Don't Play With Holy Water

by ImprobableDreams900

Summary

When the Bentley goes missing, Crowley isn't sure what to make of it. Unbeknownst to him, a certain lurking demon is waiting to settle an old score...

Notes

Written for doctortreklock, who wanted a fic to go with this piece of fanart by noxcape: http://noxcape.deviantart.com/art/GO-Anthony-J-Crowley-105853733
Chapter 1

The Bentley was missing.

Crowley lurched to a halt on the pavement, staring blankly down at the empty stretch of curb in front of him. He looked up and down the road, as though expecting to see the vintage automobile parked several metres away from where he very clearly remembered leaving it, but it was nowhere in sight.

The bag of bagels in Crowley’s hand was growing heavy, and he automatically adjusted his grip as he mentally backtracked. He’d spent the morning at the BBC Television Centre in White City, ensuring that The Keith Lemon Sketch Show was picked up and remained on air to torment Britain with another season of tasteless comedy. Afterwards, he’d driven back towards Soho; he had arranged to meet Aziraphale at one o’clock that afternoon at St James’s. Crowley had finished up meddling with the BBC right after noon, but he hadn’t had a chance to stop and eat lunch. So when he’d been driving down the A40 and remembered this excellent bagel shop by Paddington Station, he’d decided to take a little detour.

He clearly remembered parking the Bentley right outside the doors—no parking lines, Crowley always maintained, were things that happened to other people—and even recalled cutting off Richard Strauss’ “Bicycle Race” in the middle of the bit about Vietnam and Watergate.

He hadn’t been in the shop for more than five minutes (queues were also things that happened to other people), but somewhere in that timeframe the Bentley had vanished. It was possible it had been towed for illegal parking, but he usually just got tickets for that sort of thing. Besides, he’d long since draped a protective spell over the automobile that encouraged all but the most determined of mortals to give the car a wide berth.

But, whatever had happened, the Bentley was very clearly not here anymore. Scowling, Crowley glanced down at his wristwatch. It was quarter to one; if he caught the next Tube train, he might be able to make it on time.

As Crowley headed down the street towards Paddington Station, he briefly considered automotive theft as a faster option, but found the idea of driving one of these new, electronic cars repellant. With all the gadgets they cobbled on these days, driving had become increasingly less about the connection between the driver and a beautiful, well-oiled piece of human ingenuity, and more about getting from point A to point B while maintaining the best wi-fi signal possible.

Paddington Station was, predictably, packed with both locals and tourists alike. A broad barrel vault of glass and metal stretched overhead, but Crowley hardly spared it a glance, angling instead towards the escalators to the lower levels.

The bag of bagels in his hand was beginning to smell very tasty, and Crowley’s stomach rumbled in response. The demon satisfied himself with the knowledge that he’d be eating very soon, and with excellent company.

Crowley rarely used the Tube, usually preferring to walk or drive. Traffic was never a problem for him, and riding in the Bentley was truly travelling in style. But he’d taken an interest in the Underground system back in 1863, when Charles Pearson had first come upon the idea of moving the mass transportation system underground in order to keep the movements of the plebs from congesting the upper-class city centre.

Now, Crowley waved his way through the row of ticket turnstiles and squeezed past a group of
teenagers consulting their smartphones. He headed for the escalators and made his way to the platform for the southbound Bakerloo line, which would take him straight to Charing Cross Station and St James’s Park.

As Crowley slowed to a stop beside a large advert for the Globe Theatre’s upcoming production of *Twelfth Night*, he felt a sudden, unplaceable sense of unease.

The demon glanced around automatically, but nothing seemed amiss. He was catching the tail end of the business lunch crowd, and the downtrodden-looking office employees were mixed in with shoppers and teenagers. A small child was complaining loudly to his mother nearby, and, off to his left, someone was laughing a little too loudly. One of the lights by the end of the semi-circular tunnel had gone out, but kept trying to flicker feebly back to life. An electronic sign overhead indicated that the next train to Elephant & Castle would arrive in two minutes.

Crowley found his sunglasses in the inside pocket of his suit jacket and put them on. The sense of unease faded slightly, and Crowley wondered if he’d imagined it.

The train was right on time, sliding up to the platform with a combination of a rattling hiss, high-pitched squeak, and unidentifiable grinding of metal on metal. The first couple of carriages flashed past before the train slowed noticeably. It continued decelerating until the “Mind the Gap” warnings painted on the sides of the carriages ceased to be an illegible blur, and then the train finally lurched to a halt. A heartbeat later, all of the red doors slid apart with identical rattles and faint hydraulic hisses.

“This is a Bakerloo line service to Elephant & Castle,” a polite voice announced over the intercom.

Crowley moved forward with the shuffling crowd, which parted grudgingly to allow those who wanted to get off the train to do so. The moment the sole of Crowley’s snakeskin shoe touched the linoleum floor of the carriage, the feeling of unease returned with redoubled intensity and every hair on the back of Crowley’s neck stood on end. The demon automatically froze and scanned the carriage, eyes skimming across the space from behind his sunglasses, looking for anything that might be a threat.

“This is a Bakerloo line train to Elephant & Castle,” the polite voice reminded him. “Mind the gap, please.”

Someone behind him mumbled could he get a move on, please? and Crowley was jostled to the side as the last few people trickled into the carriage. The door gave a series of loud, shrill beeps and shut behind him with another hydraulic hiss and a click. Crowley felt the sudden, unplaceable urge to be back on the platform.

The train lurched into motion, and Crowley took an unsteady step sideways into a bright red pole. He grabbed on automatically with the hand that was still holding the bag of bagels.

The train made a noise that was a cross between a hum and a faint roar, and the sound increased in intensity as they picked up speed.

“The next stop is Edgware Road,” the polite voice said. Through the windows on the other side of the carriage, Crowley watched the adverts on the far wall of the platform stream together into a blur. Then they entered the tunnel and darkness swallowed them. The tunnel lights flashed by outside, and Crowley glanced around the carriage again, looking over the top of his sunglasses.

It was a little under half-full, with several groups of shoppers and teenagers interspersed with serious-looking adults, several of whom looked like they wanted very much to be anywhere else. An elderly, bearded man in the corner was reading the *Times*, and someone in a hoodie had fallen asleep.
slumped against the window in the back. A smartly-dressed woman holding a Starbucks cup was standing opposite him, and behind her a tall, thin man was staring off into the distance. An overweight man sat by himself on the other side of the carriage, reading a novel. Two teenagers sat on a nearby bench, staring engrossed at their mobiles. A scarf sat abandoned on a nearby cushion, a scattering of orange peels decorating the floor beneath it.

The train screeched and started to decelerate, adverts flashing by on the other side of the windows again as they burst out of the tunnel.

“This is Edgware Road,” the voice informed them as the train decelerated further, accompanied by the grinding of metal and a series of rhythmic thunks.

A group of shoppers looked around and started collecting their things. Once the train had fully stopped, the doors slid smoothly open, and they bustled past Crowley.

Crowley moved to follow them, still feeling uneasy and wanting nothing to do with that particular train, but two businessmen stepped onto the carriage just as he tried to step off. They were deeply engrossed in their conversation and came to a stop right inside the door, oblivious to Crowley as he tried to push past them. The demon glared at the nearest one until he was persuaded to move by sheer force of will, but just as Crowley succeeded in elbowing past him, the door beeped loudly and slid shut.

The two businessmen decided to suddenly continue walking into the carriage, where they abruptly broke off their conversation and parted ways. Crowley turned slowly, tightening his grip on the bag of bagels.

The train started to accelerate again, and Crowley moved further into the carriage. Until he knew what he was dealing with, he decided grimly, flight might not be the best option, if it were even possible.

“This is a Bakerloo line train to Elephant & Castle. The next stop is Marylebone Station.”

Crowley glanced at his watch. He was still just barely on time to meet Aziraphale, and he’d be blessed if he was going to be late.

The train coasted to a stop at Marylebone Station, the doors slid open, and everyone in the carriage got off. The two businessmen who had only just boarded left as though it were the most natural thing in the world. They were followed by the man reading the novel, the woman with the Starbucks, the teenagers and their mobiles, the hoards of shoppers, the old man reading the Times, and the person with the hoodie who’d been fast asleep until very recently. They all just stood up and calmly filed out of the carriage. All but one.

The tall, thin man who’d been staring off into the distance shifted carefully out from behind one of the red poles and turned to face Crowley, who carefully propped his bag of bagels up on one of the benches where it wouldn’t fall over. The thin man held himself easily, but his stance was slightly wider than was to be expected for his posture and, even now, he seemed to fade into the background. If Fall Out Boy had ever recorded “I’m Hell’s Housewife and You’re the Next Thing on My To-Do List,” this man would have been on the album cover.

Hastur smiled, revealing a mouth with altogether too many teeth. “We meet again, Crawly.”

Crowley pursed his lips but kept his tone civil. “Hastur.”

The doors beeped and slid closed, and the train lurched into motion. Neither demon shifted their
weight to accommodate the change in velocity.

“Did Hell send you?” Crowley asked.

Hastur seemed amused at the idea. “No. They haven’t been sending much of anyone anywhere lately.”

Crowley digested this. “Old firm slacking off, eh?”

Hastur didn’t smile. “I do not know why you have not been slaughtered for your crimes.”

Crowley tried for a nervous smile and only ended up swallowing instead. “Er, about that. How about we just forget all that unpleasantness even happened? Put the past in the past, so to speak.”

Hastur took a step forward. “You killed Ligur,” he said, and real anger was colouring his voice now. “He didn’t do nothing to you, and you killed him.”

“Er.” Crowley glanced nervously to the side, trying to come up with some way to buy time. His gaze landed on the bag he’d placed on the bench, and he picked it up quickly. “Would a light snack make it up to you?”

Hastur took several swift steps towards Crowley, and the lesser demon automatically backed up, scrambling to keep his distance from the duke. Hastur grabbed the bag out of Crowley’s hand and cast it aside without a thought. One of the bagels skipped out of the bag and slid under one of the benches.

“That was for a friend,” Crowley said automatically.

Hastur paused in his advance. “I do not know why Hell is ignoring your sins,” he growled, “but I am a Duke. I can take my own revenge for sins committed against me.”

“*The next stop is Baker Street Station. Change here to the Metropolitan, Circle, Jubilee, and Hammersmith & City lines.*”

“I’m really sorry about Ligur,” Crowley offered, and tried to creep away from the more powerful demon as unobtrusively as possible. “It wasn’t anything personal.”

Hastur’s eyes flashed and Crowley reflected distractedly that the Hastur who had delivered the Antichrist to him hadn’t been this ruthless. Maybe Ligur’s death had had a peculiar effect on him.

“I am going to make you regret the very moment you first heard of holy water,” Hastur growled, and Crowley took another step backwards. Maybe if he could get to one of the doors, there would be some sort of emergency button he could press to get the train to stop—Hastur might be able to override it, but it was worth a shot. He started edging towards the nearest door.

“Are you sure we can’t just talk about this?” Crowley tried. “If Hell—” He never got to finish, because Hastur chose that moment to lunge forward.

Crowley leapt backwards, ramming the back of his knee into the corner of one of the benches as he did so. Hastur’s hand closed around the front of Crowley’s shirt just as Crowley started to fall backwards, throwing his weight into the motion as he tried to pull away. He’d been hoping Hastur might lurch forward and overshoot him, but instead the duke just adjusted his footing and hauled Crowley upwards again.

Crowley twisted like the snake he was, wrenching his shoulders to the side fast enough that he
managed to break free of Hastur’s grip. He was right next to the door now, and his eyes latched onto a small, bright red lever marked “emergency” underneath a small glass panel. He swung the panel open and pulled it.

There was a loud screech, and at the same time the right side of Crowley’s face exploded in pain, his sunglasses flying off his face as his mouth flooded with the taste of copper. He tumbled to the floor and automatically twisted away, narrowly avoiding a sharp kick aimed at his ribs. Crowley tried to lurch to his feet, but his head was ringing and he felt Hastur’s hand close around the back of his collar. Hastur pulled him to his feet and, when Crowley ducked what he thought would be another blow to the face, only leaned into a swift punch to his abdomen.

The train was still slowing, and it took Crowley a moment to register that the bells ringing in his ears weren’t just in his head; the emergency procedures had kicked in in full force. Hastur waved his hand angrily at the train, and they started picking up speed again. Crowley sucked in a slightly painful gasp of air and took a step away from the duke.

When Hastur came at him next with a right hook, Crowley ducked and rushed him, adding an extra burst of demonic strength to carry them an additional two feet and into one of the red poles. Hastur grunted as he collided with it, and Crowley leaned back just long enough to clock him one across the jaw.

Hastur raised a hand, but instead of lashing out at Crowley, he merely moved it a half a foot to the side, the motion sharp and abrupt. At the same time, it felt like a brick wall crashed into Crowley, and he was thrown to the side and into a row of benches. The impact left him breathless, and he struggled to pull himself onto his hands and knees, feeling blood trickling down his chin. With a quick thought, he instructed his corporation to heal itself, and a moment later the dizziness started to clear. He adjusted the placement of his right hand, and felt his fingers brush something soft.

There was a flash of light and the train rattled into Baker Street Station. Hastur must have been maintaining his control of the train because, instead of slowing to a stop, it went straight through, plunging them back into the darkness of the next tunnel. Crowley wondered abstractly if Hastur was keeping an eye on the other trains on the same track.

“Count your sins, Crawly,” Hastur sneered, and Crowley turned his head and blinked blearily over at the duke as he advanced on the bench where the lesser demon was sprawled. “I’ll have you repenting before the end.”

Crowley gave a brief, painful cough as he felt his jaw start to mend. “Good luck with that.”

Hastur reached to drag Crowley up and off the bench, and as he did so Crowley darted out with his hands, looping Hastur’s neck in the scarf he’d found on the bench. He curled the ends around his fists and pulled as hard as he could.

Hastur’s face registered shock for a moment, and his hands leapt to his throat. Crowley had a fleeting feeling of triumph, but then Hastur’s eyes narrowed and he slammed his fist into Crowley’s jaw again, right where it was healing.

Crowley gasped as his entire body rocked to the side, struggling to absorb the force of the blow, but he only tightened his grip. Unfortunately, demons didn’t really need to breathe, and Hastur was remembering this. He slammed his fist into Crowley’s cheek again, and this time Crowley’s grip slackened long enough for Hastur to rip the scarf free. He cast it aside as Crowley staggered backwards, trying to put some space between himself and the duke. The side of his face was on fire, and it felt like he’d lost several teeth.
“This is Regent’s Park Station,” the polite voice announced, and there was another brief burst of light as the train sped past the platform at full speed. “Mind the gap, please.”

Crowley turned away from Hastur and stumbled towards the rear of the carriage, focusing his sluggish mind on miracling into existence something very complicated.

He heard Hastur stalking after him, footsteps measured. “Where are you going, Crawly?” he teased.

Crowley waited until he felt something reassuringly heavy and cool fall into his palm, and moved his hand to carefully click back the safety. Then he spun with as much grace as he could muster and pulled the trigger on the Walther PPK pistol, just like the one James Bond uses.

There was an unbelievably loud bang and the wall at the far end of the carriage exploded in a shower of plastic. Crowley adjusted his aim and fired again. This time Hastur staggered, the bullet casing bouncing off the floor with a sharp twang.

Crowley gave a gasp of relief, but the duke wasn’t down for the count. He was standing hunched over, a hand gripping one of the vertical poles for support, and Crowley knew he was healing the wound as fast as his corporation could register the damage.

Crowley, never one to give up on an avenue until it was thoroughly exhausted, shot him three more times. After the third, Hastur raised his hand and closed it into a fist, and all the air in Crowley’s lungs vanished as pain burst through his chest. He fell to his knees, and he had Hastur’s own injuries to thank for the fact that the duke couldn’t keep the spell up for very long.

Crowley sucked in a desperate breath as air re-entered his lungs, and he fell gasping onto the carriage floor like a fish out of water, fingers scrambling at the tacky linoleum. It felt like someone had dragged nettles through his lungs.

He heard Hastur gasping as well, and knew that he’d at least had some effect. Crowley cast his eyes around for the pistol, but it must have slid under a bench somewhere, because he couldn't see it. Though he felt like he needed to rest there for another minute, or five, Crowley forced himself to his hands and knees, trembling. The right side of his face was still on fire, and when he raised a shaking hand to his mouth, it came away red.

“The next stop is Oxford Circus Station. Change here—”

Crowley was having trouble gaining his feet, but he reached for the armrests on the nearest bench and used them to drag himself upwards. He heard Hastur’s rasping breaths grow stronger, and knew he had a limited amount of time.

Head spinning, Crowley stumbled past where the duke was still hunched over and back towards the centre of the carriage.

Crowley reached the nearest door and tried to pry it open, but he was quickly running out of strength and his head was still spinning. The demon poured the last of his energy into another miracle, this one more straightforward and familiar. He miracled a tyre iron into his hand.

He shoved the flat, chiselled end of the tyre iron into the gap between the doors and started working them open. Behind him, he heard Hastur stagger to his feet.

“Don’t even think about it,” the duke growled, and Crowley heard him close the distance between them just as Crowley shoved the tyre iron one last time and the door slid open.

In the same instant, bright light flooded into the carriage as they flashed into Oxford Circus, the
crowded platform whizzing past in a blur of colour and noise. Cold air whipped past them, pulling at Crowley’s clothes and hair, and he wondered desperately if he could survive a jump at this velocity.

He didn’t get to find out, though, because Hastur grabbed him by the arm and dragged him back into the carriage. The train plunged back into darkness as the duke spun Crowley around in a tight circle and delivered a vicious kick to one of his shins.

Crowley went down again, but he kept a tight grip on the tyre iron and rolled away from Hastur. The duke pursued him and Crowley lashed out with his feet, feeling a burst of satisfaction as his foot contacted with something with a *crunch*.

Hastur yelped and Crowley took the moment of distraction to gain his feet, staggering as his bruised shins protested the movement.

Crowley spun to face Hastur and caught a glimpse of the duke’s expression as he adjusted his grip on the tyre iron. Hastur looked positively livid, and Crowley guessed he hadn’t planned on the lesser demon evading him for so long; Crowley felt a strange burst of pride at having exceeded his expectations.

Hastur took a meaningful step forward, and Crowley swung the tyre iron at his head with all of his might.

Faster than Crowley’s eye could follow, Hastur’s hand flashed up and caught the end of the tyre iron. His fist closed around it, absorbing the entire strength of Crowley’s swing as though it were nothing. Crowley, refusing to release his only weapon, tried to pull it from his grip, but it barely budged. Then Hastur turned his head to look directly at him, down the length of the tyre iron, and Crowley had a spectacular *oh shit* moment just before Hastur shoved the end of the tyre iron back in the lesser demon’s face.

Crowley saw it coming and tried to duck, but he wasn’t fast enough and the curved end rammed into the side of his skull with the force of a hydraulic piston. There was an enormous burst of pain and stars and Crowley staggered backwards, feeling something warm trickling through his hair. He bumped into something—one of the poles, probably—and started to collapse towards the floor, but Hastur moved forward and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. Crowley's hands went to Hastur’s sleeves and latched on as he struggled to keep his eyes open. Everything had gone an alarming shade of white, and his head was throbbing like AC/DC at a charity concert.

Crowley, unable to keep his footing, started to slide downwards and around the pole, but Hastur growled and dragged him back up. He hauled Crowley away from the pole and slammed him into the other door, the one that was still closed. Crowley’s hands scrambled at Hastur’s arms in a futile effort to get the duke to release him, but he could barely gather the strength to stay conscious.

“*The next stop is Piccadilly Circus. Change here to the Piccadilly line.*”

Hastur leaned forward until he filled Crowley’s whole field of vision. “What I’m going to do to you,” Hastur hissed into Crowley’s ear, breath unpleasantly hot, “is going to make you wish you’d never crawled out of whatever cesspit He made you in.”

Crowley tried to respond, to say something witty, perhaps, but his heart was hammering in his throat and his eyelids kept trying to flutter closed.

Hastur seemed to be savouring the state Crowley was in, flexing his hand so that the back of his fingers brushed against Crowley’s Adam’s apple, which was waveriing up and down.
“Tell me, Crawly, do you know what holy water does to a demon?”

Crowley felt something warm drip down the side of his face, and couldn’t find the breath to respond, much to Hastur’s delight.

“It kills you, from the inside out. It dissolves your very soul. Do you know what that feels like, Crawly?”

Something was occurring to Crowley in a panicked, desperate way, scratching at his consciousness and demanding he stay awake no matter what. Hastur was exacting his revenge for Ligur’s death—his total death. That meant that Hastur wasn’t about to send him Downstairs for some talking to. It was an eye for an eye.

“No,” Crowley croaked, and threw every ounce he had into staying conscious and fighting the overwhelming buzzing in his head. For some reason, his mind had jumped to Aziraphale, waiting for him at St James’s, and how disappointed the angel would be if he didn’t show up. Something like moisture started gathering at the corners of his eyes, probably from the concussion.

“That’s right,” Hastur growled back. “But you will.”

The duke moved his hand so that his fingers wrapped around Crowley’s neck. He started to squeeze.

Crowley took an involuntary final gasp of air as Hastur’s grip tightened slightly, crushing his windpipe. “But do you know what else holy water is?” Hastur growled in a soft, almost intimate voice.

Crowley’s gasps for breath grew shorter and more desperate, and he dug his fingernails into Hastur’s arm as hard as he could, but he couldn’t even scratch him through the fabric of his sleeve.

“Quick,” Hastur purred.

Crowley’s vision started to blur alarmingly, and the pounding in his head increased. He thought about the bag of bagels, lying under a bench somewhere, and closed his eyes as another burst of light filled the carriage.

“This is Piccadilly Circus. Change here—”

“And this will be anything but,” the duke whispered.

Crowley felt consciousness start to slip away from him, fingers losing their purchase on Hastur’s arm as a burst of fresh air swept into the carriage and brushed past his cheek, ruffling his hair. He wondered with a last, fleeting moment of lucidity if Aziraphale would miss him.

Hastur’s grip slowly relaxed on his throat, and for a moment Crowley was suspended right at the edge of unconsciousness, teetering on the brink.

Then Hastur slackened, all the fight going out of him as he toppled backwards and away from Crowley like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

At the same instant, something vast and powerful slammed into Crowley—not into his body, but into something much more basic and internal, and Crowley crumpled to the floor as he lost control of his corporation.
Chapter 2

It is impossible to break a soul.

This isn’t because souls are especially strong, or for lacking of trying by unpleasant persons. Rather, it is because they are fluid. A soul cannot be shattered, torn apart, or broken any more than a measure of water or air can.

This is not to say that a soul cannot be harmed, tortured, or even killed—it just takes a little more creativity on the part of the person wishing to inflict the damage.

What Hastur was currently doing to Crowley could perhaps best be likened to boiling water.

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The walls were coming down.

Clouds of sand and dust were bursting from their bases, and even from this distance Crowley could hear the cries and thunderous crashes, and see the flames.

A hot, stiff breeze trailed over Crowley’s face and teased several strands of hair loose, flicking them across his cheek. Crowley took several steps forward automatically, and was still staring, transfixed, at the destruction before him when he heard someone calling his name.

“Crowley! Crowley!”

The demon turned, the wind whipping his hair around as he saw Aziraphale sprinting towards him down the road.

Crowley blinked at the angel in confusion. He knew instinctively that it was Aziraphale, but his corporation was completely different. The angel was a little thinner, for one thing, and his hair was long and dark, swept behind his shoulders and bound together in a loose bundle. He was wearing a baggy robe that had been dyed green some time ago and had since faded, and his sandals sent sand flying as he neared the demon.

“Don’t go,” Aziraphale gasped, skidding to a stop in front of him. “You’ll never make it.”

Crowley opened his mouth in confusion but nothing came out. Instead, he followed Aziraphale’s stricken gaze and turned, looking back at the smouldering complex behind him. This landscape was familiar to him, he was certain—he’d seen this before, been here before—

He stared at the mounting flames as a portion of the wall collapsed, revealing beautiful frescos and bright, green things dancing with fire—

“No,” All the air left Crowley’s lungs and he quickly glanced down at himself. His hands weren’t his own—or, rather, they were, but not any he had seen in a long time. They were dark-skinned and smooth, with long, thin fingers and a scattering of rings on one hand. Crowley’s gaze jumped back up to where the flames were growing higher. There was a cheer as another section of the wall collapsed, and Crowley felt his throat close in anger. He knew exactly when and where he was, and
it was a time and place he’d tried his hardest to forget: Babylon, circa 150 BC.

Crowley spun to face Aziraphale again. He didn’t know what was happening or how he had come to be here, but it felt real. He remembered Mithridates and his army marching on the city as though it were yesterday, and the anger and desperation stirring in the pit of his stomach were as real as they had ever been. “They—they’re burning the gardens!” Crowley said, louder than he had intended, his breath suddenly tight.

He remembered the gardens now, filled with every growing thing Crowley could get his hands on, carefully tended to and looked after. It had been his finest attempt to recreate on Earth the Paradise he had been cast from. It would also be his last.

“My gardens!” Crowley continued, and in a flash he remembered how he had left them only this morning—neat and orderly, and as lush as anything he had ever seen. The blue woodruff had needed weeding and the fig grove was overdue for a trimming, and a hundred other tiny details, but it had been a work in progress. It had been Crowley’s work in progress.

Crowley looked at the burning gardens now, and the flames reminded him of his own Fall. He couldn’t put the crushing feeling in his chest into words, could only rasp out in a voice blank with horror, “The hanging gardens—”

Before he knew what he was doing, Crowley had started staggering towards the crumbling complex. The rage boiling in the pit of his stomach was overcoming the shock, and he felt his true demonic nature start to show itself for the first time in a long time. He had spent decades working on the gardens—decades—and he was not about to stand by and watch them burn if there was anything he could do about it.

“Crowley, no!” Aziraphale protested, running after him and grabbing his arm. “It’s no use; there’re too many of them. You’ll just get yourself discorporated.”

Crowley shook Aziraphale’s hand off roughly and continued forward, locking his eyes on the flames. He had rebuilt Eden on Earth, and he was not about to lose it again. He gritted his teeth and felt something wet on his cheeks. “Then let them discorporate me,” he growled.

“No, Crowley, please—” Aziraphale grabbed him again and pulled him to a stop.

“Angel, let me go,” Crowley snapped crossly, yanking his arm free. There was fire racing through his veins now, and he was not going to let Aziraphale stand between him and his revenge.

“Mithridates will—”

“I don’t give a damn what Mithridatesss doesss,” Crowley hissed, and remembered suddenly that Aziraphale had been travelling with the Pontic king’s court for the past few years, as royal librarian or something. “You’re such good pals with him, tell him to stop.”

Aziraphale swallowed heavily and his eyes dropped, avoiding Crowley’s searing gaze. “I—I can’t. He’s made up his mind.”

Crowley started to turn away, but then he felt his heart miss a beat and he spun back around. “Wait—you didn’t—did you…” Crowley forced down the lump in his throat. “Did you know about this?”

A look of poorly-masked guilt crossed Aziraphale’s face, and the angel shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “Er, he may have mentioned something, but I must admit I thought he was joking—”

Crowley felt something like ice drop into his stomach, and his rage fizzled and blinked out as quickly
as it had come.

“I’m really sorry, Crowley,” Aziraphale tried, taking a step forward and reaching for him. “I know how much you liked those gardens—”

Crowley took a matching step backwards, struggling to process Aziraphale’s betrayal as he jerked his arm out of the angel’s reach. “Liked? How much I—?” His voice failed him and he turned his head away, fighting a crushing wave of something like helplessness.

Mithridates might be destroying the best thing Crowley had ever built, but Aziraphale was the one stabbing him in the back. He knew he should have seen this coming—this was what he got for trusting an angel—but he honestly hadn’t been expecting it, not after all this time. Not from Aziraphale.

“No,” Crowley choked out, and turned back towards the closest thing he had to Eden. He took a few staggering steps towards it, and then broke into a sprint. He could hear Aziraphale calling after him, but Crowley blocked him out.

He knew the angel was right about him not being able to save the gardens, but maybe he could reach them before the flames and Mithridates’ men got too far. Maybe he could salvage something—the weed-strewn blue woodruff, the overgrown fig trees, anything. There had to be something he could save, even if it took a discorporation to do it.

Crowley’s breaths were tight in his chest as he ran, feet striking the dusty ground and conjuring miniature sandstorms. The first of Mithridates’ men weren’t far ahead, and as he neared it looked like there were more than he’d predicted. Crowley fixed his eyes on what little green was left visible in his beautiful hanging gardens as the memory exploded in a burst of white light and pain…

…the church was dark around where Crowley lay trembling on the floor, the only illumination coming from a row of very short candles near the altar.

Crowley croaked in a wheezing breath and shivered as pain ran through him. His skin felt too tight and like it was on fire all at the same time, and every inch of him ached.

Crowley stared dazedly at where his hand was extended in front of him, sluggishly registering the rounded shapes of the boils covering his skin. A handful of small dried leaves were scattered on the floor in front of him—carnations from a posy, he recognised.

He shifted his gaze slightly, looking beyond his extended hand to where the sanctuary proper was looming in front of him. It was a holy, sanctified place, and the divinity of it prickled at Crowley’s skin. It should have been mildly painful, and maybe it was, but Crowley was having trouble parsing through where all the pain was coming from. Instead, it just felt warm.

There was something else in its aura, too—something familiar and comforting. That was why he had sought out this place, Crowley remembered slowly. It had reminded him of things. Nice things.

Crowley rattled in a painful, rasping breath but it broke off into a series of racking coughs. The motion jerked his entire body, and the demon tried to curl into a smaller ball, muscles protesting every movement. He was flush with heat and soaked with sweat by the time the coughing fit subsided, and he gasped weakly for breath as he stared blankly at the edge of the sanctuary’s dais.

He let the divinity wash over him, soaking in the memories it brought to him like they were water for his parched lips. He remembered the splendour of Heaven, stretching overhead like a banner, and the
beautiful lushness of Eden. But those memories were faded now, rendered distant by the sheer passage of time. Mostly the divinity reminded him of something—someone—else entirely. Crowley squeezed his eyes shut.

Somewhere, a bird exploded into flight, wings loud in the empty church.

Crowley was beginning to remember this endless night, and for a moment he was both living it in the present and watching from afar, safe in the future. It had begun with a fever-driven desperation to seek respite at the hand of the Father who had already driven him away. Crowley remembered dazedly having spent the last of his strength praying: to his Father, a little bit to Lucifer, and even to Aziraphale—but no one had come for him. It had taken him an agonising eternity to finally die, without even the strength necessary to disorporate himself in a more timely manner.

The ache in Crowley’s bones increased and he felt the overwhelming desire to just give up then and there. He was powerless and on death’s door; was it such a crime to want the night to be over?

There was a small part of Crowley that spoke up then, urging him to fight the spiral of hopelessness he had found himself in. It’s not real, he thought disjointedly to himself, unsure where the sudden thought had come from. You need to fight—you need control—I need to be in control—

Then that part of him faded away with the smell of carnations…

…Flames leapt up the bookcases, and the heat crushed Crowley like a wave. He moved forward automatically, casting his eyes around for a familiar shape.

“Aziraphale!” he called, and his voice jumped an octave in fear. “Aziraphale, you—you stupid—Aziraphale? Are you here?” Something exploded in sparks next to him, and across the room a bookcase collapsed, spilling burning books onto the floor. The demon drew a stifling breath to call again, and something slammed into him from behind.

Crowley hit the floor hard, sunglasses flying off his face and vaporising as water gushed over him. He forced himself to his hands and knees as the jet of water shifted away, leaving him dripping and soot-smeared. The fire hissed as Crowley’s eyes fell on a thick book lying nearby, recognising it as the one that young woman had left in the back of the Bentley.

He reached for it automatically, but something stayed his hand.

I’ve done this before, he thought, and that other voice was back, and it was stronger now. With a supreme effort of will, Crowley pulled his hand away from the book and curled his fingers together, grinding the side of his fist into the floor of the flame-engulfed bookshop. Above him, the ceiling groaned and there was a loud splintering noise. It’s not real. You’re just remembering.

Crowley squeezed his eyes shut and tried to get to his feet. There was a vast pressure on his shoulders, bearing down on him like a hydraulic press, but Crowley steeled himself. A bag of bagels was appearing in his mind’s eye, and he clung to that image. There was a bag of bagels, yes, and someone to share them with, and…and…some bastard had stolen his Bentley.

With an enormous burst of strength, Crowley forced himself to his feet. It felt like he was emerging from beneath a great deal of water, kicking towards the surface as flaming ceiling joists crashed to the floor around him—

His head exploded.

“—next stop is Charing Cross Station. Change here to the Northern line.”
Crowley wheezed in a shaking, broken gasp, feeling his cheek pressed against the cool, gritty linoleum floor of the Tube carriage. He could barely force air through his crushed windpipe, and every nerve felt like it was on fire.

He shifted a few centimetres, but before he could so much as begin to scrape himself off the linoleum, he felt himself forcibly ripped away from the reality he had fought so dearly to regain. There was a crushing pressure all around him, and everything went black—

Ash was flying through the air and more was coming down every second, blotting out the sky and the outlines of the houses.

Crowley’s throat was clogged and hot, and he choked on a lungful of ash. He stumbled out of the middle of the street and towards the nearest building, jolting to a stop and coughing wretchedly, one hand on his knee and the other on the side of the building as he struggled to expel the contaminant from his lungs. Once he had sucked in enough oxygen to stop the dizziness, he straightened and glanced fearfully down the street. People were rushing past him, some with small children or carts or armfuls of their worldly possessions, crying out and trying to make sense of the destruction that had been visited upon them.

Crowley looked past them, towards the forum, and wondered how long he had before the streets become impassable. He had last seen Aziraphale at the villa of Lucius Calpurnius on the northwest edge of the city. Crowley didn’t know if he was still there, but the ash was coming harder and faster now, and his only thought was reaching the angel as soon as physically possible.

He swallowed, and the taste was acrid in his mouth. Crowley forced his legs into motion, staggering through the warm, ankle-deep ash. He had barely taken three steps before the ground trembled beneath his feet. Crowley stumbled sideways into the building as the sky answered with a monstrous thunderclap.

Someone elbowed past Crowley, and the demon was pushed back into the wall again. People were still rushing past him, and for a moment Crowley felt their emotions as though they were his own—pain and terror as they looked desperately for friends and family members, confusion and betrayal as their gods deserted them. They were all helpless to the wrath of Vesuvius, and Crowley was no exception, trapped in the city that would become their tomb.

Crowley felt panic mounting in his throat, but he forced himself to jolt back into motion, fighting through the rising ash. If he could just reach Aziraphale, then, somehow, he’d be okay—but he couldn’t, the ash was rising too fast, he’d never make it— The feeling of helplessness rose like a wave and crashed over him, and Crowley’s toe caught on something and he fell forward onto his knees…

…He was kneeling in the snow, and the ash flying around his head had been replaced with snow, equally as thick but stinging twice as hard.

The cold slammed into him like a wall, and Crowley gasped with the shock of it. He registered that he was wearing a heavy coat with a hood, and he wasted no time trying to pull it even tighter around himself with hands encased in thick, clumsy gloves. He staggered to his feet, shoes slipping in the snow.

A burst of wind whistled past him, stinging his exposed cheeks, and with it came the suggestion of a voice, so very weak but tinged with fragile hope. “Cr—Cr—Cr—owley?”

Crowley stilled as he recognised the voice, and felt something deep within him break.
The demon turned until he found Aziraphale, sitting hunched and half-buried in the snow nearby, wrapped into a tight ball. Though he was less than three metres away, the angel kept flitting in and out of his vision as the wind gusted eddies of thick, heavy snowflakes between them. It was approaching white-out conditions, and Crowley knew it was a miracle he had found Aziraphale in the first place.

Crowley moved towards him, but his limbs were heavy and stiff with cold as he forced his way through the snow. “Ye—ah, an—gel,” Crowley stammered, coming closer and shivering mightily. Aziraphale looked up at him in disbelief, the movement shaky and incremented. The angel’s cheeks and nose were bright pink, bordering on icy blue, and there were flakes of frozen snow trapped in his eyelashes.

“W—what a—are y—you do—doing h—he?” Aziraphale forced out, each syllable shaking as the words slurred together.

He was here to rescue Aziraphale, of course; he’d started out after hearing that the wind had changed course and brought a blizzard onto the mountain. Crowley’s mind, however, had already skipped forward, skimming through his memory of this day even as he experienced it firsthand. Though he had come to rescue the angel, Crowley knew too well that neither of them would make it off the mountain, and couldn’t bring himself to lie to Aziraphale now.

Aziraphale didn’t seem to need to hear it from this version of him, though. “Y—ou sh—ouldn’t have,” he forced out, teeth chattering.

A frozen smile pulled at the corner of Crowley’s mouth, and he felt his resistance to the illusion crumbling at the sound of Aziraphale’s voice. Maybe he had this abstract memory of how things would turn out, but the wind biting him through his coat and the sharp, icy snowflakes accumulating on his cheeks were as real as anything he’d ever felt. And Crowley had never been any good at leaving Aziraphale when the angel needed him.

Crowley stammered out a frozen, “Wa—a—sn’t g—oing to l—eave y—ou here, n—ow w—as I?”

Aziraphale’s mouth twitched into a pained smile. Then the expression dropped as the angel coughed weakly, the motion twitching his shoulders far less than it should have.

Crowley closed the distance between them and dropped to the snow beside the angel. He wordlessly wrapped a heavily-bundled arm around the angel, tilting Aziraphale towards him so the angel’s head rested under his own, pressed against his chest. He wrapped his other arm around Aziraphale as well and held him as tightly as he could, locking his frozen fingers together through the gloves. Crowley had a distant memory of the two of them trying to find shelter as they fought their way down the mountain, but he already knew how futile such an effort would be. So instead he just pulled Aziraphale as close to him as he could, and closed his eyes.

He couldn’t feel even a trace of warmth from Aziraphale, only the intermittent twitch as the angel shivered weakly and rasped in frozen breaths. He made no further attempt at conversation, though he occasionally made a small pained sound and tried to burrow closer to the demon. Crowley buried his face in the ice-tipped top of Aziraphale’s hood and struggled to keep his mind from wandering and going numb with cold.

The wind picked up and Crowley’s hands and feet stopped tingling as he lost feeling in them altogether. Each trembling breath burned on its way down, and his chest tightened until it felt like there was an anvil sitting inside it. Crowley’s thoughts kept trailing off and becoming disjointed, and it felt like his mind was shattering into frozen splinters. Around him, the world was growing heavy, and each breath was harder to take than the last, as though the air were thinning.
Against him, he realised that Aziraphale had grown still without his noticing.

Crowley hugged the angel closer and squeezed his frozen eyes shut as the cold dug even deeper, numbing him completely.

He couldn’t fight it, couldn’t gather enough strength to fuel his own thoughts, much less his body. There was nothing left to do, nothing except hold onto Aziraphale and wait for his stuttering thoughts to finally stall completely.

The world vanished in a burst of white, freezing pain, and then blossomed anew…

…Crowley gasped out a broken sob as warmth poured into him, shaking so badly he staggered and almost lost his footing. Aziraphale gave him a grave nod and turned away, adjusting his grip on the flaming sword in his hand.

The ground in front of them was smoking, heaving upwards as Lucifer prepared to make his entrance to the mortal world, because if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

Shadwell pushed his way between Crowley and Aziraphale, but the trembling demon couldn’t tear his eyes from Aziraphale as the angel unfolded gleaming white wings toward the sky.

Something heavy slipped from Crowley’s hand and fell into the grass. His mouth opened, but he couldn’t force anything out around the knot suddenly in his throat.

The warmth of the summer’s day was still shocking his system, and it felt like he was being dropped into the sun and freeze-dried at the same time. He could still feel the cold mass of Aziraphale’s head pressed against his chest, and his sluggish brain was struggling to reconcile this with the presence of Aziraphale in front of him.

And this Aziraphale…he was perfect. Divinity radiated from the angel like starlight, his gleaming white feathers dazzling with reflected colour and light. He shouldn’t have been beautiful, not to someone like Crowley, but…he was, and it took his breath away.

Crowley was finally starting to recognise when and where he was, and he felt tears of injustice spring to his eyes. The Apocalypse was nigh, and the shining, perfect Aziraphale was about to be destroyed yet again. Except this time it would be permanent, and everything else in this stupid, wonderful world would be going along with him. And there was nothing—absolutely nothing—Crowley could do about it.

Crowley finally found his voice, and let out a broken, wordless sob.

Something far greater than himself was rising out of the ground at the air base in Lower Tadfield, and it was crushing him like a bug under a heel.

Aziraphale walked forward alone, Shadwell marching after him, and Crowley knew with gripping, terrifying certainty that they would both be utterly obliterated. He took an urgent, shaking step forward. He needed to save Aziraphale, to drag him back from the brink. He couldn’t watch the angel die again. He just couldn’t.

Lucifer pushed his way up through the soil like a bamboo shoot in a time lapse, and Crowley’s trembling legs gave out completely. He fell to the ground, crushed under the weight of a will ten times the strength of his.

He gasped for breath, struggling against the wave of emotion pushing down on him. He could still see Aziraphale, but he might as well have been an ocean away; Crowley knew the angel was lost to
him. Lucifer would destroy him in a matter of seconds, and that meant that this last glimpse of Aziraphale, beautiful and brave, was the last one he would ever have.

Crowley’s eyes clung to Aziraphale, and he felt his cheeks grow damp as he allowed himself to be overwhelmed—

On the Bakerloo train to Elephant & Castle, Hastur blinked open golden serpentine eyes.

A smile slowly grew across the duke’s face, and he carefully picked himself up. His new corporation was badly damaged, but Hastur remedied that with a thought, feeling the concussion recede and the jaw realign itself.

Hastur glanced at the doors and the train started decelerating with a faint shriek and the sound of metal gears turning over.

Crushing Crawly into submission had been immensely satisfying, and the lesser demon’s final whimpered words before he succumbed had been very educational. Hastur hadn’t been aware Crawly had such a soft spot where the principality was concerned, but this was only good news, as far as the duke was concerned. Hastur allowed himself a small grin and straightened his stylish suit jacket. He had a feeling this was really going to be quite enjoyable.

The train coasted into the station and slowed to a stop. The doors slid open.

“This is Charing Cross Station. Change here for the Northern line.”

Hastur cracked Crowley’s neck and strolled out onto the platform.
Chapter 3

Aziraphale was worried.

He had waited patiently at his and Crowley’s usual rendezvous spot at St James’s as they’d arranged, but, though Aziraphale had waited for a full hour, Crowley had failed to arrive.

Aziraphale tried to tell himself that the meeting had probably just slipped Crowley’s mind, except the demon hadn’t been more than ten minutes late for any meeting with him for anything less than a very good reason since the nineteenth century.

Aziraphale walked back to his bookshop in case Crowley had been under the impression that they were going to meet there, but the shop was as dark and empty as he’d left it. He went to the Ritz next, and then to Crowley’s Mayfair flat, but the demon was nowhere to be found.

At Crowley’s flat, Aziraphale left a note on the sleek, futuristic-looking, stainless steel fridge that just said “phone me.” He didn’t initial it in case other agents were afoot, and he knew Crowley wouldn’t mistake his handwriting anyway.

The angel even went so far as to phone Crowley on the mobile cellular device the demon had given him several years ago, but it went straight to “voicemail.” It took Aziraphale several seconds of talking over the electronic voice to realise that was what it was, dimly remembering a conversation in which Crowley had painstakingly explained to him that this was what happened when the recipient of the call didn’t pick up.

Mystifyingly, the Bentley was also nowhere to be found. This implied that Crowley had driven somewhere and simply never returned. Working on the theory that where the Bentley was, Crowley would be too, Aziraphale placed his next call to the Metropolitan Police.

There are many ways to track down a car, especially an unusual vintage one, in a modern, well-policed (or at least well-monitored) city like London. Aziraphale hadn’t the foggiest what any of these ways were, but he knew people who did.

A little angelic persuasion later, Aziraphale convinced the young man on the other end of the line to put him through to the Ministry of Transportation. He then kindly asked the constable who picked up to be a dear and help him find a vintage automobile that had been stolen.

Aziraphale was fully prepared to simply describe the vehicle and then wait the appropriate span of hours while his request was processed and an enterprising young constable was put on his case, but instead the woman on the phone only asked for the Bentley’s plate number, which he gave her.

Usually this wasn’t a piece of information Aziraphale would have bothered memorising, or even noticing, except that Crowley had had it changed some time ago to JM35 BND and had been inordinately pleased with himself.

Only a few seconds later, the constable informed a rather surprised Aziraphale that the car was sitting in the police pound at Charlton. Apparently, it had been turned over to the police by a Mr George Hopkins, who had seemed to be a little confused as to how he had come by the car, but felt certain that it wasn’t his.

Aziraphale convinced the constable to give him the address of the law-abiding Mr Hopkins—a nice two-story terraced house in Norbury—and then thanked her for her help and hung up.

Aziraphale took a taxi all the way to the Charlton pound. Though they only covered a distance of
seven miles, it took the better part of an hour, and Aziraphale spent most of that time staring out the window and trying not to think about what could possibly have parted Crowley from his precious car.

The Bentley was hard to miss among the sea of Fords and Vauxhalls at the pound, and Aziraphale somehow felt his spirits sink even lower as he saw it. Somehow, he’d hoped that maybe Crowley hadn’t left the car after all, and that he’d find the demon arguing with the attendant over the finer points of automotive excellence.

Instead, it was Aziraphale waving away the words of the attendant as he insisted he needed to see a photo id. The attendant was nothing if not persistent, doggedly following the angel as he approached the vintage car, objecting that he couldn’t take the car because he wasn’t the legal owner, and also because its MOT test pass certificate wasn’t up to date. Aziraphale hadn’t the faintest idea what that was, but he patted the attendant reassuringly on the shoulder and told him he was doing his job splendidly, and it was really perfectly all right if he took the Bentley.

The attendant stammered a bit more, protesting about a statutory charge he needed to pay, and Aziraphale mirrored a few tenners into his hand to placate him.

Once he had given in and left the angel in peace, Aziraphale opened the door of the Bentley and dropped into the driver’s seat.

For a moment he just stared at the steering wheel, utterly at a loss. Crowley had always been the one with the knack for automobiles, and Aziraphale had never really seen the need for them himself—or, at least, the need for knowing how to drive one. Crowley had usually been available for that sort of thing.

Aziraphale recalled that cars had keys which were required to get them going, but he remembered Crowley usually just waved a hand to start the vehicle. The angel repeated the gesture now, focusing his mind on an image of the running car. It took several tries, but finally the engine coughed and the Bentley purred to life.

Aziraphale let out a relieved breath and patted the steering wheel. “There you are, old girl.”

The radio flickered to life with a brief burst of static and started playing “You’re My Best Friend,” so Aziraphale decided he hadn’t messed up too badly so far.

Aziraphale really had very little experience driving any sort of vehicle, let alone the Bentley, but he had seen Crowley do it enough times, and he supposed a few minor miracles here and there to keep him on the road weren’t too much to ask.

It took him five minutes to work out the pedals, and another five the gearshift, but he was finally rolling forward in first. He nodded politely at the attendant as he reached the edge of the car park, and the young man opened the gate without any more fuss.

Aziraphale drove to Mr Hopkins’ Norbury house next, pulling the Bentley into the short drive beside a blue Peugeot. The vintage automobile growled unhappily as Aziraphale fumbled with the gearshift and tried to slam on the brakes at the same time, finally jolting to a halt as Aziraphale glared at the car. It died with a little cough, Freddie Mercury’s voice winding down to silence.

George Hopkins, a middle-aged balding man wearing a checkered polo shirt, answered the door when Aziraphale rapped smartly on its painted white surface. Aziraphale introduced himself, said the police had given him his address, and asked as politely as he could how exactly he had ended up with the Bentley.
“It’s a funny story, actually,” George said, shifting his weight and putting a hand on the doorframe. “I had just left a business meeting, you see, and I was on my way back to the office when I decided to stop and grab a bagel. There’s this great place by Paddington Station. I’d taken the Tube to the meeting, because it was at the other company’s office, and I’d just left the bagel shop when I saw that car of yours.”

Aziraphale frowned, but didn’t bother to correct him.

“And I know I shouldn’t have—I don’t know why I did at all, really, maybe I was fed up with the Tube—I just…got in.” George looked very embarrassed. “And don’t you go thinking I’m a crook—I’m as honest as your mother. It was just this—this—” George struggled to articulate what exactly it was.

“External compulsion?” Aziraphale suggested.

George looked relieved at the suggestion. “Exactly!” he said. “It wasn’t…wasn’t *me* at all. The keys were just lying on the seat and everything. The radio was broken, though; kept playing ‘I Want to Break Free’ or somesuch.”

Aziraphale fought a growing apprehension as he wrapped up the interview, patting George on the shoulder and telling him not to worry about it.

Aziraphale returned to the Bentley and dropped back into the driver’s seat, tapping the sides of his thumbs against the steering wheel nervously. The only beings Aziraphale knew who were capable of compelling someone with as clean of a nose as George Hopkins into spontaneous automotive theft were angels, demons, and maybe a certain boy who’d be a young man around this time.

Aziraphale found the last to be extremely unlikely, though he didn’t rule anything out. And between agents of Above and Below, Aziraphale wasn’t sure which option was worse. He hadn’t received any updates on Heaven’s whereabouts or even much in the way of orders since the failed Apocalypse, so he had no way of knowing if any of his brothers were currently walking the Earth, or what they might be up to if they were.

Enough time had passed that Aziraphale had begun to think maybe he and Crowley had avoided negative consequences after all, but perhaps he had let his guard down too soon. If Heaven had grabbed Crowley, things could be very bad indeed. He wasn’t sure what Hell thought about Crowley right now, but it was entirely possible they had simply arrived and taken Crowley Below for a regular status update.

Although the thought of Crowley fighting boredom in a quarterly operations meeting made him feel a little better, Aziraphale fought a deeply unsettled feeling in the pit of his stomach the whole drive back to Soho.

The angel was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he completely failed to notice that the Bentley had switched to playing “Bohemian Rhapsody,” and kept looping a particular line over and over again.

Aziraphale carefully parked the Bentley right outside the bookshop doors; whenever Crowley came back, he’d want to make sure the car was all right before anything else. He was awfully attached to that car.

“*Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me…a devil put aside…devil put aside…*”

Aziraphale waved a hand and the radio died as the Bentley’s engine stilled.
The angel let out a worried breath and got out of the car. He walked into the bookshop, made sure the sign was turned to CLOSED, and went and made himself a cup of tea. He would just have to wait and have faith that Crowley would come back.

Corporations are a lot like motorbikes. They require regular maintenance, come in various styles and models, and are ridden by a single passenger.

Crowley’s corporation is as well-tuned and oiled as the Bentley, and is very used to being driven by Crowley. This was no longer the case.

Hastur was currently sitting astride the motorbike, booted feet on the pedals and palms on the handlebars. Crowley, by virtue of being incredibly attached to both life and this corporation in particular, and also by virtue of being incredibly stubborn, was currently clinging to the rear number plate holder (HE77 BNT) by his fingertips. He was being dragged behind Hastur like the tail of a comet, slamming into the tarmac every passing second as Hastur roared down the motorway like a bat out of Hell.

A week later, Crowley had still not turned up.

Aziraphale’s assessment of the situation had steadily worsened, until he was certain something was seriously wrong. It didn’t help that the part of him that always seemed to know if Crowley was in trouble had been on high alert ever since the demon had failed to meet him at St James’s Park.

He was considering hiring a private detective to look into things more closely, or maybe trying to find a witch willing to perform a scrying spell on a demon. He might be able to convince Anathema to do it.

If Crowley was no longer on Earth, though, which seemed likely, neither of these avenues would be of much help. It would be good, though, to at least narrow things down.

Aziraphale was in the middle of trying to decide whether he was willing to leave London—which Crowley might return to at any moment—for Lower Tadfield to meet up with the witch, when he received a call on his mobile from the Metropolitan Police.

It was the same woman from the Ministry of Transportation who’d helped him previously.

“That vintage Bentley you were looking for,” she said, a little cautiously, “you said it was owned by a Mr Anthony J. Crowley?”

Aziraphale sat upright so quickly he almost dislodged the book he’d nominally been reading from his lap. “Yes, indeed,” he said quickly, steadying the book and redoubling his grip on the mobile. Had she found something?
“Er, dark hair, super great cheekbones, really freaky yellow eyes?”

Aziraphale swallowed. “That’s him.”

“I’d maybe consider finding a new friend,” she said. “We’d like you to come in so we can ask you a few questions.”

Aziraphale felt dread creep over him, and imagined the police finding Crowley’s corporation uninhabited under a bridge somewhere. His stomach twisted uncomfortably and he felt his grip tighten on the phone. “Is he all right?”

There was a noticeable pause. “Well, he’s alive, if that’s what you mean,” she said after a long moment. “But I really don’t think—”

She broke off uncertainly as Aziraphale let out a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding. Corporations were funny like that.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions,” the woman began again.

Aziraphale let a hint of angelic power colour his voice. “That won’t be necessary. What made you remember him?”

There was the sound of the woman licking her lips. “It’s all over the news. Surely you saw it?”

Aziraphale felt his unease grow again. “I’m afraid I’m a bit behind.”

“We have it all on tape. He just—I don’t know how to say this—he just murdered twelve people at the British Museum.”
Chapter 4

There were several alarms going off all at once, some shrill, others merely persistent, the sounds bouncing off the walls and combining into a cacophony.

Aziraphale moved through the Greek antiquities gallery cautiously, feeling the unholy presence ahead of him grow. It was a demon’s aura, but nothing about it was familiar.

It was darker than Crowley’s, that was for certain, and colder. It made the hair on the back of Aziraphale’s neck stand up, and struck him as being just plain evil in a way that Crowley’s never had, even back in Eden.

But when Aziraphale edged around a bust of Apollodorus of Damascus and peered cautiously around the corner into the Norse and Viking exhibit, it was very clearly Crowley who was smashing through a glass display case with a fire extinguisher.

The demon who looked like Crowley casually tossed the fire extinguisher behind him, the canister colliding with the floor with a loud thud and rolling to a stop. The demon reached into the glass-littered display case and pulled free a long, double-edged Viking sword. The gold crossguard and pommel were heavily tarnished and the blade was completely rusted through in places, but when the demon adjusted his grip on the hilt, it hummed in his hand.

The demon must have felt Aziraphale’s presence, because he paused in what he was doing, still facing the display case. At the same moment, every alarm in the vicinity cut out, leaving a sudden, very loud silence. The demon turned slowly, heels crunching in the fragments of glass scattered across the floor.

Whoever he was looking at, Aziraphale felt certain he was facing Crowley’s latest corporation at least. He was wearing the same snakeskin shoes and one of the stylish, bespoke suits Crowley favoured, though it was dotted with blood and rumpled in places, and it looked like it hadn’t been washed or miracled clean in days. Crowley usually kept his hair neat and well-combed, but it was a little awry now, hanging over his forehead in dark locks. He smiled when he saw Aziraphale, but it didn’t reach his serpentine eyes.

“You have excellent timing, principality.”

Aziraphale swallowed. Any doubts he might have had about it actually being Crowley vanished. This demon spoke with Crowley’s voice—that lovely, expressive tenor—but he had pulled all of the emotion from it, like sucking the sunshine from a summer’s day. And, though Crowley often called him “angel,” he couldn’t remember the last time he’d called him “principality.”

“Who are you?” Aziraphale asked, taking a couple of steps further into the space and putting a display of rusted cloak pins between him and the demon.

“Hastur, Duke of Hell,” the demon said in Crowley’s voice, tilting his head a little. He smiled again, showing altogether too many teeth. “You may have heard of me.”

Aziraphale had indeed—Crowley had told him about the duke, and his trick with the holy water during the Apocalypse-That-Wasn’t that had resulted in the death of Ligur, another duke.

Aziraphale pursed his lips. “What have you done with Crowley?”

Hastur seemed amused by the question, raising one of Crowley’s slender eyebrows in response.
“Little Crawly? Oh, I wouldn’t worry about him anymore. I must say I’m quite enjoying his corporation, though.” Hastur rolled his shoulders. “Very roomy.”

Aziraphale swallowed, fighting a sudden burst of uneasiness while keeping his expression as blank as possible. “Why did you kill all of those people?” he asked instead, stalling.

“They got in my way,” Hastur said uninterestedly, hefting the sword in his hand.

“That seems like a poor reason to kill twelve people.”

Hastur’s gaze moved from the blade of the sword to Aziraphale, golden serpentine eyes meeting his own with a distinctly predatory glint. “I guess that makes you lucky thirteen.”

The sword was named Tyrfing, and it had once been wielded by the king Svafrlami, grandson of Odin.

The legend went that Svafrlami forced two captured dwarves to forge a sword for him with such powers that it could cut through stone as easily as cloth and would never miss a stroke. The dwarves did as they were bid, but they cursed the sword before giving it to Svafrlami. The curse decreed that, each time the sword was drawn, it would kill a man, and that it would be the cause of three great evils.

Hastur knew that the story had been greatly embellished over the years, but the general principle remained the same. Tyrfing had been forged for Svafrlami, that much was true, but Hastur had been the one to curse it, pouring all of the powers of evil into the iron blade. Of course, the blade didn’t compel people to murder each other—people needed no encouragement for that.

Hastur flexed his fingers over the wire-wrapped grip, feeling the sword respond to his touch. The duke had gone looking for it in the northern foothills of the Carpathians, but it had been too many years and the entire area had been vastly changed from his memory. He had threatened some locals, killed a few for sport, and the rest had soon come to him with the information he required. It turned out that the sword he sought was being held in Britain, ironically in the London he had just left, in some sort of prison for objects.

It had taken him nearly a week to track down the exact location, but here it was at last, singing in his hand and burning with a fire that had laid dormant for millennia. It had missed the fight, missed the feeling of cutting through skin and flesh and bone, and Hastur was all too willing to indulge it.

He eyed the angel slowly circling him on the other side of the room. The principality looked soft and weak, just as easy to grind under his heel as Crawly had been. Tyrfing was more than capable of ending the principality’s entire existence, of burning through his very soul in much the same way holy water had ravaged Ligur’s.

It would be a fit fate for him, Hastur decided, especially since Crawly had shown some inkling of fondness for the divine abomination.

In fact, Hastur reflected with a twist of his mouth, it would be even more fitting if Crawly watched. Crawly had forced Hastur to watch Ligur dissolve in front of his very eyes, after all.
He could feel the lesser demon coiled very deep within the corporation, clinging on for dear life. He’d been very quiet, even when Hastur was snapping that screaming woman’s neck; he had been ever since Hastur had overpowered him. The first time Crawly had stirred in days, in fact, had been just minutes before, when the principality had drawn within sensing range. Hastur thought initially that it had been a simple stirring of recognition, but there had been something hopeful about it that was possibly the most pathetic reaction a demonic soul could have to the proximity of an angelic one.

He was planning on keeping Crawly around for a little while longer, regardless. He was ever so fun to toy with. Hastur had grown bored several times on his expedition to Poland, but watching the infuriating demon scream and writhe as Hastur tested the limits of his soul’s durability had been utterly fascinating and oh so satisfying.

But in the meantime, maybe there were more interesting ways to make the demon wriggle.

Hastur reached deep into the corporation and set about dragging the crushed and mangled Crawly back to the forefront, where he’d have a better view.

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Everything was muffled.

Crowley was floating in a sea of grey nothingness, focusing what strength he could scrape together into maintaining his grip on his corporation. His soul ached, burning in places as though it had been branded.

There were voices sometimes, but they were muted and distant, as though someone had left the telly on in the next room. Occasionally there were images as well—a snow-covered mountain, a terrified-looking old man, a series of photographs of different swords, all heavily damaged.

But mere seconds ago he had felt a flash of something very different, something clear and well-defined amid all the hazy shapes and sensations. It had felt like—he could have sworn—

It was an impression, and it came with a trace of tea, and the slightest hint of dusty books, vintage wines, and warm, cozy fires. It felt like…well. It felt like Aziraphale.

The feeling had broken through Crowley’s stupor, splashing over him like cold water. It felt real in a way that nothing here did, standing in stark contrast to the faded, half-forgotten versions of the angel that paraded through his mind whenever Hastur decided to torment him for a while.

Crowley was still clinging to that feeling, that impossible, tangible impression of his angel amongst the swirling grey haze, when he felt Hastur shift suddenly.

A great weight that had been bearing down on him lifted without warning, only to be set down again a moment later, crushing him anew—but he was somewhere else now. The grey nothingness was fading away, and he could feel his corporation again, warm and solid, and hear the beating of his heart loud in his ears.

Something searing with power was in his right hand, and as Crowley’s swimming vision adjusted, he saw Aziraphale standing in front of him.

Crowley opened his mouth automatically, feeling a surge of relief at seeing the angel, but when he
tried to say his friend’s name, something else came out instead.

“I guess that makes you lucky thirteen.”

Across the room, Aziraphale’s face hardened imperceptibly. “If you intend on killing me, you should know that Heaven will not think very highly of it.”

Hastur paced closer, stepping out of the scattering of glass on the floor with a series of measured crunches.

Crowley realised with mounting horror and panic that he had no control over his corporation. He tried to move his arm, or even flex his fingers, but his commands went unheeded. He was powerless.

“I don’t care what Heaven thinks,” Hastur said casually, the words flowing off Crowley’s treacherous tongue with almost practised ease. “This is personal.”

Aziraphale took a few steps to the side, moving around a display case, and Hastur mirrored his movements on the other side of the room. The duke readjusted his grip on the object in his hand, and Crowley abruptly recognised the nature of the power flowing through it. It was a demonic weapon of some sort, and very powerful.

It occurred to Crowley quite suddenly what Hastur intended on doing, and he felt a tremor of fear run through him. This was why Hastur had allowed him to see and hear what was going on.

Run, he thought desperately, staring out of his own disobedient eyes to where Aziraphale was watching him very carefully. Run, you daft angel. You don’t stand a chance.

“Then perhaps we can work something out,” Aziraphale said, and his voice was so level you could have built a foundation on it.

Hastur seemed to find this notion amusing, huffing a laugh that made Crowley uncomfortable to feel in his own chest. “I don’t think you understand what you’re dealing with, principality.”

Aziraphale continued his slow pace across the other side of the room, and Crowley found the movement strangely unsettling. He was moving each foot with careful, calculated deliberation, and it almost looked like he was stalking Hastur, like a lion might a gazelle. Then Crowley realised that that was exactly what he was doing.

He’s going to fight. Oh, G—no.

“Oh, I think I do,” Aziraphale said calmly. “Though I’d be very careful with Crowley, if I were you.”

Crowley’s heart leapt into his throat and stayed there.

Hastur sneered at the angel. “What, is that a threat?”

No, Crowley thought loudly, and with more than a hint of desperation. No, it’s not, tell him it’s not and then run—you can still get away—

Aziraphale took a long moment to respond. “Yes,” he said at last, the word cool and deliberate.

Crowley felt his heart drop and start beating twice as fast at the same time. On an abstract level, it was nice to know that Aziraphale was willing to go around threatening dukes of Hell in the course of mounting a rescue attempt, but on another, far more pressing level, Hastur was going to rip him to
shreds. He needed to run, needed to leave Crowley and save himself. The problem with angels, Crowley had always thought, was that they never thought about themselves first, and Aziraphale was no exception.

“I’ll be sure to remember your… threat when I’m driving this into your throat,” Hastur commented, hefting the sword. It flared a vibrant red-orange as he did so, glowing as though it had just been forged.

“Please do,” Aziraphale said politely, and Crowley felt Hastur tense to spring a heartbeat before he did so.

*Look out!*

Hastur lunged across the distance between them, bringing Tyrfing around with a searing hiss. Aziraphale leapt back quickly and smashed his elbow into the glass case behind him.

Crowley reached as deep into himself as he could and sprang at Hastur with everything he had. He was well and truly damned if he was going to just sit by and watch Aziraphale get himself killed on his behalf.

Hastur made a beeline for Aziraphale, but the angel turned, reached up, and yanked a large, misshapen iron shield out of the case behind him, dragging it through the shards of glass. He ducked to the side, putting the shield in front of him just as Hastur closed the remaining distance and brought Tyrfing down hard. There was a flash of orange sparks as the blade skittered across the surface of the shield and Aziraphale took several hasty steps backwards, absorbing the force of the blow.

Crowley latched onto the closest part of Hastur he could find and sank his metaphorical teeth in, pushing back at the bindings that kept him a prisoner in his own body. Hastur growled irritation and the force resting on Crowley’s shoulders doubled, sending a wave of dizziness crashing over him.

Aziraphale continued pacing backwards, clearly trying to open up space between them, but Hastur lurched forwards, striking the shield again with an overhead blow so strong the metal *bonged*.

Hastur’s next strike carved a sizeable notch into the rim of the shield, and Tyrfing glowed even brighter and started smoking slightly.

Aziraphale retreated further, but Hastur kept following, striking the shield over and over. The aged iron of Aziraphale’s defence cracked and crumbled as the demonic sword tore it to pieces.

Crowley’s attempts to make any noticeable dent on the enormous weight Hastur had trapped him under were proving fruitless, and he gave up, gasping and thinking hard. If he couldn’t go after Hastur directly, maybe there was an alternative method.

Crowley knew that Hastur had spent most of the last six millennia Below, which meant he had practically no experience with corporations. Crowley, meanwhile, had spent those same years kicking and being kicked around by any number of humans, not to mention Aziraphale. And one thing Crowley had learned over all those centuries was that human corporations had plenty of weaknesses, if you knew where to look. Maybe this old serpent had a trick up his sleeve after all.

Aziraphale discarded the disintegrating shield and sprinted away, dodging around a display case full of coins as Tyrfing slammed into it, shattering the glass.

“Where are your threats now, principality?” Hastur jeered, stepping around the case to pursue Aziraphale into the next room.
Crowley dived at his own corporation’s heart, grabbing at the rhythmic beats like spokes on a wheel. He pulled back hard, stilling the chambers and squeezing at the arteries, seeking to cut off blood flow as long as possible. Hastur audibly hissed as his heart constricted and missed a beat.

Crowley, sensing victory, tore at the fabric of his corporation with renewed vigour. If he could destroy enough of his physical body, both he and Hastur would be discorporated. Crowley honestly wasn’t sure whether he had enough strength to survive a discorporation, and Hastur would undoubtedly just track him down in Hell after the fact if he did, but then at least Aziraphale would be saved.

It took Hastur a long three seconds to locate Crowley, and then his grip closed on the lesser demon like a vice. He tightened his hold, crushing Crowley with no more effort than it might take to wring out a sponge. Once Crowley’s grip on his corporation’s heart slackened, Hastur released the extra pressure and tossed him aside, throwing him back down into the recesses of the corporation. For a long moment Crowley just lay there, stunned and wheezing brokenly for breath, struggling to stay conscious.

Hastur strode into the next room just as Aziraphale spun on his heel. The angel was holding another shield, this one a round Greek one emblazoned with an image of the sun, and a long, slightly curved sword with a very sharp-looking tip that he’d just pulled out of a display case.

Aziraphale tested the weight of the sword experimentally as he kept a sharp eye on Hastur. “Crowley, I know you’re in there,” he said.

Crowley raised his head slowly, feeling light-headed and groggy. “You can fight him,” Aziraphale continued in a loud, ringing voice.

Hastur chuckled and the weight on Crowley increased again, just in case he had any ideas. “I assure you, principality, Crawly is very, very dead.”

There was the faintest hint of a flicker of doubt on Aziraphale’s face, quickly masked by confidence. “I don’t believe you,” he said firmly.

Hastur paced forward, tilting Crowley’s head to the side and raising Tyrfing, pointing the shining red tip of the sword at the angel. “He called out to you, you know,” the duke said, tone smug. “As I crushed him from existence. Oh, it was nice and slow, I assure you, but how he cried, at the end.”

Aziraphale’s fearless expression really did falter this time, and Crowley tried to stagger upright, to regain some footing in his own body. *It’s not real, angel*, he rasped soundlessly. *He’s lying, I’m here, I’m right here, I’m trying—*

Hastur lurched into movement, taking Aziraphale’s moment of distraction to lunge forward with Tyrfing.

Aziraphale reacted with equal speed, raising his own sword in a parry. Their weapons collided with a clash of metal on metal.

“Oh, Aziraphale!” Hastur cried, parodying Crowley’s voice as he drove closer, trying to get inside Aziraphale’s defence.

The angel, however, had not spent the entirety of human history pretending weaponry didn’t exist, and deftly blocked every jab with an elegant parry.

Crowley gave up on trying to stand and fell back onto his hands and knees, head ringing and breaths
coming short and quick.

“Help me, Aziraphale!” Hastur continued, feinting to the right before jabbing to the left, where Aziraphale was already waiting for him. “So pathetic.”

Aziraphale stayed on the defensive, letting himself be slowly driven backwards.

Hastur shifted his weight and brought Tyrfig around from the side in a swift lateral arc. Aziraphale blocked the blow easily and stepped forward, inside Hastur’s defence, keeping Tyrfig trapped on the other side of his Greek sword. Before Hastur realised what Aziraphale was doing, the angel had jabbed upwards with his other hand, the one holding the round metal shield. Pain exploded across Crowley/Hastur’s jaw as the rim of the shield contacted hard, and Aziraphale danced away before he could bring Tyrfig around.

Hastur growled at the blow, but the pain cut through the haze in Crowley’s head, clearing it. He was still in touch with his corporation, and he felt that connection strengthen as his nerves flared. Hastur didn’t notice; he was busy swinging Tyrfig around in an angry arc, seeking retribution.

“Leave him,” Aziraphale demanded from a safe distance, holding his sword and shield at the ready.

Hastur growled and closed the distance. “Make me.”

There was another spate of fencing, this one more intense than the last, swords flying as the angel and demon duelled. Aziraphale was clearly the superior swordsman, but Hastur made up for what he lacked in skill with brute strength.

Tyrfig skittered down the entire length of Aziraphale’s curved Greek sword, sending up a huge shower of orange sparks before finally catching on the crossguard of Aziraphale’s sword. Aziraphale yelped as one of the glimmering, diabolical sparks landed on his wrist, and sprang back.

Hastur pressed his advantage, forcing his way forward as Aziraphale retreated behind his shield. More sparks jumped from Tyrfig as Hastur hammered on this shield much the same way he had the last.

Crowley wrapped his mind around his own left hamstring and yanked hard. Hastur stumbled and went down, giving Aziraphale time to make his retreat. Hastur ripped Crowley away a second time and threw him even further down into his corporation, kicking him hard with the promise of something very unpleasant later.

Hastur looked up, Crowley’s serpentine eyes flashing, and Aziraphale started to glow.

It was a gradual but swift increase, not unlike opening a lantern. The white, burning light shone with divinity, and both Crowley and Hastur shied away instinctively as it prickled at their shared skin, burning at their respective souls. Crowley hadn’t been on the wrong end of a smiting in almost eight hundred years, and it was always a horribly painful experience, but it was only discorporation. If he could survive it, that was.

“Leave him,” Aziraphale repeated, and his tone was as whole and strong as the light radiating off him, spilling over the edge of his shield.

Hastur pulled himself to Crowley’s full height, serpentine pupils transforming themselves into vertical slits. “Do your worst.”

Crowley breathed a sigh of relief and waited to be enveloped by the light, steeling himself for what was coming. Instead, Aziraphale held his ground. “Leave him, I said.”
A sneer pulled at the corner of Hastur’s mouth, and for a long couple of seconds Aziraphale just stood there and blazed, but nothing else happened. Crowley realised with a chilling, sinking feeling that Aziraphale was bluffing.

“And I said, do your worst,” Hastur repeated, moving closer, no longer intimidated by Aziraphale’s aura of light. “But you know I’m more powerful than you by ten. You won’t kill me. You’d be lucky if you could even discorporate me. And if Crawly still is in here…well…he’d be the one you’d be vaporising, wouldn’t he?”

Aziraphale seemed to be at a loss as to what to do next, and Crowley had the second, equally horrifying realisation that not only was Aziraphale bluffing, but this was his last card.

“Where are your big words now, principality?” Hastur sneered, stalking closer. He opened his arms, leaving his centre exposed and daring Aziraphale to smite him.

Aziraphale hesitated, the light fading from his aura.

Just stab me already, Crowley thought desperately. Don’t worry about me, just discorporate him before he can use that demonic sword. Crowley felt himself chuckle a little, dryly, and he didn’t know if that was him or Hastur. Who knows, maybe I’ll even make it out alive.

“That’s what I thought,” Hastur said, and lowered his arms.

The last of Aziraphale’s aura faded away.

For a moment, Crowley had the fleeting hope that maybe Hastur would just turn away and seek a worthier foe, but then he lunged forward, Tyrfing flashing in his hand.

Aziraphale blocked just in time, but his reflexes seemed slower now, barely catching Tyrfing on his Greek sword. As Hastur drove him backwards towards the nearest wall, Crowley realised suddenly that Aziraphale’s exhaustion wasn’t just physical in nature—working up all the energy that he’d needed for his angelic display must have been exhausting.

Crowley tried to pick himself up, but Hastur pushed him back down before he could gain more than an inch. Crowley tried again, shaking with the effort, and Hastur drove him down again. Crowley gasped and tried to clear his head, but it was swimming.

Aziraphale backed up again and Hastur abruptly closed the distance, grabbing the top rim of the angel’s shield and yanking it out of his hands. Aziraphale just barely caught the tip of the demonic sword with his own as the shield went flying to the side. It hit the ground with a clatter and bounced away.

Crowley was trembling, but he could feel Hastur’s anger now, hot and acidic. In his hand, Tyrfing was lusting for blood, the need fervent and immediate, and he knew the duke would be ending it soon.

Crowley fixed his mind on Aziraphale and thoughts of the bookshop and his wonderful Bentley. He forced himself upwards again, and got almost to his feet this time before Hastur snapped him like a toothpick.

Aziraphale dodged to the side as Tyrfing crashed into the wall where he’d been standing a heartbeat before, sending a shower of diabolical sparks tumbling to the floor.

“Crowley,” Aziraphale gasped, raising his sword to block a swing from Hastur as he continued retreating, “I know you’re in there.”
A tiny motion of Hastur’s hand moved the shield lying on the floor behind Aziraphale two feet to the left, and the angel stepped backwards onto it. He stumbled for a moment, lost his balance, and tumbled backwards. Hastur pursued him ruthlessly.

A small part of Crowley flickered back to consciousness, just barely holding onto his corporation. It felt like he was clinging to the edge of a cliff with one hand, the chasm looming massive below him as Hastur, equally massive, loomed above him, one foot positioned delicately on his fingertips.

“Crowley,” Hastur hissed as he stepped towards where Aziraphale was on the floor in front of him, “is,” —he kicked the shield to the side— “dead.”

Crowley slid his other hand onto the edge of the cliff and started slowly, laboriously pulling himself up and away from the chasm.

“No,” Aziraphale rasped.

Crowley dragged himself over the lip, trembling from head to foot and gasping breathlessly.

Hastur lashed out with Tyrfing and Aziraphale caught the stroke with his sword. In a burst of unexpected strength, Aziraphale leaned up and forwards, pushing dangerously close to the demonic blade with his own, and grabbed onto the hilt. Hastur wasn’t expecting it, and Aziraphale wrenched Tyrfing from his grip in one fluid motion.

Hastur grabbed for Tyrfing immediately, but Aziraphale dropped his own sword and made a neat little dismissive gesture with his newly empty hand. As had once happened to a soldier guarding an air base at Lower Tadfield, the demonic sword simply vanished.

For a heartbeat they all just stared at each other, and then a look of intense smugness crossed Aziraphale’s face. Crowley felt a burst of relief and let himself sink back against the ground, revelling in the sudden reversal in fortune; without the demonic sword in play, Aziraphale was safe.

A wave of rage burned through Hastur at the deception and the duke, still reaching for the now-vanished Tyrfing, adjusted his course. His hand closed around the hilt of the sword Aziraphale had dropped instead, the Greek one from the display. Hastur brought his hand back in one swift motion.

Crowley realised what Hastur was about to do a split second before he did it. He leapt to his feet and lunged forward with what little strength he had left, clinging to the hand gripping the hilt of the sword and using all of his strength to stall its motion.

Hastur ran Aziraphale straight through.

Aziraphale gasped, the sound abrupt and surprisingly loud as the sword plunged into his chest, only a few inches below his heart.

Crowley cried out, but his vocal chords refused to answer. He could only watch, transfixed with horror, as Aziraphale’s eyes widened in shock.

Hastur’s intense satisfaction crashed over Crowley as the lesser demon felt his legs collapse beneath him. There was a new weight settling onto his shoulders and into the pit of his stomach, but this one was of his own making.

Aziraphale looked down, and he seemed surprised to see the sword emerging from his chest. His hands went automatically to the blade, as though he wanted to pull it out. One wrapped around the smooth metal surface as the other reached towards the hilt, finding Crowley’s hand and closing around it.
The contact was startling, and Crowley’s head shot up in surprise. He met Aziraphale’s gaze, and for a second he thought the angel might have seen him, the real him, somewhere in Hastur’s eyes.

Aziraphale gasped in a rasping half-breath and his grip tightened convulsively on Crowley’s hand, fingers cool against his skin. Crowley couldn’t break the angel’s gaze, struggling to read what Aziraphale was trying to convey to him. It was mostly plain shock, but there were other things too—a hint of desperation, and something stronger that might have been a promise.

Hastur took a deep, victorious breath and twisted the blade. Aziraphale shuddered and his head rolled back, ramming the rear of his skull into the wall behind him. The angel tried to take another breath, but it was too short and broke off in an involuntary whimper as Hastur twisted the sword further.

Crowley felt the grate of the blade on Aziraphale’s ribs as Hastur pushed the sword in deeper, relishing the way the angel shivered and tried to jerk away. Crowley felt like he was going to be sick.

Then the duke leaned back, drawing the sword out of Aziraphale with a horrendous wet noise and the faint scrape of bone. Aziraphale’s hand slipped from Crowley’s as Hastur pulled away, and the angel started slumping to one side.

Crowley found his cheeks were damp and didn’t know how it had happened.

Hastur straightened, casting the very mortal, bloodied sword a disgusted look before tossing it to the floor with a clatter.

Aziraphale slumped over further and slid onto his side, blood already soaking his chest and seeping onto the gleaming floor. The angel tried for another breath, the motion convulsing him as he fought for life. He whimpered again, the sound tiny and impossibly pained.

Crowley didn’t want to watch but it seemed to be all Hastur wanted to look at.

“If I see you again, principality,” the duke hissed, “I’ll finish the job.”

The breath panted out of Aziraphale in a series of sharp, aborted bursts, and his fingers twitched convulsively against the floor.

Hastur watched, the contempt clear in his cold serpentine eyes.

Aziraphale’s shoulders trembled as he tried to inhale again, shaking with the effort. The movement was jerky and a few tears slipped down the angel’s nose as he squeezed his eyes shut, golden curls falling over his forehead and framing his face in an imagined halo.

When he didn’t exhale, it was almost a mercy.

Crowley’s stomach was full of acid, and there was a salty taste flooding his mouth. He was reliving the feeling of his arm driving the sword through Aziraphale, the muscle memory entirely his own.

Hastur must have thought Crowley was in enough agony as it was for the time being, because he simply turned and walked away, leaving Aziraphale lying there motionless and utterly alone on the cold, hard floor.

The respite didn’t last long.
Aziraphale was furious.

He knew he ought to feel lucky, or grateful, even—he had only very narrowly avoided complete obliteration, after all—but that didn’t negate the fact that he wanted to wipe Hastur from the face of the planet more than he had wanted anything for a very long time.

He was certain Crowley had been in there somewhere, buried, perhaps, or suppressed, but he was certain his friend wasn’t gone forever. Maybe he had subconsciously noticed a tiny flare of the demon’s familiar aura, or maybe that flash of something other than anger and hatred he had seen in Crowley’s beautiful golden eyes as he’d breathed his last had been his Crowley after all.

He could still feel the wound in his chest, still feel the cold surface of the museum floor against his cheek and the almost feverish warmth of Crowley’s hand beneath his freezing fingers. He was still getting echoes of the pain, pangs of it racing through his chest so it felt like the blade was entering again and again—Aziraphale hadn’t been killed like that in a long time.

And if Crowley had been in there somewhere, and Hastur had made him watch—meaning that he was still in there, trapped with that monster somewhere on Earth—

Aziraphale was furious.

He marched up to the angelic services desk and demanded a new corporation immediately.

The angel behind the desk, a small, rather scrawny fellow with a pained expression who Aziraphale had dealt with too many times and knew was named Abroxos, looked him up and down and pursed his lips.

“Have you filled out Form AEC-294?” he asked primly.

Aziraphale took a deep, steadying breath, but knew he should have seen this coming. He’d been naïve to think Heaven would have reformed the red tape since his last discorporation.

Abroxos seemed to regard this as a ‘no,’ and carefully leaned back in his chair just far enough to open one of the drawers in the desk and draw out a lilac form. He handed it to Aziraphale.

“I don’t have time for paperwork,” Aziraphale said sharply, letting urgency colour his tone. “I was just discorporated by a demon; lives are at stake. Time is of the essence.”

Abroxos was unimpressed. “Then you should have discorporated the demon first,” he said.

Aziraphale bristled. “Lives are at stake, aren’t you listening?”

Abroxos pursed his lips again. “Lives are always at stake.” He kept holding out the form.

Aziraphale snatched it out of his hand impatiently but scowled just to let Abroxos know exactly what he thought of him.

Abroxos ran his tongue over chapped, pale lips and turned back to his own paperwork.

Aziraphale stomped over to a nearby table and miracled a pen into his hand. He filled in the blanks as quickly as he could, legibility be damned. When he got to his angelic identification number, a seven-digit code that had been implemented a thousand or so years ago to help keep angels with
similar names like Savuriel and Eiael straight (they looked similar in Enochian), Aziraphale stalled. He left it blank and finished the rest of the form.

He brought it back to Abroxos’ desk and shoved it at him. “There you go, hurry please.”

Abroxos gave Aziraphale a tempering gaze and took the form from him. He then proceeded to meticulously look over every line while Aziraphale nervously tapped his foot.

“A-zir-a-phale,” Abroxos enunciated with agonising slowness.

Aziraphale nodded quickly. “Yes, that’s me.”

Abroxos pursed his lips again. “You have not filled out your AIN.”

Aziraphale frowned. “I’ve forgotten it,” he said.

Abroxos leaned back in his chair again, and reached for the drawer.

“Can’t we just skip it?” Aziraphale asked helpfully. “I can come back in a week and fill it all out afterwards, surely.”

Abroxos retrieved another form, this one green, and held it out to Aziraphale. “That is not proper procedure.”

Aziraphale eyed the form, which was at least three pages long. “Surely we can…bend the rules a little?” he asked.

Abroxos gave Aziraphale a very disapproving look. “Principality,” he said sternly, “mind your tongue.”

Aziraphale scowled and grabbed the form.

Twenty minutes later, he shoved it back in Abroxos’ direction. “There you go, one Forgotten-AIN form.”

Abroxos looked this one over with the same painstaking thoroughness he had shown the previous one, and then nodded.

“Can I—”

“Have you filled out Form ATCP-74?”

Aziraphale shifted on his feet, aware of the time he was wasting. “That’s the one with the corporation preferences, right?”

Abroxos nodded.

“Well,” Aziraphale began, and then trailed off. What sort of corporation did he want this time around? “I’d like one just like the old one,” he said after a moment’s thought. It surprised him a little to hear the words, but he’d grown unusually fond of the corporation after the failed Apocalypse.

Abroxos held out a thick form, this one a least two dozen sheets of paper stapled together. “Please mark your preferences.”
“There, that’s the entire bl—perfectly lovely incident report,” Aziraphale said, slapping down a small ream’s worth of paper on Abroxos’ desk. The angel looked at it and rifled through the pages with a thumb.

“It’s a little slim,” he commented critically.

“I was concise,” Aziraphale countered.

Abroxos seemed to think this unlikely, but picked up the top sheet and started reading it to himself nonetheless, eyes crawling across the page as he weighed each and every word individually.

“Is there anything else I need to fill out that I can do in the meantime?” Aziraphale asked.

Abroxos looked up at him and carefully adjusted his glasses. “Have you filled out Form HPU-7382369b?”

Aziraphale frowned. “I think I did that one last time,” he said.

Abroxos leaned back in his chair and tapped his finger against a large book that was open next to him, blank pages edged with gold leaf. It filled with text immediately, scripted in an elegant, curling hand.

Abroxos ran a thin finger down the page and stopped. “No,” he said.

“Really?” Aziraphale asked. “I’m certain I remember that one—”

“That was Form HPU-7382369a,” Abroxos said, turning back to him and stressing the last syllable. “This is Form HPU-7382369b.”

Crowley felt the blade shiver as it sank into Aziraphale’s chest, protesting as it met the resistance of muscle and bone.

Aziraphale’s mouth dropped open in surprise as the mortal blow was delivered, and Crowley felt an intense rush of satisfaction.

Then Aziraphale’s cold fingers wrapped around his hand, and his brilliant blue eyes met Crowley’s. The betrayal in them was clear, but Crowley only sneered and twisted the blade, eliciting a gasp of pain…

…Crowley felt his divinity stripped away inch by inch, and it felt like he was being skinned alive. He was screaming, but no one could hear; or maybe they could, and it was just that no one cared. His memory was full of the lush gardens and light of Heaven, but there was nothing but darkness surrounding him now, a cold empty blackness that was devoid of everything he had ever come to love, and his wings were burning…

…He was shouting at Aziraphale and Aziraphale was shouting back, something about Ferryner and
the Duke of York. Aziraphale was accusing him of having started the fire that had just blazed through London and burned the city almost to the ground.

“Why would I do that?” Crowley shouted, lungs burning from breathing in the smoke. He could still see the rivers of lead flowing across the street from the melted steeple of St Paul’s cathedral, couldn’t shake the image of birds’ wings bursting into flame as they struggled to escape into the air. “London is my home!”

Aziraphale was red in the face, angry and upset over losing a great many of his books to the fire, and at not having been able to be of more help stopping the blaze. “You’re a demon, Crowley!” Aziraphale shouted back, and his words stung worse than any flame. “You don’t have a home!”

…The heels of Aziraphale’s leather boots came into Crowley’s line of sight as he lay on his side on the ground, broken and bloodied and struggling to breathe. His left wing was crumpled beneath him from where he’d tried to break his fall, but he hadn’t had enough time to gain lift before he hit the ground.

Aziraphale’s feet came to a stop, boots grinding into the sand. Crowley tried to breathe but he couldn’t get his throat to respond, everything shrouded in a white haze of pain.

Aziraphale’s feet shifted and then the angel was squatting next to him, studying him with head tilted slightly, as though he were a particularly interesting insect.

Crowley tried to speak, but his lips only twitched. It felt like he was paralysed.

Aziraphale’s mouth twisted speculatively and Crowley felt tears of pain spring to his eyes as the angel regarded him levelly. Then Aziraphale reached forward with a jewelled dagger and quickly and efficiently slit his throat. There was a burst of warmth and he got his last glimpse of freedom before he was plunged back into Hell’s icy grip.—

Hastur smiled and tore another leaf off of one of Crawly’s plants. The lesser demon had quite a few at his residence, and they reminded Hastur unpleasantly of Eden. Hell didn’t have any plants, and Hastur liked it that way.

Crawly was curled up in a ball somewhere very deep inside their shared corporation, and Hastur noticed with interest that he had run out of energy and stopped trembling for the time being. The duke was rather enjoying seeing how long he could push Crawly before he made a pitiful attempt to fight back; watching the annoying lesser demon squirm and submit anew was satisfying on so many levels.

Now, Hastur shifted his presence in the corporation so that a fresh weight bore down on Crawly. He barely even resisted, collapsing under the weight of the duke’s superior will.

Hastur grinned.

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“This isn’t anything like I asked for,” Aziraphale said, tone incredulous as he looked over the specifications of the new corporation he was to be assigned. It was female, for one thing, and rather short, and about the only thing it had in common with his last one was that it required corrective lenses to be able to see clearly.
Luring, as much as lurking, is an art unto itself.

Given the monopoly exerted over lurking by the demonic community, one might imagine that luring enjoys a similar expertise among demons; this is largely true. The logic then follows that, since demons are the ones doing the luring, they know how it works well enough that they are practically impervious to it happening to them.

The people who think that clearly haven’t met Aziraphale. The angel had successfully lured Crowley all sorts of places on the mere promise of alcohol, a funny story, or a particularly well-prepared meal.

It is also noteworthy that, in those previous cases, it had indeed been Aziraphale doing the luring. Luring is about as exclusive to demons as the fans of the Manchester United Football Club are to Manchester. Definitely a critical mass, but there are enough exceptions to make things interesting. Aziraphale was one of those exceptions, and she was planning on making things very interesting very soon.

One of the main difficulties involved in the art of luring is choosing where the luring should lead. The whole point of luring is to convince someone to move from point $A$ to point $B$, so if the location of point $B$ hasn’t been properly thought out, the whole point of the luring is nullified.

Aziraphale had chosen the reconstruction of the Globe Theatre in Southwark for her luring destination for three reasons. Firstly, it was fairly nearby, because there is simply no point in luring someone somewhere rather distant from where you happen to be; it’s just not terribly efficient. Secondly, the Globe is a large, sheltered space in which one can have some privacy, since it is relatively easy to empty of people, particularly if you have some angelic persuasion on your side. Thirdly, Aziraphale quite enjoyed the theatre and felt like she’d been slacking and needed to go more often.

Luring Hastur there had been easier than Aziraphale could have hoped. All she had to do was pick up a brochure for the Globe’s upcoming performance of *Twelfth Night*, circle the location in black pen, write “Come finish the job,” and have it posted to Crowley’s flat, where she could sense Hastur’s aura from half a kilometre away. You can always count on a demon’s ego.

Hastur was there in under half an hour.
Aziraphale stepped out from behind one of the two faux marble pillars on the rectangular thrust stage as Hastur strolled in from one of the theatre’s side entrances.

“You have excellent timing,” Aziraphale said, and savoured the unpleasant look on Crowley’s face. And it was still Crowley’s face, Aziraphale felt irrevocably certain. If Hastur truly was trying to get revenge for Ligur’s death by killing Aziraphale, then it only made sense that Crowley would still have to be alive, because otherwise he wouldn't be able to watch.

But as she looked at Hastur now, she had to admit she didn’t see anything of her friend beyond the corporation’s appearance—the swagger was all Hastur, as was the curl of his lip.

“Came back for seconds, I see,” the duke said as he drew closer, rolling Crowley’s shoulders.

“You haven’t done as I’ve asked.”

Hastur climbed onto the stage casually. “You seem to be struggling to understand me when I say that Crawly is dead.”

Aziraphale held her ground and stuck close to the pillar. “I don’t think that’s true, and I think you know it.”

Hastur narrowed his eyes and stalked closer. He came to a stop several feet away and licked his lips. “I am going to have such a fun time killing you again.”

Something was wrong, Aziraphale noticed distractedly as she kept her eyes trained on the duke. Something about him was…off.

“It’s a shame I haven’t yet been able to retrieve Tyrfing,” Hastur said, taking another step closer. “But I’m sure I can find some way to make things work.”

It was the eyes, Aziraphale noticed suddenly. Crowley’s serpentine pupils were huge and round, appearing almost human in shape. Several things could cause pupil dilation of that magnitude, but most of the usual suspects didn’t apply. It wasn’t dark, for one thing, and his cool and calm manner indicated he wasn’t aroused, afraid, or drugged. That left only one major contender.

As Aziraphale gazed at the duke, she realised that he must be in terrible pain. Hastur sneered, and Aziraphale adjusted her hypothesis—Crowley was in terrible pain. If the corporation was that badly injured, Hastur would have healed it. Aziraphale felt a thrill of relief, tempered by a wave of anxiety; Crowley was still alive.

“Having second thoughts, principality?” Hastur asked, stalking closer, and Aziraphale shook herself. She took a quick step backwards and swallowed, dragging her eyes from Crowley’s. She reached a hand behind the faux marble pillar and grabbed the spray bottle she’d propped up on the pillar’s plinth.

“On the contrary,” Aziraphale said, and pointed the bottle at Hastur. Hastur’s expression shifted immediately, and he stopped advancing. “I believe you’re familiar with holy water?”

Hastur gave Aziraphale a calculating look, the expression unusually cold on Crowley’s face. Then he grinned. “You’re bluffing,” he said.

Aziraphale tilted her head. “Am I?”

Hastur’s confident expression flickered for a second, and Aziraphale knew she had him right where she wanted him.
“I am an angel,” Aziraphale said, taking a bold step towards Hastur. The duke took a matching step back and to the side, and they started circling each other slowly on the stage. “You know that I have no trouble getting my hands on holy water.”

When Hastur didn’t comment, Aziraphale continued, “And if Crowley really is dead, like you keep insisting he is, then I have nothing to lose by taking my own revenge.” Aziraphale shook the spray bottle threateningly.

Hastur’s eyes stayed trained on Aziraphale’s hand.

“Now,” Aziraphale said, in a slightly calmer tone of voice. “Maybe you’re the one who’s been lying, and Crowley really isn’t dead.” Aziraphale scanned Hastur’s face for confirmation, but the duke’s expression was blank. “In that case, you’d better say something sharpish, because otherwise…” Aziraphale gave an experimental tug on the trigger of the bottle, and a spray of water droplets flooded the air in front of her.

Hastur didn’t step back, but he was safely out of range as it was.

“So,” Aziraphale said, “what’s it going to be? If you leave Crowley now, I swear on my honour that I will not use this.”

Hastur pursed his lips in thought while his eyes, still blown wide in pain, never left Aziraphale’s. “It’s a tempting offer,” he said after a moment, “but what’s to stop me from just—” Hastur brought his hand up and jerked it to the side.

Aziraphale felt the invisible force slam into her just as she threw up a quick defence of her own. Despite the swiftness of her response, Hastur had all the power of a Duke of Hell, and in a direct battle of wills Aziraphale never stood a chance. Her defence held for a fraction of a second and shattered; something rammed into her like a brick wall and she went flying sideways and into the backdrop of the stage set. She hit the wall with a sharp crack as the plaster splintered, the spray bottle bouncing out of her hand and rolling to a halt a few feet away.

“That’s what I thought,” Hastur said, and stalked towards where the angel was sitting stunned against the facade.

Crowley was breathing fast, watching Aziraphale blink rapidly as she struggled to maintain consciousness.

He had surfaced from the endless cycle of nightmares the moment Aziraphale had spoken, the angel’s familiar aura again cutting through the illusions Hastur had surrounded him with. He had regained a little strength despite Hastur’s attentions, but he could still only watch as Aziraphale bargained for his freedom.

It had been a good, smart bargain, and it probably would have worked on anyone other than Hastur. But now Aziraphale was down for the count again, and Crowley had a sinking feeling that she wouldn’t be getting back up again. Hastur was going to find some way to kill Aziraphale, permanently this time, and Crowley was going to spend the rest of eternity as Hastur’s favourite plaything.
Aziraphale must have regained somewhat of a grip on her senses, because she shook her head and started crawling towards the spray bottle.

Hastur crossed the distance between them and kicked Aziraphale hard in the ribs before she could get more than two feet. She wheezed and fell back to the floor, and Hastur strolled past her. He reached down for the spray bottle, which had remained miraculously intact in its bounce across the floor.

The plastic of the bottle was dry and smooth against Crowley/Hastur’s fingers, with no hint of the danger posed by the liquid within. Hastur straightened up slowly, keeping a very ginger hold on the spray bottle. Hastur starting drawing his power together, and Crowley knew the duke was about to destroy the bottle, or else banish it as Aziraphale had Tyrfin.

Hastur’s entire concentration was on the spray bottle, being careful not to drop it or let so much as a drop spill. He had even put a quick shield around it in case Aziraphale tried to melt the plastic or something. As Hastur’s focus intensified, Crowley felt the weight bearing down on him lift momentarily.

Crowley sucked in a great breath and for a few seconds he was dizzy with the freedom allowed him. Hastur was distracted, and Crowley suddenly realised what exactly that meant. The duke knew any misstep with the holy water could mean his demise—he wasn’t paying poor, half-dead Crawly any attention.

Not that he necessarily should be; Crowley was greatly weakened and racked with enough pain that he could hardly think straight. But that pain was his, and this corporation had been Crowley’s long before it had been Hastur’s.

Crowley felt around in his corporation, quickly locating the one place that Hastur had never allowed him access to, even when letting him tag along for the ride. It was the pain centre of his brain, and by cutting him off from it Hastur allowed himself to watch indifferently while Crowley suffered.

Hastur’s defences around it were weakened as the duke focused all of his effort on the holy water, and, in that singular moment of distraction, Crowley threw himself forward and tore the barrier apart.

Pain exploded across every nerve in Crowley’s corporation and Hastur screamed. The duke wasn’t used to bearing the weight of the pain, but Crowley had been subjected to it for weeks. Crowley steeled himself and pushed his way upwards even as Hastur struggled to register what was happening, using the pain as his path to the surface. Crowley shouldered his way upwards, pushing Hastur down as he climbed his way towards reality.

And then he was in control.

Crowley sucked in a huge breath and took a half-step backwards as he struggled to get his bearings. His leg moved, the muscles and tendons obeying his command, and Crowley could have wept in relief. He could smell the air, a little stale and tangy but flowing into his own lungs again, and when he looked at Aziraphale, his eyes moved to his will.

Aziraphale stared up at him in surprise, and Crowley regretted having never before cherished the mere miracle of eye contact, because in that second their gazes locked, it felt like a lifetime passed.

Then Crowley’s fingers tightened and he looked at the spray bottle in his hand. Holy water.

“Crowley—” Aziraphale began urgently, but Crowley wasn’t listening.

He could feel Hastur recovering already, clawing his way upwards, and the pain was still coursing
through every inch of his skin. His corporation was bearing some of the damage now, and it was starting to fail. His legs trembled and threatened to give out, forcing Crowley to take another, stumbling step backwards.

Hastur was growing closer, and Crowley felt himself start to go numb, whether from an effect Hastur was having on him, the pain, or fear, he didn’t know. What he did know was that there was no way in Above or Below he was going to let Hastur push him under again, no way he was going to let the duke toy with him a moment more. And Aziraphale—Crowley’s gaze went back to the angel and locked on like a drowning man.

Hastur would make short work of her once he got back. And then it would all be over, for both of them.

Crowley felt the spray bottle, heavy in his hand, and he turned it deliberately towards his own head, laying his finger on the plastic trigger.

“Crowley, no!” Aziraphale shouted, and did her best to surge to her feet.

It would save Aziraphale, Crowley thought as he felt his eyes burn and threaten to betray him. It would stop Hastur from ever going after the angel again. And Crowley wouldn’t have to go back under.

Hastur was almost upon him, and Crowley knew he had only seconds. He locked his eyes with Aziraphale’s horrified ones again, and resolved to never look away. “I’m ssssorry, angel,” he rasped, hearing his own voice slide into a hiss as the pain overwhelmed him again.

Crowley squeezed the trigger.
A fine mist of water droplets sprayed over Crowley’s cheek, cool and wet.

Nothing happened.

For a long moment Crowley held his breath, waiting to be annihilated, but the expected terminus failed to come. Then he realised it was never going to.

Crowley let out a broken gasp and stared at Aziraphale. No, he thought desperately, searching the angel’s eyes for some sort of explanation, no, there’s been some mistake—

Hastur overwhelmed him.

Crowley screamed as he was torn from his corporation yet again, Hastur throwing him as far down into darkness as he could. The pain redoubled and Crowley gasped as he was confined to a tiny space within himself, utterly locked away.

Hastur kicked Crowley, hard, and he went under.

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Hastur wiped the moisture from his cheek with the back of Crowley’s hand.

Aziraphale could still see the flash of devastation and betrayal in Crowley’s eyes, and it rattled her more than she cared to admit.

“It seems all you know how to do is bluff,” Hastur said as he tossed the spray bottle to the side. It hit the floor and the lid popped off, spilling the harmless water across the stage floor.

Aziraphale swallowed. Of course she hadn’t actually blessed the water in the spray bottle; she couldn’t risk Hastur calling her bluff, and she didn’t dare actually use any on Hastur, not if there was even the slightest chance Crowley was still in there somewhere. And, since it turned out he was, Aziraphale didn’t regret her decision in the slightest.

Aziraphale stepped forward, Hastur made a motion with his hand, and the angel was slammed heavily back into the wall. Aziraphale took only a fraction of a second to catch her breath, edged the two feet necessary to the side, and stepped backwards through an embroidered curtain and into the backstage area.

It was dark behind the facade, but Aziraphale didn’t give her eyes a chance to adjust, instead ducking around a stand of painted wood panels and out of sight of the curtained entrance. She heard Hastur pull the curtain aside a moment later, the noise accompanied by a beam of bright light shining into the backstage area.

Staying carefully away from the light, Aziraphale started moving as silently as possible towards a nearby table holding a pile of prop swords.

“Come out, come out, principality,” Hastur hissed in Crowley’s voice, and the beam of light disappeared as quickly as it had come.
Aziraphale reached the table and picked up the top sword carefully. There was a slight noise as the other swords shifted positions, and she heard Hastur’s footsteps stop as he listened. Aziraphale carefully pulled the sword free of its sheath, using a tiny miracle to keep it from making an audible scrape.

She edged behind an urn with a large fake plant and held the sword vertically in front of her, waiting. Aziraphale heard Hastur’s footsteps start up again, growing slightly louder as they neared her.

When she could hear Hastur’s breathing, Aziraphale spun out from behind the urn and struck the demon around the shoulders as hard as she could with the side of the sword.

There was a loud *schwap* and Hastur yelped, the metal blade thrumming in Aziraphale’s hands from the contact.

A moment later, Aziraphale felt something close around her throat as Hastur threw out his hand and clenched his fist around empty air.

The vice around Aziraphale’s throat doubled in intensity and a hand went to her neck automatically, struggling to remind her corporation that she didn’t need to breathe.

She was only partially successful, so when Aziraphale remembered the prop sword in her hand and smacked Hastur around the middle with it, causing the demon’s spell to slacken slightly, she sucked in a slightly choked breath of relief.

Hastur dropped the spell in favour of miracling a long, dark sword with a wavy blade into his hand. It was only a mortal blade—it was impossible to miracle a cursed or blessed one into existence—but it was enough to disorporate Aziraphale again.

It was easily three feet long, though, which meant it was difficult to wield at very close quarters.

Taking advantage of this, Aziraphale cast the prop sword aside and quickly closed the space between them. She shoved Hastur’s hand holding the sword away and to the side, rendering the weapon useless as she twisted his arm. At the same time, she stomped hard on one of Hastur’s feet and delivered a quick left hook to the demon’s abdomen. She tried not to pull her punch but it was still Crowley’s corporation, and she knew that every time she struck Hastur, Crowley felt it.

The other problem was that Aziraphale’s new corporation was considerably shorter than Crowley’s, which had always been a little taller than hers as it was.

Hastur tried to step back and stumbled when he couldn’t move the foot Aziraphale was still standing on. He did manage to ram his elbow into Aziraphale’s face, though, hard enough to draw blood. Then Hastur brought the hand with the sword around again, and even though they were still too close for him to put the blade into play, he brought the hilt down hard on the angel’s temple.

Aziraphale’s vision flared white, and Hastur took advantage of her distraction to wrench his foot free. He tried to take a swipe at Aziraphale with the sword, but she had enough presence of mind left to duck and dash forward, dodging around the demon under his swing. That was one advantage of this corporation’s lesser height—she could zigzag around Hastur with relative ease. Before Hastur could turn to pursue his prey, Aziraphale kicked at the back of the demon’s left leg, right at the hamstring.

Hastur blessed loudly as his leg crumpled, and Aziraphale danced away and out of range of his swinging sword as he tried to turn. Aziraphale waved her hand and the sword leapt from Hastur’s hand and vanished into the darkness.
Hastur tried to gain his feet again, but Aziraphale had already darted around him. She kept directly behind the demon as she grabbed onto his arm and yanked it behind his back, twisting her grip until the demon cried out in pain.

“Blessed angel,” Hastur swore, followed by a burst of demonic energy.

Aziraphale took her turn to swear and jumped back as her palms started to sear. She repaired the damage with a thought and took several more hasty steps backwards, passing a rack of period costumes.

Hastur turned to pursue her, stalking closer and holding out his hand. As he did so, the wavy-bladed sword sprang out of the darkness and flew to meet its master.

Behind her back, Aziraphale made a tiny movement with her hand and continued retreating. “Honestly, for a duke, you’re rather underperforming,” the angel said mildly.

Hastur growled, and didn’t hear the sound of ropes suddenly sliding free from their pulleys. “We’ll see about—” The triple-level candle-bearing wrought-iron chandelier slammed into Hastur’s head and the demon folded like a collapsible top hat.

Aziraphale wasted no time in turning and making a beeline for the curtain. She emerged back into the broad daylight of the stage, blinking as her eyes adjusted. She could hear Hastur already recovering behind her, the sound of metal hitting the ground accompanied by a deep growl.

Aziraphale’s searching gaze found the puddle of water sitting on the stage next to the discarded spray bottle, and a plan quickly formed in her head.

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Hastur stumbled out into the brightness, tearing the curtain aside and growling with rage. The daylight was blinding, and the pain coursing through the corporation was not helping his mood.

Crawly, annoyingly, had surfaced soon after Hastur had driven him down after his little stunt. It appeared that he had been drawn back up by the sound of Aziraphale’s voice, even as different as it was, and the familiar aura of the angel. It truly was pathetic.

Hastur was satisfied that he posed no immediate threat, though; the lesser demon seemed to be barely clinging onto the corporation well enough to be able to see and hear what was going on.

Something slammed into Hastur’s side and he skidded several feet before bringing himself to a halt. He looked over to see that the principality had approached from the side, attempting to take advantage of his moment of blindness with a burst of divine power.

Unfortunately for the angel, Hastur outranked her on so many levels. The duke threw out his hand and Aziraphale flew backwards, crossing half of the stage before hitting the floor hard and skidding another several metres before coming to a halt.

She started to pick herself up almost immediately, long black hair falling over her face.

“Is that—the best you can do?” Aziraphale rasped breathlessly.
Hastur crossed the space between them and reached down to pick Aziraphale up by the front of her blouse. “Oh, we haven’t even started yet,” he growled.

Aziraphale gave him a beatific smile, and there was red staining her teeth. “Looking forward to it.”

Hastur picked the angel up, walked her the three feet to the nearest pillar, and forcibly rammed her into it, the wooden plinth cracking slightly.

The angel’s expression stayed annoyingly cheerful even as her breaths grew shorter every time Hastur rammed her into the column.

After the third, he dropped her and she slid awkwardly to the floor.

For a moment she just sat there, catching her breath, and then the angel raised the back of one shaking hand to her mouth and wiped away a streak of blood. She examined the red smear on the back of her hand and then sniffed derisively. “Really, I’ve seen cherubim worse than you.”

Pinpricks of proper anger were flaring in Hastur now, and he felt Crawly stir in alarm. The duke growled, feeling the overwhelming desire to wipe the smug expression off the principality in front of him. His hands clenched, and as they did so he abruptly remembered that he was still holding the wavy-bladed sword.

Hastur pulled his hand back, aiming the tip of the sword at the angel’s heart, and felt Crawly constrict in fear.

Aziraphale smiled, and despite the blood dripping down her cheek, she looked thoroughly amused. “What, the sword again?” she asked. “No originality, demons.”

Hastur hesitated, stilling his hand. He knew the principality was mocking him, and it was the most annoying thing on the planet, more annoying even than Crawly’s illusions of grandeur. He was Hastur, Duke of Hell, powerful and feared, and this mere angelic principality was treating him like their places were reversed. It was downright insulting.

Hastur lowered the sword slowly, turning the problem over in his mind. “No, you’re right,” he said after a long moment. “You’re far too irritating to kill.”

Aziraphale shrugged, and the movement looked painful. “I try.”

Hastur pursed his lips in thought.

The angel made to push herself into a more vertical sitting position, but her face went pale and she slid back to the ground, panting with exertion.

It occurred to Hastur quite suddenly that the principality was showing all this bluster to hide the fact that she was entirely at his mercy.

Hastur made a dismissive motion with his hand and the wavy-bladed sword disappeared. He dropped into a squat so he could get a closer look at the angel. Her corporation was certainly damaged, and she’d likely expended most of her power on that pathetic attack earlier, when he’d been briefly blinded.

Hastur swallowed, relishing the facts of the situation. “You’re all mine, aren’t you, little angel?”

Aziraphale turned even paler and spat at him.
Hastur smiled in amusement. The principality had such spirit...she would be fun to break. He’d gone too quickly with Crawly, and not savoured it as much as he could have. Maybe he could be more creative this time.

“I’ll never be yours, Hastur,” Aziraphale hissed.

Hastur wondered with morbid fascination where all of the angel’s breaking points were, all of the little weaknesses in spirit and will. He loved driving wedges into those little spaces and pushing them in ever so slowly, seeing how many moans and cries he could elicit before the begging started.

Yes. He had definitely gone too fast with Crawly. Hastur felt his heart rate increase at the prospect, mouth watering with the promise of pleasures he had yet to enjoy. In front of him, the angel’s aura flickered with uncertainty and pain. She was trapped here at his disposal right now, but maybe he could make that arrangement more...permanent.

Hastur licked his lips and coiled himself. As he did so, he felt Crawly stir again, panicked this time. Hastur had been a little disappointed he hadn’t died yet, but he wondered now if maybe he could play with Crawly and Aziraphale together. Twice the fun.

But he couldn’t risk Crawly getting the wrong idea while he was subduing the angel, which might take some time. He retreated inside himself long enough to pinpoint Crawly’s exact location, deep within the corporation. Hastur leaned on him hard until he fell to the ground, trembling. Before he had a chance to recover, the duke moved forward and kicked the lesser demon hard around the ribs.

Crawly let out a sharp gasp and shied away, trying to hide from further blows. Relishing the way the lesser demon whimpered and cowered from him, Hastur kicked him again and again, not stopping until Crawly was gasping and curled into a tight ball. Hastur kicked him twice more for good measure and waited until he was sure the demon had lost all illusions of consciousness.

Then Hastur turned his attention back to his newest plaything. In one fluid motion, he leapt out of Crawly’s corporation and forced himself into that of the weakened, injured angel in front of him.

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Something with the strength of a goods train going full steam slammed into Aziraphale as Crowley collapsed to the floor.

Aziraphale gasped with the shock of it, but, despite every instinct, she didn’t push back. Direct opposition, she knew, wasn’t in her best interests. She threw herself to the side instead, slipping past Hastur even as he tried to grab ahold of her. Possession was a tricky business at the best of times, and there were many ways to resist. That, and the fact that the resident had the home field advantage.

Aziraphale ducked around Hastur, keeping a firm grip on her corporation. She had faked some of her injuries, and could tell that Hastur was surprised at her strength, the duke floundering in confusion and frustration while Aziraphale evaded him.

On the stage floor, Aziraphale pulled herself to her hands and knees and started crawling around the corner of the pillar, moving towards the puddle of water.

Hastur lashed out blindly, trying to land a blow, but Aziraphale kept her course. The duke was gathering his strength, but it would take him a few seconds more to get his bearings in the angel’s
corporation, and a few seconds was all Aziraphale needed.

She reached the puddle of water she had blessed only minutes earlier, in the precious moments before Hastur blundered back out onto the stage after her, and slammed her palm into it. In the same instant, Hastur finally got his bearings and sank his claws into her side.

Hastur screamed, and Aziraphale screamed too, every inch of her corporation reacting to the combination of holy water and a demonic inhabitant.

Hastur tore blindly at Aziraphale, clawing gouges in the angel’s soul. Unfortunately for the duke, that only resulted in Aziraphale losing her grip on the corporation, and she slid forward and sideways, straight into the puddle of water. Holy water seeped through the angel’s sleeves and crept along the line of her cheek, and every nerve exploded as the corporation started to vaporise.

Hastur’s soul was burning, and so was the corporation by extension, but it was common knowledge that angels couldn’t be harmed by holy water.

Aziraphale shook herself free of Hastur’s dying grip, gasping as the demon’s claws inflicted a few last injuries, and surged upwards.

Like a drowning man reaching for a rope, Aziraphale started pulling herself from her corporation.

For a confusing second Aziraphale was everywhere and nowhere all at once. She knew she’d be gasping into awareness in Heaven in mere moments, but she still had time as she finished extracting herself from the corporation.

As she did so, she saw Crowley lying very, very still on the stage floor nearby. It didn’t look like he was breathing.

The thing about possession is that, if you want to have any chance of overwhelming someone in their own home, their defences have to be pretty low. The sheer act of entering an occupied and actively resisting corporation is incredibly difficult, and the current owner has a number of tools at their disposal for keeping others out. So the best way to storm the castle gates, in a sense, is to knock out the guards.

Looking at Crowley’s motionless form now, Aziraphale didn’t think his defences could have been lower if he tried. Hastur was in his last death throes in her own corporation, and Aziraphale had nearly pulled herself completely free; she had mere heartbeats before she’d be coming to in Heaven.

Fighting the niggling feeling of guilt in the back of her head, Aziraphale poured her soul towards Crowley’s battered, broken corporation.
Aziraphale gasped and struggled to take a second breath as a wave of pain rolled over him. The corporation was racked with it, and Aziraphale didn't know where it was coming from, so he couldn't shield himself.

His hand scrambled against the smooth floor of the stage, fingers clenching in an attempt to steady himself. Aziraphale squeezed slitted golden eyes shut and focused on healing everything within easy reach.

He felt the pain start to numb after a few seconds, and let out a shaking breath as he slowly oriented himself in Crowley’s corporation. There were some localised sections of corporeal pain, from Aziraphale’s earlier blows and several others that looked puzzlingly like they had been caused from the inside, but mostly it was a deep, full ache that seemed to be more of a consequence of extended possession than anything else.

Aziraphale softened the edge of the pain, and felt himself start to get a little light-headed as he sapped his strength. The angel took a break, drawing several long, deep breaths and feeling himself settle into Crowley’s corporation.

He opened his eyes and pulled himself to Crowley’s hands and knees. Seeing his friend’s limbs move at his command was bizarre, to say the least, but Aziraphale tried not to think about it too much.

He crawled a few metres away from the dark smear near the holy water, in case the latter should spread, and flopped down again, breathing heavily. The corporation was going to need more healing than he could give it right now.

Aziraphale took another deep breath, rolled onto the demon’s back, closed serpentine eyes, and went to find Crowley.

It took him longer than it should have, and he was beginning to seriously worry when he found Crowley all the way in the recesses of his corporation, curled into a ball and trembling.

Aziraphale approached cautiously and laid a gentle hand on his friend’s shoulder. The demon was slick with sweat, and Aziraphale could feel that he was flush with warmth even through the material of his jacket.

Crowley wasn’t literally any of those things, of course, but souls are peculiar things. They are fluid and amorphous, and when torn away from their corporations or stuffed into an already-occupied space only ever meant for one…well, things get strange pretty quickly. In a case such as this, the soul, which is never meant to interact physically with anything, is forced into a situation where the only way to make sense of things is to operate on several layers of metaphor.

In this metaphor, Crowley’s soul portrayed itself in the manner to which he had unconsciously become accustomed—in the guise of his latest corporation—and in the physical state which best described the state of his soul—severely injured, and in pain. Along the same lines, Aziraphale appeared in the form of the corporation he had lost recently in the British Museum; he had grown awfully attached, after all.

Aziraphale pulled all the energy together that he could muster and set about repairing the damage to Crowley’s soul that Hastur had wrought.
It was slow, laborious work, but Crowley stopped trembling after a minute or two, which Aziraphale took to be a very good sign.

A few minutes after that, Crowley shifted and rolled over so that he was facing the angel, strands of dark hair falling into his eyes. Aziraphale moved so that he was sitting with his legs out in front of him, and carefully pulled the demon onto his lap.

It looked like Crowley might have been coming around for a moment, but then his eyelids flickered shut again and he settled for simply curling around Aziraphale and burying his face in the angel’s jumper.

Souls are fluid, metaphoric things. Aziraphale doubted Crowley even knew he was doing it.

Crowley could feel Aziraphale nearing, his aura growing stronger as he sought out the demon, but Crowley ignored him. He kept his head down and pulled the thin blanket tighter around his shoulders, keeping his eyes fixed on the stretch of dried grass in front of him.

"Crowley?" That was Aziraphale, his voice carrying but still a little far-off. Crowley imagined him looking around the sea of people clustered on the field in small packs, huddling under blankets and sitting beside piles of what remained of their earthly possessions. The displaced of London had fled north to Moorfields as the Fire raged through the city and hadn’t yet returned. They were already calling it that, the Fire with a capital F. That it deserved the extra emphasis went without question.

He heard Aziraphale's feet crunching through the grass, and then the angel gave a short sigh of relief as he spotted the demon, sitting a little way away from the nearest cluster of humans, knees tucked up to his chest.

"There you are, Crowley, I've been looking for you everywhere,” Aziraphale said in relief as he closed the distance between them, coming to a stop next to the demon. Crowley pursed his lips and turned his head away.

Aziraphale shifted uncertainly, and Crowley imagined the smile on his face faltering. Despite the warmth of the previous days, there was a cold, stiff wind today, reminding the world that winter was well on its way. The angel rubbed at his arms as the wind gusted; Crowley let it hit him even through the blanket.

"What are you doing all the way out here?" Aziraphale asked after an awkward moment, and Crowley knew he was referring more to his present company than physical location.

“I’m right where I belong,” Crowley hissed bitterly. "With everyone else who doesn't have a home.”

Aziraphale was silent for a moment, and Crowley wished he would just leave.

“I'm sorry about that, Crowley,” the angel said. "I wasn't thinking. I didn't mean it."

Crowley gave a dry laugh and it almost turned into a cough. His lungs were still dry and scratchy from the smoke. "Yeah you did, angel."

Aziraphale took a moment to respond. "You're going to freeze to death out here, all on your own,”
he said at last.

Crowley tucked the thin blanket a few inches higher around his shoulders. "Then let me freeze."

Aziraphale let out a worried sigh and shifted on his feet. “Look, Crowley, I’m sorry. I really am. I—I put in a claim on a nice bit of land, over in Soho. A lot of people are already rebuilding, and I thought it would be nice to have a little bigger place. The old one was getting a little cramped anyway, don't you think?"

The breeze gusted again, unusually cold for this time of year. "That's nice."

Aziraphale shifted his weight again. “I was wondering if you, er, maybe wanted to come help rebuild?" he asked, a little timidly. "There's not a lot there right now, but it has a couple of walls and I think we could improvise a roof.” Aziraphale hesitated. “You can stay as long as you like. I'd be pleased of the company."

Crowley wasn’t entirely sure what Aziraphale was saying, but he wasn’t so naïve as to think the angel’s words meant what a small part of him hoped they did. “Someone else here could lend a hand, I'm sure,” he said instead, a little bitterly, not looking at Aziraphale.

The angel shifted. "I'm not looking for the help," he said.

Crowley digested that for a moment. He opened his mouth to say something else, but Aziraphale spoke over him.

“And it’s not someone else’s company I’m looking for, either.” Aziraphale reached down and gave his shoulder a friendly nudge. Crowley swayed a few inches to the side and then rocked back into position. Aziraphale let out another worried breath. “I’m really sorry, Crowley. I didn’t mean it. Come back with me, please.”

Crowley swallowed and wondered when naïveté had grown in such popularity. Something small and warm was blossoming deep inside of his chest, and it had nothing to do with homeostasis.

Aziraphale seemed to think he needed more convincing, because he added, “I can miracle you up some tea if you like.” Crowley could hear the hint of desperation in his voice, and knew that Aziraphale really did not want to leave here alone. “I could try for—what are they calling it?—coffee?—but no promises.”

Crowley shifted under the blanket and turned his head towards Aziraphale for the first time. The angel really did look miserable, wringing his hands and looking down at Crowley with a worried expression.

Crowley gave in. “Well, when you put it that way…”

Aziraphale beamed in relief as Crowley started peeling himself out from under the blanket, preparing to stand. Aziraphale grabbed him by the elbow and helped him up. Crowley's legs protested the movement, stiff with cold and having sat in one place for too long.

He grimaced. “Careful there, angel.”

Aziraphale took a moment to fuss over his jacket, and mirrored a warmer one around his shoulders with a wave of his hand. A second wave produced a long tartan scarf, which Aziraphale was gracious enough to allow Crowley to wind around his neck himself. The thicker coat cut the wind a lot better, and Crowley felt himself start thawing almost immediately.
“Come along, my dear. I’ll make you that tea once we get there, you’re frightfully pale.”

Crowley didn’t protest when Aziraphale linked their arms and started tugging him back in the direction of the ruined city, or when the angel plied him with tea for the next three days straight…

…Crowley hit the ground hard and his leg exploded. He must have bounced on impact, because a heartbeat later he hit the ground again, almost banging his head into a swath of bracken as he did so. When he finally rolled to a stop, he registered distantly that he was halfway down a slight incline, face pressed against the sandy soil.

For several long moments Crowley could only lie there, stunned and breathless, as he felt the pain in his leg steadily increase.

He could hear his horse neighing loudly from behind him, punctuated by the staccato strikes of his hooves on the road as he decided whether or not to bolt. Some part of Crowley wondered detachedly what had spooked the horse enough to throw him.

The demon took what was supposed to be a steadying breath, but it came out as more of a ragged gasp. His leg was on fire, and when he tried to get to his hands and knees it screamed protest and he went down again. His heart was beating fast in his chest, and he could feel his cheeks flush with warmth. When he looked down at his hands, they were trembling and very pale in the moonlight. He supposed it was shock.

He twisted and tried to heal himself, but he’d wasted all his energy on escaping the garrison at Gomorrah, and he was all but spent. Crowley flopped back onto the ground, struggling to think through his options even as the pain in his leg seared through him like a wildfire.

He was still trying to collect together any lingering scraps of his power when a flurry of fresh hoofbeats cut through the haze of his pain. The hoofbeats slowed to a controlled stop and Crowley heard his own horse whinny, hooves still striking the ground.

Crowley made another effort to stand up, but he didn’t make it more than a foot off the ground before his muscles failed him. He lay there panting and decided that he could just call for help. He didn’t know how he’d been found so soon, but this was one miracle he was prepared to accept. God Himself knew Crowley had been in dire need of those recently.

The noise of hoofbeats stilled, and a moment later there was a sharp thump as the rider dismounted. Crowley drew breath to call out, but the newcomer beat him to it, speaking in an all-too-familiar voice.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

Crowley felt his heart hit rock bottom and stay there. He tried to sink further into the bracken behind him, but it only resulted in a loud rustling noise.

“Hang on, I’m coming,” Aziraphale’s voice said, and Crowley blessed and forced himself to his feet. He only made it halfway before his leg gave out and he went down again, but he had gained a couple of feet.

He could hear Aziraphale moving towards him through the bracken, and glanced over his shoulder to see how close the angel was. As he did so, Aziraphale’s eyes locked with his through the semi-darkness, and the angel stumbled to a surprised halt.

“Crowley?”
Crowley forced himself to his feet again, clenching his jaw as he felt a scream start building in his throat. His vision was blurring now, and he could feel blood trailing all the way down his leg. The moment he tried to put even a modicum of weight on his hurt leg, it collapsed. A fresh explosion of pain rocked through Crowley as he fell to the grass again, and he would have screamed had he had the breath to do so.

When he gazed blankly down at his leg, he registered a bright glint of white among a shocking amount of scarlet. Then his hazy vision shifted upward to where Aziraphale had started moving towards him, and a fresh surge of adrenaline rushed through him.

He couldn’t get discorporated again. He just couldn’t. And he hadn’t even done anything this time.

He’d been discorporated a record number of times in the last two decades, and he didn’t know if he could take another smiting or throat-slitting. Physical trauma aside, Hell was becoming fed up with the rate he was blowing through corporations, and didn’t seem to care that he’d given Aziraphale his fair share of discorporations in the meantime. When Crowley had finally managed to secure his latest corporation, it had been with the strict warning that it was the last one he could be expecting for a good long while.

Crowley had taken that to heart, and made every effort to avoid trouble—it was the precise reason he’d been riding flat-out in the middle of the night away from Gomorrah, for example. And now his ruddy horse had done him in.

Crowley turned and started dragging himself away from Aziraphale as fast as he could, leg screaming the entire way. His fingers knotted in the grass and he bit back another scream as his leg dragged over every hillock.

He heard Aziraphale close the distance between them and made a last effort to drag himself to safety, but it was no use. He flopped down on the grass and sucked in gasping breaths. “Damn.”

Crowley felt his desperation mount in his helplessness and frustration. “Damn, damn, thrice-blessed bloody fuck,” he swore, voice escalating as he felt himself start trembling with exertion and pain. He wasn’t going to make it.

He heard Aziraphale grind to a halt a few feet away, grass rustling underfoot. Crowley buried his face in the ground and waited for the searing light of a smiting or the bite of a blade. Aziraphale was going to discorporate him again, and he was going to be sent back to the dark, soul-crushing eternity of Hell for the next century or two, and there wasn’t a blessed thing he could do about it.

Crowley felt tears spring unbidden to his eyes as he took what he was sure were going to be his last breaths of free, clean air for half a century at least. He unsuccessfully bit back a sob and squeezed his eyes shut, waiting to be wrenched from his corporation and tossed back into the clutches of Below.

But no blow came. Crowley bit back another sob and clutched the grass tighter, as though he could tether himself to this world by sheer force of will. The pain was playing havoc with his mind, dancing along his nerves and shaking his hands, and he wondered what Aziraphale was waiting for. He could feel the angel’s gaze on him, simultaneously hot and cool with detachment. Crowley felt a surge of anger at himself for having broken down at death’s door, and at Aziraphale for judging him for it.

“Are you going to kill me already?” Crowley hissed, and his voice caught.

He heard Aziraphale shift behind him, boots crunching through the grass, and was vaguely aware of the angel kneeling beside him. He’d been in this position enough times, badly injured and at
Aziraphale’s mercy, to know that he was about to kiss this corporation goodbye.

Crowley squeezed his eyes shut and slowly tilted his head back, exposing his throat. That way Aziraphale would have a good angle, and at least it would be quick.

Crowley swallowed heavily, Adam’s apple wavering, and wished he could have seen the sky one last time.

He felt Aziraphale’s hands on his injured leg, and before the demon could automatically flinch, Aziraphale yanked hard. Crowley screamed as red-hot pain shot through him, and he struggled to scramble away, only managing to drag himself a few excruciating inches. The angel followed him and when he pushed hard at the most painful area of his injury, Crowley gasped breathlessly and knew Aziraphale was torturing him.

“Please—” His voice wavered and broke.

Crowley was still trembling and burning with the after-image of the pain when Aziraphale laid both hands on the demon’s leg, near the break. Crowley was panting and slick with sweat, and his throat was choked with unshed tears. He wished desperately that Aziraphale would just kill him already. The angel had never toyed with him like this before.

Then Aziraphale’s aura brightened, and Crowley whimpered in fear as it touched his. He far preferred the knife to a smiting.

For a moment all he could feel was the warmth of the angel's hands against his blood-soaked leg, but then the pain started to numb. At first Crowley thought it was fading because he was finally dying, but then he registered that whatever Aziraphale was doing to him, it wasn’t a smiting.

Instead of Aziraphale’s aura turning bright and hot, searing with righteousness and all the power of Heaven, it had softened and felt comfortably warm, like sun-warmed silk. The feeling flowed over him, liquid and golden, and Crowley felt himself automatically relax as his breathing steadied. The pain in his leg was receding, and the entire world seemed to cool suddenly as his fever broke. It was a feeling not unlike that of taking a warm bath after a long day’s labour or basking in a pool of sunlight on a chilly day. When the warmth started to recede, Crowley found that he was sorry to see it go. He felt Aziraphale pull his hands away.

Crowley just stayed there for a few moments, eyes shut and appreciating the act of breathing, allowing himself time to register that he—a demon—had just been healed by an angel.

When he finally cracked his eyes open, the night was as still and quiet as it had always been, and a soft breeze ruffled through his hair. Crowley rolled over and found that Aziraphale was sitting at his side, looking a little tired but no worse for wear.

Crowley swallowed, and when he twitched his foot experimentally, his leg didn’t hurt at all. He fought the desire to scramble to his feet and bolt. "What'dya do that for?" he asked instead, and his voice came out hoarse.

Aziraphale looked a little like he wanted to know the answer to that question himself. "It doesn’t seem..." The angel hesitated for a long moment. "Doesn’t it seem to you that we, er, just keep doing the same thing over and over again?"

Crowley stared at him and almost laughed, giddy with relief and disbelief. Aziraphale’s face was a mask of uncertainty, as though he’d made a grave error and was waiting to see if he would be punished for it.
Crowley flopped his head back down on the grass and gazed up at the dark, star-spangled sky. "Yeah, angel," he said. "It sure does."

For a moment they both just sat there, Crowley staring up at the sky and cherishing the feeling of air moving into and out of his lungs while Aziraphale looked off into the distance, brow furrowed.

Eventually, Aziraphale asked, “What were you even doing out here anyway?”

Crowley huffed out a laugh. “Trying not to get killed,” he said truthfully, mentally tracing Serpens above him.

“Oh.”

Crowley tilted his head slightly towards Aziraphale. “What were you doing out here?”

Aziraphale shrugged. “Following you, to be honest. The guards said someone suspicious had fled the city at dusk, and I thought whoever it was was responsible for the sin in the city.”

Crowley grunted noncommittally.

There was a short pause. “Were you?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

They were silent for a little while longer, and then Aziraphale said, almost hesitantly, “If memory serves, there’s a nice little tavern just up the road, at Zoara. I don't suppose you want a drink?”

Crowley really did laugh a little this time, and thought he had never needed one more…

…Below was planning something big, but Crowley hadn’t the foggiest what it was. He reached over to turn the radio up, and threw back another shot. The announcer was discussing the runaway inflation which had gripped the nation.

Below had been piling the demands on recently, and Crowley didn’t like being stationed in Berlin half as much as he’d thought he would. Even the Bentley couldn’t provide much comfort. Crowley was tired and worn out and just wanted to go home, properly home, and for some inexcusable reason someone was banging on his door.

“Go away!” Crowley shouted, and made a mental note to put something threatening by the front door to scare people off in the future.

The knocking continued, and Crowley blessed loudly in German and stood up. He abandoned the tumbler of brandy and made his way to the door, miracling slippers onto his feet as he did so. He unbolted the door and yanked it open. “I said—’” He broke off in surprise.

Aziraphale grinned at him from his doorstep. “My dear, is that any way to greet an old friend?”—

Crowley could feel something soft and warm pressed against his cheek, and all around him was the bright, warm, soft light that he’d come to associate with angelic healing. He could feel the aura of the angel responsible as well, wrapped around him like a cloak, and he knew without a doubt that it was Aziraphale.

Crowley let out a long breath and let the angel’s magic wash over him. He wasn’t sure exactly where he was, but he could tell Aziraphale was very close and he felt utterly and irrevocably safe in a way
that he hadn’t for centuries.

But he wasn’t safe, Crowley remembered slowly, and the feeling of blissful contentment evaporated as quickly as it had come. Hastur had crushed him into oblivion, had gone after Aziraphale—

Crowley tried to sit up, and something very strange happened. In one sense he was sitting bolt upright in a grey stretch of nowhere, and Aziraphale’s comforting aura had ceased, and in another he was paralysed, able to feel the smooth, hard floor of the theatre beneath his fingers but unable to move them.

Crowley’s breaths doubled in panic. He was still possessed.

He sensed something reaching for him and exploded away from whatever it was, clawing his way upwards as fast as he could. The burning pain was starting to return, but he’d have a few moments before it returned in full force. Had Hastur been tricking him, healing him somehow so that he could inflict fresh damage?

Crowley’s heart was in his throat and his vision was a blur of white static as he struggled to reassert control. Then, abruptly, whatever had been holding onto his corporation pulled away, and Crowley surged forward.

Crowley took in a hitching gasp and his eyes shot open. He was lying on the floor of the theatre, the side of his face pressed against the stage. He scrambled to his hands and knees and stared down at the wood beneath his palms. He was shaking, but relief flared through him as he flexed his fingers and they moved to his will.

Crowley turned his head up. He could still feel Aziraphale, very close, and looked around for him. There was nothing out of the ordinary apart from a dark smudge by a puddle of water a few metres away. A second later, Crowley recognised with surprise that the smudge looked an awful lot like the one Ligur had made when Crowley had doused him in holy water. Crowley edged further away and cast his eyes around again for Aziraphale, but the angel was nowhere to be seen.

“Aziraphale?” he asked, and his voice came out hoarse and scratchy. He cleared his throat and looked around again, and that was when he felt something stir inside of him that was most definitely not him. It was familiar, which was how he had overlooked it momentarily, but it was clustering now, drawing the strands of itself together. It might have been tensing for an attack, but somehow it didn’t feel like that to Crowley; it felt more like someone collecting their coat, hat, and shoes from the front entryway of a friend’s house.

Crowley laid his head back on the stage floor and retreated inside of himself.

“Zira?” he asked, and he knew it was.

There was a bizarre shimmering feeling and then Aziraphale was standing in front of him, looking a little bashful and rather embarrassed. “Hello, my dear. Sorry; I was just leaving.”

Crowley let out a slightly relieved breath; just seeing Aziraphale in front of him, and not in some half-forgotten memory, was more reassuring than he cared to admit. “It’s fine.”

Aziraphale looked taken aback. “I’m possessing you,” he pointed out.

Crowley exhaled heavily, and was a little surprised to find that it didn’t bother him as much as he’d thought it would. “I know.”

The pain was pressing harder on Crowley now as the adrenaline wore off, and he put together that
Aziraphale must have been healing him from the inside out, not from the real world as he’d initially thought.

“Hastur’s dead,” Aziraphale told him helpfully. “Permanently.”

Crowley nodded, and the movement made him feel a little light-headed.

“I really didn’t mean to possess you, my dear,” Aziraphale said, and he sounded dreadfully upset about it. “You just—you looked—I wasn’t sure—”

Crowley nodded understanding and fought the sudden need to sit down. He felt himself start swaying.

Aziraphale was halfway to him before he lurched to a stop. “Do you mind—?”

Crowley shook his head and felt himself start sinking into a sitting position, suddenly exhausted. Hastur must have inflicted more damage than he’d initially thought.

Aziraphale was there in a flash, grabbing him around the elbows, but they ended up on the ground anyway. Crowley waited for the healing glow to resume, but there was nothing, just Aziraphale’s hands on his shoulders.

“Could you…” he asked, and hoped his request wouldn’t be misinterpreted. He was just so tired.

An apologetic look crossed Aziraphale’s face. “I’m sorry, my dear, but I’d need control of your corporation for that.”

Crowley stiffened automatically and felt his grip on his corporation unconsciously tighten. Aziraphale patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it,” he said soothingly.

Crowley took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. This was Aziraphale, after all. “No, it’s…”

Crowley took another steadying breath. “It’s okay.”

Aziraphale gave him a look that said it most certainly was not. “Crowley—”

“Really,” Crowley said, and swallowed. He forced himself to release his vice-grip on his corporation, and told himself that this was the last time.

Aziraphale shifted uncomfortably. “You really don’t have to,” he said. “It’s perfectly all right.”

“Just take it,” Crowley said, relaxing his grip further and burying his face in Aziraphale’s chest. The pain was still drumming against his skull, and he just wanted it to stop.

Aziraphale wrapped his arms tightly around Crowley and, with as little force as possible, carefully nudged Crowley away from his own corporation.

Crowley forced himself to breathe evenly as he relinquished control, pressing himself closer to Aziraphale and telling himself that he wouldn’t be going under this time.

The moment Aziraphale assumed control, the warm glow started up again and Crowley felt the edge of the pain dull. He exhaled in relief and arranged himself into a more comfortable position, though he couldn’t regain that same sense of safety; both he and Aziraphale were acutely aware of the corporation this time. Aziraphale was holding the metaphorical reins as loosely as he could while Crowley hovered anxiously at his elbow, ready to take action should Aziraphale suddenly betray him. He couldn’t honestly imagine it happening, but the feeling of Hastur submerging him in the
darkness of his own subconscious was still very fresh, and he knew he wouldn’t be at peace with that for a long time.

Crowley felt himself slowly growing in strength as Aziraphale healed the damage to his soul that Hastur had inflicted. After a long while, the glow faded and Aziraphale carefully retreated from his position controlling Crowley’s corporation, gently shifting control back into Crowley’s hands. The demon took it gratefully, even if it did bring an extra burst of pain as he took on the burden of the physical injuries the corporation had sustained.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” Aziraphale said, and Crowley looked over to see that the angel had gone rather pale beside him. “That’s about all I have.”

Aziraphale moved to stand, stumbling slightly as he did so. Crowley leapt to his feet, ignoring a wave of nausea as he helped stabilise the angel.

“Whoa, you should have saved some for yourself,” he said, and felt a belated wave of guilt at not having noticed and stopped the angel sooner. Hastur had knocked him around too, after all.

Aziraphale waved him away. “It’s fine. I—I’ll be okay.” He took a step back and Crowley could sense him pulling the threads of himself together.

“You’re going?” Crowley asked, and felt a twinge of regret.

“Can’t cheat discorporation forever,” Aziraphale said, and tried for a smile. It came out a little tight, and Crowley remembered with a sudden unpleasant jolt that this version of Aziraphale had breathed its last in the British Museum. The next time he saw the angel, he’d have a new corporation entirely. It was a sobering thought.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Aziraphale continued as he readied himself for departure. “Do be careful. Don’t get anywhere near that holy water.”

Crowley gave him a wry smile and tried to hide the fact that he was doing his best to memorise every line of Aziraphale’s face. “I’ll steer very clear.” The demon smirked. “That stuff can kill you.”

Aziraphale rolled his eyes, and then the shape Crowley was looking at vanished as seamlessly as it had come. There was a bizarre feeling like a bird taking flight in Crowley’s chest, and then, abruptly, he was all alone.

Crowley blinked serpentine eyes open and sat up. The theatre was just as still and deserted as the last time he had seen it, and when he used the nearby pillar to pull himself to his feet, he staggered a little.

Though he had spent almost the entirety of his existence as the sole possessor of a corporation, he felt oddly cold and lonely without Aziraphale’s soul wrapped around his own.

Crowley shook himself and focused on taking stock of his corporation. Aziraphale must have healed most of the major wounds, because there wasn’t anything left that merited looking at by a professional. The remaining wounds would heal by themselves, or he’d gather enough strength and do it himself.

Once-over complete, he moved to the edge of the stage, slid off, and limped towards the nearest exit to the theatre. When he found the Bentley sitting outside, pristine and very not lost, Crowley felt his spirits lift.

Crowley fancied that the car was happy to see him, as it kept alternating between “Keep Yourself Alive” and “We are the Champions.” Crowley turned the Bentley towards a certain Soho bookshop
and headed home.
Aziraphale dropped the stack of papers on Abroxos’s desk with a thud. The angel paused in what he was writing and looked up at Aziraphale over the top of his glasses.

“Back so soon?”

“I missed your stellar personality,” Aziraphale said dryly. He cast a glance at the pile of papers he’d just deposited on Abroxos’s desk. “That should be all of it.”

Abroxos raised an eyebrow as though he thought this was highly unlikely, and picked up the top form. It was the stapled bundle of Form ATCP-74, the corporation preferences one.

He flipped through it and gave Aziraphale an unsurprised look. “Same preferences as last time?”

Aziraphale nodded. “Yes, please. As close as you can get it.”

Abroxos pursed his lips as though he found Aziraphale’s attachment to his previous corporation a little distasteful, and moved to the next form, which was the incident report. He started reading it over, and Aziraphale waited patiently. When he got halfway through, Abroxos stopped abruptly. Aziraphale watched his eyes flip back to the previous line and read it again, and then he glanced over the rest of the page in surprise.

He looked up at Aziraphale. “You lost your last corporation by…trapping and killing a Duke of Hell in it?” He sounded incredulous.

Aziraphale allowed himself a small smile. “Something like that.”

Abroxos blinked at him again and picked up the corporation preferences form. “I think we can get this done for you,” he said. “I’ll just go have a word with Raphael straightaway. If you’d have a seat, I’ll be right back.” Abroxos waved his hand and a very comfortable-looking sofa materialised a few feet away from Aziraphale.

“Oh course,” Aziraphale said graciously. After Abroxos had scurried away, Aziraphale smiled again and settled down on the sofa, tapping his fingers pleasantly against the arm.

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Henryk Kamiński had worked the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains for as long as he could remember, as his father and grandfather had before him.

The world, his sister and her husband told him, was moving forward, and he was going to be left behind if he didn’t start taking notice now, but Henryk had never had much of an interest in moving anywhere.

He loved these lands—the rolling green hills, the gentle peaks of the mountains, and the way the dawn crested over Eliášovka. If the world was moving forward, Henryk was fine with being left
behind, because this was the finest place to be so left.

In large part to avoid his wife, Henryk enjoyed an early morning walk among the foothills of the mountains, feeling the connection of his body with the earth and admiring the way the wind sang through the hills.

On this particular fine, sunny morning, Henryk had just passed the ruins of what his father had once told him was a small Norse fort, and was walking along what he knew had once been a well-travelled trail, when he felt himself step on something hard and flat.

Henryk stopped and took his foot off the object. Surprised at what he saw, he reached down and picked up the long Viking sword. It hadn’t been buried in the ground, instead merely resting atop the grassy track as though someone had dropped it there.

Henryk thought that was an unlikely proposition, as the sword was rusted very far through and didn’t look like it was good for much of anything anymore. It was unlikely its owners would miss such a damaged piece of iron, if they hadn’t just thrown it out in the first place. Henryk raised an expert finger and felt along the edge of the blade to see if it had any bite left to it.

Tyrfing, cursed sword of the great king Svafrlami, causer of three great evils, slayer of men great and small, sang of fire and vengeance and blood.

Henryk decided the blade wasn’t sharp enough to do a good job cutting firewood, and thought it would make a good fencepost for that bit of fence falling down just over the next rise that he’d been meaning to mend.

Henryk swung the sword over his shoulder like a miner would a pickaxe, and started whistling as he continued down the trail.

Crowley was waiting for him.

Aziraphale picked the demon out straight away, sitting on one of the benches in St James’s Park and looking out over the pond.

He must have been absorbed in his thoughts, because Aziraphale was almost upon him when Crowley looked over abruptly.

The demon’s face registered surprise and then relief and then surprise again as he stood up to meet him. “Aziraphale!”

“Sorry I took so long,” Aziraphale said, coming to an awkward stop a metre or so away. He wanted to give the tired-looking demon a hug, but he wasn’t sure how that would be received, and a handshake seemed too impersonal.

“Your—your corporation,” Crowley said in surprise.

Aziraphale smiled and shrugged identical shoulders to the ones he’d worn for the past century and a half. “I’d become rather attached,” he admitted. “And it turns out killing a Duke of Hell looks really good on a CV.”
Crowley laughed, and for a bizarre moment Aziraphale thought that Crowley was going to hug him, but then the demon just awkwardly scratched his ear. “I bet.”

Aziraphale shifted a little, confused at Crowley’s reaction and uncertain what it meant. “Should I have asked for something else?” he asked, a tad nervously. Perhaps he really was just becoming sentimental in his old age. He could have gone younger, or thinner, for that matter.

“Nah,” Crowley said, turning to look out over the pond so that Aziraphale couldn’t see his expression. “Then I’d have to get used to the new one, and that’s just a spot of bother, isn’t it? It’s easier this way.”

Crowley sat back down on the bench, and as Aziraphale joined him he noticed the demon had a small bag propped up next to him.

“How are you doing?” Aziraphale asked. Crowley looked tired, but he seemed to be in good enough spirits and his corporation only had a few minor marks still on it.

“I’ve got it all patched up,” Crowley said dismissively, and Aziraphale decided that meant Crowley was doing okay.

For a few moments they just sat in silence, looking at the ducks scudding past in the water, and Aziraphale wondered how many days Crowley had spent here waiting for him.

“Er,” Crowley said after a moment, and Aziraphale glanced over at him to see the demon staring furiously at the pavement, “with Hastur and all that, I ought to—I should say—er, that is—”

“It’s all right, my dear,” Aziraphale said kindly, and Crowley turned a slight shade of pink.

They returned to staring at the pond, and Aziraphale just soaked in the fact that they had both somehow made it out of this alive.

After a minute or two, Crowley turned away and picked up the small bag sitting next to him on the bench. He pulled the top open and held it out to Aziraphale hopefully. “Bagel?”

Chapter End Notes

Works inspired by this one:

Curiouslissa drew Aziraphale healing Crowley [here](https://example.com/).

Whiteleyfoster drew Hastur discorporating Aziraphale in the British Museum [here](https://example.com/).

Thank you dears!!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://example.com/) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!