right before everyone arrives,” Crowley said, doling out pieces of fruit to the five ducks *not* busy guarding a nest. “They'll get lots of company later.”

Judith, the one perched next to a pile of straw in which three tiny ducklings wriggled and flapped
and squeaked their heads off, tilted her head at Raphael, as if to size up whether he was a threat.

“What are they called?” Raphael asked, wrinkling his nose as he accepted a piece of something tropical from Crowley. He picked his way over just far enough to extend his offering to the new mother, who plucked the fruit daintily off his palm with a waggle of her tail-feathers.

“Rob's got dibs on naming the kids,” Crowley explained, dropping to a crouch next to the nest. “Jude's always been his favorite, and Pippa's, too. Nicola's bringing him at the weekend.”

“How she hasn't pecked your eyes out by now, I can't even imagine,” said Raphael, backing away as Jude, unbelievably, sidled up to Crowley and watched as her brood nibbled his fingers.

“Well, you're forgetting that I'm her mum,” Crowley explained, shrugging. “More or less.”

“Forget lambs and lions,” Raphael said, smiling in spite of himself. “You're ridiculous, darling.”

“Wouldn't have it any other way, not coming from you,” replied Crowley, dusting his hands off as he got to his feet. He straightened his vintage white jacket—dignified, if adorably awkward.

“Let's go back inside,” Raphael suggested, turning for the door. “Uriel's in one of her moods.”

“I can't imagine which one that might be,” Crowley muttered, following him out. “So specific.”

They found Uriel, Pippa, and Sophia in the kitchen, all three of them watching various pots and the cupcakes in the oven with terse expressions.

Crowley shooed everyone except Sophia into the dining room, so Raphael took the opportunity to get Uriel seated and a shot of whisky down her.

Uriel gulped a third of the contents, handing back his flask. “Don't let me go in the living room.”

“Darling, I don't...” Raphael gave her a helpless look, taking a long swig. “Why should I do that?”

“Please,” Uriel pleaded, her sudden white-knuckled grip on his arm strangely terrifying.

“All right,” he said soothingly, stroking her cheek. “We'll stay right here if that's what you want.”

“It's not what I want,” she said, watching Pippa amble into the living room to join the rest of the humans who'd assembled there while Raphael was outside with Crowley. “It's what I don't.”

Judging by the voices Raphael could pick out, the living-room crowd was sizeable: Aziraphale, Adam, Anathema, Newt, Natalie, Janet, Dani, Pippa, Rani, Mary, Jaime, Shadwell, Tracy, and a voice he couldn't place. By process of elimination, he assumed it was the mother of the bride.

“Shouldn't there be more strangers than that?” he ventured. “The groom's folks up from Spain?”

Sophia, overhearing the conversation, dashed over with her phone in hand. “Keep your voice down,” she said tersely. “Yeah, that's Mandy's mum in there, but Iván's family are AWOL.”

Raphael nodded slowly, lips twisting in distaste. He'd seen Mandy's distress at New Year's and been party to Crowley's brief assessment. “And where are the bride and groom?” he whispered.

Sophia took the chair to Uriel's left, which situated her directly across from Raphael. She motioned for the flask, so Raphael handed it over. “I have no fucking clue,” she said, rolling her eyes, “and I'm the officiant since I've now got piddling civic authority.”
“If not for this, I would've called wedding-eve ducklings a good omen,” Uriel said morosely.

Raphael squeezed her wrist. “Don't talk like that just yet. For all we know, she forgot the veil.”

“Maybe they eloped,” said Crowley, sauntering over. He sat down next to Raphael, making grabby hands across the table; Sophia handed him the flask. “Gretna Green's just far enough for comfort.”

“Then I'd hate to break it to the senior Ms. Tomlin that her daughter's just buggered off to the very country she's come from by train,” Sophia groused, snatching back the flask once Crowley had drunk his fill. “Mandy's not answering my texts, and neither is that good-for-nothing...”

They all stared at her, the combination of foreboding and alcohol-buzz settling heavily over them.

“I'd better go pull the cupcakes,” said Sophia, hesitantly getting to her feet. “Don't go anywhere.”

Watching Uriel bury her face in her arms against the tabletop was about all Raphael could stand. He sat back in his chair, gulped what remained in the flask, and turned to an ill-at-ease Crowley.

“We've got a real problem on our hands,” he enunciated thickly. “Get Az in here. Now.”

“Right,” Crowley said, getting to his feet so fast his chair almost tipped over. “Just a second.”

“Stay with me, darling,” Raphael whispered, tugging one of Uriel's hands up to his mouth.

“Whoever it is, whatever that scythe-swinging bastard's asked you to do, we're going to—”

“Don't you mention him,” Uriel seethed, face still hidden in the crook of one arm. “Don't—”

“Oh dear,” said Aziraphale, stiffly, following Crowley into the room. “Why is it we can't seem to—”

“Tall, dark, and tattered paid her a visit in December,” Raphael said. “I thought it was nothing.”

“Shit,” Aziraphale spat, snatching the flask from in front of Raphael, only to find it empty.

“The other issue's that Gemma is asking after her daughter and son-in-law-to-be,” Crowley said.

It was only then that Raphael noticed that Uriel had begun to shake, shivering so hard that the whole table was vibrating. He hauled her out of her chair and into his lap, holding her fast. Wings and a blinding halo, burning silver-grey eyes. They couldn't risk it.

“Don't listen to whatever nonsense he put in your head,” Raphael whispered, stroking her hair.

“Believe me, I—” Uriel grimaced at him, features terrible and pale “—I'm t-trying my b-best.”

“Well, much longer and the food will be ruined,” Crowley sighed, leaving to help Sophia shut down all live sources of heat and transfer various sweets and savories into serving dishes. “C'est la vie.”

Gemma Tomlin, resplendent and dignified in a knee-length midnight blue Topshop number that Raphael recognized from a window on the high street, came into the living room with Natalie and Janet straggling along behind her. Their expressions of worry were, uncannily, identical.

“Do you have any idea where my daughter is?” Gemma asked Aziraphale, hard-eyed.

Raphael pressed Uriel's face into the crook of his neck, still stroking her hair. Please, he thought. Please, whoever might be listening, don't let her, don't take someone, don't let her...

Aziraphale got up and came around the far end of the table, graciously intercepting Gemma.
“I’ve just been reading that there's a spot of traffic due to that construction a mile up, so I'm sure—”

The front door of the cottage swung wide, and Mandy, pale lavender from head to toe, strode through it. Her upswept hair was uncovered, her face tear-streaked in lieu of a latticed veil.

“He left,” she said, brandishing something in her outstretched hand. “Gone, early. Before I even...”

Raphael watched as Crowley took the crushed note from her, folding the distraught girl in his arms.

As if sensing her cue in some terrible relay-race, Sophia took the note from Crowley and rushed it to Gemma. They scrambled to open it so that they could devour whatever information lay within.

Natalie and Janet crowded up behind them, joined in short order by nearly everyone else from the living room. That kind of commotion was difficult to ignore. Raphael stayed where he was, and Uriel clung to him just as hard as Mandy, sobbing her heart out, clung to Crowley.

“That fucking bastard,” Sophia blurted, letting go of the note, surrendering it entirely to Gemma.

“He took a job,” Mandy grated out, loudly enough to silence everyone else in the room. “A fucking job at some new five-star in Spain. And there's, I don't know, somebody. So.”

“Oh, my dear girl,” said Aziraphale, softly, but he didn't move from his place at Gemma's side.

Crowley met Raphael's eyes across the distance, his chin tucked over the top of Mandy's head as firmly as Raphael's was now tucked over Uriel's.

Mirror, mirror, Raphael thought. How close to the tree we both fell.

“This is gonna be a really bad day,” Uriel whispered. “I can already fuckin' tell.”

* * *

Mandy sat trembling on the edge of the bed, sodden tissues in hand. She was simultaneously grateful and irritated that her mum, arm tight about Mandy's shoulders, huddled close beside her.

“Was it some girl?” asked Gemma, furious, eyes tracking repeatedly over the note. “Some boy?”

“Doesn't say,” Mandy sighed, feeling wrung-out as she blew her nose again. “Doesn't matter.”

“When it's my only child left at the altar, it matters,” insisted Gemma. “I'm going to write that charlatan's family, don't think I won't. It'll be the last time a man takes advantage of us.”

Perversely, Mandy felt the urge to laugh. So she laughed and laughed and laughed, until she was in tears all over again. Her mother let go of her, getting up off the mattress, arms folded.

“It doesn't matter, Mum,” Mandy said, choking till she could force a bitter smile. “In the end, I wasn't good enough. Not to him. Not what he was looking for, yeah? You get it?”
“You are good enough, Amanda,” insisted Gemma, reproachfully. “No, you are better.”

Mandy nodded in agitation, fighting off a fresh wave of grief. She hopped to her feet, strolling over to study her reflection in Aziraphale's full-length mirror. She was a fright, mascara running, hair escaping its pinned arrangement. She fancied herself a furious, vengeful spirit.

Even after she'd found the note in the kitchen, she'd still showered and dressed for the occasion.

Shock could get you through a lot, and so could denial. But by the time she'd driven half the distance to the cottage, reality had set in. She'd had to pull over to get herself under control.

“Yeah,” Mandy said to her reflection, meeting her mother's eyes in the mirror. “You know, I am.” She blew her nose again, dropping the wad of tissues on the carpet, shredding it with one sharp heel. “This is gonna be something even better,” she said, turning for the door. “You watch.”

“Amanda, sweet one, please take a moment”—Gemma's pleading followed her up the hall.

“Listen up, you lot,” said Mandy, marching into the open area between kitchen and dining room, not at all shocked when about a dozen voices fell silent and as many pairs of eyes snapped to attention. “This is now my anti-wedding party. The fuck-Iván soirée of the century, if you will.” She nodded to Crowley, indicating that he should follow her over to where a whole segment of work-top was populated by bottles of champagne. “I can see about a quarter of you are hammered already—hip flasks, nice thinking—so allow us to get you the rest of the way to smashed. Let's eat, yeah?”

Satisfied by the subdued cheer that went up amongst the company, Mandy met Crowley's hesitant, rueful smile with one of her own and tossed him his well-loved Laguiole waiter's corkscrew. Doling out glasses to her friends, her family, her nearest-and-dears, helped to take her mind off the seething agony behind her eyes. The burn of it, made flesh in her tear ducts, somehow made her loss easier to bear.

(Distantly, through a myriad offered consolations, she wondered if what she wept was Holy Water.)

Even after almost everyone had milled about drinking, eaten their fill, and followed Crowley outside to see the new arrivals, Mandy noted that Raphael and Uriel hadn’t budged from the dining-room table. Before she could stroll over to ask them why the hell they weren't in the garden, one of the only other parties still in the house lightly touched her elbow, waylaying her.

“I didn't mean to startle you,” said Jaime. “Forgive me. Your day has been difficult enough.”

Mandy stepped back over to the counter and refilled the first two empty glasses she could find, shoving one of them into his unsuspecting hand. “Drink with me, and you're forgiven.”

As if he couldn't argue with that, Jaime nodded and swallowed half the glass. “I have a story.”

“Right now,” said Mandy, the corner of her mouth twitching, “any story's better than mine.”

“Even speaking from many years' experience, I cannot convince you the pain of this will fade,” Jaime began, earnestly seeking Mandy's averted gaze. “That is not what I mean by telling you this. Long, long ago, I was married. I loved her. We had two children together, even—two children grown, with lives and stories of their own. That is not the point, either.”

“I'm beginning to wonder where this is going,” Mandy confided tipsily, “but I'm invested.”

Jaime flushed and set his glass aside, forging on. “Long, long before that, my grandfather's people were forced from their homes. They walked out of the forest and into structures made of steel and
glass and the corpses of their trees. Their world—like mine, like yours—ended.”

Mandy nodded slowly, finishing what must've been her third glass of champagne. “I think...”

“The point is, they didn't have a choice,” Jaime said. “Not like I had. Not like you have.”

“I get it,” said Mandy, grinning at him, her eyes spilling over. “But the meantime's shite, yeah?”

Jaime opened his arms, so she went to him, clapping him on the back. Mary had done all right.

“Oh, my poor love,” said Madame Tracy, amongst the first to traipse in from the chill. She rubbed between Mandy's shoulder blades while an equally tearful Jaime released her. “I'd gut him alive.”

Mandy had to laugh at such a vehement statement coming from a woman who, she was convinced, couldn't hurt a flea. On the other hand, she'd once survived sharing a body with Aziraphale.

“She'd do it, too,” said Anathema, wobbling in with an even wobblier Newt on her arm. “That motorbike helmet of hers might look twee, but she's ridden with the roughest of 'em.”

Newt looked nervous about the direction his wife’s ramble had taken. Wisely, he said nothing.

“Poor thing, she must be ill,” he said instead, nodding over to where Raphael had left an out-cold Uriel at the table. She stirred as they glanced in her direction—sitting up, blinking at the room.

Something flickered at the back of Mandy's mind, uneasy prickle of memory as her eyes were the only ones left on Uriel. She watched as the Archangel rose, trance-like, from her seat, and—

Wings. Silver, blinding. Maybe nobody else could see them, but Uriel had them sure enough.

“Carry on,” said Mandy, tautly, somewhat relieved that the knot around her had resumed talking to each other. She slipped away from where she'd been standing between Jaime and Madame Tracy, kicking out of her inconvenient heels as she rushed to follow Uriel into the living room.

What is it that she does again? thought Mandy, frantically, crossing the low-lit room to find Shadwell asleep in the tartan armchair. Dominion Over the Souls of Men—

“Oh no,” said Mandy, softly, touching Shadwell's shoulder. She looked up.

Uriel stood behind him with tears in her eyes, her right hand resting on the other.

“Don't,” Mandy whispered, shaking Shadwell with both hands now. “Don't you dare. This day's been hell enough for all of us, hasn't it? Hell enough for me.” She gritted her teeth, working a hand beneath Shadwell's vest to press her palm flat over his heart. “Don't do it, mate. There's been nothing but trouble since you came. I won't fucking let you.” She glanced over her shoulder, out into the kitchen, at Madame Tracy—who was chatting blithely away with Anathema, Newt, and Jaime.

“How can I?” Uriel asked desolately, her grasp on Shadwell's shoulder tightening. “I promised—”

“Break it!” Mandy cried, slapping Shadwell's cheek now. “Come on, come on. Resist!”

Uriel let go of Shadwell, stepping back as if she'd been dealt a shock. “We're already stuck here.”

“You're telling me,” Mandy muttered, her heart racing with relief as the old man drew a terrible, labored gasp and continued to breathe in spite of his waxy complexion. “Hey. You all right?”
“Aye, sweet lass. Now which way'd the no-good, shite-for-brains Spaniard go?” Shadwell rasped.

“Fuck,” Uriel said, wings extinguished, producing her mobile. “I'm calling an ambulance!”

Mandy started to cry again, but she was smiling this time. She found that she couldn't quite stop.

“Think I saw him jump in the Channel,” she said, keeping Shadwell in his seat. “Brexit, innit?”

“And lose the likes o’ you?” Shadwell said, covering Mandy's hand with his shaky fingers, his eyes darting frantically around the room, doubtless in search of Madame Tracy. “Ambulance?”

“Just stay calm now,” replied Mandy, wiping her nose with her free hand, listening in on Uriel's conversation with the staff at St. Richard's. “Thought we'd lost you, mate. Really I did.”

* * *

Shivering in the driveway in spite of his dress-shirt and jacket, Crowley steadied Madame Tracy while Gemma steadied Mandy as the ambulance pulled away. Too many parallels; too much pain.

“I knew something wasn't quite right,” murmured Tracy, hollowly. “For weeks and weeks on end.”

“I'll drive you to the hospital,” Crowley replied, nudging her elbow. “C'mon, let's go in and get your things.” He guided her back to the front stoop, followed by the Tomlins. “And, for what it's worth, these things are never anybody's fault,” he said, remembering Harold. “They just happen.”

“The cards had it right,” Tracy lamented. “Not just about Mister S. Everything.”

In the process of hunting for her handbag, they wished the twins, Dani, Newt, and Anathema goodbye. They also found Rani gathering her coat and purse from the bedroom.

“What a right bollocksed-up day it's been,” she crooned, hugging Madame Tracy tightly while Crowley looked uncertainly on. “Shall I run you down to St. Dick's, then? I'll sit with you till they know what's what, pet. I don't live but a mile from there; you can stay at mine.”

Crowley opened his mouth and shut it several times before finding his voice. “It's all right,” he told Rani. “Really. I was about to take her down myself, because I'm not much use other—”

“Get your arse back out there to the kids,” Rani scolded. “Your man, too. Run along.”

“Fine,” Crowley stammered, hugging Madame Tracy one more time. “Yes, er. Keen.”

Emerging chagrined from hall into kitchen, Crowley almost smacked face-first into Mandy.

“Guess that means Mum and I don't have to run her to hospital?” she asked, still red-eyed.

“Rani's got the take-charge attitude none of us deserve,” Crowley muttered, scrubbing at his face with both hands. “Gemma,” he said, turning to Mandy's mother, “I'm truly, truly sorry—”
“Unless you fixed my treasure up with that trash, there's no need,” Gemma said reassuringly.

“Nobody fixed me up with him,” said Mandy, sounding impossibly weary. “Did it myself.”

“Take your mum home,” Crowley told her. “Keep drinking or get some sleep or...listen, I have no idea. Do whatever it's going to take to achieve catharsis, and take the rest of the cupcakes.”

Tearful again, Mandy winked, breaking into a grin. “Mind if we take the rest of the champagne?”

“Two bottles,” said Gemma, taking her daughter's arm. “One each. Good night, Mr. Crowley.”

“Good night,” Crowley said, collapsing on the edge of the mattress as they left him alone.

Drained, he let his eyes take stock of the darkened bedroom, observing how the full-length mirror caught eerie reflections of light filtering in through the blinds. He heard Mary and Jaime outside, the pair in heated conversation as they got into their car.

That leaves me with Aziraphale and Sophia for clean-up, Crowley thought. And—

“Thought I might find you here,” Adam said, silhouetted in the half-open doorway. “Brooding.”

“Where's your wife?” asked Crowley, as Adam came over to sit beside him. “And Aziraphale?”

“Getting a head-start on the mess,” Adam told Crowley, hands folded in his lap. “Like they do.”

Crowley couldn't even argue with that, so he nodded. No matter which end of the mess it was, you could always count on Aziraphale or Sophia to get a smashing jump on everybody else.

“I feel like there's something you might need to get off your chest,” Adam said, unfolding his hands, loosening his endearing terrier-print tie. “Something you'd like to say to me, yeah?”

“You could've stopped all this from happening,” Crowley insisted. “Could've kept them safe.” He glanced sidelong at Adam, all but pleading, watching Adam's eyes widen and catch pinprick sparks of the glow from his own. “After what happened with Soph a while back, aren't you just...” He spread his hands in supplication, shuddering as he drew breath. “Tempted to seal them away?”

Adam seemed to seriously consider this proposition for a moment, but his demeanor went calm.

“You can't keep people in jars. Besides, it's bad enough that's exactly what I've done with you two.”

“If that's what we're going to call this, then you've got to face up to just how many non-humans you've bound,” Crowley pointed out. “And how inconsistent your rules are at times.”

“Two,” said Adam, pointing to a photograph of Aziraphale and Crowley on the dresser. “Four,” he said, pointing to the window, just outside of which Uriel and Raphael, forgotten until that moment, huddled smoking against the wall of the cottage. “Six,” he said, pointing Heavenward; Crowley imagined Gabriel and Michael bickering away. “Eight,” he finished, pointing toward Hell.

“Ten,” Crowley amended, his lips twitching. “Four of them down there, remember?”

“Thirteen if you count the Horsepersons, I s'pose,” said Adam, dully. “Death doesn't count.”

“He meddled with Uriel,” Crowley replied, furious. “Tried to get her to do his job. Why?”

“Well, he did take a pot-shot at me there at the end. Remember?” Adam scrunched up his features, looking impossibly young. “I AM AZRAEL, CREATED TO BE CREATION'S SHADOW. YOU
Never do that again,” said Crowley, shuddering. “That's entirely too good an impression.”

Adam shrugged. “We're holding the world together as best we can, but it's his job to unmake bits of it here and there. I reckon he got tired of how efficient we've been. Wanted to even the score.”

“If Shadwell survives,” Crowley ventured quietly, “then we'll have won again, won't we?”

“Something like that,” said Adam, clapping Crowley's shoulder. “Another zero-sum game.”

“Jesus,” Uriel said, easing her ear away from the glass, releasing her breath on a final puff of smoke. “No wonder Crowley can't weather those talks of theirs without going a bit spare.”

Raphael nodded, getting to his feet, brushing himself off. “We ought to bid them good night.”

“Yeah,” Uriel sighed, hugging herself against the increasingly frozen air. “Today's my bad.”

“Don't let him bully you like that next time,” Raphael said. “If you have to, call us all in.”

Uriel nodded, heading toward the front of the house, leading the way. “Lesson learned.”

Before they could even mount the stairs, a cyclist came tearing up the road. She skidded to a halt in the driveway, sending frost-glitter gravel across Uriel's bare feet and Raphael's stockinged ones.

“Hey,” said Mandy, letting her bike fall on the spot as she hopped off. She'd changed into her university-logo sweatshirt, skinny jeans, and silver-sequinned flats. “Mum's out cold. She's a lightweight.” She scrubbed at the side of her face, a mannerism not unlike Crowley's when under stress. “I, uh, got most of it out of my system. Still feel like arse, though. Can you...?”

Uriel felt a pang as Mandy ignored her in favor of approaching Raphael, tugging one of Raphael's hands up against her forehead and the other against her belly. I deserve this, she thought.

“I charge thee,” she said. “Only, well. Hangover prevention is a pretty low-key charge.”

Raphael was silent for several long seconds before he burst out laughing and did as she asked.

“Comparative Religions major,” he said, pulling his hands away, wiping his eyes. “Good one.”

“More like a good two,” said Mandy, eyeing Uriel, seeming brighter already. “That was a close call earlier,” she said. “You didn't look right. Weren't yourself. I remember how that feels.”

“My essential Aspect is my least favorite part of myself,” Uriel admitted, starting for the front door. “C'mon, you hosers, it's cold as balls out here. I don't wanna think about this right now.”

As Uriel's luck would have it, they didn't make it inside the house. Sophia dashed down the front
walk and came to them, each breath she expelled rolling fog-like in the sunset-kissed air.

“Come around out back,” she said, tugging Mandy along by her sleeve. “You've gotta see this.”

Thirty seconds later, the four of them were huddled inside Crowley's avian heat-lamp paradise.

“You were right,” said Uriel, stunned, hanging back with Raphael as the girls sat in the straw and cuddled Judith's hatchlings. “These ducks would never survive in the wild. They're too tame.”

“It's a pity the naming ceremony's to be left in the hands of a schoolboy,” Raphael remarked.

“Eh, we named the first batch,” said Mandy, smirking at Sophia. “We got 'em good, I think.”

“Rob's likely to give these kiddos names with less baggage,” Sophia replied. “Thank God.”

Just when Uriel thought she'd worked up enough courage to tempt Jude's wrath and pet the squeaking balls of fluff, Crowley burst into the shed, crowding it. Aziraphale was behind him.

“Let's get some air,” he suggested, watching with approval as Mandy and Sophia scooped the ducklings back into Jude's nest. “It's past their bedtime anyway. I'm amazed the others stayed asleep with all of you yammering,” he said, studying the huddle of five grown sisters.

Jude rejoined her offspring in the nest, nipping affectionately at Mandy's fingers as she settled.

“I'll second that,” Uriel said, backing Aziraphale out of the doorway so that they both stood in the cold. “It'll be nighttime soon. Who wants to go for a walk on the beach?”

The sound of Unchained Melody erupting suddenly from someone's mobile startled all of them, although it turned out the perpetrator was Mandy. She held the device out at arm's length.

“You owe me a dance,” she said to Aziraphale, and then shifted her glance to Crowley. “You too.”

“Can't argue with that, darling,” said Raphael, elbowing Crowley. “Will you dance with me after?”

“Don't push your luck,” Aziraphale said warningly. “Next in that queue, he's very much taken.”

While Adam came down from the house to join them with a bottle of champagne in hand, Mandy left the boys and Sophia to their bickering, urgently taking hold of Uriel's hand.

“Come with me,” she said, tugging her up and over the sea-grass scattered rise. “I need a witness.”

Before Uriel could ask what she'd be witnessing, Mandy had kicked out of her ballet flats and dragged Uriel down to where the sand was saturated. The tide lapped their toes, taunting.

“If the Channel wants him, the Channel can have him,” Mandy said, twisting the ring off her finger. She studied it for a moment in the hush-filled dusk, listening to the waves. “Count for me?”

Uriel took Mandy's meaning without having to be asked twice, heart suddenly buoyant with hope.

“One,” she said, making firm eye contact with Mandy, watching the wind-up. “Two. Three!”

Mandy flung the ring as far and hard as she could, stumbling knee-deep into the freezing surf.

“That felt,” she panted, wading back in toward shore, tucking her hands in the kangaroo pocket of her sweatshirt, “really great. Like, perfect ending to a perfect day kind of great.”
Something shimmered darkly on the horizon, catching Uriel's attention. She froze, staring at it.

“Get up there and claim your dances,” she told Mandy, attempting levity. “I'll only be a minute.”

“Sure thing, weirdo,” Mandy said, patting Uriel on the shoulder as she passed. “Don't freeze.”

Night fell as Death loomed over the sea, unfurling his star-studded cloak over all of Creation.

YOU WILL SUFFER WITH THEM TILL THE LAST, said Azrael, disembodied, omnipresent. TILL THE LAST OF THEM IS GONE, TILL KINGDOM COME.

"The Kingdom's come and gone," Uriel said. "For better or worse, it's theirs. We only live in it."

AND WHEN THEY'RE GONE? WHEN YOU INHERIT THE EARTH, YOU AND YOUR ANGELIC COHORT AND THE PRINCIPALITY'S DEMON LOVER? Azrael asked. WHAT THEN?

"I don't have to answer that," said Uriel, wading into the surf. "Not yet. Wait and see."
London, 10 March 1776

It wasn’t breaking and entering, Aziraphale told himself. Not if it involved concern about a sort-of-friend who, for the better part of the week since Aziraphale had returned from his travels, had not answered his door. He forced the lock with a thought, pushing his way inside.

Crowley’s rented rooms were on the third floor. The demon consistently preferred a high vantage point, the better to peer at whomever might be approaching. Not in this case, it seemed. He wasn’t at the window.

Aziraphale unlocked Crowley’s flat, turning the knob with a guilty flinch. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Crowley was in neither the sitting room, nor the kitchen. Dust had begun to accrue on the mantelpiece and the ornamental side-table. Aziraphale sniffed, adjusted his spectacles, and started back the hall.

“Crowley?” he inquired, rapping tentatively on the closed bedroom door. “Crowley, are you there?”

Stirring from within sounded like the rustle of heavy bed linens, followed by a recognizable sigh.

“It’s nearly two o’clock,” Aziraphale continued, with false cheer. “Time you got up, don’t you think?”

Crowley groaned feebly, the fabric-swathed flailing suggesting he might have flopped onto his back.

“Last I checked,” he called, “humans were doing a bang-up job of playing silly buggers on their own.”

“Yes, well,” Aziraphale forged on. “I’m just back from a nice holiday in the Orient, and you, it seems, are just waking from a week-long nap. We can’t stay off-duty for long. Someone might notice.”

“Notice,” Crowley mumbled, with a hint of drowsy laughter. “Heh. Have you met my people?”

Finally frustrated with the run-around, Aziraphale unlocked and opened the bedroom door faster than Crowley could re-lock it again. All that was visible above the quilt-covered lump was Crowley’s disarrayed hair—longer than usual, unkempt, with a hint of wave to it.

Aziraphale plucked the nearest silk ribbon off Crowley’s dressing table and tossed it on top of him.

“Come now, don’t be daft,” he coaxed. “Won’t you accompany me to lunch? There’s some gossip.”
“Can’t, too depressed,” Crowley yawned beneath the duvet. “What did the Colonists break this time?”

Stepping around to the side of the bed, Aziraphale prodded at him with one cautious index finger. Memories of Spain came flooding back. This wouldn’t be a repeat, oh no. Not on his watch.

“As if that upstart of yours across the Atlantic—Paine, wasn’t it, and aptly named, too—weren’t enough,” Aziraphale said, yanking back the covers while Crowley let his guard down and indulged in a stretch, “another troublesome friend of yours, Smith, published a screed titled An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. Just yesterday, in fact.”

Clad in only a loose, unlaced nightshirt, Crowley gasped indignantly and yanked the sheets back up.

“It isn’t my fault they’re developing the good sense to question proto-Capitalism,” he snapped.

“No,” said Aziraphale, in irritation, snatching the dove-grey ribbon, pressing it on him, “but you’re an instigator, you—you old serpent.” He ignored Crowley’s strident nonverbal protests as he wrangled him to the edge of the mattress, bedclothes in tow. “Fix your hair, Crowley, and get dressed.”

Crowley folded his arms across his chest, ribbon dangling from his fingertips, practically pouting.

“Don’t want to,” he said tersely, gleaming eyes darting to the shuttered window. “It’s too bright out.”

“Oh, this again,” said Aziraphale, unsurprised to hear one of Crowley’s favorite protests against being dragged kicking and screaming from a rigorous bout of Sloth. “No matter,” he said, snapping his fingers so that the tangles fell from Crowley’s hair. He snatched the ribbon from Crowley’s grasp, whisked it behind Crowley’s back, and tied the soft, dark spill haphazardly in place. “There.”

Crowley slid off the bed and pushed past Aziraphale, fussing with the ribbon as he dashed to his full-length mirror. Aziraphale couldn’t help but stare at his bony knees and the shapely, exposed turn of his calves. He closed his eyes while Crowley studied his reflection.

“How’s this,” mumbled the demon, and the air perceptibly went swish. “Not overdoing it?”

Aziraphale opened his eyes and found that breathing, rather than forgetting to, was the problem.

“You’re a vision—” Aziraphale bit his treacherous, overeager tongue “—of gentility. Quite serviceable.”

Crowley brushed at his frock coat, examining the intricate golden stitching against the grey damask. White linen shirt and neck-cloth, white stockings. Black breeches and shoes, buckles of polished silver.

“One feels a touch of severity is in order,” said Crowley, snidely. “These are, after all, troubled times.”

“Vanity,” Aziraphale chided. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were out to impress someone.”

Crowley froze, his eyes flying up to meet Aziraphale’s gaze, already gone far too fond, in the mirror.
“Granted,” he coughed, averting his glance to underscore its difference, “I’m not in the mood for stares.”

“Lucky for you,” said Aziraphale, reaching inside his coat, “I’ve come prepared.” He handed Crowley the oval-shaped shagreen case with its copper trim and braided silk cord. “A little something from China.”

“Stingray?” Crowley asked, running his fingertips absently across the scaled sharkskin. “You shouldn’t have,” he murmured, popping the case, pleased when the cord kept the top half from falling to the floor. Curiously, he withdrew the item inside with thumb and forefinger. “Oh.”

Aziraphale took the case out of Crowley’s hand, setting it aside. “The frames are made of brass,” he explained, keenly aware he’d tripped into a nervous ramble. “See the maker’s mark, there? I’m rusty when it comes to seal script, alas. Not as ornate as they come, but those rivets should—”

Crowley unfolded the glasses’ arms and slid them reverently onto his face, stealing Aziraphale’s breath.

“Smoky quartz with no inclusions,” he said, fingering one lens-edge. “You really shouldn’t have.”

“Worth every penny,” said Aziraphale, vehemently, “if they get you out of the blasted bed.” He ought to have been disturbed by his fleeting notion of wanting to keep Crowley in it.

“You’re turning tempter, you know,” said Crowley, turning away from the mirror, poking Aziraphale in the chest with a much less tentative index finger than Aziraphale had used on him. “It’s unseemly.”

“Then forgive me,” Aziraphale said, offering Crowley his arm in challenge, "if you have it in you.”
Small Hauntings

Chapter Summary

Five silent cottages, five sleepless residents, five small hauntings. This picks up where *Dance At My Wedding* leaves off.

Shangri-La

Well past midnight was when when Shadwell tended to be at his most wakeful, alone in the telly's technicolor glow. He yawned and fumbled for the clicker, switching the blasted thing off.

Back the hall, his wife snored serenely beyond the flimsy confines of their bead-curtained bedroom.

“'Aye, wumman,” Shadwell muttered, hefting himself to his feet. “I'll be along wi' ye in two ticks.”

Leaning heavily on the arm of the sofa, he bent to fetch his thermos. And did a double-take on rising, wondering how much scotch there'd really been in his bona fide, entirely medicinal hot toddy.

“Yowe foole,” said the apparition, ticking an ash-smudged finger at him. “Notte without wasshynge.”

Shadwell had to wonder how the mad old bat did it, audibly plastering on all of those extra letters.

“Back to the Damnation whence ye've come, harlot,” he warned, brandishing his right index finger.

Agnes Nutter let loose a belly-laugh, traipsing along behind him as he shuffled to the dim kitchen.

“How does it feele,” she asked, leaning on the work-top as he turned on the tap, “cheatynge Death?”

“Like a ton o' roofing nails where it counts,” Shadwell muttered, squeezing some Fairy into the sink.

“That Amanda ys a shrewd one, I grante,” Agnes admitted, reaching for the bottle of washing-up liquid. “How came thys substance so greene?” she asked wonderingly, tapping the plastic.

“Ton o' chemical shite,” yawned Shadwell, scrubbing away, feeling drunker by the second. “Truth.”

Agnes set the bottle aside, dusting off her hands.

“This buys yowe but a little space,” she warned.

“Ye'll have to catch me,” Shadwell warned, rinsing the thermos thoroughly. “You an' every witch.”

“Those termes, we accepted many yeeres gone,” Agnes agreed. “Aye, 'tis the sunne's time to wane.”

“Stuff an' nonsense,” Shadwell scoffed, drying off his hands, turning to face her. “Damn yer lies.”

Agnes regarded him sadly in the wan glow of the stove light, reaching to brush suds off his sleeve.

“Even sonnes become sires,” she cautioned, straightening his stained collar. “And so it must goe.”

*Sons*, Shadwell thought, shivering as she vanished into thin air, *not suns. Satan's kin.*
The Laurels

Sleepless with the memory of a similar evening scarcely a month gone, Jaime pondered the stars. He'd grown used to the winter constellations of this tiny island, and perhaps even took comfort in them.

“So cruel, Anhangüera,” he said to Orion. “So much you took from that lovely bride-to-be.”


“I do not know who to blame,” Jaime admitted sheepishly, glancing sidelong at the overgrown hedge.

The leaves rustled like laughter in the freezing twilight breeze, and the stars overhead seemed to wink.

“That young man she loved was danger,” his grandfather went on, in the whisper of gravel beneath his soles. “Next time you see Amanda, teach her how to say: Toma, Caipora, deixa eu ir embora.”

“Pale, freckled demon with red hair,” Jaime said, fumbling inside his coat for the half-smoked pack of cigarettes he'd left there, making the sign of the Cross. “Iván was nothing like your Caipora.”

“Maybe not, but he led her astray,” chided Jaime's grandfather. “You are the shepherd of growing things.”

“There are many shepherds here,” Jaime said, striking his lighter, “who are more than they seem.”

“Then you must be more, lindinho,” replied his grandfather. “You named this house for honor.”

“For the English idea of it,” Jaime agreed, admiring Mary's light in the bedroom window. “And mine.”

Dunroamin

Raphael hated sleeplessness. His kind had no need of sleep in the first place; and yet, here he was. As reliant on a full night's worth as a certain irritatingly attractive green-thumbed dork up the road.

Hours and hours before, Uriel had fallen asleep on the sofa as she stared out to sea, her eyes open wide.

Stubbing out his cigarette on the patio floor, Raphael rose from the rocking chair. He stretched, resenting the creak in his bones. Too lived-in already, this mortal coil he'd kept for centuries on end. He wondered if, before long, he'd find traces of white in his flame-colored hair.

HEY, said the perfect, flat static of the radio station he'd been too lazy to change. RAFE.

Raphael leaned forward and tried turning the dial this way and that, only for the static to chuckle.

YOU REALLY NEED TO LIGHTEN UP, Tanith said. THIS ISN'T MOHENJO-DARO.

“I wish they'd revoke your communications license,” Raphael sighed. “You can't sleep, either?”
DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS, said Tanith, indifferently. DOWN HERE, WE DON'T CARE. The static wavered, a telltale sign that this wasn't just idle messing around. IS URIEL ASLEEP?

“As close to asleep as she ever gets,” Raphael sighed, resuming his seat, lighting another smoke.

THIS ISN'T AN EASY ONE FOR ME, Tanith crackled. IT REALLY, REALLY ISN'T.

“What's coming down the pike?” Raphael asked, blowing smoke at the moon as he folded his arms across his chest. “We've seen it all, the likes of you and me. We haven't gone soft.”

WHAT, replied Tanith, the dial rotating in autonomous amusement. LIKE EVERYONE'S FAVORITE DUCK DADS? LIKE MY BOSS'S ESTRANGED KID?

“Darling, I thought you were fucking your boss,” Raphael chided. “Be clear who you mean.”

IF DAGON HAD A KID, I'D KNOW BY NOW, Tanith said. DON'T PLAY DUMB.

“The nightmares will start if I don't get her to bed,” Raphael murmured, pitching his cigarette into the grass. “The premonitions, the trance. Same difference. She's been fighting this one a while.”

I FEAR FOR WHAT IT WILL MEAN, Tanith wavered, swiveling the dial down to nearly nothing.

“It'll mean change,” Raphael told her, twisting the dial in warning. “Just like humans usually do.”

THIS HUMAN WILL BE DIFFERENT, Tanith whispered, rendering the dial hot in his grasp.

“Fortunately, we're experts at different,” Raphael said, pausing. “How long do you think we have?”

MONTHS, Tanith warbled as he coaxed the dial lower. MY RESEARCH IS THOROUGH.

“Then batten down,” Raphael told her, turning the dial until the radio clicked off, “and leave it to us.”

The Shambles

Pippa made her way one stair at a time, pausing for breath. Her bones ached fiercely with the February chill, and the eve of March hadn't drummed the past month's tragedy from her chest.

You'll freeze if you keep forgetting, Harold cautioned with the creak of the next stair. Pip.

“Didn't ask you, did I,” Pippa muttered, triumphantly mounting the top stair. “Anyway, the radiator's been on.”

No quicker on the uptake than I left you, Harold creaked, the protest of each floorboard a comical syllable. Denial's a good 'un. Always was, at least with you. Buying us time.

“I'd buy back all the time in the world,” said Pippa, stoically, making for the bathroom, “if it meant I could learn the lads' secrets, or warn Mandy off that twat, or...” She paused for breath, touching her favorite knot in the wall, the one Rob liked to say would fit a mouse. “But I wasted it.”

Wasted it on what, petal? asked Harold, in the low groan of the door. How d'you mean?

“Wasted it on myself,” Pippa said, angrily snatching her toothbrush. “On living to see what
happens.”

Maybe death's made me daft, Harold scoffed as she ran the tap, but isn't that just life?

“I ought to have done something by now,” Pippa fretted, squeezing out enough toothpaste for two.

Something about what? About those secrets our neighbors keep, what's always out of reach?

“Wish I could wash you away,” Pippa mumbled, brushing harder than necessary, “into the beyond.”

There's where you're in a pickle, Pip, said Harold, reluctantly, as she spat and rinsed. This is as much a corner of the beyond as, well, the beyond itself. You're all bound up in it.

“You left,” she said, bent double, her tears falling on what suds were left in the basin, “too soon to see.”

Home

Sometimes, in the dark of morning, Crowley woke to a rattling so faint he couldn't help but rise to investigate. He'd perfected the trick of leaving bed without disturbing Aziraphale long ago, as a whisper of scales across carpet until it behooved him to resume human form.

In front of the mantelpiece, rattled with the tumult of transformation, Crowley finally caught the cause.

The precious wentletrap rocked where it sat, each clack off the junonia's spotted shoulder an eerie intrusion. No visible force had set the shell in motion, no glaringly obvious catalyst.

Crowley set one shaking index finger on the most prominent ghost-white whorl, forcing it to fall still.

“Don't tell me you're haunted,” he hissed threateningly, as if it were no better than an ill-behaved plant.

He'd never had the privilege of understanding what had caused Aziraphale to shriek all those years ago, but the ticklish, silken skitter across his toes threw the memory into relief. The sheer nerve.

“You're the only ghost I'll stand for,” Crowley warned weakly, glowering down at the floor. “I swear.”

The mouse sat poised in the curve of his instep, washing its prim paws as it beadily returned his stare.
Moments before dawn, pain seized Sophia's insides with such suddenness that it took her long seconds of breathing into the space between her pillow and Adam's to settle it. She swallowed, throat thick with bile at the memory.

Stumbling to the loo across the hall took more effort than it should have, although the white-hot flush from forehead to belly and the tremor in her limbs was familiar. She splashed her face with freezing water—and then paused, staring at herself in the dark.

“Can't be,” Sophia whispered, touching her cheek's unyielding simulacrum. “We've taken so much care.”

Her reflection, catching shreds of morning's rising brightness through the blinds, seemed to wink at her.

“Couldn't stop at a book, could you,” Sophia whispered to the specter. “Couldn't even stop at two.”

The mirror shimmered, chimerical as Crowley's tide pool. She touched the surface with ten damp, hesitant fingertips, confronted so clearly with Agnes's likeness that it shook her. Her mother’s reconstruction of the burnt woodcut had been accurate.

_Yow're no Nutter if yowe can notte bear it, came the words, curtly, and no Device, either._

_The catch is that, in present terms, thought Sophia, with defiance, this Young is neither._
For Sorrow

Uriel woke to the startling, sea-reflected light of morning through the picture window. She blinked, eyes dry, unable to call what she’d dreamed.

The warm, constant weight against her shoulder was Raphael. He’d huddled into the curve of her right arm and fallen asleep there, concerned.

Next to Uriel, on the arm of the sofa, was her phone. It never needed charging, because where was the sense in that? She picked it up, studying the fleet of messages on its screen. They were all from Crowley, and all sent within the past twenty minutes. Her skin prickled.

Uriel shifted Raphael into the pile of throw pillows. She stood up and perused the texts, running an agitated hand through her hair.

*Snoozed and lost. Az and Pippa book club breakfast in progress at café.*

*Illiterate losers’ brunch imminent because Soph stopped by. No Adam.*

*Nothing wrong, mind. He’s in LT for the weekend uncle-ing Sarah’s kids.*

*Jude’s brood got names yesterday, are you not bloody curious to find out?*

*P.S. Found Tim Horton’s Fruit Explosion muffins clone recipe, baking now.*

“Fuck you, dude,” said Uriel, spurred into action, doing little more than pull on a hoodie over her threadbare pajamas and jam her feet into the pink Crocs she’d bought to piss off Crowley.

Several attempts at waking Raphael—talking, shaking him, sticking her tongue in his ear—failed. Only then did she notice the empty wine bottle and ashtray on the floor.

“Fine,” she said, mussing Raphael’s jagged ginger fringe so it covered his eyes. “Sleep it off.”

Uriel biked to the cottage, and Crowley gave her a double-take when he answered the door.

“I know you can’t catch your death,” Crowley said gloomily, “but it is still February.”

“Only for three more days,” she said, tailing him over to the espresso machine, “counting today.”

To their right, the oven radiated syrup-sweet heat smelling of mixed berries and dried russets.

“Careful, it’s full,” Crowley cautioned, handing Uriel one of the two mugs he’d pulled from the tray beneath the steamer. “I offered to make Soph one, too, but she hates maple.”

“Awesome,” Uriel said, taking a greedy gulp of the latté. “More for my homesick hoser ass.”

Crowley smiled over the rim of his mug, but the swift glint of his eyes darted to her footwear.

“I’d take those off if I were you,” he said, deceptively mild, heading for the table to sit down.

“Shed,” Crowley sighed, taking Aziraphale’s habitual seat at the table. “Feeding the riff-raff.”

“You relax and keep an eye on those muffins,” Uriel said, gulping down what remained of her latte, ditching her mug at the empty seat next to him. “I’m gonna go see the babies.”

“Don’t come back alone,” Crowley cautioned, flipping through the puzzle-book Aziraphale had left lying there this time. “Ten minutes. If you’re late, you don’t get hot ones.”

*That’s all the time I need*, thought Uriel, stepping behind him, opening the sliding glass door with stiff fingers. *All the time in our fragile world.*

Freezing dew filtered in through the holes in her footwear, but it was a matter of seconds until she reached the shed. She pushed the door open, shivering into the lamps’ warm glow.

Sophia knelt next to Judith’s nest, her impossibly dark hair a loose spill over her bright blue coat.

“Hey,” she said, glancing up with a grin, picking some straw from the wiggling balls of fluff in her lap. “Meet Tony, Bruce, and Natasha. As soon as Rob heard it was two boys and a girl...”

“That little nerd,” Uriel said, dropping to a crouch before Sophia, reaching to brush the nearest duckling’s head. “Who’s who? Can’t tell ’em apart.”

Sophia laughed, eyes crinkling, and it was then that Uriel noticed how exhausted she looked.

“Me neither,” she admitted. “Not yet. As long as Jude and Crowley can, that’s what matters.”

Judith, who’d been lying in the straw with her head half-tucked under her wing, hissed at Uriel. Her five sisters, drowsing in a cluster nearby, lifted their heads warily.

Sophia set her hand on Judith’s feathery back. “*Shhh shhh, don’t wake the aunties.*”

One of the ducklings nipped Uriel’s finger, breaking her reverie. Everything slid into focus.

“Witch-daughter,” Uriel said, lifting her hand to Sophia’s cheek, “my head’s gone quiet. Do you have something to tell me?”

Sophia flinched. “Isn’t this supposed to happen the other way ’round? *You’re* the angel.”

Uriel took her turn to laugh, stroking Sophia’s face as Sophia tearfully leaned into her touch.

“Fear not,” she admitted, “isn’t a thing I can say in good conscience. It’ll be scary. Ask Jude.”

“I woke up sick. Can’t blame a hangover, can I? Mandy’s unwedding was two weeks ago. Haven’t drunk since.” Sophia gave the ducklings back to their mother. “I’m no virgin, either.”

“And I’m sure as hell not gonna tell you what to name your kid,” Uriel agreed, finding she needed to wipe her eyes. “That is,” she went on, “*if—*”

“I’m ready,” Sophia insisted, collecting herself with impressive speed. “Don’t tell the others?”

“You should do it,” Uriel agreed. “When you’re sure. The silence in my head could be nothing. Maybe you ate a bad salad.”

Sophia shook her head as Tamar, nudging her slender bill at Uriel first, flapped and waddled over.
“In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children,” she said, feeding Tamar a piece of mango. “KJV. The JPS Tanakh’s more straightforward, it just says in pain. Did you know the Device line’s Jewish? Into England out of France in the eleven-hundreds. They didn’t leave after the 1290 edict, just...hid, hid in plain sight like so many. Agnes’s son, John, kept his father’s name. Nutters become Devices, and life goes on.”

“Device-Pulsifers become Youngs,” Uriel murmured. “All that’s left of the Book is notecards for a bedtime story.”

“And Biggles,” said Sophia, seeming full of sudden, astonishing hope. “We mustn’t forget that.”
Newt liked bright, cold Sundays. They were the kind of day on which he could crawl out of bed around seven and be guaranteed three to four hours’ quiet work catch-up until Anathema and the twins woke.

There were infinitely worse things than having one’s two youngest still under one’s roof, done with university and just shy of their twenty-third birthday. Natalie had taken up full-time administrative work in the local NHS surgery. Janet’s anxiety kept her largely at home with legal freelance handed along by her mother, but Dani’s influence had been a blessing.

(So far, Dani was the closest thing Newt had to a daughter-in-law, and he had grown very fond.)

Midway through tea and a sheaf of emails related to his latest client’s contract, Newt startled to the sound of rapping on the kitchen window. He adjusted his robe and glanced over.

Sophia stood waving and pointing in the direction of the door, with Uriel hanging behind her. Newt let them in, with a fond shoulder-pat each, before yawning his way over to heat the kettle.

“Where are the girls?” Sophia asked, offering Uriel a seat at the table before taking one herself.

“Both asleep,” Newt said, pulling two ancient mugs from the cupboard. “So is your mother.”

“Damn,” Sophia sighed, glancing at Uriel. “Looks like your offer of moral support’s for naught. If I tell Dad, he’ll just tell everyone else for me.”

Leaning against the counter while the water boiled, Newt folded his arms across his chest.

“This isn’t anything to do with needing to raid your ancestors’ possessions in the attic again, is it?”

“Nope,” Uriel said. “Although it *does* have to do with something in the opposite direc—”

Sophia elbowed her in the ribs, forcing a startled breath from her.

“Can you get them out of bed?”

Newt cast Uriel a worried glance, seeking reassurance.

“Should your presence concern me?”

“Since Adam’s out of town till tomorrow,” Uriel said, “I thought she’d appreciate a cheerleader.”

Sophia nodded, shrugging out of her coat. “I found her at the cottage. After we fed the ducks and had brunch with Crowley, she was game for a ride. Adam’s car is a tip, but it was nice of him to leave it for me and take the train out to Tadfield.”

“Rafe’s going to wonder why I’m gone and his motorbike’s up the road,” Uriel said, “but oh well.”

Rather than respond, Newt dropped tea bags in the mugs and filled them. He carried them over to the table, set them down in front of his guests, and then drew a deep breath.

“If you’re awake,” he shouted, causing Uriel to visibly flinch, “then get down here! Kettle’s on!”

The twins appeared first, drowsy and irritable, sniping at each other the whole way. They weren’t in a much neater state of dress than Uriel, and Janet was texting someone all the while.

“This better be good,” Natalie grumped, pushing past her father to the cupboard. “You want?”
Janet nodded, taking a seat next to Sophia at the table. “Milk. And honey, none of that fake shite.”

Newt fetched two tea bags and handed them to Natalie. “Where’s your mother?” he asked.

Natalie shrugged, clicking the kettle back on. “Still asleep as far as I know. The door was shut.”

“She needs her beauty rest,” Sophia joked, but the tension in her hands as she clasped her mug spoke volumes. “But, listen, you might want to change—” she bit her tongue, glancing from Uriel to the twins each in turn, and then back to Uriel “—er. Are you okay with being dressed like this?”

“Do whatever,” Janet said to Uriel, setting her mobile face-down on the table. “Mum told us ages ago.”


“That makes my life easier,” Uriel said, and the pajama set beneath her hoodie instantly became skinny jeans and a Toronto Maple Leafs t-shirt. “Sorry ‘bout the Crocs, though. They stay.”

Newt came back to the table and sat down, gathering up his papers. “They took it quite well.”

“I hope so, given Rafe once blasted away Janet’s alcohol poisoning,” said Sophia, unimpressed.

“Whoa,” said Janet, in belated realization. “That was the miracle equivalent of a stomach-pump?”

Newt chased Natalie away from the task of tea-making, finishing the job. Whatever his eldest had to say, it was likely a long time coming.

“Why the cloak-and-dagger?” Natalie said to Sophia, now seated across from her. “Spill it.”

“I guess, well,” Sophia said, her tone pensive, “everybody here knows about four years ago.”

All honey, sugar, milk, and spoons accounted for, Newt carried the mugs over to the twins. He crossed behind Janet and put a hand on Sophia’s shoulder, comforting.

“What happened was for the best,” he said, hugging his daughter tightly. “You don’t need to—”

“No, I know,” Sophia reassured, squeezing her father’s forearm. “This isn’t about regrets or anything like that, it’s just…context. It could happen again since I seem high-risk, or…”

Relief flooded Newt’s chest first, followed fast by startled joy and pique at Anathema’s absence.

“How far along?” he asked, over-brimming with questions. “Have you been to see your GP?”

“Between two and six weeks,” Sophia admitted, “which makes me worry about how much champagne I drank at Mandy’s unwedding party.”

“Oh God,” Janet said, dribbling some tea down her front. “Are you fucking serious, Soph?”

“Rude,” Natalie cut in, kicking Janet’s ankle under the table. “Congrats. Does Adam know?”

“Nobody knows except present company,” Uriel explained. “She hasn’t even told Crowley.”

“I wanted to sit on it,” Sophia said, “maybe wait a while to be sure, but I need you lot to know.”
“Need us to know what?” asked Anathema, chipper and oblivious as she strolled into the kitchen.

Newt joined his girls’ laughter, because Anathema being last to know anything was absurd.
At the sound of her doorbell, Pippa startled awake. Midmorning of a Monday wasn’t unheard-of for a guest to pop by, especially not if her boys were bored. Ignoring Tom’s circling and plaintive mewling, she pushed herself out of Harold’s armchair and fetched her cane from the side table.

The transition from winter to spring was rougher this year, an ache in her hip that wouldn’t fade. Rather than Crowley on her doorstep, she found a pale, yet unmistakably eager-looking Sophia.

“Missed Saturday, didn’t I,” she said, shaking a pair of new washing-up gloves. “You must be drowning in dishes and dust.”

“I’ve kept up the dishes, love,” Pippa said, ushering her inside, “but I won’t deny the dust-bunnies have got a mind of their own. Poor Tom’s outnumbered.”

“You little creeper, c’mere,” Sophia said, snatching the cat before he could pounce on her feet.

*Mrow*, Tom protested, but he butted his pretty, distinctively-marked head beneath her chin.

“Bless,” Pippa said, making her slow, but steady way over to the table. “Fancy some tea first?”

“Nah, I’m good,” Sophia said, setting Tom on the table so she could shed her coat. “Breakfast didn’t sit well.”

Pippa thought again about what day it was, and how unusual Sophia’s presence truly seemed.

“If you called off work, why in the world are you turning up here?” she said. “Go home. Rest.”

“Oh, I didn’t call off,” Sophia said dismissively, scratching beneath Tom’s silky chin. “I quit.”

Frowning, Pippa got up and went to put the kettle on anyway. This wasn’t about cleaning, not at all, and she’d be damned if she didn’t lend the girl her ear. She’d suss the problem out.

“But the best thing, maybe,” she said cautiously, fetching the jar of tea bags, “given it’s only been months since they took you on paid as it is?”

“They were paying me shite, Pip,” Sophia said angrily. “I’m making better off the freelance.”

“All that writing and such?” Pippa asked, dropping a bag in each mug. “The short stories?”

“Columns, too,” Sophia said, letting Tom leap to the floor. “Politics, opinion, you name it.”

Pippa clicked the kettle on, soothed by the vibrant blue light that let her know it was working.

“I suppose that husband of yours is doing well enough,” she said. “Took a formal spot in your father’s new entrepreneurial project, is it?”

“You have to remember Mum’s got the Device fortune,” Sophia said. “They value normal lives, though, which is why Mum’s gone on working all these years, and so has Dad. Modest house in the suburbs and all that.”

“They’ve raised fine girls, all three of you,” Pippa said, watching bubbles rise. “Sensible, kind.”
“Oh, I’m not sensible,” said Sophia, moodily. “Just lucky. You never know when it’ll run out.”

Letting a minute of silence hang between them, Pippa pulled the kettle off and filled the mugs. She left her cane propped against the counter and carried both over to the table, determined that this should be a show of capable authority. Something was the matter.

“Life’s been weighing heavy on us all since Iván up and walked out,” she said, settling in her chair, pushing the sugar bowl at Sophia. “It’s been a terrible fortnight.”

“Mandy’s taking it harder than most, not very well,” Sophia sighed, politely declining the sugar with a wave of her hand. She brought the mug up to her lips, hesitating. “I feel helpless.”

Pippa sugared her tea, set her spoon aside, and then reached over to pat Sophia’s free hand.

“You went through worse, once upon a time,” she said consolingly. “So did I. We’re still here.”

Sophia bit her lip and finally took a sip of tea, as if it pained her to do so.

“Four years next month, I know,” Pippa said gently, squeezing Sophia’s fingers. “It’ll sting.”

“No, it’s—” Sophia shook her head, took a longer swallow, and set her mug down “—more.”

Something prescient stirred in the depths of Pippa’s mind, something she’d never given credence until a remarkable young man and his stubborn partner had turned up in the village she called home. There was cause and consequence, false hope and free will. She’d seen it all.

Abruptly, Sophia coughed into her hand, muttering apologies as she pushed away from the table.

Pippa caught up with her at the sink, clear of dishes, and rubbed Sophia’s back as she retched.

“Oh, dear heart,” she said quietly, keeping the girl on her feet. “How long have you known?”

“A little over twenty-four hours,” Sophia gasped. “I didn’t mean to tell anybody this soon.”

“Who have you told?” Pippa asked gently, steadying her through another vicious coughing fit.

“You know how Uriel is, uncanny,” Sophia spat, holding her hair back. “She…guessed.”

“Am I to assume your family knows? Mum and dad, your sisters?” Pippa prodded patiently.

Sophia nodded, eyes tightly shut as she turned on the tap. “Not Adam. He’s away till tonight.”

“Then you’d best tell him when he gets in,” Pippa said. “What about my nosy lads up the road?”

Sophia drank a handful of water, opened her eyes, and forcefully slammed the lever back down.

“No,” she said with a pensive, heavy slump of the shoulders. “Not even them, not just yet.”

“They’re as much family to you as I am,” Pippa replied, handing her a tea towel. “Why?”

Sophia remained tight-lipped as Pippa guided her back to the table and settled her into her seat.

“They…took it hard,” she said haltingly, “four years ago, back when I tried to…when I lost…”

“And you want to make sure you’re out of the woods first,” said Pippa, sagely. “I understand.”

“Do you know,” Sophia said, fingering the handle of her mug, “that I’ll be due in late August?”
Pippa’s breath caught. The coincidence with Harold’s passing, the jolt of it, was tremendous.

“Make it to the twenty-fifth,” she said, “and we’ll have mourning and joy in equal measure.”
TRIGGER WARNING: There's mention of suicidal ideation in here (Mandy is going through an incredibly rough time in the wake of what's happened; Sophia, whose presence has been requested, comforts her), so approach this with care.

On leaving Pippa’s, before she could even start the car, Sophia checked her mobile to make sure she hadn’t missed anything in the several hours she’d been visiting. There were two texts.

AY
Would you mind if I stayed till tomorrow night? Sarah doesn’t want to let me go yet, and Mum has old stuff from when I was a kid she wants me to sort out and take, or let her bin the lot.

AT
please could you come over, soph
this isn’t going well for me at all

Sophia bit her lip, ready to respond with *Come home, you twat, I’m pregnant* in the first instance. Instead, she typed: *No, I wouldn’t, have fun and hug the niblings for me.*

She had no second thoughts when it came to answering the second. *Of course,* she sent.

Mandy’s flat was only a short distance from the Shambles, and Sophia wasn’t inclined to honor the speed limit much mind given how empty the roads were. She thought of the time Crowley had been pulled over, which Mandy had told her about. She almost wished she’d been there.

She made a crooked mess of parking and rushed to the front door. The fact that Mandy wasn’t at work was cause for concern. Everything about her message, from the uncharacteristic lowercase to the arrangement of the words themselves, was cause for concern. She knocked urgently.

Three minutes later, red-eyed and bedraggled in a Manchester United tee and threadbare black leggings, Mandy answered the door. Her hair made it clear she’d just gotten out of bed.

“That was fast,” she said, voice thin and strained, pulling the door open wider. “Well, come in.”

Before Mandy could say she’d put the kettle on, or fix them plates of her latest experimental baked goods, or any other such thing, Sophia caught Mandy’s hand and spun her around. The resistance was only brief; Sophia’s arms were full of Mandy’s too-thin frame in a heartbeat.

“This is hell, Soph,” Mandy sobbed, curled into Sophia’s shoulder. “I’d take Crowley’s place any day if it meant this would end. God, I can’t—”

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Sophia soothed, rocking her, leaning against the wall. “You’d
break his heart like you’re breaking mine.”

“Fuckin’ need to say it to someone,” Mandy seethed, choking on tears. “’Cause it’s true.”

“Tell me you’ve at least been calling in sick, or got a note from the GP, or…” Sophia rubbed Mandy’s shoulder blades vigorously and held her out at arms’ length. “Do you need help?”

“No GP’s note, are you daft,” Mandy laughed, wiping her nose. “Quit. Can’t stand to be there when every nook and cranny of that kitchen reminds me of him. Can’t even stand remembering what I tried to do there years ago, too young to believe I stood no chance.”

“That makes two of us who’ve handed in notice this week,” sighed Sophia, resigned. “And I understand what you mean about it reminding you of—Iván, but not the other—”

“Come off it,” said Mandy, disgusted, grabbing Sophia’s wrist and leading her over to the kitchenette table. “The first stolen kiss, my original sin.”

That was all the prompting it took for Sophia to remember the anecdote, from both parties’ perspectives, plain as day. Cream and chantarelles in exchange for twenty quid.

“You can’t judge anything by that,” she said desperately, dropping into a chair, understanding where Mandy’s mind had gone with this. “It proves nothing. You’re not cursed.”

“Am I not?” Mandy asked, yanking out the chair across from Sophia, dropping into it. “I get mixed up with an agent of the Devil Himself—so what if it was after he got fired, there’s a pun for you—and my love life from that moment forward is the proverbial apple gone to rot.”

“Crowley’s done nothing but look out for you,” Sophia said. “Done nothing but look out for—”

“Some favor he did you the once,” Mandy snapped. “Just ace big-brothering, that was.”

“I wasn’t ready!” Sophia shot back. “Stuck between care for me and doing the right thing, between millennia of toeing the party line to survive and being who he really is…”

“God, now I’ve done it,” Mandy whispered, reaching across the table. “Got us both a mess.”

Sophia snagged a napkin from the holder and blew her nose. She let Mandy take her hand, determined to bear the crush of Mandy’s grasp.

“We’d never have met if not for them,” she sobbed. “I love you. Don’t leave me, not now.”

“Tell me one good thing, Soph,” Mandy said, her voice gone quiet. “One reason I shouldn’t.”

“I wasn’t ready!” Sophia shot back. “Stuck between care for me and doing the right thing, between millennia of toeing the party line to survive and being who he really is…”

“Tell me what?”

“I’m ready this time,” Sophia said, pulling herself together as much as she could. “I’m…”

Mandy’s expression flickered between grief-stricken and dismayed. “You’re having me on.”

“Like hell I’m not,” Sophia said. “Pip had me take her ’round the shops so I could pick up a few tests while she got some groceries. Did ’em at her place. Is three positives enough?”

Mandy covered her face with both hands and stayed like that so long Sophia was terrified.
“For heaven’s sake,” she said at length, splaying her fingers, eyes wide. “Why didn’t you…”

“You might’ve been the first to know if Uriel hadn’t done that thing she does,” Sophia replied.

“Oh Christ,” Mandy said, in a brief fit of laughter, mopping at her eyes. “Adam’s out of town.”

“He’ll be in Lower Tadfield an extra day,” Sophia said, “and I don’t want to tell him by text.”

“Who’s left to tell?” Mandy asked, in undisguised curiosity, blowing her nose. “Just the three?”

Sophia nodded, biting her lip. “Crowley, Aziraphale, Adam,” she sighed. “Wrong as it gets.”

“I’ll be damned if I die before meeting my godchild,” Mandy said. “Let’s do this thing right.”
For Heaven and Hell

Mandy cranked the shower up to just shy of scorching, as hot as she could possibly stand it. Two days since her last one, not that she had anyone to particularly impress. But Sophia turning up with grudgingly-given news in response to her plea for help felt like providence.

Felt like a miracle, even—or a sign. Tears were neither holy, nor profane. *Be not afraid.*

When Mandy stepped out from behind the curtain, sopping, Sophia was waiting with a towel. She dried Mandy down, dressed her, and brushed out the tangles in her hair.

“This isn’t for you to do,” Sophia said, winding Mandy’s hair into the tight, requested knot. “You’re in no condition. I should be going alone.”

“Helping you as you’re helping me is a purpose,” Mandy said. “You asked me to find one.”

“But here’s no danger in it for me,” Sophia insisted. “No absolute need for moral support.”

Mandy glanced at her reflection as Sophia finished pinning her hair, saw her lips twist in a smile.

“You and I both know that facing them alone with matters of high emotion never ends calmly.”

“I did ask you to find purpose, didn’t I,” Sophia sighed, sticking Mandy’s favorite hoops in her ears one after the other. “If this’ll get us both through today, I’m all for it.”

“I know how pathetic it sounds,” Mandy said, picking at a peeling cuticle with her nail-clippers. “Feeling like a bloke’s the end of the world.”

“There’s more to it than just that,” Sophia said, taking the clippers away from Mandy, setting to work on tidying up Mandy’s nails. “What we know, what we’ve seen. That would do a number on anybody. In your shoes, even I would’ve had cause to doubt.”

“I understand we’re all just doing our best, even them,” Mandy sighed, “but it comes at a price.”

“All existence comes at a price,” Sophia said, her expression clouding. “They’ll pay it highest.”

“A fearful thing,” Mandy murmured, recalling HaLevi’s poem, “to love what death can touch.”

“Did you see the dedication in that edition?” Sophia asked.

“It’s in Hebrew, I couldn’t read it.”

“I can read Hebrew, but I don’t speak Ladino,” Mandy said. “We should ask Az sometime.”

“There’s another mystery for us to chase,” Sophia said with approval. “Save it for another day.”

“Let’s get out of here before I decide I’d rather have you curl up in bed with me,” Mandy said.

Over Mandy’s shoulder, in the mirror, Sophia grinned. “Sick as I’ve been, wouldn’t go amiss.”

On their drive to the cottage, Mandy couldn’t help but notice that Sophia obeyed the speed limit.

“Flashbacks,” Sophia muttered, exiting the car once she’d parked. “None of them pleasant.”

“It’s a valid concern, take it from me,” Mandy said, slamming her door, grabbing Sophia’s hand.

Marching up the front walk, Mandy didn’t check to see if Sophia’s labored breath meant tears. She
knocked without delay.

Crowley answered almost immediately, as if he’d been mucking in the kitchen to begin with.

“Just as well you’re here,” he said, his lack of formality a strange comfort. “Who wants lunch?”

“I could eat, maybe,” Sophia said, but her subtle trepidation wasn’t lost on Mandy in the least.

“Haven’t had anything today,” Mandy said, drawing Sophia along as Crowley led them through the aromatic steam, “but I can try.”

Pausing, Crowley turned to look at both of them. “Is there a tummy bug going around, or…”

Aziraphale, already seated at the table, beckoned to them. “How splendid, you’re just in time.”

“Stand up,” Mandy said as mildly, yet commandingly as she could, “and come over here.”

“If there’s bad news to be had, make it fast?” Crowley asked, backpedaling a few steps even as Aziraphale approached with the Telegraph in hand. “Like pulling a plaster.”

Aziraphale set a protective hand on Crowley’s wrist, fingers curling lightly. “What’s this, then?”

Slipping an arm around Sophia, Mandy looked them each hard in the eye, one after the other.

“This is a precaution,” she said. “We’ll have none of your needless melodrama, gents. Not for this.”

Crowley, who hadn’t blinked once, was searching Mandy’s face. “You don’t look well,” he said.

“Yeah, fine,” said Mandy, hesitantly. “That’s the bad news. I’m having a rough time existing.”

If Aziraphale had something to say about that—and it looked like he did—he kept it to himself.

Meanwhile, Crowley looked like he was ticking through every awful outcome he could imagine.

Sophia disengaged herself from Mandy and stepped up to him with a demeanor that was all mercy. She lifted one hand in gentle hesitation, stopping shy of his cheek.

“Would this help, or would it hurt?” she asked quietly. “Crowley. Crowley, come back.”

“Help,” he whispered, grasping her hand like the offered lifeline it was, pressing it to his face.

“One wonders to whom the admonition against melodrama actually applies,” Aziraphale cautioned. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Mandy insisted on being here when I tell you I’m pregnant, is all,” Sophia said, beaming.

Crowley’s eyes closed as he leaned into Sophia’s hand, and then opened wonderingly wide.

“Scare me for nothing, why don’t you,” he said bitterly, nonetheless grinning helplessly back.

Sophia threw her arms around his neck when he opened his arms, shrieking for absolute joy.

When Aziraphale beckoned, Mandy followed him to the sliding glass doors and stepped outside.

“Dear girl,” he said, turning to face her, eyes filled with tears, “your life’s worth more than what you threw in the sea. Surely you must know that I’d…” He took a breath so labored that he seemed broken. “I’d rather your survival than news of any child.”
Astonished to find she hadn’t cried herself out after all, Mandy took hold of Aziraphale’s awful, *comforting* slipover jumper and yanked him to her.

“Forgive me,” she sobbed. “Forgive me my trespasses, my mistrust, my weakness. I just…”

“’Tis a human, holy thing,” Aziraphale said, stroking her hair, “to love what death has touched.”
Adam lounged in his train seat with a dog-eared copy of *Biggles Looks Back* in his lap.

He’d boxed up the entire lot of books that his mum had threatened to trash, plus several stacks of *New Aquarian* issues that Anathema had given him, and posted them to himself. The Royal Mail attendant stuck in her corner at the back of the chemist’s had looked at him funny.

The toys, he’d packed off with Sarah and her kids. Better that they see some use, he reckoned.

Hardest of any visit home was the inevitable visit to Dog’s grave. That he had lived a decade free of illness and pain was blessing enough, and it had taken great restraint on Adam’s part not to arrange things such that a canine might last a human lifetime.

That last choice, yes: he’d made it. Eternity without Sophia would be more than he could bear.

The Oxfordshire landscape was far behind him now, at two train-switches’ remove. Four more stops till Eastbourne Station, where his partner would be waiting to collect him.

*(Wife was outdated, a tiresome tangle of meanings, as was husband. They’d jettisoned both some time ago, pleased to be in cahoots.)*

Thinking about the niblings’ tears on departure always made him a bit sad. They’d been disappointed that Sophia hadn’t come. He’d explained that she was busy becoming a cracking writer, and didn’t they want her to have a shot at writing the next *Harry Potter*?

Chloe and Dylan had both nodded eagerly, emphatic that Auntie Soph should write until she had a whole series lined up. For eleven and eight, they really were quite reasonable.

Adam contented himself with reading till the voice over the speakers finally announced his stop. He tended to travel light, with backpack and laptop case. The train attendants likely wouldn’t have been happy with him lugging four whole boxes of books onboard.

He stepped onto a platform damp with recent rain, tugging his phone from his coat pocket. There were no texts from Sophia beyond that morning’s missive: *I'll see you at 6:30ish.*

After a few minutes’ walk to the car park, Adam spotted the Wasabi in a far-corner spot. When he reached it, he peered inside.

Sophia had the driver’s seat cranked back as far as it would go, sleeping away. She looked peaceful, if pale, and her loose hair had a wildness about it that suggested she’d been too busy to think about anything as irrelevant as picking up a hair brush.

Adam grinned and rapped on the passenger-side window, waving as she shivered awake.

Rolling down the window beneath Adam’s continued tapping, she said, “Scare me to death.”

“If I'd rung you, it would've been worse,” Adam said, opening the door once she'd unlocked it.

“Nothing makes me jump a mile like my bloody ring-tone,” she agreed, leaning toward him.

They kissed slow and soft, like an apology. Adam drew back, worry pooling in his gut; his remorse was for having been gone a day too long, but what was *hers*?
“Look at this,” he said, setting the *Biggles* book in her lap. “Have you got this one?”

“Somewhere,” Sophia sighed, shifting it immediately to the dashboard. “Belt up. We’re off.”

Adam set a tentative hand on her wrist before she could turn the key in the ignition, steeling himself. If he’d been wrong to stay, he wanted to make it right.

“Sorry, Soph,” he said quietly, brushing the back of her hand. “I missed you loads, you know.”

Sophia stared pensively at his hand, following the movement of his fingers when he withdrew it.

“Lots happened while you were gone,” she said. “More than ought to happen in a weekend.”

Adam nodded sympathetically, feeling much the same way about the task his mum had sprung.

“Would it help to tell me about it?” he asked patiently. “Or d’you need more time to process?”

As Sophia shook her head, a swift and vehement *no*, Adam realized she was in tears.

“Mandy’s in rough shape,” Sophia choked, absolutely heartbroken. “Luckily, she thought to text me before doing anything so rash as...” She sat forward and squared her shoulders. “It’ll be all right. She’s staying at the cottage. I took her yesterday.”

“Which cottage?” Adam asked, shaken just to hear of it. “With Pippa, or with Az and Crowley?”

“Home,” Sophia said, wiping her nose on the back of her hand, turning the ignition. “The latter.”

Adam stayed her again, this time bringing her hand over to press against his chest. He inhaled.

“She’s safe,” he said, feeling the tension drain from her as she breathed with him. “You’re safe.”

Exhaling on a desperate laugh, Sophia turned her head so she wasn’t staring out the windshield.

“I should’ve gone with you, is what,” she said shakily, “but if I’d done that, I couldn’t have...”

“Chloe and Dyl insisted I tell you that you’re going to be the next J.K. Rowling,” Adam said.

Sophia laughed again, this time much less pained. “I’m writing in the wrong medium for that.”

Behind Sophia’s eyes, there was a kind of manic, outcome-tracking strain that Adam recognized.

“You can tell me what it is,” he said. “Not today if you don’t want. Waiting’s a thing I can do.”

Sophia shook her head, twisting her hands together in her lap. “I’ve known for days. I hid it.”

“Yeah, Soph, but I know you,” Adam said reassuringly. “You don’t like to text the big stuff.”

Lifting her head, Sophia gave the keys a decisive twist. “You had fun with Sarah’s kids, yeah?”

“They’re great,” Adam said, nonetheless cautious as she pulled out of the parking spot. “Why?”

“That’s reassuring,” Sophia replied, “but you’d better not tell *our* kid I’m going to be famous.”

Adam blinked at the reflection of her eyes in the rearview mirror, wondering how he’d missed it.

“Nah,” he said, his chest tight with elation, “but you bet I’ll give them a ton of feminist reading.”
Book Burning

Discorporation
25 August 1990

“Oh, fuck,” Aziraphale said. His feet—and, indeed, the floorboards beneath—vanished.

For a moment, suspended in blinding blue light, he bore witness to Sergeant Shadwell’s dismay.

“Hallo?” said the stunned Witchfinder, shakily using his left hand to lower his right. “Hallo?”

Aziraphale, incorporeal for the first time in millennia, knew that he needed either transit or an anchor. Determined to avoid binding himself to the terrified, fleeing Shadwell at all costs, he cast about for the first available matter composed of flesh.

Leather was less than ideal, but, given his surroundings, there was plenty. The closest book with a hide cover was on the floor, and it was a stone’s throw from the candle Shadwell had upset.

This is ludicrous, Aziraphale thought, sounding out his atoms, which enclosed so much precious seventeenth-century paper. I suppose there’s no escaping Agnes now.

And as the flames sparked and took hold, his ancient floorboards and cheap paperback stock so much enticing tinder, Aziraphale put his strength into the one act that felt most urgent. He wondered if the Book glowed with the force of his will.

For interminable minutes, until the fire brigade finally turned up, the shop and its written marvels burned. All except one, which had, in spite of Aziraphale’s efforts, begun to singe.

Through the onslaught of acrid smoke and stale water, something living, something flesh-and-blood, burst through in spite of the rafters’ groaning. Someone Aziraphale knew.

When Crowley hit the charred floor, his aura, a wave of desolate panic, rippled through Aziraphale like nausea. If he’d still been in possession of a heart, it would’ve stuttered.

When Crowley’s frantic, water-slick hand fell on the Book and grasped it, Aziraphale’s resolve wavered. He no longer needed to remain inert; he’d done his job at preservation. How easy it would be to infiltrate Crowley’s mortal coil, to make himself known using Crowley’s lips.

Don’t, Aziraphale told himself as Crowley shoved the book in his pocket and ran. Crowley is capable, and you’re needed elsewhere. He’ll get you out of this wreck, and then...

He stayed long enough to feel the tremor in Crowley’s hands as he gave over driving to the power of thought alone, the brush of Crowley’s fingers as he flipped pages and swore helplessly under his breath. How easy it would be to forget should and surrender to want.

When the Blaupunkt clicked off at the cassette’s end, Crowley reached out in agitation to hit several buttons, even though there was no need. But the split-second of contact was enough.

Aziraphale slid guiltily from book-cover to Crowley’s skin, and radio waves whisked him away.

Disorientation
25 August 1990

Drive or be driven, Crowley knew, was his only option. So he pushed his resolve to the limit as he left the fussy gentleman and his gratuitously small dog in a cloud of smoke and dust.

The Bentley and himself, he could save. For a while, at least, or for as long as it took him to arrive in Lower Tadfield. It was a temporary fix, a means to an end, and he dreaded it.

There had been a moment in the midst of those other flames, his safe-haven from many a storm, as it crumbled to ashy, wet rubble and forced the breath from his lungs. He thought he'd felt something like what Aziraphale had pointed out about Tadfield the night they hit the cyclist.

*Oh lord, that girl,* Crowley thought, eyes falling askance to where he’d set the Book aside on the seat. *I should return it to her if we live through this, what use do I have—*

What use he had for a priceless antique volume, what cause his aching heart had for covetousness exceeding Aziraphale’s the night he’d retrieved it from the Bentley floor, was his shame. He hadn’t snatched the Book out of the sense it would be game-changingly useful.

Crowley had taken it because it felt, deep down, like the only shred of Aziraphale he had left.

And, as he drove on, it was withering to cinders with the car’s upholstery before his very eyes. He peeled his left hand from the hell-hot steering wheel and grasped at it, his breath hitching.

What remained of the Book—a charred spine—was smeared with glowing ash beneath his palm.

Revelation
26 August 1990

“Think of it like this,” Newt said, so softly Anathema had to lean in. “Do you really want to be a descendant for the rest of your life?”

Anathema gave him a dubious look, clutching the book to her chest. “I’ll be one no matter what.”

“It’s your decision,” Newt conceded, his demeanor softening with apology. “How about some tea?”

“That’d be lovely,” Anathema murmured, letting the hand that bore the book drop to her side. She grabbed what remained of Agnes's first volume, too, and wandered over to the hearth as Newt left the room. She dropped to her knees. “Let me think.”

Flames licked invitingly in the grate, tame and contained. How hungry they looked, insatiable.

“You think I can bear it, don’t you, Agnes?” Anathema said sourly, running her fingers over the charred spine's ashy gilt. She fed it carelessly to the fire, just to prove to herself that she could, in fact, execute the action she'd resolved to take next.

She slid the second, intact book halfway into the fire before losing her nerve, which cost her part of the spine and binding. It crackled and went up in a curling gasp of white smoke that escaped up the flue as she yanked the book back. She beat out the smoldering with the hem of her robe.

Shifting off her knees so that she could sit cross-legged, Anathema anxiously opened the book.

*Lette the jeste be on yowe,* crowed Agnes’s crabbed handwriting on the flyleaf. *Whatte did yowe*
expecte, with an absurde titel lyke thatte?

On the next page, where the printed matter began, the title differed from what was on the spine.

*Ye Nutter Cooke-Booke; Being a Recorde of Delicacyes for All Occasiounes*, it read.

Newt rushed in when he heard Anathema’s cackling, sloshing both mugs’ steaming contents.

“What a joker,” Anathema said, tossing his words back at him with tears of laughter in her eyes.

“Oh, well,” replied Newt, bending to read over her shoulder, abashed. “Guess I had it right?”

**Restoration**

25 April 2017

“I don’t understand how I let this go,” Crowley groused from the front seat, still rubbing oil into the Bentley’s well-loved upholstery with a grubby rag. “Usually, it takes care of itself.”

“You’ve been too distracted lately to run that mental subroutine,” Sophia said, borrowing one of her dad’s endearingly unfunny lines. “So now you’ve got to clean your car like the rest of us.”

“Thanks for your help,” Crowley muttered, eternally determined to sound as if he didn’t mean it.

Sophia switched off the Dustbuster and peeled back the floor mat, studying the back-seat footwell. It smelled of oil and a whiff of brimstone. Given the car’s history, it made sense, but it also made her vaguely nauseous. She stepped back, hand pressed to her unyielding stomach.

Crowley popped up in the front and hung with his arms over the seat, peering at her in concern.

“Maybe you oughtn’t be doing this,” he said fretfully. “Fumes and dust can’t be good for, well.”

Proudly patting her bump, Sophia revved the Dustbuster and got back to it. “Oh, don’t be daft.”

“Adam will remember his roots if something goes wrong,” Crowley sighed. “Take it from me.”

“Tell your paranoia to shut it,” said Sophia, pointedly, shoving the nose of the Dustbuster as far under the front seat as she could. “There’s no proof that cleaning is…”

She pushed harder. Something resisted with such force that she withdrew the hand-vac in shock.

“What’s the matter?” Crowley asked as she chucked the Dustbuster onto the gravel behind her.

Sophia bent forward until her cheek nearly rested on the floor, snaking her arm beneath the seat.

“There’s something under here,” she said absently, scrabbling until her fingers scraped something that felt like the Bentley’s leather upholstery, only if it had gone brittle.

“Aziraphale’s forever leaving things,” Crowley said above her, “so it would just figure, eh?”

Closing her fingers on one corner of the object—oblong, possessed of some heft—Sophia dragged what she was sure would be an edition of Wilde or Shakespeare into daylight.

“Careless of him to leave this,” she said, flipping the antique volume so she could read the spine.
Crowley shrugged, rolling his eyes, leaning forward to read, too. “Yeah, you know how it goes—”

“No,” Sophia gasped, running her fingers over the embossed title. “Is this some kind of joke?”

“If it is,” said Crowley, sounding about as gobsmacked as Sophia felt, “you’d better ask Adam.”

Sophia’s mind whirled through what she knew of the events of nearly twenty-seven years ago.

“You said the car was on the curb the next morning, good as new,” she whispered, her heart stuttering in joy and disbelief. “And the books in Aziraphale’s shop, they’d all been restored, plus some that hadn’t been there before.” She climbed into the back seat, opening the Book in her lap. “I always dreamed of seeing…”

Crowley was staring at her like he expected infernal retribution to rain down at any moment.

“It never occurred to me to check!” he blurted, climbing over the seat so he could settle beside her, blinking at the frontispiece in amazement. “The spine was all that was left, so I gave it to your mum. I didn’t expect this particular twist, okay?”

“It’s fine,” Sophia said, cradling the Book, companionably bumping Crowley’s shoulder. “You’re good at losing things. You lost my husband for a whole eleven years.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you,” replied Crowley, gloomily, but he leaned into her with a smile.
If the situation at hand were a round of Cards Against Humanity in which Crowley was the card czar, the winning submission would surely have been *Exactly what you’d expect*. And, given what was happening, the victory would’ve gone squarely to Aziraphale.

Four of them crammed into the Bentley’s back seat, with Crowley jammed up against the back passenger-side door, was solid cause for dissociation. Their group’s recreational trash-heap of choice was a convenient format for his distressed musings.

“I can’t believe it,” Aziraphale murmured, reverently closing the Book, running his fingers over the parched cover. “To think it had been lying here for all that time. *Restored.***

“Stranger than fiction,” Crowley agreed, dangling his left arm out the window in desperation.

Sophia, scrunched up against Crowley’s right shoulder, patted Mandy’s knee immediately to her right. To Mandy’s right sat Aziraphale, practically hugging the tome to his chest.

“Mum’s going to want that back,” she volunteered cheerfully, leaning to address Aziraphale.

“Reckon she’ll let him borrow it?” Mandy asked. “Maybe don’t tell her till he’s had his way.”

Crowley clawed at the door-handle. He spilled onto the gravel and crawled into the grass, unconcerned that the hellebores lining the walk had outgrown their bed. He blew at the leaf brushing his cheek, closing his eyes.

“Hey,” said Sophia, her voice far closer to his ear than it ought to have been. “Are you okay?”

“Ngh,” said Crowley, draping one arm across his face. “Rather crowded in there, wasn’t it?”

Sophia touched the wrist he’d flung above his head into the hellebores, as if checking his pulse.

“You went away there for a bit,” she said tentatively. “It’s been happening a lot since spring.”

“Well, a lot’s been happening,” Crowley replied, overstating the obvious, “and it’s still spring.”

Removing Crowley’s other arm from his face, Sophia arranged him in the grass. When Crowley opened his eyes, she knelt beside him.

“Let’s ground you,” she said, amused with her comfortingly literal joke. “Tell me a story.”

“That’s what Eve said,” Crowley sighed, squinting at her in relief. “Which one will it be?”

“Maybe I want to hear more than one,” Sophia replied, helping him sit up. “And did she really?”

“Their stomach hurt,” Crowley said. “They didn’t know it was hunger. They wanted a distraction.”

“Just Eve?” Mandy interjected, wandering over with her arms folded. “Or Eve and Adam both?”

“Not sure if I’m translating the pronouns correctly,” Crowley said, wondering how hard a time they’d have coaxing Aziraphale out of the car, “but Eve had no concept of themself as a woman.”

“That’s wild,” Mandy replied, crouching on the opposite side of Crowley, “but it makes sense.”
Sophia was running both palms absently over her stomach, as if she hadn’t gotten used to its new, unyielding shape. Her expression had clouded fit to match Aziraphale’s when he’d first discovered doubt, only Crowley hoped she wasn’t debating a moral quandary.

“Hunger,” she said. “That, and then childbirth. They didn’t ask for it. Must’ve been terrible.”

“Now all I can think about is what a kick-ass gender and religion course you’d teach,” Mandy lamented, her bitterness palpable. “Would’ve given an arm and a leg for that at uni.”

“You can study doctrine till the dove flies home, but you’ll still end up in the kitchen,” Sophia replied. “I’m looking at two compelling arguments in that direction.”

Fleetingly, Crowley wondered why he’d ever made the mistake of letting these women meet.

“Doves and catering are a bad combination,” he managed, breath caught in his throat, remembering the limp, still-warm weight feathers and flesh in his hands.

“What the fuck did you do?” Mandy said accusingly. “He’s somewhere else entirely.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Sophia shot back. “The car got crowded! I’m trying to distract him!”

Crowley shook his head, trying to clear it. It was too much, always too much to bear, and he’d never know an existence without regret. That was the price of free will, wasn’t it?

“Distractions are a mistake,” Crowley said, drawing his knees up to his chest, “but stories…”

“Right,” Mandy said encouragingly, touching his shoulder. “Stories aren’t always distractions.”

“That was my point,” Sophia said tetchily. “Stories can pull you out of really dark headspace.”

“Who said anything about dark?” Crowley asked with reluctance, clinging to Mandy’s hand.

“Well, Soph did,” Mandy replied, “and I’m seconding that, seeing as I’m the resident expert.”

“At least you’re cracking jokes about it,” Sophia said. “Spend enough time around these two—”

“And your sense of existential dread gets recalibrated, yeah,” Mandy hissed. “Now shut up!”

Crowley had to admit that there was some measure of hilarity to his present circumstances. He couldn’t drink his way out of this one. Worse yet, he didn’t even want to.

“There is always the dove situation,” Crowley remarked. “That one, at least, I could fix.”

“You told us about that,” Sophia said reassuringly. “Years ago. It kind of explains the ducks.”

“Nothing explains the ducks,” Mandy parried, rocking Crowley slightly. “They’re constants.”

Wrapping his arms tightly around his knees was a comfort, and so was whatever Mandy was doing, so Crowley kept at it. He could remember Spain, where he’d drunk and lain curled in on himself for weeks until Aziraphale had come to him at last.

“I could also tell you about the Inquisition, but that’s probably a bad idea,” Crowley concluded.

Sophia leaned in front of him, her brow knit in anxious concern. “You’re not telling that one.”

Using her free hand, Mandy pushed her back a fraction. “Are you trying to trigger him?”
“It was his idea, and I’m sure as hell not endorsing it!” Sophia snapped. “Ugh. Sorry.”

“The thing about stories,” Crowley said slowly, “is that you lot think the dark ones mean more.”

Both young women turned their heads and stared at him, breath eerily suspended between them.

Aziraphale wandered over without warning, as he was wont to do, with the Book in hand. He extended it toward Sophia, waving it a few inches from her head, perhaps as a distraction.

“My apologies, dear girl,” he said with mild chagrin. “Please take this home to your mother.”

As if jarred from a trance, Sophia turned away from Crowley and blinked up at him, taking hold of one gilt-leather corner. She almost dropped the Book in an effort to make an unsteady attempt to stand, finding her center of gravity had changed.

“Back just in time to resume its old role,” Sophia said. “Bedtime reading for a young Device.”

“The kid won’t learn how to spell worth a damn,” Mandy chided. “Save it for sixth-form.”

Crowley uncoiled one of his arms and reached for the nearest bit of Aziraphale, which was his shin. He brushed at Aziraphale’s trousers, finding the fabric worn and familiar.

“Christmas Eve,” he said. “Our first Christmas here, with the champagne and terrible jumpers.”

“Quite,” Aziraphale said fondly, dropping to a crouch in front of him. “And the ghost stories.”

“Oh, great,” Mandy said, dusting off her leggings as she got to her feet. “Just what we need.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Crowley said, meeting Aziraphale’s gaze. “They were hilarious.”

“Then tell us about that,” Sophia replied absently, enthralled with the Book’s brittle cover.

Aziraphale took both of Crowley’s hands, cradling them between his own as if to warm them.

“You drift ever so far away,” he sighed. “The one time I couldn’t reach you, you slept—”

“Be that as it may, angel,” Crowley said wryly, squeezing his hands, “I needed the rest.”

“Most people sleep when life sucks,” Mandy said defensively, as if that were a no-brainer.

“Yeah, but not for most of an entire century,” muttered Crowley, with flat self-deprecation.

“What the actual fuck?” Sophia said, almost dropping the Book. “You slept for what now?”

“It wasn’t a hundred years continuously,” Aziraphale clarified, “but he only woke a few times.”

“Even if I could do that, I’d be running to the loo every three months,” said Mandy, deadpan.

“That’s not the most interesting part,” Crowley replied, finally steady, “but I’ll tell you what is.”
Eden, The Beginning (Slightly Later Still)

The previous evening’s deluge and grudging cave-share arrangement had left both Crowley and his opposite number feeling miserable. On waking, he’d realized the angel had somehow managed to sneak out without his knowledge. If there was anything he did know, it was that they’d got off on the wrong foot, and that simply wouldn’t do.

Crowley had closed his eyes and pressed his only-hours-ago-formed fingers to his temples. Enemy, enemy, enemy. He thought the word until it stuck, some part of his back-brain too painfully aware that, right down to the spark at their cores, he and the angel were—

It wasn’t on, was what it was, he’d decided peevishly, and trudged out of the cave.

After about thirty minutes of haphazard squelching about through muddy underbrush and unpleasantly dripping flora, Crowley found the angel sitting on a grassy rise that sloped down to—well, it was too large to be a puddle, but not large enough to be a lake.

The grass looked temptingly dry in comparison to the rest of the greenery, so Crowley marched right over and sat down. He propped his elbows on his knees, involuntarily sighing.

“What’s this called, then?” Crowley ventured, spreading his arms wide to indicate the water.

“A pond or somesuch, if I recall,” said Aziraphale, dully, clearly resigned to Crowley’s presence.

Crowley considered the word, and then considered the rather splashy ruckus that some nondescript brown fowl were making in the shallows. They had a real knack for half-submerging themselves and coming up with their bills full of weeds. He’d overheard the humans having an argument over what to call them, and he’d been pleased when Eve won.

“Slides right off them, doesn’t it,” he said awkwardly, at an abrupt loss. “The water, I mean.”

Aziraphale turned to fix him with a withering stare. “You have no sense of timing, do you?”

Shrugging, Crowley stretched his legs and wiggled his toes, still taken with the sheer novelty.

“Talking about the weather seemed to work before,” he said snidely. “Right up your alley.”

“The animals would make for a lovely change, don’t you think?” Aziraphale said expectantly.

“Oh,” said Crowley, wondering why on earth his cheeks felt hot. “The ducks, you mean?”

“Ducks,” said Aziraphale, dubiously, as if he disliked the taste of the word. “You’re serious?”

“Comes of them ducking under the surface like that, I think,” Crowley replied, watching one of them repeat the action, and then got a brilliant idea. “Or maybe more like this…”

Aziraphale actually lunged across the space between them and caught Crowley’s arm when the next duck vanished completely beneath the ripple it had made. He squeezed Crowley’s wrist.

“I can’t believe the lengths to which you’re going to—to, er—Crowley, really?”

Letting the disgruntled, but ultimately unharmed duck bob to the surface, Crowley stifled a grin.
“Well, if you can’t mess them about,” he said thoughtfully, “then what are they good for? Eh?”

“Eating,” replied Aziraphale, somewhat guiltily as he released Crowley’s wrist, “eventually.”

Crowley made a face, rubbing self-consciously at the residual warmth of Aziraphale’s touch.

“Bit fishy, wouldn’t you think?” he muttered. “On account of their diet and environment.”

Aziraphale took his turn to shrug. “The humans have already given it a try. Why shouldn’t—”

“Strictly speaking,” Crowley pointed out, plucking a few virulently pink berries from a creeper beside him in the grass, “we don’t need to eat.”

“Strictly speaking, we don’t need to sleep,” Aziraphale retorted, “yet you snored all night.”

“Lying doesn’t become you,” Crowley warned, crushing one of the berries curiously between his fingers. The insides were crisp, white, and had a cool, sharp-sweet scent. “Hmmm.”

“Teaberry,” remarked Aziraphale, with disdain. “On that name, the humans agreed to disagree.”

Crowley ignored the angel’s stuffy editorializing, pitching several of the berries into the water.

All six ducks lunged for them at once, causing a quack-ridden disturbance. It was satisfying. Aziraphale was looking at him with something that aspired to be contempt, but settled for envy.

“Fine,” Crowley sighed, plucking a fresh handful of the berries, offering them. “Want to try?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Aziraphale, in unabashed relief, chucking the berries for all he was worth.

“There,” Crowley said approvingly, watching the ducks continue to fight. “You’ve got a knack.”

“Not for the sort of thing you’re implying,” Aziraphale said tetchily, watching with satisfaction.

Crowley chewed his lip, stifling a wave of genuine anger. Instead of wanting to, say, turn back into a snake and sink his fangs into the angel’s ankle, what it felt like was wanting to needle the bastard until he had no choice but to admit that he knew what Crowley knew.

“I don’t know why you’re so hell-bent on pretending,” he seethed, flinging some more berries.

“Why in heaven’s name are you determined to argue?” Aziraphale shot back, all sarcasm.

“Because it’s a bad situation,” Crowley said hopelessly, abandoning their entertainment. “You can’t possibly be happy about this. I’m not.”

“I don’t know about you,” replied Aziraphale, slowly, side-eyeing him, “but I have orders.”

“Just because I have orders,” Crowley whispered harshly, “doesn’t mean I like them.”

“We’re not supposed to have an opinion,” said Aziraphale, with determined displeasure, getting to his feet, brushing off bits of grass and leaf-mold. “We’re supposed to do what we’re told.”

“Within reason,” Crowley said, glancing up with halfhearted, conspiratorial hope. “Surely?”

Rather than leave, Aziraphale shifted to stand in front of Crowley. He got down on his knees so that they were eye to eye.
“We can’t stay here forever now that the humans are gone. You said so yourself, last night.”

Crowley pointedly refused to blink, rather enjoying Aziraphale’s ill-concealed discomfort.

“To play devil’s advocate, which I am,” he said, “why are you taking what I say seriously?”

Fleetingly, Aziraphale looked furious, but he schooled his features as quickly as Crowley had.

“Because, for good or for ill,” he said, glancing at the ducks, “we’ve set a precedent. Lunch?”
London, 23 September 1888

Crowley fiddled with his silk tie and upturned collar, nearly smacking into a passer-by coming from the opposite direction. His tinted glasses, a gift from Aziraphale slightly over a century ago, creaked when he adjusted them. He tightened the wayward screws with a thought.

Daylight was harsh even filtered through those lenses, what when he’d spent so much time recently asleep. He’d awakened intermittently, but never for long; whatever frivolities Aziraphale was frittering his time on, he’d adamantly wanted no part.

Why he’d wanted no part was certainly at issue, but it wasn’t up for casual discussion.

Pushing through the front door of Aziraphale’s townhouse without regard for either knocker or lock wasn’t the rudest unannounced entrance he’d ever sprung on the angel, but it was up there. He was groggy, and the darkened foyer was easier on his light-starved eyes. He removed his glasses, stuck them in the breast pocket of his wide-lapelled black silk jacket, and did a double-take.

There were books everywhere, stacks upon stacks, ones that weren’t Aziraphale’s prized Bibles.

“You might have given me fair warning,” Aziraphale tutted from the parlor. “I’d begun to fear you fancied yourself some princess in a fairytale. Nobody waits forever, Crowley.”

Nobody except you, Crowley thought, lips quirking into a half-smile. “Hallo, angel.”

“Please pardon the riff-raff,” said Aziraphale, fussily, revealing himself to be over-dressed for all that it was early on a Sunday evening. “I intend to sell most of this lot. See how it goes.”

“Time you re-entered the book trade,” Crowley ventured, remaining where he was as Aziraphale navigated the books in order to reach him, “but through sales rather than the print-shop end?”

“Dear boy, let me look at you,” Aziraphale said, his soft, precise hands coming to rest on Crowley’s elbows. “Well-rested indeed,” he concluded, patting Crowley in approval. “How shall we celebrate your re-entry into public life?”

“With whatever alcohol you’ve got on hand, I had hoped,” Crowley admitted, loosening his tie.

Aziraphale clucked his tongue and materialized a bowler that was, at least, something of an improvement on the top hat Crowley had last seen him wear. The angel’s checked trousers and velvet waistcoat were distracting, right down to the inclusion of a rose gold watch-fob.

There was something visible in Aziraphale’s other waistcoat pocket, but Crowley didn’t ask.

“Come now,” Aziraphale said, taking hold of Crowley’s arm, guiding him back toward the door. “It
“won’t do to just sit inside, not when the weather’s been so agreeable of late.”

“It’s hell out there,” Crowley said with distaste. “Just this side of sweltering, take it from me.”

“There’s someplace I’d like to take you, if you’d be willing,” Aziraphale cajoled. “My treat.”

“As long as there’s plenty to drink, fine,” Crowley said, pushing through the door, holding it for Aziraphale. “I can’t imagine your idea of a good time these days is taxing.”

“Oh, indubitably,” said Aziraphale, entirely too pleased for Crowley’s liking. “Food and drink in spades. Oodles and pots. Anything you should fancy, and if they haven’t got it, why…”

Crowley tuned Aziraphale’s wittering out, replacing his glasses before the humans across the street got within range. Wherever they were going, they were clearly remaining on foot.

Aziraphale abandoned his chatter after a few blocks, tucking Crowley’s arm back over his own.

“This is Portland Place,” Crowley observed when Aziraphale towed him around the next corner.

“Yes,” Aziraphale agreed, patting Crowley’s arm as he steered him up the first townhouse’s low concrete stairs. “And you’re about to be my guest for an evening at the Stratford.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Crowley said nervously as Aziraphale laid insistently on the brass knocker, “but you had better explain it before I decide to leave.”

“The Stratford Club is very discreet,” Aziraphale reassured. “Cards, mostly whist and bridge.”

Crowley couldn’t suppress a grin. “You’ve taken up gambling? Whatever would Heaven say?”

“It’s not my fault they haven’t got dancing,” said Aziraphale, tartly, as the door swung inward.

“Wait, I…” Crowley goggled at him as the steward let them inside. “Did you say dancing?”

“That comes much later,” Aziraphale said placatingly, handing over his hat and jacket, indicating that Crowley ought to do the same. “After the cards and drinking, you understand.”

Crowley swatted at the steward’s hands when the man made a grab for his glasses. “They stay.”

“Fine, sir,” deferred the steward, wearily, appealing to Aziraphale once more. “This way, sir.”

It was a bridge night, which was just as well, because Crowley didn’t have the foggiest notion of how to play whist. The other two gentlemen at their table greeted Aziraphale like an old friend, and the one with a carnation that hadn’t quite drunk up its green dye in his buttonhole had a glass of port at the ready. He made apologies to Crowley and shuffled to the bar.

“That’s William,” Aziraphale explained, pulling Crowley’s chair out for him. “Silversmith.”

“Sure, and you’re a bookseller,” Crowley scoffed, leaning over to greet the other gentleman.

While Crowley chatted to Ben, William returned with a glass of tokay and set it in front of him.

“It’s not my fault they haven’t got dancing,” said Aziraphale, tartly, as the door swung inward.

“Wait, I…” Crowley goggled at him as the steward let them inside. “Did you say dancing?”

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“Your friend has often spoken of your preferences in the weeks since he joined,” William said.

Crowley blinked stupidly at the glass while William took his seat. He glanced up just in time to notice that Aziraphale was guiltily busy drawing something from his non-watch pocket.
The gleaming snuffbox snapped shut almost as soon as Aziraphale had opened it and partaken.

“Didn’t know you actually *used* those,” Crowley said, picking up the tokay as William’s expression turned to confusion. “He collects them,” Crowley explained. “Just for show.”

“I wouldn’t have assumed as much,” William admitted, obviously eager for Crowley to try the wine, “given he’s made use of this one since I finished it not a month past.”

Nearly choking on the too-large swallow he’d taken, Crowley reached across the table and flexed his fingers at Aziraphale, indicating he’d like to see the object. Aziraphale pocketed it stiffly.

“Plain in comparison to the rest,” said the angel, brushing his nose fastidiously. “Functional.”

Crowley swallowed more tokay, shocked to find he was wounded by the uncharacteristic rebuff.

“Good taste,” he said to William, setting down his glass, reaching for the cards. “Shall I deal?”

It was bad enough that Crowley spent the next two hours of halfhearted gameplay brooding over William’s carnation and the implications of Aziraphale’s newfound company. Infuriating, too, to be denied access to Aziraphale’s latest shiny acquisition, only to endure saccharine encouragement from two overly-attentive humans.

What they wanted from Aziraphale was obvious, but they seemed to know they couldn’t have it. As if sorry for rebuffing their advances at every turn, Aziraphale sabotaged Crowley’s half of their joint game and let the humans win all three matches. Disgusted, Crowley threw down his cards and went over to the bar. The steward, it seemed, was also the one tending.

“More of whatever I’ve been drinking all night,” Crowley said, slapping down too many coins.

“Take it back, sir,” said the tender, pouring a fourth glass of the tokay. “Your way’s paid.”

Crowley glanced over his shoulder at Aziraphale and ran his tongue over the backs of his teeth, vexed. He gathered up the coins, stuffed them back in his pocket, and snatched the glass.

“Az—ah, Mr. Fell says this place is discreet,” he said curtly. “How discreet we talking?”

“Such as you might meet the occasional backgammon player, sir,” said the steward, pointedly.

Crowley ran that statement through his dusty catalogue of human slang. It pinged accordingly.

“Right,” Crowley said, aware that the assemblage of string-quartet players had come off break and resumed their seats in the corner. “And enjoy some scrutiny-free dancing, yeah?”

“I fear you’ve missed your chance at the gavotte,” interjected Aziraphale, from behind him, “as we wrapped up those lessons last week. Every fourth week’s your casual waltz night.”

“Waltzing?” Crowley echoed, dizzily draining off his glass while that sank in. “Casual?”

“He’s rather a stick in the mud, one fears,” Aziraphale said to the steward, taking Crowley’s glass away from him. He set it on the bar with a resounding *clink* and took Crowley by the shoulders. “Won’t you loosen up long enough to spare me partnering with, er—?”

Crowley took a moment to look at Aziraphale, to really scrutinize him by the low-hung gaslight. Aziraphale’s cheeks were invitingly pink, no doubt because he’d drunk more port than Crowley had drunk tokay, and somehow those infuriating trousers were fetching.
“Angel,” Crowley said as nonchalantly as he could manage, “are you asking me to dance?”

Aziraphale nodded, biting his lip in an unexpected show of contrition. “Only if you’d like.”

On the far side of the room, the quartet struck up something oddly pensive for three-four time.

Tipping his head back on a strangled laugh, Crowley closed his eyes in a desperate attempt to compose himself. If he’d like. If he’d like. Oh, the things he’d love, let alone like.

“Ssssure,” he said, snapping back to attention, losing control of his tongue, “but you’re leading.”

“That was quite the point,” Aziraphale reassured him, breath hitching as Crowley set his left hand on Aziraphale’s shoulder. “I don’t know if you’ve spent much time observing—”

“I know what a box step is,” said Crowley, aggravated, in one-sided demonstration. “Keep up.”

Where Crowley was just shy of negligibly competent, Aziraphale was somehow halfway decent.

Crowley found it easy to tune out the murmurs of interest from the other unlikely pairs as they whirled by. Aziraphale’s eyes were fixed steadfastly on his glasses, as if seeking, so Crowley removed his hand from Aziraphale’s shoulder on the next turn they took and pushed them into his hair.

Aziraphale’s tipsily sincere smile hit Crowley square in the chest.

“There you are,” Aziraphale said, inclining his head toward Crowley’s ear. “Welcome back.”

Whether it was the feel of Aziraphale’s warm breath or the low, grateful resonance in those words that caused Crowley to stumble backward was unclear. He hit the drape-covered windowpane hard enough to rattle it, cushioned by the burgundy velvet, and Aziraphale caught him even tighter about the waist, dragged forward into Crowley by the momentum.

*How easy it would be,* Crowley thought, letting his eyes flick over Aziraphale’s lips.

Aziraphale swallowed, regaining his footing, tugging Crowley away from the drapes. They were pressed flush, a position that surely would have scandalized a crowd less discreet.

“Are you all right, my dear?” he asked, his breath now decisively warming Crowley’s cheek.

Losing his nerve, Crowley bowed his head and inhaled against Aziraphale’s immaculate collar.

“Cologne, angel?” he deflected, relieved that Aziraphale had begun to move again. “Really?”

**London, 25 September 1988**

Aziraphale scarcely looked up from his pricing when the front-door, which he had most decisively locked several hours earlier, jangled. There was only one person it could be.

“Thought you might want to give old Skindle the slip,” Crowley said, striding into the back room with a sense of purpose, “and give this new distraction a try. With wine, of course.”

Aziraphale squinted mistrustfully at the portable television Crowley had set down on the table.

“Looks like a brick with a screen,” he said, flipping the price-guide shut and closing the volume in
which he’d been about to pencil a hefty figure. “If bricks were made of plastic.”

“I could say the same about your computer, but do you see me complaining?” Crowley said, patting the television’s dusty top. “Found this in your friendly neighborhood Oxfam.”

Aziraphale waved it on, not even bothering to miracle the plug into the wall. “Black and white?”

Crowley shrugged, pulling out the chair next to Aziraphale’s, situating himself in it. “Classic.”

On the screen, some manner of ballroom dancing competition was in progress. The sound wasn’t working, so Aziraphale had to guess at the music. Box-stepping meant a waltz.

“Your notion of wine was on the mark,” Aziraphale said, snapping his fingers. Several bottles of Côtes du Rhône and two glasses appeared on the table in front of them, blocking their view.

“Bit heavy for a spot of mockery, don’t you think?” Crowley asked, vanishing all three corks.

“I could ask you the same,” Aziraphale parroted, an uneasy memory prickling at the back of his neck. The one time he’d made a heavily-hinted pass at Crowley and failed was intolerable.

Crowley let out a whistle and grabbed one of the bottles, vanishing the glasses while he was at it.

“I’m fine with sharing the third one as long as you are,” he said, drinking deep. “S’bad form.”

“What is?” Aziraphale asked vaguely, glad to just grab one of the other bottles and have at it.

“These amateurs,” Crowley clarified, chugging too fast for anybody’s good. “No flair, eh?”

Aziraphale took a pull so extended from his bottle that he almost choked on the bitter edge.

“Does this taste corked to you?” he coughed. “I could’ve sworn this vintage was at its peak.”

Crowley had fixed his eyes on the static-laced screen, entranced. His sunglasses were off, too.

“We weren’t so bad,” he said distantly, polishing off the bottle. “I mean, we’d never even tried.”

“You’d never even tried,” replied Aziraphale, bitterly, finishing his own with a hiccup.

“What’s that s’posed to mean?” Crowley demanded, swiping the bottle they were meant to share.

“I’d been putting in the hard work for when you decided to get out of bed,” Aziraphale admitted.

Sputtering outright, Crowley lowered the bottle and dribbled red down his chin. Before he could lift his arm to wipe at it with his sleeve, Aziraphale withdrew his handkerchief, feeling his pocket’s other contents shift disconcertingly, and dabbed at it for him.

Crowley tipped his face into the linen-padded touch like he’d been longing for it, everything in slow motion now given how much they’d already drunk. He let slip a hitching sigh.

“Wanna try again?” Crowley slurred, so unexpectedly that Aziraphale dropped the handkerchief.

The weight of what was behind them, the words Crowley had used in that century-ago moment, made Aziraphale laugh aloud. His turn to struggle for composure, his turn to say the line.

“Dear boy,” Aziraphale wheezed, unsuccessfully stifling a hiccup, “are you asking me…”

Crowley was nodding with intoxicated emphasis, already getting to his feet. He hauled Aziraphale
out of his chair and waved at the television. Its absent sound blared, as if startled to find itself restored. The first waltz had ended, and the next contestants’ turn had begun.

“I’m leading,” he said, taking Aziraphale’s right hand in his left. “We’ll see who remembers.”

_I remember_, Aziraphale wanted to say as Crowley worked his free arm around Aziraphale’s waist and spun them into action. _Every last step._

There was more laughter than precision in the mix, and they knocked into the chairs more than once. Aziraphale stopped them in the middle of it to shove the offending furniture back under the table where it belonged, and then Crowley pulled him back in.

They danced their stumbling way out of the back room, past the untidy desk and the till.

Crowley clipped a nearby shelf and apologized to it, which was so endearing that Aziraphale lost the count of their steps. He staggered into the shelves behind him, yanking Crowley along.

If there was any earthly thing closer to Heaven than the drag of alcohol in Aziraphale’s veins and Crowley’s wide, luminous eyes less than a head-tilt away, then Aziraphale didn’t want to know.

“Bless it,” Crowley mumbled, seemingly too far gone to overthink meeting Aziraphale halfway.

The press of Crowley’s lips, his damp and startled breath, lasted only as long as it took for something to fall from Aziraphale’s pocket. It hit the floor with a metallic _clink._

Crowley disengaged from Aziraphale unsteadily, bent down, and retrieved the jostled-open silver snuffbox. He held it flat on his palm, working the lid a few times, knitting his eyebrows in irritation when it wouldn’t stay shut. He ran his fingers over the scrollwork engraving, squinting at the initials well-hidden in the pattern’s complexity. His jaw tightened as he handed it back.

“Empty,” Crowley remarked while Aziraphale pocketed it in shame. “Off the sauce a while?”

Aziraphale nodded, unable to meet Crowley’s eyes. “It fell out of fashion, like most vices do.”

“Like most vices,” Crowley said, the statement almost a sneer. “Like, let’s say, backgammon?”

Aziraphale squared his shoulders and looked Crowley in the eye, but he had no desire to deny that he’d been soundly found out. Let Crowley think what he would; the damage was done.

“If you’re not ready for this thing we’ve been…dancing around for so long,” he said quietly, leaning warily into the book-spines behind him, “then I would understand.”

The gleam in Crowley’s hazy eyes—not sober enough for this, never certain—was hopeful.

“Give it more time,” he sighed, turning on his heel. “Lots can happen, I promise you that.”
An Invitation You Can't Decline

Chapter Notes

The first half of this was written for Argyleheir under the title "An Invitation You Can't Decline" in the 2018 Good Omens Holiday Exchange, and the second half of this was written for DwarvenBeardSpores under the title "Three Out of Seven" in 2018 GOHE as well; the halves were readable as separate pieces, but they click together as shown here.

Home, 24 December 2005

Having just bundled three delightful guests into their coats and seen them off, Aziraphale sagged with his back against the front door. It had been a near thing, shooing them by sundown, but they had readily agreed that Christmas Eve was best spent with one’s family.

Aziraphale’s family—by the metric of six millennia as friends, the latter two weeks of which had marked the start of much more—was in the living room. And he wanted more wine.

On his way back through the kitchen, Aziraphale erred on the side of champagne, pulling a bottle of Moët & Chandon from the fridge. The disadvantage to entertaining humans was the necessity of seeming human. This entailed stocking one’s cold-storage appliances with alcohol.

Crowley was curled up in the corner of the sofa when Aziraphale returned, fiddling with the juniper-handled Laguiole waiter’s corkscrew that their guests had brought as a gift. He stopped long enough to push his sunglasses up into his hair and make grabby hands.

Taking his time, Aziraphale twisted off the muselet before handing over the bottle.

“They’ll have me doing this the old-fashioned way yet,” Crowley said, sticking the bottle between his legs while he pried a serrated steel claw out of hiding at one end of the tool. “The blade part’s pointless, I used to think,” he mused, slicing through the gold foil, “what when fingernails—”

Aziraphale bent down and kissed him, and then took a seat beside him on the sofa cushion.

“You know that’s not necessary,” he sighed, realizing Crowley was dead-set on flagrant misuse.

“I might’ve cut myself,” Crowley groused, flushing pink, but he was smiling as he painstakingly peeled away the foil and got down to business twisting the corkscrew. “Reckless.”

“Not so bad,” Aziraphale said, sliding his arm surreptitiously around Crowley, “wearing a jumper, is it?” He plucked at the charcoal-and-grey Fair Isle pattern over Crowley’s shoulder. “You look quite fetching,” he murmured in Crowley’s ear.

Popping the cork free, Crowley gave Aziraphale a withering look that bordered on fond.

“This isn’t what I had in mind when I told you not to get me another espresso machine,” he cautioned, setting the tool-impaled cork down on the coffee table. “Blessed thing itches.”

“That’s why you ought to have worn something underneath,” Aziraphale said, reaching for their
empty glasses. He held them while Crowley filled one after the other to the brim. Crowley read the bottle’s label, brow knitting in realization before he set it down. “Seriously?”

“Nineteen ninety was a good year,” said Aziraphale, raising his glass with a straight face.

“Lower the tone, why don’t you,” Crowley sighed, but he clinked the rim of his glass off Aziraphale’s all the same. “I guess we’re meant to toast to the future and all that rot.”

“We’ve already had more of one than we thought we’d get,” Aziraphale reminded him, drinking deeply. “Fifteen years, imagine that. I’ll gladly drink to fifteen more, my dear.”

Sucking down three quarters of his glass, Crowley tipped into Aziraphale’s shoulder.

“Yours is itchy, too,” he muttered, rubbing his cheek there anyway.

Overcome with the unprecedented ease of such contact, Aziraphale plucked the sunglasses out of Crowley’s hair and kissed his forehead.

“At least I didn’t insist on matching ones.”

“If you had, I wouldn’t have worn mine,” Crowley admitted, patting Aziraphale’s cheek. He waved his hand, and the sunglasses vanished from Aziraphale’s grasp. “Simple as that.”

“Don’t be silly,” Aziraphale scoffed, taking another sip. “Our company would’ve harped on it.”

“Oh, as if that would’ve stopped you,” Crowley replied, shifting to straddle Aziraphale’s lap.

Aziraphale wasn’t over the fact that Crowley wanted this. Wanted him, to be precise.

“Finish up,” he urged, guiding the glass back up to Crowley’s lips, “so we can have more.”

Crowley snapped his fingers, and both of their glasses were full again. “I know we’re doing this human-style and all, but I refuse to move,” he said, pressing their foreheads together.

Cupping Crowley’s cheek, Aziraphale pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “Is that so?”

“Fact,” Crowley confirmed, shivering as he took an undignified slurp from his glass. “Mmm.”

“You wanted to end the day like we started it,” Aziraphale reminded him. “Just the two of us.”

“I wanted a proper Christmas Eve,” Crowley agreed, “and I’m getting it. What else do humans do in front of the fire, eh?” He swallowed more champagne, and then kissed Aziraphale lingeringly on the mouth. “I’m not one for carols. Maybe ghost stories, or, I don’t know——”

“No Dickens rehash,” Aziraphale cut in, horrified. “I forbid it. That hack’s overdone enough.”

“I liked Dickens,” Crowley protested, pouting. “Paid by the word. Can you blame him?”

“I’d as soon watch one of the adaptations,” Aziraphale said. “At least then it gets interesting.”

“Muppets or nothing,” Crowley offered, glancing sidelong at the telly. “I forbid Disney.”

“I fear we’re at an impasse,” Aziraphale said, downing the rest of his glass. “Thirds, dear boy?”

Crowley filled their glasses again, and Aziraphale noticed that the level of champagne in the bottle on the coffee table was, indeed, diminishing. He kissed Crowley slowly this time, sussing out
whether Crowley’s clinginess meant he wanted to take this elsewhere.

“You can ravish me later,” Crowley whispered with charming chagrin. “Let’s tell ghost stories.”

Aziraphale made an irritated noise and sipped his champagne. “I don’t know any ghost stories.”

“You, surrounded by books all the live-long day,” Crowley laughed, “don’t know any?”

Strictly speaking, Aziraphale knew any number of banal supernatural narratives that humans had devised to occupy themselves in the dark of the year. He also knew a number of true ones to which Crowley had also been privy, and dwelling on those wasn’t wise.

“Please?” Crowley asked softly, eyes luminous in spite of the fact he was backlit by the fire.

Aziraphale supposed there was no harm in dredging up the pedestrian, perhaps even the anecdotal. That was the bread and butter of apparition-related oral tradition, wasn’t it?

“I suppose you’ll be wanting to hear something from London,” he ventured at length.

Crowley snorted, sending his glass to the coffee table, where it materialized beside his sunglasses. “You overestimate my homesickness. The novelty of being here hasn’t worn off.”

“The point, I thought, was for it not to wear off?” Aziraphale ventured, suddenly perplexed.

“Anything’s a novelty until it settles,” Crowley said, clearing his throat. “No, I don’t mean…”

“I know what you meant,” Aziraphale reassured him, banishing his glass, too. “I read a news feature once that claimed London has more ghosts per square foot than anywhere on earth.”

“Dare you to dig up one that’s new to me,” Crowley said conspiratorially. “I know spooky.”

You like to think you do, Aziraphale thought, mulling over his options. They were vastly dull and grimly overdone, no small thanks to the city’s plethora of ghost tours.

“How about we just debunk some?” Crowley suggested, his brow furrowing as he watched Aziraphale think. “Here, I’ll go first. That stuff about Handel House is rubbish; Hell has him. I appreciated the exorcism they did four years ago, though. Cleared my sinuses for a week.”

Aziraphale brushed at the corner of Crowley’s mouth as it twitched up, half-smiling with him.

“I might have spirited you away for a while, had I known Mayfair was in for one,” he admitted.

“Ineffective. They ought to’ve jettisoned exorcisms and stuck with Holy Water,” Crowley said.

“This isn’t so much debunking as clarification,” Aziraphale ventured, thinking of something offhand. “That couple in the Greenwich Foot Tunnel is real enough. Helen and Gary. A colleague of mine couldn’t persuade them away, not even with the promise of Heaven. Night after night, they’re content to stroll the place they first met. Romantic, I always thought.”

“Can’t blame them,” Crowley said, leaning forward to huddle against Aziraphale’s shoulder. “We’re hung-up enough on the place we first met. Defended it to the bitter end.”

“An end that didn’t come,” Aziraphale reminded him, wondering if champagne on top of the wine from earlier had finally gone to his head.

“You ought to do something about the dead monk at Great St. Bart’s,” Crowley suggested.
Aziraphale sniffed, thinking of the last handful of times he’d got the low-down on that.

“I have it on sound authority that Rahere’s harmless enough when he’s not tripping alarms.”

“They ought to just put the sandal back in his tomb. I can relate to a man fond of his shoes.”

Aziraphale wrapped his arms around Crowley’s waist. He rested his cheek against Crowley’s hair, feeling warm and pleasantly drowsy.

“There’s something I ought to have told you,” he said hesitantly, “about these very premises.”

“Nuh,” Crowley yawned, nuzzling into Aziraphale’s neck. “Not possible. Sss’not haunted.”

“Perhaps not at present,” Aziraphale agreed, “but one of the former residents did die here.”

“Thought two of ’em died while living here, but not necessarily in here,” Crowley said.

“The one just before us passed in hospital,” Aziraphale said, trying to recall the chat he’d had with their agent over the paperwork. “But the one before that…”

Crowley shrugged, tucking a kiss beneath Aziraphale’s earlobe. “All this place feels is loved.”

“I’d have it stay as such,” whispered Aziraphale, with the abrupt clarity intoxication imparted.

Crowley’s fingers curled and uncurled at Aziraphale’s nape, combing through the wisps there.

“I can manage that,” he said. “Loving you has been no grief anywhere else, so why not here?”

Aziraphale held Crowley tightly, closing his stinging eyes. “Loving you has been all my joy.”

Crowley sighed, but in concern rather than in exasperation. “Is it time to cut you off, angel?”

“I rather fear your ghost-stories gambit failed,” Aziraphale said ruefully. “Yes, maybe so.”

“Don’t wanna sober up,” said Crowley. “I bet some version of Christmas Carol is on.”

Aziraphale made a successful grab for the programming guide that was on the coffee table. Flipping through it one-handed on the sofa cushion while Crowley made content noises against the side of his neck was a chore, but he got the job done.

“Our choices are Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone on BBC One,” Aziraphale read, “and Miss Marple: 4.50 from Paddington on BBC Two.”

“I’m not watching Miss Marple,” Crowley said emphatically, nipping the spot he’d just kissed.

Aziraphale waved the Potter film on, knowing they wouldn’t pay that much attention anyway.

Drinking in companionable silence after a substantial meal was a time-honored tradition, and if there was anything Aziraphale respected, it was that. He’d come to respect Crowley more—but, since the demon was just as big a fan of the traditional, the decision didn’t warrant much fuss.

Aziraphale leaned into Crowley while overblown opening credits sprawled their way across the television screen.

The particular vintage they were drinking had been an astute call indeed: dulcet enough to appease Crowley’s sweet-tooth, but possessed of enough bite that Aziraphale didn’t feel like transforming it
“Dunno about you,” Crowley said, sinking lower on the sofa as he drained his champagne flute, wiggling his toes against the edge of the coffee table, “but I’m hungry.”

Aziraphale steadfastly ignored the young-adult drama unfolding on the telly, emptying his flute so that he, too, could slouch to a Crowley-worthy degree. He reticently braced the balls of his feet against the coffee table, trying the sheer indolence on for size.

“I can see why propping one’s extremities on the nearest piece of furniture not built for the purpose holds so much appeal. It’s bound to leave smudges on lacquered wood, and the overall effect it has is anything but elegant.”

Crowley snickered, snapping his fingers so that both of their glasses vanished. “Sloth, really?”

“I’ve already got a handle on this one, as you’re fond of pointing out,” said Aziraphale, irritably, bumping Crowley’s shoulder with his own. “I’m taking it to the logical extreme.”

“If you think bare feet on furniture’s as extreme as it gets,” Crowley marveled, “whooo-eee.”

Aziraphale scoffed wearily. “Rather hard to fetch leftovers from this position, I should think.”

Somehow twisting his body without losing toe-purchase on the coffee table, Crowley snuggled into Aziraphale’s side. He ran his hand over Aziraphale’s belly, slipping his pinkie deftly beneath Aziraphale’s overdone top layers.

The soft, slyly calculated brush of Crowley’s finger made Aziraphale shiver.

“You didn’t really want to watch an insipid Christmas Eve film, did you?” Crowley murmured.

“No, my dear,” Aziraphale sighed, setting his hand against Crowley’s middle in turn. He rucked up the grudgingly-worn, itchy jumper with caution, palming the planes of Crowley’s ribs and stomach.

Shivering, Crowley melted into the cushions with a breathy sigh. “I was thinking more dessert.”

“That wouldn’t go amiss,” Aziraphale agreed, delivering a light, fond pinch to Crowley’s side.

“Someone stuck both pies in the fridge,” Crowley griped, swallowing a giggle as he flinched. “I don’t think custard is meant to be eaten cold.”

Too lazily aroused to get up and do things the old-fashioned way, Aziraphale snapped the fingers of his free hand. A plate with two surprised, flash-heated slices of the requested confection landed on the cushion next to him. He stopped caressing Crowley and reached for it, bringing it over to balance precariously between their pressed-together hips.

“There’ll be none your complaining about crumbs,” Aziraphale warned, materializing a fork. He cut a diminutive sliver of custard, nudging it enticingly against Crowley’s lips.

Crowley took the bite without protest. He licked the tines with a hazy expression that suggested this had no more been about food for him than it had been about cinema for Aziraphale.

“S’good,” he said, opening his mouth for more, so Aziraphale obliged him. “I could make this.”

Aziraphale snorted and indulged in a heaping forkful. “You? Baking? That would be the day.”

“Listen, there’s a lot you don’t know,” said Crowley, making a grab for the fork. “No fair.”
“Ah _ah_,” Aziraphale chided, holding it out of his reach. “You needn’t lift a finger.”

“No, but I could lift the plate,” Crowley said, “and do a repeat of the blasted cream cake.”

“You wouldn’t,” replied Aziraphale, with mock-horror, but he swung the fork back within range and scooped another piece of pie. He fed it to Crowley. “My poor coat never recovered.”

“That coat bit the dust at least a century before you decided to put it back on,” Crowley said with his mouth full, snatching the fork. With fierce concentration, he cut off a piece that, given the angle at which they were slouching, Aziraphale would have difficulty swallowing.

“Yes, but you thought I looked quite fetching,” Aziraphale mumbled once Crowley had successfully shoveled the custard into his mouth. He swallowed. “I could tell.”

Unblinking, Crowley took one more bite of pie, dropped the fork on the plate, and banished the whole lot to the coffee table. He took hold of Aziraphale’s collar and hauled him into a kiss that, while sticky on account of the custard, was more tempting than Gluttony _or_ Sloth.

“Change of plans,” Crowley whispered against Aziraphale’s mouth. “I thought we might…”

“Here?” Aziraphale asked, certain he was suggesting something trickier to clean than crumbs.

Crowley nodded, tangling his fingers in a hurried effort to remove Aziraphale’s jumper.

“There’ll be none of your complaining about—_oh_,” Aziraphale gasped, twisting off the sofa so he could dislodge Crowley’s feet from the table and kneel between his thighs. Not that he had many encounters to go on just yet, but Crowley only vanished their clothes when he was feeling touchy about stamina. “Crowley, what…”

“I’m, ah,” managed the demon, his attractively-flushed chest already heaving, “not full enough.”

Aziraphale leaned forward, dipping his fingers into the sensitive hollows behind Crowley’s knees before sliding his forearms beneath them just _so_. He couldn’t breathe at the thought, but his wanting equaled Crowley’s, if not exceeded it.

Crowley closed his eyes and shifted, hooking his knees over Aziraphale’s elbows. Not the most comfortable position, but Aziraphale was steady, at least, and Crowley was flexible. He made an irritated sound, rubbing his fingers together with a look of concentration until they went slick.

“Please don’t rush,” Aziraphale murmured, bending forward to lavish kisses on Crowley’s exposed neck while Crowley worked himself open one trembling digit at a time.

“I’ve, look—I’ve _tried_ this,” Crowley gasped, his eyes opening wide. “For science.”

“Only on yourself, I should hope,” Aziraphale soothed, aiming for a good-natured joke. He lapped at the hollow of Crowley’s throat, and the resulting sounds were just divine.

“Harp on the irony, why don’t you,” Crowley whimpered, clenching stickily at Aziraphale’s shoulders. When had he freed up both hands, and how had he managed to last?

“I didn’t mean,” Aziraphale began, but one of Crowley’s hands slipping down to guide him into position erased any and all notion of what he’d meant to say. Keeping the forward press of his hips measured was torture, at least until Crowley bore down on him with a groan.

“Did,” Crowley stammered, meeting Aziraphale’s breathless kiss with laughter, “did I—say the _pie_
was good? Because…” He shuddered into Aziraphale’s careful thrust.

“I haven’t the faintest idea if I’ll be up for more,?” Aziraphale said haltingly, adjusting his hold on Crowley’s legs as he withdrew and pushed in again, “but three out of seven…isn’t…”

There wasn’t any tactful way to say Lust was going to do them in, but Crowley’s bitten-off cries and half-hissed pleas were heavenly. This experiment was at least on par with dessert.

“I’m,” Crowley gasped, wide-eyed, with a strained jerk of his hips, “I’m going to…”

“I do hope so,” Aziraphale whispered, nipping Crowley’s ear. He rocked frantically without withdrawing this time, feeling Crowley’s breath hitch in delicious warning.

“Oh God,” Crowley rasped, clearly beyond caring what he sounded like, winding his arms tight around Aziraphale’s neck. “Feels like...”

“Feels like what?” Aziraphale gasped. His next conscious thought was lost to the last stutter of his hips and the utterly glorious havoc that orgasm played with his nerve-endings.

Crowley clawed at Aziraphale’s shoulders, pressing them closer, bucking against the restraint of Aziraphale’s arms hooked beneath his knees. And then he was gone, the hint of wetness against Aziraphale’s chest spreading with each taut thrust.

“Like Heaven’s supposed to,” Crowley sighed as he went limp. He trembled, thighs tensing when Aziraphale dug in his thumbs at Crowley’s hipbones and massaged there. “Mmm.”

“I quite agree,” Aziraphale panted, enjoying the aftershocks immensely. He kissed Crowley’s temple and miracled them clean, pleased when Crowley made a few more of the content noises he’d been making earlier. “Satisfied?”

“Never,” Crowley yawned, nudging at Aziraphale’s arms until he got the message and disentangled them so Crowley could stretch his legs. “S’why I’ll need more, understand.”

“Perfectly,” Aziraphale said, tugging Crowley’s blanket down off the back of the sofa. He tipped them sidelong onto the spacious white leather cushions, tangled and warm.

The film they’d been ignoring plodded on in the background, lulling them into a doze.
March 1630

The father of Agnes’s child was not present on the day his son was born, so she assumed that what
the spark behind Creation sent instead was compensation. She certainly expected something for her
trouble, what with risking her life to bring John into the world.

Whether it was an inkling or a warning, the vision passed behind Agnes's eyes no sooner than the
midwife from up the lane had placed the babe in her trembling arms. She squinted.

The man was dressed very much as men everywhere tended to dress. He stood at the crossroads not
far from Agnes’s home. One lock of dark, scarcely-waving hair fell across his temple as he studied a
piece of creased parchment clutched in his hands, obscuring his eyes.

The man’s profile had a sharpness to it that Agnes might have called handsome if she’d decided,
after some pragmatic experimentation, that she preferred men. As it happened, she did not.

From that day forward, visions came often. She learned to disguise them as gazing into the middle
distance, for what was expected of suspected witches if not batty contemplation? The joke, she
reckoned, was on the suspected part. She was the genuine article.

The visions had mostly to do with her descendants. She could tell because the family resemblance
was strong—the tawny skin and elegantly pronounced nose her son had inherited from his father
would prove markers forever after, as would Agnes’s piercing dark eyes.

But none of them looked quite like the young man she’d seen in her first vision, and she had no idea
why she’d seen him, or what he’d been doing.

So she waited.

Somewhere near John’s tenth birthday, around the completion of half her Book, she had a vision
with not one, but two strangers in peculiar dress.

One of them bore passing resemblance to the stranger with the parchment, but his face was obscured
by a by a pair of dark glasses and by the profile of the hatted man sitting beside him. She squinted,
questioning.

Not human, a warped echo of her own whisper replied. Powers not of this world.

And then the vision reconfigured itself into a sequence she could only describe as a series of three
 unholy transportation nightmares. Was this four separate visions, or was it two?

The first had lasted as long as the second even though it had only contained one visual. Two, she
concluded, and picked up her pen. After supper, she’d come back and fill in the details. For the time
being, she jotted:

An the Great Hound sharl coom, the Two Powers sharl watch in Vane

No stopping themme: not fish, nor rayne, nor rode, neither Deville nor Angel

Agnes bent the nib of her quill on the terminal L, her eyes tracking back. Neither Deville nor Angel,
she thought. Powers not of this world. Ah, I see.
What kind of creature would he be, she wondered, the wayward one she was destined to meet?

**March 1655**

*Go to this tiny, insignificant Lancashire village,* Dagon’s infuriatingly precise missive said, complete with a sketched map and X-marks-the-spot. *There’s been a growing disturbance for the past 25 mortal years. We need you to investigate it.*

Crowley ought to have told Aziraphale about this. No, he wanted to tell Aziraphale about it, but Dagon’s postscript suggested that Crowley should contrive some reason to meet with Heaven’s agent and covertly discover if they, too, were tracking the disturbance.

In guilt-ridden shame, Crowley had done nothing of the sort. He’d simply refolded the singed parchment, packed his traveling bag, and hit the road for blessed Nowhereville.

Dagon’s technical rambling about *the trace glowing off its damn pendulum* didn’t really make sense. The tools Asmodai and that lot had engineered weren’t Crowley’s division.

Crowley alternated between walking and hitching carriage rides when he could find them. The inns and public houses between London and the village he sought weren’t much to behold.

The closer his destination loomed, the worse the roads got. Five days of travel, and the soles of his goatskin boots had worn thin. He could repair them, but all he could think of was Aziraphale’s last recommendation of an excellent cobbler in Aldgate.

On arrival in a village that looked to be in the vicinity of Dagon’s X, Crowley paused not far from a row of houses. The wind bit insidiously through his cloak, but at least it was dry. He unpocketed the map and squinted at it.

“You there,” said the voice of a human, probably a woman, huffing as it approached. “Lost?”

Crowley lowered the map and glanced up in bewilderment, brushing back the hair that had fallen into his face. He’d grown fond of wearing it long and gathered, but there were a few bits that wouldn’t stay tied back no matter what he did. He hoped the glamor on his eyes had held.

The woman was middle-aged, with iron-grey hair and piercing brown eyes. She might have been something approaching attractive, if that had been Crowley’s thing. It wasn’t.

“Seems so,” Crowley agreed reticently. He felt approximately as if he were facing a horse in human skin. Aziraphale would have disapproved of what he was about to do, but he did it anyway; at the snap of his fingers, the woman’s eyes glazed. “Good morning, ma’am. Perhaps you can help me. Have there been any strange goings-on around here of late?”

“Yes,” said the woman, sounding a bit more present than she ought. “They took me to court.”

“Okay,” Crowley sighed, folding the map before stuffing it in his bag. “While I’m sorry to hear about your legal woes, that’s not what I—”

“Why,” she said softly, reaching to for him, perhaps aware of her actions, “it’s just as I saw.”

Crowley flinched, taking a step back, holding up his hands in defense. “You really shouldn’t—”

“You shall be there,” insisted the woman, knowingly, turning to leave, “as you were at the start.”
April: With the Unfamiliar Name

This was the sort of lazy morning of which Aziraphale approved. Not that he was conscious of much beyond Crowley’s breath against the back of his neck and Crowley’s arm draped over his side, but the previous day’s excitement lingered in his mind.

Crowley yawned, curling the heated press of his arm possessively around Aziraphale.

“Why should it resurface now?” Aziraphale blurted, unable to contain the jittery thought.

“Wait,” Crowley said, exhaling as he stretched languidly against Aziraphale’s spine. “What?”

“The Book. On our watch again, no less,” Aziraphale replied, afraid he’d tipped into fretting.

With a pained sigh, Crowley hugged Aziraphale to him, sleepily kissing Aziraphale’s shoulder.

“Because the Antichrist’s offspring is due in four months? Sophia was helping me clean the blasted car? Take your pick.”

“If only I had known Agnes,” Aziraphale said. “Knowing her descendants is a wonder in and of itself.”

“Well, like you’re forever pointing out, she was too smart to let herself be…” Crowley trailed off, recoiling from contact. “Oh, hell.”

“I don’t see what I could possibly have done wrong,” Aziraphale protested, rolling to face him.

“No, I mean,” said Crowley, “literally Hell. They managed to find her. Dagon got the drop, and then…”

Aziraphale’s mind lit up as wildly as one of Crowley’s better pinball matches against Adam.

“Do you mean to tell me there was an investigation?” he said faintly, clutching Crowley’s hand.

Crowley rubbed the side of his face with his free one. “Yeah, uh. They sort of…sent me there.”

“You went to middle-of-nowhere Lancashire,” Aziraphale managed, “and didn’t ask me along?”

“I wanted to, but—look, I didn’t think I found her!” Crowley said. “At least not at the time!”

“But you did find someone, didn’t you,” Aziraphale replied, easing his grip on Crowley’s wrist.

Crowley chewed his lip in defeat, tilting his head forward to rest against Aziraphale’s collarbone.
“She noticed that I looked lost,” he laughed. “Came right out into the road and offered to help.”

“You met Agnes Nutter,” Aziraphale said in amazement, “and didn’t even know it?”

“I tried to hypnotize her! Standard procedure back then, right?” said Crowley, fretting. “I asked if there’d been any strange goings-on, and all she did was complain somebody had taken her to court.” His face twisted. “She said… I’d be there, even as I was at the start.”

“And then what?” Aziraphale asked, his consternation giving way to elation. “Anything else?”

Crowley shrugged and went back to clinging like the most tenacious of his prized pea-vines.

“She walked off the way she came, I kept questioning clueless locals, and then, well, nothing.”

“Lack of competency remains a blessing, I suppose,” Aziraphale said consolingly. “My dear?”

“Please, let’s talk about anything else. Brexit. Pippa’s upcoming birthday do. The weather.”

Aziraphale sighed. “One of those upsets you, one doesn’t warrant planning till July, and one’s quite evident if you look out the window.”

“August first sneaks up,” Crowley muttered, “just you watch. Fine. What about breakfast?”

“Per usual, we’ll do our utmost as hosts,” said Aziraphale, disentangling himself from Crowley so he could sit up and stretch.

“Eh,” Crowley groused, pulling him back down with a huff. “Your latest books can wait.”

Aziraphale gave him the morning kiss he was doubtless after, and took his time about it, too.

“One can’t be too prepared for one’s grand-godchild’s arrival. Even you ought to know that.”

“Whatever, angel,” Crowley replied, melting into the mattress. “Scones?” he added hopefully.

“I’ll fix a tray and bring it in,” said Aziraphale, temptingly, “if you’ll let me read while we eat.”

* * *

Pippa hadn’t the faintest idea what Rani Bhatia was doing on her porch with coffee and pastries on a Wednesday morning.

“Shocking news in this morning’s obits,” Rani chattered from the off, somehow guiding Pippa to the kitchen table without dropping her haul from the café. “Letitia’s kicked it, rest her soul.”

“Your stage manager?” Pippa said, grateful her memory hadn’t failed. “Gracious, I’m sorry.”

Rani nodded ruefully, passing Pippa one of the paper-sleeved cappuccinos. “Careful, that’s hot.”

“I didn’t know her well, but—she did hand out programs worth a treat,” Pippa tried awkwardly.
“To hell with not speakin’ ill of the dead and all that rot,” Rani said, tearing into the brown-bagged sweet rolls. “Flamin’ racist and a homophobe besides, that one. Good riddance.”

Pippa breathed a sigh of relief, snatching a roll. “Didn’t even get to know her, thank God.”

Tom yowled petulantly in the next room, as was his wont when humans didn’t come to him.

“Such a charming beastie,” Rani said, her mouth full. “Anyway, let’s talk shop, shall we?”

“Shop?” Pippa echoed, bending down to snap her fingers so Tom would come running.

Rani nodded, taking a satisfied sip of coffee. “I’m out a volunteer, and you need a hobby.”

“My book club’s ad hoc,” said Pippa, lifting Tom into her lap. “Why don’t you come along?”

“Nice try, but it hasn’t met in months,” Rani replied. “So says our charming Mr. Fell.”

“Gossiping without me, the nerve,” Pippa said. “It’s kind of you to offer, but I couldn’t, really. Not with the hip.”

“Oh, come off it,” Rani scoffed. “I’ll get you a wheelchair and bloody walkie-talkies if I must.”

“What about programs and publicity,” Pippa offered, appeasing. “Didn’t she do those, too?”

“Aye, right, but I’d have to hunt another recruit,” said Rani, pensively. “Any ideas there, Pip?”

Pippa gave Tom a good, thorough scratch about the collar and then set him back on the floor.

“Didn’t you say that cousin of yours in London was retiring? Thinking about moving down?”

“Hah, Rashid?” Rani cackled. “You’ve got to be joking. He arrived the week after New Year’s, crammed himself an’ all his stuff into my spare room. Only comes out for breakfast and tea.”

Pippa had to remind herself that, by tea, Rani meant supper. “Must be lonely.”

“Always was an odd bloke,” Rani said with regret. “Very private. He watches old films on that laptop of his, and I mean every spare minute.”

Pippa took a bite of her roll, pleased to find that it was crammed with sultanas. Her favorite.

“If he likes cinema, maybe he likes theater, too,” she said. “I’ll do your PR if you promise you’ll offer him the stage management.”

“It’s kind of you to insist we include him, but I doubt he’ll take the bait,” Rani replied wistfully.

“Sounds like a job for someone more persuasive,” Pippa said, grinning. “I know just the man.”

“Do you?” Rani mused into her coffee cup. “Well, I’d sooner you meant Az than Anthony.”

“See, now, that was easy to sort, wasn’t it?” Pippa replied, tapping her temple. “Great minds.”

* * *
Uriel covered her ears with the pillow, the better to shut out whatever inanity Raphael was raving about.

“Darling,” Raphael went on, “you have got to see this. It’s a playlist of cats who’ve made friends with small rodents.”

“I’ve already watched every goddamn YouTube vid there is,” Uriel groaned. “Every vine, too.”

“Given that three hundred hours of footage are uploaded to this site every minute, I doubt that.”

Uriel stopped hugging her pillow and blinked up at Raphael, who lounged against the headboard.

“Can you at least talk at a normal volume?” she asked. “It’s, like…noon. On a damn Saturday.”

Raphael smirked and rummaged Uriel’s phone from under the sheets. He set it on her bare belly.

“Crowley’s texting about Az suggesting they hoard baby supplies for the inevitable sitting duties.”

“Does he know infants aren’t anything like ducklings? Crowley knows, but I mean—”

“Less said about Az interacting with children, the better,” Raphael tutted, clicking another vid.

Uriel thought about that, finally propping herself up. “I don’t know. He’s good with Rob.”

“Rob’s hardly your average child,” Raphael said, laughing at his phone. “Also not an infant.”

“Well, if you want something to worry about, remember the last time Crowley handled a baby?”

Raphael paused the video and slid down to lie beside her, skewing the covers every which way.

*I didn’t sign up for this level of emergency preparedness,* read Crowley’s latest text.

Uriel responded with soothing nonsense. *I’m sure it’s just a phase,* she typed.

“Az making lists of shit he intends to stockpile isn’t a phase,” Raphael said. “It’s a covenant.”

Uriel set her phone face-down on the rumpled sheets and hit Raphael in the face with her pillow.

“What do you want me to tell him, that everything’s going to be just peachy? It’s a whole new human, Rafe. Maybe one so important that everybody’s going batshit waiting to see what will happen. I doubt the world’s going to end again, but it’ll be something.”

“Then it’s downright refreshing that all Az is worried about is changing its theoretical diapers.”

“Maybe years of cleaning up duck poo’s been enough prep,” Uriel said. “What’s this you wanna show me?”

“It won’t hold a candle to your ASMR—darling, *shhh*, your search history’s appalling—but it’s so entertaining I don’t feel compelled to get high.”

“Perish the thought,” Uriel muttered, and hit *PLAY* with her thumb. “Kitties, wow me.”

The playlist was an excellent waste of twenty minutes. While the instance of a mouse in Japan that
had been genetically engineered not to fear predators was kind of off-putting, its feline friend was affable. The rest were people’s pet rats, cats, and dogs grooming each other.

“See?” Raphael said, raking his fingers through Uriel’s hair as the last vid ended. “Quality.”

“Quality nap fodder,” Uriel yawned, about to close her eyes when one of the suggested vids caught her eye. “Hey, that cat looks like Tom.”

Raphael stopped lavishing attention on her and tapped the vid. “Besties 5eva, it’s called.”

Uriel watched in fascination as the Snowshoe, a dead-ringer for Pippa’s, sat patiently twitching its tail on a hardwood floor.

“Well,” Raphael remarked, knuckles pressed to his chin. “That sounds a lot like…”

The words died on Raphael’s tongue as a pair of small, brown hands set a mouse before the cat.

“Where you go,” said Rob, remaining out of frame. “No running, ’cause I’ve got to catch him.”

“Yup,” said Uriel, with grim certainty, “that’s him all right, and that mouse is good ol’ Rando.”

“How much you want to bet,” Raphael said, “that Crowley has no idea his vermin’s gone viral?”

“Dude, I’m not telling him,” replied Uriel. “Rob clearly smuggles Rando out regularly, because this channel has…uh, five videos.”

Raphael whistled. “Hence the Seva. Rob must keep popcorn on him at all times. Hardcore.”

“At least he doesn’t show his face,” Uriel said, clicking the next vid, “or say Crowley’s name.”

* * *

Sophia fiddled with the folded half-slip of paper in her cardigan pocket, tapping her heels impatiently against the legs of her chair.

Adam, lounging in the chair across from her, grinned and gave her a double thumbs-up.

“Anyway,” Newt went on, “the client’s happy, so that’s all right.” He carried three mugs over to the table in a perilous two-handed grip.

Sophia claimed the mug that had sloshed a bit. “Dad, why so nervous? No need.”

“Because you’ve come from your twenty-week scan, is why,” Newt said, “and I’d like to know how my grandchild’s doing.”
“No sense in playing cloak-and-dagger about the projected gender, we decided,” Sophia said, “but I want to wait till Mum and the girls—”

Natalie clattered through the front door with a ton of shopping in tow. “Took too long in Waitrose again, thanks to Janet!”

“Fuck you,” Janet said, trudging in grumpily. “I couldn’t find the right peanut butter, and then I thought maybe the almond would do, and then—”

“Good morning,” Anathema said testily, trailing after her two youngest. “What’s the news?”

“Don’t you want to sit down?” Newt asked, indicating the empty seats. “Kettle’s still hot, even.”

“Nah,” Anathema said, plonking her cargo on the table before patting Sophia on the shoulders. “We’ll listen while we unpack. This is routine.”

“Routine,” Newt echoed, glancing at Adam. “I’m a father two or three times over depending how you hash it, and that’s a word I’d never…”

Sophia slurped her tea loudly, fed up with the absurdity of it all, deciding it needed milk.

“So, spill,” Natalie said, shoving some pasta boxes haphazardly in the cupboard. “Girl?”

“Boy,” said Janet, sullenly, folding several of the newly-emptied bags. “I dreamed it.”

“Well, that’s no fun,” Sophia sighed in defeat, tossing the printed scan onto the table.

“I’m right?” Janet asked, dashing over to the table. She grabbed the paper and frowned.

“It’s upside-down, numpty,” Natalie said, snatching it out of her twin’s hand. “There.”

“Yeah, okay,” Janet said, squinting. “With that biology, I guess boy is tentatively right.”

“We’re fine with being wrong,” Adam said. “So’s Doctor Rajit. Her family didn’t know her sister was a sister till she came out at twenty.”

“Rajit,” Newt said, as if the name rang a bell, but let it pass. “Of course. Anything’s possible.”

“In case you need advice, there’s Petula Potts,” Anathema said. “Marjorie’s niece, remember?”


“How come you get to call her that, but she tells all the rest of us Tracy’s fine?” Janet protested.

“Witches’ privilege,” said Anathema, with mock-mystical inflection. “Gotta earn your broom.”

“Oi,” Sophia interjected, slamming her mug down on the table. “Don’t you want the rest?”

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Anathema said, chagrined, finishing up the canned goods. “Continue.”

“Joke’s on you,” Sophia said, shrugging. “Everything’s normal. I was worried for nothing.”

“Drinking heavily for a night around the time you conceived isn’t nothing,” Natalie said.

Adam looked like he had something to say to that, possibly about the utility of frozen peas from Tesco. Wisely, he kept his mouth shut.
“It was bloody New Year’s!” Sophia protested. “Pippa’s party was worth it. I didn’t know.”

“That means you got knocked up, like, the last week of December,” Janet said helpfully.

“Anyway!” interrupted Adam, brightly, tapping his mug. “Hold off on name suggestions.”

“There’s plenty of family ones to choose from,” said Newt. “Nat and Janet come from mine.”

“No, Nat comes from yours and Janet comes from Tam Lin,” Anathema corrected him.

“That means it’s time for Mum’s side to have a turn,” Natalie suggested. “I wanted an Agnes.”

Everyone around the table—even Adam, and especially Newt—broke into a chorus of NO!

* * *

Resolutely, Mandy shoved her dirty clothes into the duffel bag she’d most recently brought from her flat. She’d been between there and the cottage since February—only brief stints at home, never unsupervised.

“I’m sure,” she repeated, meeting Aziraphale’s worried gaze. “My therapist says I’m stable.”

Crowley, leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded, gave Aziraphale a placating look.

“She’s doing much better,” he insisted. “The medication’s leveled off, even. It’s obvious.”

Mandy continued to pack, lowering her head so Aziraphale wouldn’t see her smirk. The hilarity was further compounded by the fact that she’d been sleeping on an air mattress in the office since it afforded more privacy than the fold-out sofa.

“I’ll miss your Bibles,” she said earnestly. “Best nighttime reading ever. Zonked me right out.”

Aziraphale cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably against his side of the doorframe. “Oh?”

“You said I was welcome to read anything,” Mandy reminded him. “I really appreciate that.”

“Anything else amiss in my departed friends’ inscriptions?” Aziraphale asked, cracking a smile.

“I think Paracelsus was sweet on you,” Mandy said, winking at Crowley, “but what else is new?”

“I could tell you a thing or two about who was sweet on whom,” Aziraphale said, “but let it be.”

Zipping her duffel with a flourish, Mandy pointed straight at him. “Wilde, though? Yes, no...?”

Crowley looked like he was trying his best not to crack up, but his eyebrows spelled anxiety.

Eyes averted, Aziraphale released his breath in a rush. “A kiss or several, if you must know.”

Crowley made a disdainful sound. He pointed to the da Vinci sketch on the wall, glaring at
Aziraphale.

“We’re even,” he said, with more conviction than ire. “Your several to my one, but fair’s fair.”

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Mandy tried to slip between them. If a row was imminent, she could always call for a ride. She didn’t want to be around when they made up, because…yikes. Reasons.

“Hey, look, it’s fine,” Crowley said, catching her by the shoulder. “We’re fine. Want a ride?”

Mandy studied his features, finding them relaxed, and then looked to Aziraphale. “You good?”

Aziraphale raised his hands palms-out, a gesture intended for both of them. “Quite, dear girl.”

“Keen,” Crowley said, the utter nerd, and leaned to kiss Aziraphale’s cheek. “Won’t be long.”

“I’m sure,” said Aziraphale, knowingly, but his mobile rang before he could reciprocate. “Yes?”

“Isn’t that some way to greet an old friend!” Rani squawked, audible without speaker-phone.

Covering the mouthpiece of his mobile, Aziraphale rolled his eyes and abashedly left the room.

Crowley stuck his hands in his pockets and offered Mandy a fragile-seeming smile. “Ready?”

“You know I am,” she said, hugging him so he wouldn’t have to initiate. “Hey, can I drive?”

“Nuh-uh,” Crowley said, but he didn’t let her go just yet. “Not on your life or mine.”

“One of these days,” Mandy replied wistfully, “I’ll be old enough. Or maybe wise enough?”

Crowley smiled like a snake. “Russet crop’s not due till autumn. It’ll take more than a bite.”

“Ouch,” Mandy said, lightly punching his shoulder as she released him. “You’ve still got it.”

* * *

Crowley studied his reflection in the Bentley’s rearview mirror, adjusting his sunglasses. Ever since Aziraphale had explained Rani’s request of the day before, he’d been dreading the chauffeur run he was about to make. He disliked meeting new people on short notice.

Aziraphale finally trundled outside, in as many layers as Crowley thanks to the wind. He opened the passenger-side door and got in.

“Rani appreciates our willingness to evangelize, as it were,” he said bracingly, “very much.”

Feeling neither charitable, nor evangelistic, Crowley shrugged him off and started up the car.

“This is all you, angel,” he said, teeth chattering as he pulled into the road. “Seeing as all I did was understudy Ariel in a weekend of Tempest on short notice, I’m not qualified.”
“Pippa’s been taken in, too, if it makes you feel better,” said Aziraphale. “Programs and PR.”

“There goes the neighborhood,” Crowley replied. “Nothing but hipsters and theater geeks.”

“Must you be so nasty?” Aziraphale lamented. “If this is comeuppance for yesterday—”

“You could’ve lied to her,” Crowley said blandly, “seeing as, for you, lying comes easy.”

“Is it the kisses you resent,” Aziraphale asked, blessedly blunt, “or that we had an audience?”

“Definitely the audience,” said Crowley, tapping the wheel tetchily, but he already felt better.

Aziraphale slid his right hand from Crowley’s thigh down to his knee, squeezing gently.

“You’re quite right about the lying,” he murmured. “I ought to have done. I’m sorry.”

Crowley let go of the wheel with his left hand so that he could hold Aziraphale’s fast.

“You’re in luck. Forgiveness is my wheelhouse. Re-brief me on the mission?”

“Rani’s recently-retired, reclusive cousin has moved down from London,” Aziraphale said. “Since this happened just after New Year’s and we haven’t seen Rani since the party, it’s news to me. The cousin’s slightly older than she is—a film buff, it would seem. Her attempts to engage him in social activities have mostly failed. We’re to help her convince him that stage-managing her little troupe is the way forward.”

“Feels like the set-up to an offbeat rom-com,” Crowley quipped. “Benny & Joon, much?”

“My dear, you’re dreadful,” said Aziraphale, mildly. “There’s no poker game involved.”

“Nor taking the cousin off her hands, I hope,” Crowley said. “I don’t need a housekeeper.”

“Crowley, do try to see this as a favor for a dear friend,” Aziraphale urged quietly.

“What’s the cousin’s name?” Crowley asked. “He’s retired, you said? What did he do?”

Aziraphale’s reflection in the windscreen instantly adopted a fierce and terrible frown.

“Rani, ah, didn’t mention his name, but she did say something about…hospitality?”

“Must have been the relative she had a telephone call with that night after drinks.”

“How on earth do you remember such inconsequential details? That must’ve been—”


“Both hands on the wheel,” said Aziraphale, squeezing Crowley’s hand before releasing it.

Rani’s terraced house was on the opposite side of town, tucked between two other houses that looked nearly identical. The snarled fairy lights on her front gate were the give-away.

Once Crowley had parked on the opposite shoulder, it was obvious Aziraphale was stalling—not so keen on this operation himself, the endearing hypocrite. Crowley got out of the car, went around to the passenger side, and opened Aziraphale’s door for him.

He even led the way through Rani’s gate and up the front walk, dragging his angel along behind.
“Dear boy, is this quite necessary?” Aziraphale hissed in frustration. “I was working up to it.”

“Maybe you sold me on the favor thing,” Crowley said, rapping the brass knocker, “or maybe it’s a hunch. Either way, you’ll be helping me talk our subject into this, or else—”

“Oh!” Rani said, startled to see Crowley as she opened the door. “Wasn’t expecting to see you.”

“Charmed, as always,” Crowley said, unwinding his scarf as he stepped through into Rani’s living room. “We’re here to meet…”

The gentleman on the sofa was more careworn than ever, but Crowley never did forget a face.

“Earl Grey?” the man ventured tentatively, his eyes wide in amazement as he got to his feet.

Aziraphale’s faint noise of disbelief was an embarrassment, so Crowley collected himself and crossed to their acquaintance with his arm extended.

“Rashid,” he said, grinning right back as they shook hands in greeting. “So, how’s the Ritz?”

“Too hectic for these old bones,” Rashid replied. “You two had the right idea when you left.”

“I’m sorry,” said Aziraphale, in polite confusion, “but did you call Crowley Earl Grey?”

“Kitchen code-words, can’t be helped,” Rashid replied with tired amusement, offering his hand.

Aziraphale shook it in delight. “Then I must be Lapsang Souchong or Darjeeling, give or take?”

“Wait a sec!” Rani demanded, stupefied. “They’re the ones you were always on about?”

“Unchanging,” Rashid said. “When they vanished, I thought I’d dreamed them all those years.”

Rani glanced from Aziraphale to Crowley and took a step backward. She muttered an unmistakable phrase: Masha’Allah.

Crowley could tell by the apprehension rising in her voice that they had some explaining to do.

“Tea sounds lovely,” he said, making a break for Rani’s kitchen. “Milk and sugar all around?”

May: With Transitory Blossom

Aziraphale didn’t mind waking alone anymore, not when the number of places Crowley was likely to have gotten off to was limited.

There were the tide pools, the shed, and the garden. Given those possibilities, Crowley would turn up eventually. He’d be tracking either sand, feathers, or soil, which detritus would normally be cause for mild reproach.

Still feeling guilty about having kicked off an unintentional who-kissed-whom match the week previous, Aziraphale got up and went about his morning. He had no intention of either pursuing
Crowley to any of his habitual haunts, or scolding him once he returned.

Evidence of Crowley’s passing-through abounded, from the paper brought in to the breadbox left open. This many years on, the jam-jar on the counter, rather than store-bought, was one of Crowley’s own: rose-hips from the rugosas sweetened with honey from Regent’s Park.

Aziraphale snatched the bag of brioche loaf, half expecting to find their tiny freeloader lurking.

“Scarce of late, aren’t you,” he murmured, popping two of the faintly sticky slices in the toaster.

“I’m a bit worried, to be honest,” Crowley said, suddenly standing at Aziraphale’s elbow, where he hadn’t been before, with several freshly-gathered duck eggs in hand. “Want one?”

“Yes,” breathed Aziraphale, in startled relief. “Fry them all. Use the door next time, please?”

“Spoil my fun, why don’t you,” Crowley said, but he took the eggs to the hob. “As far as I’m concerned, you deserve a few more days’ penance.”

“Dear boy, would you let it go,” Aziraphale cajoled, adding another two slices to the toaster. “It’s been centuries. You’re all the world I could want.”

Crowley’s sibilant intake of breath spoke volumes as he continued cracking eggs into the skillet.

“For what it’s worth,” Aziraphale went on, glancing over his shoulder, only to find Crowley glancing over his, “congratulations. Notoriously choosy, Leonardo—or so I’ve heard.”

“Yeah,” Crowley said, breaking into a sly grin as he turned back to his work, “from me.”

“I stand by my thrusting a hand in his proverbial bag of eels,” Aziraphale replied evenly, still hoping that he might incite fierce, if good-natured affront. “The lamprey I pulled even cooks.”

“Oh, come off it,” Crowley groused, smacking down the spatula. “That conversation was ages ago, and we ended it on a feel-good note. If you want me to bite, you should just say—”

Aziraphale abandoned his supervision of the toaster, crossed the kitchen, and caught Crowley around the waist before could even pass his lips.

“If I weren’t genuinely hungry, my dear,” he whispered in Crowley’s ear, “I’d ask for it.”

Crowley shoved the skillet from the front burner to the one directly behind, extinguishing the lit one with a thought. His trembling fingers caught Aziraphale’s wrists.

“Are you trying to burn the place down?” he asked, twisting around for a kiss that might have left Aziraphale’s lip bloody if not for his restraint.

“Breakfast will get cold,” Aziraphale said, catching Crowley’s lip in retaliation. “Thoughts?”

The tip of Crowley’s tongue darted out as he released Aziraphale’s hands, turning to face him. His expression was softer than one might have expected, less predatory. His tenderness was perpetual cause for awe.

“Why’s that an issue?” he asked, languidly taunting. “We both know how fast you can eat.”

That baiting and thwarting each other had come to this—such playful, effortless seduction—still gave Aziraphale moments of pause. Wondering, guiltless, grateful pause at how thoroughly their roles had switched.
“Snake’s got your tongue?” Crowley said softly, palms light against Aziraphale’s cheeks. “Bed?”

“I rather think yes,” Aziraphale said decisively, taking his hands. “Reheat the lot later.”

There was nothing elaborate about what followed, the simple thrill of stripping down and sprawling across the sheets. Crowley reached for Aziraphale, falling back, pulling them flush—deliciously hard, so eager already.

“How could I not want this,” Crowley said, breathless with laughter. “There’s no world without you.”

Aziraphale made sure there was no more chatter, at least not for as long as it took to finish him.

* * *

Pippa led her guests around the periphery of the Shambles, grateful that their pace matched hers. Where Pippa’s doddering was due to her reliance on a cane, her newly-hired landscapers lagged for a different reason. They paused often to prod at greenery that had run riot.

“The ivy was here when we moved in,” explained Pippa, with a sweeping gesture at the vast runners Jaime was contemplating. “Harold was ever so good at keeping after it, but…”

“Your brick-work has suffered a touch,” Mary said sympathetically. “Maybe remodeling’s in order before we get down to the business of tidying up and planting new?”

Pippa closed her eyes on the abrupt sting of tears, but she recovered before anyone noticed.

“I couldn’t possibly,” she said, wistful. “Those mortar touch-ups you can see are Harold’s.”

“Understood,” Jaime said, patting the root-riddled masonry reverently. “We will leave it.”

“Hedera helix, the sheer nerve,” Crowley agreed, rounding the corner with something cupped in his grubby hands. “Did you know,” he said to Pippa, not missing a beat, “that these were lurking under one of your Buddleias out front? Exposed to the elements, even.” He held out three scrawny, shoot-tipped bulbs for inspection. “Reckless.”

“Those’ll be the lilies Rob brought home from school,” said Pippa. “Sat them down and forgot to turn them under. They’re yours if you like.”

Crowley shook his head. “When’s he coming around next? I’ll help him pick a better spot.”

“Half term,” Pippa replied. “School gets off the whole week after next. It’s creeping up.”

“Could’ve sworn it was just the first of May,” Crowley said, stalking off before anyone could ask him what his absently-muttered kitchen shenanigans had to do with it.

“Speaking of, Jaime,” Pippa said, more to fend off somber nostalgia than anything else, “did you
ever get that muffin recipe you were after?"

“Yes, and they’re a Sunday morning fixture,” said Mary, darkly, taking some measurements.

“It makes her feel better to blame Crowley for the bellies we’ve put on,” Jaime explained.

“Now your nursery’s up and running, those pounds will melt off in no time,” Pippa replied.

“Where I’m from, there are worse fates than extra weight,” Jaime said, bending to examine a leaf, withdrawing when he realized it was a nettle.

“Truth is, I’d rather eat the muffins,” Mary admitted slyly, clacking her tape-measure shut.

Feeling the strain of standing under the afternoon sun, Pippa made her way to the lawn chair Crowley had set up for her. She fanned herself while Jaime and Mary conversed in rapid Portuguese and took notes on their fancy tablets.

Out of the breezy, cloudless blue, a flash of movement on the roof caught her attention. The hint of a swift-moving shadow vanished over the edge of the cottage’s far side, leaving her to question the wisdom of that mimosa she’d had with breakfast.

Just then, Crowley came from around the opposite side of the house. He was empty-handed this time, shielding his shade-covered eyes with an exaggerated air while he gazed upward.

“Your tiles certainly don’t need replacing,” he said. “That’s some very well-behaved moss.”

Pippa tried not to frown as he approached her, not while he was wearing that rare, winning smile.

“Roofing expert right along with the botanical, are we?” she asked, unable to suppress a shiver.

Crowley shrugged, shoving both hands in the back pockets of his dark jeans, seemingly unaware that his well-worn charcoal Bentley tee hadn’t suffered sweat-stains in the slightest.

“You pick up a bit of architectural knowledge, don’t you, mucking about people’s gardens?”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” Pippa said, squinting contritely when his tone turned anxious.

“Here,” Crowley said, removing his sunglasses, handing them to her. “No need for eye strain.”

Hands frozen on the glasses’ arms for several seconds, Pippa searched those caring, slitted eyes for some sign of deception. What she saw instead was familiar, unspoken melancholy.

“You dear thing,” she said, firmly handing the shades back to him, “whatever’s the matter?”

Crowley shook his head before putting them back on in the biggest hurry Pippa had ever seen.

Pippa’s mobile rang before he had the chance to respond. It was Rani, so Pippa took the call.

* * *

* * *
Visiting the Shambles on half-term Monday wasn’t the smartest move Uriel had ever made, and Raphael let her know it under his breath as they walked up the drive. Asshat.

“Not ideal company given our purpose,” Raphael said between clenched teeth as Aziraphale, sipping lemonade in a lawn chair while Crowley and Rob dug in the flower bed, waved.

“What a pleasant surprise,” said Aziraphale, shading his eyes. “Come to see Pippa, have you?”

“If she’s around, yeah,” Uriel said, shoving her hands deep in the pockets of her denim shorts. She wasn’t sure how to play this, especially not if Aziraphale asked why. “Is she?”

“Gran’s inside,” Rob said without turning from the planting demonstration. “It’s too warm.”

“You want the hole three or four times the length of the bulb, see?” Crowley was saying. “No more chucking them under the bushes. They might sprout and take root, but they’ll slouch something awful. At least this way you’ll get them to stand up straight.”

“Like you’re capable of doing anything straight, darling,” Raphael said, opening the front door for Uriel. He watched Rob neatly plant the bulb.

“Like it matters,” Crowley shot back, glancing up at them from behind his shades. “Uriel. Hi.”

Uriel waved at him, noting that Aziraphale had gone back to reading the magazine in his lap.

“Hey,” she said, only half smiling. “Less stressful tutorial than the manuscript stuff, huh?”

“You have no idea,” Crowley replied, tipping his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose.

“They’ll grow into lilies,” Rob volunteered, pointing at the hole he’d just filled in. “Tall.”

“You’ve done a fabulous job,” Raphael said, prodding Uriel’s shoulder till she went inside.

They found Pippa at the kitchen table, where she sat sorting through a sheaf of coupons.

“Why did I bother to clip these?” she asked, letting them scatter. “Hello, the two of you.”

Uriel pulled out the chair next to Pippa and sat down, leaning forward for the offered hug.

“Thrifty intent?” Raphael said, taking the chair opposite them. “It’s the thought that counts.”

“This feels awfully like having a sit-down with Rob’s teachers,” said Pippa. “What’s wrong?”

“Actually,” Uriel said, withdrawing her phone from her pocket, “it does have to do with…”

Pippa took the phone from Uriel’s hand as the video started to play, her expression unreadable as she watched Rob’s hands release Rando to play with Tom. After a minute, she chuckled.

“That’s quite clever,” she said proudly. “There’s no harm in budding cinematography, is there?”

“Five vids,” Raphael said. “He’s created a YouTube channel. The whole internet’s watching.”

“We found it totally by chance,” Uriel said as Pippa’s expression shifted to indistinct worry. “Cat and rodent compilations are pretty popular.”

“Rob was up the road at Home for a bit, helping feed the ducks,” Pippa sighed. “Crowley drove them back here when they were through. That’ll explain borrowing the mouse, I suppose. He’s there
often enough.”

Uriel scrolled down the list of vids, realizing that there were now six. “Huh, new upload today.”

The three of them gathered around Uriel’s phone, watching Judith’s three mostly-grown ducklings snatch cubes of fresh mango as Rob dropped them. In the background, Judith and her five sisters lay in a straw-strewn huddle, heads tucked under their wings.

“That’s Tony with the white spot on his chest, isn’t it,” Raphael said. “Quick reflexes, that one!”

“Wouldn’t put money on Bruce and Natasha,” Uriel sighed, hitting PAUSE. “It’s cute, and he never shows his face. But we thought you should know.”

“Nicola probably hasn’t a clue,” Pippa sighed, folding her arms. “That’s my daughter for you.”

“Even though Aziraphale has that book Twitter,” Raphael pressed, “it’s anonymous enough. Crowley has no web-presence I know of, although that doesn’t stop him from Googling himself.”

Unexpectedly, Pippa’s expression turned curious. “So you’re as worried about them as you are about Rob? Whatever for? They’re grown men. Maybe not sensible ones, but.”

Shaking her head, Uriel tried to come up with an explanation that wouldn’t encourage inquiry.

“They value their privacy a great deal,” she said, with a pleading glance. “You know that.”

Pippa tilted her head and narrowed her eyes, but not unkindly. “I might say the same of you.”

In uncharacteristic agitation, Raphael knocked on the tabletop. “Prudent in our line of work.”

“Which you’re ever so cagey about, darling,” said Pippa, with instant and startling sarcasm.

“That’s enough for one day,” Uriel announced, getting to her feet. “We’ve done our part.”

She grabbed Raphael’s wrist and hauled him out of the chair, too troubled to gauge Pippa’s ongoing reaction or even say goodbye. She didn’t stop until they were outside, where Crowley and Rob were digging again while Aziraphale read.

Thankfully, Raphael took over from there. “Young man, turn out your pockets,” he said.

“You said my pen’s gauche, so I doubt you want that,” Crowley said, dusting his hands off.

“Not you,” said Raphael, impatiently, snapping his fingers. “I mean our friend Robert.”

Rob stood up, sighing as if he knew what was coming. He reached into his breast pocket and produced a peacefully-sleeping Rando.

The mouse uncurled itself in his palm, opened its mouth, and licked at the air—almost a yawn.

Aziraphale leaned forward and blinked at it. “We hadn’t seen him in at least a week. How…”?

“He likes popcorn lots, remember?” Rob said, plucking a half-nibbled piece from his pocket.

Crowley rose and scooped the snuffling furball from Rob’s palm before the boy could protest.

“No more borrowing my household pest without asking, are we clear?” he said sternly to Rob.

The boy looked crestfallen, but he nodded solemnly. “Ask first. I promise, Crowley. We’re clear.”
Uriel watched as Rob threw his arms around Crowley, unable to hide the depth of her distress. “For heaven’s sake,” she said, waverin
“It’s all yours,” said Crowley, deadpan. He refilled the cup with a wave and took it back.
Aziraphale sniffed, composing himself, as if he’d remembered something terribly important.
“Sophia, have you been taking the proper supplements? You’re at what—twenty-odd weeks?”
“Just about twenty-three,” Sophia confirmed, slapping her belly. “Really kind of you to ask.”
“Tentative projections say it’s a boy,” Crowley said brightly. “Didn’t know if you heard.”
Sophia noticed that Aziraphale, rather than beaming at her, waxed more deeply concerned.
“I do hope you’ve added iron supplements to your prenatal regimen,” he said. “It’s vital.”
“Uh, yeah?” said Sophia, shrugging. “I think that’s one of the ones Dr. Rajit gave me.”
“You should take this seriously,” Aziraphale said. “At this stage, there’s high risk of anemia.”
“Oh lord, fortify this fetus,” Crowley muttered, burying his face in his arms. “Angel, knock it off.”
Sophia covered her mouth, but it was useless given her explosive laughter. “Oh my God.”
“You require thirty milligrams a day,” Aziraphale went on. “Do you have upper back pain?”
“Kinda,” Sophia said, wiping her eyes, regaining her composure. “That’s par for the course.”
“The literature I’ve been perusing advises a more supportive, ah—brassiere, in which case.”
Crowley pounded the table with both fists, raising his head. “It’s like he doesn’t hear me.”
Uselessly, Sophia doubled over laughing again. Or maybe quartered over, given her belly.
“This is no laughing matter,” said Aziraphale. “The brain and sense of hearing are more developed than ever. What music have you been—”
“Steady diet of Velvet Underground and Queen,” Crowley snapped. “Courtesy of yours truly.”
Sophia couldn’t stop giggling, and now both of them were regarding her with mild annoyance.
“It’s just, hah, fuck,” she said, rattling the basket as she leaned on it. “You guys are precious.”

* * *

Judging by the number of in-jokes, Mandy hadn’t been clothes shopping with Crowley as often as Sophia had. It was still funny as fuck to watch Crowley chuck the red shirt Sophia had just suggested back in her face.
“I mean, she’s right,” Mandy said teasingly, watching Crowley’s features pinch even further.
“Just because she’s right doesn’t mean I should wear it,” Crowley seethed. “Honest to…”

“Okay, Soph, back on task,” Mandy said, shaking Sophia by the shoulder. “This trip’s for you.”

“Marks and Sparks lingerie section sucks,” Sophia sulked. “I didn’t see anything, but Crowley’s fun to dress. I mean, look at that scarf. Look at it. What kind of statement are you even trying to make?”

Crowley adjusted it defensively. “You’re forever telling me it’s twenty-seventeen now.”

“Somebody had better tell Aziraphale,” Mandy scoffed, running her hand along hangers.

“He’ll never listen to you, and it’s just as well,” Crowley scolded, turning toward the mirror.

Sophia pulled a muted blue-and-grey collared gingham affair off the rack and thrust it at him.

“Why don’t we see how close you can get to tartan? Az will lose his mind,” she said smugly.

“Doesn’t matter what I’m wearing,” Crowley muttered, holding the shirt up under his chin.

“I don’t want to hear about what you were cooking this time, thanks,” Mandy said, hauling Sophia away. “C’mon, let’s take one more pass.”

Sophia waited in the fitting room while Mandy selected an armful of maternity bras.

“These’ll do you,” Mandy said breathlessly, shoving her choices at Sophia, and closed the door.

Sophia dropped them on the footstool and stepped up to Mandy, pushing back the hair that framed her face. Christ, she’d never been lovelier.

Mandy kissed her soft and tentative, still cautious at the fragility of whatever this was.

“So what did Adam say?” she whispered, realizing it was absurd. No one was listening.

“You’re family,” Sophia whispered back, beaming. “He says let’s see what happens.”

“I mean, he’s…” Mandy pinched her cheek. “Cute, yeah, but it’s mostly the personality.”

“We meant what we said about wanting you to move in,” Sophia insisted, “even before…”

Mandy nodded undoing the first few buttons of Sophia’s tunic. “I know you did, love.”

“I don’t like…” Sophia swallowed as Mandy undressed her. “Don’t like you alone.”

Mandy kissed Sophia’s cheek, and then fetched a tangled bra from the messy pile.

“I don’t like being alone, either,” Mandy replied with conviction. “Not anymore.”

Crowley was slouching just outside the partition when they emerged, his arms folded.

“I’m not getting anything,” he said adamantly, fussing with his scarf, “but I’ll foot your bill.” He gestured at the undergarments Sophia had picked, plus Mandy’s several tank tops. “Call it a housewarming gift.”

Realizing she was happy for the first time in months, Mandy bumped her shoulder against his.
Several days’ worth of processing had done little to demystify how Crowley felt about what he’d learned on his recent shopping excursion with the girls. He wasn’t shocked, not as such, and he didn’t disapprove. He’d never been inclined toward any such thing, but good for them.

When he told Aziraphale during their pre-company lunch prep, the result was a shattered glass.

“That’s so much change all at once,” fretted the angel. “Have they even considered the strain?”

“If it’s strain on Sophia you’re worried about, don’t,” Crowley said. “She’s the rock in that relationship. I can’t believe I have to spell it out.”

Aziraphale fetched the broom and dustpan, but got flustered. He cleared the shards with a blink.

“I hope you’re right,” he sighed, restlessly passing the implements from hand to hand. “It’s nothing to do with moral implications. I’ve been working on that, you know. It’s…Crowley, I can’t see Amanda heartbroken again. I won’t.”

“They’re grown-ups, angel,” Crowley said, putting the broom and dustpan away. “Trust them.”

“More equitable than in the old days, one should hope,” said Aziraphale, “if it’s all reciprocal.”

Crowley hadn’t even thought about that. He pulled the parsnips out of the oven, pondering.

“Polyamory’s not polygamy,” was all he managed to say. “Not that I’m an expert, mind.”

“My dear, don’t touch the breadbox,” Aziraphale advised as the doorbell rang, rushing to answer it. “Our furred friend is in there.”

“Good for Rando,” Crowley said absently, busy making up four plates. “Bad for your brioche.”

During lunch, Rani was unusually quiet, but Rashid was nattering on at such a clip he couldn’t seem to stop.

“Rani told me about your Tempest,” he said, cutting his chicken. “Three years ago?”

“It was my Tempest,” Rani insisted, pushing around her parsnips, “but they made it.”

“I only played Ariel the second weekend by accident,” Crowley said. “Emergency understudy.”

“He ought to have played the full run,” said Aziraphale. “We brought a certain…authenticity.”

Rani, still fragile in the knowledge that Rashid had intuited and forced them to reveal, gasped.

“Oh, I hadn’t even considered—flippin’ heck, d’you mean to say you knew Shakespeare?”

“Knew of him,” Crowley said cautiously, “at some remove. We were Globe regulars.”

Aziraphale looked like he had something to say about that, but all he added was, “It’s true.”
Crowley couldn’t help but notice that Rashid was absorbed in his plate. Flattering, to have impressed a Ritz veteran.

“The lemon-parmesan reduction’s too tart,” he said self-deprecatingly, holding his breath.

“That is nonsense,” said Rashid, contently, dabbing his mouth. “I could have served this.”

“They traveled the Low Countries together during his lost years?” Rani was asking Aziraphale.

The memory hit Crowley like a ghostly stab of what it contained, the searing sting far worse than watching that performance of *Hamlet* with Aziraphale from the back of the house. It had suffered for Marlowe’s absence, and so had Will.

“I’ll never forgive Deptford,” he said, digging his fingernails into his palm. “The loss—”

“Don’t,” Aziraphale murmured, clasping Crowley’s hand beneath the table, uncurling it. Crowley realized he’d been clenching his fork in the hand Aziraphale wasn’t squeezing.

“Rosemary,” he sighed, recovering himself for their company’s sake. “I used too much.”

### June: With Voluptuary Sweetness

Aziraphale shaded his eyes against a spectacularly riotous sunset. The waves were silvery and placid as he strolled the damp tide-line barefoot.

In pursuit of some object he’d seen roll in the surf, Raphael waded out knee-deep.

“Anything worthwhile?” Aziraphale called, shivering as the freezing surf covered his toes.

“Intact shell,” he said, holding it up, “but inhabited. Crowley wouldn’t evict a hermit crab.”

“Yes, best to put it back,” Aziraphale agreed, squinting as the light caught in Raphael’s hair.

Raphael lowered the creature back into the water, and then perfunctorily brushed off his hands.

“This isn’t an ordinary social call, darling. We’ve avoided the unpleasantness long enough.”

Aziraphale nodded heavily, bending to roll up his trousers. He waded out to where Raphael stood backlit in orange flame, knowing he’d never looked even half so imposing. So much for jokes about Principalities going out of style.

“Humans and our sort,” he sighed, tugging ineffectually at his waistcoat. “It’s on your mind.”

“Ever since that close call with Rob? Constantly,” Raphael admitted. “It’s one thing for a family of witches to know, but to risk exposure otherwise…”

Aziraphale closed his eyes, tightening his jaw. “Mandy also knows. We trust her implicitly.”
“I count her as a witch,” Raphael said, waving him off. “You can’t tell me that girl’s ordinary.”

“Amanda Tomlin is anything but,” replied Aziraphale. “However, quite recently, there are more.”

Unashamedly discomfited, Raphael hugged himself against the chill. “What have you done?”

“Fate would have it that Rashid, Rani’s cousin, is none other than our Rashid from the Ritz.”

“You’ve had a way of tempting fate since getting tangled up in that Eden business. He knows?”

Aziraphale resisted the urge to protest Raphael’s jab. “We remained unchanged for decades. He noticed. What were we to do, faced with his delighted realization? Rani was present.”

Raphael scowled, his eyes cold and pale. “You could’ve wiped their memories and walked out.”

“No,” insisted Aziraphale, wearily. “My days of doing that are done, and so are Crowley’s.”

“You would risk this fragile, perilous accord we’ve struck with Adam—so many times over?”

“What use is an accord without room for amendments? The Arrangement, for instance, served—”

“The Arrangement was an outlier, and should not be counted,” retorted Raphael, all bitterness.

“You underestimate the extent to which I’ve perused Know Your Meme,” Aziraphale warned.

Raphael laughed viciously. “Oh, did you mean: the extent to which you’ve gone to get laid?”

“Bold of you to insult my intelligence,” Aziraphale said. “Didn’t Uriel have to teach you—”

“No good will come of this,” Raphael seethed. “I cannot, will not let her come to harm.”

“What can they do to us? Truly?” Aziraphale demanded. “Go on morning talk television and out us to the world? No one would believe it. They’d be laughed right off the air.”

Raphael stared at him, eyes wide with the kind of sorrow that he’d only ever seen in Crowley.

“They could shun us,” he said, arms spread as if to let the light slip away. “We’d lose them.”

Never, not in millennia, not in all of Time and Creation, had Aziraphale seen Raphael in tears.

“My dear boy,” he said, wading until their toes touched, “I understand far better than you think.”

“Then why do you risk it?” Raphael gasped, latching onto him. “Over and over again, why?”

“Because once, not so long ago, Crowley asked me to try,” Aziraphale said. “And so I do.”

* * *

In a fortunate turn of events, Nicola agreed to drive Pippa two hours up to Folkestone—on the
condition she’d take the train halfway back in a few days’ time. That was fair. It helped that Madame Tracy and Sergeant Shadwell had agreed to put her up for two nights.

Pippa and Marjorie—a profound gesture of trust, when the trade-alias fell away—had a lot of catching up to do. They spent the first evening playing cards and disabusing Shadwell of the notion that Pippa was a shameless cheat. She had been in sore need of a laugh.

They spent the second evening on the patio with glasses of chilled sangria, staring out at the Strait of Dover.

“Tell me how everything’s been with Anathema’s darling girls,” Marjorie said, fanning herself.

“Sophia’s not due for another two months, but she looks fit to burst,” said Pippa. “The twins are fine. Janet’s still with that lovely graphics designer, Dani. Natalie’s ever so keen on her career.”

“Petula came up from Barbados for a week this spring. I’m always afraid for her there, so very anxious, you know—but my brother’s getting on in years, and he’s speaking to her again.”

“I know you said it pained her to think she’d lost her dad. I’m glad he’s come ’round, finally.”

“Such a dreadful thing, isn’t it, people who turn against their own flesh? Son or daughter, what does it matter? Their children are alive,” Marjorie said wistfully, looking out to sea.

“Petula was a daughter to you,” Pippa replied, patting her hand, “and a fine mother you made.”

Marjorie made a dismissive noise, shrugging. “It was no posh living, Drawing Aside the Veil.”

“Maybe not, but you kept her fed and clothed and loved till she got that Cambridge scholarship.”

“You’ll have me too big for my britches, love, talkin’ like that,” Marjorie sighed. “How’s Rob?”

“Full of the devil,” said Pippa, with a rueful laugh. “He started up a YouTube channel.”

“No wonder, with the company you keep,” Marjorie chuckled. “It’s the devil you know.”

“Oh, my boys up the road had nothing to do with it,” Pippa reassured her. “They were rattled, too. It’s no good, a child unsupervised online. Crowley’s ever so protective.”

Marjorie had gone quiet, and she was searching Pippa’s eyes with a sort of hazy disbelief.

“Gracious,” she started, and then shook her head. “Do you mean to say you don’t—oh.”

There it was again, that frisson of warning down Pippa’s spine. She sat forward, reaching.

“Funny you should mention it, that streak of mischief in them—if that’s what you meant?”

Shaking her head again, Marjorie looked away. Her dark brown skin shone in the falling sun.

“You haven’t seen them as I have,” she said, low and distant, “and you won’t until it’s time.”

Pippa shivered as a breeze finally swept through. The air was cooling faster than she liked.

“They came from London for a fresh start. Now, they’re like sons to me. That’s all I know.”

“What you know is for the best,” Marjorie replied. “Love them for who they’ve become.”

Oh, Crowley, Pippa thought. What are you still, dear heart, that you must hide?
Taking off her oversized sunglasses, Uriel flipped onto her stomach and groaned into the towel.

“You’ll burn if you’re not vigilant,” Crowley warned, tossing the sunscreen at her. “With this, you can be as lazy as you like. I couldn’t do without napping in the sun.”

“Of course you can’t,” Uriel said teasingly, scratching the tip of her nose. “You’re a snake.”

“Sure, I can be,” Crowley said flippantly, “but I’m not right now. Haven’t shifted in a while.”

Uriel turned her head to squint at him. He lay beside her with his chin propped on his arms, his eyes covered by those perpetual, inscrutable shades. She pulled them off his face.

“Why can’t you change your eyes?” she murmured. “I never understood, but then I realized…”

Crowley shrugged, but his demeanor was no longer indifferent. “Some curses are like that.”

“I’ve seen you face strangers without your glasses, never for long,” Uriel said, reaching to clasp his hand. “Sometimes they react, and I assume you want them to. But sometimes they don’t.”

“Glamors are so much work to maintain,” Crowley sighed, “so I don’t use them that often.”

“Cheers to that,” Uriel agreed fervently. “Thank fuck the wings come with one by default.”

Manifested and spread in an instant, Crowley’s wings shaded them from the relentless sun.

“Benefits of a private beach,” he pointed out. “Who cares what humans see from a distance?”

Uriel rolled onto her back, staring up at his pale feathers, raising one hand to brush his pinion.

“It makes no sense,” she said, “that your eyes changed forever, but you got to keep these.”

Crowley let his head drop to his hands, peering at her. In the shade, his gaze was luminous.

“What makes you think they weren’t always this color?” he asked, painfully earnest as ever.

“Guess I’d be a snake with slitted blue eyes,” Uriel said, smiling. “Wouldn’t that be cool?”

“If it had been you instead of me,” Crowley said, “we might not have made a mess of things.”

“Nah,” Uriel said, patting him. “If it had been me up that tree, the mess would’ve been worse.”

“You would have liked…” Crowley trailed off. “I think of Eve more and more these days.”

“Little wonder, dude. You’re surrounded by bright young things who remind you of her.”

“Of them. I swear, will the lot of you go on misgendering them for all eternity?”

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“Little wonder, dude. You’re surrounded by bright young things who remind you of her.”

“Of them. I swear, will the lot of you go on misgendering them for all eternity?”
“Right, sorry,” Uriel muttered. “Given who I shacked up with, you’d think I knew better.”

“Nuh,” Crowley mumbled, closing his eyes, winching in his wings. “Rafe’s one of a kind.”

“He’s been she before, but then it’s he again before you know it. Also, I don’t think he cares.”

“I’ve never considered it,” Crowley said quietly. “Whether I care, I mean. I’m what I am.”

Overcome with affection, Uriel rolled over and hugged him until he relaxed in her embrace.

“You’re exactly what you are,” she said, “and who you are. That’s why I love you.”

Crowley sighed, spat sand, and buried his face against her shoulder. “Don’t make me say it.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Uriel reassured him, stroking his hair until he dozed off.

* * *

Balanced precariously on her belly, Sophia’s laptop flickered for the third time in as many minutes. She cursed, nervously hitting SAVE.

“What’s the matter?” Anathema asked from across the room, where she sat in Newt’s favorite armchair. She was rummaging through an ancient, tape-reinforced shoebox, the contents of which clinked.

“This machine will croak any second,” Sophia muttered, “and I’m going to lose this story.”

“We’ll ask your father and Adam to have a look at it when they come back, how’s that?”

“If Dad touches it when he’s tired, it might just explode,” Sophia grumbled. “What’s that?”

Anathema rattled the box with a look of long-suffering responsibility. “Agnes’s nails.”

“Oh, right,” Sophia yawned, trying to shift position on the sofa. “What’s the legend? Her ghost drops one every time she visits a family member, and we’ve saved them up?”

“It’s not just family members, if my suspicions correct,” Anathema said. “Marjorie gave me one of the ones in here. She found it on her floor one morning this past winter.”

“So what?” Sophia scoffed, giving up on her endeavor. “Old roofing nails are commonplace.”

“Not one that turns up after your former-Witchfinder husband insists he was visited by Agnes.”

“Shadwell dreams about Agnes? Creepy,” Sophia said, giving up on writing for the time being.

“She was his organization’s great failure,” Anathema reminded her. “That would haunt anyone.”

“What are you going to do with those tetanus hazards, then?” Sophia asked, rubbing her belly.
“He’s been restless today, hasn’t he?” Anathema asked, regarding one of the nails thoughtfully.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t answer my question,” said Sophia, feeling tetchy. “Why so morbid?”

“I was thinking,” Anathema said, “that it’s high time I did something with these. I’m no carpenter, but I was capable enough with a hammer to keep Jasmine Cottage standing.”

Sophia was suddenly overcome with curiosity. Why hadn’t Agnes dropped a nail the morning she’d seen her in the mirror? Didn’t auditory hallucinations count? Had she only seen herself?

“Is the nail from Marjorie the only one you’ve confirmed in the hands of a non-family member?”

“Yes,” Anathema said, sounding disappointed, “but if she haunts Shadwell, she might haunt others.” She paused. “Others who were involved in Lower Tadfield, at least. Anyway, she dropped one for me when you were young. My regret’s that I didn’t keep it separate.”

Agnes, Sophia thought, sinking against her pillows, where else have you been?

* * *

Mandy finished transcribing the folio in front of her, setting Aziraphale’s bookbinding bone aside. She pulled off her white cotton gloves.

“I don’t think this’ll be as much use as what’s in those modern pregnancy books,” she said.

“We mustn’t leave pages unturned on account of age,” Aziraphale said, still in his seat, methodically scanning the manuscript propped in front of him. “Wisdom has always existed; the trick’s sifting it from the dross.”

Wandering over to stand at his shoulder, Mandy squinted at the text. “That’s about midwifery.”

“One can’t be too prepared,” Aziraphale said vaguely, turning the leaf with his gloved hand.

“Mate, are you serious?” Mandy asked, swallowing mirth. “In case you have to—”

“Labor knows neither rhyme, nor reason,” Aziraphale said, irked. “Why, you’d do well to prepare since you now live under the same roof.”

Mandy reached around him and closed the manuscript, murmuring apologies for her bare fingers.

“You’re way too stressed about this,” she said. “Worse than me and Adam, believe it or not.”

Aziraphale removed his gloves and tossed them on the desk. “What distraction do you suggest?”

“You’ve got six daughters and three grandchicks already,” Mandy said. “Or did you forget?”

“True,” Aziraphale sighed. “I’ve been remiss in spending time with them. To the shed, then.”

After making a pit-stop in the kitchen for the mealworm container, Mandy dragged Aziraphale out to
Crowley was stalking the hedge-row with his pruning shears, giving the shrubs a good telling-off.

“We’re gonna spend some time with the ducks,” Mandy said, waving at him as they passed.

“I’ve left the door open,” Crowley said, zeroing in on a rogue branch. “They might be out.”

Mandy had to dash to catch up with Aziraphale, who had already located the entire gaggle. They were foraging on the grassy rise where the crab-grass grew. She counted all nine.

“Oi, ladies, gents,” Mandy called, rattling the worms. “Want something wiggling? C’mere…”

Aziraphale froze where he stood, watching as the ducks made a flapping racket and ran to her. Like she’d always done, Mandy flopped down in the grass. She scattered some worms in front of her, unsurprised that audacious, aggressive Tamar had beat out the rest. The brazen fowl nibbled Mandy’s bare ankle, complaining stridently about having to share.

“She wouldn’t dare draw blood when it’s you,” Aziraphale said, approaching only once Mandy was surrounded. “Which is no small miracle.”

Mandy hugged the three ducklings that had crowded in her lap for hand-feeding. Not so small anymore. Judith wasn’t concerned, plucking worms from the grass as greedily as her sisters.

“Tamar would never hurt Soph or Crowley, either,” Mandy pointed out. “Or you, come to it.”

Perhaps heartened, Aziraphale dropped to a crouch next to the container, reaching into it. The sensation must have startled him, given his perturbed gasp. He scattered another two handfuls of sawdust and worms, his look of distaste utterly comical.

“He didn’t think this would be in the job description,” Crowley remarked, finally joining them.

“Oh, I still don’t,” said Aziraphale, tipping backward with a huff. Defeated, he sat in the grass.

Jemima, Ruth, Lilith, Tamar, Judith, and Eve flapped over to investigate. While most of them ate, Tamar and Jemima plucked at Aziraphale’s cuffs.

“Aziraphale, for heaven’s sake,” Crowley chided, dropping the shears. “They’ve missed you.”

“I suppose,” said Aziraphale, put-upon, but he scooped them both into his lap. “There you are.”

Mandy left him to it, turning her attention back to the three noisy teenagers perched on her legs.

“Your granddad needs the practice,” she said, grinning as Natasha’s sleek head butted her chin.

* * *

Undressed, Crowley lay on his back in the freshly-remade bed. He listened to the shower,
appreciative of the steam that wafted through the door.

“I doubt you need to do that,” he said, raising his voice. “Mealworms don’t carry the plague.”

“Some of us prefer to clean up the old-fashioned way,” Aziraphale shouted. “You could join me.”

Crowley sat up and swung his legs over the side of the mattress, considering the invitation. He enjoyed showers, but he’d wished himself clean post-gardening and opted for a nap instead.

“I swam with Uriel a couple days ago,” he said contrarily. “I don’t feel like getting wet.”

The shower only ran for another half-minute. Aziraphale stepped into the bedroom, not even bothering with a towel as he wished himself from dripping to appealingly damp.

Taking a moment to look at Aziraphale, really look at him, was something Crowley hadn’t done of late. What was it he’d read about not taking one’s partner for granted? Had he become that much of a cliché?

Usually confident to a breathtaking fault, Aziraphale stopped hesitantly in front of Crowley.

“Have you forgotten what I look like?” he asked, trying for levity as he stroked Crowley’s cheek. “Decided it’s time to re-evaluate, as it were?”

Dazedly, Crowley tipped his chin up as Aziraphale ran his thumb along Crowley’s lower lip. “I find you so attractive, it’s…” He struggled for words, wanting nothing so much as to pull Aziraphale to him and abandon thought. “It’s embarrassing. You’re everything I was meant to be.”

“Would you sell yourself so short,” Aziraphale said, bending to catch Crowley’s mouth in a crushing kiss. “How is it you’re so impossibly beautiful,” he went on, pushing at Crowley’s shoulders until he scooted back and sprawled, “and it took me until…when was it, ah, the Inquisition…to notice.”

Crowley thought about the state he’d been in and decided that was rather more of an eyeful than Aziraphale had gotten since Eden. In the Beginning, surely, they hadn’t yet learned desire.

“You could’ve acted, angel,” he gasped, arching as Aziraphale mouthed at his neck. “Easily.”

“That would have been taking advantage,” Aziraphale said between kisses, “and you know it.”

“Would’ve welcomed the distraction,” Crowley said, savoring the heat of him. “I’ve loved…”

“We’re forever lying to ourselves about the when,” Aziraphale soothed, raking Crowley’s hair back so that he’d turn his head. “I’ve loved you from the moment you questioned everything I’d ever held dear,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “You asked me to give the Garden a chance. I did it, Crowley. I didn’t know why at the time, but now—”

“Aziraphale, can we,” Crowley said, jolting at his increasingly fervent pitch, “ah, talk later?”

With a curt laugh, Aziraphale nodded. He tugged at Crowley’s hips, angling them such that Crowley shivered and hitched a leg around him.

“Never know what I want with you,” Crowley hissed between his teeth, “because I want it all.”

“I had ideas in the direction of sucking you off, but I’m open to suggestions,” Aziraphale said.

Crowley was the one to laugh this time, his voice catching as Aziraphale ground down harder. He
ran his fingers through Aziraphale’s hair, at a loss. Anything, *everything* was bliss.

“We got better at this, like…I can hold off until you make up your blessed mind. Sss’nice.”

Aziraphale slowed his movements, so subtle they were nearly still. “This is all I could ask.”

Dragging his hands back to Aziraphale’s hairline, Crowley slid them down to frame his face.

“Mmm,” he managed, dry-mouthed and drunk on sensation, “gonna come if you keep that up.”

Taking decisive action, which was just as maddeningly attractive as his pride, Aziraphale shifted off Crowley. He spread Crowley’s legs wide and, without pause, put his mouth on him.

Crowley’s vision blanked to the static glow behind his eyelids. He shook, letting his arms fall.

Aziraphale was massaging his wrists and resting his cheek against Crowley’s belly as the tremors died down, as patient as ever. He kissed just beneath Crowley’s navel, licking a spot he’d missed.

Crowley heaved for air, flinging one limp, exhausted arm across his forehead. “That’s not fair.”

Sensing Crowley’s vague bout of insecurity, Aziraphale crawled up and lay down beside him.

“Whatever Hell may have intended,” he said, nuzzling Crowley’s cheek, “that’s not what you’re *for*. I’m only good at this because I know you.”

Stroking Aziraphale’s flushed cheek in kind, besotted, Crowley rolled over and kissed him quiet.

“Good job incompetence is your number-one kink, isn’t it,” he said, taking Aziraphale in hand.

Aziraphale groaned and squeezed his eyes shut, pushing into Crowley’s grasp. “The nerve.”

“Yep,” Crowley said, watching with a satisfied smirk as he came without further warning.

With what faint presence of mind he had, Aziraphale pulled Crowley close and sighed.

“How terrible for me,” he said fondly, catching his breath, cleaning them up with a thought, “to love somebody I’m not even supposed to like.”

Crowley rested his forehead against Aziraphale’s, finding none of his habitual sarcasm adequate.

“D’you realize,” he said, “that we never tire of things humans get bored with on the regular?”

Aziraphale shrugged, lazily basking. “I’ve always assumed it’s that we don’t tire of each other.”

Pressing several fingers to Aziraphale’s lips, Crowley dropped a kiss at the corner of his mouth.

“That’s a relief,” he said quietly, “because you know one day each other is all we’ll have left.”

Aziraphale took hold of Crowley’s fingers, curling them, tilting Crowley’s hand to kiss the back.

“As it once was,” he said with no trace of regret, “it shall be again. Crowley, you are enough.”

“Didn’t used to think so,” said Crowley, drowsily, “but if an angel says it, then it must be true.”

Aziraphale snorted and gave Crowley’s backside a sharp tap. “Now, look, there’s no call for that.”

“Smack dab in the afterglow, and you’ll still find a way to spoil my fun,” Crowley groused.
Yawning, Aziraphale shoved between Crowley’s shoulder blades until he lay his head down.

“Wasn’t it you who sold me on the virtues of sleep? You’re the one ruining the moment.”

Crowley inhaled against Aziraphale’s neck, finding words easy. “That’s daft. I love you.”

On waking later, Crowley noted by the clock on the nightstand that two hours had passed.

Aziraphale dozed with his perpetually unkempt wings drooping over the side of the bed.

Stretching, Crowley got up without going to the trouble of transformation. If Aziraphale stirred, he’d fall back and whisper reassurance. He ought to have done the whole sneaking out of bed thing like that from the start.

In the kitchen, silent save for Crowley’s bare feet on the tile, Rando was waiting on the sink.

“I can always count on you for a told-you-so,” Crowley said with reproach, filling the kettle.

**July: With the Flickering Tongue**

Bastille Day was of little concern to Aziraphale, save for the fact that he recalled the commemorated events with a degree of nostalgia. He and Crowley had both been in France at the time, but they’d left the humans to their own turbulent devices.

Since it was Friday, Pippa had Rob staying over. She had declared an impromptu movie night.

Crowley had wedged himself between the arm of Pippa’s plush sofa and Aziraphale’s side, dozing with his head tucked against Aziraphale’s shoulder. He had already seen *Deadpool* with Mandy.

“Bless him, but he’d sleep through anything,” Pippa said mildly, fast-forwarding to the post-credits scene at Rob’s nattering insistence. Softly, she added: “So brooding today. Has he been well?”

“Yes, of course,” Aziraphale replied, not quite frowning at her. “What made you think to ask?”

“There’s that sadness about him again, comes and goes,” Pippa sighed. “Pains me to see it.”

“Be quiet,” Rob said, snatching the remote control away from his grandmother. “Watch.”

Aziraphale tilted his chin, his jaw brushing Crowley’s warm forehead. He held him closer.

“He’s anxious about Sophia, as you might expect. It’s all I can do to stop him fretting.”

Pippa gave him a withering, don’t-you-start-with-me look. “That’s not what Soph says.”

Staring at the ceiling, Aziraphale attempted to find an excuse for his dishonest projection.

“I shouldn’t keep after her so,” he said, defeated, “but Crowley would never recover if…”

“It’s the twenty-first century,” Pippa reminded him. “People survive childbirth all the time.”
“It wasn’t always thus,” said Aziraphale, feeling peevish. “It’s still one of the leading killers of humans in developing countries.”

Releasing Rob so he could sit closer to the television and echo the dialogue, Pippa reached over and patted Aziraphale’s elbow. She looked earnest now, less like she was taking the piss.

“With parents, sisters, and partners like she’s got, all shall be well,” she said reassuringly.

“And all manner of thing shall be well,” Aziraphale murmured, Eliot’s refrain inescapable.

“Maybe it’s my own sadness reflected,” Pippa said quietly. “We’re coming on four years.”

Ah, Aziraphale thought, rubbing Crowley’s arm when he twitched. Harold.

“Perhaps a gathering of friends in his memory?” he suggested. “We’d keep it low-key.”

Pippa shook her head. “You two hosting my seventy-fifth birthday come August is enough.”

Crowley had awakened. The brush of his eyelashes, sluggish at first, grew rapid.

“Is there anything else we can do?” Aziraphale asked. “You need only name it.”

“My only wish is to see him again,” Pippa said wistfully, “but you have no say in that.”

Twitching again, Crowley splayed his fingers at Aziraphale’s hip as if to catch himself mid-fall. He’d begun to breathe erratically, ribcage expanding and contracting against Aziraphale’s side.

“Don’t think about it,” Aziraphale whispered, the half-formed words pressed like a kiss to Crowley’s forehead. My love, it was never your fault.

“Let’s speak of happier things,” Pippa said, touching the back of Crowley’s hand. “How is the garden? The ducklings? Your apples and roses?”

Crowley sat up, so hazy-eyed that Aziraphale wasn’t even positive that he was fully awake.

“The Garden,” he echoed, the emphasis undetectable to anyone else present. “Seriously?”

Pippa regarded him with confusion. “Thought I’d ask, since you’ve been so keen on mine?”

Shaking himself, Crowley licked the backs of his teeth and tried again. “Sorry, they’re great.”

What’s the matter with you? Aziraphale sent urgently, nudging him in tense concern.

Technically, Crowley replied, masking his upset with a yawn, we had say in it.

“Stop,” Aziraphale murmured, drawing Crowley back against his chest. “Are you feeling ill?”

Pippa grabbed her cane and got to her feet, waving at the kitchen. “Maybe some water?”

“That’s kind, but no,” Crowley said, squirming from beneath Aziraphale’s arm. “I’ll get it.”

Resuming her seat beside Aziraphale, Pippa watched him stalk to the loo instead of the kitchen. Rob put the television on pause, stood up, and stared after Crowley. He turned, eyes questioning.

“Gran, let’s watch the ones that don’t make him feel sad. No blood and monsters. No fire.”
"No fire," Aziraphale agreed, leaning on his knees, face covered with both hands. “Next time.”

* * *

Seeing Crowley in fragile condition several nights ago had, to put it succinctly, not been Pippa’s first rodeo. She’d been reminded of nothing so much as the time he turned up on her doorstep barefoot with a packed bag, back when he and Aziraphale had fought.

It had scarcely occurred to her until now that she hadn’t been clear on what the row was about.

Ringing Crowley up on a morning when she knew Aziraphale was helping the Bhatias repaint the theater lobby was easily done. He picked up on the third ring, sounding winded.

“Hallo,” Crowley said, self-consciously clearing his throat. “Sorry about that. Jude’s brats didn’t want to go back outside, so there was a chase.”

“I thought you might be at a loose end today,” said Pippa. “Won’t you come ’round for tea?”

Crowley was silent for several seconds, and then sighed. “We’re not having a domestic.”

“I didn’t say you were,” Pippa replied, keeping her tone light, “but something’s amiss.”

“Yeah,” Crowley said hesitantly. “Adam rang yesterday. Sophia’s latest exam turned up high blood pressure and protein-heavy urine test. Likely pre-eclampsia, so she’s on aspirin, calcium supplements, and bed rest. I was going to go over, but then the kids got loose and—”

“Shhh,” Pippa said, cutting him off as his words spiraled out. “I’ll grab a taxi and nip over.”

“If it’s no trouble,” Crowley admitted, sounding relieved, “I would appreciate the company.”

For the entirety of her short ride, Pippa attempted to puzzle out the conflicting information. Something had been wrong since long before Sophia’s troubling news. She thought back to the day she’d had Jaime and Mary come around for an estimate.

The shadow on the roof haunted her. If it had been human, then Crowley was the only culprit.

Resolutely, Pippa put the matter out of her head, paid the driver, and got out of the taxi. She turned on the shoulder of the road, planting her cane.

The cottage door was already open.

“Not as hot as it’s been, but I don’t trust that for an instant,” Crowley said, lingering there.

Getting up the hellebore-lined walk was slow going, but the welcome that awaited was worth it. Crowley’s frame seemed leaner than before, but bony as ever. She squeezed him and let go.

“Before you ask if I’ve been eating enough, the answer’s no, not really,” he said, helping her cross the kitchen. “Cooking’s all well and good, but nothing tastes right.”
“What does Aziraphale say?” Pippa asked, touched to note that the tea service was ready.

“That it tastes fine,” Crowley said, helping her into her seat. “I know where the flaw lies.”

Pippa tapped the tabletop while Crowley filled both their mugs. “It’s everything at once.”

Crowley set the teapot down and stared at her. He looked like his focus had scattered.

“I hadn’t thought of it like that,” he said, “but it would go a long way to explaining.”

“Explaining?” Pippa prompted, hoping she’d finally chased the right emotional lead.

“Well, think about it,” Crowley said, reaching for the creme. “Sophia’s due-date is just past August twenty-fifth, which is the anniversary of Harold’s death. And it’s…” He poured half the tiny vessel’s contents into his mug, his jaw tightening. “Historically, it’s a busy day.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Pippa said, taking the creme from him. She emptied the rest.

“Fifteen-thirty,” Crowley began, spooning sugar into his mug. “Birth of Ivan the Terrible, look how that turned out for Russia. Eighteen twenty-five, Uruguay declares independence. That’s an improvement, though, if you ask me. Nineteen-thirty, Sean Connery comes into the world, which is probably the high-point of August twenty-fifths. Nineteen forty-four, the Liberation of Paris. That was…it must have been quite the spectacle, not to mention stressful. Nineteen-ninety, there was…” He took a desperate swallow of tea. “No, ninety-one was when there was something with a famous race-car driver. Can’t sort trivia to save my life.”

For whatever strange reason, Pippa was hung up on the way he’d spoken of nineteen forty-four.

“Tell me about Paris,” she said hopefully, sipping her unsweetened tea. “My memory’s failing.”

Just like that, Crowley got a far-off look. For nearly half a minute, he didn’t blink even once.

“There’s something about the light that never changes. The way it falls over everything that’s been there since time out of mind. You can’t say that about London. No, London changes. The revolts and plagues and fires, relentless—” He stopped, returning to himself. “Your memory’s failing?”

Pippa nodded, blinking back tears. The knot in her throat and the chill down her spine collided.

“That’s where Harold took me for our honeymoon. Paris, I mean. I haven’t been back since, but you…and your travels, you and your knack for every last detail. I’m in awe.”

Crowley was looking at her strangely, as if he didn’t quite know her. “Tell me about Harold.”

“The two of you never did talk much, did you,” Pippa murmured. “Always one for the surface pleasantries when it came to strangers. Harold, I mean. Eight years between your arrival and when he passed. Time’s nothing to me now, what when he’s not sat in his chair making puns about the paper and fussing about how Nicola never comes home. He was funny, is the thing, but he didn’t show it—not to anyone who wasn’t me or Nic. He was dashing in Paris, looked so handsome by that light you mentioned. He loved art, would you ever guess? He wanted to see every gallery in the city. To hell with museums when there were undiscovered treasures—”

“What about his life before you met?” Crowley asked, the words clipped as he forced them out.

Nodding, Pippa wiped her nose on the napkin. “In and out of scrapes,” she said. “Let it suffice.”

Crowley was staring into his mug, lips taut. “I know the type,” he said. “Really takes me back.”
Unable to bear it any longer, Pippa reached across the table and took hold of his cool hands.

“Please,” she said, squeezing his fingers when he wouldn’t look up. “I’m beyond caring. Maybe I never cared at all. Just gave up when I saw your smile. Dear heart, please. What is it the two of you did?”

Unexpectedly, Crowley’s eyes flicked up to meet hers. He laced their fingers, a last hesitation.

“We were enemy agents who went rogue,” he said. “We chose each other. We chose you.”

Pippa didn’t bother to restrain her tears, not when he was no better off. “That’ll suffice, too.”

* * *

Uriel ran to the door after the first barrage sounded: Crowley’s frantic fists and strained voice.

“This is bad. This is very bad. I don’t care which of you comes to the door, because—again, this is bad, and—” Crowley took a forced pause for breath. “Actually, no, I want—”

“I’m here, jeez,” Uriel gasped, staggering as Crowley fell into her when she opened the door.

“Is Rafe around?” Crowley asked. “I know I said either of you, but actually this is more your division. In a manner of speaking.”

“No,” Uriel said, throwing the deadbolt. She pulled Crowley into the living room by one bony wrist. “He’s on one of his random-ass joyrides. He loves that bike more than me.”

“I doubt that,” Crowley said, collapsing on the end of the sofa. “Okay. I’m about to run something by you that you’re not going to like, but I need you to hear me out.”

“One sec,” Uriel said. She went to the kitchen and grabbed two glass bottles, not even paying attention to which labels she’d pulled. “No offense, but I don’t wanna be sober.”

Crowley studied the bottle she handed him. “One Strongbow’s not going to do it.”

“I’m a fuckin’ lightweight when it comes to cider,” she said, flipping off the cap. “Go.”

Crowley did the same, taking a pained swig. “Tanith said Harold Morrison was in Hell.”

“Yeah,” Uriel confirmed. “I was in the Bentley with you when we had her on the radio.”

“Yeah,” Uriel confirmed. “I was in the Bentley with you when we had her on the radio.”

“In order to pacify Mandy’s concern about Harold being, well, damned,” Crowley continued feverishly, swallowing hard, “Tanith talked about some kind of general amnesty right after Tadfield, thankfully, went down like a lead balloon. Anyone could switch sides if they wanted, right?”

“Uh-huh,” Uriel said grimly. “That’s how Asmodai ended up building spy-tech for Gabriel.”

Crowley waved his hand in the air and took another sip. “What I’m not clear on is whether it applied
to humans who died after the cock-up. She made it sound like it made some kind of difference to the, uh, quality of existence down there, which…” He squeezed his eyes shut and drank deep. “It was never what you’d call great. Not for me. Not for most of the humans, either. I feel like I should have pressed the issue.”

Uriel set her bottle on the coffee table, arms spread, wondering where he meant to take this.

“Listen, I don’t know anything more about it than what she said on the call. Why is this bad?”

Leaning forward, Crowley muffled what might have been a strangled scream in both hands.

“Pippa’s not doing well. The other night, Aziraphale suggested a gathering on the anniversary of Harold’s death. Which is also the anniversary of when we decided we’d rather be erased from existence fighting side by side, which fortunately didn’t happen. Anyway, she said no, but Aziraphale asked if there was anything else we could do. She said she wanted to see Harold again, wistful joke, of course we have no say…”

The pieces slid into place with wrenching clarity, enough to make Uriel decide the rest of the bottle had to go down her gullet this instant. Leave it to the demon with a heart of gold to blame himself for the status of a soul he hadn’t even personally procured.

“Are you plotting some kind of, like, afterlife jailbreak heist with Tanith’s collusion—after which you need me to convince Azrael to let Harold, I dunno, hang around here as a ghost?”

Crowley huffed in frustration, shaking his head. “D’you think I’m reckless? Stupid? Both?”

Uriel could think of any number of answers he wouldn’t like, so she shook her head, too.

“Then why are you running all of this by me? Why don’t you ask for Aziraphale’s help?”

“Okay, let me put this in simpler terms. What I want is for Pippa and Harold to be together again when…when she finally…” Crowley sucked in his breath and blinked rapidly at the ceiling. “Don’t make this harder for me than it already is.”

“Oh,” Uriel said, reaching for him. “Oh, honey. I gotcha. That shit hits right where it hurts.”

Crowley lowered his chin and said shakily, “We both know Pippa isn’t in Hell’s bad books.”

“I see your problem,” Uriel said, sliding her arm around him. “Aziraphale can’t do squat.”

“Right, and he’d blow a gasket if he knew what I was trying to do. The key here is Hell. The people who fired me, but with whom I still have ties. Dagon’s fond of me. Strike one. He’s loyal, even—strike two, if any of the brass are paying attention—but I don’t for an instant think he’d just transfer a soul to Heaven because I asked nicely. The contracts don’t work like that.”

“And you had a hand in making sure they don’t,” Uriel sighed. “Learn, guys.”

Nodding miserably, Crowley polished off the rest of his cider. “Bargains,” he said. “Ones you can’t get out of, usually, not if you’re a piddling human. Demon to demon, though—there’s your actual loophole. *Quid pro quo*, tit for tat, *et cetera*. I need leverage with Dagon, and I just…don’t have it. What have I ever done for him? He doesn’t owe me a favor.”

Suddenly and fiercely, Uriel missed Tanith. She missed Tanith with every atom of her being, wished she could hold her again, but knew that part of Adam’s bargain in bringing her back—

* * *

Sophia tapped her fingers against the hem of the cotton sheet, counting the minutes.

She’d read everything Adam had brought her—mostly those hilarious old *New Aquarian* issues of his he’d salvaged from his parents’ attic—and Mandy’s puzzle-books borrowed from Aziraphale were dull as fuck.

Footsteps in the hall diverted her attention from picking at fabric. Eagerly, she looked up.

“You’ve got a visitor, babe,” Mandy announced, unceremoniously ushering Crowley in.

“You’re, er, welcome to stay,” Crowley told her as she turned to leave. “We like you.”

“Nah,” Mandy said, waving him off, pulling the door shut behind her. “You two dish.”

Sophia beckoned Crowley, pointing to the chair Adam had set alongside the bed.

“Sit,” she ordered. “I’ve had only Mum’s swear-ridden texts for company. Whatever she’s making out in the shed, it’s breaking her.”

“I couldn’t find anything more interesting,” Crowley said apologetically, handing her a Tesco tote bag crammed with some of his crumbling *National Geographic* issues. “I would’ve brought Jude and Tamar, but something tells me your nursemaids wouldn’t approve.”

“I like that Adam gets to be a nursemaid,” Sophia said wickedly, setting the bag next to the pile of pillows she lounged in. “So, tell me what’s up.”

Crowley shook his head, not quite smiling. “Aziraphale’s working on the theater with Rani and Rashid. Means I’m getting mornings with the girls.”

“I wonder if Tony and Bruce’ll fly off when they’re grown,” Sophia said. “Drakes are solitary.”

“Natasha would get to be an only child,” Crowley replied, “and that would suit her just fine.”

Taking stock of him, Sophia couldn’t help but notice that he seemed less put-together than ever. He hadn’t even taken off his sunglasses, something he would’ve done moments earlier alone in a room with her. She reached for them, her hand falling short.

“Are you hiding from me?” she asked teasingly, but she couldn’t quell the anxiety in her throat.

Hesitantly, Crowley removed his shades. The dark circles beneath his yellow eyes threw them into even sharper relief than usual.

“Oh jeez,” said Sophia, unhappily. “Haven’t you been sleeping? You know my prognosis is excellent, yeah, as long as I do what Dr. Rajit says?”
Crowley nodded, fussing with the scarf he’d been wearing all summer. “Yeah. Swell.”

“Don’t you do that,” Sophia chided, slapping the mattress. “If I’m not the problem, then—”

“It’s Pippa,” Crowley cut in, with a hunted look. “She’s thinking of Harold every second.”

“And you’re thinking of her,” said Sophia, understanding. “That must be hard. I’m sorry.”

“Listen,” Crowley began, and then swallowed. “I need to ask your forgiveness. Pre-emptively.”

“If you’re about to suggest a bunch of baby names,” Sophia said, “it’ll be tough. But maybe I’ll find it my heart to grant you absolution.”

Crowley actually laughed at that, pained and genuine. “No, it’s worse. Much, much worse.”

Smoothing both hands over her belly as the child kicked, Sophia took her turn to swallow.

“There’s something I’ve got to try to do,” Crowley said, “and it involves contacting Hell.”

“No,” said Sophia, instantly, not even having to consider her stance. “Crowley, don’t.”

“It won’t be as bad as you think,” Crowley went on, sounding unconvinced of his own words. “You’ve met Dagon and Tanith. They’re pretty decent for demons, remember?”

“I know how this shit works,” Sophia muttered, narrowing her eyes. “It’s all about bargains.”

Crowley nodded fearfully, glancing sidelong out the window. “Bargains. Yeah,” he agreed.

Fretful and furious, overwhelmed with hormones and having been cooped up, Sophia hit him full-force with the strongest psychic inquiry she could muster. The child kicked harder, knocking the wind out of her. She rolled sideways, facing Crowley.

Crowley’s response, a wash of guilt and sheer relief to be confiding in her, was instantaneous. Reviewing the information present and complete in her mind, Sophia forced herself to breathe.

“We’d be fucked without Uriel around,” she said with a shaky laugh. “You know that, right?”

“Sure,” Crowley said, rising to help her re-situate herself against the pillows. “I do know.”

“Not to cut this short, but,” Sophia sighed, closing her eyes, “I need to sleep for a while.”

“I could sit here and suggest baby names until you drift off,” Crowley offered. “Awful ones.”

“Oh, don’t fuss,” Sophia murmured, her eyelids heavy. “The three of us are dead-set against Adam, Junior, and something tells me there’s no real chance of us using Cain or Abel.”

Crowley rose from the chair at her side, straining the wicker. He sauntered over to the door.

“Well,” he said with a kind of fond resignation, doing his best to tease, “there’s always Seth.”

He was gone before Sophia could open her eyes, so she repeated the name. The child kicked.
Crowley having Mandy around in Aziraphale’s absence didn’t happen that often anymore, so Mandy was excited to receive the texted invitation.

**BRUCE PARRY’S BOTTOM**
*WATCHING, 2PM. Nah, I’m lying. It’s probably Great British Bake Off.*
*Cocktails provided, drink at own risk.*

Mandy turned up with a bottle of tenner Chianti just in case. That date-palm paste was lethal.

Crowley was already in front of the telly, idly flipping channels. “You’re late,” he taunted.

“Listen, mate, Season 8 doesn’t start airing till August twenty-ninth,” Mandy shot back. “All we have to choose from are reruns, and we both know we’ve seen ’em all.”

Nodding gloomily, Crowley indicated the two glasses on the coffee table. They were both full.

Mandy set the wine on the floor, flopping down beside him. “If you need to break out the hard stuff, shit must be going tits up.”

“I missed your inventive turns of phrase,” Crowley muttered, which was such an Aziraphale thing to say that it stung. “Cheers?”

Mandy shrugged and took the other glass, clinking it off Crowley’s before taking a swallow.

“You better tell me what’s happening,” she warned, coughing at the burn down her throat.

“My theater-widower status means I’ve had too much time on my hands,” Crowley began bitterly, “which means I’ve been visiting with Pippa.”

“Oh lord,” Mandy sighed, companionably patting his arm. “A dangerous pastime, I know.”

Crowley cringed at the Disney reference, but he forged on. “She’s feeling Harold’s absence.”

“Well, yeah, what d’you expect,” Mandy mumbled into her glass. “Anniversary’s coming.”

“What if I were to tell you,” said Crowley, hesitantly, “that I’ve thought of something that’ll comfort her, but it’s more of a…long game pay-off?”

Mandy set down her glass before falling back against the sofa. That was all he had to say, and the pieces clicked into place. Knowing what she knew, ignorance just wasn’t an option.

“Holy fucking hell,” she said with stunned trepidation, resolved to volunteer on the spot.

“There’s nothing holy about it,” agreed Crowley, too soberly. “Plus, it scares me to death.”

“Don’t tell me that means you’re having second thoughts,” Mandy said. “You have to. If you want, I’ll do it with you. I’ll go with you. I survived that bastard Ligur lurking in my head the once, so don’t think I wouldn’t.”
Crowley’s expression made several transformations in a single second. The slot-machine spin, if there’d been a literal corresponding image, landed on a plant mister. He set down his drink.

“No,” Crowley gasped, aghast. “No no no, that is absolutely not an option, young lady.”

Mandy grabbed him by the collar, yanking him forward. She’d never seen his eyes so wide.

“Neither is you chickening out! Not only is Pippa depressed, but you know something she doesn’t—something that’s insult to injury. Her husband’s in torment. I don’t care what you and Uriel’s ex-girlfriend have to say about it not being so bad once you get used to it. I got possessed by one of those twats and tried to kill you. That’s the opposite of fun! Just—just fucking man up and do the thing, okay?”

Crowley nodded, quick and terrified. “Right,” he gulped. “Don’t know what came over me.”

“Think of it this way,” Mandy said, gentling her grasp. “You’re Agent Bond, and I’m M.”

“Mission accepted,” Crowley said. Resolute and resigned, he drank the rest of his cocktail.

Unable to keep up the charade, Mandy released his collar and threw her arms around him.

“I want you to know,” she said haltingly, “you’re the only person I’d follow into Hell.”

* * *

It’s a morning just like any other, Crowley told himself, curled like a lump under the covers. If the answer’s no, they’ll just laugh me off. Aziraphale doesn’t need to know.

Footfalls insufferably chipper, Aziraphale came back over to the bed. He bent over Crowley.

“We’re making real progress,” he said, adjusting his bowtie. “The lobby went so fast that we’ve decided to paint the dressing rooms, too! That dreadful green was chipping away. Won’t the next cast be chuffed?”

Crowley cracked a sleepy smile, hoping Aziraphale would take his apprehension for fatigue.

“Always knew you had it in you. Charity for the greater good instead of your own pride.”

Aziraphale pulled an irked face, but his heart wasn’t in it. He kissed Crowley’s forehead.

“Do something about those nettles, would you?” he sighed. “Mandy just stepped in one.”

“Wait,” Crowley said, opening his eyes wide. “She’s here already? Why didn’t you say?”

“Told her you were still asleep, so she said she’d play with the ducks till you came ’round,” Aziraphale said, heading for the door. “Also, Uriel’s texted to say she’s running late.”

“CAH deck-improvement waits for no woman,” Crowley said, sitting up. “Oh, and angel?”
“Yes?” said Aziraphale, expectantly, peering around the door. He looked absurdly perfect.

“Go easy on Rashid, will you? His back’s been in questionable shape since the nineties.”

Aziraphale nodded. “I’ll tell him and Rani you send your regards. Behave yourself, my dear.”

“Always!” Crowley shouted after him, stumbling out of bed in a rush. He clothed himself in the act of dashing for the door, startled to realize he’d materialized one of his vintage suits.

Out in the garden, he discovered that Mandy had already been joined by Uriel, who’d healed her.

“Want me to just nuke the suckers?” the Archangel offered. “I’ll gladly sow those spots with salt.”

“You’re not pulling another Sodom and Gomorrah,” Crowley said, arms folded. “Not on my weeds.”

Mandy offered him a tense salute, but her eyes were calm. “When shall we three meet again?”

“That get-up takes me right back,” Uriel said, and then whistled. “Az will go wild.”

“No doubt,” said Crowley, distractedly, taking off his jacket. He draped it over the garden gate, and then held it open for his co-conspirators. “Does this tie project likable competency?”

“You’re always likable,” Mandy reassured him, leading the way to the Bentley with fast steps.

“You know it’s the competency part that’s questionable, right?” Uriel whispered, ribbing him.

Crowley watched Mandy open the driver’s side door and shift the whole way across the broad seat. He indicated that Uriel should follow her, and then slid into the driver’s side.

“Not going to lie,” he muttered, jamming his key in the ignition, “I’m glad you’re both here.”

Uriel was staring at the Blaupunkt, which was fizzling with static. She twisted the radio dial.

“We are not gonna use that station,” Mandy protested, turning it a few marks further. “There.”

She came to give her blessing while causing devastation, sang Florence Welch, and I couldn’t keep my mouth shut, I just had to mention—HEEEY, CROWLEY! LONG TIME NO TALK!

“Ah, hey,” Crowley said, loosening his collar, “Tanith! Always a pleasure to hear your voice.”

DAGON WOULDN’T PICK UP, said Tanith, put-upon. LAZY BASTARD.

“Glad to hear he’s, um, slacking the requisite amount,” Crowley babbled. “Credit to the team.”

Mandy had covered her eyes with both hands and bent forward to lean against the dashboard. Get to the point! Uriel mouthed, sending the thought as she gestured at the speaker.

SAY, Tanith went on, with an air of mischief. YOU WOULDN’T HAPPEN HAVE MY AMICABLE EX AND MISS TOMLIN ON HAND, WOULD YOU?

“Dammit,” Uriel seethed, thumping the dashboard hard enough to make Mandy sit up. “Hi.”

“Wotcher,” sighed Mandy, resignedly, slouching down in the seat. “D’you have Dagon?”

NOPE, Tanith said, sounding genuinely peeved. HE’S TAKING A NAP.
“Keen,” Crowley said, silently cursing his default vocabulary under stress. “I need him rested for when you ask him to do something treacherous.”

**WE LIKE TREACHEROUS**, Tanith replied, sounding excited. **WITHIN REASON.**

“If it helps any, it’s my fault he’s going through with this,” Mandy volunteered. “I’m collateral.”

Crowley felt a jolt of horror, turning to stare reproachfully at her. “You bloody well aren’t!”

“No,” Uriel said, having gone so remarkably quiet that Crowley should have noticed. “I am.”

**RAFE WOULD SURE BE SAD**, said Tanith, after a pause, **BUT I’M SELFISH.**

“Nobody’s collateral here,” Crowley said emphatically. “I don’t think there’s need for any.”

**WE ALL KNOW YOU’VE NEVER DONE DAGON DIRTY**, Tanith mused, **BUT I DOUBT YOU’VE DONE ANYTHING FOR HIM THAT MERITS A FAVOR.**

Mandy took Uriel in her arms, because the Archangel had broken into sudden, undignified tears.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Crowley insisted, willing himself to channel the moment he’d stepped in to back up Aziraphale before Beelzebub and the Metatron. “If I may?”

**I ALWAYS DID LOVE A GOOD SINNER’S PLEA**, Tanith conceded, intrigued.

“I’m sorry if this is a sore spot,” Crowley said, “but I’m afraid I need to remind you what happened in that theater five years ago. Aziraphale’s down there right now helping Rani and her cousin with renovations. The carpet never recovered.”

Tanith was unresponsive for nearly a minute. **WHAT’S THAT HAVE TO DO WITH—**

“With the favor I’m about to ask?” Crowley said, extending an arm to help Mandy in the endeavor of rubbing Uriel’s back. “Everything. See, you sacrificed yourself for me when Asmodai took aim. That crossbow-bolt turned you to ash. Then, Aziraphale avenged your death with a stage-prop sword. Long story short, Uriel saved a handful of your remains, and Adam Young used it to bring you back.”

**THAT’S WHY I WOKE UP IN HELL**, Tanith said, **INSTEAD OF NOWHERE?**

“Yeah,” Uriel sniffled, setting her hand against the Blaupunkt. “We did you and Dagon a solid.”

“So,” said Crowley, “that’s why I’d like you and Dagon to transfer Harold Morrison to Heaven.”

There was silence on the air for so long that Crowley couldn’t even imagine what Tanith was doing. Hitting Dagon’s files to refer to those contract templates, probably. Looking for something to cover their asses if Beelzebub ever decided to do a Soul Audit.

**CROWLEY, MY BOY**, Dagon boomed abruptly, scaring them all out of their skin.

“Yes,” Crowley said reluctantly, grateful that Uriel had his arm and Mandy had his hand.

**YOU PULLED ONE OVER ON ME**, said Dagon, **BUT I WOULDN’T TRADE WHAT I GOT OUT OF THE DEAL FOR ONE PALTRY HUMAN SOUL. IT IS DONE.**

“Wait,” Mandy said before Crowley could respond, “does that mean you’re going to do it?”
“IT’S LITERALLY ALREADY DONE, IS WHAT IT MEANS, replied Tanith, dryly.

“Mr.—” Mandy began, swallowing thickly, and laughed “—Dagon? Thanks, mate. I mean it.”

SAVE YOUR BREATH, Tanith said wryly. HE’S GONE BACK TO BED.

Whatever Crowley was feeling, he couldn’t quite separate it from the sheer and utter disbelief that they’d done it. They’d faced another challenge that could’ve gone pear-shaped and won.

“Hey, babe?” Uriel said, finally collected enough to disentangle herself from Mandy. “Love ya.”

DON’T MAKE ME SAY IT, murmured Tanith, scarcely a hiss. YOU KNOW I DO.

“When I say thank you,” Crowley managed, his voice rough, “it’s on Pippa’s behalf.”

SHE’LL HAVE A WHILE TO WAIT BEFORE SHE SEES HIM, BUT NOT LONG.

Setting one hand on the key and the other on the dial, Crowley sniffed, materializing his shades.

“I know, and I accept it. Thanks again.” He switched the radio off. “Let’s go get breakfast.”

August: With a Kind of Valediction

Halfway up the Egremont’s trunk, from his vantage-point on the ladder, Aziraphale could see Adam’s stubbornly-maintained vintage Wasabi approaching. He didn’t bother to climb down, plucking another russet to place in his basket.

“Your volunteers are about to arrive,” Aziraphale sighed. “Three rather than two, by the look.”

Crowley, perched precariously in the branches of his beloved Roxbury, made a satisfied noise.

“Soph’s made a full recovery,” he said. “Light exercise will do her good. Just no climbing.”

“You’ve chosen a rather ironic mode of celebration, given the day,” Aziraphale remarked.

Slithering down from his perch at the intersection of several branches, Crowley retrieved the few russets that had bounced out of his basket.

“I’m tired of fraught August twenty-fifths. This is productive, not to mention humorously apt.”

Aziraphale backed down a few rungs, watching as Adam, Sophia, and Mandy got out of the car.

“You really ought to be resting, dear girl!” Aziraphale called. “Why don’t you and I go inside?”

“And let you natter about what to expect with my due-date a week off?” Sophia called back, her voice full of laughter. “No thanks!”

“We’ve appreciated your vigilance,” Mandy said, marching right over to the Egremont, shading her eyes as she gazed up at Aziraphale, “but everything’s under control. Need a hand?”
“Please excuse him,” Crowley said, helping Sophia across the gravel so Adam could dash to inspect the Egremont. “Sun’s gone to his head.”

“We’re going to need another ladder,” said Sophia. “Not everybody can climb as easily as you.”

“I’m not going up one, no way,” Mandy said, gathering viable pieces of fruit from the ground. “I’ll get what you lot drop.”

“You’re not climbing, either,” Aziraphale told Sophia, coming the rest of the way down the ladder. “Crowley’s orders.”

“Yeah, and Dr. Rajit’s, too,” Sophia replied, leaning against the Roxbury’s trunk while Crowley pulled down a cluster of fruit for her to admire.

“Cor, can I take over?” Adam asked, placing a foot on the lowest rung of Aziraphale’s ladder.

“Be my guest,” Aziraphale said, setting down the basket he’d filled, fetching an empty one.

“Didn’t you used to climb these like anything?” Mandy said, poking him in the arm. “All that bragging.”

“Never said it was smart,” said Adam, winking at her, “climbing somebody else’s trees.”

“Oh, how the mighty have fallen,” Aziraphale muttered, joining Crowley and Sophia beneath the Roxbury’s shade. “What do you make of the crop?”

Sophia was turning a single perfect apple around in her hands. She smelled it, hummed, and then offered it to Crowley, her eyebrows raised.

“The first taste should be yours, right?” she said. “Gardener’s privilege, only seems fair—”

Crowley had no sooner taken a bite than Sophia’s voice broke in warning. She dragged him to the ground, breathing hard.

“Hey, uh,” Mandy wavered, tugging the hem of Adam’s shirt, “looks like it’s hospital time.”

“This is precisely what I’d feared,” said Aziraphale, helping Crowley get Sophia to her feet.

* * *

Pippa sat sipping her cappuccino, admiring the theater lobby’s soothing blue walls while Rani and Rashid argued over prospective scripts at the opposite end of the table. They’d done a bang-up job, no question.

“Even if we could agree on a show,” Rani was saying, “it’s awfully late to be holding auditions!”

“That’s bollocks,” Rashid insisted. “Some London shows don’t start rehearsals till September.”
Ignoring her phone as it vibrated in her lap, Pippa sighed. “This committee’s in dreadful shape.” 
“We shouldn’t be making decisions without Aziraphale,” Rani said. “He’s put in his share.”
Pippa’s phone vibrated again while Rashid shuffled scripts. “Then, the vote would deadlock.”
“It’s a fine time of year for Macbeth,” Pippa suggested, picking up her agitated mobile.
“What have I told you over and over?” Rani asked in irritation. “Put that bloody thing away.”
“It’s gone off four or five times,” Rashid shot back. “That could mean something important.”
Pippa stared at the pile-up of texts from Crowley on her screen, at first too stunned to process.

_Not that I expect you to drop everything, but we’ve taken Sophia to hospital._

_St. Richard’s, I should say. Sorry for reminder._

_Nothing’s wrong. Labor._

_Middle of apple picking, can you believe the kid’s nerve?_

_I hate this waiting room._

“Brace yourselves,” Pippa announced, preparing to reply. “Sophia’s popped off early.”
“Good gracious,” Rani said, getting to her feet. “Do the troops need reinforcement?”
“I told you it might be of consequence,” Rashid murmured. “Has it been very long?”
“No way of knowing,” Pippa sighed, and then typed, _Need us to come down?_

“I’m sure only the family’s allowed at the birth,” said Rani, disappointed.

_Please don’t_, came Crowley’s terse reply. _Parents and sisters here as is._

_What about Adam and Mandy?_ Pippa sent back. “I’m sure you’re correct.”

_They’re here,_ Crowley responded instantly. _We were together at the start._

Abandoning the pile of scripts, Rashid got up and came down to Pippa’s end of the table.
“So nervous,” he said in quiet shock, “as if he forgets it’s in their power to ease her way.”
Rani sucked in her breath, shooting a warning glance at Rashid as Pippa regarded them.
“As if it were in any of our power,” she scoffed uneasily. “Aye, we’ll just have to wait.”
Rashid glanced worriedly at Pippa, and then back at Rani. “Not proper, these secrets.”
Pippa shivered, setting down her cup. “You had better tell me what this is all about.”
Shaking her head, Rani put up both hands in refusal. “The story’s not ours to tell, pet.”
“But you can tell your side of it, right?” Pippa asked Rashid in a moment of epiphany.

Setting a hand on Pippa’s shoulder, Rashid trembled. “I worked at the Ritz in London for years. Your venerable neighbors were regulars.”

“Quite the odd coincidence,” Pippa said, patting his hand. “Tell it from the beginning.”

* * *

“Shit,” Uriel said, shakily bringing the lit cigarette Aziraphale offered up to her lips. “I dunno how humans do it, all the waiting and the screaming.”

Aziraphale leaned against the brick behind them and stared pensively out across the parking lot. “In great pain,” he murmured, shaking his head. “One of His crueler curses, if you ask me.”

“Never wanted to try it,” Uriel replied, taking another drag. “Not even to know what it’s like.”

“Just as well we steered clear,” Aziraphale said, gesturing for the cigarette. “Nephilim. Messy.” Uriel handed back the smoldering stub, watching him take a drag so deep it dizzied him. “Tell me something,” she said quietly. “Will the kid be human, or are we all fucked?”

Shrugging, Aziraphale pitched the cigarette butt on the pavement and stamped it out. “Whatever plot Gabriel and Asmodai tried to attach to Sophia was foiled,” he said. “Yeah, but that doesn’t erase the possibility that Adam’s inheritance might override—”

“Upbringing is everything,” said Aziraphale, with a tilted smile, “and we’re experts.”

“I’m no fuckin’ expert,” Uriel scoffed, folding her arms. “Wait, d’you mean you and…”

“I mean that Crowley and I have been at this godfathering business long enough to know what to avoid,” Aziraphale said.

“So just let ’em muddle their way through it,” Uriel suggested. “Like Adam’s parents had to.”

Aziraphale snorted and shook his head, withdrawing the pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “At least we’ll be on hand, for good or for ill,” he said, lighting another, “and so will you.”

“Raphael, too,” Uriel said, feeling too somber to shorten his name. “Hey, gimme that.”

“Just take one, please,” replied Aziraphale, testily, holding the pack out to her, “or two.”

“I’m relieved he and Crowley insisted on staying inside, to be honest. Insurance policy.”
Aziraphale nodded in agreement. “Inasmuch as Crowley insisted we ought not to interfere with the process, it’s quite obvious to me that Sophia’s recovery was…significantly expedited.”

Uriel smiled at him, lighting her cigarette with a thought. “When he asked me to pay a visit and make sure Rafe was in tow, I got the message.”

Closing his eyes wearily, Aziraphale tipped his head back and blew smoke through his nose. “No word for over an hour,” he whispered, “and she’s been in labor since this morning.”

“Got your phone volume turned up?” Uriel asked. “Maybe you’ve missed some updates.”

Without warning, Raphael appeared between them and snatched Aziraphale’s cigarette. “Behold,” he said, taking a rakish drag, “I bring you tidings of great joy. Is that the line?”

“You missed out the good before tidings,” Aziraphale sniffed, “but otherwise—”

“Then they both made it?” Uriel prompted, stubbing out her cigarette. “The baby’s just fine?”

Raphael nodded, pitching what was left of Aziraphale’s. “Real lungs on him, just like his aunts.”

“Crowley’s beside himself, no doubt, so I’ll go back up,” said Aziraphale, flickering out of sight.

“Heya,” Uriel said, wiping at Raphael’s tear-bright eyes, smudging his liner, “we did all right.”

---

Above all, Sophia felt three things. Those were: cranky, exhausted, and numb from the waist down.

Anathema nudged Sophia’s elbow, lifting Seth’s head a fraction. “You need to support him.”

Seth, thirty minutes old and swaddled in a green blanket, scrunched up his face and howled.

“Where’s the mute button?” Sophia asked, licking her lips. “Please tell me he comes with one.”

While Mandy, out in the hall, was busy grilling the nurse about Sophia’s C-section home care regimen, Adam fetched a cup of water and pressed it to her lips. He looked scared, but elated.

“Should I run to the cafeteria?” he asked. “Tell your dad and the girls they can come back?”

“Didn’t have to leave in the first place,” Sophia muttered, gulping the whole cup. “Cowards.”

Mandy, seemingly done with the nurse, stuck her head in through the door. “Gang’s all back.”

“Crowded waiting room,” Sophia said. She wondered whether her father and sisters were the biggest collective wreck—or if Crowley, Aziraphale, and the Archangels had them beat.

Anathema had claimed the chair near the window and begun texting. “Your dad’s faint.”
Sophia rolled her eyes, bouncing the whimpering bundle, and watched Adam slip out to join Mandy in the hall. Now they were both talking to the nurse, who looked fed-up.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Anathema said tiredly, looking up from her phone. “You up for a few more guests, or should I tell them all to go home?”

Running her damp palm nervously over Seth’s feather-fine black hair, Sophia glanced up.

“The angels,” she said softly, her eyes stinging, “your two. Are they still there?”

Anathema held her mobile screen out so Sophia could see it. “Crowley’s texting like mad.”

“That’s what I thought,” Sophia rasped, closing her eyes in relief. “I want to see them.”

Anathema rapidly typed a response, making a face. “Aziraphale wants to give you space.”

“Then send Crowley in,” Sophia insisted, letting Seth suck on her pinkie. “Mum, please.”

It took less than a minute for the door to open. Crowley peered in, inscrutable behind his sunglasses, hesitating on the threshold. He flashed her a tentative thumbs-up.

“Yes, jeez,” Sophia said, raising her strained voice. “Get your arse over here.”

Crowley approached Sophia’s hospital bed, pushing his shades up into his mussed hair.

“Didn’t do this right the first time,” he said. “With Adam. Wanted to throw the basket.”

“I wanted to hit the mute button,” Sophia confided, offering Seth to him, “so we’re even.”

With more care and surety than Sophia felt herself, Crowley tucked Seth against his chest.

“Accidentally named you, did I?” he whispered in awe. “History won’t repeat. I swear it.”

“Oh, shush,” Sophia yawned, watching Seth wrap his tiny fingers around Crowley’s thumb.

Aziraphale lurked in the doorway with an expression both guilty and fond, eyes questioning.

“There’s plenty of space,” said Crowley, with tremulous impatience. “Get over here, angel.”

Sophia closed her eyes, content as Aziraphale set one steady, soft hand on her child’s head.

* * *

Mandy heard the knock before Crowley did, which was just as well. With Sophia asleep and Adam out on a job with his father-in-law, the two of them were on Seth duty. In the past several days, Crowley had scarcely been home.

“Stay put,” she said, waving at Crowley where he sat with a just-fed, wakeful Seth drooling on his blanket-covered shoulder. “They’re early, yeah?”
Crowley checked his watch, bouncing Seth a little when he hiccupped. “Five minutes or so.”

Opening the door, Mandy greeted Pippa, Mary, and Jaime with a nod. “Quiet, Soph’s zonked.”

“Hello to you, too,” Pippa replied, stubbornly marching in, unaided save for her cane. “Would you look,” she went on, making her way to sit next to Crowley on the sofa, “at this? You’re a natural, dear heart.”

Crowley made a face, patting Seth’s back. “Tell the whole blessed world, why don’t you?”

Mary sat down beside Pippa, leaning forward to peer at Seth as Crowley brought him down off his shoulder and turned him around. The baby sucked his fist and kicked contentedly.

“If you say anything about lovely toesie-wosies,” Crowley warned, covering Seth’s delicate, blotchy feet with his hands, “so help me…”

Mandy snorted, unsuccessfully stifling her laughter as she showed Jaime to the nearest chair.

“Don’t mind him, Sister,” she said, recalling Crowley’s account. “He’s making amends.”

“This one does look like his father, though,” Crowley said, smoothing Seth’s duckling-covered onesie over his belly, “if you ignore the dark hair.”

Mandy sat down in the chair opposite Jaime’s, watching Mary reach across Pippa to catch one of Seth’s flailing hands.

“Your daddywaddykins was very sweet,” Mary told the baby. “You’re quiet like he was, too.”

“He’s really not,” said Crowley, with feigned distaste, and then glanced at Pippa. “Want a turn?”

Pippa held her arms out, so Crowley shifted Seth over with an easy dexterity that Mandy envied.

“Before you know it, they’re grown,” said Jaime, and it took Mandy a second to realize he was addressing her. “Make the most of every moment.”

“I don’t think there’s a manual on this kind of parenting, mate,” she sighed.

“You’ll raise him the way my grandfather’s people raised children. Together.”

“I don’t think you’ll escape child-minding now and again. Mary’s besotted.”

Jaime was watching intently as Pippa handed Seth off to his wife. His eyes flicked to Crowley.

“I know what they are,” he said in Portuguese, sending a jolt down Mandy’s spine. “Mary told me.”

Mandy hadn’t taken to Spanish and Jaime’s mother tongue as readily as she’d taken to Basque, but she’d learned a bit of each anyway.

“You know they’re not human?” she asked cautiously, stumbling over the phrasing. “Really?”

Jaime chuckled. “The scoundrel who ran out on you was more of a demon than this one—” he nodded meaningfully at Crowley “—will ever be.”

Mandy caught Crowley’s eye when she realized he was listening. “And his other half’s hardly an angel all of the time, take it from me.”
Aziraphale couldn’t help but twist his hands in his lap while Pippa made tea in the kitchen. That the arrival of such a mundane-seeming child had prompted him to existential navel-gazing was absurd. Everything had turned out right, hadn’t it?

“As I was saying, it’s been bothering me,” he fretted. “Why should I have glimpsed such a future if politics aren’t where Sophia’s now headed?”

Crowley shrugged, setting his hand over Aziraphale’s, easing the strain in them with a squeeze.

“Because, at that point in time,” he said, “that’s where she was headed. Futures change.”

Pippa rounded the corner more swiftly than her cane usually permitted, pale as she leaned against her patterned wallpaper. Behind her, the kettle was beginning to boil.

“I couldn’t help overhearing,” she said. “I don’t want you to think this is a confrontation.”

They’d been fools for long enough, Aziraphale knew. The notion that they might up-end Pippa’s world, or that they might risk her asking too much of them in her grief, was crumbling.

Besides, it hardly mattered now that Crowley had gone and performed that particular miracle.

“Think what you will, dear girl,” Aziraphale sighed. “An explanation’s what we owe you.”

Pippa shook her head, marching resolutely to the sofa. Stiffly, she sat down beside Crowley.

“Rashid told me everything. Everything as he understands it, that is. He seems to think the two of you might be djinn, or maybe mala’ikah. Do you know what that means?”

Aziraphale winced inwardly. That it had come to this, fate catching up with them, was fitting.

“Yes,” Crowley said. “So, if you add that to what I told you, you’ll know that’s not what I am.”

“You never owned the part they assigned you!” Aziraphale snapped. “How many times do I—”

“Angels,” Pippa whispered, translating the second word she’d said perfectly. “You’re angels?”

Crowley blanched, making a helpless gesture. “I suppose you could say that—originally? Yes.”

“There’s little difference between those that Fell and those that didn’t,” Aziraphale explained.

Pippa didn’t respond, her unblinking gaze shifting back and forth between them as they spoke.

“I guess you’ll have worked out that this applies to Raphael and Uriel, too,” Crowley sighed.

Unable to verbally improve the situation, Aziraphale got up and started for the kitchen. The tea wasn’t going to make itself, and it looked like Pippa was the one who’d need it. What he heard next stopped him in his tracks, caused him to turn in utter, breathless surprise.
“Dear heart,” Pippa said, her voice uneven with long moments’ disuse, “let me see your eyes.”

Crowley removed his sunglasses and set them on the coffee table. He was startled to the point of gasping when Pippa took hold of his hands.

“Say you’ll bless me, come the end,” whispered Pippa, imploring. “Please tell me he’s waiting.”

“That,” Crowley said, through tear-strained laughter, “I promise. But don’t leave me just yet?”

At the kettle’s reassuring click, Aziraphale spun on his heel and continued on his way.

**Epilogue: Here, Now, Always**

*September arrived, unseasonably hot, and the cottage still stood.*

*As cottages went, it remained unremarkable. In recent years, the garden had flourished, and the ducks that had once nested down the rise were now resident in the shed. There was an orchard where there had not been.*

*The double glazing and the paint had not been touched in some time. Regardless, the mattress in the bedroom remained comfortable, if a bit worse for wear. Rain or shine, the inhabitants read, talked, and spent a considerable amount of time outside.*

*And still, no matter the pastime or weather, they always touched.*

* * *

Crowley wasn’t sure why Anathema had led him outside, especially not while her grandson’s one-month birthday celebration was in full swing.

Minus Madame Tracy and Sergeant Shadwell, the gang was all there.

“If you’re going to ask me whether or not you could raise ducks in here,” Crowley said, following her into the dim, dusty space, “the answer is no. It needs a ton of renovations. Get rid of the work-top and tools for starters.”

“Relax,” Anathema said, pulling the tarp back from whatever sat in the middle of the floor.

Crowley studied the spacious, old-fashioned wooden cradle with dismay. It had been sanded and finished to perfection, not at all what he would’ve expected from a witch whose talents ran
predominantly to prophecy, research, and raising twin hellions.

“Really great work,” he praised, at a loss for further comment. “Need help carrying it inside?”

“Yep,” said Anathema, grinning, reaching into her pocket. “Here’s something for your trouble.”

Squinting, Crowley wasn’t sure what to make of the ancient roofing nail she set in his palm.

“I haven’t seen one like this since the seventeenth century. Did you want me to authenticate it?”

“Oh, no,” Anathema said, brushing off her hands. “I know it’s authentic. It’s just—after I finished this project, it was the only one I had left. I thought maybe you’d want to add it to your collection. Unless your mantelpiece of wonders is at capacity?”

Something flickered in Crowley’s memory, dim and irretrievable. He put the nail in his pocket.

“Could’ve sworn I had one like it somewhere,” he replied, “but an extra can’t hurt. Thanks.”

* * *

**Humans and not-humans alike, it must be said, remain irredeemably dim.**

*At first, all the mouse could perceive was that the curious sounds they had begun to apply to him were meant in jest. And as long as he was safe in the young brown human’s pocket, it was tolerable. Not so, he found, as the card games wore on; not so as the sounds persisted. He came to understand that such sounds constituted the names they had for each other—as well as the name they had for him. Rando, the mouse decided, was not a very dignified name.*

* * *

Aziraphale was impressed at Anathema’s handiwork, but perhaps he ought not to have been. Still, hereditary Book custodianship, occult legal work, and uncanny foresight were one set of skills, whereas woodworking was another.

“That, if I’m not mistaken,” he said to Seth, who was tugging at the flap of his tartan waistcoat pocket, “is for you. Your nan’s quite the polymath.”

Seth cooed and smiled, ducking his head against Aziraphale’s chest. He tugged some more.
“Leave it to the birthday boy not to appreciate the splinters Mum gave herself,” Sophia sighed, walking gingerly to where Aziraphale sat with her son. “Wanna try it, goober?”

“Are you feeling all right?” Aziraphale asked, hoisting Seth up. “Nearly recovered, I hope.” Sophia took the mischievously squealing baby and blew a raspberry against his pink cheek.

“Almost back to normal,” she said. “I can’t run or anything, but I’m in less pain by the day.” “I hear congratulations are in order,” Aziraphale went on, brushing off his waistcoat. “Tell?” “Crowley’s acting like I’ve never sold a short story before,” she sighed, lightly bouncing Seth. “Never to this illustrious a market?” Aziraphale ventured. “I must say, I hadn’t heard of it.” Wincing, Sophia sat down next to him. “That’s because you think The Strand is still a thing.” “It ran until nineteen-fifty,” replied Aziraphale, holding his hand out since Seth was reaching. Seth grabbed Aziraphale’s fingers and tried to tug them to his mouth. He fussed, determined.

“It’s an online zine,” Sophia said, offering Seth his dummy as an alternative to slobber on. “Dear girl, it makes little difference,” Aziraphale said, smoothing Seth’s hair. “I’m proud.” “You’re the worst,” muttered Sophia, wiping her eyes one-handed. “You’re making me cry.” “I’m the worst at a good many things,” Aziraphale agreed, leaning forward to return Seth’s smile, preventing the dummy from falling out of his mouth, “but recognizing literary talent is not one of them.”

* * *

The opening and closing of the cottage door, relentless, came at a price.

The screws that held the name plaque in place, on account of the eroded holes into which owners had driven various metal spikes over the years, repeatedly came loose. Oddly, in the twelve years since the latest plaque had been affixed, no tools had been used.

Rather, the screws periodically tightened themselves, a subtle machination. Thought and intention seemed to be the cause.

Home knew itself to be exactly what it was, and did not wish to lose its name.

* * *
Crowley hadn’t meant to corner Adam in the kitchen, but being the only two people after a wine top-up in that particular moment felt portentous. He poured Chardonnay for both of them, considering the tiny amount left in the bottle.

“Go on,” Adam said, raising his glass. “I know you want to. Waste not, want not, and all that.”

Furtively, Crowley chugged what was left in the bottle and dropped it in Anathema’s sink. He raised his glass to meet Adam’s halfway.

“The world’s not doing much better since last we spoke, is it?” he asked, clinking their glasses.

Adam shrugged and took an ungraceful gulp of his wine. “I reckon that’s just how it crumbles.”

Crowley almost lost his desire to drink, but he forced himself to take another swallow. “Oh?”

“The world won’t be a better place till everyone comes ’round,” Adam said. “Be patient.”

“I’ve been over six thousand years of patient,” Crowley sighed, swilling his wine. “It’s tiring.”

Adam gave him a searching look, faintly incredulous. “Have you quite forgot what we did?”

Crowley wasn’t sure which turn of events Adam meant, given there’d been so many of them.

“I’m the one who will remember everything, I’m sure,” he said, “even after you lot are gone.”

“Listen,” Adam said, reaching for Crowley’s shoulder. “The world, given that we’ve saved it—all we can really do is improve our corner of it, yeah?”

Catching Adam’s hand mid-reach, Crowley considered the proposal. His chest tightened.

“That’s sensible,” he said at length, shaking Adam’s hand, “and I’m sure we’ll all keep at it.”

* * *

In days that followed, the mouse found that the name was hard to shake.

It was on the lips of the not-humans that lived up the road, the ones with quick, pale eyes and flashing smiles. The taller brown-skinned human, brash-tongued and sad, asked the masters of the house how Rando was. The grey-furred one with the cane asked, too.

The mouse found another friend in his unlikely new student, Tom. The kitten was eager to learn how to be clever and quick, so Rando obliged.

He wasn’t quite sure when the name grew on him, but grow it did.
By early evening, the heat had lessened somewhat, so Aziraphale took the opportunity to nip outside. Anathema’s garden didn’t have a patch on Crowley’s, but it was tranquil.

Newton Pulsifer passed Aziraphale on his way out of the shed, shaking an envelope at him.

“My wife left the card for Soph out here,” he said sheepishly. “These days, I’m a reminder.”

You’re a reminder all right, Aziraphale thought, but smiled instead. “As is proper.”

“There are berries on the bramble bushes,” Newton called over his shoulder. “Have some!”

Aziraphale found the brambles behind the shed without difficulty, and found he wasn’t alone.

“I needed a minute away,” Mandy said, sitting cross-legged in the grass. She held out a handful of blackberries, beckoning.

“Is this how I’m tempted, then?” asked Aziraphale, flopping down beside her, resigned to stains.

“Nah,” Mandy said, tipping her haul into Aziraphale’s cupped palms. “You Fell when Eve did.”

Overcome to a shocking degree, Aziraphale struggled to swallow the berries through the lump in his throat. They were sweet as anything, just like Crowley’s russets.

“Hey,” Mandy whispered, scooting so that they faced each other, reaching to brush away his tears. “We’re all on the same page now. It’s a relief.”

Aziraphale let Mandy’s precise, juice-stained fingers wipe the joy of absolution from his eyes.

“Tell me you no longer have a death wish,” he said desperately. “Dear girl, tell me you’ll—”

Mandy set both index fingers to Aziraphale’s parted lips, grinning through tears of her own.


The cottage had opinions on its third resident, none of them favorable.

Holes in the wainscot had remained throughout the present owners’ residency, and the object of the
cottage’s disdain chewed new ones on the regular. While they didn’t cause significant drafts, the noise and imprecision were unseemly.

It was a wonder the human-shaped occupants stood for it. They encouraged malingering by leaving crumbs on the counters; these days, the breadbox was very seldom closed. They had even gone so far as to give the sleek-furred, sneaking culprit a name.

Names fondly given, as every self-respecting structure knows, have power.

* * *

Crowley accompanied Rob outside once Aziraphale and Mandy had come in with blackberry stains on their hands and faces. There was no way they’d be denied the same fun, or a taste of something that wasn’t the cake Crowley had made for the occasion.

Picking posed significant risk of thorn-scratches, to which Crowley was rather accustomed.

“Here are a few more,” he said, idly healing himself as he dropped berries in Rob’s palm.

Rob watched with wide eyes as the scratches vanished no sooner than they’d been inflicted.

“Is that a magic trick?” he asked, eyes wide and earnest. “Can you teach me how to do it?”

Crowley rubbed at his wrist, relieved at having been caught out by the last person in the dark.

“I can do it to you,” he said matter-of-factly, “but it’s not something you can learn.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Rob shoved the berries in his mouth. “I know why you won’t leave.”

“Well, yeah,” said Crowley, distractedly, looking for more ripe targets. “Party’s not over.”

“No, I mean,” Rob clarified, “like you said in hospital, back when my Pap died.”

Frozen mid-pluck, Crowley removed his sunglasses, regarding Rob with glad resignation.

“Why didn’t you tell your gran when you worked it out? It would’ve saved us the trouble.”

Robert shrugged, calmly sucking the tip of his finger after it caught on one of the thorns.

“Time was all funny, but now it’s not,” he replied. “Gran’s happy again. She knows.”

* * *
Rando had no quarrel with the walls in which he lived, save perhaps over the wainscot.

Without holes for coming and going, he would have known no safety. Had the resident not-humans lacked charity, he would have been shooed out the door with a broom—or worse. How close he had come to the peril of traps was not something he liked to dwell on.

Gnawing on pigment-covered wood was unpleasant business. However, the paths he forged behind chipped stretches of paneling led him true.

The cottage—Home, if Rando was being polite—eventually kept these quibbles to itself.

* * *

Aziraphale turned from the window, where he’d been watching Crowley and Rob make their way back up to the house, at a tap on his shoulder. He turned to find the one person that he would, after recent events and avoidance, nervously expect.

Pippa had a glass of the unpopular Pinot Noir in hand. She leaned pensively on her cane.

“I hope you don’t feel slighted,” she said, offering the glass. “I’d like your blessing, too.”

Aziraphale accepted the peace offering and drank deeply, relieved. “You already have it.”

Outside in the fairy-light strewn garden, Rob had dragged Crowley to a stop next to one of Anathema’s potted plants. From the look of it, he was receiving an animated lecture.

“Then I hereby pass it to Rob,” Pippa replied after a moment, shuffling to the window. “Promise you’ll always look after him. His life will be hard.”

“No harder than most humans’, with the right support,” Aziraphale reassured her. “Fortunately, we’re well-positioned to ensure he has it.”

Pippa nodded, eyes closing as if weary of the vision before her. “He’s been lucky to have you.”

Aziraphale almost choked on his next tense swallow of wine. Pippa’s implication was absurd.

“Who, Rob?” he said, mystified. “I rather think his good fortune is owing to his gran’s—”

Pippa cut him off with a touch to Aziraphale’s elbow, eyes open again, pointing outside. Still kneeling next to the potted plant, Crowley ceremoniously placed his shades on Rob.

“Gracious, no,” Pippa chuckled, snatching the glass of wine from him. “I meant Crowley.”
Insofar as the cottage was irked, it had struck a kind of accord with the mouse.

Warmth and shelter were any home’s purpose, a place for inhabitants to weather storms. Sometimes, when storms of another sort brewed within its walls, its purpose was to stand steadfast.

The cottage had seen both; it preferred atmospheric ones by far. When the other sort finally arrived, it had driven one of the inhabitants barefoot into new-fallen snow. Rando had been listless for days, a scurry of sadness in the walls.

That was when the cottage had proposed what you might call their Arrangement.

As he drove himself and Aziraphale home, Crowley couldn’t shake the suspicion that there was something he needed to remember. The more he’d drunk throughout the evening, the more present in his ruminations Aziraphale’s erstwhile bookshop became.

Of course, he’d sobered up at Aziraphale’s insistence—as long as Aziraphale sobered up, too.

“It’s at the edge of my thoughts,” Crowley went on, maintaining the speed limit, “like a bad dream.”

Aziraphale shrugged, or at least did his best rendition of one given his hand was a soothing weight on Crowley’s thigh. “I’m sure it’ll come to you,” he said. “What brought this on?”

Crowley took his right hand off the wheel and rummaged in his pocket till he found the nail. He handed it over to Aziraphale.

After an ominous, unwarranted stretch of silence, Aziraphale said, “Where did you get this?”

“Anathema gave it to me out in the shed,” Crowley replied. “Said it was payment for helping her carry the cradle inside. She used these to build it.”

“I see,” Aziraphale said pensively, passing the nail from hand to hand. “What a coincidence.”

Several times in the lead-up to pulling into their drive, Crowley tried to ask him what he meant. Every time he opened his mouth to make the attempt, the words shied from his tongue, remained an ache at the back of his throat.

Aziraphale was still brooding over the nail when Crowley opened the passenger-side door and helped him out of the Bentley. He didn’t protest Crowley’s over-solicitous arm hooked through his.

“That’s enough,” Crowley said, releasing him, unpocketing his keys as he dashed up to the door.
“I’ve got to make sure we don’t trip—hey. Wait.”

Opening and closing the door a second time, Crowley heard the rattle of the plaque overhead.

“Those screws are useless,” he seethed, staring up at the offending articles. “We should replace…”

It took all of the split-second in which Aziraphale, in his dithering, dropped Anathema’s nail on the pavement for Crowley to understand. He knew why the nail looked familiar, and he knew what he needed to do.

“Give me that,” he said, snatching up the nail before Aziraphale could retrieve it. “Hang on.”

Shaking head to toe, he strode through the darkened house and didn’t stop until he reached the office. He miracled open Aziraphale’s locked drawer, rummaging with his free hand.

The article he sought clinked harmlessly off a few pens and a pair of scissors before he caught it.

They’d been especially drunk that evening in the bookshop twenty-seven years ago, and they’d had a visitor. Aziraphale had been so flummoxed at her presence that he’d waxed infuriatingly polite, and Crowley had hidden under the table.

“When the angel didn’t say anything, Crowley waved them expectantly. “I need a hammer.”

As if that were the most ridiculous statement Aziraphale had ever heard, he sighed and snapped his fingers. Crowley grasped at nothing, and the name plaque overhead shook with impact.

“Is that all you’ve got to say?” Aziraphale asked, taking Crowley’s empty hands in both of his.

Memory’s a bugger, Crowley thought, realizing that Aziraphale had begun to laugh in genuine, unashamed amazement. He twined his fingers elatedly with Aziraphale’s, their rings a gleaming reminder.

“No, angel,” said Crowley, and kissed him soft and slow there on the threshold.

* * *

All in all, if you had asked him, Rando would have said he had seen worse days.

There were plenty of crumbs for eating, still, and plentiful tea-drips for drinking. There were affectionate arguments about what improvements had not been made timely to the cottage, and whose fault was that?

There were beach roses in the garden, resplendent, and nettles lurking beneath. There were ducks in the shed and children to chase them. There were apple trees to climb, and their russet fruit ripe to be
eaten.

And while the world was not a better place, the cottage, which was in it, was.

The mouse would tell you its walls, wainscot and all, felt exactly like a Home.

Works inspired by this one

[PODFIC] It's All Fun and Games by kerravon, [PODFIC] Until Someone Opens Their Eyes by kerravon, Plausible Deniability by mizstorge

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