and the sky full of stars

by Lyaka

Summary

"You're right, of course," Adam said thoughtfully. "This is just another form of play-acting. But I'm not under the veil of ignorance those philosophers go on about—I know this isn't going to end the way it's written. Makes it hard to act as if I do."

"Then don't," Jesus shrugged. "You wouldn't know what you did if your part didn't require you to know it. Just go on acting normal."

"And Ineffability will take care of itself?"

The Christ toasted the Antichrist with a little pink paper umbrella. "It usually does."

Notes

This was actually written all the way back in 2007 – beta’d (thanks tsukinofaerii!), revised and polished up to a shine – but for whatever reason it never got posted anywhere. I found it sitting in my works-in-progress folder and thought it deserved its day in the sun. I like to think I’ve improved in a writer in the intervening six years, but nothing in my reread made me want to hide under my bed and burn the manuscript, and so I think it stands up fairly well.

(It does contain my first and, to date, only attempt at actual smut, so, fair warning for that. I never did quite manage to get it explicit. Probably that’s for the best.)

Footnotes should be click-able, both to go to the footnote and to go back to the original text.
As a general rule, angels knew better than to burst into the Throne Room of The Lord of Hosts, Creator of Existence and God Almighty.

How exactly the angels came to know better was something God had never quite figured out. There had been no Examples of angels who had broken the rule; He’d never even issued a memo. In fact, He really thought that the angels should be less formal about this sort of thing. It wasn’t as if He was *really* just confined to the Throne Room.

He was *Everywhere*.

But somehow, every angel—every single one of them—“knew better”.

Which was why it was so unusual this “morning” for Michael to come bursting through the door.

“Lord! Lord!” He ran three or four steps in, waving a flaming sword around in excitement. The archangel had clearly heard something of great importance, for his appearance today was Biblical in the extreme—golden hair, blue eyes, impressive evil-smiting muscles, raiment of most glowing gold. The awe-inspiring effect and dramatic entrance was somewhat lost a moment later, however, when all of a sudden he seemed to realize where he was and fell to the floor on his knees with a thud. “Forgive my intrusion, Lord!”

God waved a hand dismissively. It wasn’t as if He hadn’t *known* Michael was coming. In fact, He’d been expecting him. For something like the last six thousand years.

Michael bounded back to his feet, his normal ponderous piousness temporarily gone. “It’s The Adversary, Lord! All reports indicate he’s preparing a major push! Demonic activity is tripling—we think he’s going for *Earth* this time.” Even in the midst of his excitement over the prospect of battle and his awe at being in the presence of the Lord, he still managed to inject a note of hardship in his voice. Perhaps, the archangel’s tone of voice suggested, if You’d only been willing to show us the True Plan rather than letting us chase after that whole Antichrist mess, we’d have known about this in advance.

The Lord firmly repressed the urge to rub His hands together. The last time He’d been this excited, an entire species had suddenly found itself sentient.

<*I quite agree with your assessment, Michael.*> He contented Himself with saying, knowing that within wing-beats of the archangel’s departure every angel in Heaven would have heard that He’d said that. *<He’s definitely going to Earth this time. Personally, in fact.*>*

“Personally?” For a moment Michael looked even paler than the ephemeral lighting of Heaven usually managed to make him. Then a terrible grin split his face. “Personally! How wonderful, Lord! We can finally smite him once and for all! And then follow him down into Hell and smite every last demon of them! We’ll need to form a few new brigades. We’ll need to practice fighting on Earth. All of those impediments! But don’t worry, Lord, we’ll be ready! I’ll have angels practicing night and day! We’ll smite ‘em!”

The Lord sighed as the head of His Avenging Angels (and He *knew* it had been a mistake to let
them take that name) went on and on about how, exactly, he was going to smite the multifarious forces of evil. <Michael.>

“…but we’ll have to chase the lot of them back to Hell before we can really Obliterate them; it’s no good killing a human body, they just go back, we have to kill them in their True forms, and that means an invasion force…”

<Michael.> The Lord’s intonation remained perfectly inflectionless.

The archangel looked up with a guilty start. “Yes, Lord?”

<When Lucifer invades Earth, he will cause great devastation among the humans.> Michael developed the sort of trapped look employees all over the world get when their boss reminds them of something they forgot said boss thought was important. “Of course, Lord,” he said cautiously.

<Before the fighting starts, I intend to recall the souls of the Saved.> “Of course, Lord,” Michael repeated, looking relieved. “Fewer potential allies for Hell—fewer obstacles in our way—how lovely are Thy blessings, Lord.”

<I want there to be as many souls Saved as possible, Michael.> “Of course, Lord.”

<So you, and everyone else, are going to go down to earth and Save as many as you can before Lucifer’s little plan goes into effect.> “Of course, Lo—” Michael jerked to a stop. God watched in amusement as the urge to demand an explanation warred with Michael’s fundamental angelic “don’t anger your Creator” instincts.

They compromised. “But, Lord,” he said diffidently, “surely our time would be better spent preparing to smite the unholy Fallen when they make their futile attempt…”

<Thy time would not be better spent,> he boomed. There was to be no question on this point. None. <This is my commandment to you: go forth, and save the souls of mankind.>

Michael definitely broke his previous paleness record this time. "...yes, Lord," he managed to croak.

The Lord went down the few steps from his Throne to the marble floor and placed a comforting hand on Michael’s shoulder. <This is the Final Test. Those among the humans who are vulnerable will fall; those who are strong will survive. This time is temporary. When it has passed, you will have your chance.>

"Yes, Lord!" There was the enthusiasm, back in his eyes again. The flaming sword burned brighter in his hands.

The Lord watched Michael go, carefully restraining His sigh until the archangel had departed. Sometimes He wished He’d created his angels with more knowledge of His Plan. Their shortsightedness made them regrettably bloodthirsty at times.

But if they Understood, they could not act as required of them.

The Lord moved on. It would not be long now.
Soon it would all be Finished.

“...AND SO, FOR THE NEXT FORSEEABLE, THE RESTRICTIONS ON APPEARING IN DIVINE FORM NO LONGER APPLY.” The Metatron looked around the assembled ranks of angels. “IS THERE ANY FURTHER INFORMATION YOU REQUIRE?”

An angel in one of the foremost companies beat his wings, raising himself above the ranks long enough to be noticed. “How long do we have?” he called.

The Metatron looked somewhat uncomfortable, hunching forward under the gazes of the crowd. One of his wings seemed to have developed a flitter. “THAT INFORMATION IS NOT AVAILABLE AT THIS TIME.”

Murmurs spread at that admission. Aziraphale, standing in the back and trying to look as if he smote demons every day of the week, was starting to feel very worried. He was debating the relative merits of continued existence versus asking the Metatron for more information when (to his great relief) another angel rose to the task. “How will we know when to get out?” he shouted across the distance.

The Metatron’s discomfort was more pronounced now. “YOU WILL HAVE TO ESTIMATE.”

The first angel looked over at the second and said “Well, at the very least, we can leave once the Rapture’s gone off, can’t we? Plenty of time for sword-drill after that.”

“THAT IS NOT ADVISABLE.”

“What?”

“THE RAPTURE WILL BE DELAYED UNTIL AFTER A BREACH BY SATAN’S FORCES HAS BEEN CONFIRMED.”

The murmuring rose to outright speaking, sweeping through the assembled angels like wildfire. “SILENCE.” The Metatron’s bellow was a thing of legend among the younger angels, who had never heard it in use; those in the front ranks were literally bowled over by it, tumbling wing-over-halo. Some elbow-nudging and muttering continued from the safety of the back ranks, but on the whole silence reigned.

“OUR BEST ESTIMATES PUT LUCIFER’S INVASION AT A WEEK HENCE.”

A sigh swept through the congregation. At least there was some concrete information, Aziraphale thought, which was more than one usually got out of the Bureaucracy these days, but really, for something this major…

The Metatron did not look inclined to entertain any further questions. “NOW, GO. GO IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, FOR THE SOULS OF MANKIND, BUT MOSTLY JUST GO OUT OF MY SIGHT!” The first part of this declamation came out in a rather desultory fashion, but the last part sounded very genuine. One by one, orderly ranks of angels folded their wings and swept down towards the waiting Earth below. No one liked to argue with the Metatron when he was in A Mood.

Why wasn’t there any warning? Aziraphale wondered. All of a sudden, an invasion? But I haven’t seen anything about it. And I haven’t heard anything about it. And I would have. Wouldn’t I? Or has that demon been creatively editing The Arrangement again? It wouldn’t be the first time. He himself had gotten a little artistic with the wording when it came to that minor—very minor—
incident in the seventeenth century. The important thing was that it hadn’t been his fault and no lasting harm had been done.

Aziraphale looked down at the blue Earth, rising to meet him.

(Perhaps it’s not too late to avert it. It’s not too late to save everyone.)

Earth

(somewhat later)

Crowley was in Tijuana when the news came down.

If asked by Hell, he would have solemnly avowed himself to be tempting the locals to sin and debauchery. If pressed, he would have closed his eyes, spun around, picked a club at random, and proudly announced it to be all due to his influence, thank you very much.

If he spun in the right direction, he might even net another commendation. The prospect did not excite. Oh, sure, they were nice to hang on the wall the first few times, but after a while it started getting tedious. Hell’s ideas of what was commendable were as far behind the times as its methods of communication, and it was starting to get just a little too easy.

If asked by himself, though, Crowley would have admitted that he was just there for the booze and the heat. Although he’d been warm-blooded for centuries now, every so often the urge to find a hot sun and bask in its rays became too much to resist.

He’d been lying on a beach sipping one of those margaritas with the bright colors and the little plastic umbrellas that you see in travel magazines. A few palm trees had decided to make their home near him (after a little prompting) and there was a delightful breeze coming in over the ocean. The demon had even unbent so far as to allow his towel to be colorful—it was a very peaceful shade of blue. (He’d decided he was going to get the full experience on this trip.)

“Way down in Kokomo,” his iPod sang into his ears. He was particularly proud of the iPod. An entire generation of teenagers were tragically misunderstood because of it. They felt they were cut off from the outside world, and they were absolutely correct.

Not that teenagers these days really needed his help. One of these days he was going to have to find the demon who invented Facebook and buy her—Crowley was sure it was a her—a stiff drink.

“That’s where I wanna go—HELLO, CROWLEY.”

He sighed. It just figured that something would interrupt his vacation. “Good afternoon, Boss.”

“WONDERFUL NEWS, CROWLEY.”

“What is it, Boss? The end of the world?”

How his iPod managed to beam at him, he’d never figure out. “YOU HAVE BEEN PAYING MORE ATTENTION THAN CERTAIN DEMONS GIVE YOU CREDIT FOR, CROWLEY.”

He sat upright abruptly. “Well, you know me, Boss, always on top of things.” His mind, however, was racing. What the Hell (and he meant that literally) could be going on? On such short notice?
Crowley was pretty sure another Great Plan hadn’t been implemented; someone would have talked. And Great Plans usually took centuries to execute. He’d thought they’d averted that whole end-of-the-world nonsense last time. The Antichrist didn’t even have an earthly body at the moment.

“THE TIME HAS COME FOR OUR GRAND INVASION, CROWLEY.”

“Naturally, Boss,” he managed to say with some of his usual smoothness. Oh, damn, he did remember seeing something like that at the last all-hands meeting. But that had been decades ago. Apparently the Infernal Bureaucracy had managed to find something after it had been filed away in storage—a clear sign that the End really was near.

“WE NEED YOU TO RETURN TO YOUR BASE OF OPERATIONS AT ONCE. THE HEAVENLY FORCES ARE ATTEMPTING A MASS CONVERSION OF THE HUMANS. APPARENTLY WORD OF OUR PLANS HAS LEAKED OUT.” The voice didn’t bother with implying that endless torment awaited whomever had been silly enough to let that happen. The voice never implied anything. It just let it be obvious.

“Uh, if I find them, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“WE ARE SURE YOU WILL. Afternoon delights... cocktails, and moonlit nights...”

Crowley switched off the iPod.

He really, really wished he could get drunk. Drunker than the last time he’d been handed the Antichrist.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have the time.

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Hell

*(meanwhile)*

The 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; was doing his best to pay attention to His Father’s ranting.

“...and then the seas will turn to blood, and there will be fire in the sky at night, and we’ll finally get to blow up the Vatican,” Lucifer was saying, sounding as nearly cheerful as it was possible for him to sound.

A pause fell over the table at the last words, and the Antichrist looked up in time to nod and smile with the rest of the demonic Generals around the table.

“Then get out there,” The Morningstar boomed with false cheer, “and make all ready!”

Bang. Adam winced as the sound of imploding air and the scent of brimstone echoed in the cavernous meeting hall, an unavoidable side effect of demonic teleportation to The Surface. He’d been trying to convince His Father for years to just install a lift, but Lucifer said—and probably rightly so—that it would ruin the ambiance. His Father worried a lot about ambiance. It was something they’d had quite a few discussions about, given Adam’s insistence on keeping his human appearance (frozen somewhere around eleven, for good measure). In His Father’s defense,
it was *true* that Adam no longer matched the drapes, but the Son of Satan suspected that wasn’t such a big deal as their arguments were prone to making it—it was just something they argued about to avoid talking about any of the more dangerous topics.

Like free will. Or ineffability.

Adam sat in the empty hall for a while longer, thinking.

Something, he was sure, was wrong about all of this. And not wrong in the right way. Or rather, yes, wrong in the right way. Not wrong in the way that reassured him that he was back Home, and things were plodding along the way they were supposed to, wiles being attempted and so forth. Demons were wily, angels were thwarting, the Celestial and Infernal Bureaucracies slogged on uselessly, and nothing really got done. Which was, as far as he was concerned, the best way of doing things².

But this wasn’t wrong that way. The whole thing was like a glass of water that was managing to resonate at two different tones at once. It was *wrong*, of course, because His Father was masterminding it and all sorts of temptations and Vatican-burnings and so forth were afoot. But at the same time, something at the bottom of his soul was smugly singing hymns.

It felt like doing *wrong* was somehow doing *right*.

And when he thought about it that way, he realized he *had* felt like this once before.

A long time ago.

…in Tadfield.

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*Heaven*

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Her name was Samantha.

Once, a long time ago, Samantha had believed in God. She’d been brought up in a church like many other little girls and taught about God and Jesus and Baptism and Christmas and the Salvation Therein.

But something had gone terribly wrong as she got older. It could have been one of many things, too many—Aziraphale had seen it all before. Maybe her parents got divorced. Maybe she fell in with the wrong set of friends. Maybe, he thought sadly, believing in God had stopped being ‘cool’.

So she’d ended up like millions of others, loudly proclaiming her atheism to the world. *She* wasn’t going to be taken in by those myths. *She* knew better. But deep at the bottom of her heart, everything she’d learned and believed in as a child lay patiently waiting for something tangible her mind could accept.

The light on her face when Aziraphale appeared to her was the sort of thing that made him feel like all of it, the whole Creation, the Fall, the Ineffable Plan, even the impending Invasion, all of it, was worth it. That it had some true meaning at its root, was all Ineffable and not just thrown together in a way that would get a lot of people hurt.

*(Faith,)* he reflected, leaving Samantha to take her long-forgotten Bible off her shelf, *(is the sort of thing that you get when you give.)*
Aziraphale soared to about 100 feet above the city, angled his wings into a sort of stationary glide, and listened with all eight of his senses. Despite Heaven’s propaganda, there were a lot of little girls and boys like Samantha in the world, who had faith in their hearts but needed to see something with their eyes. Now that the restrictions on appearing in his True Form were lifted, Aziraphale intended to visit every last one of them, before it was too late.

He was so focused he forgot to wonder where on Earth Crowley had gotten to, and why the demon wasn’t returning his calls.

Earth

It was sunset before Crowley, trailing smoke behind him the whole way, pulled his Bentley to the curb in front of a little bookshop in Soho.

“Aziraphale!” Crowley leapt out of the Bentley, turning a fire hydrant into a nice potted plant with a wave of his hand. The plant, sensing the aura of dead greenery that hung around the demon like a harbinger of death, endeavored to look as lush as possible; but Crowley had no time to spare anymore for things like plants. He threw the door to the bookshop open, completely ignoring the lock, and tried again. “Aziraphale!”

He came to a panting halt in the middle of the bookstore, too worked up to remember not to breathe. The angel wasn’t there.

How could he not be here? Crowley had called ahead and left a message, specifically mentioning The Plans and how it really wasn’t his fault this time, he swore. By all rights, Aziraphale should have filled his ansaphone with messages by now, demanding to know Just What They Were Thinking and Why Hadn’t He Warned Him?. The angel should be right here, where he always was, waiting.

Unless he was out there already—on those streets that were only going to get more and more dangerous. Bloody idiot, that’s what Aziraphale could be sometimes, and if he were really out there Saving souls on the eve of Hell's invasion something was just bound to go wrong.

As if from a long way away, he heard something he barely remembered as the song of a heavenly chorus.

Crowley cursed and spun on his heel. There was even less time then he’d thought.

He found Aziraphale on the dawn of the third day.

Crowley had spent most of those past few days chasing false trails. For centuries his angel had been the only one around, or close enough to it for government work. He’d gotten into the habit of just orienting on the most angelic patch of Holiness he could detect and heading towards it.

Recently, that method had backfired on him spectacularly. He'd known something was up when his mental map of the area lit up like a Christmas tree with pinpoints of angelic essence. Every angel Heaven possessed had to be on earth performing miracles right now, because he’d nearly run into thirty just in London alone. Fortunately he’d managed to sneak away before any of them noticed and tried to smite him, but the sneaking just slowed his search down further. Aziraphale, it seemed, had been on earth just a little too long for his own Good, because even low-level gatekeepers were rating higher than he was Crowley’s Holy-o-Meter.
What worried him even more, though, was that bright as the area had been at the start of his search, now—at the end of it—it was nearly as barren of holy energy as it had been a week ago. The pinpricks of angelic essences had been vanishing, singly and in groups, over the course of Crowley's hunt. In fact, now that he stopped to think about it, he hadn't seen an angel—any angel—in the last twelve hours. The last five places he'd gone had all been churches that, for reasons he didn't understand, were reading as strongly as if they were angels in their own rights. The Cathedral had showed up like a Cherub on his internal map of the area, and several of the second-tier churches were strong enough to require that he take detours around them. All in all, it put Crowley in a very foul mood.

Crowley had checked St. James' Park earlier in his search, on the general principle that people tended to be in places where, well, they tended to be. But it had been reading consistently empty of God's creatures—at least, the immortal varieties thereof—since he'd gotten back to London. That had abruptly changed an hour ago, while Crowley had been rendezvousing with yet another church, this one in the all-too-familiar town of Lower Tadfield. The park had been glowing dully—not much of a holiness rating, but Crowley had already checked everything else. And as he'd been driving towards it, bulldozing trees as he went, he had noticed...something. Like the light at the end of the tunnel that grows as you approach it, St. James' Park seemed to be glowing larger and brighter with each mile he covered on the motorway back to London.

Now Crowley could no longer see the aura of the park. It had swallowed him up two blocks away. But his skin was tingling, a distant aftereffect of all the positive energy flowing around him. It was like setting foot inside a consecrated place—he could ignore the tingling for a while, but if he stayed too long, it would start to get to him.

And the park itself, he saw as he swung the Bentley into an open space (where, moments ago, there had been a large decorative shrub) was full.

Not just the usual early-morning joggers and dog-running types. Not just businessmen heading to the station to catch an early train and overnight laborers heading home. All sorts of people were there. Little children still in their pyjamas, looking as if they should be in bed. Women who were unmistakably housewives and had no business being up before ten o'clock. Homeless vagrants the police usually chased out of the park overnight. Policemen, looking lost without their customary coffee cups. A whole mass of humanity, just gathered together in St James' Park for no good reason.

Crowley leapt out of his Bentley and was greeted with a blow to the abdomen, of the sort one might feel if the star offensive player for Manchester United had attempted to score a penalty shot into one's stomach. He staggered to one knee and blessed under his breath.

Crowley turned and gazed at the leyline he'd just inadvertently crossed. Now that he'd spotted it, he could see its effects, the tangles of energy running through the city, the vibrations of the park that grew more resonant with each human soul added to the chorus. They had been drawn here. Someone—and Crowley thought he knew who—had sent out the religious equivalent of a dog whistle. Those who heard it and had enough Good left in them had found themselves inexplicably drawn to this place, and now that they had come, they milled about, waiting—for what?

He just bet he knew.

Suddenly the sky was grey—the grey of the moment before dawn, before the beginning of a new day.
As one, the crowd swung towards the East and sighed.

Crowley managed to think, with the demonic part of him that always remained detached, that the angel had demonstrated an unusual talent for showmanship this morning. Moments later that part was overcome by the shining glory in front of him.

The sky turned pink, the color of first dawn.

Aziraphale was hovering off the ground, just clear of the treetops. His wings, fully extended, were a rainbow of color in the morning sun. They were rippling as the great wings slowly beat, producing a hypnotic effect. Bright rays born of the dawning sun turned their very tips gold, gilded his brow with righteousness. And for a moment—a bright, shining, eternal moment—the sun itself was his halo, a crown of holiness as pure as the first sunrise, too potent to be denied by any who witnessed it.

Just as suddenly as it had come, the moment was gone. The sky was blue again, and the vision of Heaven was no longer to be seen.

But Crowley could feel the effects radiating out from the spot where, moments ago, his angel had hung, radiant in the splendor of the Lord. Every human who had laid eyes upon him was Saved, he could sense that effortlessly, but it went farther than that. He'd be blessed if he knew how the angel had done it, but each of them carried an— an aura around them. They carried Aziraphale's promise with them, and he knew that wherever they went from now on—for as long as the memory of wings at dawn remained—they would share that promise with everyone they met.

That, his mind observed, was why Aziraphale hadn't shown up on his map of holiness. He hadn't seen a miracle like that since... he couldn't remember when. A long time. The angel had to have spent all night setting this up; maybe longer. Sending the call, then waiting for all of the people to gather... it could have taken days.

Crowley shook himself, hard. Too much of him was reacting to Aziraphale's display. He'd been an angel once, too. Something at the very bottom of his being had responded to what he'd just seen. And that was a problem, because if the reports coming out of Hell were true, he very much needed to be a demon right now.

Crowley started pushing his way through the crowd, using the exercise to focus. He'd had to waste three days finding that blasted angel, three days that by all accounts Earth didn't have. If they were going to Do Something they didn't have any more time to waste. And his demonic pride, which was just starting to poke its head back up, would be blessed before he'd let Aziraphale see that his little show of splendor had had any effect on him.

He was halfway through the park, heading for the treetops where the angel had appeared, when he reached to push a human out of the way—and the human vanished, seconds after his hand had made contact.

Crowley came to a screeching halt, and, slowly, turned around.

Behind him, the park was empty. Completely, totally, unequivocally empty.

He turned back around in time to see a group of dazed-looking humans fade out. Behind him he could finally see the form he recognized—a little plump, rather less well manicured than usual, visibly exhausted, but still Aziraphale, leaning against one of the trees he'd just used as a prop in
his little stage play. Crowley took the last few steps to bring him to standing in front of his angel on
reflex. Everything he'd planned on saying, or not saying, had flown completely out of his head.

The silence around them was the silence of the absence of living things. Crowley's map of the area
had gone dead—Aziraphale wasn't even registering as a source of holiness right now. For the space
between one breath and the next, the entire world consisted of just the two of them, angel and
demon, alone together. They stared at each other in confusion, and all the things they could never
name rose up between them like the tide.

In the next minute the Earth *heaved* beneath Crowley's feet.

Off balance, he was thrown to the ground, and so he was face-down in the dirt when the wave of
pure evil rolled over him.

If he had been a snake, his skin would have peeled off in layers. It felt as if it was bubbling from
within. Everything he'd ever felt during his brief stopovers in Hell exploded all at once, scraping
along both mortal and immortal nerves. It indeed felt as if someone had dug up all of his old
reports on the Spanish Inquisition and was trying them out, right now, on him, all at once.

He hadn't felt like this since the Fourteenth Century.

When it ended, as abruptly as it began, he looked down as if from a height of several feet and saw,
to his complete and utter lack of surprise, the body he'd been borrowing lying crumpled on the
ground like used tissue paper. Humans had some pretty amazing medical science these days,
Crowley reflected, and for a moment strongly considered finding some demon willing to lay him 5
to 1 the body would never be identified.

He'd been *discorporated*. And of all the inconvenient—! But then, why was he still here, gazing at
his ex-body? He was – yes, he was hovering five or so feet above the ground, and his wings were
out, and he was sure that if he looked in a mirror he'd see Himself, which would be rather nice
because he hadn't been in his True body in a good 200 years. But it didn't explain why he was on
Earth. After all of his previous discorporations, he'd always ended up right back in Hell.

His seventh sense *twinged*. Crowley turned around and immediately wished he hadn't.

Reality was broken.

Demons, all in forms he recognized but wished he didn't, were coming through the cracks. As he
watched, the shattered pieces of the sky darkened in color. The ground beneath him cracked and
split, the grass of St. James' Park plowing under to reveal stone and rocky outcroppings,
incongruous against the trees and park benches who had survived the earthquake. His old body was
gone. *(Just as well I never made that bet,)* he thought a little wildly.

Well. That explained why he hadn't gone back to Hell. There was no need to go anywhere. Hell had
come to him.

"C-Crowley?"

Slowly, the demon turned his head.

Aziraphale was still leaning against the tree. He was now, of course, several feet above the ground,
but he still looked like he'd fall over if it weren't for the trunk's support. His wings were out; the
slight middle-aged paunch was gone as if it had never been, and his eyes, freed of any need to protect mortals, were the color of a sky after a storm. If Crowley looked deeply enough, he could see lightning flashing in those depths.

The only thing detracting from the picture of a perfect angel was the green tinge Aziraphale's face was rapidly acquiring.

Almost in unison, they both looked slowly down. The body of a middle-aged bookseller who liked one too many cream puffs of an evening could barely be identified beneath them. Slowly, again in harmony, the angel and the demon looked back up at each other.

"I- I don't feel so well," Aziraphale said faintly, and, still hovering three feet off the ground, passed out.

Adam was watching from several thousand feet up when the celestial spheres were shattered. The sight distressed him. He liked Earth—a fundamental failing in an Antichrist, but there you were. Jesus liked Earth a lot too, so maybe there was just something about being incarnate down there that got to you no matter what you did. He and Jesus had been spending an awful lot of time together since That Incident. They'd discovered they had much in common—a sneaking liking for Creation, a taste for good margaritas, parents who didn't understand why they wanted to go on being called by the names they'd used while incarnate.

The Spheres shattering had reverberated against his soul, and Adam had shaken along with them, down to his very core. It wasn't right. One of his favorite things about Earth had always been the way it had looked from space. In an old room in Tadfield there had been a picture of it spread across one wall of an entire room. Continents had glowed in the dark. It had been beautiful.

The red planet he was gazing down on now, though—

"Magnificent, is it not, Mammon Antichriste?"

Adam scuffed one foot against absolutely nothing, preparing to have the argument again. "Adam. It's Adam now."

Lucifer rolled his eyes. "Irritating me is all well and good for your nature, but isn’t this taking it a bit far?"

"Adam," he insisted.

"Very well. Adam. Nice, isn't it?"

Adam considered all of the answers he could possibly make to that question. "Not really," he decided to say.

Satan looked disdainful. "Perhaps you have not yet had a chance to appreciate its full beauty. If we descend—"

"Why are you bothering with this?" Adam closed his mouth with a snap. If there was one thing Father disliked, it was interruptions.
His Father looked dumbfounded. “Why are we bothering?”

Adam nodded. “‘S not gonna work.”

The Lord of the Pit drew himself up in a manner that was very impressive to those who were not his son and merely indignant to those who were. “It will work. See, already we have expanded our dominion to Earth; soon we will reach into Heaven itself!”

“No, we won’t.” He wondered how to explain something he barely understood himself. ”Look—Remember when you tried to get me to try to bring about Armageddon?”

His Father lifted an expressive eyebrow. “Yes.” His attempt to pack a world of menace into that syllable was really quite impressive—he’d had, after all, millennia to practice—but Adam was unaffected.

“Didn’t work. Wasn’t Ineffable.”

“The way I recall it, it was an unfortunate side effect of your mortal incarnation coming with—”

The Adversary grimaced—“free will.”

Adam kicked at the nonexistent floor. Even barefoot, as he tended to stay, he still managed to give the impression of wearing battered sneakers with the laces untied. Humanity, he decided not for the first time, had changed him. It was hard to remember, like trying to recall a dream, but he was fairly sure the experience of casually exercising free will had radically changed his perspective. It made him reply, “Dunno ‘bout that.”

There was a period of silence.

“Didn’t really figure it out till I got back here,” he added eventually. “I mean, I knew it, but I couldn’t think about it right till I got back.”

Lucifer reminded himself that patience, although technically a virtue, was a vital part of his master plan and could profitably be applied here. “Think about what?”

“All this.” Adam waved a hand about him. “‘S not supposed to be like this.” He paused. “Well, it is. Gotta have someone on the other side, temptin’ people an’ all that. ‘S about free will. But it’s like I said. It’s no use either side winning. An’ God knows that, you betcha. The Plan’s not gonna have us winning.”

“The Plan’s not going to have them winning, either.”

Adam blinked in what was probably his first moment of complete and utter surprise. “You know that?”

His Father nodded. “You were right about that part, at least. Winning’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

“The struggle.” Lucifer angled his wings slightly, beginning to descend towards the planet.

Adam ran a few steps downward, after him. “If you know that, then why are we doing this?”

The Adversary didn’t turn around. His speed gradually built. “I knew that eventually The Plan would let me break the equilibrium. Earth wasn’t meant to stay like that forever. And then I’ll finally find out.”
“Find out what?” Adam called.

“What the point is.”

(a little piece of) Heaven

Jesus sighed. "I don't know what you think I can do about it," he said.

Adam shrugged. "Maybe your Dad will listen?"

The Lamb of Peace just shook his head. Without the beard and shaggy hair, he looked not a day older than 21—the age his fake ID claimed for him, in fact. He and Adam were sitting at a recreation of what used to be a bar in Miami, sharing the locally famous Giant Frozen Margarita. It didn't taste any better than the regular-sized ones, Jesus thought, pulling on his straw, but the price couldn't be beat. Couldn't used to have been, that was. They didn't need to use money in what was basically an elaborate illusion.

"You know My Dad," he said now, miracling away his frozen headache before it had time to materialize. "He's got a Plan, and he's going to carry it out. He's done a lot of stuff he didn't like doing already to get it done; I don't think he's going to stop because you're a bit bothered."

"Something's not right," Adam insisted.

"As far as everyone in Heaven is concerned, you're wrong," Jesus sighed. "They're thrilled up there. After that Apocalypse fiasco—" he looked meaningfully at his opposite number—"they were running about like—oh, I don't know. What do they say runs about on Earth these days?"

"Chickens without heads," the Antichrist supplied helpfully.

"Like chickens without heads," the Son of God nodded. "Now things are happening as they were written again, my lot couldn't be happier. They're already sharpening flaming swords and planning maneuvers."

"But that's just it," Adam said earnestly. "The whole point of Armageddon was that what was written wasn't. Being in the middle of all of that, it..." he shook his head. "I understood the whole thing, just for a second. You did, too, when you were on that Cross thingy, I know you did." Unwillingly Jesus nodded. "What was written was written so that people would react the way they did. It wasn't because that was the way things would be, it was to get people to act right. You know the entire world wasn't really underwater during the Flood, for example; it was just that little corner of it, but it was important for people to think it was the whole world. That's how they got the proper effect." Adam stared moodily into the drink, somewhat hampered in the pose by the fact that the drink was taller than he was sitting down. "That's exactly what's got me thinking. Things aren't supposed to go by the book—so why are they?"

"Some things happened the way The Old Book said. The whole business in Eden, for example," Jesus pointed out.

"Yes," Adam mused, "but that was—that was like a play. They did it that way so people would remember it that way. It wasn't like the flood. It really had to happen that way, not just be written, to get the proper results."
"Maybe that's what's going on now," Christ suggested. "Just reading about it isn't enough. We've got to act it out. We're all like those people in those play thingies—actors. All playing our parts. Doesn't follow that we'll get the same ending. After all, everyone played their parts right in the Apocalypse, didn't they? Just like they were Written. But the result was different."

"It was that," Adam agreed. For a moment his eyes unfocused. "You're right, of course," he said thoughtfully. "This is just another form of play-acting. But I'm not under the veil of ignorance those philosophers go on about—I know this isn't going to end the way it's written. Makes it hard to act as if I do."

"Then don't," Jesus shrugged. "You wouldn't know what you did if your part didn't require you to know it. Just go on acting normal."

"And Ineffability will take care of itself?"

The Christ toasted the Antichrist with a little pink paper umbrella. "It usually does."

Earth

Aziraphale woke up with the mother of all hangovers.

This, in and of itself, was not indicative. Usually he remembered to sober up before he passed out, but if he estimated incorrectly and toppled over one bottle early, his Earthly body was quite capable of punishing him for it.

There was something bugging him. Something was wrong about him having a hangover this particular morning.

Well, he certainly couldn't remember anything in this state. With a groan, he tried to force the hangover from his body.

Tried was, unfortunately, the operative word. When the world came back into focus, five minutes or five eternities of blinding pain later, nothing had changed—except now he was nose-to-eyes with an uncharacteristically worried-looking Crowley.

"Don't try that again," Crowley advised.

"Ng," Aziraphale managed. All right, if you know so much about what's going on, could you be of a little help here? his eyes said sternly.

Crowley's hands were cold. Aziraphale had a space in which he thought he was freezing, from the inside out, turning into an ice sculpture of himself. Then warmth returned with a whoosh, and—thank the Lord—he no longer felt like he'd been run over by a steamroller.

"Actually," Crowley said, "That's not very far from what really happened."

"My dear—" Aziraphale sputtered, then clutched his head: the headache had apparently not gone away completely. Reading minds without permission was one of the things Aziraphale had insisted be outlawed by The Agreement, though, and he intended to make his displeasure known. What do
you think you're doing?

Crowley looked surprised. "You must have wanted me to hear that. I didn't do anything."

I most certainly did not. The headache was ebbing away again.

"You didn't?" Maybe a side effect?, rang in Aziraphale's hearing as clearly as if Crowley had said it aloud. The only problem was that the angel had been staring directly at his opposite and was positive his lips hadn't moved.

"...what's happened?"

Crowley looked for a moment as if he wanted to drop through the floor of what Aziraphale now realized was his bookstore. Then he sighed and, with the air of one who is damned regardless and may as well get it over with, he strode over to the single window and dramatically pulled back the old curtain. For a long moment Aziraphale simply stared, paralyzed into doing nothing, not even thinking. A livid sky on London, he heard Crowley thinking softly, as if in a dream.

The angel tried to say something and found he couldn't. There was nothing he could say. Hell... is here?

Yes, Crowley admitted quietly.

That explains why I couldn't miracle my hangover away.

Er... yes. If by 'hangover' you mean 'backlash from the opening of the Gate'.

Aziraphale surprised himself by laughing quietly. Then he winced. The vibrations of an angel's voice in the air, he was realizing, had unpleasant ramifications. The newly Hellish atmosphere reacted poorly, to say the least. His words seemed to hang in the air, echoing from wall to wall, actually painful to hear.

Crowley sent, It's probably better if we speak like this. Hell hasn't quite got all the pockets of good rooted out yet... you've only been out for a day... but you don't want to be noticed.

Aziraphale nodded, although privately he wondered, (Exactly what difference does he think it will make?) He was literally the last angel on Earth; it was only a matter of time before the forces of Hell descended and... and...

It didn't bear thinking about.

Eventually, he observed, I guess I missed my exit.

Crowley looked quickly left and right as if someone might be watching. Then, sheepishly, he produced a bag from a corner of the dusty bookshop. I...er... brought you some candles. And chalk. When the angel continued staring at him blankly, he added, You know. So you can, well, get out of here. Er.

Aziraphale blinked. We're in the middle of what is literally Hell on Earth and you're trying to help me escape?
Crowley's discomfort was obvious in the way he couldn't meet Aziraphale's eyes. *Ahem. Well. Sort of. I mean I'll make it sound like you got out at the last minute a few hours ago. And it'll be much more daring in my report. Horrible fight—both of us discorporated—you escaping by the skin of your wing-tips—maybe even some holy water. You could tell your lot the same thing. Just our little secret. Okay?*

This time the angel remembered to keep the laughter inside himself, but some of it must have seeped over, because Crowley looked unaccountably hurt. *I'm sorry you went to all that risk, my dear, but I can't just draw a circle on the floor and pray. Firstly, if the sound of my voice is enough to give me a headache, I doubt I could survive a full-on transportation ritual. And secondly...*

Crowley waited expectantly.

*well... er... as it happens... Ineverconsecratedthebookshop.*

Crowley looked dazed. *Oh, well, is that all,* he thought vaguely for a moment. Then— Aziraphale never thought he’d actually get to see the phenomenon that occurred in so many books—the light dawned. *You WHAT?!*

*Well... I never quite had the time,* Aziraphale said defensively. He had a horrible feeling it had just sounded sheepish. *It wasn't necessary when Earth was just Earth.*

Crowley surged to his feet and started pacing furiously. Aziraphale was sure that this would be a very impressive display under normal circumstances. Right now, however, he was embarrassed by his admission, more than a little worried about being stuck in *Hell* of all places, and the room Crowley was trying to pace in was only ten feet wide or so. It sort of ruined the effect.

*Angel, they're going to Obliterate you.*

Aziraphale winced. *I'm trying very hard not to think about that.*

Crowley turned for the last time and leaned down into Aziraphale's face. *This isn't just Earth anymore. Look at us both. Couldn't pull your wings in if you wanted to, could you? Or wear anything besides that glorious white robe? You're not in some inconvenient mortal form they can discorporate. You're you. And if they kill you...*

Aziraphale shivered. He'd never even considered the possibility that he might be truly vulnerable. Being discorporated would hurt, but—

He looked down at his hands. They were *his* hands. The air of the bookshop had acquired an acrid tinge, and his wing-feathers trembled in sympathy.

He remembered the War, the Angels and Fallen whose fate had never been fully known or understood. After that the War had gone cold, focused on the humans. On Earth, where they could wear convenient mortal bodies and losing a battle only meant being deported back to Heaven or Hell, there to hang about in the Celestial Bureaucracy’s waiting room until they coughed you up a new one. Like that giant game of chess humans were always going on about. Aziraphale felt a vaguely hysterical giggle rising up in him. They'd got it wrong, those humans. It wasn't God who was playing chess, it was all of his minions, angels and ineffable demons alike, who'd set Earth up as the board and doled themselves out as pieces. And in the end it didn't mean anything at all, did it? No one cared when a piece was lost. And if the pawn you took happened to be Obliterated, not
just discorporated, well, it was his own fault, wasn't it? Not theirs. All Ineffable anyway. Just doing their part.

—ziraphale! Crowley yelled.

He jumped and cracked his head a good one on a low-hanging bookshelf. Sorry.

Crowley must have been sick or something, because he was looking worried yet again. No. I'm sorry. I didn't realize you couldn't get out from here... I thought if I just got you here without anyone noticing, you could...

Fly away? Aziraphale couldn't laugh at the situation anymore. Angels didn't get to go into shock. He lolled his head back instead and stared at the ceiling. Dusty and cobwebby. Just as he liked it, the better to keep out potential customers. Human customers. Wonderful humans who'd written the books he'd collected so lovingly over a dozen lifetimes. What would happen to them all? Was there a demon, somewhere, who would take care of them? Would Crowley...? It would mean something, just a little something, if his books survived.

*Do you think you could... could take care of the books?* Aziraphale whispered.

Crowley snarled. With a sudden motion, he tipped an entire bookshelf over, hauled Aziraphale off the bed and shoved him against the wall. *Now see here...*

Aziraphale wasn't looking at him. He was starting, transfixed, at the fallen bookshelf.

Crowley shook him, hard, and he was stronger than he had realized in this new Hell, because he shook Aziraphale to his soul.

The angel cried out a little, then did it again when the echoes of his voice came back to him on the winds of Hell. *Now you listen to me, angel,* Crowley's voice echoed angrily in his mind. *I don't give a blessing about these books. If Adam could make 'em for you again, then they're replaceable. You're not, and you are not just going to sit here making plans for what will happen after—* Crowley's thought-voice died away, and he stepped back, releasing Aziraphale. *All you need to get out is a consecrated place. Is that right?*

Aziraphale nodded dazedly, then shook his head. *I couldn't perform a miracle earlier. The sound of my own voice makes me sick... I would need to borrow holy energy from the site in order to complete the ritual. And your lot will have gone for the holiest places first.*

*No,* said Crowley thoughtfully. *Not quite. Not if I know them.*

Many people make the mistake of believing that since chaos contributes to Hell's dominion, Hell is, by nature, Chaotic.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Certainly, the Infernal Bureaucracy was slow, ponderous and had a tendency to lose things; but it was that way *on purpose.* It was the only bureaucracy in Creation that functioned exactly as it was designed.

That by itself should have tipped off any self-respecting intelligent creature that Hell is perhaps the most tightly controlled operation ever to exist.
Ordinarily, the method in their madness was, well, madness. Lots of paperwork, damnation of souls, abandoning field agents on Earth and not checking up on them for a few centuries. But the invasion of Earth was certainly not going to be handled in a slipshod fashion.

They were being methodical. Minor demons were being sent to round up the remaining humans and herd them into one of the five locations chosen by Lucifer. Demons from the Infernal Bureaucracy were already setting up offices to deal with the new territory. The high-level demons were, appropriately enough, having a meeting. And detached groups of mid-level demons had been dispatched to the hundreds of places around the world that retained an aura of Holiness.

The entire affair was very well-regulated. Each group had a sector of the world to cover. Computer scientists all over the world would have been delighted to observe the pattern of their movement, because they had been right–Hell had invented, and subsequently solved, the Traveling Salesman problem.

And if one or two of the spots happened to move from time to time, well, the field agents would catch up to that eventually. They had, after all, all the time in the world.

Seventh Day Adventist? Crowley suggested.

Not holy enough, the angel replied.

Our Lady of London, he tried.

Only built 100 years ago. Won’t have enough spare faith.

Beth Cha’im?

No good. They don’t store energy properly. And none of those little denominations. Something Catholic, or Anglican. They still do the right rituals. What about St James’, over by the park?

Crowley looked uncomfortable. Ahh. Yes. St James’. I meant to tell you about that, actually, funny thing…

Aziraphale tried for tolerance, which was remarkably difficult to come by at the moment. Yes? he prompted.

Well, you know, Hastur and Ligur were hanging ‘round Earth back during that Antichrist mess, and they go in for the personal touch, and Hastur was talking about this priest…

Aziraphale buried his head in his hands. He didn’t.

He said ‘in a decade we’ll have him’ so I thought I’d better check up on it and… well, he was right. Crowley had the grace to look slightly sheepish. So St James’ is out. I think we’re going to have to go clear across town.

Where?

Only place I can think of that fits all your needs is the Cathedral.

St Peter and All Angels?
Crowley flashed an ironic grin. *The very one.* Then the grin slid off his face. *Getting there will be a problem.*

*Something’s happened to the Bentley?* Aziraphale tried to look concerned. It was difficult, but he thought Crowley would appreciate the effort. Crowley was, after all, sticking his neck out here.

But the demon was waving a dismissive hand. *No, no, but to get to that side of London we'd have to take the M25, and we can't. We'd light up soon as we crossed it.*

*Ah,* said Aziraphale inexpressibly. *Odegra.*

*Well,* Crowley said miserably, *it was a very good idea at the time.*

They sat there a moment in silence, and then Aziraphale ventured, *Isn't there anywhere else?*

*If you need a consecrated place more than 200 years old, where they perform the old Catholic rituals, and there have been no major hellish actions... then no, there really isn't.*

Aziraphale nodded resignedly, as if he’d expected that but had to ask anyway.

Crowley gazed over at him contemplatively. *However we get there, you can't go around in that 'glowing raiment' your lot is so fond of.* He coughed discreetly, just to make sure Aziraphale had noticed him holding back from mocking Heaven’s sense of style, in light of the seriousness of the moment.

The angel shifted uncomfortably. *Can't miracle it away either. Part of the True Form.*

The demon looked suddenly mischievous. *Ever changed clothes by hand...?*

The worst part of it, Aziraphale felt, was blackening his wings. They’d used soot, which was becoming increasingly common as Earth grew more and more to resemble Hell. And while it hadn't hurt, particularly, it had *felt* terrible. His wings were supposed to be white. Black wings were an affectation for demons. But Crowley was quite right when he said that they’d make him stand out for miles. Even though there still were demons who refused to miracle their wings black, his chances of passing for one of them were slim. And white was just far too visible.

Aziraphale tried to tell himself that he’d disguised himself plenty of times before—what was walking around on Earth in a mortal body if not a disguise?—and the Greater Good hadn’t seemed to mind. But when Crowley had blackened the last wing-tip he felt like wailing. It felt like a rejection of who he really was, and paradoxically, Hell was the last place on Earth (if you'll pardon the expression) where he wanted to do anything of the sort.

*Scowl a little more, angel. Demons spend most of the time mad,* Crowley advised.

*At what?* The relative emotions of demons weren't the best distraction, but Aziraphale would take what he could get.

Crowley took a quick peek out the door of the bookshop and, apparently satisfied, beckoned the angel forwards. *Lots of things. Humans. Ineffability. Humans. Not having had their coffee in the morning. Humans.* He winked. *Angels. And of course, humans.* The demon sighed, then jammed his hands into his pockets and strode off confidently down the deserted street. They’d decided that
the best defense was not to have to make a defense at all. Until they got to the motorway overpass or saw someone they needed to avoid, the plan was simply to walk down the street and look evil. Aziraphale conscientiously locked the bookshop behind them—by hand, which he’d never done before and required some not-quite swearing. Crowley looked resignedly at the Bentley.

At heart, you know, they’re all still angry at God, Crowley said as they started down the street. Some of them, they think that if they play their part well enough, you know, be Ineffable, he’ll take them back one day. But then they walk around mad at him all the time and cringe whenever someone mentions His Name, so who are they really fooling? They don’t really believe that.

What do you believe? Aziraphale asked, fascinated, remembering at the last minute not to let it show on his face.

Crowley tipped his head backwards and looked at the sky. Funny thing is, he said slowly, I would never have believed this could happen. I thought He liked humans better than that... I thought some of that mercy you’re always going on about came into play somewhere.

Aziraphale wanted to touch his shoulder, to pat him on the back, to do something to take the strain from his features and the sadness from his eyes. It’s here somewhere, he said softly but clearly. We can’t always see it because we haven’t got the big picture in mind. But it’s here all the same.

Faith, Crowley observed sardonically. But there’s only so long you can expect people go on having it, surrounded by all of this, now isn’t there?

To this Aziraphale said nothing; but he began to suspect something very startling. (Crowley’s not normally sarcastic about things unless he’s looking for something—like when he says he really will run over that pedestrian,) Aziraphale thought privately. (He doesn’t really want to run him over. It’s not about the human at all. It’s about me – he wants to see if I’ll still stop him. So what does he want to see this time?) After a moment, he decided to take a guess.

Expect? Aziraphale replied thoughtfully, trying to draw him out. I don’t know if he expects anything. Hopes, perhaps. Just like some of us hope.

Silence from the demon. A quick glance to the side told him there wouldn’t be any reply—Crowley was walking steadily along, hands in his pockets, and although Aziraphale couldn’t see his eyes, the angel knew from long experience that the demon’s mind was now somewhere else entirely.

But Aziraphale had his answer anyway—the missing piece. It was hope. Could it possibly be, Aziraphale asked himself, that Crowley tempted in the hopes someone would thwart him? To prove to himself that the mercy of God was real? For mercy, Aziraphale believed, was the heart of the matter—the ability to go on believing that God was merciful even after living through six thousand years of War and Pestilence and Famine and Death.

Mercy—in some sense—would mean that however many humans Crowley got on pride or gluttony or wrath, they would all of them get a chance at Salvation anyway. (The Arrangement in a nutshell,) Aziraphale realized in startlement. Made to keep the balance, they’d said; make sure no one side got the advantage. Make sure, in other words, that every human who got Tempted eventually got Saved.

But... no. That was too much of a leap, (Surely not,) he told himself. It was just his angelic nature again. Fishing for reasons to continue being... friends... with Crowley. Aziraphale had never quite understood why he was so drawn to the fallen angel. Others of his kind had never felt compassion
or remorse over the Celestial War that had split them into Heaven and Hell. But Aziraphale found himself drawn to Crowley. It was silly and foolish, he thought angrily at himself, to hope that anything could ever change that permanently. *(To think what? Crowley’s secretly all warm and fuzzy inside? Nonsense.)*

It was just his angelic nature acting out, that was all. He was hearing things that weren't there. He and Crowley had had discussions before on the nature of faith and Ineffability, usually three or four bottles in of an evening. It was just something they talked about, being as it were intimately concerned with it. To think he heard something else... well.

Aziraphale strode on through the empty streets, and he didn't have to fake the scowl anymore.

The sun was going down—still, Crowley noticed with some relief, in the west—by the time he and Aziraphale reached the outskirts of London. The cathedral had been built before anyone really knew where this city thing was going to make its permanent home, with the result that they still had miles to go over open country. Once they got past the M25 around London, though, Crowley felt he could relax a little. They were much more likely, he judged, to be noticed in the city than in the country. If only that blasted motorway weren't between them and the cathedral they'd be nearly home free by now.

His mind occupied with the problem of crossing the dread symbol *Odegra*, Crowley forgot to keep his eyes from sliding over to his angel. As soon as he saw him, though, his original train of thought took a sharp left at Albuquerque and dead-ended somewhere in an empty desert. Aziraphale looked terrible. It wasn't just the awful taint of blackened wings or the slightly ill-fitting dark clothing that drooped sadly on the angel's body, no happier to be worn by him than he was in wearing it. It was... it was something in the defeated slump of his shoulders, and the dreadful sincerity behind the scowl, and the weariness in the stormy eyes—dark eyes now, with thunderclouds on the horizon, the normal sky-blue almost swallowed up entirely.

Crowley lurched to a stop and grabbed Aziraphale's shoulder—and let go again in shock when the angel hissed at him.

*Aziraphale? What's going on?* Something, the demon was sure, was very wrong. Now that they'd stopped trudging along, the angel was actually swaying on his feet. What on earth was the matter with him? They were *immortals*, a little thing like walking twenty miles didn't wear them out. If anything Crowley felt stronger than when they'd started.

*Nothing,* Aziraphale said flatly.

*Lying now, angel?* He frowned. His opposite number had told a lie or two in his time—the incident with the flaming sword in the garden came to mind—but he'd never known Aziraphale to lie over something so *minor*. He'd only ever done it when he thought the good he was doing outweighed the taint of the lie. When it came to day-to-day matters or simple questions he was painfully honest.

There was a mental sigh. *Nothing important,* he clarified. *I'm... tired.*

Crowley frowned. *You shouldn't be tired.*

*You know, I think I may possibly have been aware of that.*

Crowley's frown deepened. Aziraphale had an un-angelic gift for irony, but outright sarcasm had
been classed as 'uncouth' from the twelfth century onwards. Something was definitely wrong. Let's get across the M25, he suggested—hanging around for too long near the symbol could be almost as hazardous to their health as driving across it—and then we'll take a brief rest, okay? (And figure out what's got you acting out of your skin like this,) Crowley thought privately.

They were coming up on the motorway now; no fewer than four of Crowley's eight senses were making him aware of its existence. There's an overpass about a quarter of a mile that way, the demon gestured, and some homeless lady's been using it as a den for the past five years. One of yours. Dunno how she managed it so close to Odegra. But she ought to have left enough residual to let us get through without showing up too holy. Crowley cast a quick glance sideways at his angel. You're still pretty dim as far as holiness goes. You must have really wiped yourself out with that miracle.

Aziraphale shrugged jerkily, then turned in the direction Crowley had indicated. The demon followed, a little mystified and more than a little worried. Once they got past the underpass, he told himself, he was sitting Aziraphale down somewhere and shaking him until he found out what was wrong.

The overpass was in view to the naked human eye now. It was empty of cars, but the aura of, well, evil hovered around it. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Aziraphale wince as he came in contact with it. The sooner they got this over with, the better, he thought. Come on, angel. He reached out and grabbed Aziraphale's hand before he could protest, and then he was running down the gently sloping hill to the arched overpass. Just have to keep going, he thought, panting a little with the effort of hauling his angel along. Aziraphale wasn't doing much to aid his own propulsion.

The shadow of the M25 engulfed them a few yards before they actually reached its underside. It was eight lanes in this part of London, and sloped sharply downwards into a ditch. As the angel and the demon skidded down it breathlessly, the angle of the walls swallowed the light of the setting sun. Aziraphale moaned beside him, but Crowley paid him no mind. They just had to keep going—

One of Crowley's extra senses sat up like a terrier. Breaking his stride, he veered sharply to the left and pressed himself up against a concrete pylon. Aziraphale hit the support beside him with a thump, making no effort to break his fall. Crowley clapped a hand over his angel's mouth and concentrated on not breathing.

Around them, the motorway started to rumble.

Crowley's eyes widened, glowing faintly in the dark, as he felt the magnitude of what was approaching. This had been a bad idea—they would be noticed in a second—

He spun around, ignoring Aziraphale's sudden squawk, and pulled the angel away from the concrete. Then Crowley wrapped his arms and wings around them both—Aziraphale cried out again as his wings were squeezed—and thought evil thoughts as hard as he could.

The rumbling got louder. Aziraphale seemed to be shrinking in the little cocoon, but Crowley had no thoughts to spare for him, concentrating on forming a bubble of evil around the both of them strong enough not to show up against the M25.

Overhead, the motorway was being graced by the presence of one of the demons of the Highest Circle.
The shaking intensified until it seemed like it couldn’t get any worse. For an awful moment Crowley thought the entire thing was going to come down on their ears. Then he focused the thought of horrible maimed bodies into the general stream of evil he was exhibiting.

After what seemed like an eternity, the motorway gradually settled back down. *(Guess I didn't mess with the structural integrity too much when I moved the marking-posts,)* the demon thought a little wildly. Crowley wanted to sit down and have a mild case of hysterics; but he had an angel to dispose of and he didn't have any free time. Gingerly, and more than half expecting to get slapped, he let go of said angel.

Aziraphale promptly fell to the ground in a little heap.

*Azira—* Crowley bit off his thought. Even thinking too loudly about an angel could be dangerous right here, with the residue from one demon's passage and Crowley's own deliberately evil thoughts. He bent over grimly, thinking to shake the angel, and then stopped mid-crouch. An unconscious angel, by nature, radiated much less holiness than a conscious one. And they were still in a very dangerous place.

He changed his plans and, with a casual heave, threw Aziraphale over one shoulder. Then he paused momentarily.

Sure, Crowley was a demon, and just as he could walk twenty miles without breaking a sweat he was quite strong and could lift a good bit. But immortals weren't made of matter in quite the same way as everything else, and consequently the normal rules of mass didn't quite apply to them. They could be remarkably light sometimes—how else could their wings manage to lift a man-sized being?—and remarkably heavy others. Being picked up and tossed in a fireman's carry by another immortal—especially of an opposing alignment—ought to have been one of those other, heavier times.

*(It shouldn't be this easy,)* he thought. *(But... of course.)* Why hadn't he thought of that before? He, a demon, was getting stronger. That only made sense, since Earth was getting closer to being his natural habitat, namely Hell. A demon in Hell is stronger than a demon on Earth. A demon in Heaven was a sitting duck. And an angel in a place edging towards being Hell couldn't be much better off.

But there was more, Crowley realized. It wasn't just that Aziraphale was tiring easily and stumbling about. It wasn't just the physical, it was the rest of him too. Aziraphale may not have been an archangel but he should be perfectly capable of withstanding harm from a simple bubble of evil, especially when it was just wrapped *around* him and not trying to corrupt him. But he'd actually been knocked unconscious. And before that, he'd been acting decidedly odd—sarcasm, unnecessary lies. What if this atmosphere was acting on Aziraphale from a spiritual point of view—actually corrupting him the longer he spent in it? Breaking down his angelic barriers one by one and getting under his skin? It made a horrible sort of sense. The whole point of this exercise was to Tempt humans, and Lucifer had clearly jacked the atmospheric evil up through the proverbial roof. High enough to tempt the souls of mankind in the time allotted. High enough to start affecting Crowley. High enough that it could start affecting an honest-to-(cough)-God angel? Possibly. Quite possibly.

It only made getting out of there more important. Balancing the unconscious angel, Crowley drew a net of evil thoughts around them and made his way to the other side.
Belial was a demon who prided himself on attention to detail. It was too easy, in his opinion, to just
destroy things or corrupt souls en masse, and lose sight of what really mattered. It was really all
about the moment when your target realized just what they'd done—that each of the steps they'd
taken, so reasonable individually, had together led then down the path to Temptation.

It was craftsmanship, that sort of Temptation. There were hotshot demons nowadays who preferred
to work large, to spread out a year's temptation over hundreds of people. Not Belial. He practiced
an Art. And under him, the Department of Tempting practiced that Art. Oh, yes, he had a sub-
department for those mass-production sorts of demons, but it was less of a functioning group and
more of a place he temporarily assigned people who didn't please him. He claimed credit for
anything effective they did, of course, but it didn't stop him from generally holding their methods
in contempt.

The conquering of Earth was going to be a wonderful opportunity for the practice of the Art. No
Heavenly interference, and coupled with the appropriate atmosphere—well. He'd already had
humans rounded up and moved to holding locations in the future areas of the Five Cities –
carefully chosen with reference to Revelations – and he was on his way to get started right now.

Belial was traveling down the M25.

He had chosen his route deliberately because, he felt, he ought to at least have a look at it. This,
after all, was one of the few decent projects to come out of the Mass Corruption sub-department.
That Crowley fellow had been behind it. It was a good idea, as far as it went, but he couldn't help
but think of all of the individual souls not tempted while the groundwork for Odegra had been laid.
It was a shame, really, Belial reflected. Crowley had been the one to do the Eve job. Now that had
been a real piece of work. Somewhere along the way the other demon had lost that edge. A real
pity. The Eve job had been one of the best.

Perhaps now that the masses of humans weren't so mass-like there would be an opportunity to get
Crowley back into fighting trim. Craftsmanship was what was needed now. He'd have to make sure
the other demon was properly assigned for the duration of their stay on Earth.

After the meeting, then. Belial would see to it.

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"...and with your permission, Lord, I'd like to take over the Eastern domicile area for more training
grounds." Michael waited. When the Lord didn't answer, he went on in a more diffident tone. "No
one really lives there anymore; the area was pretty depleted after the Fall and most of the loyal
angels moved out afterwards. Bad memories, Lord. And we could really use the space."

God still wasn't answering. He was staring vaguely off to one side, head cocked, and He appeared
to be watching something very intently—something Michael, of course, couldn't see. He also
seemed, improbable as it sounded, to be ever so slightly worried. After another moment, however,
He shifted His penetrating gaze over to the archangel and said <What for?>

"We've added several new Flaming Sword and Spear Brigades to handle the upcoming—err—
effort," Michael said. "They're overflowing the current practice space."
Again there was silence. Michael was starting to worry a little. Normally the Lord knew everything he was going to say before he said it—probably had known everything the archangel would ever say or do from the moment he was Born. That made conversations like this more like a play than a real dialogue—the angel reciting lines that were, to God, prearranged, and hearing responses that had been carefully planned for millennia. It was unlike the Lord to actually need to, well, think about His responses. At least, not to basic questions like this.

<...No,> God said eventually. <I think not.>

Michael sighed. They could really have used that space. "Perhaps just part of it, Lord?"

<No,> His Creator said again. <I believe we will soon have use for that space as housing again.>

Michael's eyebrows remembered not to climb at the last minute. Did He really think they'd get that many angels out of the newly-Saved souls? Well, He would Know, of course. "Very well, Lord." He sighed. Maybe if he rearranged the practice schedules—again—and reduced the amount of space dedicated to lance training, he could make it work... "I shall continue training, Lord." He bowed and turned to leave.

<One additional thing, Michael.>

"Yes, Lord?" The angel paused expectantly.

<The Communications Ports. I understand you've eliminated normal guard duty over those.>

"Yes, Lord." Michael hadn't been planning to use it in their counter-offensive, and every angel was needed in the offensive line, but if the Lord had a different plan...

<Post messengers there at all times. I want to be notified the moment anything happens.>

The archangel waited, but no further information was forthcoming. "Yes, Lord." He turned away again. One of the things about working for God, he'd learned, was that curiosity got you nowhere.

God checked the position of the sun around the Earth. This was one of the trickiest events to predict—there was a good deal of 'messing around' and free will to calculate for. But if His guess was correct, it would be soon now.

Of course, if He were wrong, it could already be too late.

Earth

For the second time in as many periods of unconsciousness, Aziraphale woke with the mother of all headaches.

Angel? You awake?

He turned his head slightly. Ahh. As if to add to the sense of déjà vu, Crowley was hovering worriedly off to one side. But this wasn't his bookshop; Crowley was distinctly more dirty than he had been when they'd left—filthy, really, what did he think he was doing being as close to
Aziraphale as he was in that condition?, and there was no comforting cup of tea in his hands, which might have been the worst crime of all. *What happened?* he demanded shortly.

Crowley looked guilty. *I over-evilled you.*

Aziraphale mulled over this and decided that made no sense. *You what?*

*I wrapped us in a bubble of evil to hide us. You didn't take it well.*

*Obviously,* he thought back and was rewarded with a slight flinch of Crowley's shoulders. Well, what did the other being expect? The demon had wrapped him—*him,* a being of purest good!—in a bubble of evil. Let him realize his folly. It would make him more respectful in the future.

*Aziraphale,* Crowley said carefully, *how do you feel?*

At least the demon was worried. That was something. *Fine, no thanks to you,* he sent back, swinging his legs over the edge of what turned out to be a bed and stretching all six limbs. Ahh, that was better.

Crowley had backed up several steps hastily and was watching Aziraphale the way the paralyzed bird usually watches the snake—an amusing metaphor; Aziraphale was rather proud of it. The snake-demon's role reversed. *What is it, Crowley?* he asked almost genially.

*You shouldn't be feeling so good,* Crowley said quietly. *You're an angel in a place becoming more Hellish by the moment. You should be getting weaker, not stronger.*

Aziraphale shook his head dismissively. What did that matter? Surely Crowley didn't think it was bad that he, Aziraphale, was recovering his strength. It could only make the rest of their trek easier. Unless...

Crowley was saying something about negative auras and seeping into vacuums and the possible effects of hanging around Hell too long, but Aziraphale wasn't listening. His eyes narrowed. Crowley did seem *awfully* upset by his recovery. Now why would he want Aziraphale to go on stumbling about like a weakling, unless... he meant him some harm?

(*It's a trap,* Aziraphale thought suddenly. *The Cathedral’s a trap.*)

It was the only possible explanation. Why should Crowley help him? He'd been a fool, naïve, too willing to believe that a few bottles of wine now and then over the centuries might affect a demon’s baser nature. Why, every demon in London was probably waiting for him. It would explain why they hadn't seen another soul this entire journey. The forces of Hell were deliberately keeping clear of them so that Aziraphale could be conveyed to the chosen location.

And come to think of it, it *had* been Crowley who'd said that they had to come this way—he'd been planning their route the entire time. Aziraphale himself had no more than a general idea where they were (something like 'in an abandoned house on the far side of the M25'). And taking it one step further, hadn't it been Crowley who'd said that the Cathedral was their *only* option? A bit suspicious, that, wasn't it? How he'd only just then remembered to tell Aziraphale about St James’—that was exactly the sort of thing the Arrangement had been designed to cover, Crowley should have warned him about it *years* ago. It was convenient. Too convenient.

Why had he believed Crowley? He'd been tired. Not operating at full strength, that was for sure.
The Gate opening had weakened him. Crowley had probably hoped to get him all the way to the Cathedral—(*like a little lamb to the slaughter*), Aziraphale thought viciously—before the angel adjusted to his new environment. And then... well. The last angel on Earth... he'd be quite a prize. Get Crowley promoted a few ranks in the Infernal Bureaucracy, wouldn't it?

A shuffling noise caused Aziraphale to look up. Crowley had noticed that Aziraphale wasn't paying attention to him—(*the lying snake-in-the-grass*)—and had come closer to where Aziraphale sat on the edge of some vanished human's bed. One of the demon's hands was actually *reaching* towards him. A thought flashed across the angel’s mind like lightning: (*this is my chance*).

He struck with the terrible swiftness of divine retribution, grabbing the offending wrist and *twisting*, using the leftover momentum to haul the demon over him. Crowley hit the bed with a yelp and skidded, raking up the covers. (*Aww, he tucked me in,* Aziraphale thought sardonically.) He took advantage of the demon being momentarily stunned and grabbed his *other* wrist, then swung himself over the demon's body, pinning him down as effectively as he could manage at the moment. In a bit he'd have to get some rope or something; if he blessed it strongly enough it should hold against Crowley, who was, after all, really a rather *minor* demon. But first of all he was going to get some answers.

Transferring both of Crowley's wrists to one firm, angelic hand, he tapped the other's forehead firmly with the other. The demon, who still appeared to be afflicted with some form of paralysis, just stared at him. Aziraphale shook his head. The good old days were gone, he reflected. It used to take a lot more to smite righteously in the name of the Lord.

*Now,* Aziraphale said pleasantly, enjoying the feeling of slim bones trapped in his mighty fist, *let's have a few answers.* *How many do you have waiting at the Cathedral?* For a moment he could see it, and his breath caught; a multitude of demons, of all types—flying, horned, spiked, too horrible to describe—crouching behind pews, befouling the holy water, destroying the works of art... and all for him, all because of him. He wouldn't allow it. Sudden rage made him shake the demon he had trapped below him. *How many?*

Crowley stared at him in complete and utter shock.

Aziraphale sighed almost lovingly, then charged his free hand with power and laid it gently against Crowley's cheek.

Nothing happened. The angel frowned. That had been holy energy. It should have made a bigger impression on the demon.

Perhaps his energy level was still low. It wouldn't do to let that be seen. *Tell me,* he demanded, fixing the demon's attention firmly on him. *How many?*

*...there's no one waiting, angel.* Something he couldn't identify flickered through the demon's eyes. Whatever it was, Aziraphale knew he didn't like it; he squeezed Crowley's wrists harder.

*I know you've got a trap arranged. Come on, now, let's not waste time on all the nasty questioning preliminaries. How many are there?*

Crowley was silent a long moment; thinking about his answer. *You're wrong,* he said finally. *There's no trap.*

Aziraphale seethed with sudden anger. How *dare* this demon lie there and deny what he so clearly
knew to be true? How dared he lie to a direct representative of God? He bent, fixing Crowley's gaze with his, and brought his face down so that their noses nearly touched. Tell. Me.

Crowley did the one thing that could possibly distract Aziraphale at that moment in time. He kissed him.

Outside, the wind started to kick up.

Aziraphale had thought he was prepared for any treachery on the part of the demon, but this! —he was so startled that for a second he lost his grip, and that was all it took for Crowley, with a massive heave and a snakelike twist, to reverse their positions.

The angel, thrown with a thump against the long-suffering pillows, was momentarily furious with himself. How could he fall for such an obvious stratagem? But it was getting harder to think as Crowley's golden eyes stared ever more deeply into his. Something warm was starting deep inside him and then—with complete disregard for the fact that, moments ago, Aziraphale had been accusing Crowley of trying to kill him—Crowley was kissing him again, deeply, with inflections. Doing it for real, Aziraphale thought dazedly, and the difference between the two methods was astounding. The first kiss had been merely distracting; the second kiss—

I haven't seen that look on someone's face since the last time I performed a real Miracle, Crowley said huskily an eternity later.

Aziraphale was engaging in the very undignified process of gasping for breath—the idea of not needing to breathe had flown completely out of his head. There was a roaring in his ears; he couldn't tell if it came from without or within. My... God, he managed, not thinking how the utterance might affect Crowley until he saw the demon wince slightly. Instantly Aziraphale was contrite, combing tangles into Crowley's hair by way of apology. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Having paused in his tirade, the events of the past ten minutes started to fully catch up with him, making him feel even worse. I didn't mean any of it, I'm so sorry, I don't know what came over me... How could he have thought Crowley was out to get him? If he'd wanted to gain fame and glory by defeating Aziraphale he could have done it a dozen times before now, starting with the unconscious angel in the immediate aftermath of the Gate opening. How had he forgotten that? His earlier thoughts seemed like the result of some mad fever-dream; someone else's, not his.

Crowley rested his forehead against Aziraphale's; the demon's grip on his wrists relaxed to nearly nothing. I was trying to tell you... being in Hell like this isn't good for you. I think it was wearing you down, Tempting you without you even knowing it. That's why we've got to hurry. I don't know what could happen if you stay here too long.

Aziraphale knew he should be shuddering in horror at the thought of the long Fall, but his mind was too busy being frightened by something else. I'm thinking straight now. At least, straighter.

The old Crowley, the one who got drunk with him and liked Manchester United and had a sneaking fondness for humanity, would have been ready with a snide quip about how that was quite a feat for a being who usually didn't bother with sexuality. The new Crowley, who brought him candles and smuggled him through demonic outposts and was showing more than a sneaking fondness for his angelic neck, looked at him strangely and said Yes, you are.

He wasn't getting it. Why am I thinking straight now? I flipped out, attacked you, accused you of conspiring to murder me; and two seconds later I'm fine? *Why*?
...I don't know. I don't understand anything about this.

It was growing darker inside the abandoned house; there was no artificial lighting on. Aziraphale's wings glowed faintly through their soot coverings.

A crazy idea was starting to take shape in Aziraphale's mind. Maybe it was you, he suggested.

Crowley looked incredulously down at him. The angel couldn't help but notice how well he looked when viewed from this angle, slightly disheveled and in nice close proximity. Me?

Mmhmm. Confusion, Aziraphale decided, was even more adorable on Crowley's face. A vanishing piece of his sanity was saying something about this being just as crazy as his paranoid theories of five minutes ago, but it was fighting a losing battle against the warmth starting to light up the air around the two of them. Sthe only thing that happened. Maybe you're, I don't know, a counter charge or something. He grinned light-headedy. I always knew there was some good left in you.

Now wait a mrrrph! Crowley's defense of his demonhood was derailed by the adventurous lips of a certain angel. Aziraphale knew, at some instinctual level, that Crowley would go on arguing if he were given half the chance. He knew, moreover, that Crowley didn't want to argue right now; it was just he wouldn't be able to bring himself to do anything else. His demon was unfortunately good at running, and far too used to doing it. It was up to Aziraphale to make sure that he didn't run away from this. The angel wasn't sure what "$this" was, but he wasn't listening to his mind anymore; he was listening to the basic formative part of his Nature, the one that said that he was doing the first truly, completely Right thing he'd done since coming to Earth. The world had literally gone to Hell all around them; by rights he should be somewhere, anywhere else – discorporated; lined up with the Hosts and a flaming sword in his hand, waiting for the Word; Obliterated; alone on Earth waiting for his fate... he should never have come to this place, in this time, alone with Crowley in Hell on Earth, at the end of everything.

Outside a storm was roaring up to its full strength. Weather had nothing to do with it; it was a storm of emotion—it had all of the anger and hatred and loneliness of the humans who had been abandoned; it carried with it the cruelty and malice of the demons turned loose on earth. It was darker in the room now, the darkness of twilight. Crowley's eyes were glowing amber. Aziraphale's wings continued to shed light, still muffled by their black covering. The wind howled, rattling the windows, and Aziraphale pressed up against Crowley as Crowley tightened his own grasp on Aziraphale's wrists, holding them against the bed on either side of him—not because the angel was frightened of the storm, but because he was determined not to let Crowley run away from this particular Truth.

Their eyes locked, and a silent battle was waged between fight and flight.

Then Crowley's mouth was on his, and his demon had made the first move. His fingers were impatient on the buttons of the shirt Aziraphale wore. It had belonged, originally, to Crowley, but the demon had either forgotten or did not care, for he tore at it with a carelessness he'd never displayed towards clothing before. Aziraphale wriggled within its confines, unused to removing clothing the human way, but Crowley's hands were on his shoulders, now, stilling him. I'll take care of it, angel, he heard in his head. Let me.

So he lay or wriggled at Crowley's direction and focused on finding ways to keep kissing him while cloth was pushed, pulled, tugged and coaxed around his wings and over his head, finally to be discarded. Aziraphale was saved from the necessity of admitting he couldn't possibly duplicate the feat by Crowley's timely dismissal of his own shirt, and then they were (were they? could they
possibly be?) cuddling together, skin to skin, and oh, it was wonderful to be so close after so long —

*(what does that mean?)*

—but not enough, not just to lie there and discover all of the places he could reach with lips and eyelashes and cheek. Before the angel knew it there were demonic hands at the trousers that were really far too nice for him and a low voice in his ear—

*Don't forget to make an effort, Azira*

—and the name made his breath catch a moment before Crowley showed off just exactly what his forked tongue could do; Crowley hadn't called him that since—since—

*(when has he ever called you that?)*

—it didn't matter; nothing else could possibly matter when Crowley was doing *that* to him.

And when, a few minutes later, he stopped doing *that* and instead looked seriously at Aziraphale, he saw an angel who had completely forgotten anything in the world existed beside the two of them, and was suddenly afraid.

*Angel*— he said seriously, then stopped. Aziraphale smiled at him more brilliantly than the dawn of the First Day. Crowley buried his face in his angel's neck and whispered something aloud in the stillness of the room, something that was as close to a prayer as he could come.

It was enough to make Aziraphale's heart break, hearing those words from Crowley's lips. The demon spoke them not just out of reverence but out of fear. Crowley was afraid—of what might happen to him if he proceeded; of what might happen to Aziraphale; of change. The tempted would have to be the tempter, this time.

Aziraphale smirked unseen and rolled his hips in a deliciously wicked way.

*Nnnnn*, Crowley groaned, reflexively rolling along with him. Then he pulled back and stared at the angel—yes, there was the fear in his eyes. *Do you really*—

Aziraphale leaned forward and gently laid a finger across those lips. *I'm not an innocent, my dear.*

Immediately Crowley's face was a mixture of dangerous and wounded. *Who else?* he demanded.

Aziraphale started to respond, then stopped abruptly. *Who else, indeed?* The statement had been so reflexive, so obvious—so self-evidently true—but now that he put his mind to it, he couldn't recall. *Does it matter?* he said instead, refusing to lose the momentum.

The battle on Crowley's face continued a moment longer; then Dangerous won. *Not after I'm through with you,* he said, and pressed Aziraphale down hard into the bed.

*Oooh.* That demon of his was so frustrating sometimes. Aziraphale was going to have to give him a piece of his mind. Just as soon—mmm—just as soon as *something,* he was sure of that. Then he stopped thinking, because he couldn't really kiss Crowley properly and think at the same time and it was very important right now that Crowley be properly kissed.
Crowley, however, had other ideas. Right in the middle of a very important part of the kissing—the one involving the tongues and the teeth and the nibbling—he took advantage of their positions to break away from Aziraphale and pin him down, hands on his wrists, ankles to ankles, wing-tip to wing-tip—there was a long shudder than ran between them both at the fullness of the connection, every inch of skin—had they always been of a height, one to the other?—pressed flush against its counterpoint. They molded together, as if they were meant to lie like this.

Aziraphale, amazed, would have stayed frozen, but Crowley was not done his explorations. Releasing the angel’s hands, he slithered downwards, sliding open pale thighs with an expert knee, and reapplied himself to his demonstration of the skills of a forked tongue.

The angel felt a stab of jealousy, thinking of how the demon must have come by his knowledge, to move so assuredly over a man-shaped form like this. But wasn’t that the same thing Crowley had just been feeling? Wasn’t it hypocritical to want, even as he writhed and moaned and forgot his own Name, to find those unknown humans and destroy their memories of this—of Crowley’s dark hair, his serious chin, his intensity when he kissed, the lanky body carrying scars from a dozen lifetimes? He was jealous even as he reached down and tried to grasp that dark head, needing to feel more, needing to get closer…

At the first touch of angelic hands, however, the demon hissed; then with a sudden sinuous movement he flipped the angel flat on his belly. Aziraphale yelped a little; more because he wasn’t done enjoying the sensations than for the wing that got bent at a slightly odd angle, but Crowley patted it back into place anyway, then got to exploring an angel’s back with lips and tongue. It was insane; the demon seemed already to know every inch of him—he lingered over the junction of wings and skin, teasing it, driving him crazy. He could almost feel the demon’s smug smile as he arched helplessly under that damned tongue. Thoughts of anyone else vanished entirely from his mind. Crowley could not have played with anyone else’s pinion-feathers, or traced the muscles allowing for flight with that incredibly talented tongue. He could not have known where the sensitive spots were on Aziraphale’s body from the exploration of anyone else’s. This was private, new, something that had never been done to anyone else. He twisted his head, impossibly, eager to have his turn, catching an errant earlobe with the tip of his tongue.

*Mmmmm*, Aziraphale heard in his mind. If snakes could purr, Crowley was reproducing the effect right now. The mental hum resonated through his entire body, thrumming down his spine to center in a very responsive place. Then he lost the ability to hear for a brief moment as Crowley finally got low enough to dare attempt a breach on his virtue.

Some part of his mind was appreciating how Crowley had deliberately not had clawed fingertips at the moment; the rest of him was busy chasing itself in circles. There was a better way to do this, he was sure of it. Something that didn’t involve wasting time with fingers and messy creams (there weren’t any messy creams yet, but he knew there would be soon—he’d read books, after all). Aziraphale sank into himself, into the pleasure and the oneness and the warmth of his demon above him—

*Ahh*. There it was. Crowley resonated distinct surprise as he found his way suddenly prepared for him. Aziraphale had a moment to feel smug before the world was rotating and ahh, he could kiss Crowley again now, that was very nice. He fluttered his wings lazily for balance, not realizing that he and his demon were now several feet above the bed. A fine layer of soot drifted downwards like mist. The rays of light shining through it made strange pictures on the far wall.

*Where’d you learn to do that, angel?*
How could Crowley talk at moments like this? Clearly he wasn't sufficiently distracted. Well, Aziraphale could fix that. He happened to know (how, he wasn't quite sure, but that didn't seem important right now) that Crowley was very sensitive... yes. Right there. The gasp and moan he got in response made heat pool deeper in the center of his body, and as much as he wanted to take his turn, explore Crowley as the demon had wandered over him, the need in him was too great, too overwhelming; he indicated to Crowley very strongly that any more questioning or waiting would be most rude.

Crowley was flushed and panting and operating on a basically instinctual level, but he had enough higher brain function left to grin, that maddeningly delightful grin that Aziraphale loved so much, and twine their legs together. Let me in, then, the demon thought moments before he suited action to words.

When Crowley moved inside him, Aziraphale arched and moaned helplessly. Wings fluttered almost out of his control. He clutched Crowley as if he were the only thing in the universe between Aziraphale and nothingness. Their lips kept finding each other, unable to stay apart; they explored deliciously with their hands and rocked their bodies together. The warmth of Crowley’s mind and soul drew Aziraphale onwards, like there was some Aziraphale-specific gravity pulling him closer and closer until he didn’t know where his thoughts ended and Crowley’s began.

Aziraphale could see inside of Crowley now, and knew the reverse was true; lifetimes were passing before their eyes as they drew closer, rocking back and forth mindlessly. The events of the past days flew by, lost in the grey space on the edges of time. Together they relived the averted Armageddon. But surely they’d never stopped on the way back to London, pulled the borrowed Jeep over to the side of the road and made love (or, well, at least lust) under the flourishing Tadfield trees? They’d never stood together in a gentlemen’s club in the 1800s; Crowley had never learned to dance the gavotte, and twirl Aziraphale around with a conspiratorial smile that promised sultry doings later.

Aziraphale bit back another moan, knowing he hadn't been there during the dreaded Fourteenth Century, guarding Crowley's slumber as he dreamed away a century of disease and war. They'd never explored each other in Jerusalem during the lull in the Crusades—oh, what exploration, Aziraphale’s hands wandering without his knowledge, finding the back of Crowley’s neck and pressing their lips closer, impossibly closer—wandering hand in hand through beautiful gardens before retreating to shaded groves. Crowley hadn't been there for Aziraphale during the Crucifixion, holding the angel tight in a dusty room while he wept and wept, caressing him later with gentle touches and making him forget the pain for a little while... Ages passed faster and faster around them as they writhed and moaned and drove into each other and forgot where the boundaries between them lay, forgot the differences in the lives they'd never had.

They were there together in the Garden of Eden, wanton on the grass under the Tree; they were one being before that, in heaven, among the stars. They were before that—

The world shattered around them and inside of them at the same instant. Aziraphale, staring at Crowley as the one fixed point in his universe, thought he saw storm-grey eyes in his face, and the wings on his back were white, they were white; then their souls were flooding out of them, into each other, abandoning their bodies and uniting in a glorious, complete whole that was inexpressibly familiar, and more than pleasure washed over them in the moment of release.

They fell, still entangled. In that moment they were one being, and all of the barriers constructed over six millennia of separate existence were shattered.
"Lord! Lord!" A demonic messenger—nasty winged little thing, Lucifer noted with approval—zipped into the room and came to a sudden halt the regulation ten feet from The King of Hell. With military precision the little demon genuflected before his ruler.

"What is it?" The Morningstar asked. For once, he was benevolently inclined towards a messenger. Things had been going extremely well.

The messenger advanced to the table and, after a quick glance to secure permission, planted a red flag on the spinning map of the Earth. "A purification miracle has been detected in sector 39B, Lord," he squeaked. "Approximately 50 miles from the chosen site of one of the Five Cities."

Lucifer's eyes rose. This was an unexpected development, but it had great potential. "A human missed by Heaven during the Rapture?"

"Respectfully, Lord, The Department of Thwarting thinks otherwise. They say it's too strong to be human—that it's definitely got," the messenger demon lowered his voice and darted his eyes around, "an angelic component."

"An angelic component?" Lucifer rose to his feet. The messenger winced reflexively, but relaxed somewhat when he saw His Lord was grinning broadly, revealing far too many jaggedly pointed teeth. "There's an angel on Earth."

"Thwarting is of the opinion that one got left behind when the Gate opened, Sir," the demon quavered. Lucifer smiling meant no one was going to be in imminent pain, but he was still determined to shift the blame—or the credit—entirely off himself. "They say it's ssssta—ssstatissstically probable, Lord." He hadn't the faintest idea what that meant, but it seemed to be good, because the Morningstar was definitely pleased to hear that. "Shall I summon the Thwarting Attack Squad, Lord?" Anticipating Satan's wishes was less dangerous than the alternative; the demon had learned that over long millennia in Hell.

"No," Lucifer boomed impressively, stretching to his full height. "That will not be necessary." The grin, impossibly, spread wider. "I shall be going myself."

Footnotes

1. Well, Up.

2. A local girl had been very surprised to find herself wearing a grass skirt and serving the margarita to him. But he’d tipped remarkably well, and CDs weren’t cheap, so she’d just pocketed the money, gone home and forgotten to mention it to anyone.

3. Hell had invented the phrase “Loose lips sink ships” during the first World War, and had found it too good of an idea to let go to waste afterwards.

4. Adam had given the whole human thing a real go of it after the aborted Armageddon, but had given up in disgust when he found out they’d expected him to grow up. He’d borne puberty with remarkable fortitude, Crowley thought, but college had really been the last straw.

5. Who still preferred to go by Adam.
6. With the exception of blowing up the Vatican, this was actually the program of events for the annual New Year’s Party. Entire legions of doomed middle managers slaved over the arrangements for all eternity. The Vatican was a last-minute addition, since it seemed like the closed-circuit feed of Times Square wasn’t going to be available this year.

7. Before getting back to Hell, he’d had a hand in making sure the Earthly Bureaucracies went right on behaving the same way. People, he knew, thought just like him in these matters—the less effective their governments, the better.

8. Occasionally Heaven or Hell took it into their head to try to station other field agents on various parts of the globe, but they usually returned Up or Down gibbering within a decade. Earth was like that sometimes.

9. He would cheerfully discorporate before he admitted that what this really meant was that he was worried sick.

10. Surprise as a divine being, that is. Adam Young the mortal had been surprised numerous times. That whole puberty thing, for example...

11. Who had adjusted his appearance to match his fake ID more out of habit than anything else, since after all, no one here was carding.

12. The one with the Not Quite Ineffable Plan.

13. This curtain had been hanging since 1876, and long since rusted to its pole. This didn’t usually matter, because the glass of the window was so fogged with age that nothing could be seen through it. Crowley, however, wasn’t acquainted with the subtleties involved in scaring customers away. He assumed that any window he encountered could be seen through.

14. The Morningstar was determined to do this one by the Book. Revelations said five cities, and five cities there would be.
The sun was shining. This was still a novelty to the residents of Heaven; it had only been Created recently. The warmth was lovely. Warmth was also a relatively new thing, but one much appreciated. It felt particularly good on sore wings.

Aziraphale was trying to appreciate it in the aftermath of what had been some really excellent angelic bonding. But his partner seemed to have other ideas today, and Aziraphale was discovering that the experience wasn't nearly so enjoyable without him.

"What's going on, my dear?"

Gadriel sighed, caught out pacing the length of their shared room. Coming quickly back towards the bed, he kissed Aziraphale quickly. "I've been thinking," he said, "and I think... I'm going back to Markel's."

"Gadri!" Aziraphale sat up straight, somnolence falling away from him, and caught his partner's hands. "Don't do it, please, Gadri. They're really starting to worry me, the way they're going on about things... about the Lord's Plan. There have been some nasty rumors in the officers' mess about some retribution coming their way one of these days."

"But don't you see," the other angel said earnestly, kneeling on the floor and bringing Aziraphale eye-to-eye with him. "That's just why I've got to talk to them again. I think they're close to doing something rash, but it's not too late to talk them out of it."

Aziraphale wanted, instinctively, to stop his partner from going. He had a terrible feeling, nothing he could name, nothing he'd ever felt before. A premonition. But he could never say no to those cloudy eyes. "Just... be careful?"

Gadriel smiled warmly and kissed him again. "I will. I'll be back soon, Azira, I promise."

Hours later, Aziraphale was jerked from a sound sleep by the sound of a sudden, screeching crash—a sound more felt than heard, that raced up and down nonexistent scales until it made him cry out, and rumbled so deeply he felt it would tear him apart.

He took to the sky, winging through the top of his domicile. As the walls of the room fell away from him, he moved instinctively towards the setting sun and saw with horror that a part of Heaven was gone—not merely temporarily vanished, leaving its aura behind, but as completely missing as if it had been Obliterated.

All around him other angels were in the air. Many were simply staring in shock, as Aziraphale was, but some were in motion. Some looked as if they had a purpose. One of them—Nalaphiel—grinned as he went by; Aziraphale was horrified to see a hint of vindictiveness in the expression. "Those rabble-rousers finally made a move," he called out as he flew by. "The Lord's dealt with 'em."

"Kicked 'em out of Heaven, all of them," another angel said from behind Nalaphiel. "Sent them Down There. Created a whole new place for the wicked ones, where they can't come back, not ever."
Aziraphale was so shocked by this news that he nearly fell out of the sky. (Kicked them out? Somewhere they can never come back?) he thought. And only that evening Gadriel had been reminding him of the Lord's Divine Mercy—

Where was Gadri?

Aziraphale was gripped with a blind panic. Surely he hadn't been with them when they were evicted! He'd just gone to talk them out of it; when it became clear he couldn't succeed, he wouldn't have followed them further. Not Gadriel. He was smarter than that. And the Lord knew he'd had no part in any of this. He'd probably just gone home. He was probably there right now, waiting.

Aziraphale turned and flew back home as fast as he could.

"Gadri!" he called in a fright before he'd even properly landed. Let him be here, oh, please, he prayed. He can laugh at me for taking a silly fright and then we can be sorry for everyone else but —

He wasn’t there.

Aziraphale felt panic rising up in him like a wave, but at the last second, he managed to master it. Faith was the important thing here. Probably, while he had been out there looking for Gadri, Gadri had been out there looking for him. Probably they had just crossed paths. Probably all he had to do was wait, and Gadri would come back.

Aziraphale sat down on the bed and tilted his head towards the sky. Eventually Gadri would have to come back here. He would just sit and wait until the other angel returned.

The Lord moved silently through what would later be called the night.

He was the stars, twinkling in the sky, looking down with infinite sadness as the new-Fallen fought amongst themselves, blaming and cursing and blaspheming.

He was the Sleep that had been laid on all the residents of Heaven, giving them peace in the wake of the recent disaster.

He was the Wind who moved through their domiciles, one by one, finding each of his angels. And for each of them he performed a service.

To most angels, he gave serenity. The Fallen would be reclaimed. There was a Plan. All was not as bleak as it seemed. Where he went, peace followed.

To some few angels, he took as well as gave. It would be a long time coming before the Fallen would return, and they needed to be able to go on in the meantime.

In a domiciliary in the Eastern quadrant, Aziraphale sighed and rolled over, alone in a bed he would not remember he had once shared.
"What do you mean, a major miracle?" Michael was running down the hill from the Great Temple to the practice fields. Beside him the angel of deliveries had to beat his wings twice as hard to keep up. Michael made a mental note to fly him around the track a few times—it wouldn't do to have anyone out of shape for the upcoming battle, not even—perhaps especially not—an angel on messenger duty.

"We don't have details, sir," the angel—whose name was Raziel and who was really beginning to doubt the wisdom of his choice to join the messenger ranks instead of the lances—gaped, struggling to keep up. Michael noticed and increased his pace somewhat. "The Hellish layer is obstructing our sensing. But it's definitely of angelic quality, sir, a major purification miracle."

"Impossible," Michael snapped. "We didn't leave anyone down there capable of reliably praying, much less performing any sort of miracle."

"I don't know about that, sir," Raziel got out, privately resolving to get transferred as soon as angelically possible. He wasn't as young as he'd used to be, and all of this flying around—and delivering bad news, it seemed like—wasn't really for him after all. "I just know that Tracking saw a major miracle being performed in sector 39B, outside of London, sir. Said it would take at least one angel to pull off. Thought you should know right away. End of message, sir."

Michael frowned in thought. It didn't seem possible, but Tracking had had six millennia to get used to its job and by and large did it pretty well. He glanced over to the angel beside him and grinned slightly. Here was an opportunity to Save two souls with one Miracle. "Okay, then. I want you to personally go around to every division and get a headcount. Report back to me if anyone's missing, or when you discover we're all accounted for. Okay?"

Raziel looked like he might pass out, but one didn't get to say no to an Archangel, particularly not the one who was in charge of the arrangements for the upcoming battle. "Yes, sir," he panted, and reluctantly winged away.

Michael watched him go with a smile. This bit about an angel being on Earth was utter nonsense, of course. God kept track of His flock, and he would have told Michael if they'd left one of their own down there. No, it was probably just a human who'd had the misfortune to see the Heavenly Light a few hours too late to be caught in the Rapture—but getting an all-angels headcount would whip that young Raziel back into shape.

It was the little things, Michael thought, and flew onwards to the waiting training fields.

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A few minutes, or an eternity, later, Aziraphale opened his eyes again and was greeted with a remarkable sight. When he had first awoken in this unknown room, the air had been dark and gritty with the weight of Hell. Although not decrepit, precisely, the room definitely appeared to have
been abandoned for a long, long time—that was the Hell talking, of course—and in a general state of disrepair. Now it looked brighter, well-lived-in, well-loved. The dust was gone from the air and the corners; the wallpaper seemed cheerful instead of merely bland.

(Does Hell have a maid service?) The angel giggled to himself. The thoughts that went through one's head after—well! He supposed it was natural for everything to look different. There appeared to be, well, colors in the air, like there were in Heaven. There was no other word for it. And light where there had been none before—not from any source, just generally permeating the room. A general sense of warmth, comfort and well-being that made Aziraphale sink happily back into the bed, against a Crowley who didn't seem quite so demonic as he had a few hours ago. (Everyone looks innocent when they're asleep,) he thought vaguely. (They look like the person God always wanted them to be.) Impulsively he reached up and touched his partner's face.

Azira? Crowley yawned widely, revealing well-sharpened incisors. Why'm I tingly?

The room's all sparkly, Aziraphale told him dreamily, not quite making the connection.

Crowley twitched, then sat upright fully. Aziraphale protested at the sudden loss of his pillow, but the demon was paying him no mind. He was, instead, extending his white wings to their fullest, staring as if he’d never seen them before in his life. The delicate pinfeathers trembled in the rarefied air like antennae. Sparkly, he said flatly.

Mmmhmm. Aziraphale was wearing a slightly silly smile.

That's not how it looked before.

Isn't it nicer this way? The angel sat up and threw an arm around Crowley's bare chest. I wouldn't be surprised if the entire world had suddenly gotten nicer just now.

The entire world, Crowley repeated slowly. Then he literally leapt out of the bed in shock.

What is it? Aziraphale demanded in genuine surprise.

Crowley touched a wing with trembling fingers. I haven't worn them white since... since the Fall. His face took on a look of sadness and concentration.

Aziraphale sat up, the blankets pooling in his lap. I remember, he said softly. It makes me homesick, seeing them this way.

Crowley looked up from his preoccupation, and his mind voice had a definite tinge of hysteria to it.

I can't change them back, angel.

Said angel blinked. Why not?

Crowley looked frustrated. I don't know. I can't change them back, I can't summon clothes, and I'm tingling all over—like I've leapt into an acid bath or something.

Aziraphale looked around him with wide eyes. He could feel his mind—reluctantly leaving behind memories of time in Heaven with his partner—focusing again on the here-and-now. I woke up, he said slowly, and everything was warm—and safe—and glowing from within. There were colors in the air. It was... he paused, slightly embarrassed. It was a lot like Heaven, actually. How Heaven used to feel when... when you were still there with me.
Crowley looked stricken. Azira, I'm so sorry.

The angel shook his head. That's not it. I mean—yes, but that's not what I mean right now. When we—he blushed. We remembered, both of us. And your wings changed back. I think I did something. Aziraphale took a deep breath. I think we did something. Something besides the obvious. I think we may have... err... consecrated the room. Pause. At least.

Consecrated?! Crowley looked wild. That's a major miracle! You just performed one four days ago, you couldn't have done another by yourself so soon!

Aziraphale hesitated. I don't think I did it by myself, Gadri.

He thought Crowley was going to go straight through the roof when he heard that. That's impossible! Hastily he checked his teeth, his tongue, his eyes. I'm still myself. I'm still a demon.

The relief in his voice made Aziraphale sad, but he just said, Your wings are white.

They're naturally white. It's just atmosphere, changing them black. Most demons do it, but it's cosmetics, that's all.

But you can't change them back. And you're having trouble performing curses. Aziraphale shook his head. You're clearly still a demon in some respects, but... not... in others.

I'm having trouble performing curses while surrounded by recently-purified air. Not the same thing. How about you? Can you perform miracles?

Aziraphale blinked. Moments later, he was clothed—and suddenly dizzy. He fell back against the pillows. Sort of. He shook his head slightly, then wished he hadn't. It hasn't been here long enough to build up any energy. But—if we purified the air as well—

Stop saying 'we!' Crowley snapped.

—then my voice won't cause problems, and I can do the transfer here! Aziraphale finished triumphantly.

It'll still stick out like a sore spot, Crowley said truculently, on a map in Hell.

There was a pause. Demon and angel looked at each other.

Do you think maybe no one will notice? Aziraphale ventured.

...No.

Drat.

Come on, angel. Crowley glanced nervously over his shoulder. Get up, start chanting. We've got to get you out of here before—

Aziraphale wasn't listening to him. He had tilted his head as far back as it would go, and he was staring at the ceiling as if he could see straight through it. Crowley knew he couldn't really, but he could see a lot of things that worked sort of the same way. And whatever he was seeing now was
something he didn’t like very much, because he had that little wrinkle between his brows that made Crowley want to go over there and kiss it till it went away...

Too late, Aziraphale said distinctly into his mind.

Then all Hell broke loose. Quite literally.

Hell

(on Earth)

The ceiling, for lack of a better word, imploded.

Cover! Crowley shrieked, lunging towards the bed and rolling Aziraphale—and himself—off and under it. Aziraphale strained to catch a glimpse of who (or what) had just deprived the room of one of its walls, renovating it into what might be a very nice angel-style home16, but the debris made it impossible to see.

Under the bed, surrounded by a dust ruffle that was valiantly clinging to the color blue despite what had to be years of dust and neglect, the angel and the demon stayed very, very still. Straining, they could just make out a rhythmical thump-thump-thump.

Wingbeats, Crowley thought as quietly as he possibly could. We've been found.

Aziraphale reached out in the semi-twilight, groping for his hand. I'm sorry I got you into this.

He could see Crowley's teeth flashing in a manic grin. We're not done for yet, he said, and Aziraphale's questing hand found a canvas bag shoved into it. Candles. Chalk. Get drawing, angel. Do it under here. Yell when you're done.

Yell? Where will you be?

I'm going to cause a distraction, he said, and grinned again.

Aziraphale gaped at him in shock. Frantically he searched for words with which to protest. They didn't come.

Crowley slithered the few feet between them like the snake he wasn't quite and dropped a kiss on Aziraphale's open mouth. I'll be back soon.

That's what you said before, Aziraphale cried, but Crowley was gone.

For a moment the angel longed to rush after him, but he could think of no quicker way to ensure that they'd both die. If Crowley went up there alone, maybe they could talk their way out of this. Maybe he could distract whoever-it-was long enough for Aziraphale to escape, and then it could be "Well, I was fighting the angel, but then you went and distracted me and he got away!". Assuming, with Aziraphale gone, they could even prove there was an angel in the first place. As long as no one else saw him...

Aziraphale reached for the opening of the bag. It was closed, tied with a piece of string. He gritted his teeth, resigned himself to the destruction of his manicure, and ripped it apart. (Ow.) All right.
Chalk first. Just the seven basic symbols. He'd have to chant the cabbala passages, there wasn't time to write them down.

**Prudence**, he wrote carefully, reciting as he did so the appropriate text. A useful virtue in theory, he'd always thought, but whenever he'd tried to apply it, things had never really worked out. The prudent move had always seemed to get him in more trouble, in the end. He'd long since put it down to Crowley's influence and stopped bothering with it.

**Temperance.** It was hard to figure out how temperance was supposed to apply to angels. After all, could he really over-indulge in, say, alcohol when he could sober up in an instant, and he never hurt anyone while under its influence? The whole goal of temperance was not to lose control, it seemed, and there was always a little bit of Angelic Essence hanging around in the back of his head telling him he'd better sober up now or Crowley really would hit a pedestrian this time.

Crowley. Instinctively Aziraphale glanced upwards. He wanted to turn one of his extra senses to seeing through the mattress above him—a rather old mattress for that matter—but he couldn't take the chance of detection. His human-esque senses, although better than the average mortal run, were still frustratingly limited when confronted with things like line-of-sight.

There was no sign of anything yet. He couldn't even hear voices raised in anger, just the steady *thrum-thrum* of wingbeats far above his head—how far away he couldn't guess, but several feet up at least, clear of the room. So far the situation was under control. Aziraphale rushed the end of the chant for Temperance anyway, worry getting the better of him.

**Fortitude.** His nerves could really use a little more of that. As always, chanting the cabbalistic passage infused him with some of its power—not from the words themselves, but from the stock humans put in them. It amazed him sometimes, how much power humans just gave away by believing like they did. He finished the symbol with a steady hand.

**Justice.** Now that was the big question, wasn't it? Humans didn't worry so much about it, so content to leave it to higher powers. It was all well and good for them, of course, they were told how it all worked. Some of them didn't believe it, but that was beside the point. Just follow some basic rules, nothing too onerous really so long as you didn't listen to the people that had got carried away when writing it all down. It was different for angels. Where was the justice in what had happened to Gadriel?

The symbol blurred before his eyes. Angrily Aziraphale wiped tears from his eyes, an awkward feat when lying on one's stomach under a bed in near-darkness and trying not to blur chalk lines. He couldn't afford to be distracted by such thoughts right now; he had to get himself out of here. Then he'd have plenty of time to ponder those sorts of questions, and maybe even seek out an answer or two.

**Faith,** he made himself write sternly. He had to have faith.

Abruptly, there was a loud crash.

(*Crowley!* he thought, barely restraining himself from actually broadcasting the thought. He wanted to pause in his writing and soft-voiced chanting, to peer out from beneath the dust ruffle at least, or better yet to leap out from his cover entirely. His entire left side was suddenly in pain—pain that wasn't his. Gadri's? Obviously talking had not worked.

Aziraphale fought with himself, grabbing hold of every instinct in his body, all clamoring for him
to stop laying here like an idiot and find Gadriel, protect him from whatever had caused him such pain. *Stay put*, he ordered himself, exercising his angelic will. It was a wrench, but it was the only chance either of them had. *Faith*, he told himself, finishing the symbol. *Hope*, he began.

Halfway through the symbol he was seized by a violent spasm, coughing up fluid. Aziraphale was barely able to turn his head in time to avoid destroying the symbol, but as soon as he had control of his hands again, he struggled to finish.

*Charity*, he wrote finally, ignoring the aches, the burning, the sudden inability to breathe and the overwhelming fear. It was funny how that one translated, he thought distantly. Most people heard ‘charity’ and immediately started donating to non-profits. It wasn’t about money, Aziraphale wanted to tell them. It was about loving one another and your neighbor as yourself. It was about forgiveness and tactfully not telling your wife green really wasn’t her color. It was about caring for other people, regardless of circumstance... it was about *love*.

He couldn’t help glancing up one more time, circumstances weighing heavily on his mind, but the mattress kept its secrets from him.

Finishing the last sutras, he hastily set up the candles in a circle around him, one next to every symbol, sinking each an inch into the floor to prevent them being knocked in the dark.

Maybe it was the slight bit of energy expended to make the floor malleable enough to sink candles into. Maybe it was the chanting, but there hadn’t been any help for that. Maybe the bed was just the next obvious target.

For whatever reason, Aziraphale was aware of a sudden *whoosh*, as from a large tornado; then the bed shattered above him, pieces flying wildly outward and being caught in the windstorm raging in the little bedroom.

Aziraphale looked up automatically, not even angelic will being enough to keep him from it. The sky was full of wings, whirling and beating, making it almost impossible to see anything clearly. Ranks of demons, Belial at their head, hovered ominously and made a sound of thunder. Then, unable to stop himself, he tilted his head an inch farther and beheld The Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Great Beast that is Called Dragon, Prince of this World, Father of Lies and Lord of Darkness.

He was a terrifying apparition, but it wasn't his physical manifestation that paralyzed the angel. It was his eyes—all of the negative emotions, the rage and the hatred and the bloodlust, that froze him in place.

Aziraphale would probably have stayed there, waiting to be killed, if a man-shaped cinderblock hadn't chosen that moment to fall from the sky and land on him.

*Gadri!* he cried in shock.

Crowley coughed once or twice, weakly. He moved his hand vaguely in the direction of Aziraphale's, but had to let it drop.

Satan boomed a terrible laugh and drew a deep breath to Obliterate them both.

Aziraphale was suddenly very, very calm. He watched Satan carefully. If his timing as even a little bit off, this wouldn't work at all. The chances of it working weren't very good in the first place, of
course, but something (as angels were in a unique position to understand) was, after all, infinitely more than nothing.

He wrapped his arms around Crowley and, at the precise moment of Satan's attack, threw up a wall of Holiness.

It couldn't hold long, of course. Aziraphale knew perfectly well that he was no match for the Adversary even when he hadn't just tramped thirty miles overland in Hellish territory, made love to a demon, recalled long-buried memories, and had a room torn to pieces around him. But it wasn't a question of holding for very long. It was a question of holding long enough.

Satan's blast of fire sublimated three or four inches of candle from each of the seven, but Crowley—as Aziraphale had gambled—had bought (or miracled up) the good stuff. Around the chalk circle, seven brave candle stubs came to life.

Aziraphale cried out three short words, and just as his barrier failed, angel, demon and candles alike all vanished.

Heaven

(a little bit earlier)

Daguel landed at Northwest-by-West Communications Portal with a thump. It was an undignified landing, but he was too tired to muster a better one. Raphael had had him for six hours on the training field before this, and now he had to take a watch at the portal on top of it all. Worse, Miguel was standing guard over at East-by-Southeast Communications Portal in the next watch, so he wouldn't even get to curl up with his partner and sleep for a while after this.

"I'm here," he called.

"I can see that," another voice said. Daguel frowned. Was that an undercurrent of stress, or meanness?

He turned. The angel whose guard he was relieving—Anaphiel, that was his name—was holding out the silver monitor medallion to him. There was nothing on his face but a little weariness and an eagerness to be gone.

"Okay then," Daguel settled for saying, and, reaching out, took it.

"Incoming?" Anaphiel asked in confusion.

With a whomp, the space in front of them was no longer empty.
The first thing Daguel noticed was the almost overpowering scent of brimstone—it set him coughing, his eyes watering. Smoke was actually eddying around the new arrivals. Two of them, he saw. One—an angel? (We left someone down there?)

"Demon!" Anaphiel said suddenly. Daguel squinted. Then the pile of charred clothing in the angel's lap moved, and he could see that it was, indeed, a demon. Or, rather, what was left of one.

"An invasion," Anaphiel said grimly, and a flaming lance appeared in his hand. "We'll take 'em—"

"No," Daguel interrupted. "The medallion is blank. No one else is coming. And this does not look like an invasion." His eloquently raised eyebrow alluded to the fact that the demon was most definitely subdued already. Anaphiel subsided reluctantly.

The angel on the ground didn't even appear to have noticed them. He was bending over his injured—well, companion—seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. Daguel took a closer look at him, trying to see beneath the dust and soot.

He swallowed. Aziraphale? he sent cautiously.

The angel on the floor—yes, it was Aziraphale—looked up in surprise, focusing on him for the first time.

Daguel was looking at the demon. Even more slowly, he asked, Gadriel? It couldn't be. He remembered them—hadn't seen them in millennia, since Aziraphale got sent down to Earth and Gadriel went Below...

"Consorting with a demon," Anaphiel was sneering beside him. "Come on, Daguel. We know what to do about traitors, don't we?" He took a menacing step forward.

He was stopped by Daguel's arm across his chest. "I took the medallion," Daguel said firmly. "That makes me in charge here. And I say this is a matter for the Lord."

"The Lord?" Anaphiel asked incredulously. "I won't bother him with this!"

"I will," Daguel said. "And while I am bothering him, you are going to stay right here and do nothing."

"Nothing?" Anaphiel demanded.

"Nothing," Daguel said again, and bored into the other angel with a gaze of iron. Anaphiel looked away first.

"Nothing," he said sullenly.

"Good," Daguel said. He looked over at the sooty pair on the marble floor. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

The first thing Crowley was aware of was light—a lot of light.

The second thing he was aware of was that he could breathe—which was very, very good, because breathing was important right now. Breathing was giving him strength. This must be what it was
like for humans, to need to breathe to stay alive.

There was only one place where the air had healing properties. Crowley was in Heaven.

He considered trying to curse, but settled for just being glad he hadn’t been incinerated on the spot. It didn’t even hurt that much. There was something wrong about that, but maybe he just couldn’t feel it over all the other hurt.

The third thing he became aware of was Aziraphale. He pried his eyes open and commanded his ears to work.

"Crowley," Aziraphale was saying urgently to him. "Crowley, you don’t need to breathe. You’re just hurting yourself further."

Was the angel daft? He kept right on panting. “Energy,” he gasped, waving a hand, hoping the angel would understand.

“You need the energy in the air?” Aziraphale guessed.

He nodded, unable to do more.

“Then he should definitely stop breathing,” another voice—Anaphiel, Crowley's subconscious hearing supplied—said maliciously. “We don’t want him alive, and we definitely don’t want him polluting the energy of Heaven.”

“Shut up,” Aziraphale snapped. “Just shut up. You keep breathing, Crowley. We’ll—we’ll—” his voice died away. Crowley knew the angel didn’t really know what they would do. They were just postponing the inevitable. But he couldn’t help it; his immortal body wanted to live as much as he did. Wanted to look at Aziraphale for as long as it possibly could; wanted to see that face without its worry and its horrible undying sadness, see it laughing or content or even asleep. Even to see it worried was enough to make him keep breathing.

“You’ve been on Earth too long,” the guardian angel accused. “You’ve gone native. Both of you—” he jerked his chin at the speck in the sky that was Daguel, flying away—"you've forgotten. Well—" suddenly a lance was in his hand— “I’m more than capable of taking care of the matter.” He took a step forward.

“You stay where you are,” Aziraphale said dangerously, and abruptly the guardian angel had five feet of flaming steel almost touching his snow-pure throat. “Back away. Slowly.”

“You’re mad,” Anaphiel whispered. “You’d attack me? Your own kind? Over a demon?”

“I said, back away.”

Anaphiel had the longer weapon, and he was much stronger at the moment than Aziraphale, having not just held off The Adversary Himself, but he backed away nonetheless. Something in Aziraphale’s eyes was wild and terrifying. It truly was madness, and the other angel recoiled from it instinctively.

“We’re just going to sit here,” Aziraphale said, more calmly but still with an edge of steel, “until Daguel comes back.”

“You think the Lord will forgive you for this? He’ll incinerate you both where you lay!”

“Maybe,” said Aziraphale, eerie now in his calmness. “We shall see.”
Crowley tried to figure out what Aziraphale thought he was doing, but it was hard to think. Darkness kept creeping onto the edge of his vision. It was getting harder to draw each breath of air, but he kept laboring on, determined. It wasn’t that he believed God would help them. He doubted Aziraphale really had any plan either. Probably he just felt the same way Crowley did—that it would be worth any price to stay together for just a little bit longer, for just a few moments more.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Must keep doing it. Must not forget. Each breath was painful on the inside and on the outside, Heaven-pure air searing his already lacerated lungs. The fact that it hadn’t burned him up from the inside out was proof enough that Aziraphale was right earlier—he wasn’t completely a demon anymore—but he wasn’t enough of an angel for the healing air of Heaven to save him. Aziraphale was clutching his left hand so hard it hurt. Breathe in. Breathe out. Focus on the pain to stay aware, focus on Aziraphale to make it worth it. Keep on breathing.


Anaphiel looked triumphant as the Lord bore down upon them. “You’ll see what happens to sinners now!” he shrieked self-righteously. “You’ll see!”

<Be silent, Anaphiel, in matters passing thy understanding,> the Voice said. The Lord appeared beside them.

Crowley struggled to sit up, to at least not be lying prone during what was, in theory, a demon’s worst fear—to be once again before their Creator in Heaven. Aziraphale’s arms tightened around him, keeping him in one place. Crowley struggled anyway, reaching out with his free hand. Lord, he tried to say. His vocal chords were completely destroyed; focusing his mind enough for speech hurt, and Aziraphale made a strangled noise of protest.

God must have heard his cry, because he reached down—actually knelt—and took the hand Crowley held out. <I am listening, my son.>

Daguel, landing behind them and watching in a detached kind of horror because the true meaning of all of this really hadn’t set in, was suddenly glad that his Miguel wasn't there to see it.

Don’t talk, Crowley, Aziraphale was pleading in vain. Wait until you’re healed. ButAnthony J. Crowley, once called Gadriel, knew The End when it bore down on him like an express train. Breathing the ether of Heaven would only sustain him for so long; already his body was beginning to reject the purified air. Soon there would be nothing left of him, just memories, all those awful memories that he wished he’d never made…

For a moment he was actually angry. It wasn’t as if he could really have done anything else, could he? He’d made a choice six thousand years ago and everything after that was just Ineffability. God must have wanted him to do all the things he’d done, or He never would have allowed it. And he’d minimized the damage, hadn’t he? Set up the Arrangement, kept everything low-key. He’d thwarted the Apocalypse! He didn’t have anything to regret.

The Lord gazed down at him steadily.

No, dammit, it wasn’t his fault, it wasn’t…

(Whatever’s coming next, it has to be better with forgiveness than without it.) Even if, in retrospect, he didn’t see how he could have lived any other way.

Stop, Gadri, Aziraphale begged him.

(Azira,) Crowley thought. (Do it for Aziraphale.)
It would mean something to the angel, after he was gone. Something *good*.

He looked up into the infinity of his Creator.

*Lord,* Crowley started, then coughed horribly. Quicksilver flew from his mouth with the force of his hacking. Not long now. He had to do it. It was so hard…

*(just do it, just say it, you bloody demon, what do you care, you never meant to fall, you never wanted—!)*

*Forgive me,* Crowley managed.

For a long, long moment there was nothing but silence.

He clutched at the divine hand in his, and saw the Lord nod slowly. At least he’d heard.

Exhausted, at the last of his strength, Crowley let his head roll back on Aziraphale’s shoulders and caught the angel’s eyes. He hauled in a last deep breath—just enough, long enough to finish it. *I love you,* Azira, he said, glad that he had lost enough of his demonhood that he could say it out loud. *I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you. I’m sorry about leaving.* A shallow breath he knew to be his last. *I love you.*

It started as a rumbling deep inside of him. Then it spread, throughout his whole body, his demonic essence and angelic essence mixing with the air of Heaven and Hell he’d been breathing since the day—only four days ago?—that the Gate had opened. It was like a chain reaction, and all the Heavenly air he’d been breathing to prolong his life a little farther only made the final result more predictable, more rapid.

*I love you,* he tried to send again, but he knew Aziraphale couldn’t hear him. He squeezed the hands he held; then darkness closed in for the last time.

There was a long pause.

No one moved.

Slowly at first, then with sudden strength, Aziraphale felt it—something he had only heard of before, something Crowley would only speak of haltingly, only when very, very drunk. The moment of loss. The tearing, ripping, searing pain no words ever invented could encompass. The feeling of part of his soul being actually, metaphysically torn from his body, vanishing into whatever nothingness had taken Crowley. He screamed.

Every angel in the vicinity winced and drew back instinctively from the anguish in his cry. Daguel, who remembered the Fall, had heard the sound before, from the mouths of the new-formed demons. He was suddenly very afraid for the other angel. Anaphiel, who had been a human once, had gone several steps back, his eyes wild with incomprehension.

<&Aziraphale,> the Lord began, but was interrupted as Aziraphale, wild, turned on his Creator with sudden violence.

"Why?" he demanded, clutching the shell that had once been Crowley. It was fading slowly in his arms, empty of its owner. Empty like he was, now, with only an ache, a terrible ache, remaining inside him. "*Why,* Lord? How could You let this happen?" Some part of his Nature was telling him he was insane for talking to his God like this, but the rest of him—the half of the soul he shared
with Gadriel—was wailing loudly enough to drown it out, and drive him forward. “You let him Fall!” Only six thousand years—nothing compared to immortality—and they’d spend them all apart from each other. Every memory was bright-edged with loss; all those drinks they’d shared, those walks they’d taken… the words they’d never said, the nights they’d never spent together. Never would spend together. They rose up in him like a physical thing, impossible to bear. “Why did you create us this way?!”

The Creator was shaking His head slowly. The terrible compassion in that all-encompassing gaze was too much; Aziraphale couldn’t look at it. He looked away, but looking down was no better—he could see his hands through the transparent body in his arms, going away from him. He closed his eyes, but he couldn’t escape the Lord. "There is yet a Plan, my son."

“And that will fix everything?” he said softly, doubting. The anger was leaving him, leaching out through the sudden, empty place in his soul. It was too much effort to keep hold of it. When it was gone he felt emptier still, and suddenly exhausted, tired as mortals must become, as he’d never felt before. “That’ll just make it all better?” It was suicidal of him to speak this way; but all he could think of was Gadriel—his smile, his eyes, his hands on Aziraphale’s skin only that very day—how could any Plan make up for the loss of that? What future could this Plan have for him that could be worth it?

For a moment he mastered himself, long enough to silence the agony of his lost soul and try to picture a future—a future of saving all those mortals the Lord had made, rescuing that quirky, confusing, rather sweet little planet they’d lived on—that Crowley had lived on, all this time… wouldn’t he want it saved? But then his imagination failed him, and all he could see was a long corridor of time stretching before him, blank, empty—alone. He realized he was crying out again, wordlessly, the pain of a torn soul spreading through the vast reaches of Heaven.

Back to them, as if as an echo, came the sound of tolling bells.

Aziraphale opened his eyes slowly. The two watching angels automatically turned towards the East, where the Pearly Gates stood.

"Bells?" Anaphiel whispered. "Why are there bells?"

<A Soul has been Saved,> the Lord said inscrutably.

"Now?" Daguel didn't understand, and wished desperately he were somewhere else. This was too private for his presence. "Who is there to save?"

"A human," Anaphiel suggested. "Someone who discovered their Faith after the Rapture?"

"Someone who survived down there," Aziraphale said bitterly, and his voice no longer sounded angelic. Daguel looked sharply at the grieving angel, searching for one of the telltale Signs. Aziraphale seemed to have collapsed into himself; he was little more than a pile of soot- and silver-stained robes on the marble floors, and his arms were now empty.

Louder now, the bells of Heaven continued tolling.

"One toll for each major sin committed," Anaphiel said wonderingly. "So many? What human could have committed so many?"

"Too many," Daguel said. "Too many for one lifetime."
<Aziraphale,> the Lord spoke, <Look.>  

Wearily the angel lifted his head. *What more do you want of me, Lord?* he asked dully, not even expending the strength to speak with an audible voice.

Daguel turned, almost against his will. Then he staggered.

Two pairs of wing-tips were just visible over the horizon.

"...don't *care* where your record books say I should be," a familiar, irascible voice could just be heard approaching them. "I don't know what's going on. I just showed up there, without so much as a by-your-leave. You want to know why, you take it up with *Him.*"

"Believe me, I intend to," the frosty tones of Saint Peter could be heard, and then the two speakers came into view.

Aziraphale lurched to his feet, eyes wide; moments later he was bowled over again by the force of an angel launched through the air at roughly the speed of thought.

<A little more faith from both of you would not go amiss,> the Lord remarked, but there was no real reproof in his voice.

For a moment the two only had eyes and lips for each other, and Aziraphale was laughing without realizing it. The eyes looking into his were grey again; darker now, the color of storms, but they were still the eyes he remembered. He squeezed tight, and felt himself being squeezed in return; there was nothing in the universe but getting as close together as possible.

A mental voice cleared its metaphorical throat. Abruptly remembering where they were, both angels turned to face their Creator.

*Lord,* the angel formerly known as Crowley said slowly, *I don't understand. Why am I here?* Aziraphale clutched him possessively, frightened that the reminder would be enough to force them apart again, but he, too, wanted to know the answer.

The Lord gazed off into the middle distance, something unfathomable passing over His face. *<Many have come before me in the past.>* the Lord said, almost conversationally, *<and said, "forgive me", then flinched, more expecting a blow than a caress. They did not believe that they would be Forgiven.>*

*I was Dead,* he insisted. *Actually Obliterated.*

The Lord looked, it must be confessed, superior.

*Faith,* Aziraphale said slowly. *It's always been about faith.*

The Lord might have smiled. *<It is indeed. And it is about seeking forgiveness for forgiveness' sake, out of true repentance, rather than out of selfish desires.>* He laid a hand on each angel's head. *<You are the first to return to us, Gadriel.>*

*Crowley,* he said.

Aziraphale half-turned. *What?*
The ex-demon squirmed a little under the scrutiny. Well—familiarity breeds comfort, right? And I've had six millennia to get used to Crowley. I rather like it. I chose it myself. And I'm not... the same as I was, before I... left. Going back to the old name would be like trying to pick up right where we left off, and we can't do that. We're not any of us the same.

God was definitely smiling now. <Wise words, my son,> He approved. He bent and pressed His lips to Crowley's forehead. <Welcome home.>

A whirl of air took the direct presence of the Lord from before them, but Crowley was not surprised. Instinctively he turned towards the Throne, and the distant Presence was a comforting tie in the back of his mind, linking him back to his source. He would never be without the presence of God again—and he would never be alone, either. Crowley turned back towards his partner, smiling fully.

Aziraphale still looked a bit dismayed. But...

Crowley leaned over and kissed him. You are an exception, he assured the other angel. You can still call me Gadri. In fact, I want you to.

Aziraphale smiled in relief. That's all right then, he said.

Behind them, Daguel cleared his throat, then stepped forward, looking slightly embarrassed.

Daguel! Crowley said at once, leaping to his feet and grinning broadly. Is that really you?

It sure is, Daguel said, coming forward now that he was sure of his welcome. Awkwardly the two angels patted each other on the back. I'm glad to see you back again. Miguel is, too. He's coming over right now. The other angel was currently very confused, but he'd understand as soon as he arrived.

I haven't seen either of you for ages, Crowley said, and a ripple of laughter passed through the little group at the ironic truth. How are you?

Daguel looked at Crowley/Gadriel, beaming back at him with white wings and a broad smile. He looked at Aziraphale next to him, looking whole and content for the first time in all the ages of man. He thought of Miguel, and all the fears that had dogged them both since the Fall. And then he thought about how they didn’t have to ever feel that fear again. God had had a Plan.

Fine, he said, meaning it. We're both just fine.

That night, there was more rejoicing in Heaven than there had been for a long time passing.

Earth

(...later)

Satan looked out through the windows of his penthouse office suite and contemplated his City.

It had been a long time—he could not remember now how long—since the opening of the Gate had
brought Earth under his dominion. He had expected some difficulty; there had not been much. He had expected to corrupt human souls; he had corrupted some.

He had expected to feel satisfied, but he did not.

He had expected to feel victorious; but the numbers on his polished, cherry-wood desk could not be induced to lie the way mortals could. It hadn't been enough. None of it had been enough.

A Wind blew through his expensive-looking office. Somehow, although he could not have been said to be expecting this, he was not surprised.

"I suppose you've come to gloat," Satan said resignedly to his opposite.

The apparition shimmered briefly, then relaxed into a rare affectation—that of human form. As two well-dressed businessmen the Creator and the Morningstar gazed at each other directly for the first time in six millennia.

"How many?" God asked.

Satan shrugged, trying to pretend indifference, and named a mystical number.

The Creator heaved a long sigh that involved more air than human lungs could hold. "It is more than I hoped," he said, "but it is less than I feared."

It still wasn't enough, of course. "I suppose I've failed as an Adversary," Lucifer mused.

God looked startled. "No, not at all! No one could have done it as well as you, my dear—"

"Your dear?" The Morningstar leapt from his chair. Condescension he had expected, but patronization was too much! "I am not your dear!"

Jehovah gazed at him sadly with endless eyes. Against his will, Lucifer looked deep.

"It's all well and good theoretically," he heard his own voice coming as if from a long distance, "but it's no good passively. You can't trust to these humans of yours to Tempt themselves. You can put up a Tree and say "don't touch this", and that's fine, but if they're just left on their own they'll decide it's not worth the risk."

"You don't know that," God's familiar voice replied. "I haven't even created Trees yet, what makes you think you know how Humans will react?"

"Because I know you," his voice said affectionately. "Everything you create is good at heart. Even me."

"Very good." The wink in God's tone was unmistakable; Satan's jaw dropped in disbelief.

"You've got to have someone—" Lucifer's voice was continuing. "Someone hanging by the Tree saying "Go on. Eat it." Someone advocating for the other side. It's not enough to resist their own imaginations. That's not a real choice, you'll have gone to all this trouble giving them free will for nothing. They'll never learn and they'll never evolve. There's got to be an Adversary."
<That's what this is about?> the present-day Lucifer demanded in astonishment. <All of this... was my idea?>

<Don't you remember?> Jehovah asked.

And then he did remember, and the force of his memories made him sit down hard in the splendid leather of his office chair. He remembered the first moment of his Existence, something he'd thought was gone forever. He remembered Existing when the universe was new and it was just the two of them, Jehovah and he, playing among the newborn stars.

There was laughter, and philosophical discussions, and love among those stars. Between them their passion had created new suns, flaring anew and burning out over eons before their focus on each other could be relaxed long enough to contemplate the existence of other angels and, later, humans.

<You made me forget,> Lucifer said softly. <Those memories— you took them all from me.> Then he shook his head, a violent denial. <No, you couldn't have. We were born from the same soul, we're the same, that's the whole point—you couldn't have done anything like that to me... unless...>

<But whoever you get to do the other side,> his own voice came again from the distance, <they've got to mean it. Take me now, if I tried to Tempt someone I couldn't do it properly. I would know that I didn't really want to succeed, and that would bollocks it all up. It's no better than leaving the humans to their own imagination if the Adversary isn't truly trying to win.>

<It was my idea?> the modern Morningstar cried, tasting true frustration for the first time. Always before when he'd been balked he'd thought it was okay, he'd get around God's nefarious plans somehow... but they weren't God's plans after all. They were his... <You're telling me that stealing my memories, changing who I was, separating us for six millennia, all of those horrible things I did—> Were those tears in his eyes? Surely not!—<it was all my idea?!>

Slowly, almost fearfully, God nodded.

Lucifer buried his head in his hands; for several minutes his shoulders shook, while silence reigned in the air between the two deities.

<What now, then?> The Adversary said at last, voice rough. <"Good job, old pal, you did your work well, and I'll just pat myself on the back now too because you got so few souls? Guess the humans really stood up to the test?"> His tone was mocking. <What do I do now?> He felt suddenly tired, the weight of an eternity of evil weighing upon him. He could remember the miracle of Creation now—with that picture hanging so vividly in the front of his mind, the atrocities he'd committed so gleefully were suddenly revealed in their true horrors. He, the Morningstar, had done these things—and it had all been, at the bottom, his own idea. He was too numbed by the revelation of his true nature even to feel betrayed.

<I was thinking,> God said simply, <that you would come home.>

<Come home?> Satan stared in shock. <What home? Heaven is barred, and even if you opened its
gates for me, how could I enter them? How many of your Saved remember the touch of my influence on their souls? How many of your angels long to destroy me for everything—for the War, for taking their brothers with me—> he choked, a sudden worry seizing him. <The Fallen—will they—>

<All who truly desire Forgiveness will receive it,> God said formally, then grinned, an inside joke sort of grin. <I estimate it will take another half millennia or so to reclaim them all, but we can wait. I seem to recall you have a nifty Lake of Fire around here; somewhere to keep them in until they see the Light. Humans, too. We'll get them all back eventually.>

<Good.> Lucifer said dully. At least he would not be permanently responsible for their souls. <But I cannot... how can I go back?> He glanced up at the immortal being that had created him out of his own soul, long before time had been dreamed of. <How did we think this would end?>

<We knew there was a chance,> Jehovah said softly. <A chance that it would destroy you.> His gesture, his stature, were eloquent of anguish. <I wanted to go, but you insisted... you made me let you go instead.>

Lucifer sighed deeply. <I want nothing more than to go back with you to that time before time, when everything was new... and simple,> he confessed. <I am glad that I can at least remember it, again. But I cannot go back to Heaven.>

Yahweh was looking thoughtfully out the big windows of Lucifer's office. <I've spent a bit over six millennia in Heaven,> he said slowly. <It's nice, of course, I made it to be nice. But I made Earth to be nice too, and I haven't gotten to spend any time on Earth.>

The First Fallen watched his old partner in crime warily. <I'm sorry,> he said, thinking an apology was called for.

God turned from his contemplation, smiling brilliantly—the smile with which he could call life from nothingness; the smile for which Lucifer had given up everything. He swallowed, remembering. <I was thinking,> God said brightly, <that instead of going back Upstairs, we'd make a new Heaven. A different Heaven. Down here.> He gestured to the Earth in the window.

Satan gaped. <A new Heaven?>

Yahweh's smile took on a mischievous edge. <As I recall, you had a few ideas for how it could be done better. Care to test them out?>

Lucifer turned slightly in his chair so he could face out the window. He looked out at the destruction he'd helped cause. In a way, he thought, it was cleansing. The traces of the mortal cities had been wiped out, taking with them the mortal sins and those of he who had tempted the mortals. Earth wasn't the same as it had been when it was first Created; then again, neither was he—and neither was Jehovah. But maybe the slate could be, if not wiped clean, then reset—maybe, here at the end of time, they could all begin again.

<A new Heaven,> he repeated slowly.

epilogue: sleeping in light
"You know," Aziraphale said thoughtfully from his position, prone on the newly-grown grass of New Heaven, "I used to wonder why God created us like this."

"Angels?" Crowley asked in puzzlement, watching as God (variously called Jevvy, Yah darling, and El dear by the ex-Devil) led his newly recovered partner around, showing off the changes to Heaven-and-Earth as excitedly as a schoolboy.

"Partnered angels. Like you and I," Aziraphale specified. He shook his head. "It never made much sense. Either we—" he squeezed Crowley's hand—"are the way we're supposed to be, in which case, why isn't everyone like us? Or we're different—so why have us at all?"

"Maybe we were an accident," Crowley mused. God—who insisted on calling his other half Luci, despite said half's protests that that was a girl's name and did he need to show off exactly how manly effort could make him?—was now cooing over the wonders of the Tracking Department's big globe representation of Earth. Crowley, who knew perfectly well they'd had one of those in Hell too, was impressed by how patient the former Satan was being.

"God doesn't make mistakes," Aziraphale said positively. "There were a few unforeseen incidents with free will, of course, but he didn't have any of that to worry about when he was creating us. No," he said more slowly, "I think he created us because... he couldn't quite help himself."

Crowley raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound like him."

"Sort of like man," the other angel went on, "He created angels in his image... and with all of that love, some of it just couldn't help spilling over. He created a family and a partner for himself out of his own soul... he wanted us to have that feeling, like he did."

"Great feeling," Crowley sighed. "Oh," he smiled at his partner, "my old memories from Heaven are wonderful... and we've got a lot of time now to set things right. But those six millennia were no picnic. I couldn't remember you, but there was always something missing at the bottom of my soul. I thought it was just being a demon."

"I thought it was because I was stationed on Earth, farther from the Throne," Aziraphale admitted.

"Hmm," Crowley mused. "That's a very interesting theory, angel."

"I wonder if we'll ever know."

They snuggled companionably together, just holding hands and soaking up the sun, and watched Luci finally lose his patience and drag El dear away for some six-millennia-overdue makeup bonding.

"You know," Crowley pointed out, "if that is the case... it's practically our duty to spend some time, er, reacquainting ourselves."
Aziraphale laughed. "Gadri, my dear—*mmph*!" Even when one is an angel, it's still disconcerting to find oneself suddenly pinned beneath another angel; especially when one is also being thoroughly kissed. *Is this really the best place?* he asked, glancing pointedly at the other angels and resurrected humans (one of whom he recognized, with a start, as Samantha) flying about, enjoying the new fields.

Crowley stopped suddenly, which was unexpected; appeals to his modesty had never worked very well in the past. "No," he said, "it's not." Mischief was suddenly lurking in his storm-grey eyes; he bounced to his feet, pulling Aziraphale along with him. "There's somewhere else we have to revisit first."

Aziraphale stretched and smiled tolerantly at him. "Where's that?"

"Home," Crowley said seriously, reaching out to touch Aziraphale's cheek gently. He looked nervous and hopeful at the same time.

Aziraphale blinked in surprise. "Our old home?"

Crowley nodded. "It's down here now. Everything is. Jesus brought it all. I had him put it over where London used to be—right next to your bookshop. Er. The third coming of your bookshop, anyway."

"That was sweet of you, my dear," Aziraphale smiled, "but... it's just a building. We never had any possessions or anything of the sort to make it different. Just a bigger bed. After all this time I honestly doubt I could pick it out of a crowd."

"It's the idea of it," Crowley insisted. He looked a little vulnerable. "It's been six millennia since we were there together... I thought it should come first."

Aziraphale leaned forward and kissed him, a kiss of forgiveness, a kiss of rebirth. "Of course," he agreed, smiling brilliantly. "Let's go home."

---

_An END_

---

_elsewhere_

(...earlier, later, and always)

"What I don't get," Adam was saying to Jesus somewhere about 20 miles due Heavenward, "is _why_. The Plan seems much too complicated if this is all the result it was going for."

Jesus, for his part, shrugged. "I can't tell what My Father is really thinking any more than you can."

"But you've got an _idea_. You've guessed."

The Christ looked both ways, as if he was about to cross a very dangerous street and a marauding tractor-trailer with wings might appear at any moment. Then he leaned closer to the Antichrist and lowered his voice. _"Well..."_
Footnotes

15. Angels, contrary to popular belief, are every bit as capable of blaming the messenger as humans and demons are.

16. Angels, as winged beings, preferred their homes without roofs.

17. After all of these years of His Fiery Reign, there wasn’t really money anymore. Or an economy, craftsmen, and other offices. So there wasn’t really anything to be expensive in relation to. And it couldn’t really be costly if he hadn’t spend anything on it. But if his office could not precisely be said to be expensive, he still thought of his office as expensive-looking.

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