

One of the golden rules of creating a long-lasting, memorable story is to begin and end it with a visual, of something to put an image into the wonderful mind of the reader who decided this afternoon, they were going to spend their very spare and precious time reading words and hallucinating rather than doing the very many chores that they were purposefully and expertly ignoring. In some cases, that image is of a garden, or perhaps the sound of dialogue of someone getting forcibly captured, or of an address that surely doesn't exist. This one, curiously, will begin, and [most likely] end, with a rather intelligent car.

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#### MODERN DAY (AUGUST 2023) - EARTH

If there was one thing to know about the Bentley, it was that it had a mind of its own, and was, quite honestly, a bit impudent if it felt that would give it more attention, positive or negative. It was much like a rather obstinate child, in that manner, stomping its feet and demanding things from its parents, but being loving in return when prompted (of course, due to its lack of feet, it instead would blink its headlights, rev it's engine, or play wildly appropriate lyrics of songs at the most inconvenient of times). It hadn't witnessed what happened in the bookshop, as it had been a bit preoccupied watching Nina and Maggie exchange bashful goodbye's in the coffee shop, so when its parent opened the driver's side door in a tangibly terrible mood, it figured it might try to cheer him up. It already had *Nightingales in Berkeley Square* queued up, since it understood that a rather 'alcoholic breakfast' was to follow the angels' and demons' visit, but the beautiful sound rang hollow with the passenger seat empty, and freshly threatened tulips wilting, even with Fear running through their stems. After a moment, Crowley turned it off, with a bit of a huff and a rather unkind press of the button. The Bentley felt a bit miffed, as it thought it would have been the perfect mood setting, but after turning the corner and seeing Aziraphale enter The Elevator,\* something sadly clicked in its motor.

(\*It's quite important to capitalize this particular Elevator, as it was no ordinary elevator. It led to places which were either much too spacious, much too crowded, but both definitely not welcoming of vintage cars owned by demons.)

Given the curse (or gift, depending on who was asked) that had befallen it so many years ago, its arsenal was filled to the brim with anything having to do with Queen, and after shuffling through its options, settled on the appropriately titled "Love of My Life."

*Love of my life, you've hurt me. You've broken my heart and now you leave me.*

Crowley didn't react. Just reached forward and turned off its radio again without taking his eyes, covered as they were, off the road.

"Not in the mood." his voice felt far too distant for the Bentley, "No funny business."

If the Bentley possessed a mouth, or any sort of facial appendages, it would have expressed its concern for its master, possibly in the form of a rather over exaggerated frown with big, wet puppy dog eyes and a tilt to its head. Instead, it settled for following its instructions to a T: going, shockingly, the speed limit, through central London and then through the sideroads where the

only company they had were trees and the many deer that decided the middle of the street was the perfect place to walk at a leisurely pace.

They pulled up to a quiet pond, not the usual one in St. James's, but one that looked as though it had been forgotten by most except for a very select few who remembered the winding, misleading roads it took to find its location. Crowley pulled onto the grass, then parked fast enough for the inertia to nearly launch him through the window. It was familiar a motion as breathing to him, both the actions unnecessary for him to do, yet he found intriguing to do nonetheless.

Crowley jumped out, taking care to turn off the car, and waved his hand in a very specific motion. Immediately, a bottle of very expensive and very intoxicating liquor miracled itself into his hand, and he bit off the cork with his bare teeth, careful to spit it out directly onto the ground. It had been taken from the cellar of a very rich man in America who had been saving it for his retirement party in a few years, but Crowley couldn't care less as he put the rim to his mouth and took a very long, very deep swig. He leaned against the Bentley, looked across the water, and stared out at the gorgeous afternoon reflecting against the water of the pond ahead of him.

At the moment, the inside of Crowley's mind was something akin to a mindfield. Not in that it was explosive and dangerous (he was well aware that he was a bit of a deviant of a demon when it came to that) but rather, every thought that he waded across, there was a high likelihood that he would end up thinking of the man-shaped being that he was trying his best to avoid. The problem was, Aziraphale was everywhere in there.

How long had they been friends? Too long for Heaven and Hell's taste, not long enough for his taste, and whatever Aziraphale felt about them, it clearly wasn't strong enough to keep him from leaving. From Mesopotamia to China, Russia to America, they had always managed to bump into each other, somehow end up saving or damning some unsuspecting human, and top it off with a nice dinner and drink at the fanciest establishment the area had to offer. It was their routine, and a rather enjoyable one at that.

Crowley's throat tightened, both from the burning, almost oaky taste of the drink (it had been appropriately called Forest Fire), and from the struggle of trying not to let a very human-like emotional reaction overtake him. To cry over an angel would be blasphemous, both to Hell and his very strong, very tough ego. It was a good thing he only had to report to himself anymore. Or perhaps, it was even worse. He knew everything happening in that mind-field mind whether he wanted to or not.

It only took about forty-five minutes for the bottle to fill and empty itself about three times over, and for Crowley to become fabulously drunk: swinging hips, loose grip on the bottle, and hiccups to top it off. The Bentley watched curiously. By now, it could tell the Something that was upsetting its master had to be the Angel. If he was upset enough, he would never say anything out loud, but the negative energy wafting off of him was enough to serve as a full conversation. But, the Bentley noticed as it sifted through the energy,\* there was something more complex

within it: pain, that was the most noticeable and overwhelming part, but also, buried low, as if trying to hide itself, was the unmistakable ache of love. A deep seated longing, a staunch, if fruitless, reaching out toward the cosmos in hopes of grabbing a lone star.

(\*The Bentely, like Angels, Demons, and any other object, had the ability to sense emotion around it. Even a simple dining room seat knows when its owner is unhappy, and does its best to be the chair-iest chair in its most needed moments.)

The sun began to set. It had been a rather bright and beautiful late Summer afternoon, the kind that would have been perfect for a picnic for two, but the Bentely had to settle for watching its master throw up unceremoniously in a bush.

“Ngk...ugh...” Crowley stumbled and leaned against the hood, “Well, that hasn’t happened in a while...”

He stumbled again, and this time chose to sit in the grass next to one of the wheels. Had he been more sober, he would have refrained from talking to his car so directly, but instead, he lolled his head against the warm metal toward its headlights.

“I don’t suppose *you’ve* got any advice.”

The Bentely sputtered its engine non-contentiously. The most experience it had with romance was playing *I’m in Love with My Car* for its master near the end of the world (and perhaps the odd bird it sweet-talked into not pooping on its hood).

“Lovely. Awesome. Thanks, that’s great.” Crowley slurred.

Something vibrated in his pocket. It took a moment for him to notice through the haze of utter drunkenness (and other unnamed emotions, feelings, and things that would remain unsaid), but he was able to pull himself together enough to reach into his pocket, not even look at the caller ID, and spit out a welcome.

“Who are you and what do you want.”

“Oh! ‘Ello, ‘ello, ‘ello!”

Crowley nearly hung up.

“How did you get this number, *Inspector Constable*.”

They laughed politely.

*“I just picked up the old looking black speaker thing in the bookshop and asked it to find you. I guess that worked! I had a few question-”*

“Don’t care.”

He blessed (blessed!) the humans that designed the end call button on modern phones to be so bright and red, as it took only a moment for him to hang up on Muriel before they could get another word in edgewise. Lazily, he picked up the bottle and lifted it high in order to take another drink, but groaned when only a few spare drops fell out. His brain wasn’t clear enough to try to refill it again, and in defeat, he tossed it into the grass. He figured that would be the right (well, wrong) thing for him to do, litter. After all, he was nothing but a demon who needed fixing, according to an angel he knew.

His eyes began to water for the fifth time in an hour.

“Don’t. Don’t you *dare*.” he hissed to them.

If he were able to put the fear of himself into his plants, he should be able to do that with his tear ducts as well. They shivered, but mainly just to make him feel better about himself. Truthfully, they felt more sad for him than anything (hence the tears). It worked for the moment, and they dried enough for him to notice his phone vibrating again.

“What.”

“Oh! ‘Ello, ‘e-”

“Get to the point or I’m hanging up on you again.” he growled.

Muriel cleared their throat.

*“Right. Um...Well, the Metatron put me in charge of the ‘book-shop’-”*

“I remember.”

*“Of course!”* they laughed lightly, but it was breathy with uncertainty, *“And, I would hate to disobey such a figure of high command, I don’t think I could truthfully. A-and he gave me an extremely important task but...I erm, don’t quite know how to ‘run’ a ‘bookshop’?”*

A hiss rose in Crowley’s throat, and he put a fatigued hand to his face.

“And you’re calling me because...?”

Muriel was quiet for a moment, then laughed again, this time, more certain in their humor.

*“Well, you know how to ‘run’ a ‘bookshop’!”*

If Muriel could see Crowley's expression, they would not have felt so confident laughing about his de-facto occupation as a bookseller. It was more pathetic than anything, but the infernal fire blazing in his eyes would have been enough to make them recall that he was, in fact, still a demon. A heartbroken, down-on-his-luck, homeless demon, but a demon nonetheless.

"Why does everyone think I know how to sell books..." he muttered to himself when the initial anger and embarrassment wafted away. "You're asking me to help you?"

*"Yes! Certainly that's a very human thing to do? They- I mean, we ask for help when we don't understand how to do things? Such simple-minded creatures we are."*

He could hear the smile in their voice, like they had come to the rather ingenious conclusion all by themselves and was quite proud of it. This angered him slightly: as empty-headed as humans could be (every war in existence proved that in spades), the last week also showed him the complexity of the beings in a way that perhaps he had been too distracted? blind? maybe a bit thick-headed himself? to see. A debate surged in his head: Muriel had only been on Earth for a grand total of a few days and an unsuspecting angel could cause trouble on their own quite easily. While they weren't impulsive, they were clueless, and being clueless in the middle of a crowded city while dressed as a police officer was begging for a night (or several) in jail. On the other hand, he wondered why he should bother whatsoever. Part of being 'human' was trial and error, figuring things out on one's own. That's what he had done in his six thousand years spent on the Earth's surface. In either case, he had his own life to attend to.

He burped and wiped a thick line of strangely smelling sweat from his head. His back ached from leaning against the Bentley and his (designer) pants were soaked from sitting on the wet mud for so long. The empty liquor bottle glittered in the dying sunlight.

His lip twitched. The only thing he had to look forward to was another uncomfortable night sleeping in the front seat and breakfast by himself. And brooding. Lots and lots of brooding, enough to make even the most sullen-eyed languisher feel put out and, frankly, annoyed at losing to such fierce competition after so much thankless training.

*"Ello? Mr. Crowley, are-"*

"I'm still here."

*"Oh! Right, of course. So, fellow human, um, what do you say?"*

Crowley didn't pout. It was not something that a person of his caliber would do. The pull of his lip and draw of his brow was a rather sophisticated expression of deep thought, if he said so himself (and he did say so). A groan came from deep inside of him, one that he really had to dig out with effort to get the point across exactly how he felt about their offer. He sighed, just to top off the drama.

"I can be there in half an hour."

Muriel cheered.

*"Thank you! I was starting to get worried, humans were coming inside and asking to give me 'money' for their 'purchases' and-*"

"You didn't actually sell it to them, did you?" Crowley asked as he gently pulled himself up from the ground.

*"Um...no?"*

Scoffs are natural actions for demons to be able to do (as well as mockery and treachery) but in his years of dealing with the many clever, yet exceedingly idiotic antics from a certain angel, he'd turned the feat into an art, which, of course, he mastered.

"Human lesson #1," he said as he sobered himself (he replaced the alcohol into the bottle and miracled it back in the cellar - the rich American's wife whacked him on the head for evidently being blind as a puppet with scratched out googly eyes), "If you're going to lie, at least be good at it."

*"Oh, I'm sorry! They were just...very persistent. Said the previous owner almost never had the shop open in the first place so this was a 'golden opportunity'?"* the hurt was evident in their voice, *"Is that true? Did Aziraphale always have this shop closed? Perhaps I should do that too..."*

Even the Bentley could feel Crowley's heart (as unnecessary as it was for him to have one) jolt slightly at the mention of such a silly, and familiar tradition.

"Yeah, he did..." he started up the engine and it sputtered to life, "And for a reason. Human lesson #2: Humans are annoying. Just flip the sign by the front door so it says 'very closed' on the outside."

"Right, on it. Thank you!"

He hung up without giving them a goodbye. He'd see them soon anyway.

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#### MODERN DAY (AUGUST 2023) - HEAVEN

There was nothing wrong with the coffee. It was a regular caramel latte made with as much love as Nina could spare given the lack of sleep for the past 30 hours. He drank all of it during the conversation with the Metatron, and its sweet flavor remained on his tongue, even through the overpowering taste of desperation that had been pushed onto him by a certain demon when he had grabbed him by the lapels and pulled him close, much too close.

Aziraphale tightened his mouth as if a reflex as soon as the memory came back. Really, it never even left. It had happened no less than 10 minutes ago, but his mind folded and replaced it so many times over, it may as well have happened before metaphorical clocks even began to tick.

“My dear boy, what’s got you so tense?” The Metatron had taken the appearance of a sweet and gentle old man, and it seemed the characteristics were accurate.

“Oh, ah, I just…”

Lying never came easy to Aziraphale, not unless he really, *really* needed to. That was the demon’s job. Half truths he could do, but the Metatron could absolutely not know even the slightest what exactly was happening in his mind, as it could pose something of a problem\*.

(\*As much a problem as, say, a plugged-in toaster being tossed into a healthy bath with an unsuspecting, and very much alive, body still inside, playing pleasantly with a rubber duck.)

He straightened himself up and quickly eased a pleasant smile onto his face.

“I’m just rather excited and, well, I’ll be truthful, it *is* a virtue, ah, a little *nervous* about this project you’ve entrusted to me.”

The Metatron smiled warmly, the wrinkles around his eyes suggesting many years of similar displays of kindness.

“Not to worry, Aziraphale. You will be briefed about what is expected of you, of any guidelines, et cetera.” He chuckled politely, “I was worried you were going to say that you were afraid of returning to Heaven!”

Aziraphale chuckled as well. In the meantime, his heart squeezed itself nearly inside out and a cold sweat began to develop on his back. Of course he wanted to be here, it was the *right* thing to do after all. Heaven called him up for an important duty, and it was an opportunity to make great change, if he was given the chance. Yet, with each moment he remained in this Elevator, the closer he was getting to Heaven, the further he was getting away from Earth, the further he was getting away from -

“I must ask again,” he interrupted his own train of thought, “Why me? I mean, there are plenty of very capable angels in Heaven who, I’m sure, could do a much better job than I.”

The Metatron smiled again, but this time it was warm as stale coffee.

“Oh, there certainly are,” the Elevator came to a stop and announced that they were in Heaven in a neutral, secretarial manner, “but you offer something that no other angel in Heaven can: human experience. Walk with me, if you will.”

The empty white walls and repeating windows led to a view of nothing - his brain filled in a scene of a few stray humans passing by on their ways to other Soho shops. The offices of Heaven were a widespread nothingness that was inescapable no matter what direction one went in, save for the area for humans, where wonders of the world reached far into an infinite (and blinding white) sky. It was the only part of Heaven that Aziraphale could stand, from a purely aesthetic perspective, naturally. There was a reason why he kept his bookshop as crowded and colorful as possible.

“You have a very unique perspective that could make the Second Coming that much more smooth of an operation.” The Metatron said as they walked down a hallway that was as indistinguishable from the fifteen others that they had just passed, “6,000 years of interaction with the very creatures that are going to be Judged\* by the Almighty themselves. You know the little...*things* better than anyone else here.”

(\*This is another word that is important to capitalize. To judge a human normally would be sin, and a rather shallow look at a person’s character. To be Judged meant to have one’s soul put into a metaphorical [or perhaps literal, the Almighty hasn’t chosen yet] lemon squeezer and see how much goodness or evil in liquid form came splattering out when squished. A rather painful process for the recipient if one did not know how to handle a human soul.)

They turned to an office: a clear table with a single, thick manilla folder sitting on top. Behind it sat a chair with a back so straight just looking at it snapped Aziraphale’s spine into a 90 degree angle, and behind that, Michael, Uriel, and Saraqael, each with equal expressions of barely suppressed rage, sequentially, behind their eyes. Curiously, however, Saraqael’s held just the tiniest touch of pity. Aziraphale merely looked at them and tightened his jaw. Cocking his brow would have been too much, much as he felt compelled to. A simple show that, no matter how much they hated him at this moment, they could not touch him. They, as it would seem, *needed* him.

“Aziraphale, Principality, Guardian of the Eastern Gate of Eden,” Michael announced with sharp, and almost certainly mocking, grandiose.

“Michael,” he nodded his head in their direction, “Uriel, Saraqael.”

The Metatron stood between the two groups at the side of the office desk. The tension was thick, enough to almost send shimmers into the air made of angelic magic, but to him, it was all childish nonsense. Surely whatever hatchets they had armed themselves with could be buried for the greater good of God’s Plan.

“Welcome, all of you.” he started, “We have much to discuss and very little time. Uriel, would you like to begin?”

Aziraphale could feel their air of importance rise just a touch from being addressed first by the voice of God. He had to make an effort not to roll his eyes.



“Of course. Let us not delay: The Second Coming.” They declared and raised their hands outward in prayer, “Where God will come down to Earth and Judge every human soul.”

“Right,” Aziraphale said stiffly.

“Every soul that ever has or ever will be formed will ascend into Heaven or Hell for their eternal reward or eternal damnation.” Saraqael continued.

“How excellent.”

“And the Earth will be engulfed in flames, and the final era of war for Heaven and Hell will begin to decide the final, ever encompassing rule of the universe.” Michael finished.

“Jolly good.”

“Will you *please* stop talking, Aziraphale.” Uriel snipped.

He smiled awkwardly before it fell into a partially hidden frown. His hands behind his back had been shaking during the entire exchange, just a tiny pulse that went in accordance with his unnecessary heartbeat.

“Your job,” Michael stepped forward and pushed their hand into the manilla folder; a projection of the Earth spinning slowly with billions of different colored dots spread across its surface phased into existence, “is to find a suitable vessel for our God to be hosted inside. Each of these dots represent a human body. Considering your, hm, *expertise*, with the creatures, you can decide which physical characteristics, strength of faith, or any other traits would be fit for the Almighty to inhabit.”

Slowly, Aziraphale raised a hand. Michael stared at it, then raised a brow.

“What is that...*thing*\* you’re doing with your arm?”

“I’d like to ask a question.” He said calmly.

“Then why did you do that? You could have just asked it.” Saraqael added.

Aziraphale always had a bit of a streak of something that wasn’t quite so holy. It was what drew a certain demon to him, and was just enough to make him apparently, be worth knowing. Of course, in Heaven, that sort of attitude wasn’t appreciated, but certainly, if he was to gain the respect of the archangels again, was he not to follow every word?

“You asked me to stop talking,” he said, cool and smooth as a body of water lacking angry ducks, “I was simply obeying, and being humble is a virtue. Raising one’s hand is a human action to show that they’d like to speak or ask a question.”

Michael looked as though they would very much like to toss him out of Heaven themselves.

(\*Michael was vaguely aware of what raised hands meant, Muriel, the little fool, had done it themselves. It was strange to see a creature who had been in Heaven their entire life doing it, it felt near sacrilegious to see an Earth-grown angel do it as well.)

“Of course,” they said, sweet as sugar clumps in vinegar, “what is your question?”

Aziraphale cleared his throat professionally.

“How do I know which human to choose? Surely just how they look is a rather, well, superficial way of selecting a vessel fit for the Almighty.”

Michael smiled again, this time with more malice laced in the curve of their lip.

“That is up for you to decide. If the vessel is too weak, *well*, that would risk the life of the human,” Michael’s smile grew as Aziraphale’s dropped like a stone into a pond, “And I’m sure that, with how attached you are to the creatures, you wouldn’t like to put any human lives unnecessarily at risk, yes?”

Aziraphale straightened his back and tried very fiercely to keep his hands from balling into fists. He had always tried to show empathy for the creatures, his very first action on Earth besides guarding a gate was trying to save the humans inside of it. They were such fascinating creatures, full of imagination, wonder, love, and endless compassion...he even had a little bit of input on their creation as well, in the early days. Was it such a shame that he wanted to see them safe? True, there was a time, back during the French revolution, that he had essentially damned a human to death by beheading for wearing his clothes, but, in his defense, he really, *really* wanted that crepe.

“Very true, yes.”

“Any other questions you have for us?”

“Ah,” Aziraphale took a short breath, “Yes, actually, I was wondering, why not send Jesus down? Surely that was the original plan, what with the Revelation to John and all?”

Uriel barely managed to hide their scoff, and it was one that suggested they thought Aziraphale kept his nose in too many books at a time.

“Sending the Son down didn’t work last time. This time, we’re going to be more thorough. Send the Almighty down Herself, it’ll all go much according to plan,” they sneered, “And no thanks to you and your *boyfriend*, we hardly have enough time to do that either.”

Aziraphale blushed hard enough to feel his ethereal soul glow pink.

“Right...”

“Anything else?” Uriel continued, feigning politeness.

Aziraphale smiled politely and shook his head.

“No, thank you. That is all.”

“Excellent!” The Metatron said, “Archangels, you have your own duties to attend to, Aziraphale, you have your orders.”

The archangels each gave him a single, curt nod before walking or wheeling down the holy white hallway, leaving him and the Metatron alone.

“If you do have any more questions, you know how to contact me.” He said.

Aziraphale’s lip shuttered for a moment.

“Oh! Actually, yes, ah, I do have, hah, one... uh, question.”

The Metatron stared at him for a moment and prompted him with a hand when Aziraphale said nothing.

“Right-o, um, how much time will I have to select the vessel?”

Aziraphale smiled, but inside he already felt winded. Whatever number the Metatron would give him meant how much time the Earth would have left. It was a familiar feeling, this ticking clock on his back. It had been on him since the beginning of the universe, and only recently had he managed to hit the snooze button on it for a few years. The clock, it seemed, grew a spine and decided to hit him back with its sharp needle-hand.

“I think a year would be sufficient, yes?” said the Metatron.

The clock’s hand stabbed him right in the heart.

“Oh! Oh, no, no, no, I don’t think that’d be enough at all! Um...” he searched around for a number, oh, bless how clever those Arabians were for inventing standardized numbers! “How

about three years? I think that would be enough. I mean, after all, this is a vessel for the Almighty, one cannot be, ah, flippant with this decision.”

The Metatron stood still for a moment in deliberation. Aziraphle watched his lip twitch in thought, and with each pull, he felt his own heartstrings tug like that childish human game of tug of war.

“I suppose that would be alright.”

Aziraphel’s heart nearly burst. It wasn’t a lot of time, but it would be enough for him to figure out something. What that something was, he didn’t quite know yet. At the very least, he had three years to figure it out.

“Thank you, *thank you*, truly.”

The Metatron nodded and turned away, but stopped in his tracks to pull something out of his jacket.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” it was a small, undecorated, gray box, “Your promotion. There is a second one in there for your, eh, Earthly acquaintance, if he’d be willing to return to the side of light and righteousness. It is now, to say, *officially* within your rights to ‘bring him home’.”

Aziraphale’s throat dried as he gently took the box from the Metatron’s hand. How he ached for a steaming up of hot chocolate, if not for the taste, but for the comfort it could provide in such a small, simple liquid (bless, oh bless those humans for creating such wonderful things with their lovely, beautiful imaginations).

“Good luck,” Metatron turned away toward the emptiness of Heaven, “You may need it, Supreme Archangel Aziraphale.”

Aziraphale watched as he left, but he could not pinpoint the exact moment when the figure in the hallway seemingly either turned a corner or simply disappeared from sight, and he was left with only himself. Of course, Up here, one was never truly alone. She was always there, always watching (or at the very least, taking a sweeping glance). Heaven was supposed to be where one felt the truest, strongest, and warmest love of The Creator, something that could not be found or replicated anywhere else in the massive, ever-expanding universe.

Aziraphale’s hands were cold as he opened the box.

A harsh light burned his eyes slightly as he pulled off the top. Once he adjusted, he stopped breathing. Two twin cracks split down his heart like a glass thrown very gently at full force against very sturdy concrete.

Halos. Two halos rested snugly inside. One emitted a harsh glow, gold and glittering with high royalty and extra decoration around its gleaming, new rim. This one was designed to be the halo

of an archangel, and as bright and truthfully, gaudy, as it was, it would be his to bear. It took no physical effort to lift it, not here in Heaven, and he let it float gently above his hand for a moment.

"I suppose you know where you're supposed to go, old chap." he said kindly.

The halo sputtered and spun chaotically, worrying Aziraphale for a moment, until it begrudgingly came to a rest above his head, harshly refusing to merge with his corporation permanently.

His old halo had been destroyed in the battle of the bookshop, and would have cost him a fortune to replace (it likely would have cost him his entire Heavenly pension - they were hand-made by the Almighty and customized for every angel, after all. If one looked closely, he had the script of his favorite poem etched into it before writing had even been created by humans). Yet, he found himself wishing for its comforting, if invisible, presence. This crown bent his head down as if in forced prayer.

No, he chastised himself. He chose this, now he shall wear it with pride (but not too much, of course). Carefully, he attempted to sit up straight and regal, he was the new supreme archangel, and damn him if he wasn't going to try to present himself as that.

His neck cracked dully from the weight.

Very slowly, he let a sigh escape him, a tiredness he hadn't felt in a long time settling onto his shoulders, just to add on to this new pain. He didn't forget the other halo.

Slowly, he too picked it up and let it float gently above his fingers. This one was old, very, *very* old, perhaps older than 'old' itself as a concept. It was tarnished, but still glittered like silver, with old smudges of stardust, and perhaps, was that ink from a celestial drawing pen? And was that a burn on one of the sides? He wondered, had the previous owner spent nights tapping a pen against their head while drawing up plans for the universe? Had they tossed it away when they began to Fall so it would not get too damaged, and hoped that some lone force would catch it?

Aziraphale cracked a smile. It was lovely and light, and much more friendly and familiar than the one shackling his head at the moment. It flew around him in a charming dance, making his smile grow just a tad more, before it settled on shrinking itself into a small band on his left ring finger.

His smile flicked as he touched a hand to the new ring. Oh, if only Crowley had *listened*. If only he *understood* what he was trying to do. Hell was always going to be wrong, why would he turn down an opportunity to be on the *right* side of things?

*We're on our side*, he had said some years ago, *We could have been...us*. Aziraphale grimaced. There never was a 'their' side. It was only...going as far with each of their respective offices as they could. That still fulfilled their heavenly and hellish duties, in his mind, and was the

most correct thing either one of them could do with their circumstances. He twisted the new silver ring absently, his own golden pinkie ring growing slightly cold with envy.

Up here, he could certainly do much more. While it was uncomfortable, this space (no, he chastised himself again, this was *Heaven*, it wasn't *supposed* to be uncomfortable, he should never even want to *leave* it) he would endure it so that he could change it for the better. While he knew it had some issues and was far from perfect (incorrect, this was *Heaven*, it was the *definition* of perfect) he knew that with some effort, it could be made even better, suitable enough so that Crowley could be welcomed back with open arms.

He twisted the ring again. By default, halos were on the warmer side, filled with the mighty love of God, after all. Yet, the halo on his head was stiff and cold as a crown, and every part of his vessel felt almost frozen. His left hand was warm. The silver ring caught light from every direction and seemed to laugh playfully at him as he shivered. Not unkindly, but enough to say 'oh, you silly, silly angel, did you forget your cardigan in the bookshop?' Aziraphale pursed his lip. He did. And he missed it.

He leaned back in the chair, but it was as stiff and uncomfortable as it looked.

"Oh, my dear..." he mumbled to no one\*, "I only wanted to see you happy again...I've never seen you smile quite so brightly as when you were making those..." What was the word? "Nebulas."

The globe spun slowly in front of him, casting its own blue light around the room. Aziraphale had to thank the Archangels for this small, indirect blessing, at least: they had allowed him the gift of color.

"Well," he muttered briskly and sat up, "I suppose there's no better time to start than the present."

(\*There was always Someone listening in Heaven, They were just a little preoccupied with finding a lemon squeezer.)

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#### MODERN DAY (AUGUST 2023) - EARTH

Truthfully, there never were any parking spaces available in the middle of one of the busiest streets in Soho (it was Soho, after all), but whenever the Bentley approached, a spot seemed to miraculously appear, usually, near the bookshop. It had been a trend for the past 90 years, and it would continue to be so, if a certain demon had anything to say about it.

Crowley parked, locked the car, and stepped out, for the first time, with some trepidation. *He* wouldn't be in there, that wasn't the issue, the problem was that as soon as he would step inside, he'd see every single memory they had together instead.

The few passersby of the evening rush muttered 'excuse me's' and 'pardon's' around him as he stood in front of the entrance, a scowl etching itself deeper into his face. He could stand there forever with little to no effort, if he really felt like it. At first, people would assume he was a paid actor pretending to be a statue and toss money by his feet, then after a few days, they would wonder if he actually was a statue. After a few years, a fence would be put up around him, so pedestrians wouldn't assume he was a person worth barging into or mugging. After fifty years, grandparents would tell their grandchildren of the night where a mysterious man-looking thing walked up to the front of an abandoned bookshop and simply never moved from the spot. He'd be used as an allegory for indecisiveness or greed, perhaps of how capitalism keeps one in a constant state of confusion and uncertainty. After a thousand years, he'd be used as an example for what 'humans' used to look and dress like in that day and age. In a million, he'd be used as an example of what a 'human' was.

Crowley growled. Then he jumped up the stairs two at a time, and wrenched open the door with both hands.

There was the cushion he sat on while Aziraphale practiced his magic set for the show in the West End after the Blitz. There was the shelf where a line of Jane Austin books stood in a row, all with a semi-glittering gloss of gold calligraphy stating their titles: *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice* (damn that book in particular), *Sense and Stability*. There was the space that was cleared for the ball. There was the hall where they shared their first and only dance together. There was the spot where he had grabbed his angel by the lapels and begged him not to leave without exchanging a single word.

"Oh!" Muriel exclaimed upon seeing him (they were reading a book while standing in a corner),  
"Ello, 'ell-

"Yeah, you can drop the Inspector act, Muriel."

Their smile shook, but did not fall. If anything, they relaxed.

"Oh, wonderful!" they sighed, "I was getting a little tired of it, if I must be honest."

"You must be..." he muttered.

There was the chair, where the new-to-Earth angel had their first 'cupper-tea,' and he sat on the ledge next to a more seasoned celestial entity. Now, he fell into it and slinked his leg over the armrest.

"Erm," they turned to him.

"What."

It was strange for Muriel to think that, at one point, this creature sitting wildly incorrectly in the seat in front of them was an angel. They couldn't imagine him dressed in all white with wings and a halo, not while he was decked in all black and sunglasses even while they were inside and it was almost nighttime.

"D'you think I could change the outfit? I'm not saying I'm ungrateful for this but, I do prefer my own uniform," they looked around the bookshop for a moment, as though a set of clothes would jump out from behind a bookcase, "Wherever it is."

Crowley rolled his head along his neck to scowl at them.

"Why're you asking me, it's your body you're dressing. I would say raid Aziraphale's closet, but you won't find anything good up there."

That was a lie. They'd find many good things up there. It just wouldn't fit them.

"Oh, um," they awkwardly removed their hat, "Well, I think I may just take a look anyway. Um, you said the clothes would be in a 'clos-et'?"

Crowley stared at them for a moment. And right when he had just gotten comfortable.

He jumped up, and gestured at them to follow him. They went up the spiral staircase, and walked down a short hallway to the room Aziraphale called 'his'. It wasn't so much as a bedroom as it was a room with a bed in it (a bed that was hardly ever used - Crowley could count the amount of times Aziraphale slept in six-thousand years on one hand), with all his favorite books towering on all sides, and the closet bursting with clothes he'd managed to save as far back as his Shakespear days. The smell of him was strong in here, with the culprit being an open bottle of cologne on a dresser. Crowley's lip shook, but he turned it into a grimace.

"Here," he tore through the hangers and cloth (his Fell the Marvelous suit, his cravat from the Globe, his many, *many* tartan bow ties-), "Pants," he shoved them into Muriel's hands, "Shirt. Vest. Congratulations, you now have clothes."

He'd given them one of Aziraphale's white button ups and a cream vest that was on the newer side that had been a tad too small for him. He remembered the angel had called him in a panic that day when he went shopping, surprised that the sizes had changed for the first time, well, ever. Crowley smirked slightly remembering his response.

("Maybe lay off the cakes, yeah?" "Now, *Crowley-*")

He hadn't meant it, of course, but it was worth getting Aziraphale's feathers ruffled. That store was known for selling their clothes too small, and Crowley forgot to warn Aziraphale that was his doing before suggesting he shopped there.



Muriel smiled wide. Crowley frowned. Were all angel's smiles radiant as sunshine, or was it just the ones who were most annoying?

"Thank you!"

They waved a hand up and pulled it toward the ground quickly, yanking down Heavenly magic to put on the new outfit. As soon as it was on, Crowley could tell they miracled it to fit correctly as well. In their hands, the Constable outfit folded itself neatly in a small pile, with the hat on top.

"It looks wonderful!" they exclaimed, taking a few astonished glances down at their newly dressed corporation.

Crowley nodded shortly.

"Cool. Awesome."

The scent was too much. It was making his head think things that were far too pleasant for how he felt about the angel in the moment, so he stalked over to the spare bedroom (it had been used as a closet, a book den, and most recently, a bedroom for a rather empty-headed archangel) and slammed the door behind him, just to tell Aziraphale's room exactly how he felt about it (it wasn't too offended, it understood completely how he felt, and in fact, sympathized).

Muriel felt the walls rattle from the force. They pursed their lip. They were, admittedly, not very good with reading emotion yet (not without using a secret talent of theirs), especially not such *intense* human-feeling emotions, but something told them that the demon was angry. Possibly, they thought, with a certain new Supreme Archangel. Since he returned to Heaven for his new duties, Mr. Crowley seemed rather cross. It was a strange reaction: shouldn't he be happy for him?

They stood still. No, no. That wasn't for them to mind with. If working at their desk for the past 6,000 years taught them anything, it was that unless someone came to them with a problem, everything was probably fine! Their input wouldn't be helpful anyway, so it was best to stay quiet and out of the way, just observe, document, and report as they were told. Now what to do? Well, they supposed, they were in a bookshop. They had been given a 'book' to 'read'. Perhaps they should get a move on with it.

They set down the Constable clothes on the neatly made bed and walked out into the quiet hallway. Imitation candelabras on the wall threw warm light across everything, making the stacks of books cluttering the hallway seem more towering than ever. Muriel gently slid their fingers over the spines as they walked by. So many 'books'. So different from the scrolls and projection screens in Heaven, all written in a universal language angels were guaranteed to understand. Many titles in the stacks had compositions and glyphs on them Muriel could not recognize, and yet, they all looked equally worn with love and age. Had Aziraphale ('Mr. Fell,' as

they recalled he liked to be called by the humans) the time to read all of them? And why did he need so many?

They paused by the spare room Mr. Crowley stomped into, careful not to let the floor creak. Something told them that being perceived right now while the demon was upset might not be the best course of action. Ever so slowly, they leaned closer toward the aged, wooden door. It was quiet, save for the sound of deep breathing, and perhaps a little bit of fabric rustling. That was strange, what did a demon need to breathe for? Yet, that begged another sly question in their brain: why did angels need bookshops? Especially bookshops that were filled to the brim with crumbling pieces of paper and leather stapled together, yellow paint, the most comfortable squishy chairs, warm 'cupperty's' to look at, pretty lights...Muriel found herself engulfed by a very warm feeling indeed.

This space was much different from Heaven. It was crowded, it was full of color, and it had a distinct flavor of evil in some places (Muriel had felt it most as they passed by a small table in the back, with candles on its surface and two chairs neatly pushed under it, as if waiting to be pulled out and used once again). But that 'evil' hardly counted for anything, it was overpowered by such a strong and sweet scent of love that they could help but feel happy just being inside the shop. It was heavy with memories that they were unfortunately not privy to, but could tell were there. They could almost stick out their nose and smell\* the laughs and smiles, the almost-glances and almost-touches that could have and *should* have been there.

(\*Muriel was especially good at discerning emotions through scent. It was a secret talent of theirs that they mainly kept to themselves, except for the rare, and unfortunate, celestial creature who happened to pass by their desk once every couple of hundred of years.)

Slowly, they descended the spiral staircase, breathing in the feeling of each step. Everything on Earth was so new and incredible! Even something as simple as staircases and railings, the humans made it intricate and beautiful! Carefully, they ran their fingers over the old iron, miraculously free of rust and spots. The tiny details were almost lost in the dim light, but the delicate touch they applied to it only made them appreciate such new senses. In Heaven, things were only made to be necessary, to have such beauty would be indulgent, and indulgence was a sin...Muriel pulled their hand away.

What was this new feeling, a rush of warmth to their face and a stirring of discomfort? They wanted to admire the railing, but it would be a sin, would it not? Would it not tarnish their holy spirit? Muriel quickly finished their descent. Perhaps they should stay away from the stairs for now.

On the desk lay the book they had begun to read. Its black cover was simple, and free from too much decoration. This calmed them. Gingerly, they sat in the comfortable desk chair and picked up the novel, opening it to the last page they had left off. Muriel methodically scanned over the words and went through five pages in thirty seconds. They were an archivist after all, and a documentor. They were *very* good at reading.

Yet, they found themselves enjoying it less as they sped through. It simply felt like taking in the words without taking in the feeling with it too, nothing but information rather than a story. For a moment, Muriel set down the book, and decided to let the strangest part of their brain take charge. It was silly to think in such a way, but perhaps, just for this, it would be warranted. Anything was possible on Earth, after all, why not let the strange and miraculous take over? So many strange things had happened over the past few days either way.

*Imagine you're a human*, they thought to themselves. The thought made them both slightly giddy and slightly sick. They shook away the feeling. *Imagine you're a human, and you don't have the luxury of being able to read really, really fast. You have to sit and take in every word, every single one on the page. Try to do like that, yes! Some human spent a long time putting all these written words together, and it'd be a shame to just ingest them so quickly.*

Muriel pulled the book up from their lap and let their eyes rest on the page again, this time, being sure to take their time drinking in each word. The human method of reading was so much slower than simply viewing the contents, but Muriel appreciated this new way of gathering information. Did humans always do everything so inefficiently, just so they could enjoy it more? As they read, something strange began to happen.

Pictures.

Pictures and scenes of the book began to form in their mind, based on the words they read, until the words themselves seemed to fall away from their vision. It was almost like the projection from files up in Heaven, except so much different, so much stranger, so much more tangible and almost real, able to be edited with just a thought in real time.

And it was beautiful.

~

#### MODERN DAY (AUGUST 2023) - HEAVEN

"What are you playing at?" Uriel cornered the Metatron, not angrily, as that would be a rather stupid attitude to direct toward their boss, but not kindly either, "Bringing the traitor up here? Giving him the demon traitor's halo?"

The Metatron hardly spared them a glance as he passed by them to his own office.

"It's well within his rights to, he is the Supreme Archangel now."

Uriel took in a breath (that truly showed how annoyed they were, it was such a human action, and yet there they were doing it) and struggled to keep from exploding on him. Everything having to do with Aziraphale was bound to end in tragedy and a frankly embarrassing amount of paperwork. It would be best to avoid the headache altogether.

“Yes, that’s an even better question,” they placed themselves in front of the Metatron’s path so he couldn’t walk by them dismissively as he often liked to, “Why in the holy name of God would you make *him* an *Archangel*?”

Uriel’s voice dropped to an angry hiss that surprised even the Metatron. He gave them nothing more than a raised brow, but it was enough to remind them that he was above them in every way, and his mood was never too distinguishable.

“Respectfully, of course.” They straightened themselves and clamped their arms behind their back.

Surprisingly, the Metatron smiled, which sent Uriel into some confusion, and even more so when he began to chuckle.

“You Archangels,” he took a breath, “You never really take the time to see the big picture, do you?” he shook his head and gestured for them to follow him.

“This was all orchestrated by the Almighty. Trust, Uriel, if I had the choice, I would have struck the traitor Aziraphale and the demon Crowley down the moment they decided to muck around on Earth as a team, rather than as adversaries like they were *designed* to do. But, that was not my call to make.”

The Metatron kept his head forward, but the tiniest glance he made Up gave Uriel all the answers they needed.

“The Lord spoke to me a while back, and explained that, after a certain important event happened concerning a fly, I was to come down to Earth and give an offer to a strange and unlikely source. It made no sense at the time, but after today, well...how She does love a good riddle.” he chuckled again, but it fell more flat than before, “My assumption is that, with Gabriel gone, Aziraphale can fill the power vacuum, *but*, also be kept under watch here in Heaven. He always got into too much trouble on Earth, this could be an opportunity for him to learn from his mistakes.”

Uriel nodded once. It made sense, but not enough to appease.

“Why offer to raise the Fallen one? Why not just strike both of them down? They’re both certainly deserving.”

The Metatron smiled again. It was always such a cryptic, and frankly, annoying move, as if he knew more than the person he was speaking with and was positively tickled by the prospect.

“I already knew the demon wouldn’t take the offer, he’s far too corrupt to accept anything from anyone. It really was more a bargaining chip for Aziraphale to want to come back to Heaven. He’s sick in love with that...*creature*, I figured it would make him happy. As for why we don’t strike them down....”

For the first time, the smug look on his face fell.

“Part of me wishes that we could, the demon especially, in any case. Both have been a thorn in my side for centuries. But for some reason, they always manage to wriggle free of punishment.” he shrugged, “I suppose being separated is enough punishment for the both of them, for now. Once the Earth is destroyed, they’ll have their final true sentences, I’ll make sure of that.”

“But you always have access to the Book of Life.” Uriel said quickly, “You could always do with it what you wanted.”

The Metatron nodded again in agreement.

“Yes, yes, I could,” he put his hands behind his back, “And for hiding Gabriel, they certainly should be taken care of. But... I was recently told to drop the issue. Whatever Plan They have, it is not one that I am allowed to know just yet.”

Uriel could read the frustration on his face, it was evident and tangible, and said that he would like nothing more than to punish the two beings who prevented not only an entire apocalypse that had been planned for thousands of years, but also caused an Archangel to run away with a demon, and corrupted each other from their respective job callings.

“So,” Uriel said, copying the Metatron’s movement, “The Plan is to just...wait and babysit a principality with a big desk and shiny, new halo.”

“She will be coming down soon enough,” he said with a reassuring smile, “Everything we will ever want to know will be revealed then. We must simply wait.”

As the Metatron walked away, Uriel’s lip tightened semi-unconsciously, and their fist shook ever so slightly.

“This is... bullshit.” they grumbled through gritted teeth.

Their footsteps echoed onto empty ears as they walked away.

~

Aziraphale took another deep sigh. He had been staring at documentations of humans for the past 53 hours straight, and it was beginning to make his eyes water. By all technicality, it was no different than the kind of reading he did in his own bookshop, where he’d become so engrossed by a text that several days could pass without him noticing. But this was far more soul crushing - how on Earth (pun intended) was he supposed to pick a single human out of the billions that walked, breathed, were born, and died on such a planet that was huge in prospect, but tiny in reality? And for it to carry God, the creator of every thing that has ever or will ever exist? He swirled the globe with another swipe of his finger against its touchless surface and picked whatever dot he happened to land on:

Miguel Ramos, 56 years old, location: Nicaragua

- Devoted Catholic, loving husband, father, recent grandfather
- Recent good deeds: donated food to the poor even when his own food supplies were low, helped an elderly woman cross the street

Aziraphale pursed his lips. It was superficial, the notes he was given on any certain human. They all read the same as another at such a non-detailed level. In any case, this one could work, but if the vessel were too weak to carry God, he could risk leaving a family without a father, a husband, a grandfather. He groaned and finally let his composure, a thing he'd spent many millenia delicately putting together, crack, and he put his head onto the desk in defeat.

There was a certain dot he had been wanting to check on. It wasn't quite human, but it did occupy a human body, even if it had been used to house a celestial (well, occult) spirit rather than a human soul.

Slowly, he barely pulled his head back up and took a glance down either hallway on his left and right. The pillars on either side of him, if anything, would give him some privacy. With the coast clear, and his mind heavy, he swirled the globe toward the United Kingdom, then zoomed in toward London, then toward Soho, then towards a particular street, which housed a particular shop. He stopped. The dots took the forms of people this far close up, each human shaded in a color that matched with their aura\*, which threw the entire street into a rainbow cacophony.

(\*Of the many things that Anathema Device got incorrect in her wild theories about the world, human auras were not one of them. In fact, she had been spot on with them, so much so that a certain angel was depending on them to find a vessel to house the spirit of God.)

He had a perfect view of the bookshop, with a perspective that was a little bit higher off the ground. It was becoming sunset on this section of Earth, where it turned away from the rash sun to face a quiet and polite moonlit night. There was a white angelic presence in the bookshop, and it ached Aziraphale's heart to know that it wasn't him. Peeking between the halfway closed curtains, he could see Muriel sitting straight-backed and proper upon his desk chair, reading a book, with a small stack next to them on the floor. Every once in a while, they set the book down and closed their eyes, squeezing their lids shut, as if trying to manifest something that only they were allowed to see. There was another presence in the shop, on one of the upper floors. Aziraphale felt something pounding in his throat, as well as the sensation of it drying up quite and very suddenly.

The aura was yellow. Of course it was yellow.

He shouldn't be trying to spy on him, not so close after leaving him, not while he was under constant surveillance. His fingers shook, with anger, envy, fear, perhaps something akin to a definitely warm feeling he'd rather not place a name on. All he was supposed to be doing was

checking to see if a human body, thin like paper mache, could hold the spirit of God for even just a moment before being shredded apart. *That* was his job.

Still, the decision to choose him for this particular job felt like a strange choice - surely there had to be some reasoning beyond his connection with humans? It didn't make sense, but the weight it put upon his shoulders was very real, and very easy to understand. The halo as well seemed to steadily and sneakily get heavier when he wasn't paying attention to its freezing presence. He wondered if he could take it off for just a moment.

"Supreme Archangel."

Aziraphale shot up and faced the voice, quickly trying to hide the pain and surprise that flashed over his face. It was Uriel: they had appeared a little to the left of his desk with a serene, if empty, smile on their face, and their hands held professionally behind their back.

"Oh! Ah, Uriel, how can I be of assistance?" he asked, doing his best to hide the anxious quiver to his voice.

Uriel pulled their eyes away from him to take a curious look at the globe spinning slowly next to them and walked around it at a leisurely pace.

"Nothing in particular. I just wanted to check on your progress."

Aziraphale blanched.

"My-my progress? Why, it's only been a few days, I'd been told I'd have three years to choose a vessel?"

Uriel hardly raised a brow.

"Of course. I doubt an angel as smart as you would need all that time, though, would you?"

Aziraphale was quite intelligent, but beyond that, he had impeccable memory. Uriel had only been on Earth for a few separate times in recent years, and one each of them interestingly, involved him. He *recalled* being pushed against a wall with threat of Falling, he *distinctly* remembered how they tried to use his distress halo to declare war on Hell, again, and he *certainly* couldn't forget them assisting in capturing "him" (Crowley in disguise) for the express purpose of putting him to death through hellfire. He put his hands together on the desk and kept his answer short and cordial.

"I will use any and all time God will provide for me."

Uriel's expression did not change, but it certainly darkened a couple shades as they swiped the surfaceless Earth to spin in toward themselves.

“Looking for a vessel in your bookshop?”

His lip twitched.

“Just, ah, wanted to check on Muriel. Wanted to see how they were faring with the new position-”

“Muriel is fine.” Uriel interrupted. Their eyes were dark, and if Aziraphale looked close enough, he could see the starless night that covered the universe in them before a certain fallen angel had filled it with color and light. If they weren’t so dangerous, so powerful, the sight would almost be beautiful. “If anything, they will report to me. You need to focus on *your* job. Three years really is not a lot of time in the grand Plan...” they raised a brow, “So choose carefully.”

A tiny choir played, and they disappeared. Aziraphale watched the spot they came from for a moment longer, and was careful to let out a tiny sigh and a few tears very, very quietly.

He miracled himself a new notepad and fountain pen, wiped his face, and spun the Earth again with an expressionless face.

Amy Thomas, Derrick Whitter, Valeria Cerron, Arjun Das, Jade Wong....

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#### MODERN DAY (AUGUST 2023) - EARTH

Books, Muriel discovered, were exceedingly more interesting the more one took their time with it, and, as they also discovered, if they let the images that formed in their brain run wild as they read. They did try to ask Crowley about the interesting phenomenon, but it had been three days since he arrived, and he had not left the room he stormed into once.

Muriel stretched and placed the latest book onto the ‘read’ pile. It was a short, but rather lovely and heartbreaking tale of a boy who lived in a graveyard and was raised by ghosts, but as he grew up, he had to learn to say goodbye to those ghosts he considered family. Another interesting thing books taught them was how things as simple as words had such a profound effect on their mood! Human emotions were still rather new to them, but as they parsed through volume after volume, they found themselves reacting to and feeling things they never imagined: tranquility, anger, immense joy, sadness, regret...this latest one left them ever so melancholy.

They quickly stood up. Immediately, two things happened: the world suddenly went very dark, and it also suddenly went very hard. They opened their eyes, and the darkness burned like ashes at the corners of their vision.

“Ow...” Muriel muttered.



They'd read about characters being 'in pain', and 'ouch' was the usual reaction, but imagining the wind being knocked out of oneself versus feeling it were quite different things. They preferred reading about it much more.

Slowly, they pulled themselves up from the floor, and tried valiantly to shake the pins and needles feeling from their legs. Outside, the morning crowd swelled with the rising of dawn. It was a Tuesday. The bookshop was closed. Not that it was ever completely open any other time. Muriel pursed their lip. Crowley was supposed to be teaching them to run the bookshop, and yet, he was still in the spare bedroom doing...well...truthfully, they didn't quite know.

They turned their gaze toward the stairs. A small clump of nerves formed in their throat. They hadn't faced the ornate rails since they walked down the stairs the other day. And *yet*.

"Well, beauty was created by God..." they whispered as they cautiously approached them, "God is beauty..." they took another step, "If I take the time to admire the stairs..." they put a gentle, shaking hand upon the iron surface, "then I admire the beauty of God!"

They smiled and clapped to themselves before racing up the stairs. It was incredible what simply rearranging one's worldview did to change one's mind. Oh, they had so many things to share with Mr. Crowley!

They stopped in their tracks near the top.

The demon. Mr. Crowley, the *demon*. The bright smile that had grown so warmly on their face chipped and fell apart.

Crowley was *still* a demon, and on top of that, he was a traitor, both to Heaven *and* Hell. *How does one even accomplish that?* they thought to themselves. There was no way to rearrange the view on a truth as objective as that. A weight settled in them, and they felt themselves dragged down to sit on the second to first stair near the top. From here, they had a view of the guest room door and the cool, morning light that came from below it. No shadows underneath it shifted. They strained their ears, but heard nothing except the bustle of humans outside as they began a new day.

Gently, they closed their eyes, and pointed their nose up in the direction of the room. Never had they used their secret talent so many times so closely together! Slowly, they took a deep breath in.

Misery. The wet, salty scent of unhappiness reached them first. It came out in heavy waves, a raging fog of light, salty water that was overpowering enough to have them choking back a sob themselves before it mixed with the sharper, tangier scent of rage. This fury was all consuming, almost metallic, almost bloody. They held tight to the bars of the railing, gritting their teeth and trying their best not to let a vein (whatever that was) pop from the pressure building inside of

them through their nose. The scent settled. Muriel took a few quiet breaths, attempting to settle themselves. One last scent came through, one that they were more familiar with.

Love.

Love was always their favorite smell. It was light and sweet, and what Heaven smelled like, at least, in its early days. If they thought about it, it reminded them of the cupperty Mr.Fel- the traitor- had offered them when they first arrived.

But this love was different.

This smell was much heavier than the love they smelled around the shop, or in Heaven. It was concentrated, oily and thick, dark and possessive, they found it impossible to sift through it to find the lace-like gentleness its form should have originated from. It was comforting and warm, yes, yet, they found tears streaming down their face as they took in one final, deep breath.

*There* it was. It had tried to hide, but Muriel was too good with their talent. The gentle mesh, thin as the silk of a spider's web, clinging to every molecule in the air. It smelled of the old book pages being flipped, of the dust that erupted from a couch when one sat on it after a long day, the water of a pond which splashed happily with well-fed and surprisingly intelligent ducks, of meetings century after century that started as accidents but developed into nervous intention that turned into loving habit. Another few tears dripped from Muriel's chin.

For a moment, the rainbows in their mind clouded over with storms that provided them with the most clarity they'd ever had, possibly, in their existence. Mr. Fell's promotion into Heaven hadn't been a good thing, not for the demon on Earth that sat waiting for him.

Mr. Crowley was not only grumpy without the angel by his side, he was positively *miserable*.

The misery returned, and began to permeate everything, the cycle repeating endlessly. It covered the door and spilled out underneath the tiny gap at the bottom, and made the warmth of the hallway seem to fade by a few shades. Muriel almost had to wade through it in order to reach the polished, wooden surface.

The human books Muriel read said that knocking on a door was an excellent way to ask permission to enter from the person who was on the other side. Carefully, they raised a fist and knocked three times, each more harmonious than the last.

No response.

They knocked again, with a little more force in the swing.

"Hello?" they called, "Mr. Crowley?"

Something shifted. It sounded like cloth, perhaps, then the sound of weight landing on the floor. Muriel backed up as it approached, and the door swung inwards.

The wave of misery washed over them, the scent now overpowering to the point where they almost stumbled back. The demon's eyes were covered with the familiar sunglasses, but otherwise, he was very dressed down, only in a t-shirt, boxers, and socks. His hair, once deep, cherry red and styled with incredible swoops and curves, sat flat and wild on his head, and faded slightly in shade. Incredibly, however, his expression had not changed since the last time they saw him: a tight scowl, and brows drawn together in the eternal question of what animal's back does water slide off of with no issue? This time, the question was directed at them, and not quite so philosophical.

"What do you want." it was not so much a question, when voiced aloud as a demand, and it reminded them much of his harshness over the phone that was only more pointed in person.

"Oh, um," they struggled to hide how well they could feel the negative emotion that clung to everything in the room, with the source standing in front of them with increasing annoyance on his face, "I just wanted to ask, when were you going to help me with the shop? It's been a few days and-

"Yeah, no, sorry, not quite feeling up to it today," he said dryly and began to shut the door.

Muriel stuck their hand between the door and its frame right before they came together. Again, the urge to shout 'ouch' came to them as their fingers pulsed with new heat, but for the moment, it kept Crowley from retreating back into the room that could only be referred to as a 'den' in their mind.

"Mr. Crowley," they said with as serious a tone as they could muster, "you said that you would help me with running the bookshop. This is an extremely important job given to me by the Metatron himself! I don't want to mess this up!"

Crowley sneered.

"S'far as I care he can shove it. And maybe, frankly, so can you."

Muriel felt themselves draw their brows together unconsciously and a small sting in their eyes upon hearing Crowley's words. They didn't know what exactly they were 'shoving,' but it certainly didn't sound inviting.

Crowley softened just a touch. It wasn't their puppy eyes, or the fact that their fingers were already swelling from the door slamming on them, but something else that made his reaction feel...wrong. He should know what doing wrong felt like. He was a demon after all.

“Look, Muriel, just...give me another day or two. To...recover. For now, go back to reading or, I don’t know, muck about on the computer downstairs,” he waved a hand in the direction where he knew the brick of a monitor sat with half an inch of dust on its surface and screen, “and, uh, discover more about humanity.”

Muriel tilted their head again in confusion.

“Com-pu-ter?”

Crowley grasped for words and leaned unsteadily against the door frame.

“Think of it like, ehh, a massive library. But it’s got basically anything you could think of on there. Music, videos, photographs, books, whatever that angelic little brain of yours can imagine.”

Muriel’s eyes widened.

“Music?”

Crowley made a sound that was almost close to a laugh, if he had the energy to spare, he would have actually done so.

“Almost forgot Heaven doesn’t have music. Well,” he shrugged with a roll of his eyes, “*celestial harmonies*, but that hardly counts for anything, now does it?”

Muriel looked away at the wall and found their face warming up slightly in an uncomfortable manner.

“I quite enjoy the harmonies. I was in the choir...”

Crowley sneered again\*, but he at the very least made an attempt to hide his disdain.

(\*At one point, a very long time ago, he too had been in that same choir. He sang lead tenor. When he re-emerged on earth, he made it quite clear to any snooping angels, or one singular one in particular, that he *could* not and *would* not sing *ever*.)

“Well here, I’ll get you started: look up any songs by Queen. Or, or... eh... I dunno, Velvet Underground, if it’s not too ‘bebop’ for you. Classic bands, can’t go wrong with ‘em. Now,” he smiled, but even with Muriel’s limited understanding of human expressions, they could tell it wasn’t very genuine at all. It was more just a pulling of lips to either side of his face than anything else, “Can I go back to sleep?”

“Oh, yes, yes, of course!”

They removed their hand from the doorframe, and Crowley wasted not one second to slam it in their face as soon as he was sure no flailing appendages would try to stop it again. Muriel stayed outside the door for only another moment.

“What in Heaven is a ‘bebop’?” they muttered to themselves.

~

Crowley turned over in bed. As soon as he sent Muriel away, he miracled himself another bottle of something that he could hardly read, and popped open the top, fervently ignoring the discomfort in both his stomach and soul at the thought of downing another drink, this early in the morning as well.

Getting himself to stop thinking was harder than he thought. Hard, but certainly not impossible. The 14th century certainly allowed him plenty of time staring at walls and trying not to let the scent of death overwhelm every nerve in his body. The only methods of escape were A) get away, B) sleep through it, or C) dull the senses so that it all blurred together and time was merciful enough to speed up just the tiniest bit.

He debated sleeping for another hundred years. Aziraphale clearly had chosen his side, Crowley couldn't go back to Hell (not that he would have ever wanted to, there was nowhere comfortable to sleep), he didn't have an apartment anymore, and there really wasn't much worth exploring on Earth without that exceedingly foolish, lovely angel by his side. The duck pond would be too quiet, going to the Ritz wouldn't feel the same at a table for one, their rendezvous points, as he had so cleverly named after watching many action movies in the 70's and 80's, wouldn't make a single bit of sense to go to by himself.

There was another angelic presence on Earth, just downstairs in fact, but it wouldn't be the same. He hardly knew this creature, at any rate, but he couldn't just leave them to face the dangers of Earth all on their own. Earth was an incredible place, with incredible humans and inventions beyond the imagination of even the most free thinking angel, but it could be just as cruel in its wonder. It was why he hadn't left already.

He rolled over again, careful not to spill the bottle anywhere on the sheets. He could always miracle it away, but he'd always know it had been there. He *could* have left already. Could have taken his car, his plants, which were really the last of his belongings, and drove to Alpha Centauri and hitched a tent on one of the exoplanets with the least amount of wind to spend the rest of eternity. No nightlife to speak of, but a gorgeous double sunrise and sunset to look forward to. But there was an angel depending on him. Two, really. One who needed his help, and one who hadn't realized it yet. To say he was explicitly waiting for Aziraphale would be a gross overestimation of the special kinds of longing and anger he felt inside himself that, if Muriel's expression was anything to go by, was extremely tangible to other supernatural creatures. Aziraphale didn't want his help, clearly, and Crowley didn't want his. They both couldn't save each other, and now they were apart for the first time since...

Crowley shot up.

No matter how he wracked his brain, he couldn't think of a single moment from when they had ever been truly apart. Aziraphale had been by his side since the beginning, since *before* the beginning. He had called on him to help create some of those stars, winding it with a tire iron that hadn't even been named or conceived of by humans yet, *humans* had hardly been named or conceived of. Aziraphale's hair reflected so many of those colors, wondrous and many without names either, and Crowley's own wings sparkled with stardust and ink from his celestial pen. Ages had been spent on designing those stars. Couldn't even see half of them from Earth. Wallpaper for aliens, he supposed, and he hoped they were getting some enjoyment from them at least.

Slowly, he laid himself back down onto the sheets and elicited a weak groan from the mattress. He set the bottle down on a nightstand and finally pulled the covers over himself again, as if trying to bury the strange new wave of *something* that shot itself into his disgraced spirit and wouldn't budge. It stung like a gunshot, and an eerie creeping pain crawled from the invisible gash, growing and spreading through him like an infection. In their six thousand years of being stationed on Earth, save for occasional visits to their respective former offices, they had never been too far away. Four thousand miles, oceans and seas were nothing distance when one could fly faster than light or teleport on a whim.

Of course, despite this realization, his face portrayed nothing. His poker face was notorious in casino's across Los Vegas (a vacation he gave to himself on his way back from the newly formed Disneyland, Aziraphale had wanted to visit it), and even though he was truly as alone as he ever could be, he wouldn't let even his pride face his sadness. He closed his eyes.

Nothing spilled out of them as he shut the lids tightly, he made sure of that.

He had once been complimented for his imagination, by human inventors across the ages and, once, he felt, while he was trying to keep his car together at the end of the world. He didn't know what told him this, but he was so sure of it that he held the compliment nearly as high as when Aziraphale told him for the first time he liked his hair\*. So while his eyes were closed, he allowed himself to put it to use, and daydream.

It was definitely not about Aziraphale. It was certainly not the image of him standing in the doorway, while sunlight beamed through the windows and threw heavenly light across his face and hair. It couldn't possibly be the visual of Aziraphale spotting him lounging in his desk chair, waiting all this time for his angel, and approaching him with open arms and an apology on his lips, perhaps a dance to visualize on the way and a celebratory lunch to really seal the deal. And it could not possibly have been the feeling of Aziraphale's hands on his back, brief as the real thing had been (1.781 seconds, exactly 1.782 seconds he placed them there before they slid off; and for exactly 1.781 seconds, for the first time in millions of years, Crowley put his faith in a higher power), holding him close and finally returning what could only be said as over six thousand years of pretending to be something they were not.

Crowley turned over one last time before sleep captured him and held him close, and brought a shaky hand to his lips, as if trying to recreate the feeling of a million and a half years of passion he'd put into a single action. Truly, what an *idiot* he was.

(\*It was after the flood began. They found the top of a very high mountain near Tibet to settle on, and sat together as they watched the rain clouds pour unnaturally hard in the distance. Crowley told him the robe wasn't that flattering on him, while Aziraphale had complimented the lovely curls and braids in her hair. Crowley told him some village girls had asked to braid it before she had gone to meet him near the arc, and commented wistfully that they had probably drowned by then. Aziraphale said not another word for forty days or nights after that. Crowley let him.)

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#### MODERN DAY (DECEMBER 2023) - HEAVEN

It was beginning to snow in a certain section of Earth. Aziraphale watched from heaven as the dark, threatening clouds swirled over the globe, and sighed into his sleeve. If any archangel had been around, they would have chastised him for that, as it was a brand new suit, and even more repulsively, one that didn't have a single bit of tartan on it. The Metatron helped him pick it out, as 'the scent of earth and evil' wafting off of his old suit was becoming too distracting to any Archangel that came by to check on his progress. This new one was crisp, pure white with only slivers of silver in some of the stitching and in his bow tie. It was the most uncomfortable thing he had ever worn. ("The Supreme Archangel must represent the purity of Heaven, both in action and in what he wears, wouldn't you agree?" The Metatron had said. Aziraphale only nodded. If he opened his mouth, he feared he would say something not quite so 'pure.')

It'd been a few months of staring at the globe as it spun slowly with thousands of names and auras glittering on its surface, each dot losing meaning as a new one popped up or grayed out. His notepad, on which he recorded potential vessels, had thousands of names, all of them crossed out. He'd taken to observing the humans he thought about choosing for a week at a time, and just when he thought they'd be perfect, they always committed some sort of unforgivable sin that tainted them too harshly to be used. He had to refrain from pulling out his hair when his latest choice, Lisa Marksberry, cheated on her husband with the mailman.

"I need a break..." he muttered to himself.

The bones in his own vessel cracked as he stood up for the first time in months. Archangel meetings were held in his office, and they mainly consisted of Michael, Uriel, Saraqael, and the Metatron standing around his desk talking for an hour while he nodded every couple of minutes, and struggled to keep his head from falling under the weight of the halo, so standing was quite a task. His neck strained, and he quickly grasped the cold ring of gold around his head and set it on his desk, where it floated gleefully for a moment before dropping, just as happy to be separated from him as he was from it. It clanged loud enough to send an echo down the endless hallways, the sound wave almost visible in the otherwise empty expanse. Aziraphale glared at it. It was doing that on purpose.

Slowly, he walked around the globe and spun it toward him, now on the opposite side of the desk, and zoomed in again toward the bookshop. It'd been several weeks since he last checked on them, the memory of Uriel's surprise visit always fresh on his mind, and he felt guilt clawing up his back at the same time as he felt nerves flare around in his stomach. Quickly, he zoomed into the bookshop, his nails scraping against the surfaceless globe as he went, just a new reminder that he needed a manicure (it made him wonder - was time passing the same in Heaven as it was on Earth? He hadn't spent this long in Heaven since before time was even a concept, just occasional visits for dropping off notes, questions, and the one, singular time he'd been disincorporated. He wondered if his hair had grown any longer, it would explain the new tickle around the tips of his ears.)

If the sparkling lights and decorations outside the bookshop and other shops around the square were anything to go off of, it would be safe for Aziraphale to assume it was just about Christmas Eve. Inside, Muriel excitedly pulled apart crackers while Crowley sat up half-heartedly in his desk chair, the length of his body stretched out, his hair messy, wearing a wrinkled robe, and one slipper on his foot. Muriel placed the flimsy plastic crown on his head, but he hardly reacted. Another crack appeared in Aziraphale's heart. Crowley's hair was longer. And it hadn't been that faded since armageddon. Music played gently from inside. At the very least, Crowley was mouthing along with the words. That mended the cracks, ever so slightly.

Slowly, he pulled away from the globe. A celebration for Jesus was happening in the human holding center of Heaven, and he wouldn't miss an opportunity to take a real break from reading thousands of human names a day.

The walk wasn't far, and the twinkling bells of celebrating angelic voices and flaps of wings filled the otherwise empty silence of Heaven. For the first time in a while, Aziraphale felt the tiniest bit of relief lift from his chest.

Michael saw him first. It was strange to see the somewhat relaxed smile on their face, but it was enough to make Aziraphale feel safe enough to continue forward.

"Welcome, Supreme Archangel Aziraphale." they said.

"Oh, there really is no need for that," Aziraphale replied bashfully.

"Oh, I'm very aware."

Any smile he had on his face fell, but he did not let that stop him as he walked toward the never-ending glass walls that overlooked the human section of heaven, and a small drone of angels flooded in and out of the one open frame. From the corner of his eye, he saw Michael slide by to stand beside him. Both angels had their hands behind their backs in a respectable manner, a show for who could break first.



“Are you going to go visit the Christ and the apostles? Or the other prophets?” Michael asked cordially.

“I may.”

They nodded.

“Most angels are. We only open human Heaven to non-seraphim or higher level angels twice a year, and most are too busy with their own duties to catch the opportunity.” they took a sideways glance toward him, “Such as you have your *own* duties to attend to.”

His lip twitched.

“I needed a break.”

“Hmm. A break from your work *and* your halo, it would seem.”

Aziraphale’s breath hitched as he remembered how light his head felt since leaving. Mentally, he clasped a hand to the bridge of his nose: he’d left the damned thing in his office.

“It was a bit heavy. And I do believe after several weeks straight of working, I do deserve a small reprieve.”

“Of course,” they said snidely.

A few moments of silence hung pointedly in the air, until Michael turned fully toward him, a curious expression on their face that worried Aziraphale.

“I’m surprised you’re not having much of a reaction to this room, in particular, Supreme Archangel.”

He squeezed his hands tighter together. They always said his title like they were spitting out a rather flavorless piece of weak gum (not that they would know what gum was in the first place)

“Why would that be, Michael?”

Their brows lowered just a touch.

“We did try to execute you by Hellfire here, if you can recall. Or have all those years of fooling around on Earth with your demon husband muddled your brain?”

Wonderful. He’d graduated from ‘boyfriend in the dark glasses’ to ‘demon husband.’ Aziraphale cleared his throat and ignored the slight.

“It's a memory I'd rather like to forget.”

It was a memory he did not contain. While Crowley was up here standing in a pyre of hellfire, Aziraphale himself had been lounging in a bath of holy water, spooking demons, and, if he was being honest with himself, having a great time. Michael didn't even realize *he* was the one who'd asked them for a towel.

“I think I'll head in now, actually.” he announced.

Archangel Michael stood back and let him pass in front of them toward the opening, where the march of excited angels entering human heaven slowed. Those who wanted to enter already had, and a quiet had settled again in the wide expanse of a room.

“As you wish,” they said stiffly.

The ground was quite a ways down, so Aziraphale unfurled his wings and stepped out into human Heaven, gliding gently towards where he could put his feet down. Michael said nothing as they watched him leave. They merely noted the very slight shade of gray to his feathers, his strange behavior (not that it was anything else) and walked toward their office with the beginnings of a plan in their head.

As soon as Aziraphale crossed the threshold, he noted the breeze and how his lungs expanded with air, *real* air, something that wasn't necessary for only angels in the offices of Heaven. As he landed, he tried to fold his wings away, but they were stuck in permanent view. He noted it, but did not make much of a fuss. Perhaps this was to make sure the humans knew who was another human soul or an entirely different creature. A few souls lumbered around, all dressed in elegant clothes for their time periods, chattering excitedly as he passed by. A woman in a ball gown gave him a solid, almost nervous glance up and down while arm in arm with a woman in bell bottoms and a crop top, and they bowed in reverence. It discomfited him down to his very soul.

“My dear ladies, there's no need for that, I promise to you.”

They lifted their eyes, but made no contact with his and said not a word until he was far enough from earshot. His face fell. Even up here, camaraderie was hard to find.

The trail leading to Jesus and his 12 apostles was not hard to find. Aziraphale only had to follow the sound of flapping wings and bunches of loose feathers that fell to the ground like a light snow, which some of the younger human souls picked up with wonder in their eyes. He smiled as a young boy, dressed in gleaming white and gold rags from the 14th century, picked up several at a time and stuffed them into his pockets, giggling the entire way. Looking up, a line stretched where angels eagerly awaited to enter the Temple, an exact replica of the first built by a human king named Solomon\*.

(\* Aziraphale, at the time, had urged the king to consider putting a lounge in one of the spare rooms, but was ignored.)

Even with his wings still out, Aziraphale preferred to walk. After six thousand years of doing so, it only felt more natural. Voices above him dipped as he passed, and grew into hushed whispers in his wake. He tried his very best to ignore them. The stairs, he took his time with. They stretched far higher than the Earthly version ever did in their time, yet, even this did not make the Temple higher than the ethereal office buildings that surrounded the white expanse.

It took quite a few minutes, but he finally reached the top, where the line of angels began. Each turned a curious head toward him, and he felt suddenly very conscious of the sweat that lined his forehead. Perhaps he should have just flown after all.

“Supreme Archangel,” a female presenting angel stepped aside from the grand doors and bowed in deep reverence as the humans had done, with several in the vicinity doing the same, “You may enter in front of me. It is only just for you to see the Messiah ahead of us.”

Awkwardly, Aziraphale walked in front of them, as if he’d cut someone in line for popcorn at the cinema (he had done that once before, and blessed their bucket to never empty during the duration of the film as a silent apology).

“Erm, thank you.” he stammered as he passed.

A few human soldiers, dressed in ancient Hebrew and Roman battle armor, pushed open the doors, and he was greeted with an expansive courtyard made of clay brick and polished wood, where a few of the more holy human souls wandered about, and a few angels sat upon the rafters to watch them go about their business. Again, he preferred to walk, even if it drew eyes to him. He felt like a beacon amongst those on the ground, ethereal wings that he kept close to his back for fear of bumping into anyone, clothes that resembled none from the era most of the humans in the era wore, and shoes that somehow managed to squeak against the dusty brick on the ground. It was quite embarrassing.

His reprieve came in the form of a door to his left opening, with a Roman-empire era dressed man gesturing at him to follow. Aziraphale glanced around for a moment, as though not sure the man was calling for him exactly.

“You, Angel!” the man said again, and opened the door wider with a matching smile, “The Messiah is expecting you.”

“Oh!” Aziraphale straightened his waistcoat, “H-he is?”

“Yes, sir.”

Azirpahel followed, and once he entered, the man pulled the heavy wooden doors shut with a booming, yet comforting, clang. The two began to walk down a hallway, and its darkness contrasted greatly with the blinding white of outside. Aziraphale had to blink spots from his vision to adjust. Torches lined the walls, throwing uneven light across the bricks, which seemed pickpocketed with holes like scabs across their surfaces.

“I am called Paul,” the man said finally, reaching out to shake Aziraphale’s hand, “One of the Messiah’s later apostles.”

Aziraphale shook Paul’s hand once.

“Charmed.”

Paul smiled almost giddily at the motion.

“Yes, sir! To have the Supreme Archangel come to visit us is quite exciting. The previous Supreme Archangel almost never did.” Paul’s face fell and he brought up a hand to stroke his beard in confused contemplation, “He said that he was busy trying to connect with the true God, but that She hardly ever responded to his phone calls.”

Aziraphale grimaced. He knew several religious groups on Earth that would cause wars over phrases such as that.

“Please, sir, can you tell me, what is a ‘phone call’?”

Aziraphale opened his mouth to respond, but they arrived at a wooden door, where the sound of laughter and feasting could be heard from beyond the threshold.

“No matter. Here, I will announce you to the group,” Paul whispered.

He took a breath, then pulled the doors open then walked into the small, square room first, gesturing with reverence toward the angel, “Oh, holy LORD, I present: Aziraphale, the new Supreme Archangel of Heaven.”

The 11 faces in the room all swiveled toward Aziraphale, and he felt about as in place as a rusty nail at a balloon factory. Awkwardly, he raised a hand and waved tightly.

“Hello! I’m, well, yes, I’m Aziraphale! Pleasure to meet you all.”

The heads swiveled back to one human in particular, sitting at the very back. His brown, almost black eyes seemed to sparkle with recognition, and a tiny grin grew on his face, one that, if someone listened to very closely, could describe the state of the matter before it had been injected with love and plasma fire.

“Aziraphale,” Jesus said warmly and stood up from his mat on the floor, “the pleasure is all ours.”

The 11 other apostles stood with their leader, and shook hands with the angel, each now smiling ear to ear to meet the new second-in-command of Heaven. Their hands felt rough, but real under Aziraphale’s own palm, but it was Jesus’ firm grasp that sparked a jolt through him. It contained a condensed shot of what he could only describe as Love\*, the same kind that surrounded Tadfeild at all times, the same kind he felt radiating from the early days of Heaven before corporate chic had taken over, and the same kind he felt during the creation of the universe, a memory so far away that only this tiny interaction with a fraction of God’s power was able to remind him of it.

(\*It is extremely important to capitalize this kind of Love. God would almost be offended if the transcriber did not.)

“My friends,” Jesus announced kindly as Aziraphale tried to remember how to breathe, “Would you mind giving us a few moments? I have a few things to discuss with our new acquaintance.”

The apostles filtered out of the room and continued the conversation they had been discussing (which sounded much like a debate between different kinds of grapes used for wine) down the hallway until only Jesus and Aziraphale were left.

“Come, join me at the table,” Jesus said kindly as he closed the door again, “I’ve heard you have a taste for human food.”

Aziraphale let his guard fall just a touch, letting a deep breath out, and his shoulders dip with them.

“I could go for a glass of wine.”

A touch of mischievous light flashed in Jesus’s eye.

“My specialty.”

In moments, a fresh plate of bread, cheeses, and fruit appeared in front of Aziraphale in a clay bowl, and he sat criss-crossed upon a mat beside Jesus at the low, rounded table, wine goblets in both of their hands.

“The food is already blessed,” Jesus smiled, and dipped some of his bread into olive oil before taking a bite.

As they ate, Aziraphale could not help but take many glances at the God in man-form sitting beside him. This was the closest he had ever been to Her himself, even including his own creation. Jesus caught his eye and grinned.

“Do I look different from your expectations?”

Aziraphale blinked and broke into an awkward smile. His mouth was full of grapes.

“Ah, no, well, I’ve seen you before,” he swallowed, “but, uh, humanity certainly has a different idea of what you may have looked like.”

Jesus’s hair was long, but it was curly, and fell in almost messy waves on either side of his head. His brows were bushy, and pushed up in an incredulous manner that always had a hint of well-meaning mischief in them, as if he were winning a game no one was aware they were playing. His skin, regardless of the dim light around them, was medium toned, and his deep set brown-black eyes were separated by a long nose with a slight hook-ended shape.

His smile tightened for a moment, causing those brows to come down from their game.

“I could imagine... How are they?” He asked, dropping a few grapes into his mouth, “Humanity? How are they faring without me? I haven’t been able to keep an eye on them since my ascension.”

*The Spanish Inquisition, the Witch hunts (both in Europe and, infamously, Salem, Massachusetts), the separations of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians, the persecution of the Jews, World War II in its entirety, the sex scandals of American priests...*

Aziraphale smiled wide.

“I think they’re doing quite well.”

Jesus nodded, but the sparkle in his eye returned. The unknown game was in his hand now.

“And how are you doing, Supreme Archangel? I’m aware that before this you were a principality? The Guardian of the Eastern gate of Eden?”

“Yes, yes. However, that was a *very* long time ago,” Aziraphel smiled brightly, “I was placed on Earth as an overseer, of sorts, to keep an eye on humanity and wile the forces of evil spirits,” his mouth suddenly dried, “and demons. And such.”

He took a big bite of bread. Jesus picked at the skin of an orange before shrugging and taking a bite into it like an apple, rind and all.

“I met a demon once, during my time on Earth. Quite a nice woman. She showed me all the kingdoms of the world.”

Aziraphale's heart began to pump harder. Demon's hardly ever came to earth, let alone had enough gall to approach Jesus of Nazareth.

"She had quite the sense of humor, as well. She tempted me to jump from a cliff! I had to send her away of course, but she was ever so silly. And oh," Jesus leaned back thoughtfully and turned his gaze toward the ceiling, as if pleasantly picking out his favorite hole in the brick, "she had the most *beautiful* red hair."

"...That's wonderful." Aziraphale muttered through gritted teeth.

"Still, we're supposed to be talking about you, Supreme Archangel!" Jesus placed a gentle palm on the table, "How did you manage to get into such a prestigious position? Here in the human section of Heaven, we don't really get much news on the business part of things, but I've always been curious about how it all runs together."

Aziraphale managed an unsteady grin.

"Surley, though, as the Son of God, you would know, well, *everything*, right?"

For a moment, Jesus stared at him with those wide, brown eyes. Then his face broke into a hearty laughter, the sound warm and lovely as a church bell from a mile away.

"Yes, perhaps I should!" he wiped at his face, "But, I suppose, I'd like to hear it from you. I do enjoy a good story."

Jesus leaned forward, his eyes completely focused on Aziraphale as he scarfed down the last of his meal. It was quite good, he had to admit, and paired wonderfully with the rather sweet red wine.

"Well," he took a breath and looked away from those piercing, if gentle, eyes, "It is not a particularly happy story."

"I'm sure we can find some joy within it," Jesus said softly, "As there is Joy in all Things."

Aziraphale's lip twitched. He played with a hangnail that had developed on his right thumb, then he twirled the silver halo ring a few times. He was stalling and he knew it, but the brown eyes that gazed at him so curiously, so full of a strangely familiar Love and wonder, finally forced him to pry open his mouth.

"The previous Supreme Archangel Gabriel fell in love with the Supreme Duke of Hell, Beelzebub, and they ran away together" Jesus's brows reached his hairline in a matter of moments, "He traveled to Earth trying to escape the other archangels, as they were going to erase his memory, and he came to my bookshop for safety. To this day, I still cannot fathom why, of all people, he came to me."

Azirpahle rolled his eyes playfully, but Jesus's were still soft, still gazing.

"I wonder if he thought the two of you shared something in common," he said gently.

Aziraphale couldn't help but snort.

"Unlikely. Gabriel and I have...never quite seen eye to eye."

"And yet, you still took him in."

Jesus smiled, and in the dim light, deep dimples cast dark circles onto his face, yet it only made his expression brighter. Aziraphale softened, and stared hard into his wine.

"Well, of course I did," he said quietly, "It was the good thing to do."

Jesus smiled wider.

"It was the *right* thing to do." He leaned forward more, "Continue, if you please."

Aziraphale recounted the story: of Gabriel, then 'Jim,' the angels and demons that came searching for him, the jukebox in Edinburgh, the ball, his halo, and the heart-healing reunion between the two most unlikely of lovers; the highest upon high of Angels, and the lowest beneath low of demons. During the story, however, he left one demon-shaped being out of his mouth.

"And, that is how I came here. The Metatron and Archangels entrusted me with this new position, and as a dutiful follower of Heaven, I shall do what I'm told."

He smiled, but for the first time in the conversation, Jesus was not. It wasn't a frown per se, but a light pull to his lips that suggested he almost felt bad about putting down his next piece on the board.

"I feel as though there is something missing from your story."

The sharp gaze that cut through Aziraphale suggested that Jesus not only had a feeling something was missing, but *knew* it. Jesus set a soft hand over the angel's, and again, that Love coursed through him.

"There is no reason to lie to me, Aziraphale. Of *all* humans, I would be the last to Judge."

Aziraphale glanced at him.

"'He who throws the first stone,' yes, I am aware."



Jesus pat his hand once before removing it, while Aziraphale took another breath.

"A demon helped me." he whispered, almost as if in silent prayer, "The very same one who approached you in the desert. His name is Crowley."

"Crowley..." Jesus repeated, running the letters through his teeth like the sweet pulp of an orange.

"He helped me stop armageddon a few years ago, if you can recall that. We've been..." he struggled to pick a word: friends? acquaintances? There was not a verb on Heaven or Earth to describe the situation of their relationship at the moment, "We've known each other for a long time."

Jesus blinked slowly.

"An angel and a demon, together. I feel as if I've just heard this story."

Aziraphale licked his lips, they were dry. He could feel the press of Crowley against him, the desperation of his fists balled up into his coat. Oh, how he *shook* with anger-

"I never told you exactly what job the Archangels are having me do." he said, trying to break his own train of thought.

Jesus nodded at him to continue.

"They..." he sighed again, "They want me to find a new vessel for God, so that She may return to Earth once again to Judge to souls of humans. Afterward, the final battle between Heaven and Hell will truly begin, and the Earth will be destroyed."

His voice was lifeless, and he found himself staring at the wall, where flames flickered gently and only caressed the air with its burning touch.

"..it would make Heaven a bit more full, if anything, the human souls returning here." Jesus said softly, as if parceling through the idea himself, "And there will be more Love to be had and shared. One must think positively."

"But those humans will die!" Azirpahle tried very hard not to make it sound as though he were begging.

Jesus nodded in agreement.

"All humans will die. Eventually. That was the choice they made when they ate upon the fruit of knowledge. They now know Death, and he will accompany my dear Mother when it is time. All things end, so that they may have a new beginning."

Aziraphale sat frozen for a moment, and then felt the warm palm on top of his hand again. A weight of Love dropped into his soul that he didn't realize he could miss so much while it was still there.

"I see this upsets you."

A flash of anger crossed Aziraphale.

"Of course it does! The Earth, as it is *right now*, is my home! Its Crowley's home as well, it's *our-*"

He stopped himself before he revealed anything more. This was a dangerous game he was competing in, and in his heart he knew he'd lose. His opponent had all the pieces, all the cards, all the rules, and was definitively not sharing.

"This Crowley," Jesus started softly, "It is strange to me that, for someone you say you have known for such a long time, you have hardly mentioned him by name more than twice." Jesus tipped his head to the side, and empathy glossed over his eyes, "Did something happen?"

Aziraphale could not help the pitiful sneer that pulled at his lips.

"...We had a disagreement," he said finally, "He did not want me to return to Heaven. He wanted me to stay on Earth with him."

"...And do you think that was for a reason?"

Aziraphale knew exactly what the reason was. The answer was written in Crowley's eyes as they welled with unshed tears that Aziraphale wished in that moment he could have caught and wiped away with a reassuring smile that everything would be okay.

"He didn't want to be an angel again." he said instead, "I offered him the opportunity, we could be together, up here, doing good, but..." he shook his head with a jerk and smiled tightly, "he refused. So. Now it's just me."

Jesus caught his eye and nodded slowly, before a small, sad frown overcame his expression.

"It *is* quite difficult, having to choose between Heaven, your duty, and someone you love dearly."

Aziraphale's neck almost snapped as he turned to face Jesus.

"I don't-t-that's not quite- I don't think-"

Jesus held up a hand, and Aziraphale quieted instantly. For the first time, he could see the real human in Jesus, the human that felt tangible sadness, pain and fear; hope, joy, and love.

"I shall tell a story. Not a parable, but a story of what happened to me.

"There was a man that I loved very much as well. Of course, I Love all of humanity," Jesus gave him a playful look, but it was gone in a moment, "But this human was special to me. He was gentle, he listened, and he followed me out of true devotion, even if he did stumble at times." Jesus's head fell, "But I could not save him. An evil force took over him, and I could not stop it. I was not *allowed* to. I've cast hundreds of evil spirits, and yet, the one that was most important to me, I was not allowed to touch."

Jesus's voice seemed almost bitter, like the skins of the oranges that he ate without care, and it was Aziraphale's turn to offer him comfort. Jesus took another slow breath.

"On that night, I knew I was to die because of his actions. I recounted it for my precious apostles, and my dear Thomas, as always, did not believe me, and fought within an inch of his breath that I was not to die. But, the meal concluded, and I knew it was to happen soon. I was to be brutally betrayed by the one I loved." Jesus smiled sadly, and his sparkling eyes shined ever brighter, "And yet, in his never ending sweetness that not even the spirits of Hell could overcloud, he kissed me; gentle as a lover would toward their other half. What a kind way to put someone to death, is it not? What cruel irony."

Aziraphale could not speak, but merely watched as a single tear fell from Jesus's eye, and was discreetly wiped away. Jesus tilted his head up, if in prayer or to keep more tears from falling, the angel could not tell.

"It was only later I learned that the spirit finally left him from his torment, and my dear Judas hung himself." Jesus closed his eyes, "He rests in the freezing jaws of Satan himself, to be tortured for now until the rest of eternity for an action that he had no control over... And I will never be able to see him again."

Aziraphale watched pitifully as Jesus wept silently over his plate. He was never very good at comforting people, perhaps only one specific person (and even then, he would never ask for comfort in the first place, his pride would have to drown first in order for that to happen) but he was sure not to interrupt the Lord as he parceled through his feelings. After a few minutes, Jesus lifted his head again, wiping his face and sniffing, then grabbed another piece of bread, if only to have something comforting to play with.

"I apologize. I didn't mean to become so emotional."

"Not a problem at all." Aziraphale said lightly.

Jesus sighed.

“I only mean to say that I understand what you are feeling. To choose between duty and love is torturous. I know that for me, this was done for a reason. Mother always has reasons, but...” he took a tiny bite of bread and let his hand fall pathetically into his lap, “It doesn’t make the results of them any more bearable.”

The two sat in contemplative silence for a moment. Jesus nibbled his bread, which despite how long they had been sitting, still steamed with warmth and freshness, while Aziraphale sipped his wine from his goblet, which never seemed to empty itself.

“Would it be inappropriate of me to say that I believe love should conquer each of our issues? First Corinthians, ‘love is patient, love is kind,’ after all. Maybe...” Aziraphale swallowed hard, “...is there a way I could choose both? Love both?”

Jesus straightened and pulled a thoughtful hand through his hair.

“Hmm...” Jesus took another bite. Outside, the sound of voices returned, distantly, as if they were still at the end of the long hallway, mixed with the bells of angelic chatter, “‘It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.’” for a moment, Jesus seemed to be out of the present, his brain and heart far, far in the past, and he brought a gentle hand to touch his lip\*.

Jesus gazed at him, and Aziraphale felt his soul being drilled through with the most merciful kindness, burning him and cauterizing the wound with Love.

“Guardian of the Eastern Gate,” he said, the kingship putting an authoritarian shine into his words, “Listen closely: In a garden, there grows a tomato plant. In order to reach its full potential, it must grow upon stalks. There are two different stalks, each with their own decoration and benefits that would lead toward its growth. Tell me, should it choose one stalk over the other? Should it refuse to grow at all? Or should it forge its own path? What would be *right* for it?”

Jesus’s eyes sparkled upon seeing the confusion breeze across Aziraphale’s face. No answer worth receiving should be acquired easily.

The door burst open, and the long line of angels from outside the gates appeared at the doorway, excitement barely contained by reverence.

“We tried to give you more time, Messiah,” Paul said awkwardly, trying to hold an arm out to keep a particularly rambunctious angel from jumping ahead of the line, “But the angels were quite insistent.”

Any shadow of their conversation dissipated from Jesus's face, and he opened his arms wide in welcome.

"Let the little angels come to me, and do not hinder them, for they have waited long enough, I believe." Jesus turned to Aziraphale and offered an arm, "I can walk you out, Supreme Archangel."

Aziraphale took it, and as they passed the line of angels, they fell to their knees and bowed their heads, whispering praise and thanks. Aziraphale tightened his grip on Jesus, while Jesus patted his arm kindly.

"You become used to it," he whispered, "they only mean goodness for you."

Aziraphale grimaced, but shook Jesus's hand firmly as they reached the outer gates, and he allowed himself to spread his wings wide, as they had been pulled in tightly against his back during the whole visit. And he was not about to take the stairs again.

"I am glad you decided to visit," Jesus said before he took off, "You are always welcome to come again."

Aziraphale nodded, and let the wind catch beneath his wings and gently pull him towards the massive window to re-enter the corporate offices of Heaven; he was already dreading putting on the halo and returning to his desk, but, when duty called, he would answer.

As the angel became a small dot on the horizon, Jesus cocked his head slightly to the side and squinted. He couldn't recall ever seeing an angel with wings that had such an interesting sheen of the lightest touch of iridescent gray over them.

(\*Somewhere, far lower than even the dankest, smelliest offices of Hell, there was a massive cave that stretched the length of the deepest form of sin imaginable: the hatred of God. In it dwelled the most sinful human spirits who She could not Save Herself, merely for the fact that they did not think they were worthy of being Saved. The cavern was cold, freezing in fact, and lacked even a single working space heater. In the center was a pool of ice, where humans and demons alike were stuck, frozen forever in a twisted display case of misery, placed and delicately posed with cracked and broken limbs by the hand of the most miserable creature of all in the center.

Satan's jaw clenched upon Judas Iscariot, and, as he always had, he cried out in pain and begged for forgiveness from a being who could not, and *would* not listen. Judas closed his eyes as he had an infinite number of times before, willing for anything, *anyone* to bring him rest.

He was sorry, by all the love in his spirit, he was sorry, and wanted nothing more than to return to his Jesus and tell him that to his face; to hug him and never let go, begging for his forgiveness, his endless forgiveness that he poured out for many. If there was a single drop of it

left, he would beg for it for the rest of time. Another tear fell down his cheek, and the ice rivers of Hell grew another centimeter.

In a moment that would have been missed had he not closed his eyes for that briefest moment, the lightest touch of pressure pushed itself onto his lips, and a fraction of something other than hate chipped and wormed itself into his fragile, frozen, broken heart. For the first time in a millenia, Judas Iscariot felt something akin to Love.)

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#### MODERN DAY (DECEMBER 2023) - EARTH

Crowley planned to spend all of Christmas Eve in bed, much as he had planned to spend the day before in the same manner, but Muriel managed to drag him out of bed before 4 in the afternoon, if not for company, at least for a taste of Christmas Eve dinner.

“Look!” they exclaimed as they led him down the spiral staircase. “I went to the ‘grow-shur-ee store’ and bought human food!”

“Hmm,” Crowley grumbled and limply fell into Aziraphale’s desk chair, “And how exactly did you *pay* for that human food?”

“I gave the teller *exactly* what they wanted.” they said with a definitive nod.

“Gave them it, or made them *think* they got what they wanted?”

Muriel smiled wider, but it was more like a show of teeth than anything.

“Yes.”

Crowley stared at them, then slowly raised a brow. In his head, he drew up an image of Muriel standing in front of a human store teller with the face they made when they didn’t understand human concepts, such as ‘money’, and bringing down a quick hand to mystify them when the teller realized they weren’t getting a card or cash from this strangely well-dressed person. It brought a small, but wry smile to his face.

“Cheers on you for stealing, Muriel, *excellent* work.” Crowley marched on before they could voice the indignation that was evident on their face, “What did you get?”

He got up, and pushed aside the opening of one of the couple plastic bags laid out on the floor of the bookshop. Crowley didn’t even have the heart to express the mixture of disappointment and almost pity he felt stir in his head.

“Muriel, this is twelve packets of raw chicken.”

“Yes!” they exclaimed with a proud laugh, “And milk!”

They opened up another bag, and revealed four full gallons of milk, sweating water down the sides of their plastic containers from sitting in the warm bookshop for several minutes. Crowley crossed his arms and looked down at the beaming angel.

“And what do you suppose we do with twelve packets of raw chicken and four gallons of milk?”

Muriel took a moment to think, then shrugged. Outside, a few shapes gathered near the front door, and a moment later, the sound of a cheery knock against aged wood sounded through the area.

“We’re *closed!* It’s Christmas Eve for G- for someone’s sake!” Crowley yelled, hardly sparing a glance before flopping back into the chair.

“Mr. Crowley?” Maggie’s voice was soft, trying to be heard through the door and the snow, which picked up outside as the short day came to an end, “It’s Maggie! From the record shop?”

“And Nina!” Her voice was a bit stronger, but it too struggled to be heard, “From the coffee shop! Let us in, will you? It’s freezing out here!”

Muriel glanced down at Crowley, the question already posed in their eyes. Crowley sneered.

“S not my bookshop, now is it?”

Muriel took a step toward the doors. Crowley said nothing. They marched over to it, both hands on the knobs. Crowley still said nothing.

They threw open the doors and let the shivering human women inside, their noses different shades of rosy pink and warm brown from the ice and snow.

“Oi, what’d you do that for, Muriel?” Crowley complained from his chair.

“Do what?” they replied with a bright smile, “I can take those!”

They carefully removed a few of the bags from Maggie and Nina’s hands as they struggled to find somewhere to place down all of their things, over-encumbered by the weight and the weather.

“Oh! Well it looks like you two have been busy!”

Maggie was still slightly breathless from the storm, but waved a gloved hand toward the small selection of shopping bags, and the mountain of books on the floor that Muriel was rearranging for the fourth time that week.

“That was just me!” Muriel relieved Nina of her massive reusable shopping bag and placed it on a precarious stack of books, “I went ‘grow-shur-ee’ shopping! Mr. Crowley hasn’t been doing too much of anything, lately.”

The way they said it wasn’t an insult in the least bit, but Crowley made it a point to tell himself not to hiss in their direction once the two humans were settled enough to carry a conversation. Nina snorted.

“Find that hard to believe,” she crossed her arms, “Where’s Mr. Fell? Usually you’re usually tailing around him like a stray puppy.”

“Oh yes!” Maggie’s face brightened, and she pulled out a container of cookies from one of their endless bags, “How did things go after we talked during the summer? I am *ever* so sorry we never got a chance to catch up, we didn’t ever see the two of you around anymore. And then, school and university started, so things got a bit busy for both of us. *And*, did you hear?” she smiled wide, “Records are making a comeback! I had three *whole* customers the other day!”

The bookshop seemed to fall a few degrees colder.

“Oi, Inspector Constable, I think you forgot to close the door properly,” Nina jerked her head toward the doors, which swung a bit from the wind and let a few snowflakes inside.

They nodded tightly, and ran to close the doors, then carefully busied themselves by reshelving books, this time by rainbow order of the covers. It would be difficult, but most importantly, time consuming: many books were different shades of brown. The smell of demonic anger stabbed their nose, while the misery filled up their head and threatened to spill over in the form of tears which were not theirs to shed.

“Well?” Maggie chuckled, and the cookies bounced dully against the container.

Nina elbowed her playfully, and gave a rare, kind smile to Crowley.

“She’s been dying to know, don’t leave her waiting.”

If it was even possible, Crowley’s scowl deepened, throwing stark shadows across every fold and wrinkle in his face. The air itself seemed to crackle with *something*, and even the humans were able to taste its sharpness; a warning sign in scent alone. Nina found herself taking a step back. Maggie stepped forward, one hand on her chest and sympathy already seeping into her expression.

“It didn’t go well, did it?” she asked gently.

Slowly, she settled into the small couch across from the chair while Nina followed suit. For Maggie, she found herself cursing her own unobservance: Crowley obviously didn’t look good:



his hair was a mess and definitely needed more than a touch up for color, the robe he had on (a terrible tan and tartan pattern) was wrinkled and definitely smelled like it hadn't been cleaned in a while, and he only had one sock of his foot, while the other was, strangely, covered with a very comfortable looking slipper. The Crowley she knew from even a couple months ago would not be caught dead in a ditch naked looking like this. For Nina, she waited, and watched his chest rise painfully as he took a deep breath, and smiled wide like the Earth was about to fly into the sun.

"He *left* me."

He meant for it to come out bitter, angry, to reflect everything that he felt toward that angel in the moment.

It was quiet, breathy, and very nearly, his voice almost cracked.

Maggie's face immediately scrunched up and Nina let her grasp onto her hand.

"Followed your advice," he cocked his head and beamed in the way a skydiver does when their parachute has been replaced with a child's bookbag full of twenty pound weights, "I'd say it went *swimmingly*."

"Oh, Mr. Crowley-"

"Christ, *Mary, Joseph and-*"

Four heads turned in the direction of the front doors. Another figure, this time in a sparkly elf costume under a puffy winter coat, dragged sludgy snow onto the wood and struggled to close the door from the wind.

"Mrs. Sandwich?" Nina asked, who was the only one vocal enough to voice her confusion upon seeing her fellow shop keeper in the bookshop.

"You lot," Mrs. Sandwich almost tripped over a loose high-heeled bootlace as she marched over to the couch where Nina and Maggie sat, "owe me Christmas cookies."

Maggie's eyes widened and she suddenly seemed to remember the box cradled on her lap like a first born son.

"Oh yes! We were going to stop by your place next but-"

"And a *Wham!* vinyl." Mrs. Sandwich crossed her arms, but a playful smile grew on her face, "With 'Last Christmas' on it."

"Right, yes, I've got it in one of my bags-"

Maggie got up from her seat on the couch toward her many bags, and in her place, Mrs. Sandwich sat down with a satisfying huff. Nina cocked a brow at her.

“You look nice.”

Mrs. Sandwich flipped a few curls over her shoulder and bumped Nina with an elbow.

“Somethin’ festive for the girls working the holiday. What’s wrong with fashion star over here?”

She jerked her chin toward Crowley, who curled his lip in her direction.

“I can hear everything you’re saying, you know.”

“Yeah?” she tipped her head to the side, “So what’s got you lookin’ like my father on unemployment?”

Behind his lenses, Crowley rolled his eyes and shook his head slightly.

“Bit of *emotional* trouble...” Nina muttered, carefully avoiding Crowley’s annoyed gaze.

“Emotional?” Mrs. Sandwich jerked her head between Nina and Crowley, “You? *Really?* Thought you were too sexy to have those kinds of problems?”

Crowley had to crack a smile at that. He lifted his hand gesturally toward his lounging body and let it slap pathetically against his leg slung over the armrest of the chair.

“Guess not, love.”

“Found it!” Maggie pulled out a flat vinyl with a gray cover and handed it over to Mrs. Sandwich, who lit up and stroked the front cover.

“Ohoho...I’ll have fun with you later...”

“Should we give you a private room?” Nina asked with a slight grin.

Mrs. Sandwich playfully slapped her shoulder.

“Not me and George Michael. You, however,” she pointed to Crowley and pulled herself up to a standing position in front of his chair, “Fancy a chat?”

“Not really.”

“Too bad, hun.”

He let himself be dragged by the hand up the spiral staircase while Nina and Maggie carried on a new conversation with Muriel, who sadly confessed they weren't actually an inspector or constable, but something else. Crowley stopped listening as they floundered to try their very best not to reveal their secret identity as an entity so far out of their circle of belief that it would shatter the human's brains.

"I've never been up here." Mrs. Sandwich commented as Crowley subtly took the reins to lead her to the den he'd been calling his room.

"Not meant to. 'S where he lives. Not for customers to go nosing around in."

'Lives' was a relative term. Aziraphale lived in this upper floor as much as Crowley lived in his own flat, it was simply a place for storing a body when the lower level of the bookshop wasn't an option.

"Yeah? And where's your angel anyway?" Ms. Sandwich raised a brow as Crowley reached the door, and quietly miracled the room into a more presentable state.

Crowley grimaced.

"Said it already. He left."

"Hmm..."

Mrs. Sandwich perused around the small room at her leisure while Crowley watched her half heartedly from behind his lenses, sitting down on the bed. She picked up a comb, examined it for a minute, then stood in front of him without so much as a word and began to fix his hair.

"What are you *doing*." There was plenty of bite in his voice, but with no teeth to back it up, Mrs. Sandwich only paused for a moment before continuing.

"Fixing the rat's nest on your head," she winced when she got to a particularly knotted area, "I can't remember a day in my four years of knowing you where your hair wasn't fantastic, and I'll be damned if I can't get it back to the way it was."

Crowley sighed. Mrs. Sandwich was just as mulish, if not more, than Aziraphale at times, and he truly didn't have the energy to push her away. The motions of her combing through his hair were comforting, at least, and he found himself having to actively not lean into the rough, yet caring touch. He was enjoying the silence, grateful to not have to open his mouth, but he knew the soul standing in front of him decently well, just by being so near to her. Curiosity burned through her fingertips, and it was only a matter of time before the peaceful quiet broke.

"So, how old are you then, Mr. Crowley?"

*There it is, he thought dully, Not what I was expecting, but, there it is.*

“Er...’bout fifty-three, I think.”

He and Aziraphale technically didn’t have proper ages, but after examining humans for thousands of years, and looking at their own corporations in return, they were able to estimate an appropriate age for how they looked on the outside, never mind the agelessness on their insides.

“Ooh!” she finished getting through another knot, “Entering grandpa age!”

Crowley’s brows furrowed against the rims of his glasses, and he tilted his head up to make sure she saw. In response, she only shrugged.

“Love, I’m a grandma at forty-six. Nothin’ to be ashamed about,” she stepped back and selected a few newly miracled hair products from the vanity in order to style his hair more properly, “It’s been four years and when have we ever had a real conversation? It’s about time we get the generics out of the way.”

“Hmm,” was all Crowley said in response.

She opened up a bottle and smeared a green gel across her hands before firmly running them through his hair and scalp.

“Have you got any kids? Brothers, sisters?”

He could feel her fingers artfully making shapes with his slightly longer hair and he closed his eyes to fully enjoy the feeling.

“No kids, ‘less you count the Bentley. As for siblings, gah, I’ve got millions. Millions and millions of them.”

Mrs. Sandwich formed a curl with her fingers and held it in place with a thumb and forefinger.

“Father was a sperm donor, then?”

Humans never failed to rationalize the irrational. It was a fact of humanity that Crowley could not help but admire. If the sky was crumbling to pieces, they would say it was just a strange weather pattern, if a being with wings came crashing down from the sky in front of them, they’d say it was a wicked cosplay. If the world almost ended at the hands of an eleven year old Antichrist, they would say it was a slightly strange Saturday and go on paying taxes like it mattered whatsoever in the grand scheme of things.

“You could say something like that.”

Mrs. Sandwich gently pulled her finger away from the newly formed curl, and it held firm on its own.

“Never did know when to stop, huh?”

She raised a knowing brow up at him, and he felt a real smile grow on his face.

“Could say something like that, too.”

She smiled deeply, and offered her hands out to pull him up from the bed, complete with her task of fixing his hair.

“Much better,” she patted the top gently, “go take a look, and then we’ll find something for you to wear that doesn’t remind me of my granddad.”

“Though you said I looked like your dad.” Crowley smirked as he took a look in a mirror.

She had styled his hair on the simpler side. The sides that were overgrown were flattened and combed back, and the length on top was curled by hand with her fingers and plenty of gel, until it resembled the style he wore regularly months ago. Usually, he could force his hair into any shape he’d like, but he hadn’t found the effort to as of late.

“Changed my mind,” she shrugged, “The tartan just really screams ‘old man’ to me. Funny, I didn’t think it’d be your style.”

The tiny smirk he managed to work up fell apart.

“That’s because it’s not.”

“Oh.”

She had the decency to give him a pitying look that only lasted a few seconds at most before diving into his clothes drawer.

“Oi-”

“You know who else you remind me of? My niece,” she scoffed lightly while pulling out a pair of newly miracled jeans, “Wears all black, all the time. Black leather, black skirts, black boots. She didn’t go as far as to dye her hair black, but guess what color she did go for?”

She threw the jeans and a soft gray long sleeve over her shoulder, giving him an expectant look. Crowley shrugged. The extent of his experience with teenage girls had to do with those who wore hand stitched robes and proudly reminded him that they were the daughter of Job.

“Blue?\*

“Bright. Neon. Pink.” She cackled, and tossed him the small pile along with his usual leather vest and loose silver tie, “Oh, her mother nearly blew her casket. Lena, that’s her name, she waited until her mum was out of the country to do it, too, *just* so that she couldn't stop her! The sneaky bugger, I *love* that girl.”

(\*Crowley, along with having a hand in most trash television, also sneakily influenced social media to his advantage in order to spread chaos. The blue haired liberal meme was one of the many he used to stir up discourse, along with mistranslations of Russian posts, easily faked fun facts, and the occasional nonsense meme purely for making older generations feel like they were losing their minds while their children laughed at what was essentially the universe’s garbage noise.)

“Now,” she said sternly as she made her way to the door, “Get dressed, come back downstairs, and we’ll have some nice Christmas cookies-”

Quietly, as in, not quietly at all, Mrs. Sandwich’s stomach rumbled loudly at the mention of the cookies. She put a hand to her stomach with a slightly shocked look.

“Or maybe some *real* food...”

She shut the door behind her, leaving Crowley, confused at the totality of what just occurred within the past ten minutes, to dress, find a matching pair of socks, and take a look at his reflection in the vanity. If it weren’t for the fact that he knew he had bags under his eyes purple enough to rival the color’s name itself, he looked as put together as if nothing had happened four months ago.

“Too sexy to have those kinds of problems...” he chuckled lightly to himself.

The breath he took was enough to lift some of the weight from his shoulders and exhale it out to the air around him. It didn’t leave him entirely, but somehow, just after the short show of care from the human women downstairs, it was enough to move it temporarily, like reshelving a favored book. Humans were such interesting creatures, he thought again to himself as he made his way out of his den. He interacted with them a lot, but didn’t make a habit of becoming close friends. There would simply be too many questions to dodge, too many lies to tell, too many bodies to bury. Yet still, even as his heart splintered, he found himself drawn to their companionship, their curiosity, their endless generosity, wit...Then he had to firmly remind himself that he was a *demon*, and it was his job to drag his Mother’s creation down to eternal torment, whether they fully deserved it or not. And that it was *his* choice to do so.

He grimaced, but took one last step toward the spiral staircase, and quickly made his way down. The conversation dipped, but as he stepped between a few shelves to the main room, a round of small cheers erupted.

“*There* he is!” Mrs. Sandwich whooped.

“Oh, you did so well with his hair!” Maggie patted Mrs. Sandwich’s shoulder.

“Remind me why we care this much?” Nina stage-whispered to Maggie.

Crowley rolled his eyes at all of them. *Humans*.

“Muriel,” he called in the direction of their aura, “You can come out of hiding now.”

Quietly, they stepped from behind the bookshelf they ducked behind when they heard him come down the stairs. Subtly, they lifted their nose to sniff the air. The salty weight of misery was still present, but it was temporarily hidden by something they haven't felt from the demon in a while: the sweet, sharp, almost orange-y tang of joy. They allowed themselves to smile wide, and the sun practically came back up early to reflect through their face.

“Right,” Mrs. Sandwich clapped her hands together, “Have you got food in the back? ‘Cause I’m starving, but I don’t think I could make it through that storm out there.”

She pointed through the dark windows, where streetlamps reflected a falling snow that appeared to be going sideways, if not upside down, and quickly piled up the streets to make them a blinding white. Nina and Maggie gave each other equal glances of discomfort. Trying to walk through that, even just across the street, would be a nightmare.

“Uh...” Crowley groaned internally, “Not really. Me and Azir-” he stopped himself, “We usually just ate out.”

Mrs. Sandwich pursed her lip, her eyebrows scrunching in as well with the motion.

“Every day? You went out to eat *every* day?” her suspicion increased when Crowley just shrugged, “D’you know how expensive that gets?”

“Agk, well, y’know...” he waved his hand around the bookshop, as if that cleared up the argument with a neat bow.

Mrs. Sandwich leaned toward him with her hands on her hips. Crowley almost threw a prayer up that she wouldn’t be able to see through his lenses.

“Are you lot in the mafia?”

*Oh, humans. Never change.*

“Nah.”

“Um, if I may,” Muriel raised their hand.

“Muriel dear, you don’t have to raise your hand,” Maggie cooed.

“Ah, well, I just wanted to point out that I went food shopping for the first time!”

They pointed to their spoils of war, the two bags of chicken and milk, still sweating in the warm lights and warm temperature of the bookshop.

Nina cocked her head.

“For the *first* time? Muriel, how old are you?”

Desperately, Muriel threw a glance toward Crowley, who only raised a brow in response.

“Oh, I’m like..two hun-”

“Eh...” Crowley subtly pointed a finger down.

“Um, I mean, two...?” They leaned forward.

“Hmm...” he jerked his thumb up just a touch.

“Two...twenty...three...?”

“You’re twenty-three?” Nina asked sharply.

“Yes...?” Muriel tried very hard not to announce the question.

Nina stared for a moment, then shrugged.

“Never too late to learn a life skill, I guess. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

She and Mrs. Sandwich tugged open the bags, and the look they gave one another was clear that they were trying very hard not to laugh at the contents as Muriel smiled wide and expectantly next to them.

“How did I do for my first time?” They asked, the sunshine evident in their voice.



The human women glanced at Crowley, who shrugged for the umpteenth time that night. Truly, his shoulders were getting a workout.

“Did wonderful, sweetheart.” Mrs. Sandwich said with an almost convincing grin and pat on their shoulder.

She stared at the food a moment longer, then turned to Crowley fully, taking the bag Nina’s hand as well.

“Mr. Crowley, have you got tomato sauce in your kitchen?”

“S not my kitchen. But yeah.”

With a subtle tug of the air, a few jars manifested themselves into existence in a drawer in the small kitchenette upstairs.

“And a couple pots?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Once again, the matter of the universe found itself pinched and redistributed to form itself into the shape of a small set of stainless steel pots and pans.

“Nina, I see that baguette there, I’m gonna have to borrow it.”

“How d’you borrow a baguette?”

“Borrow as in I’ll pay you back, love.” She grabbed the bag, while Muriel assisted her with the bags of chicken and milk, “I’m making us chicken parm sandwiches. Muriel, be a dear and help us out.”

Muriel tossed Crowley a desperate look before they allowed themselves to too be dragged up the stairs by Mrs. Sandwich’s insistence.

An hour later, after hearing several laughs, a couple dropped pots, and more than an enough swear words that would make a certain angel blush, Mrs. Sandwich and Muriel returned with five plates on two trays, each with a generous sized chicken parm sandwich on it, oozing with freshly made mozzarella cheese.

“Alright, tuck in everyone!”

The humans dug into their food, all grateful to finally eat something after hours of not doing so, while the occult and celestial beings were a bit more apprehensive. Crowley preferred not to eat as a general rule: the feeling of mashing up food in one’s mouth and swallowing it felt too much

like watching a bird pre-munch food for its babies, while swallowing it whole would make him receive rather strange looks. To avoid the whole mess, he stuck to beverages and water instead. However, to appease the expectant gaze of Mrs. Sandwich, he allowed himself a few small bites. Muriel, on the other hand, stared at their plate. They had gone food shopping in the first place because they were sure that, after four months of living on Earth, they were ready to try to eat human food. And yet, with it there in front of them, they weren't sure what to do. Much like the cupperty (which they learned was actually a 'cup of tea,' all separate words), they observed those around them first.

"Muriel, eat some!" Mrs. Sandwich said, already a third through hers, "I'll be right offended if you don't."

"R-right..." Muriel stared at their plate again, then over at Crowley, who was, surprisingly, taking another small bite.

"It's good," he muttered, leaning closer to them so the humans wouldn't overhear, "just bite into it, chew it in your mouth, then swallow. Stop breathing for a sec while you do or else you'll choke. It's like with tea, just a bit bulkier."

"O-of course. I-I knew that..." they tried to say it teasingly, but the pinch of their brow betrayed them horribly.

Slowly, they picked up the sandwich, careful to make sure no sauce spilled out, and took a tiny bite from a piece of chicken that stuck out at the end. As soon as the spiced chicken and sauce hit their taste buds, Crowley was almost thrown back in time. It was like watching his angel eat ox ribs for the first time: their eyes flew open, and immediately, they took a bigger bite, almost half the size of their sandwich.

"Woah, slow down, Muriel!" Maggie chuckled, "You'll choke!"

Muriel somehow managed to swallow their bite without doing so.

"This is amazing!" stars shined through their eyes, "You made this, Mrs. Sandwich?"

Mrs. Sandwich gave them a gentle chastising look.

"Yeah, you were there with me, love. You dropped a pot on my foot in the first five minutes."

"Still!" Muriel took another huge bite, "This is incredible!" through a mouth full of sandwich, they leapt closer to the sandwich maker, "Is there more? Do you have more?"

"Here, take mine." Crowley said, giving them his mostly uneaten portion.

"Thank you Mr. Crowley!"

They gratefully accepted his donation, and plopped themselves into Aziraphale's desk chair, content as could be.

"I've been meaning to ask," Maggie said gently, swallowing her last bite and rubbing some crumbs off her pants, "How do you two know each other?" she pointed between the angel and demon.

Crowley sucked his teeth, pondered the air for a moment, then ruffled the hair of Muriel as he sat down on the armrest of the chair.

"They're my uh... nibbling. Yup, that's it."

"Why do they call you 'Mr. Crowley' then? That's a bit odd," Nina pointed out.

"Inside joke, you wouldn't get it." he flashed a smile and snorted lightly, before gathering everyone's plates along with Muriel, and miraculously away any crumbs that made their way into any of Aziraphale's antique furniture, because even if they were decidedly *not* talking, Crowley would rather stay in Hell's filing circles for an eternity than have to see the angel's face if he found a single bit of food in his couch.

"What's a 'nibbling?'" Muriel asked once they reached the privacy of the upstairs kitchenette.

"You. And it's easier for them to understand than the truth," he said, then grabbed a few bottles of wine and glasses.

The night ended with Nina slightly tipsy, Mrs. Sandwich a little more tipsy, Muriel with their glass still full (they were still working their way up to alcohol) and Crowley, in the lead, having gone through two bottles almost entirely on his own. In her hands, Maggie swirled a hot cocoa, and leaned comfortably onto Nina's shoulder, who was recounting one of several anecdotes of rude or comical customers that stuck with her throughout her many years of waitressing and restaurant owning.

"Because genuinely, genuinely, *who puts soy in their coffee?*" She finished her latest spiel, and leaned against the top of Maggie's blonde hair, a few fly-away wisps tickling her nose.

"Goodness," Mrs. Sandwich glanced at her phone, which proudly portrayed the time to be well past midnight, "Well, Merry Christmas, everyone!"

A small cheer of Merry Christmas's replied, and, because the storm had slowed enough to make the streets walkable again, the women gathered their things and braved the night.

“Crowley,” Mrs. Sandwich called behind her as she stood in the doorway, “Let me know if you ever want to come over. I know some very fine older gentlemen who would *love* to meet you, if you’re up to it.”

Crowley gave her his most charming half smile.

“Nah, but I’ll stop by. Just enough to draw some business.”

“Stealin’ my business, more like,” she cackled once again, and the wind swept it off as she made her way to her brothel.

“Well, they were nice!” Muriel chirped from their seat.

“You gonna drink that?”

They wordlessly handed off their glass while Crowley plopped onto the couch and drunk most of it down in a single swig. Carefully, Muriel twisted their fingers in knots before voicing what had been on their mind for a little while.

“Are you...feeling better then, Mr. Crowley?”

“You don’t have to call me ‘Mr,’ they were right, it is a little weird.” He avoided the question.

“Well, Crowley, are you...feeling better?”

Strangely, he found himself not having to fake his answer.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I am.”

Muriel smiled again. It felt almost a crime to be at the receiving end of it.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” they clapped, then started to gather the wine glasses and mug that had been left by their guests, “I think I’ll clean up the kitchen.”

Crowley smirked.

“Think you could handle it on your own without blowing up something?”

Muriel paused, a stricken expression covering their once bright smile.

“Will something explode?”

“If you’re not careful,” he took another swig.

Muriel's frightened expression remained, and he groaned onto the back of the couch.

"You'll be fine. Just don't drop anything."

The smile returned.

"Of course."

They began humming a small tune and took Crowley's glass as he finished it. Something about the sound struck him as odd, unfamiliar.

"What're you singing, then? Doesn't sound like a celestial harmony to me."

"Oh, I took your advice!"

"What advice?" an angel listening to him was never a good idea.

"Back around when I first arrived, you told me to use Mr. Fell's computer to explore the in-ter-net. So I did!"

Crowley was surprised it even turned on.

"How'd you even get it to work?"

They giggled.

"I asked nicely! I listened to those groups you recommended, but then I found another I liked. His name is...Hoe-zee-or, I think?"

"Hozier?"

"Yes!" they jumped slightly in excitement, "Well, I listen to all of his music, that's called a discography, I learned, and I really liked it. Have you heard his new album?"

Crowley nearly fell off the couch.

*"Hozier has a new album out?"*

~

#### ANCIENT KINGDOM OF JUDEA - 1000 BCE

Crowley scratched her face. The bright, summer sun made her skin itch after being in the darkness of Hell, even if it was only for a couple days (or, relatively, of course. Time was as much a construct in Hell as it was in any other place in the universe. Sometimes it went

backward just for fun). She had just returned to the surface after being called down for a specific mission: tempt the great David, the favored king of the Lord.

“Tempt him with what?” she had asked, kneeling at the throne of Beelzebub.

“Izzn’t that your area of expertizzze?” they buzzed boredly in response and picked at their blackened nails, “You figure it out.”

“What if I can’t?” she raised a brow, “What if that nut is uncrackable?”

Beelzebub rolled their eyes and pulled up a scroll, then tossed it to Crowley. The handwriting and spelling were atrocious of course, but it got across the message just fine that Crowley would find herself very suddenly and very completely missing several essential body parts, and would have to climb through the nine circles of Hell trying to receive them while also being hunted by Hellhounds, who were at liberty to remove even more limbs, should they felt at ease to do so, if she failed.

Crowley rolled the scroll and tucked it into a pocket.

“Understood, my lord.”

“Get out.” Beelzebub had droned, “Next!”

“My area of expertise...” she muttered, kicking a stray stone as she stood outside the palace.

She groaned, already sweating from the knowledge of what would happen if she failed her mission, adjusted her headcovering, and began the walk up the stairs to the king's palace.

“Dear lady, you cannot-”

The soldier guarding the front entrance suddenly found himself best friends with the floor. Crowley’s sandals kicked up dust as she strode past his confused sputters, a shadow over the clean brick.

The castle itself was quite magnificent for its time. A wide structure, pillars that stretched up to the high second and third floors, and a wide courtyard filled with tropical trees bursting with fruit. Crowley took a moment to admire the garden, and even picked a plum to suck the juice out of it while she wandered the floors, passing a few milling royal workers, unseen with just a flick of her wrist.

It wasn’t hard to find the king’s throne room. It was in the very back, the most protected section of the castle, and a couple guards stood at attention, holding pointed spears that Crowley found pointed in her face.

“The king is not accepting visitors at this moment,” one announced, his voice and face glowering at the figure wearing all black.

Crowley merely took a finger and pushed the blade away from her face.

“Rude,” she said gently.

These two soldiers joined their co-worker in camaraderie with the brick floors.

“Don’t struggle so much,” she cooed to the writhing figures as she walked toward the heavy wooden doors, “It’ll only hurt more.”

With little effort and quite a lot of demonic flair, she flung open the doors, sending a burst of definitive ill-intent toward its occupants. It was a bit of a waste, as there were only two people within the room toward the very back: the king himself, and what looked like a trusted advisor. Both were quite handsome, in human terms of the word, but the king shone with Godly protection. This one, She had put a *special* interest in. Crowley grimaced. How on Earth was she supposed to tempt a human who was being guarded by God Herself? Rather than back down and accept defeat, Crowley simply untucked a flirtatious amount of hair, not to the point of obscenity, and strode down the long carpet with the conviction of someone who owned the place. A slight swish of her hips accentuated her confidence, and the king merely raised an eyebrow as she approached.

“My king,” she bowed respectfully at his feet, but did not break eye contact.

The advisor, suddenly realizing he had a job, pulled out his sword and pointed it toward Crowley’s flaming hair.

“Woman-”

“Leave us,” King David said suddenly, waving a nonchalant hand in a polite sweeping away motion.

The advisor’s head made a short game of glancing between his king and the strange woman kneeling before the throne, sputtering, with his sword hand losing its grip.

“But-”

“You heard him,” Crowley said sweetly, throwing in a bit of Influence so that he’d *really* get the message, “Leave us.”

The advisor gulped, took a few more glances between them, then sheathed his sword and stomped toward the front entrance, the agitation tangible to Crowley. Even though her stomach writhed with something approximating guilt, human frustration was *delicious*. She turned her

attention back to the king, whose eyes seemed to have never left her since the moment she entered.

“Rise, gentlelady.”

“Crowley,” she raised a soft hand, and the king took it, kissing it almost just a touch beyond respect.

“Crowley,” David bowed slightly as well, “to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Oh, y’know,” she shrugged, “just passing through the neighborhood. Wanted to see what all the fuss was about this new amazing king, seemingly blessed by God Himself.”

“Himself,” The king corrected playfully.

Crowley smiled incredulously.

“Sure, you think that. But anyway,” she turned toward the windows, “I came to sate my curiosity. Perhaps get a taste of divinity for myself...”

She let her words trail, as if to let the king decide for himself what that meant. Truly, she was working off the fly here. No good plan was worth following to a T, and most good things happened as a result of happenstance and chaos anyway. If she were born human, she thought often, she would have been a great actor, and an even better improviser. Rather, the talent was used for her job securing souls for Satan instead.

“Hmm...” the king hummed, the sound coming deep from his throat, warm, and yet, a few hairs rose on the back of Crowley’s neck, an all too human reaction she found herself cursing and blessing, “And how do you suppose you would earn that divinity?”

A gentle hand brushed against the small of her back, and Crowley’s heart jumped painfully. A cold sweat began to form on her forehead, and she found herself distracted by the closeness. Divinity. True divinity. Too close, too unfamiliar. It was nothing like Aziraphale’s divinity, which was often muddled with his own small vices and controllably dulled whenever the two were nearby, but this human had none of it. Not unless, of course, if Crowley could find one.

No wonder Beelzebub had sent her to do this job. Other lower level demons would have scampered back to Hell at this point. Crowley found herself wanting to run away.

“Oh, I’m sure we can think of a few ways...”

She meant for it to come out dark and husky, but her voice cracked with uncertainty. The king was far too close. Lust, she suddenly realized, lust was his certain downfalling sin. It flowed just beneath the surface of his skin, dampened by the divinity, but directed itself toward her own



corporation. She hadn't meant for this form to be used for such temptation, she just wanted to present a little differently. It seemed, she quickly learned, that this form too came with its own drawbacks, just as much as the male presenting one. Quickly, she hooked onto his lust with a quick, practiced finger, and launched it toward the first unfortunate human that got caught outside. She didn't care, as long as it wasn't directed at her anymore.

The king's eyes slowly left her, and the hand on her back dropped. Crowley found herself able to breathe again, tight and quick as the breaths came, at least it was air in her lungs.

"Good Lord..." the king whispered.

"Blasphemy," Crowley muttered under her breath, but David did not notice.

"There, upon that rooftop, hanging laundry," he pointed toward a woman on the roof of her house just outside the walls of the castle, "Who is she? She must be blessed with the beauty of the angels..."

Even Crowley had to admit the woman was gorgeous. Deep, warm skin, browned by natural melanin and the sun, wrapped in tan robes that accentuated her striking facial features, and dark brown eyes that sparkled in the early afternoon light. Quickly, Crowley read the woman's essence, just enough to catch her name and a little bit of her life.

"Bathsheba," Crowley replied gently, "Her name is Bathsheba, wife of the soldier Uriah."

Lust clouded the king's eyes, and delicately, Crowley pulled more of it to the deepest parts of his soul so it might infect his whole being. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but she had a job to do, if she wanted to avoid hopping one-legged through hell trying to fetch an eyeball with hellhound slobber on her back.

"She is married..." doubt coated David's voice.

*Shit*, Crowley thought. She was losing him. Already, she could feel purity eating away at her demonic intervention.

"I'm sure that's not a problem for such a notable person as yourself," she saddled closer to him, despite how it made the hairs at the back of her head stand even higher.

David's eyes narrowed.

"Perhaps...John!" he called suddenly.

John, the advisor, returned, evidently frightened by the soldiers who were still stuck to the floor outside the doors.

“My king-” he stammered.

“That woman, Bathsheba,” David pulled John toward the window while Crowley slipped away, seemingly melting into the shadows, “Fetch her for me, please.”

From the darkness, Crowley watched John fumble, clearly still trying to warn him of something, before the king sent him out. Subtly, Crowley performed a miracle that the king would not remember who she was, as though she were nothing more than a specter at the edge of his vision, lost to a crowd. She evaluated his soul, and there, the lust had taken root. But would it stay was the question. Would it be damped out by Her divinity as quickly as it had before? She couldn't afford to be laissez faire with this mission. Still sticking to the shadows, she followed John the advisor as he exited the castle and walked the streets toward the woman's house. Bathsheba agreed to join the king for dinner, if he so wished her company.

As the hours ticked by, Crowley alternated between watching the woman and David, making sure to bring his lust from the center of his soul to each part of him, until it practically buzzed under his skin. The woman, she placed confidence into. She needed her to be brave enough to go along with whatever the king wanted, and not be pulled away by fear, or Satan-forbid, *faith*.

When dinner came, it was a small affair. Just the king, Bathsheba, John, and a few soldiers whom David was personal friends with. Extending a hand from the shadows, Crowley enjoyed herself a glass of sweet plum wine, curling her lip in both disgust and pleasure at a bad job well done. Soon enough, plates were taken by servants, the soldiers returned to their posts, and David and Bathsheba disappeared to the king's private quarters. Only John and a hidden Crowley remained.

Crowley sipped the last of her wine, wondering if there were any nice restaurants around to continue her early celebration, when John's eyes landed squarely on her.

“I can see you there, woman.”

Steel coated his eyes, strengthened his words. The stuttering, confused fool she'd seen earlier was gone, replaced by a wise man who also just so happened to know how to use a sword. She nearly dropped her goblet.

“Though woman, I doubt you are.” John crept closer, a hand laid threateningly upon the hilt of his weapon, “I assume you to be a creature of darkness, seeing how comfortable you are within its hold. Demon, perhaps.”

Crowley quirked up a brow. Wise man, indeed. She laughed, splayed her hands out wide, and stepped out from the dark corner.

“Congratulations, you caught me! I owe you three wishes now! Or wait, was that genies?” she shrugged and waved the goblet away from existence, “Whatever. What do you want? Or more

accurately,” she leaned in close, willing fangs to form in her wide smile and her serpent eyes to be visible to the mortal, “What are you going to do about me?”

John’s eyes hardly blinked as her more demonic features faded into view.

“It is my duty as his royal highness’s advisor to protect him and guide him from harm. You have tried to pull him from the path of righteousness, and as such, I will make sure your plans are foiled, wicked creature.”

Crowley blew a raspberry before descending into cackles.

“Right, right...” she was able to stop and breathe for a moment before being overcome with more laughter, accompanied by throaty snorts, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry, it’s just- Your face! Oh, my *Satan*, you look so *serious!*”

The advisor’s expression did not change. His hand gripped the hilt of his sword and before Crowley could fully swallow her laughter, its tip landed right on her nose.

“Aw, now there’s no need for all that,” she whined, putting her hands up in mock surrender, “Imagine all the paperwork...”

“You will leave this place,” John scowled, and pointed the tip deeper, “And return to the bowels of hell where you belong. I will save my king from the temptations you have brought and right the wrongs from his soul.”

Crowley smirked.

“Hmm, yeah, good luck with that buddy,” she paused and put a dramatic, wagging hand up to her ear.

John watched in confusion, but suddenly a light moan cut through the otherwise quiet, sleeping castle. Crowley’s smirk grew as John’s face pinkened with realization.

“Though you might just be a touch too late,” she glowed with evil, and inhaled his righteous fury.

The sword suddenly pointed at her chest, and Crowley found herself pushed against the wall.

“Fix this, demon!” John snarled.

“Lets not-” the sword cut through the first layer of her robe, “Alright, alright, alright, *relax!*”

Some weight pulled itself away from the sharp tip. Crowley heaved, glancing quickly between the sword and its wielder.

"I can't undo what your king is doing, he did *that* to *himself*," she grimaced as the point grew closer to her skin again, "*But*, I can do something for you. Whatever you want, riches, power, women, whatever your dark little heart desires."

She was desperate and she knew it. Crowley hardly resorted to outright bribery, but she was literally stuck between a rock (well, bricks) and a hard (sharp) place. Quickly, she read his soul, grasping at anything she could.

*Well, well, well*, she mused, *lust infects this one too. Humans, so weak to base desires.*

"...women?" John repeated slowly, unsure.

"Oh, yes," Crowley put on a soft voice, dark and warm like fresh oil, "As many and as beautiful as you'd like. I can tell the wife's not loving how often you're away from home, and fidelity was never quite her strong suit, was it?"

It was a wild guess on her end, but it seemed to land perfectly. The advisor unsteadily lowered his sword until it was pointed at her sandals.

"No..." he murmured, morose, "Though that is no fault of her own..."

He raised his eyes, and Crowley almost felt her heart splinter from the regret flooding his. And yet, the lust returned, and seemed to cloud over his soul. Crowley almost tipped her head in confusion at that. That wasn't her doing whatsoever.

"Any woman, you say?" John whispered, taking a few steps closer.

Crowley gulped lightly, and tried desperately to move from his gaze.

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"Even...you?"

John was mere inches from her, and he used a kind, but rough thumb to force her to look down in his eyes.

Crowley took a minute to think. She had just avoided the attention of David, and redirected the lust toward another human who had gotten caught in the crossfire. His holiness burned through his touch, and she couldn't imagine what would happen if that route continued. Here, John radiated almost no holiness in comparison. Was his soul pure? Sure, enough as any human soul could be in his situation. If Crowley got into his good books, perhaps he could do the work of further tempting the king *for* her, rather than having to lurk around the castle for David's attention and manually pulling his lust to the front stage whenever he got a bit too righteous for Hell's taste.

“Alright...” she said carefully, “But I’ll need something in return. It’s small, don’t worry.”

A small flinch of anger grew on John’s face before it lapsed back to its lustful greed.

“What may that be...?”

His breath scraped across her face, warm and heavy, not welcome, but not entirely unpleasant.

“Well, we’ll figure that out when we get there, shall we?”

~

John’s castle quarters were small, but comfortable and private, with only a small, rectangular window showing the bright, twinkling stars above. He led Crowley there, a tight hand wrapped around her waist and the other tucked deep into her stark red hair, their lips pushed together as they stumbled down the stairs and onto his bed.

“Mm, most humans don’t have a nice bed like this,” she commented as he laid her down on the surface.

“Most humans are not advisors to the strongest, wealthiest king in Judea.” John murmured, kissing along her neck.

“Blessed by God Herself,” Crowley muttered.

John did not respond, as he was busy maneuvering his hands beneath oceans of gray and black robes until he reached her breasts, squeezing them firmly. He kissed her again, deeply, and Crowley fought hard not to let the disgust rise like bile in her throat. She’d never been intimate like this before with anyone, let alone a human, and she found herself disliking it with each moment his lips and tongue tried to delve into her mouth. This was a problem, because they hadn’t even gone that far, and she still needed a favor from him.

One of John’s hands snaked their way down from her chest and came to a rest near the top of her inner thigh, squeezing and pinching the delicate skin. Her breath hitched.

“Nervous?” he murmured into her mouth.

*Do humans ever shut up?* She thought angrily.

“I’m a *demon*, what do you think?”

For a moment, John paused, as though he was suddenly realizing just what was happening for the first time. Fear coated his soul, before it was quickly pierced through with lust once more. He

smiled darkly, and Crowley felt her own essence quake for a moment, her sharp pupils shrinking into thin slits. Just because she was a demon with the ability to pull miracles out of thin air, it didn't mean she was safe from humans. The creatures were some of God's most creative, both in their endless goodness, and alternatively, in their boundless evil. Crowley bit down to keep from screaming. She had been the tempter, but now she hoped for mercy.

"Well then,"

John kept his voice low, and began to move lower and lower down, pressing heavy kisses along her neck and collarbones, while his hand near her thigh crept up. Two of his fingers were cold as they entered her, but they quickly became warm and smooth, creating a routine of slowly inserting and exiting, while his thumb played gentle circles with her clitoris. She couldn't help the low groan that escaped her, and against her leg, she could feel his own desire grow harder as his lust expanded. He may have just been some royal advisor, but he knew his way around a human female's body. It scared her. Her fangs bit into her inner lip, and the taste of blood began to fill her senses. A cold sweat formed on her back.

Crowley hadn't even noticed when he inserted himself into her, only the sudden presence of unwanted warmth filling her. Her mouth gaped in shock, and she found herself grasping at his shoulders, unsure if she were trying to push him away or bring him closer.

"Dear lady, are you-"

Demonic claws dug into his back and John found himself staring into yellow Hell: agony, screams of the damned, and his own soul frozen solid in a lake filled with other bodies, never ending.

"Let'ssss just get this over with," Crowley hissed.

She opened her legs and criss-crossed them around John's back, pulling him in as close as possible until his face was buried in her neck, panting and pushing his body down with the heaviest lust his soul could possibly hold. Each pound brought a soft breath out of Crowley, and with John no longer facing her, she freely allowed tears to stream from her eyes.

"You know, in order to take care of Bathsheba's husband, you could have him killed," Crowley panted out between moans of her own and John's, "Stick him on the front lines, draw back and let him die, plenty of people die in war."

"What-why-"

John almost finished right there, but Crowley forced his stamina to keep going for another moment.

“It’ll make your king happy,” her words licked the shell of his ears, earning her another pleased grunt from the human, “That woman is most beautiful in his eyes, and as king, he deserves her, don’t you think?”

She only needed to use a touch of Persuasion to get his soul to accept the new Truth.

“Yes, yes, thats-”

John’s words were drowned out by a low groan that reverberated through Crowley’s being, and she felt the warm sensation of liquid pumping itself inside of her. John placed warm, slick fingers on her clitoris again, and rolled it gently until Crowley felt herself climax, her back arching and breath catching with the overwhelming lust between them.

John panted, and slowly pulled himself out, a few barely visible strings of semen and Crowley’s own wetness snapping as he set himself next to Crowley on the bed. Her legs still stuck out in awkward angles, no longer being held up by John’s back. She felt sick to her stomach, bile bubbling in her gut as though a pot of inedible soup. This was a job mainly for succubi, they were creatures of pure lust and sex, born of the sins themselves, never once having been angels and knowing the Love of God. With a trembling hand, she pushed her legs in and down until they laid flat on the bed, as still as the rest of her. Beside her, John began to breathe deeply, already pulled to sleep by the physical excursion.

Her hand still shook as she pulled up another miracle.

“You won’t remember this. You won’t remember me,” she slowly sat up and let the magic settle into her palm before placing it on his chest, “Forget me. I think that’d be best, actually. But send Uriah to war, and let him die. Let the king have Bathsheba, let his soul lust for what he wants most...”

She stood up, letting her robes fall back to their proper position, until John groaned. It wasn’t at all like those of pleasure, but one of fear and nightmares. Crowley’s heart splintered. She pulled up one more miracle.

“Forget me, and return to your wife,” she whispered, her words no louder than a sweet dream, “she loves you more than you think, and you love her more than your soul can stand.”

The miracle ended with her pulling the tiniest bit of magic from Another Place, her fingers pinching the air and drawing them down in a motion she was no longer privy to do. And yet, the magic held. His soul, still corrupted, settled, and he fell into a warm, deep sleep, no longer filled with thoughts of red haired, yellow eyed creatures, but the soft curly brown waves of his wife, her beauty marks, sweet smile, and tender kiss.

Crowley couldn’t bear to smile. Her soul hurt enough from the effort of the day, and the large amount of miracles in the same amount of time.

She gingerly took several careful steps away from the bed, then the chamber, then the castle itself. Sticky, white liquid dripped down her legs as she went, and they trembled with the effort of holding her body up. She made it thirty feet away from the castle grounds before she threw up and wailed.

“Get it out, *get it out, get it out!*”

She drew up magic and snapped over and over, forcing the advisor’s spend out of her body and transporting it somewhere far, far away, anywhere, as long as it wasn’t in her. She heaved for breath, feeling the cold ghost of him inside her, his breaths along her neck, and she fought not to scream, cry, or both. Her body settled with throwing up again, and she laid on the stony ground for several minutes, letting the cool night air wrap itself around her boiling body. She took several more calming breaths before she pulled herself up, made the vomit disappear, and walked to some lonely corner of the desert.

She found a small creek with a few rocks by its bank, large enough to serve as a seat for a broken soul. Crowley settled herself down onto one, and stared up at the full moon far, far above. It was nearly midnight, if her understanding of the Earth’s angle according to the night sky was correct. This section of stars and galaxies she hadn’t worked on, when she was an angel. This sector was more Saraqael’s domain. Crowley could tell even just by looking at the simple star designs and lack of color. Gray and white? For an entire galaxy? How unimaginative. May as well just call it the Milk Galaxy and move on for a coffee break. She felt breath on her neck and froze. Her eyes squeezed tightly on their own accord, her demonic claws bared at the ready. It was just the wind.

“Just the wind,” she murmured to herself, hugging her arms tightly around her body.

She still felt liquid leaking out of her.

“Crowley?”

A familiar voice brought her back to reality. She threw her head toward the source, and found Aziraphale standing there, a confused expression playing at his soft features, leaving them upset and wrinkled.

“Smile, angel, a scowl’s not a good look on you,” Crowley joked halfheartedly, “And it’s Crowley now, remember?”

“Ah, quite right, I’ll remember next time.\*” he apologized, and settled onto a nearby rock.

(\*He would not remember her name the next time they met. It would take another thousand years, multiple gender changes, and the rise and fall of an empire or two for Aziraphale to get



her name right. It would almost be endearing if it wasn't so irritating having to remind him every single time.)

They watched the stars twinkle for a moment before Aziraphale casually adjusted with his cream and gold robes, which Crowley knew was a sign he was about to ask something, or start up conversation for the sake of politeness.

"Might I ask what you are doing in this particular corner of the world?" he asked.

Crowley shrugged.

"Same stuff as usual. Quick temptation here and there, damn a few souls for Satan to snack on, y'know how it is."

Aziraphale leaned in a touch.

"I assume this one did not go quite as well?"

His voice was more gentle, but it only caused Crowley to pinch her brows in confusion.

"Why do you say that?"

Crowley could make out the angel's deep blush even in the dark.

"Ah, well, your," he gestured toward her face, which cleared up nothing, "You look as though you've been crying."

One of Crowley's brows shot up.

"Do I look like the kind of demon who cries?"

Aziraphale sighed sharply, twisting his hands further into his robes. It drew a small smile out of Crowley.

"All I mean to say is," he huffed again, "Your eyes are rather shiny."

Mirth began to line Crowley's expression. Only Aziraphale could right her mood so quickly, even if it was completely unintentional, she reminded herself.

"Flirting, angel? I thought that was against the rules."

Aziraphale tossed a look up to Heaven, as though to ask why, of all creatures in the universe, he was down here with this demon.

“Well pardon me, dear lady, for showing you a bit of concern.”

Crowley cracked a real smile, then wiped at her face. Sure enough, small streams of salty water moistened her fingers as she pulled away.

“No need to be concerned, not for me. All part of the temptation,” Crowley lied, flicking away the tears, “went with the damsel in distress trick. Works every time.”

“Alright,” Aziraphale didn’t sound convinced.

Still, he stood up as if to go, and made it only a few steps before he felt the air change again. As an angel, his senses were more attuned towards lighter emotions that reflected the Love of God. Yet, in the presence of the demon, his soul felt weighed down, tired, almost fearful. A debate surged in him for a moment before he let his pity win.

“If there is something that is ever the matter,” he set a gentle hand on her shoulder, “You could always-”

Sharp, black claws lodged themselves into the skin of his hand, not quite hard enough to draw blood, the threat just a touch away. A warning.

*“Don’t touch me.”*

Aziraphale quickly pulled his hand away, but something made him pause rather than run away. The demon’s voice had cracked. Crowley’s voice never cracked like *that*, like there were unseen evils pulling at her vocal cords that kept her from screaming into the night.

“My dear lad-”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be, angel?” her voice was empty this time, carefully constructed to lack any feeling other than contempt.

Aziraphale, still behind her, bristled. So much for trying to help Crowley.

“Yes, I do, rather.”

He really didn't; he was here on break after a successful tour of Italy, but she didn't need to know that. Crowley's head barely turned in acknowledgement.

“Then I guess you should be heading on.”

Aziraphale’s heart pounded. Something was wrong.

“Crowley-”

“Just leave angel,” her voice was blank as a sheet of clean papyrus, “leave me alone.”

Aziraphale set his face, stern, and for once, not leaving at the first opportunity the demon offered. He should be scared to be this near to such a creature, or rather, striking her down. Instead, he returned to the rock he sat upon initially and stared out at the stars, and ignored the pointed glare that was thrown in his direction.

“What a beautiful night,” he said eventually, once the moon had passed its highest point.

Crowley had been crying silently for over an hour, sure that the angel couldn't see or hear as the tears rolled down her face without a sound to accompany them. Neither said a word, afraid to break whatever peace that settled between them.

“Thank Saraqael,” Crowley sniffed, pretending to sneeze immediately afterward and already placing imaginary blame on imaginary allergies.

“What about you?” Aziraphale asked cautiously.

Crowley quickly mastered the ability to glare from the side without ever fully facing her subject.

“What d’you mean?” her voice sharpened the air with an electric crackle.

This was dangerous territory, and Aziraphale knew. He backed up.

“Nothing, nothing.”

It was silent for another slightly tense half an hour. Aziraphale alternated between fiddling with his robes, tossing desperate glances at Crowley, and staring up at the endless stars. These definitely did have Saraqael's touch to it: clean, neat, orderly, but just enough randomness for humanity to not be too concerned. Aziraphale recalled the stars he knew Crowley had made before her Fall. In comparison, they were wild, expressive, disastrously beautiful, like an artist that had carefully dipped their brushes into different inks before giving up and throwing the buckets themselves onto a wall, calling the aftermath the finished product.

“I didn't fail my temptation,” Crowley murmured eventually.

Aziraphale had to stop breathing in order to hear her quiet voice.

“I was a bit too good at it, actually,” she continued, then stood up, finally fully facing the angel, “Keep an eye on King David, alright? And his advisor, too. I'll be seeing you.”

And she disappeared into the night.

~

## PRESENT DAY (AUGUST 2024) - HEAVEN

At his desk, Aziraphale daydreamed. Well, he daydreamed as well as anyone with a limited imagination could, so by that definition, he reminisced. He tried to avoid thoughts of Crowley, but that failed about as spectacularly as his efforts so far to find a vessel for the Almighty. He had been drawn back to that night in the kingdom of Judea by the sight of a beautiful Palestinian woman with a white head covering, and just a touch of bright brown, almost auburn hair peeking out from underneath it. He had considered her for several days, but found he couldn't bring himself to choose her. She had too much of a future at stake, too many people depending on her, too many people to save herself. If she were torn apart by the Lord's presence, he wouldn't be able to forgive himself. He wouldn't be able to forgive himself if *any* human were torn apart, ripped away from existence by the overwhelming power of God, but he was stalling as well as he could.

So, he reminisced instead of thinking of consequences to actions.

He had kept a closer eye on David, as Crowley had told him that night. Entered the palace the next morning, announcing himself as an angel of the Lord, sent by God to help make sure the king stayed on the path of righteousness. When he examined both David and the advisor's auras, he was not surprised to find their innate lust pulled forward by demonic intervention. He thought it strange that Crowley would resort to that sort of temptation. She, as she identified at the time (Aziraphale always admired their ability to change themselves so drastically in appearance - he himself was hard stuck with the default setting of his corporation for the most part and left it at that), usually stayed on the edge of things, indirectly influencing humanity by forcing them to navigate chaos and unusual choices, not direct force. He felt pulled to ask her about it that night, but she seemed upset about it enough, and their friendship was still only in its fresh, budding stages.

*And yet, where are we now, in comparison?* Aziraphale thought to himself.

Not for the first time since his return to Heaven, he pressed gentle fingers against his lips. In his existence, he had hardly experienced something such as that. There was, of course, that wonderful night with Oscar Wilde...his cheeks flushed at the memory.

He didn't know how it happened. One moment, he and several other gentlemen were at a Gentlemen's Club, having a deep and hearty conversation about one book or other\*, and the next, he and Wilde were in a private back room, deep in another sort of conversation. It wasn't the first time they'd met, of course, Aziraphale had been a fan of even his earliest essays and had a constant, if interspaced correspondence with Wilde over long, novel length letters, but it was the first time they'd been truly alone together, and ventured to topics other than the baseline of socially acceptable.

(\*The fact that Aziraphale could not even remember the book they were discussing proved how distracted he was by the following events. He dedicated a sizeable amount of his angelic

memory toward storing and categorizing every piece of influential writing he'd read during his time on Earth.)

"You seem like some sort of angelic creature," Wilde had said quietly, over some steaming cups of tea, gazing at him in quiet thought, "I'm quite unsure what it is about you. It is as if you radiate God's divinity itself."

Aziraphale tried not to blush too hard. If he had truly been human, he was sure he would have been flattered to the point of choking on his biscuit.

"I suppose it's an appropriate observation."

Wilde cracked a smile, and delicately tucked some hair behind his ear.

"Do you think that highly of yourself?"

He laughed as Aziraphale suddenly blanched.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fell, you know I like to joke..."

He had leaned closer suddenly, but Aziraphale found himself not pulling away. He was enraptured by his eyes, sparkled and glittering with a human intelligence that could have only been a gift from God Herself. It seemed Wilde had the same idea.

"Mr. Fell, your eyes!"

"Hmm?"

Wilde had leaned closer.

"Why, the pupil! They're in the shapes of stars!" he reached out a hand as if to try to capture the light, "You did not know this?"

Aziraphale coughed loudly, but it did not deter the poet.

"Ah, well, it's not quite a thing I pay attention to, I suppose."

Wilde's voice dropped to something softer than cotton candy, and for just a moment, his eyes flickered down, away from Aziraphale's stars.

"I do think it's something to pay attention to. Eyes are the windows to the soul, after all."

Aziraphale at the time found his face rather warm indeed. It was not unwelcome, however. He and this human had much in common, much of the same things they enjoyed, and conversation was almost as enjoyable and easy with him as was with-

“What do my eyes reveal then?” he cut his own line of thinking off.

He wouldn't think of Crowley. Not now, not when he was off taking a God-Knows-How-Long year pity party nap after he had tried to convince him to give him a suicide pill. This moment was too precious to waste, a jewel that would shatter if he let it go. Human lives were so fleeting, and just once, at such a lonely period of time, he would allow himself to indulge.

Wilde leaned ever closer, his breath ghosting over Aziraphale's face, sweet with tea leaves and biscuits.

“...the most wonderful and magnificent things I could only wish to understand...”

His lips were plump, soft, and ever so delicate as they planted themselves against Aziraphale's. It wasn't expected, but once again, not unwelcome. After a moment's consideration, Aziraphale pushed back, allowing himself to feel this new version of human expression that he never before let himself feel. It was almost a temptation in its own sense, the way his heart pumped harder without any direct conscious input from his brain, the way his arms reached toward the small of Wilde's back, while the other cupped his face, tilted it, and brought it closer. Eventually, roaming hands made their ways under jackets, then waistcoats, then underclothes, and eventually, to bare skin. Gasps and rose tinted cheeks filled Aziraphale's ears and vision of the poet, and it was wonderful and sweet; the delicate, searching, and then eventual desperate pull of each other's most sensitive areas, until it led to a most gentle and satisfying climax.

It was one of the few times Aziraphale had allowed himself to sleep, so worn out from the encounter that, while tucked under Wilde's arms, he allowed himself to doze for a few hours, warmed by human body heat, an impossibly soft blanket, and a roaring fire that miraculously never went out as they rested.

Regret tasted sour on his breath the next morning. Wilde had looked down at him with such a tender gaze, and yet, in that moment, his enemy brain filled in the eyes with another color, one so familiar and yet, oddly serpentine. He had to look away. Wilde, crack whip smart as he was, noticed right away.

“Is everything alright?”

His resolve fell almost immediately.

“I-I'm so sorry, dear boy, it's not your fault, rather...it's just not fair to you.”

He kept it intentionally vague, not even quite sure what he was saying himself, yet, the poet picked it up almost effortlessly.

“There’s someone else, isn’t there?” his voice was barely above a whisper, but it still made Aziraphale flinch as though he’d been slapped.

Comforting hands stroked the sides of his arms, and it settled the confusion and anxiety that threatened to leave him mute. Wilde looked away for a moment, momentarily embarrassed as well, before a small, mischievous grin grew on his face.

“It’s that red-headed fellow you discuss in your letters, isn’t it?”

Aziraphale’s mind unhelpfully supplied his mental vision with some of his favorite outfits of Crowley’s over the years\*, deeping his guilt to a point where it was ice-skating with door to door salesmen.

(\*King David Era, Golgotha, Job era, as silly as the beard was, Edinburgh 1827, as the almost immodestly tight pants did nothing to let the imagination run wild, and most shamefully, of a time long ago when Crowley’s wings were as pure white as his.)

Wilde laughed again, almost with a relieved sigh at the end.

“I should have known. You speak of almost nothing other than him.”

“I do *not*-”

“Would you like for me to retrieve my letter box and underline the number of times you have written the name ‘Crowley,’ or just the number of times you’ve described his hair?”

Aziraphale grimaced, until the sarcastic edge left Wilde’s voice.

“Or the amount of times you’ve stated that you miss him?”

Unconsciously, Aziraphale found himself tugging Wilde’s arms closer to himself, as if they could block out the painful memory of 1862. It was hardly more than thirty years ago, and they had spent centuries apart before, especially before the Arrangement, and yet, the time felt far more distant, with pain and betrayal making the years stretch on, marking each second they were apart with cruel delight.

“Would it be wrong for me to hazard a guess,” Wilde began slowly, gentle as the kiss on Aziraphale’s lips that he placed only hours before, “that this love is unrequited?”

A stutter made its way up Aziraphale’s throat, and he struggled to keep it down.

"It's, um..." he cleared his throat again, "it's complicated."

"Hmm..." Wilde hummed against his temple.

"It's just," he twisted the blanket between his fingers, playing with a couple pieces of frayed cotton, "it is rather difficult to label, what we have between the two of us. I do eventually want to go back to Heaven, and, well, any kind of relationship with him would put a damper on that particular venture..."

He tried hard not to reveal anything about his true nature, but it had slipped out, and Aziraphale could only watch as Wilde's brows came together slightly in a way that showed he was thinking far more deeply than even his expression revealed.

"I think," Wilde started, voice gentle as a feather, strong as an ocean current, "If my love for someone were that genuine, that unbreakable, then perhaps it would be worth falling from heaven, if it meant being with them forever, rather than an existence apart."

Aziraphale stared at him, in wonder of human intelligence. Only God could have made such wondrous creatures, so beautiful, so inquisitive...so naive. He turned away, unable to meet Wilde's gaze.

"I don't quite know if I would call it...'love.'"

Humor returned to Wilde's voice.

"Well, it is certainly something," he chuckled, "You're thinking about him now, aren't you?"

He had been thinking about serpentine eyes and red hair catching in the light for the past six thousand years, if not longer. He gulped lightly.

"I suppose I am."

Wilde grinned, but it was soft, the sarcastic edge put aside once again. He brushed a gentle finger against Aziraphale's warm cheek, which warmed further with the contact.

"I've hardly ever seen your eyes so soft. Your soul is reaching for him," his finger brushed higher, near the top of Aziraphale's cheekbone, "Those wonderful things I see in your eyes? It's love, I believe, shining through them, unable to be contained. No wonder you always seem so divine."

"...ah." Aziraphale replied intelligently.

Wilde laughed, full belly this time, loud and unchained.



“I wish it could be me but, this fellow you want, he is a very lucky man.”

Aziraphle had restrained himself from saying that Crowley was not technically a man, nor was he, but explaining the complex and simultaneous lack of identity for supernatural creatures would have been too awkward a conversation to carry. Instead, Wilde dressed, wished him well on his future endeavors, and gave him one last lingering kiss.

“Make sure your beloved receives that from me,” he breathed, mere centimeters away from Aziraphale’s lips, and a gentle hand placed on his still bare chest, “He needs to know what he is missing out on.”

Up in Heaven, Aziraphale pressed the fingers harder against his lips. He would trade that night with Wilde, as beautiful and fulfilling, wonderful and eye opening as it was, for just a second longer with Crowley where he could hold him back just as firmly.

He could tell he’d been motionless for too long. Royal horns went off in the distance, but no footsteps accompanied it, and nobody walked into the space to disrupt the solid white and gray walls of Heaven. Yet, it felt like each ethereal creature ever formed and molded by Their hands was keeping a sharp and distinctive eye on him in his office, reminiscing about decidedly degenerate acts, like sex with a human and, Hell forbid, kissing a demon.

He spun the Earth projection in front of him once again at random. More names, more stories, more ends to leave loose. Even as his brain turned to mush, writing and crossing out letters that became more and more meaningless with each stroke of his pen, he couldn’t help but smile gently to himself. His plan was working, stalling the apocalypse as long as possible. As he ripped out another page, tossing it into the wastebin beside his desk, he made sure to check the time on Earth, and smiled. A full year had gone by, and Heaven was no closer to the Second Coming than it had been a year before.

Bisan Ahmed, Hannah McDonald, Mingyo Yung...

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#### PRESENT DAY (AUGUST 2024) - EARTH

A full year, and not even a breath from Aziraphale. It would have bothered Crowley to no end if the human women in the shopkeepers association and a frustratingly warm angel had not forced him to spend his immortal life doing something other than sulk for 99%\* of his time.

(\*The other 1% was for daydreaming other possibilities to what *could* have happened that day. It was a painful operation, and usually, it never went further beyond imagining Aziraphale running out of the elevator to his own open arms, driving away nearly at the speed of sound, and doing some very unholy things in the back on the Bentley so that Heaven would rethink ever trying to bring the angel back Up there. It was torture, and yet, he still indulged in it. He was a demon after all.)

They had gone to the beach, had a nice dinner for Maggie's birthday that Crowley definitely did *not* pay for, taken Muriel to Dave and Buster's, clothes shopping, or any other mundane human activity that their eyes nearly bulged out of their head once they experienced it, and through it all, Crowley wished he could have been left to rot in his (not technically his) room. Today, in the comforting heat of summer, Muriel, having read almost half of Aziraphale's bookshop, decided that it was highly important that the two of them should go on a picnic.

"It sounds like something very fun, and very human!" they held up a newly miracled whickerbasket, the absolute pinnacle of a picture perfect afternoon.

Dully, Crowley was thrown back to 1967, wherein another angel had offered the same prospect to him, only with a weariness in his voice that suggested it wouldn't happen for a long while, and not without further convincing on his end. From his inhuman, twisting lounge on the couch, he let an eyebrow crest high above the lens of his glasses.

"I don't eat," he deflected.

Muriel shrugged. This was one of the many human non-verbal expressions that they'd picked up on in their 12 months of living on Earth, along with eye rolling (that they actually picked up from Crowley), pointing at things they found fascinating and exclaiming their discovery loudly (picked up from the many children that sometimes passed the shop and pulled incessantly at their parents' hands), and hugs. Hugs they had learned, unsurprisingly, from Maggie. On days when it felt like being in the bookshop was more akin to a small fishbowl than a sanctuary, they would walk with a jovial spring in their step to Maggie's record shop, then to Nina's where the three of them would talk. Or rather, Maggie and Nina would talk, and Muriel would absorb every word with the rapt attention of a being who spent their 6,000 years of existence reading, writing, and documenting information. These meetings, never lasting more than an hour at max, would end with Maggie giving Muriel and warm hug, Nina, a short side-hug, and a small plate of treats that were just a touch away from going stale for Muriel to take home to the bookshop with them.

It was a small collection of these treats, along with a few miraculously cold juice boxes that heavily lined the bottom of the whickerbasket that still dangled gently from Muriel's inviting grasp.

"The sun is out today."

Crowley scoffed lightly.

"Usually is\*."

(\*Let the reader assume that Crowley did not mean the sun specifically being out in London, as a week straight of sun would have been a surer sign of the end of the world than a young boy and his friends meeting with the personified horse people of the apocalypse.)

Muriel grinned wide.

“And isn’t that wonderful?”

Heaven didn’t have beautiful sunrises and sunsets that ranged every color of the spectrum (well, on the visible human color spectrum, at least). Heaven didn’t have such change and chaotic beauty in its hallways, where even a single person’s step would influence how a blade of grass would grow for the next month. Crowley, Muriel assumed, was simply too used to seeing such change. They, on the other hand, could hardly comprehend it. Watching something as simple as leaves swaying in the wind was enough to keep them entertained for hours on end.

Crowley groaned. They had that expression on their face that screamed they wanted to experience more of Earth and really, who was he to stop them from doing so?

“If I do this, will you and the rest of the fun gang let me wallow in peace tomorrow?”

For a moment, Muriel’s face scrunched in confusion, but they learned months ago to let more of Crowley’s obscure references and strange speech patterns fly over their head for the time being. So instead, they nodded with another one of their signature smiles.

“Yes!”

Crowley jumped up from the couch and toward the front door, hardly sparing the angel a glance.

“Let’s get this over with, then,”

The walk to the park was about as much as he expected: him, glowering and frightening passing humans so that they subconsciously clutched their pearls, and Muriel speeding up ahead of him to point something out, then falling behind once he stomped past them enough to make them have to jog to catch up to him again.

Otherwise, they made it to St. James without any further problems. That was, until Muriel suggested they sit near an overly familiar pond with overly familiar ducks quacking, and a bench so overly familiar Crowley may as well have had his name emblazoned in the wood.

“Nope, this way,” he gently took their arm and steered them toward a less memorable section of the park where there was more spread out grass, less people, and more trees to sit under.

“How about here?” Muriel pointed to a wide tree, which cast a hearty shadow onto lightly waving grass.

Crowley only nodded, and watched with his hands tucked into his pockets as they excitedly pulled a checkered blanket from the aether, spread it gingerly on the ground, and set the wicker basket on top before plopping down themselves, and smoothing out the front of their new pleated

skirt. Once he sat down, even Crowley had to admit the spot was beautiful. A few patches of wildflowers grew here and there, with tiny white butterflies and fuzzy bees landing on them in hopes of securing some nectar. In the distance, young children played in a small jungle gym, while older university aged humans played frisbee, free from the shackles of endless assignments for the summer.

“Earth really is so beautiful,” Muriel said gently, unknowing voicing Crowley’s thoughts, “I don’t understand why-”

They suddenly stopped themselves, eyes wide and flickering between the sky and the scene in front of them. Crowley perked up, and tried not to let a mischievous smile overtake his face.

“Don’t understand what?”

Muriel bit their lip.

“It’s- it’s nothing, really...” they hazarded another glance upward before diving into the picnic basket and shoving a sugar cookie into their mouth.

“Hmm...” Crowley picked out a juice box (apple) and sipped it quietly, “that’s how it started for me too.”

Muriel glanced at him, the motion jerky and uncertain.

“What do you mean?”

Crowley allowed himself to face them, and for once, let some of his sarcasm slip, if only for their sake.

“S like I told you back in Heaven last year,” he shrugged, “I wasn’t always a demon.”

Muriel’s eyes could not have opened wider even if they were held open by wires. A few crumbs decorated the side of their slightly opened mouth, but Crowley turned away. There was an unspoken question there, in their face, and he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to handle it if they actually voiced it.

A few minutes passed where they simply human-watched. A woman on skates zoomed by on the sidewalk, her braids flowing in the wind as she expertly navigated around a businessman, clearly having just finished a stressful phone call and was taking a walk to relax, who passed a father and his two daughters, each dressed as Anna and Elsa because they would have refused to leave the house if they didn’t get to dress up, who passed one of the university students who jumped up with the skill of a professional basketball player to keep the frisbee from hitting a five year old Anna in the forehead.

Humans. So separated, and yet inexplicably kept together, whether that be by family bonds, geography, or even the simple fact that they were all the same species. All of them existing as they pleased, unaware that two immortal supernatural beings, tucked underneath a large maple tree were watching them with all the horrid, quiet fascination of knowing that soon, this would all be destroyed.

"...what happened?" Muriel's quiet, shaky voice snapped Crowley out of his depressing reverie.

Crowley grimaced, and played with the straw of his finished juice box.

"...it's not a happy story."

Still, the angel angled themselves toward him, the question sparkling like stars in their eyes. Internally Crowley sighed. Who was he to deny someone knowledge?

~

#### SOMEWHERE AFTER THE BEGINNING - HEAVEN

In the distance, the war raged. The newly built offices of Heaven shook on their unbreakable foundations, and an angel glanced upward, grateful that their presence was either left unnoticed, or uncared for. They were a starmaker, an engineer really, not a soldier.

*Leave the fighting to the principalities and guardians, they thought, somehow both relieved and aggravated, leave me out of it.*

The sound of hurried footsteps and wingbeats forced them to hide in a corner, somehow feeling the need to hold their nonexistent breath and make sure the angels would not hear or see them. Just in case, they pulled out their tire iron. It would be no use in a fight against an angel with a divine sword, but at least they knew they'd die standing up bravely, even in the thought sent shivers through the top of their head to the tiniest down feathers in their wings. They could make out individual voices now, and tucked their wings above their head. The offices were devoid of color, and their bright hair was sure to give their location away immediately.

"-need another battalion on the main-"

"-Demon? What in the *Lord's* name is *that*?"

"-struck down by Michael himself-"

"-is Raphael? We need a healer!"

"A pit! Straight down, swallowed Him whole!"

They shivered as the voices got louder. Their hands fought to wave a small miracle, just to make sure the angels wouldn't notice them, but one was sent their way without any magic.

"Aziraphale!" one of the voices shouted, angry and demanding, "What are you *doing* here? You should be on the battlefield!"

Had the hiding angel any human features, such as a heart and heartbeat, they would have both simultaneously stopped. Aziraphale. What *was* he doing here? The angel felt the urge to grab him and hide him away from this mess, bring him down somewhere they would be left unnoticed and alone.

"My apologies," came a familiar deep voice that almost held a blush in its sound, "I was—"

"Whatever you were doing doesn't matter!" The voice returned, "As your commanding officer, I order you to return to the battlefield now! We are losing more angels than we can afford!"

The hiding angel grimaced, before it turned into an uncharacteristic frown. This commanding officer was sending their friend into a battle where it was near guaranteed that he'd be hurt, or worse, destroyed? Their urge to carry out their hardly formed plan solidified.

They couldn't stay here anymore.

"Yes, sir," Aziraphale responded dutifully, and with a sweep of wings and a light jingle of bells, the hiding angel knew he was gone before they could even reach an arm out.

The group of voices and wings mercifully passed without sensing the hiding angel, too swept up in their own plans and heads to notice a shaking pair of wings, nor when they parted to reveal a beautiful creature, hair as bright and red as a newly formed star, and a silver tire iron that shimmered in Heaven's light. Only their defeated scowl revealed that something was even remotely unangelic about them.

They took a step out from their hiding place, and after taking a few careful glances, continued their determined walk. They weren't even sure what they were looking for. An open hole, a crack in the wall, maybe even the vastness of space, just anything where they could escape this monotonous prison, and the unfairness it kept locked within its walls.

Something in the air shifted, and to their left, a simple doorway appeared, innocently cracked open. The angel paused. This had to be a trick, surely. It could not be this easy. Once again, they looked to their left and right, wondering if perhaps they'd find a few renegade angels playing a rather childish prank on them. There was nothing, only the striking silence of the hallways, and the dull explosions and shouts of the war far above. The door merely stood silent, as if it had been there from the Beginning, witness to all. But the angel knew this to be a lie.

There were no doors in Heaven.

Clutching their tire iron close, the angel cautiously approached the door, hardly daring to let their bare feet make a single sound, before using two thin fingers to push the door open. It swung without a creak to reveal a set of stairs leading in only one direction: down.

'Down' didn't exist in heaven. All floors were simply in one parallel plane of existence. 'Down' meant something other than perfection, purity, light, even if it were only vaguely in that strange direction.

The angel stared for a long moment. The heat death of the universe may have passed in the time that they stared at those simple, gleaming white stairs, white walls, and a white ceiling that stretched up to nowhere. Or, perhaps only a second may have passed, a fraction of time so small as to be insignificant. But the angel's next steps were not.

They set one foot on the first step. The hem of their robe caught on the landing before slowly falling with them, and trailing after them as they took a few more cautious steps down. Their wings were folded neatly behind them, the longest feathers barely tapping the higher steps as their descent continued.

Gradually, the stairwell changed. The spotless walls grew darker, and streaks of what could only be politely qualified as 'grime' began to appear with more frequency. The very air, which was light as to the point of nonexistence in Heaven, began to grow heavy and sharp, tinged with something that was unplaceably unpleasant. Still, the angel did not stop. The ceiling returned at some point, and overhead lights appeared, though their bulbs blinked and flickered, throwing the thinning stairwell into an uneven greenish tint. Dust and dirt began to coat the stairs, digging into the soles of the angel's feet, their immaculate robes, shimmering wings. Still, they did not stop.

The stairs began to crack and crumble around their edges, the walls' paint chipped away to reveal weather-beaten bricks, and the lights flickered strong enough where darkness was the default, and light was a strange and unwelcome presence. Only the angel, still clothed in heavenly white, remained untouched, physically glowing in the space, undeterred by their surroundings, until...

Water. Or at least, they thought it may have been water. It was inky black, with ripples that reflected the startling bright light of the angel who watched it with growing unease, coupled with curiosity.

Curiosity.

They almost groaned to themselves.

That was what got them reprimanded in the first place. To dare to try and approach God with just a couple questions, nothing serious, just wanted to check and make sure all the T's were crossed and I's were dotted...

The water rose ever so slightly, just enough to lap at the angel's toes, leaving them unpleasantly cold and wet. The angel grimaced. In the corner of their eye, something sparkled. Slowly, they turned around and glanced up. Far, far above, a tiny square of light shined, illuminating even in the darkness far, far below.

The door.

It was still open.

For the first time since entering the stairwell, the angel's composure cracked, a pained expression scarring their beautiful face.

"I don't know what You want from me..." they whispered to No One, "I don't know what You need me to do..."

They bowed their head, and very lightly, tears began to roll down their face. Their grip then tightened around the tire iron, and with shining eyes, they gazed up at the light, revenant, but tired.

"Whatever it is, I just know I can't do it up there."

They turned around, facing the lapping black water, and waded in.

"I'm sorry," they whispered.

Very distantly, just before their head disappeared under the water, they heard the sound of the door gently clicking shut.

~

The water was cold. Their hair, which had been kept curled and close to their head, began to relax and flow out in waves, reminiscent of holy fire. Their wings fanned out behind them, causing a small current to swirl around their body. Their robes swirled up around their mid thigh; a beautiful creature, floating untethered, white and shining in a sea of blank, dark nothingness.

Angel's didn't need to hold their breath. Angel's didn't need to close their eyes in water. Angel's didn't sink.

And because that truth is as such, this beautiful Creature began to drown.



Their eyes flew open in shock, and hands clawed at their throat where inky black water began to rush in and fill their lungs, veins, body. The water burned, freezing cold, turning everything to flaming, crackling ice. The Creature tried to scream, but that only allowed more darkness, more of this freezing burn, to coat their insides. It took a long agonizing moment for the Creature to finally realize what it was that was burning inside them.

Grace.

*Her grace.*

The Creature began to struggle more as the water reached their brain and heart, threatening to burn all that was left of them. Their wings, thrashing and trying to drag their sinking body up, only burned further with each agonizing beat of their heart. The veins inside, already filled to the brim with agony, began to reveal themselves in the lightness of their wings. Rivers of black began to appear on the once spotless, shining feathers, feathers that had allowed them to stand far above the universe and put parts of it into creation, wings that hid and cared and flew with reckless love, wings that had protected a familiar white head at one time, so long ago, and yet so achingly near.

The Creature couldn't move anymore, and let go of their tire iron, where it floated off to an unknown aether. The pain took over, its efforts doubled in the absence of struggle, and the darkness took over everything pure. The Grace was burned, the robes, ripped, waterlogged, and stained to an absolute black, and their wings...

The Creature could hardly mourn the loss of their beautiful wings through the haze of pain. Feathers black as an empty universe encroached their vision, until the darkness spread to their eyes, and every star they'd ever hung that had filled their vision with light winked out with a cruel smile.

~

At one point, light returned. It was dim, but it was visible. The Creature realized they were laying down on a surface; a good start, and that they were alive; an even better start. But what this new existence was now was yet to be known. Groaning, they pushed themselves up on a shaking elbow and tried to take in their surroundings.

"Let there be light..." they croaked, pulling down their magic in a motion as familiar as a wing beat.

Nothing happened.

Dully, they searched for their innate magic. It was still there, thrumming deep in their body like blood, but when they tried to call it down from Heaven, it was as if knocking on a door knowing there was no one there to open it on the other side.

They had no time to ponder this fully. A small hiss from behind a dead bush alerted them, startling them to push away from the unfamiliar sound. In the dim light, the Creature could recognize they were in a cave of sorts, the burning water lapping on a rocky shore a few inches from their dirty feet, dead vegetation sparse and dotted around, and obsidian rocks that dug into their hands as they pushed themselves even further from what seemed to be a moving tendril of darkness.

“Easy, easy...” they croaked again, their voice still raw with freezing fire.

The tendril slithered closer, crawling along, limbless, yet unfettered by that fact. The freezing Creature could do nothing as the tendril approached, their back now pressed solidly against a rocky wall, and their wings too pained to move to protect themselves. Dully, they wondered if a certain white haired, white winged being would know what this slithering menace was. He had experience with Earth animals (at least, the Creature thought that was as such - the face grew less and less detailed with each passing moment) and its uncertain and smooth approach had to have meant it originated from there. The slithering tendril raised itself until it was eye level with the black winged Creature. From up this close, the Creature saw that the tendril had blazing yellow eyes, and its underbelly was a shock of blood red, almost the same exact shade of the wet hair sticking to their head in loose curls.

“...hi there...” the shivering Creature whispered.

The tendril did not respond. Rather, it flicked out a tiny forked tongue in their direction and twisted its head toward their shoulder.

“What’s this now...”

The tendril began to curl itself onto the Creature’s warm shoulder, the rest of its elongated body twirling around their torso until its head came to a rest, comfortable in the Creature’s damp hair.

“Cozy?” the Creature joked.

The tendril seemed to imperceptibly nod, just the tiniest downward movement, before it tipped its head down toward the Creature’s ear. It hissed this time, and the Creature was enraptured by the sound. To an outside observer, this would have simply looked like the tendril was hissing and sticking its tongue out toward the Creature’s ear, but the Creature heard things far different, far more wonderful and terrible, far too unknown for anyone other than the Creature and tendril to know between them.

“Of course...” the Creature whispered finally, “I can protect you...”

The tendril slithered back up to a rest on the Creature’s head, comfortable in knowing it could trust its new caregiver.

“Though,” the Creature tilted its head up and the tendril metaphorically raised an eyebrow, “D’you think you could be a bit more subtle? Don’t want people running away because I’ve got a giant, scaly worm on my head.”

For some reason, the Creature did know what a worm was. Perhaps at one point they had shared a meal of ambrosia with the white winged being, and he had delightfully filled them in with the strange wonderful creatures he was chosen to guard in a place called...a place called... The Creature couldn't remember. Only that, during some wonderful conversation, the white winged being had blushed suddenly, and shyly asked if they wanted to go visit this unknown place with him one day, if they were not too busy hanging up stars on Friday, of course, only if it's not a bother, just thought I'd leave the offer on the table...the Creature felt confident that they said yes without hesitation.

The Creature tried to remember where it was exactly they had gone, but the memory slipped away as soon as they tried to recall it. All they were left with was the impression of the color green.

Up on their head, the tendril seemed to be thinking, if the slight left and right sway of its head was anything to go off of. Then, with another metaphorical shrug, it buried itself back into the Creature's dark red hair.

“That’s not exactly-”

Something changed. The tendril seemed to disappear under the creature's scalp and skin, shrinking down until it was hardly a tenth of its original size. Just below their sideburns, they felt something beneath their skin stir and curl around before coming to a stop. Gently, the Creature touched their face. A slight raise of skin in the shape of the tendril. The Creature smiled, blinked once, and suddenly realized their surroundings were much brighter.

The cave was more of a dark shade of green with bits of dark purple obsidian shining like jewels interspaced in the walls. The water, however, remained a shade of black so absolute it seemed to absorb the light from the air.

“Did you do something to my eyes...?”

The Creature left a space for the tendril to respond with a name. The tendril, in response, telepathically responded with another shrug. It didn't have a name.

“Hmm...” the Creature slowly picked itself up, holding onto the wall for balance, “I think I'll call you...Crawly. Since you're a little crawling thing.”

Crawly mentally responded with something of a gentle squeeze.

“Crawly? Issat your name?”

The Creature froze. Another voice had spoken, the source, a male presenting being with a feathery gray bird tucked into his shaggy black hair, with eyes even more inky black. He too had wings dark as the night spread behind him, though, they were as raggedy as his hair, and definitely missing a few feathers.

“Oh, no,” the Creature laughed breathily, hoping this other black winged being would not hurt them, “My name is...”

They knocked on the empty box that was their memory. They frowned.

“My name is...”

A hollow thud was all they could find as they searched their burned and scarred mind for the name that was bestowed upon them by God Herself.

“I don’t...” something sharp and cold zapped down their spine, “I can’t remember my name.”

The other black winged creature rolled his eyes, which was somehow possible without pupils (or, alternatively, pupils so wide they took up the space of each eye).

“I’ll just call you Crawly, then. I’m Mange.”

*Like the disease?* The creature thought with a small internal laugh. Where had they even heard of disease? What was disease, even? Something green then fluffy white filtered into their mind, laughter, and maybe the tiniest glint of light in what may have been a blue eye.

Mange squinted, his black eyes pouring searchingly over the Creature’s body, “Oi, where’s your familiar?”

The Creature raised a brow.

“My what?”

Mange gestured toward the gray bird nestled on his head, and it squawked with an irritated clap of its beak.

“Oh!” the Creature would have blushed if they felt it appropriate, “She’s right here!”

They pointed to the coiled tendril on their face, and Crawly hissed in greetings, a small black tongue appearing against the Creature’s skin. Mange squinted, this time not in order to see, but to judge.

“Why’s it so small then?”

The Creature shrugged.

“Guess she just felt like it,” The Creature felt the urge to say something, and instead of shutting it down like usual, they spoke up, “At least I haven’t got a giant pelican nesting on my head.”

Mange growled and stalked off to the hallway which he came from. Crawly, as they supposed they were called now, instead of the tendril like they planned, hurried to catch up. They didn’t want to be stuck in this cave with the burning ice water anymore.

“So,” Crawly said, needing only a few steps to reach Mange (he was significantly shorter than them), “Where are we?”

“Hell,” he grunted.

“Ah, great, and where would that be?”

“Down.”

*Lovely, Crawly thought, how ingenious.*

Mange and Crawly walked down thin, rocky hallways, until they eventually smoothed out to something akin to an office rather than a cave.

“Where are we going?” Crawly asked.

“You the one followin’ me!” Mange growled, gifting their question with a scornful glare, “Wha’ever, you dun’t keep your mouth shut. We’re goin’ ta see the Big Boss.”

Crawly felt the urge to ask who ‘the Big Boss’ was, but the frightening emptiness in Mange’s eyes kept them from opening their mouth. They reached another set of stairs, also descending, and walked down one behind the other. In front of them, more black winged creatures were already making their descent, and behind them, more joined. Crawly could not keep their eyes from wandering. So many faces, so many they felt instinctively they should know, but were changed, corrupted, and left hollow by the blanks in their own memory.

The further down they went, the sharper the air became, like needles driven into their nose. It was wet as well, the condensation dripping down the walls a physical manifestation of it. Eventually, the condensation began to evaporate, the air too sharp and hot for it to handle. Yet, each step beneath Crawly remained ice cold.

The stairs widened. The ceiling above tilted up, until a grand expanse opened, and the black winged creatures were led into an almost alarmingly beautiful hall, black stone pillars arranged

in a circle, a glossy, freezing floor beneath them, and air so thick and stifling hot it caused several to have instantaneous nose bleeds. Distantly, the room reminded Crawly of another room they'd been in before. What had they been doing there? There was a bright, almost divine Light, they could remember, and they were on their knees, asking something? Then the light had disappeared.

Or maybe it was all in their imagination.

A voice from deep Below began to speak, its sound rumbling the floors, the halls, the very heart inside Crawly's chest. They couldn't comprehend what it was saying, only that it was just barely familiar, distorted almost beyond recognition, and filled with a hatred so deep they could feel it clawing at everything in their heart that didn't match the infernal rage. Several black winged creatures began to scream: in pain, agreement, Crawly couldn't tell. Only they remained silent, gritting their teeth and clutching at their chest. Suddenly, the voice zeroed into their ears, clear as if shot through their head.

"Well, hello there, Curious One."

Crawly fell to the floor, surrounded by shivering, aching, screaming bodies. Nobody noticed as they shrugged to stand back up.

"You've always done too much for your own good," the voice seemed to ring in harmony with the screams around them, a beautiful, horrible song, "Get up there and make some trouble, will you?"

Crawly bit back a scream in order to nod their head. A power not of their own seemed to lift them up to the endless expanse above the hall, where the other black winged creatures were still too busy writhing in pain to notice one of their own making it out of the hall.

"By the way, Curious One," the voice seethed in their ear before the light threatened to take them, "Nice eyes."

~

#### PRESENT DAY (AUGUST 2024) - EARTH

Muriel stared down at the picnic blanket like they were trying to put a hole into it with their eyes alone. Eventually, after picking the grass to the side of the blanket half to death, they lifted their head.

"Was that...?"

Crowley tossed them a humorless smile.

"Yup. Tasked by old Lucy boy himself to go up to Eden and stir some chaos." Crowley started on his third juice box, "Got me a commendation, that one. And a permanent Earth assignment."

He sucked loudly through his straw, willfully ignoring how Muriel gently scooted away from him to pick at grass with two hands.

“So...you really are a demon...?” they asked quietly.

Crowley tried not to respond in a way that would compare his supernatural identity to that of an aardvark.

“Don’t know what else I’m supposed to be,” he settled on instead, “Went through the whole ‘burning wings’ and ‘having your Holy Grace ripped out of you’ bit, so I guess there’s not much else I can do instead.”

Muriel frowned, as though fighting with an idea in their head. Crowley groaned, leaning far back enough to have his hair get caught on the tree behind him.

“Go on. Out with it, I know you want to ask me something.”

They turned to him, pained, and dropped small handfuls of pulled grass back onto the earth.

“If you’re a demon,” they started slowly, “How can you be so nice?”

Crowley sneered instinctively. The first thing he usually did to people who accused him of being ‘nice’ or ‘kind’ or ‘generous’ or ‘maybe really still the angel you used to be’ generally learned very quickly *just* how demonic he could be. But...

They weren’t accusing him of being *anything*. The question was so open and honest, but more than that, heartbreaking. Crowley felt something tug within his own chest.

*Another angel coming to terms with reality, he thought darkly, that the world isn’t just black and white.*

An idea came to his mind.

“Muriel,” he said suddenly, hoarse (though he’d never admit it), “Pack up the picnic, I wanna show you something.”

With a heavenly snap, all the garbage was put into the nearest waste bin, the blanket, returned to the aether from which it came, and Muriel stood up, offering a kind hand to the demon, now sat upon bare grass. He accepted it.

“Is it-”

“If you start trying to guess,” he cut them off, “I will show you absolutely nothing at all.”

The walk back to the bookshop was quiet. Crowley was wrapped up in his own mind, while Muriel was trying to poke through it with nothing but their face\* staring hard in his direction.

(\*It wasn't working of course, as Crowley had plenty of experience with angels who tried to bat their pretty eyes to get something from him, but the effort on Muriel's part was still commendable.)

Muriel nearly flew up the stairs to open up the bookshop as Crowley stepped in behind them, visibly paler and, if someone paid close attention to the tips of his fingers, shaking slightly.

"Alright..." he muttered to himself, as if the word would settle his nerves, "Right, let's do this."

Quickly, he waved a hand to shut all the curtains on the ground floor, but it wasn't dark enough. Muriel gave him another one of their open, questioning looks, but he responded with another snap that filled the space with supernatural darkness and silence, heavy enough to weigh down the very air itself.

"Gah!"

"You're fine, it's alright, I'm still here," he said quietly, and allowed them to claw blindly at the wrist of his jacket in the dark, "Look, just- just close your eyes, alright? Don't want to ruin the surprise."

A rough brush of fabric against fabric told him that Muriel had nodded, and was probably squeezing their eyes closed as tight as possible.

"Alright...alright, alright..." he muttered once again.

Internally, he drew up his magic, a constant flow within his body. Pulling his hand up from the ground, he felt the air thicken and burn with demonic energy as he sapped from the well of evil. His Intention solidified within his head, and with pinched fingers still holding onto demonic energy, he pulled his hand in a wide arc until just a touch of Divinity drew itself down from the Heavens. He shouldn't have been able to do it, by all means. Any project he had worked on before his vague saunter Downwards no longer belonged to him, but was a property of Heaven. As a result, he shouldn't have been able to draw anything from there, let alone because of the fact that he had severed the ties with them as well.

And yet.

Behind Muriel's clenched eyes, tiny lights began to light their vision in a shade of red. They shifted, alerted by the change of light, and Crowley pushed them gently with his shoulder.

"Go on," his voice was the only sound in the twinkling silence, "Open your eyes."



Muriel gasped.

They couldn't be in the bookstore anymore, even if their internal compass told them that they were very much still located in Soho, London, Britain, Earth. The bookshelves and knickknacks that had lined the wall were gone, replaced by a night sky untouched by time or light pollution, that lit up the space with colors so Divine that they could almost feel God's light touch within the work. A tear or two may have dripped from their face.

They reached out a hand to touch a small gathering of pink dust, and gasped lightly in astonishment as it twirled around their finger and exploded with a light shower of glitter in their face. A laugh escaped them, and they turned back to Crowley, wonder and starlight reflecting in their eyes. They received a small smile in return, then a short exhale, and a feeling of vague satisfaction as Crowley whipped off his sunglasses and gathered a fistful of nothing in his hands, and turned it into a new dust cloud of magenta, purple, and a stark streak of red.

"Nebulae," Crowley breathed as he gently let the new creation float off to join its brethren, "That's what they're called."

The entire bookstore was filled to the brim with these nebulae, glittering in all colors and combinations, reflecting off of Muriel's pale white button up, and being absorbed by Crowley's usual dark attire. In the corner, Muriel spotted a particular nebula in a corner that caught their eye.

"Oh! I like that pinky-blue one there!" they smiled toward Crowley, "It's very, uh..."

Instead of putting out a word to describe the creation, they waved their hands out in a fashion similar to jazz hands. They laughed afterward, but Crowley's face only dropped a little.

"...someone else said something like that before."

Someone familiar had been there when he was making the nebulae, had said something eerily similar to that. Crowley couldn't remember who. Most of his memories had been burned away, and he was left only with impressions and gut feelings in their stead, but something about this scene, an angel watching him in bewilderment as he cranked out a section of the universe...that felt right.

He pushed it out of his mind for the moment to focus on Muriel. He leaned casually against a bookshelf (they hadn't *really* disappeared, merely only vanished from their view) and waved a gesturing hand toward the mock universe projection in front of them.

"This was all I ever wanted to do," he gave them a tired smile, "Just wanted to make my stars and watch them grow. Got tossed out for daring to ask why they couldn't stay hanging up there like I planned."

Something clicked in Muriel's mind. Suddenly, their expression of wonder slid to shock, then slid almost to horror.

"...you made the stars? Up in the sky?" their voice sounded as though it were escaping from dry lips, "You did? When...when you were an angel?"

Their voice dropped to a whisper, but Crowley heard them just the same. Almost imperceptibly, he nodded. With wide eyes, Muriel's gaze returned to the stars, and this time, a gentle hand went to their chest, and beneath their clothes, they could feel their human heart beating wildly.

"B-but, star engineering takes an *incredible* amount of magic!" they breathed, their days of scribbling, categorizing, and endless reading coming in use, "You'd have to be a-a," they shook their head, stuttered, then tried again, "You'd practically have to be an *archangel* in order to do *this* level of creation!"

They twisted back to Crowley, who had not moved a muscle during their revelation. The question was evident, hanging in the air just as surely as the stars.

In response, he shrugged.

Muriel removed their hand from their chest and grabbed fistfuls of their skirt. They opened their mouth, but words did not want to come out.

"Who-" they whispered finally, "...who *were* you...before...?"

Crowley watched as tears began to gather in their eyes once again, no longer tears of wonder and joy, but pity. He grimaced. The last thing he needed now was pity. With a wave of his hand, the project was swept away, and the bright afternoon sun and bustle of the city outside once again returned to the bookshop. The sunglasses returned to their perch on his nose, his hand found its way to the front door, ready to go...he paused.

He turned back to Muriel, still stood in the middle of the bookshop, fingers twisted into knots in their skirt, and tears unashamedly flowing down their face. He took a shuddering breath.

"Don't remember," he grumbled truthfully, "Nobody important, I guess."

And he left with a light jingle of the welcome bell.

~

PRESENT DAY (MARCH 2025) - HEAVEN

Aziraphel felt a little bad about it, but he had recorded that day in the bookshop where Crowley had shown Muriel the stars. At least once a month (or, he assumed it was something around

that timescale, time was hard to measure in Heaven), he scanned the left and right hallways of his desk, he took out his celestial phone, and replayed the recording of the day. The celestial phone had the ability to throw its contents out in the form of a hologram, and each time he stepped into the record, it was like being back down on Earth.

Each time he surveyed the room, he gazed out at the nebulae with as much curiosity and wonder that Muriel had, and reminisced about when he saw it in action millenia ago. When he felt the nerve, he would pause it at a moment when Crowley was smiling, *truly* smiling: with his glasses off, and eyes crinkled with crow's feet around the edges, just visible freckles dotting the skin around his cheekbones, and allow himself to commit the scene to memory. He'd pretend to lean against the bookshelf next to him, and would even put a gentle hand on the projection of Crowley's shoulder, desperate to feel real Earth materials under his fingers rather than empty air. When it got to be too much, he simply packed it all back into the celestial phone, tossed it back into a cupboard of his desk, and pretended it didn't exist.

It was a dreadful routine, one that left him feeling more empty than fulfilled, but still, it was one he returned to religiously.

Besides these little torture sessions and the occasional stretch around the office (he kept in contact occasionally with Jesus through his celestial phone after a request to have one sent to the Messiah), Aziraphale hardly left his desk. The other archangels had taken to dropping in on him more often, taking a close eye at his notes, his composure, anything that might have been evidence of his noncompliance. All they found instead was an angel with increasingly darkening eye bags, a bad case of celestial carpal tunnel, and a heart broken enough to feel its shattered remains under foot in at least a fifty foot radius from his open air office. One day, the Metatron came to visit outside of an office meeting, the first time he had spoken to him in that context since his first arrival in Heaven.

"Aziraphale," the Metatron said lightly, leaving a kind hand near the front of Aziraphale's desk and summoning a comfortable chair for himself, "How are you?"

Aziraphale glanced up from his notes and raised a brow at him, not enough to get him in hot water, but enough to show that there was a question in the motion. The Metatron shifted almost uncomfortably in his seat.

"I've been recommended by the mental health services to do a 'check up' on you," he said, a bit of worry creeping into his voice, "Other angels have noticed that you ah, haven't really left your office at all since Christmas a couple years ago."

Aziraphale's grip on his pen noticeably tightened.

"Well," he started primly, "I've been assigned a task," his eye may have twitched, "I intend to complete it."

“Of course, of course,” the Metatron replied, “And we are very glad to see you putting in the effort to do so. However, we couldn’t help but notice that...you also seem to not be making any progress.”

Aziraphale raised his brow again. The Metatron, for once the one out of his depth, coughed lightly and moved his gaze away from Aziraphale’s piercing blue eyes.

“We wondered if perhaps this is a problem that stems from mental or...’emotional’ issues.”

The Metatron did not receive a response. Carefully, he slid his gaze to the pen in Aziraphale’s hand, which shook with a barely concealed emotion. The Metatron did not even have to scan Aziraphale’s aura to know it was rage.

“I want to make an offer,” He said suddenly, putting on his business voice, “You would owe us nothing but your continued allegiance to Heaven, and I would give you information that I’m sure you would love to obtain.”

The pen stopped shaking. The Metatron took that as a cue to continue.

“Your...friend. On Earth,” he paused, and relished the slight shift Aziraphale made in his seat, “You know as well as I that he wasn’t always a demon.”

The pen froze.

“Would you like to know who he was before?”

The pen fell to the floor. A wry smile came to the Metatron’s face.

“I know the two of you were quite close friends, even before his Fall, but surely, you’d like to know *how* it happened, yes?”

The Metatron stood up, and Aziraphale’s wide gaze rose with him.

“Come, let us visit the records department.”

Aziraphale’s mind was strangely blank as he followed the Metatron’s back through endless hallway after hallway. A few left and right turns were made, but he was too busy thinking of times and places elsewhere.

Of course he knew who Crowley was before his Fall. But the exact name, the exact face, the details, they’d all gone a bit...soft. If prompted, he wouldn’t be able to tell if Crowley’s eyes from Before were green or blue or black or brown, and yet, he knew for a fact he had stood (floated) beside him with the creation of stars, taken him to Eden, showed him humanity. Was it just time that made the memories so blurred around the edges?

“Here we are,” The Metatron said lightly as they passed through another unremarkable hallway.

A female presenting angel with dark hair sat at her desk, seemingly overly engrossed with her work, and not paying a single bit of attention to the new figures in the space.

“Unless you are a scrivener dropping off records, only choir levels of Throne, Dominion, or Above are allowed in this sector,” she said flatly, as though she’d recited those exact words enough times to have them engraved on her tongue, “Please identify-”

She glanced up and blanched.

“O-Oh! Metatron!” her gaze slipped to Aziraphale, just behind him, “And the Supreme Archangel! Sorry, I just-”

“Can we please see the records of Heaven?” The Metatron interrupted kindly, “From before the Fall, please.”

The angel’s gaze flipped between him and Aziraphale, and for a moment, her hands twitched before settling down into a pleasant clasp behind her back.

“Of course. Please, follow me.”

She stepped out from behind her desk and led them down a short hallway that led to a wide open rectangular room. With a snap, file cabinets stretching out at least twice the size of Earth appeared in an instant around the three angels.

“Is there anything specific I could help you find today?” She asked with the perfect manner of a librarian that was built for this role.

“Crowley.”

The Metatron and the librarian turned to Aziraphale with a start. He was sure he looked even worse for wear under the harsh lights, and the bags under his eyes must have contrasted starkly with his face.

“The demon, Crowley,” his voice was too hoarse for his liking, “If you have his file.”

The librarian stared at him for another moment before easing her face back into one of polite indifference.

“Of course.”

Another snap, and a single thick manilla folder appeared in the librarian’s hand.

“We can take it from here, dear lady,” the Metatron said kindly, “Thank you.”

The librarian nodded and walked back down the hallway to her desk, leaving the Metatron and Aziraphale with everything Aziraphale could have ever wanted in the palm of his hand.

“Are you ready?”

The Metatron's voice was close by, but all Aziraphale could see was the manilla folder. To open it would be a massive breach of privacy. To keep it closed would mean that he might never get to see Crowley happy again.

Very gingerly, he slipped a thumb between the edges of the folder and threw its contents out into the open.

Two columns rose from the ground, flat, white, and lazer cut to perfection. On one, an image of Crowley's demonic signature, curled like a snake and vaguely 'J' shaped glowed in glittery, almost fiery characters, while on the other was a signature grayed and scratched out, almost illegible. Still, with shaking fingers, Aziraphale traced its shape in the air, and read the name out loud.

“Sekebiel,” he murmured, “The angel of curiosity and invention. Throne.”

Heaven, already so quiet, seemed to contain a stillness so absolute, Aziraphale couldn't be sure if time had stopped. The only motion was that of the Metatron, who stepped forward and gently pressed on the symbol for Sekebiel, and the file expanded. New columns erupted, each etched with different aspects of the fallen angel's life: department, inventions, achievements, singing choir position (Aziraphale made note of that one - Crowley always insisted that he didn't sing, and now he knew for sure it was a boldfaced lie), tools, memories, and lastly, a column that the Metatron walked toward, recorded footage.

“Heaven always keeps tabs on its angel in Heaven,” the Metatron said lightly, “It's part of why I wanted to come see you. You've barely moved from your office in two years.”

Aziraphale couldn't move now. The columns fell until only one remained, an interactable display that simply asked for a time or date. The Metatron looked back at Aziraphale, still frozen.

“Well, dear boy,” he gestured to the screen, “What would you like to see?”

~

#### SOME TIME AFTER THE BEGINNING, BEFORE THE FALL - HEAVEN

Typically, Sekebiel tried to spend their lunches with other Thrones, but most of them were too absorbed in their own projects to sit down for a cuppa. Dining alone in the stars was alright then, but the ambrosia didn't taste as good alone. Once, they and Raphael had toasted to Creation

and downed several bottles of ambrosia, and it was a memory they held fondly, definitely in their top ten lunches, that one. But today, Raphael was busy with editing and solidifying 'science'. As an engineer, Sekebiel was familiar with it and typically didn't like when their elements got shuffled around (it made balancing the right amount of hydrogen and other gasses for certain types of stars a pain in the neck), but if Raphael thought it was for a good reason, then they simply had to accept it, and hope their new designs didn't go ker-ploowie in their face.

A few lower level angels walked by in the new hallways of the offices of heaven, but Sekebiel didn't pay them too much mind. They were usually busy as well, scrivening, assisting higher choirs, going to go sing for the literal choir; Sekebiel almost thought it was unfair how the hierarchy of angels was organized, as it seemed like the lower levels were doing far more in terms of the sheer amount of work than the higher levels. They thought about it deeply, still clutching a bottle of ambrosia tightly in one hand, their crank in the other, until a fluffy white something knocked them out of their head.

"Oh! Terribly sorry!"

A voice from below Sekebiel stuttered out an apology, the owner ducking their head down and trying to speed walk away out of embarrassment, until Sekebiel realized they recognized that head of hair.

"Wait!" they called out.

The figure was hardly more than a foot away, so the loud yell of excitement was rather unnecessary, but Sekebiel didn't let that stop them.

"You're Asriel, right?"

The figure's blue eyes widened.

"Me? Goodness, no!" they laughed politely, "I'm Aziraphale, remember?"

Sekebiel tucked their crank away into the aether and snapped loudly in recognition.

"Right! Yes, that's right, Aziraphale! Hey, are you busy right now?"

Aziraphale glanced back at the group of other principalities he was walking with, but they seemed to be stuck in place with shock: a Throne was talking to someone of their level after getting run into, and they *weren't* furious!\*

(\*It's important for the reader to note that, had the same thing happened to a principality and a high ranking angel such as, say, Gabriel, that principality would be sent to a corner of the universe so far off and remote they likely would not have been heard from ever again.)

“Um,” Aziraphale glanced back and forth until one of them nodded her head at him in silent encouragement, “N-Not too terribly. Is something the matter?”

It was Sekebiel’s turn to blush.

“Nah, not really,” they held up the bottle of ambrosia, “Fancy some lunch together?”

A slow, uncertain smile made its way up Aziraphale’s face.

“Are you sure there’s no one else you’d...” he glanced back at the principalities who were now silently shouting at him, one even waving xer sword threateningly at him, “I mean-yes! Yes! I’d love to join you!”

“Excellent!”

Sekebiel started down the hallway with Aziraphale not too far behind, and as soon as the two were out of sight, the small group of principalities cheered.

“Any place in particular you have in mind?” Aziraphale asked gently after two minutes of walking down identical hallways, “I do wish they’d label these things...” he muttered.

Sekebiel sucked their teeth.

“Eh, not as such,” they blushed a little, and turned to Aziraphale, “Do you?”

“Um...Not quite,” he thought for a moment, “Well there’s always-” he stopped himself. A Throne wouldn’t want to go *there*.

“Wassat?” Sekebiel tilted their head, and a few curls on their head bobbed with the movement.

Aziraphale blushed deeper.

“Oh, I don’t know if you’d like it...”

Sekebiel’s head tilted further, and if Aziraphale had any less manners, he would have thought it looked adorable.

“Aw, come on,” The Throne’s smile was bright, “Don’t tease me!”

“Well, it’s just,” Aziraphale took a breath, “I-I didn’t realize you were of such a high rank when we met-”

“Ngk...” Sekebiel sneered in a way so polite Aziraphle wasn’t sure it could be called a sneer, “All that rank stuff doesn’t matter to me. If you want my opinion,” Sekebiel leaned close to the



principality, "It's all bogus, that stuff. Gives angels feelings of superiority. And that's *never* good. Ever met Gabriel?"

Aziraphale nodded flatly.

"He's my boss."

Sekebiel snorted.

"God bless you for having to deal with that prat all the time."

Aziraphale gasped, and Sekebiel tossed him a smirk.

"Come on," they jostled him lightly with their wing, "Tell me he *doesn't* get on every single one of your trillion holy nerves. Tell me you *don't* want to try and toss him out a window to test how strong the glass is."

"I-" Aziraphale blushed, "Well I-"

He glanced at Sekebiel again, and the smile they shot him was so bright, with eyes so full of mirth, he couldn't help but blush deeply again. Sekebiel winked, and oh, Aziraphale knew it was over for him, over before he even had a chance to stop and think. He broke out into a laugh, and Sekebiel joined in, the sound bouncing off the walls and causing a few heads to poke out angrily in their direction.

"I can't truthfully say I disagree," Aziraphale said once his laughter calmed, "But if Gabriel asks, I never said a thing and I have never met you before in my life."

Sekebiel's laughter rang once more.

"So, what's this place you have in mind?" Sekebiel asked, still swishing the bottle of ambrosia.

Aziraphale began tugging at the hem of his sleeves, but he didn't feel as nervous anymore in Sekebiel's presence.

"Well, there's the principality lounge. It's quite large, but it has several little nooks to dine in, and *millions* of scrolls to read, and comfortable chairs to cuddle up in, and oh-"

Aziraphale blushed again. Sekebiel was smiling at him, and oh, those brown eyes were sparkling so bright he could almost see the stars they made reflecting in them.

"Sounds bloody lovely," they said gently, just a touch of humor beneath their voice.

Aziraphale grinned.

“Oh, it is. Quite. Here,” he set a soft palm on Sekebiel’s shoulder, “I’ll make us Appear there.”

The Throne nodded, and half a blink later, they Appeared in what seemed to be a massive library, circular, with rows and rows of shelves going up into infinity, with angels floating from landing to landing, carrying scrolls, celestial writing pads, and all sorts of writing tools in their hands, and some curiously tucked into ears and hair. A few had weapons tucked into sheaths, though they mainly kept to the open-air entrances, guarding the space.

*Guarding the space from what?* Sekebiel wondered as Aziraphle began to lead them up.

“There’s a particular nook I like, because the windows allow you to see Earth,” Aziraphle commented as they flew, “It’s that little planet I told you about the other day.”

“That’s the uh, the one that’ll have the ‘hue-maans’ on it, right?”

Aziraphle nodded.

“One is already in the planning stages,” he said brightly, “Adam, I believe God is planning to call him. Imagine an angel without wings or a halo-” Sekebiel cringed, “-that is essentially what they look like. Though, I wonder if God is going to do anything about that silly appendix organ, I mean *really*, it does seem *quite* unnecessary...”

They reached a landing, and after another minute of walking, Aziraphle gestured to a set of glass chairs and a small table. In front of the seating area, a generously sized window, currently shaded, stood.

“So, you can see Earth from here?” Sekebiel asked as they sat down.

Aziraphle nodded.

“Right then,” Sekebiel set down the ambrosia and clapped their hands together, “Wow me, Mr. Principality!”

They gestured dramatically toward the shades, and Aziraphle couldn’t help but giggle.

“I do really think you’ll like it,” he tapped the shade adjustment button, “God has been working quite hard on it.”

Slowly, the shade rose. Sekebiel kept a skeptical eye on Aziraphle, but as the space filled with gentle blue light, their hands dropped. As if hypnotized, they stood, and placed their hands against the window, their nose pressed up against the glass.

“That’s...” they whispered, “that’s Earth...?”

Aziraphale smiled and stood next to the wonder-struck angel. The top half of the planet was visible, with the other half hidden in the darkness of space. Just behind it, its closest star shined bright enough to make Sekebiel's eyes water slightly, and more distant stars twinkled in their happy company (they could also tell the stars had been made by Saraqael - as intelligent as they were, creative design was not their forte). And yet.

"It's..." Sekebiel hardly dared to breathe, "it's gorgeous..."

"Quite."

Sekebiel shot him a glance.

"And in six thousand years, this," they waved their hand wildly over the window, "It's all gonna be gone?"

Sekebiel watched with grim satisfaction as Aziraphale's face stiffened. That was all the answer they needed.

"...yes."

Sekebiel turned back to the window, a hollow feeling emptying out their chest.

"Well," they grimaced, and plopped back into their chair, "Who's *genius* idea was *that*?"

Aziraphale sat down gently and cast Sekebiel a soft look.

"The Almighty's, I believe."

Sekebiel grimaced. There was much they wanted to say, but this was neither the environment nor the audience to announce it. Later, they'd go speak to Lucifer, see his opinion on these things.

"Welp," they lifted their hands and dropped them loudly on their lap before grabbing the bottle, "At least there's ambrosia."

They waved their hand, and two plain glasses appeared on the table. Two generous pours later, Sekebiel and Aziraphale sipped in contemplative silence.

"You know," Aziraphale started lightly, "Even though the universe is to end in six thousand years, that doesn't mean we can't enjoy it while we have it."

Sekebiel didn't turn away from the slowly spinning planet in front of them.

“Yeah. I s’pose.”

Aziraphale gulped down his sip, and tried to ignore more heat rushing to his face.

“Right, well, ah, I suppose what I’m asking is...would you like to come with me to visit earth?”

Sekebiel tilted their head at him and raised (quite an expressive, if Aziraphale did say so) eyebrow toward him.

“You have that sort of clearance?” they asked with an incredulous tilt to their voice.

Aziraphale nodded quickly.

“Oh yes! I’m to be put on guard duty in one of the Almighty’s most favored sites on Earth,” he smiled wide, and treasured the slight flush that made its way to Sekebiel’s face in response, “It’s going to be called ‘The Garden of Eden,’” he waved his arms out slowly, as if placing the letters out into the air, “I could bring you there, if you’d like...” Aziraphale gazed at Sekebiel softly until it jittered with anxiety, “T-that is, only if you’re not too busy hanging up stars on Tuesday, of course, only if it’s not a bother, just thought I’d leave the offer on the table...”

“Yes.” Sekebiel replied instantly, “Yes, absolutely.”

Sekebiel felt something in their chest speed up upon seeing the light stealing smile the principality gave them.

*Do all angels have smiles that rival the stars, they wondered, or is it just Aziraphale?*

~

PRESENT DAY (MARCH 2025) - HEAVEN

Aziraphale didn’t know when the tears had started streaming down his face, but once the footage faded out, his face was wet with rivers he hadn’t even known were there.

“Why-” he cleared his throat, as it was full of nonexistent mucus, “Why can’t I remember that happening?”

The Metatron regarded him with a soft look of pity.

“After the Fall, memories of angels who had interacted with the Fallen were distorted. The Fallen, well,” he made an expression close to a grimace, “they don’t remember much at all. I guarantee you Sekebiel doesn’t remember any of this.”

Aziraphale gulped, and glanced back and forth between the Metatron and the column, now asking for another date and time.

“The stars,” he whispered, “He remembered the stars.”

The Metatron gave him a small smile.

“It was his crowning achievement. It's funny,” he stepped toward the prompter, “Even though he and Saraqael both worked on several star systems, Saraqael doesn't hold them in regard as highly as Sekebiel did.”

*Maybe they just didn't love the stars as much as Crowley did,* Aziraphale thought darkly.

“The footage,” Aziraphale said instead, “Would- would there be footage of the Garden?”

The Metatron raised a brow, but imputed a few symbols into the prompter and stepped back as a new scene unfolded in front of them.

~

SOMETIME A LITTLE BIT MORE AFTER THE BEGINNING, AND YET STILL BEFORE THE  
FALL - EARTH

“Are you...nervous?”

“What? No. Not at all.”

Aziraphale bit his lip. In the past month that he'd known Sekebiel, he began to notice they had a lot of what future humans would call 'tells'. One of Sekebiel's giveaways for when they were nervous was pulling out their crank, twirling it around, and pretending they were trying to use it as a baton\*.

(\*“Sekebiel, what is a baton?” “Oh, it'll catch on, just you wait.”)

Sekebiel had tossed their crank, and it twirled enough times in the air to win an award\*.

(\*“An award for what?” “Uhh...”)

“Huh,” Sekebiel huffed once it fell back into their hand, “Gravity is pretty decently strong here. Lookit how quick it fell back down...”

Aziraphale, not quite involved in the exact science of creation, only nodded.

“Ah, that is only one of the first strange things about Earth.” he grinned, and it grew once Sekebiel met his eye, their own full of that now familiar mirth.

“I'll say,” they waved their hand in the air, and Aziraphale got the impression of them tearing apart a machine to look at the innards, “Look at this atmosphere! It's such a mix of gasses! Nitrogen, oxygen, some carbon dioxide - what is the Almighty doing? These are all so...”

*flammable!* I mean, I use these gasses for stars which are basically chemical reaction bomb factories! And They want to use them *here?*”

“Oh, I do believe these particular gasses serve a very important purpose.”

Sekebiel turned toward Aziraphle, curious. They cocked a brow.

“And what’s that?”

“Come and see.”

After another minute of walking through the desert, grand walls rose in the distance ahead of them, the sandstone bricks almost melting into the sandy horizon. Sekebiel put a hand above their eyes to squint through the pleasant, if slightly overly bright, sunlight.

“Wassat, a giant sandcastle?”

“Those, my friend,” Aziraphale announced, “Are the gates to the Garden of Eden. One of the Almighty’s most treasured Creations in the universe.”

Sekebiel stared at it for another moment before glancing at Aziraphale with the impression of someone who just watched antimatter speak fluent Enochian.

“Well, it’s a bit *small*, innit?”

Aziraphale blanched.

“Um, it is, rather,” he picked at the hems of his sleeves, “B-but! I assure you, it is *far* more impressive on the inside!”

Sekebiel turned to him fully, and as if they were able to taste the nerves sprouting off of Aziraphale like weeds, they set a calming hand on his shoulder.

“I believe you.”

Aziraphale’s knees absolutely did *not* weaken at the gold-melting gaze in Sekebiel’s eyes. He drew himself straight instead.

“Right,” he said with a bit more force than needed, “Ready to enter?”

Sekebiel nodded, the familiar glint of curiosity and wonder sparking Aziraphale forward to the wall. A barrier, invisible to the eye of anyone who was not a celestial being, was raised in place, but as Aziraphale called his sword from the aether and raised it up as if in offering, the barrier gently parted.

“And please, do allow my friend to enter,” he added once the barrier tried to force Sekebiel out, “As guardian of the Eastern Gate, I would like to grant them entrance to the Garden at any time and in any shape they do so choose.”

The smile the Throne gave him was enough that he had to turn away.

“Quite impressive.”

Aziraphale coughed as he tucked his sword away again.

“We haven’t even gone into the garden yet.”

“Still,” Sekebiel shrugged and crossed their arms with a slow smile as they slipped through the barrier, “I’m impressed by what I’ve seen so far. Ten out of ten, gold stars everywhere.”

Any words that were going to come out of Aziraphale’s mouth were forcefully shoved back down by the intense beating of his corporation’s heart.

“Are you really?” He tiptoed words around the feeling in his chest, “Impressed?”

“Oh yeah!” Sekebiel’s wings sprouted wide, “And one day, you’re going to have to teach me how to use that sword. You *do* know how to use it, right?”

Aziraphale snorted.

“I would not have been put on guard duty if I didn’t, you fiend.”

For a moment, Aziraphale remembered that he was a low-ranking principality that only had enough magic to bend reality for a few minutes at a time, meanwhile the creature next to him was capable of creating everlasting galaxies with nothing but a sheet of paper and a hand crank. And that he had just insulted them.

“Oh, dear, I- I’m so sorry for-”

But Sekebiel was already cackling. Their hair appeared almost golden orange in the sun, and the crows feet by their eyes had Aziraphale taking another breath. They hadn’t even made it into the Garden yet and he was already a mess. Certainly, he thought flatly, this was going quite well.

“Right,” he said once again, trying to pull himself together for the fourth time since bringing the Throne down to Earth, “This way.”

He extended his wings, and Sekebiel followed, and the two quickly lifted themselves to scale the wall, the top almost a full mile in the air.

“Doesn’t the wall feel a bit overkill to you?” Sekebiel huffed with every wing beat, unused to the staunch gravity of Earth, “I mean, it’s already got four guardians keeping watch over the whole thing. Wouldn’t a fence and a ‘Do Not Enter’ sign be more than enough?”

Internally, on some level, Aziraphale agreed. Surely, with there being so little else in the world besides rocks and trees, the humans would be safe to thrive in the garden on their own, would they not? However, even the thought of even venturing down that train of questioning...

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” was all he said instead.

Sekebiel huffed, as if tired of hearing the phrase.

“Sure does.”

Finally, they reached the top.

“Don’t tell me we’ll have to go through that again...” Sekebiel panted with their hands on their knees, their wings shaking a bit from use.

Aziraphale, on the other hand, already used to the flight and gravity, grinned with barely contained excitement.

“No, dear friend. Not until we leave, of course,” he gestured to the lush forest beneath them, made soft and hidden by a gentle fog, “Now, we head downward.”

“Thank the stars,” Sekebiel groaned, but it was playful and light, “Race you down?”

The question caught Aziraphale off guard.

“Sorry?”

“To the bottom,” Sekebiel tipped their head toward the garden, “Race you down?”

Aziraphale chuckled in confusion.

“Goodness, I don’t think I’ve raced since I was practically formed-”

“Then it’s a great opportunity!”

Sekebiel spread their wings wide, ready for takeoff.



"I thought your wings were sore?" Aziraphale asked, but prepped his own, wide and ready to catch the air.

Sekebiel shrugged.

"I lied. Three-two-one GO!"

Sekebiel took one flap up before making a beeline toward a massive tree near the center of the garden. They were nothing but a white and red blur whooshing with wind until the dots connected in Aziraphale's brain and he chased after them.

"Sekebie!" Aziraphale's voice was lost to the wind, but he found he didn't mind whatsoever.

Laughter floated up to him, and he saw Sekebiel turn toward him, their smile a mile wide and their hair coming loose from their tight curls.

"You'll have to be faster than that!"

Aziraphale really hadn't raced much in his younger days before the Beginning, but he certainly watched enough of them. Even in the garden, the newly formed winged creatures (having yet to be named) pulled a similar move to the angels when they wanted to gain some speed. Taking the mental images, he applied them appropriately. One wing snapped tightly to his back, then the other. Moments later, he passed by a still laughing Sekebiel in a streak of cream and white. He wasn't gliding on the air so much as falling now, and the wind rushed through him, making him empty, whole, empty, and whole again, filled with air and letting it out in a grand whoop. Only Earth could make him feel so free.

Free.

It made him wonder through the rush of adrenaline: If he felt free on Earth, what did he feel when he *wasn't* there?

In a blind panic, he snapped his wings back open again to catch a gust of wind before he plummeted to the ground, and landed with a mighty thump to his knees. A hand laid on his chest, trying and failing to calm the pounding beat of his damned heart. This wasn't a pleasant beat, as it was whenever Sekebiel smiled or laughed or existed near him no, this was cold, made his back and forehead moisten, made his throat feel tight like someone was squeezing it shut-

"Wow!" Sekebiel landed next to him in a mighty flutter of feathers, "That was-" they let out an amazed breath, "That was incredible! Where'd you learn to fly like that?"

"Oh, um..." Aziraphale fought for words, but the breath escaped him.

Sekebiel's wonder shot to concern far too fast for Aziraphale's taste.

"Alright, then?"

A gentle hand landed on his shoulder again while pulling him up to his feet, and Aziraphale gave them his most convincing smile (it wasn't very convincing).

"Uh, yes quite. Just," he waved his hands for a second, "haven't flown like that in a while. It's quite breathtaking."

"I'll say!" Sekebiel's smile was back, "That was incredible! You looked amazing!"

The pounding slowed an iota, only to be replaced with a new beat. Aziraphale lifted his head, crinkling his brow.

"I did?"

"Yeah," Sekebiel cocked their head to him, "You don't think you're amazing?"

Aziraphale laughed again, but it didn't contain much humor.

"No need to make fun of me, dear friend."

Sekebiel cocked their head to the other side.

"What do you mean?"

Aziraphale turned away to face a batch of little blue flowers, with a tiny yellow center.

"You created the stars," he said with a heavy shrug, "I'm just a spare angel who can fly fast sometimes."

"Aziraphale..." the hand was back on his shoulder, and it scared him how much he missed its warm presence, "you know I don't care about that rank stuff."

"You should."

He tried to turn away once again, but the hand was firm in its gentleness.

"Aziraphale, look at me."

He did so, and found himself looking up into those wonderful brown eyes, now full of unfamiliar sadness. The eyes glanced away from a second in thought, before they returned to him in full strength.

“...I want you to stop comparing yourself to me,” they said quietly, “Yeah, I made some stars, great, wonderful-”

“But-”

Sekebiel raised a brow. Aziraphale quieted. Another hand made its way to his shoulder, until he was forced parallel to the Throne in front of him.

“But you are *Aziraphale*. And *that* is an angel that I am so excited to see more of,” their face went a bit red, but it didn’t stop them, “I’ll have you know, some of the most powerful angels in Heaven are also the ones with ramrods shoved deep directly up their-”

“*Sekebiel!*”

They cackled, and Aziraphale could not help but join in.

“What I’m trying to say is,” Sekebiel snorted into the last bit of their speech, “I think the angel in front of me is just as amazing and just as worthy as he thinks I am. If he sees stars in my eyes, he should wonder what exactly I see in his.”

Aziraphale stopped breathing. Sekebiel’s grip tightened, and for a moment, Aziraphale thought they were getting closer.

“Right,” they stepped back instead.

They may have whistled, patted Aziraphale on the shoulder in a very chum-buddy sort of way, and may have nearly pulled a miracle out of the air to cool the heat rushing to their face.

“Is it warm out here or is it just me?”

Aziraphale, still frozen to the spot, struggled to clear his throat to speak.

“T-the temperature is made to be on the warmer side...” he gulped, and gestured to the greenery, “helps the plants to grow.”

“Ohh, is that what these things are?” Sekebiel carefully angled themselves away from Aziraphale so he would not see their burning face.

“Yes,” and damn it all, Aziraphale was coming up next to them, “I’m unsure what the Almighty plans to call these individually, but as a kingdom collectively, these are plants.”

Sekebiel had to actively pull their attention away from the pleasant rumble of Aziraphale’s voice to catch the information itself as he explained Earth things.

“Interesting...”

They pulled the air apart and began to dissect the nearest leafy green specimen in front of them. What they saw caused them to gasp.

“It’s alive!” they leaned in closer and delved deeper into the being’s genetic makeup, “Am I going absolutely nutty, or is this thing alive? And growing?”

Aziraphale laughed politely, and taking a glance up at him, Sekebiel knew it was over for them. He was still visibly ruffled from the flight, and Sekebiel could feel his shaking heartbeat in their corporation as if it were in their own chest, but his shy smile, his voice, and his ability to laugh and make them laugh at the strangest things made them know they were done, head over heels, arse over tit. Goodness, what would Raphael say if he saw them now?\*

(\*“Ask him to dinner or something,” Sekebiel could already picture the scientist peering at them over the rim of thick lenses that he did not need, and brown, nearly black hair swept up in lovely, tight curls that defied gravity, “Instead of making a fool of yourself, like you usually do.”)

“Everything you see here in this garden,” Aziraphale swept an arm out, “Every plant you see is, as you said, alive and growing. And they depend on the carbon dioxide in the air to take in and create oxygen. The future human will use oxygen to help supply his body, and he will breathe out carbon dioxide so that-”

“The plants can breathe,” Sekebiel finished, almost dazed with the complex simplicity, “It’s a cycle.”

Aziraphale smiled again.

“Indeed. And I believe that is the direction the Almighty is going for with humans and plants and the rest of Earth.”

“Thats-”

Before Sekebiel could comment on the strange wonder of the Almighty’s creation, a rumble from the sky shook the ground.

“Someone’s coming,” Aziraphale flung his gaze around and instantly pulled out his sword, pulling Sekebiel behind him.

“Aziraphale-”

“Quiet, dear friend, please.”

The two stood silently as the Earth quaked and plants began to shiver, in anticipation, in fear, neither could tell.

"It's approaching the barrier..." Aziraphale whispered, pulling Sekebiel closer to his back to make sure the Throne was still there and safe.

"Who do you think it is?"

Aziraphale responded with a lift and fall of his shoulders. Above, the shimmering barrier began to twinkle with interruption, then split open, allowing the newcomer inside.

"Could it be another guardian?" Sekebiel whispered.

Their question was swallowed by a few leaves as Aziraphale pulled them both into a bush. The sword stayed firmly in his head, and as the barrier closed again, a careful flame licked around the edges of the metal. Sekebiel's eyes widened.

"Is your sword on *fire*?"

Aziraphale tossed them a look, but took a moment to answer their questions.

"If it were another guardian, the whole world wouldn't be shaking with their arrival," he whispered quickly, "And yes, my sword catches with holy fire. Now listen-"

A Presence of sorts descended upon the garden in the form of a mist. It surrounded the two hidden angels and filled their lungs with water and fire, almost choking them with a Love and an even wider spectrum of emotion and chemicals that was heavy and near impossible to name all at once. It was Divinity, pure and untouched.

"Holy Lord..." Aziraphale whispered, and even hidden in the bush, he began to bow.

Next to him, Sekebiel did the same, but shivered from the cold and burning.

"Oh, hey Aziraphale. Sekebiel," The Lord sounded a bit surprised, as if not expecting them to be there, "Don't mind me, I'll just be working on something over here..."

Her Presence drifted over toward a tree in the center, leaving Aziraphale feeling almost empty with the loss. Internally, Sekebiel breathed a small sigh of relief.

"Oh, let's go see what's They're working on-"

Leaves shifted as Aziraphale started to get up, but Sekebiel pulled him back down.

“We can watch from here, right?” Their voice was a little strained for reasons that Aziraphale could not pinpoint, “Don’t want to distract Her, of course.”

Aziraphale gazed at them nonplussed, but nodded and returned back down to Sekebiel’s side.

“Is everything alright, my dear?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, yeah, just-” Sekebiel paused before slowly turning toward Aziraphale with the sort of smile that future scholars would describe as quite ‘shit-eating,’ “‘My dear?’ That’s new.”

It was always nice bringing out the red flush of Aziraphale’s face, and it was also quite very easy for Sekebiel to do as well.

“My dear friend, I meant to say,” he murmured.

Sekebiel grinned wider, but Aziraphale escaped by turning his attention back to the mist of God. At the foot of the massive apple tree, the mist condensed until it became a thick, rolling cloud, then a concentrated storm. Heavy, fat berry sized droplets fell from the cloud and left a small puddle that mixed with the dirt beneath to form a malleable mud-clay. The cloud settled back to mist, and began to swirl around the mud until it began to rise and take shape.

“Hmm...” the hidden angels heard the mist mumble, near choking on the sound of the Divine Voice, “five toes to each foot, femur connecting to the hips and then to the torso, arms, five fingers for each hand, a head...”

As they spoke, the features began to mold themselves into the rising clay. Breathless, the angels watched as a fully realized human smoothed itself out, lean, strong muscles forming out of dirt, with lips, a nose, and eyes sculpted by the steady hand of God.

“And finally...”

A swirl of mist distanced itself from the rest of the mass, and let itself be sucked into the nose of the human.

“Adam,” the voice of God commanded, now audible throughout the entire universe, “*Breathe.*”

And breathe he did. He opened his eyes, blinked, took steady breathes, and began to take his first steps into the mist of God.

“Let all who hear Me know,” God announced, “the human is My most treasured creation, a being of life and love, capable of much. You are to Love him and his creations as I do.”

Adam stumbled a bit, but caught himself on a tree branch. The mist swelled with gentle pride.

“You’ll do great,” She said just to Adam, and tapped his head with a tendril of rain, and dissipated into the air.

Distantly, Sekebiel felt the air shift. Something happened as a result of this human being created.

And it wasn’t Good.

~

#### PRESENT DAY (MARCH 2025) - HEAVEN

“I think that’s enough for today,” the Metatron’s voice was light, but it was all but a bomb to Aziraphale’s ears.

“We were friends…” he muttered, the realization still not settling even after knowing, somewhere in his heart, that it had been true for many thousands of years.

“Yes,” the Metatron’s brows pinched in slightly, “Yes, quite good friends indeed. But then that nasty Falling business happened and both of your memories were…made hazy.”

“Yes…” Aziraphale was hardly listening.

There was a ringing in his ears, one that he couldn’t get out that softened everything around him. His face, still wet with tears, scrunched as if gearing up for a fresh round.

“Let’s get you back to your desk, shall we?”

A soft hand placed itself on his shoulder, the same shoulder, he couldn’t help but notice that Sekebiel-Crowley always placed his own hand to comfort him. Crowley now wouldn’t even want to touch him, except possibly to try to smack sense into him.

“Good day, Aziraphale.”

He didn’t notice when he sat down at his desk. He didn’t notice when the Metatron left him to his own devices, the Earth projection spinning slowly in front of him as it had for two years now.

He didn’t notice when he inhaled and simply didn’t let it out.

~

#### MODERN DAY (APRIL 2025) - EARTH

“May I ask a question?”

Crowley sighed as he opened up another grape juice box and settled into the couch. It was a scene as familiar as it was alien: rather than a rumpled, frumpy angel sitting in front of him nursing his eighth glass of wine, it was an overly bright, basically fresh-from-Heaven angel that

forced him to wean off the alcohol since he started drinking himself to sleep over the *other* angel leaving.

“Go ‘head.”

Muriel smiled and pulled out a massive book from the aether. From his position on the couch, which would have been very difficult for someone without a serpentine spine to attempt, he had to tilt his head slightly to read the cover.

“*A Dictionary of Angels, Including Fallen Angels.*” he read blankly, and raised a brow over his glasses toward them.

Somehow, they smiled brighter.

“Yes! By Gustav Davidson,” They flipped open the massive book to a page near the front, and fidgeted with the edge of the page before turning their gaze back to Crowley, “I was doing a bit of research-”

“Of course you were,”

“-And I wanted to know...” they fidgeted for a moment more before turning the book toward him and pointing to a name that was highlighted in bright pink.

Crowley looked between the name on the page and Muriel, who had not quite yet mastered the feat of handling Crowley’s unblinking gaze, whether with his glasses on or not.

“You wanted to know if I was the angel Kokbiel.”

They nodded and launched into a quick explanation.

“I didn’t want to pry, but I really was curious, and I thought that maybe it would help you to remember who you were, or like the humans say, ‘jog your memory,’” their face flushed and they hurriedly pulled the volume back into their lap while Crowley remained expressionless in front of them, “So after looking through the in-ter-net, I found this book and ordered it and read the whole thing,” they tapped once again at the name, “You said that you made stars when you were-from, from before, so I thought-”

“Muriel.”

They stopped, almost pulling their lips back into their mouth. In the lamplight of the bookshop, he could see tears beginning to seep into their eyes.

“It’s fine,” he finished slowly, and sucked the rest of his grape juice in one gulp before crumbling it and tossing it into a mini-garbage bin, “But I don’t think I was Kobiel. He was the one who



actually designed stars as a concept. We, that being me and Saraquael, were the ones that just arranged them and put them into space,” he grimaced, “I think, at least. Sounds close enough...”

He didn't have to face Muriel to feel the pity radiating off them.

“Okay then...” they bit their lip again and flipped to a different page, “How about...?”

Crowley humored them, despite his patience running very thin, and read the other name they'd highlighted. He couldn't help but laugh, a cackle that cut through the unsteady silence from moments before.

“You think-” he snorted, which caused Muriel to break out into an uneasy smile, “You think I was the archangel Raphael?”

“Well, you could have been!” Crowley fell over on the couch in a fit of giggles, “I mean- the snake memorabilia! You-you were an engineer, a-and a scientist-”

“Muriel,” he wheezed, “Oh, Muriel, let's be realistic here for a second. If another archangel besides Lucifer fell, I think the whole universe would know.”

Muriel frowned, an unfamiliar expression on their face, with their brows pinched in thoughtful confusion.

“But *you* wouldn't know, would you?” they turned away, “A-and no one's heard from Raphael in such a long time...”

Crowley snorted and waved another juice box into his hand.

“The wanker's probably just holed up in his office making another diagram for a molecule on a planet no one's thought of since Creation...”

An image came unbidden to his mind, one of an angel with thick glasses, tight coils in the shape of an afro, and eyes that practically reflected the complex equations the Almighty used to keep the universe's webbing tied together. He paused. He wouldn't have been able to just imagine that face.

Not unless he'd seen it before.

He glanced up at Muriel, who stared at him with equal parts curiosity and amusement.

“What?”

They only smiled.

“Do you think...” Crowley didn’t like the station their train of thought was chugging towards, “If we keep jogging your memory, we could find out who you were?”

The air began to freeze again, despite the warm spring breeze coming in through the window. Crowley ached to have a glass of something even mildly alcoholic, but he knew day drinking would upset the angel sat in front of him, full of so much hope it radiated through the hair on their very head.

“That would imply I *want* to know who I was.”

Their smile flickered and faltered. The tight grip they had on the massive text loosened until it fell dully on their lap.

“You don’t want to know?”

Crowley shrugged.

“Not particularly.”

Disappointment crushed Muriel’s face, but curiosity lifted it back up.

“But why *not*?”

If the topic had been about anything other than him, he would have been proud of them being so forthright in their questioning. *Good job, gold star, let's break out the good stuff.* Instead, he shrugged again.

“Why should I? It’s been, what, six thousand years since I’ve been an angel? Summat like that,” he shook his head, “I’ve been a demon longer than I have an angel. Just doesn’t seem worth the effort to me.”

Muriel bit their lip again, a nasty habit they picked up from the millions humanity had to offer. Crowley took a sip of grape juice and subtly aged it before speaking again.

“It’s just not who I am anymore. It’s just not worth it. I’m Crowley,” he gestured lazily to himself, “Serpent of Eden, master tempter, demon of, well not Hell anymore, but y’know, *demon*. All that bad stuff.”

He could tell Muriel was still not letting it go.

“But you’re nice!” They insisted, “You’re good!”

He sneered.

“I just do what I want.”

“Yes!” they practically rose out of their seat, “And you *want* to do good! Right?”

*Aziraphale would be having a field day with this*, Crowley grumbled in his mind.

“Muriel.”

His voice was too hard for them to ignore.

“Muriel, we’re friends, right?”

They nodded. He didn’t like how shiny their eyes still were. Carefully, he reached a soft hand over, and placed on theirs, the one that gripped the side of the massive book.

“Alright then, since we’re friends, can you do me a favor?”

It felt weird, saying that. For the longest time, he only had one friend. And for a while, they couldn’t say they were even something approximating *that*, or else they’d probably get each other vaporized on the spot.

They nodded again.

“Good.” he cleared his throat, took off his glasses and tossed them onto the couch before staring them dead in the eye, “Please stop trying to make me an angel again. You’re not the only one who’s tried. Because I don’t want to be one. Not now, not ever. Understand?”

It was his no nonsense tone that he used, a rare one that hardly saw the light of day unless you were a five year son of an American diplomat who had decided that running around stark naked before his bath was the best course of action for an otherwise rather pleasant evening. Unlike a playfully screaming Warlock who hid under his bed in response to a stern talking to, Muriel merely nodded and waved the book away. He flashed them a tight grin before settling back down with his aged grape juice.

“Thanks…”

It came out far more grateful than he intended, but at least it brought a small smile back to Muriel’s face. They nodded, evidently not trusting themselves to speak in the moment, and instead brought up another one of Aziraphale’s books that they hadn’t read up yet to their nose and began to read.

Crowley appreciated silence, usually. It was a nice departure from the screams of hell that were always in the background of his mind (and *Seaside Rendezvous*, a Queen song which has been

on loop since 1994), but he wished to have another angel present, starting a meaningless arguments so they could debate into the early hours of the night while getting steadily drunker until the words were so far from the original topic that not even a map could tell them how they got there. But it was too quiet. Not even the bustle of human life could fill the roaring hole in his head. He turned back to Muriel, who glanced up from hearing his movement.

“Say, Muriel,” he took another sip, “What are some of your favorite things about earth?”

Their smile was bright enough to kill dark matter.

~

## MODERN DAY (AUGUST 2025) - HEAVEN

“I’d like to see more memories.”

The Metatron had barely appeared in the hallway of Aziraphale’s office when he stood up, nearly tipping over his chair, and stalked in front of the grandfatherly being, still in his long black coat with his hands calmly placed in his pockets. Instead of frowning and gently telling him he should probably return to his work, the Metatron cracked a small smile.

“Wonderful!” He guided Aziraphale with a kind arm toward the right exit, “I was hoping to show you more.”

The walk did not change in length, but to Aziraphale, it felt as though time stretched just to mock his anticipation at seeing Crow-Sekebiel, from before. They were friends, good friends at that! What turned them back into strangers on that wall?

The librarian hardly glanced in their direction when they reached the archives, and instead pulled down a hand with a heavenly snap. A manilla folder appeared on the higher glass level of her desk, and the Metatron took it and walked further down the hallway with a small tilt of his head in thanks. Aziraphale voiced his thanks, and as he turned, he swore he saw just the lightest tinge of pity on her face.

Once they reached the open space of the archives, the Metatron threw out the contents of the folder and navigated to the familiar menu asking for a prompt. Before Aziraphale could open his mouth, the Metatron began typing in characters.

“There are a few things I’d like you to see before you choose what you’d like to watch,” he finished the input and turned toward a slowly paling Aziraphale, “It’s rather important. And I think it will help you to understand what we are trying to do.”

Aziraphale only nodded and folded his hands carefully behind his back: any memories he got to see of Sekebiel would be enough to satiate him. Or was it? Would he drown himself in

memories while the real demon he loved in multiple lifetimes was millions of hypothetical miles away on a plane of existence far from his own?

The scene unfolded.

~

Sekebiel's face was pulled into an uncharacteristic grimace. Their cheeks were hollow, and their eyes dim, despite the light surrounding them in the hallways of heaven, and their bushy brows pinched in to form wrinkles across their usually unblemished forehead.

They'd made sure Aziraphale was otherwise occupied today. They didn't want any distractions. Or rather, a rational voice telling them that what they were about to do was foolhardy at best, downright stupid at worst.

Sekebiel was going to talk to God.

In what could be considered the center of Heaven (cardinal directions were merely gentle suggestions), there was a circular hall, held up by Corinthian pillars with swirls of beautiful plants carved into solid, pure white marble. The tiled floor was cut through by spiderwebs of gold that circled around the single most divine place in the universe: the doorway to Her Space.

No creature besides Herself was allowed beyond this doorway of pure, Divine light, but one was always welcome to sit by it and speak, perhaps even entertain sharing a pot of ambrosia if they were so inclined (They were known for being an excellent drinking and conversational partner). But Sekebiel was not here to do any of that. Rather, they were here to accuse.

Not a few days ago, they sat with Lucifer and some of his followers by a few lone galaxies. Sekebiel sat upon Andromeda, while Lucifer absentmindedly stirred at the newly made milky galaxy that Sarqael had made, where, dimly, Sekebiel knew Earth was located.

"Hmm..." Lucifer's voice was dark and still as unmade matter, as one of his Divine fingers left the milky galaxy, leaving it with a spiral down its center, "What do you think of this matter, Curious One?"

"Of which one?" Sekebiel responded carefully, batting a stray astroid out of their way.

The Morningstar's eyes flitted up to them, the white centers piercing holes through Sekebiel's very being. A small corner of his lip lifted up.

"The matter of Man, of course," he turned over on his bed of no gravity, "You heard our Mother when she made the creature, we're to love him as She does. What say you on the matter?"

Sekebiel shrugged as though they had not watched first hand as their Creator lifted dust from the ground and created life in front of their eyes.

“He’s alright. Little weird without the wings, or magic, but, y’know,” they shrugged again and pulled a snake of stars around their fingers to tame their shakes, “Perfectly pleasant enough.”

Lucifer stared harder at the angel before him.

(I never continued beyond this point. Below is a part I was planning to use as the ending bit. I haven’t read this in a while so if it’s good/bad/shit/the next American classic, go bother me on my socials. If I chose to put my email on here like it’s 1997, sure send me one I’ll read it eventually.)

### IN A TIME BEFORE EVERYTHING, IN A PLACE BEFORE EVERYTHING

In Her space, she was bored. Tossing alien prototypes around had been entertaining for a couple billion years, but it was getting all a bit...tedious. The aliens knew Her, loved Her, worshiped Her.

It was boring. So, it was time for something New.

The first thing she did was make Good.

As She pulled nothingness into somethingness (humming a catchy tune under her breath, it may have had something to do with a woman being playful as a pussycat), She began telling Herself a story.

“Let there be a world...”

What a typical start. No. This needed to be more interesting.

“Let there be a universe.”

That’s the ticket! They grinned to Themselves.

“Let there be a universe with Good.”

A good start, that. A universe with good. But that was awfully boring, wasn’t it? All Their other worlds had started and ended the same: with creatures that were made of Good, spending their days worshiping Her (She hadn’t even asked for that. They would just throw Her parties and sacrifices if She went walking down the street to sniff the alien equivalent of begonias). It was time to make things a bit more interesting.

“Let there be a universe with Evil.”

The air shifted. The formless glob of Good separated from itself, and there was Evil. Now God, because They were God, could shift their point of view from their formless blobs as if looking through a kaleidoscope. If one tilted the light this way and that, the forms of Good and Evil, well, they were made from the same stuff, now weren't they? They giggled to Themselves. Oh, this was going to be fun.

She started by designing the Angels. These would be the creatures made in Her image that would contain the Good. They too, would worship Her, follow Her instructions, carry out Her Will, as her previous creations had, but unlike the closeness She had with them, She would keep a degree of separation between them. It hurt, knowing the pain this would cause not only for Her beloved creatures but Herself, but in Her mind's eye, the dots began to connect.

"Now, this really could be interesting..."

Falling. Pain. Corruption.

Those were the words that began to align themselves with Evil. God was pleased with this.

"Alright," They cracked their fingers just a touch too hard and a level of reality fell apart, "Oops. Alright, Let there be a firmament..."

Heaven blinked into existence. Up became a thing. Down hadn't been quite invented yet, but They had Faith that something would come of that.

"Let there be an angel. The brightest, most beautiful, and most beloved..."

They pinched the matter of Nothing and Good between Their fingers, and a pillar of light and beauty was formed in the hold of Their love.

"Let this one be the Morningstar," She breathed life into the light, "Let this illuminating being be..."

They stopped Themselves. Being a spotlight and shining beacon of love and hope was nice and all, but why not throw in a bit of spice to the mix.

"Just a touch, and let's see where this leads..." With just the tip of Their nail, they tapped a bit of Evil into the Morningstar, "Let this one invent Down."

They continued this process.

Most of the angels had just a touch of evil in them, much less than the Morningstar (They didn't want all Their creations to end up the same and as powerful as it). Their fingers hurt from twisting wings and unique faces of handmade angels for so long, but They were filled with the satisfaction of a...good? bad? Well, of a job well done.

“Hmm...”

She glanced over at her Good and Evil supply. There was just a touch left of each, enough for either one very big and morally gray angel, or two seemingly insignificant, still morally gray angels. She hummed to herself and began molding the creature. It turned out way bigger, and way more morally gray than she originally intended.

“Oh, okay, let’s separate that a little-”

The Good and Evil split, neither firmly down the line, nor extremely mixed like They planned. They couldn’t tell...what this was.

“What in My name...”

An idea came to Them.

It would not be inappropriate to say God was a bit of a softy for romance stories (they were one of Her favorites, right next to comedies and musicals. If you mixed the two of them, well, that was just a splendid way to spend the afternoon, wasn’t it?). It would be appropriate in fact, to say that Love in any form was what drove Them to do anything. Why, They were making a whole universe for the sake of having creatures to love! And maybe...

Maybe they could *choose* to Love Her.

The thought struck her.

Maybe...they could *choose* to *hate* Her.

In Her mind’s eye, she put a stick figure of an angel without wings on the backburner. She’d had to do the setting and environment first, of course, give these...things...a nice planet to live on, plenty of things to sustain itself, a pretty backdrop so that they’d feel inspired, give these things-

Life.

That’s what it was.

She glanced down at the last bits of Good and Evil swirling. They almost seemed to be reaching toward each other, calling out to find themselves in the other. Slowly, a small grin grew on Her face.

“Let there be two creatures who started as one...” Love flowed into the Good and Evil, and they began to take shape under Her careful fingers, “Let there be...protection. Creativity. Just a touch of silliness.”



Colors and shapes began to define. One, she made with significantly more gentle blondes and whites in the pallet. The other, a bold streak of orange and red.

“Let them guard these things I haven’t quite fully thought of yet,” she chuckled to Herself, “I know you two will be important. In fact,” she tapped Her finger to Her tongue, and gently tapped the heads of the new creatures, “I insist. You’ll do something Important. You’ll save the world.”

There wasn’t a world to save quite yet, but the story seemed to be writing itself. Quite literally, in fact. A book appeared on a shelf, and it began to fill itself with new things called ‘words’. Really, it was mainly just a laundry list of things and angels she needed to name, but it would also house Plans for this new planet.

“الأرض, โลก, γη, земля, Jord, pământ, Erde...” the Book began to write it all down, “Earth.”

The two creatures of Good and Evil stood like dolls upon the Nothingness. God reached into the nostrils of the first one and breathed Life into it.

“Sekebiel,” They announced into their soul, “Though, you will not always go by that name. I’ll let you pick. Surprise me, Curious One, let your imagination run wild.”

They reached into the other.

“Aziraphale...you will have Doubt and Fear, but you will protect all that is Good and Righteous. What you’ll do will even surprise yourself.”

They moved back as the angels began to gain sentience, and bowed in reverence of their creator.

“Yes, yes, Holy of Holies,” They leaned forward onto their elbows, gazing down at Their creation with a mixture of pleasant embarrassment and patience, “You two are going to be very important. Do you think you’re up to the task?”

Sekebiel and Aziraphale stared at Them in confusion. They cracked a smile.

“Don’t worry,” They reached into Their own soul, and pulled out just the right amount of Judgement, “You’ll know when the time comes. And trust, you’ll be ready.”

Judgement was pushed into them.

One would be overwhelmed by the Judgement and Fall.

One would avoid the Judgement until it was almost too late.

Judgement would tear them apart.

Love would pull them together.

“Go on, you two,” She waved them toward the firmament of Heaven, “Go have fun. Make this world interesting. Play the game.”

She gently wiped their memories of anything too revealing of Her plan and sat back at Her desk. It was time to get started.

She took a breath.

Was it strange for God to get nervous? Should do, this was all new after all.

She invented numbers, math, physics, and gravity just so She could count to ten and relax Herself for a moment.

“Well, here goes Nothing, I suppose.”

She leaned back in her chair, and made sure popcorn would be ready around the years 1650, 1793, 1941, 2018, and 2023. She made sure to have an outfit ready for 2026, it would be Her grand debut, after all. That prepared, She raised a magnificent hand.

“Let There Be Light.”

Under Their breath, They hummed a song about birds that would be called Nightingales.