

Celestial Harmonies



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Cover art by Howie Spillman (inaudiblysticky on Tumblr, audibly_sticky on Twitter and Instagram)

STAFF & LETTER FROM EDITOR

Diane, editor-in-chief

Bri, fic reader

Marcus, fic reader

Vee, art reviewer

B, art reviewer

Jay, art reviewer

Tehsin, fic reader

Reader,

When I decided to put together a *Good Omens* zine, I worried that it wouldn't be successful. I feared that potential readers would ignore it in favor of established zines created by big-name blogs. I feared that potential submitters would see that we couldn't pay for their work and would look for another zine to submit to. I didn't know if there would be any interest in an exclusively-digital zine without the promise of a glossy cover readers could feel or any special trinkets they had included in their orders.

It turns out that I had nothing to worry about. I found a wonderful staff who were there for every step, and our Tumblr accumulated a decent following quickly. We had plenty of submissions and kind support from fellow fans.

While making this zine, I was able to read stories that made me laugh and stories that tugged on my heartstrings. I looked at art that took my breath away. I find myself very lucky to have been part of this whole experience, and I'd like to take a moment to thank everyone who was part of this zine—the staff and our submitters. This entire fandom has been by far the most loving and accepting of fandoms that I've ever witnessed.

If you like a story you read or a piece of art you saw in this zine, please make sure to support the creator on their own social media! Every piece has the creator's handles and usernames accompanying their work.

Reader, I hope you enjoy our first issue of *Celestial Harmonies*, and I hope that you stick around for future issues!

Diane, editor-in-chief

HOWIE SPILLMAN, COVER ARTIST

Diane: I guess my first question is: how long have you been drawing?

Howie: I'm defo one of those stereotypical artists who have been drawing since they were a kid, digital art though I started in middle school.

Diane: And how many years of experience you have under your belt?

Howie: Depending on, like, what defines like *experience* experience—from the context of drawing since middle school that's like 10-8 years. But for formal training, I'm at the end of my four-year degree in studio art

Diane: Ooh! Do you have plans for what you're doing after college? Any big aspirations? Or is this too scary to talk about?

Howie: It's absolutely terrifying to think about. I think I'll be happy in any art-based job as long as I'm able to continue making my own work on the side.

Diane: What are some side projects you're working on right now?

Howie: I've been really focused on schoolwork since semester started up again (which involves a continuation of the exploration of embodiment in my oil paintings), but when I have free time at work, I've been doodling gomens drawings. Especially since I've seen your Lolita dress hc I've been drawing Crowley in their nanny persona.

Diane: I love that Lolita drawing you did! It was so cute! Where can people find your art?

Howie: Thank you! I'm inaudiblysticky on Tumblr and audibly_sticky on Twitter and Instagram. My art's spread across those three, dependent on the audience.

Diane: Do you have a tag that you use on Tumblr?

Howie: Just "my art," but Tumblr, the hellscape that it is, sometimes does not show anything recent in that tag.

Diane: Our viewers should check you out on all your platforms because your art is very nice. Your cover art is gorgeous, of course, but there's so many other works by you that I think everyone should see. So, Vee from our staff wants to know: how did you get into Good Omens, and who is your favorite character?

Howie: I read the book in early high school from the recommendation of a friend, Crowley's my favorite because I, too, am a dramatic bitch.

Diane: Aren't we all? I think that's all the questions I have for you for now. Is there anything else you'd like anyone to know about you or your art?

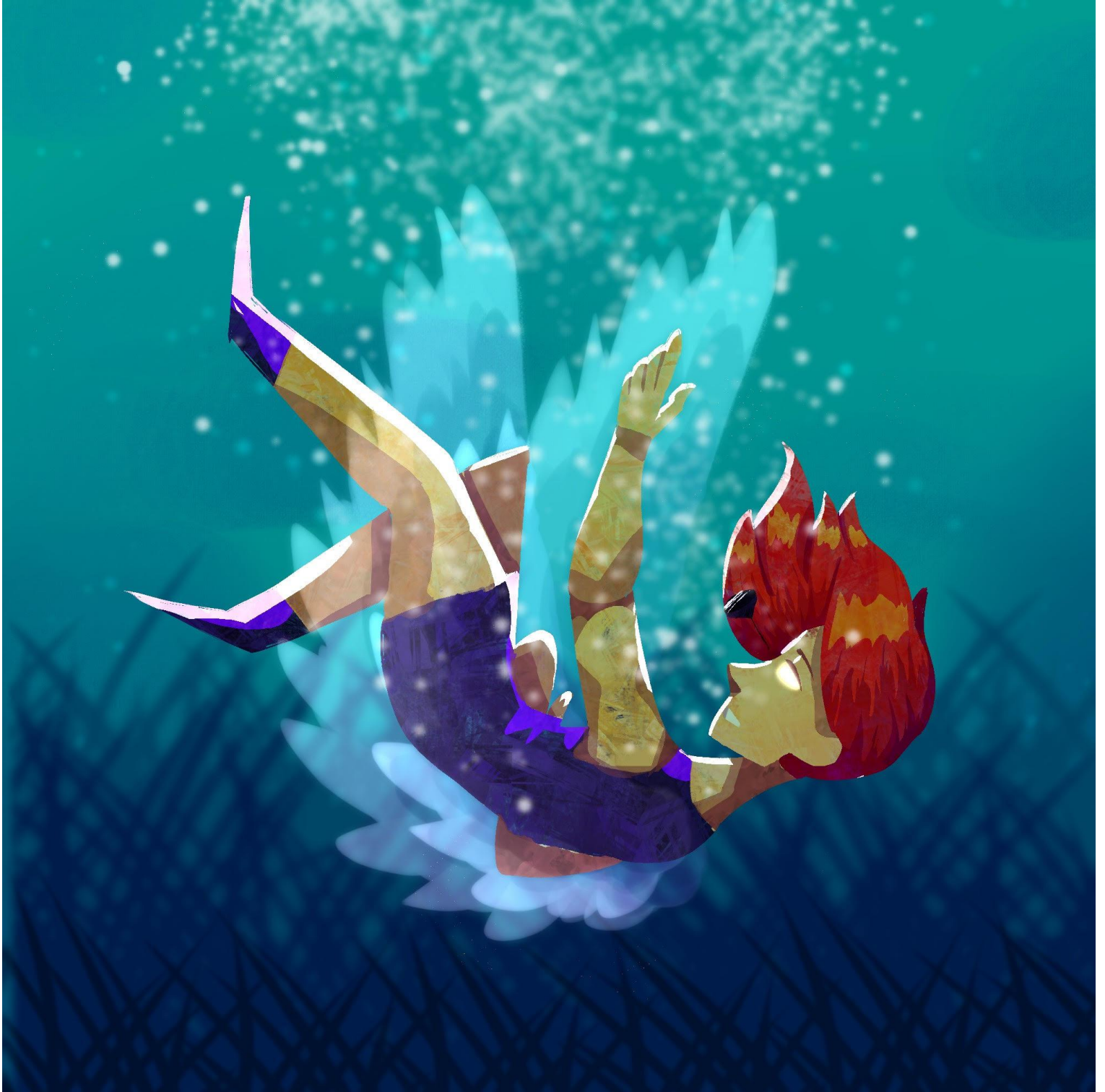
Howie: Cool cool, and I guess that I'm always open for commissions.

Diane: How can people contact you for a commission?

Howie: Messaging me on any of my socials!

Diane: Lit. Well, thank you for contributing to our zine! We can't say how much we appreciate you designing our cover for us.

Howie: Yee! Ofc! Thank you for starting the project, it all looks super cool.



"left to think; swim or sink," L.Z Connelly (ay1x on Tumblr)

DUET MELAYNE SEAHAWK

Once upon a time (what a way to start), before he was Crowley or even Crawley, he used to sing. Of course, he sang. He was an angel.

All angels sing. It's why they're sorted into choirs.

Unlike some angels, whose song was about the Glory and the Grace of G-d, Crowley-that-was had a more functional song. His choir sang the World into being, to entertain their Lord: Earth and sky, land and sea, plants and animals, fish and birds. Crowley himself had sung stars. Sometimes, when he looks up into the night sky with the special vision that only immortal beings have, he can see them, spinning along on their own special paths through the universe. The only proof that Crowley was ever something else. Something more.

As much as he jokes and dissembles (*sauntered vaguely downwards*, right), Crowley knows exactly why he Fell: he asked a question. Well, he asked lots of questions (why are we creating? why make creation *this* way rather than *that*? and so on), but it was one specific Question that sent him skinny-dipping in hellfire: Why create Humans, only to make them suffer? It seemed like a flaw in the Plan, like something so glaringly obvious that it was amazing someone else hadn't caught it. Crowley had been mildly incredulous when he'd raised his hand to ask, perplexed that the songs of creation had passed into the hands of the angels that would sing them into being with this massive defect still in place.

The Seraphim and the Cherubim, all the angels of Law and Land and Love, of Truth and Torah, had stared at him, their unnumbered eyes wide and staring, and that's when he'd begun to burn.

Despite the outcome, despite everything that came after, Crowley doesn't regret the asking.

Like every demon, Crowley lost a good many things when he fell, carved from him like whittled wood or marble to create a completely different shape. His Grace and most of his wings, of course, but also his lovely name and his ability to say the holy words. And he lost his ability to sing.

He still has a sense of rhythm (not that it helps his dancing), and he can hum along to a tune. He still has perfect pitch, a blessing/curse given to any being that is part of the fabric of the universe the way an angel or demon is. He could probably play a musical instrument if he bothered to learn, but he's never tried, worried that even that had been taken away.

So, Crowley has listened, treasuring every interesting song he encounters, from the mbira in Zimbabwe to ocarinas in Mesoamerica, symphonic orchestra pieces from

Italy and opera from China. India's sitar reminds him most of the music of the spheres, with its sympathetic vibrations and semitone scales.

For good or ill, it reminds him of Heaven, back when Heaven was still home.

Crowley has been trying to update Aziraphale's taste in music for almost a century. Like many things about the angel, his music taste was dreadfully modern until about 1885, and then he just stopped (the *rest* of the angel's preferences date from the 1950s). He acquired a gramophone sometime while Crowley was sleeping after their holy water fight, and Crowley has made a habit of bringing him new records whenever something catches his fancy either because he thinks the angel will like it or because he knows the angel really, really won't.

(Crowley is very sad that camera phones didn't exist in 1956 when he brought Aziraphale Elvis Presley's first album. His *face*.)

Sometimes the music Crowley wants to show him isn't available on a record, and since the Apoca-don't Crowley has used that as an excuse to drag Aziraphale to his gradually more homey flat where he has every sort of sound-replaying equipment from Betamax onward.

Sometimes they'll banish Crowley's coffee table and dance, though they spend almost as much time tripping over each other's feet and laughing about it as they actually spend dancing.

Crowley is showing Aziraphale an up-and-coming French jazz singer (thank Someone for Spotify; he hadn't had a hand in making it, but it was the best way to find new music for Aziraphale), swaying together to her recording of "Someone to Watch Over Me", when Aziraphale stops and pulls back, catching Crowley's eye.

"You're humming," Aziraphale says when Crowley gives him a quizzical look, "to the music."

"I'm allowed," Crowley says defensively, the ingrained instinct to not show too much emotion, to not scare Aziraphale away, still strong.

"Of course you are, my dear," Aziraphale says, squeezing their linked hands. They're still standing close together, hands on hips and shoulders. Closer than they'd ever been a mere six months before, though they haven't taken that last step Crowley is so desperate for. He won't push, he needs Aziraphale to come to him. In this brave new world they live in, he's still afraid of scaring the angel away. "Do you ever sing along? I'm sure you have a lovely voice."

Crowley throws him a lopsided smile. "I used to. Not anymore." Aziraphale's eyes widen as he understands, and Crowley holds up a hand before he can stammer an apology. "It's alright, angel."

"I'll sing for both of us, then," Aziraphale says, eyes scanning Crowley's face. He must be satisfied by whatever he sees because he nods slightly, drops their linked hands, and brings his palms up to cradle Crowley's jaw. "My darling," he breathes and presses his lips to Crowley's mouth.

Crowley's throat may not be able to sing, but his heart certainly can.

MELAYNE SEAHAWK CAN BE FOUND ON AO3 AND TUMBLR AS MELAYNESEAHAWK.

WITH WORDS
DANNYE CHASE

It was, perhaps, the worst-timed interruption of Aziraphale's entire life. One moment he was in the bookshop, and the next, the angel found himself unexpectedly dropped onto a wooden floor in the middle of a circle made of sigils in white chalk. He looked around, finding himself in what looked like someone's parlor, furniture pushed back against the walls.

Aziraphale struggled to his feet and said, in his most commanding voice, "*Excuse me.*"

Crowley would have laughed at him for being polite about it. Crowley would have—

Well. Crowley had been about to do *something*, hadn't he, a moment ago in the shop with Aziraphale backed against the wall and Crowley blustering at him, standing so close, his hands on Aziraphale's lapels and his mouth just inches from...

Well.

Alone now, in the summoning circle, Aziraphale adjusted his waistcoat and shirt. His tie was missing. He'd removed it for the evening, opening his collar, and surely he hadn't misread how Crowley was staring at him, at the little glimpse of collarbone that Aziraphale so rarely revealed. Crowley had been wearing his sunglasses, but Aziraphale was fairly good at figuring out where Crowley's gaze went without being able to see his eyes. Aziraphale certainly hadn't expected to have his lapels seized and to be backed up against a wall in the middle of a rather mild disagreement about which of them had first guessed the murderer in *The Mousetrap* when they'd attended the play sixty years ago.

Aziraphale had been with Crowley, in one way or another, since they'd met six thousand years ago. And now, six months ago, the world had not ended. The Apocalypse had turned out to be nothing but a mile marker passed along the way. The universe was spinning on with ease and steadiness that made it seem like it had never been possible that it wouldn't.

Aziraphale didn't want it to be like that, not completely. He wanted change. He wanted *one thing* in particular to change. But nothing had. Aziraphale was near his wit's end. Removing the bowtie had been a more obvious signal than he'd ever thought he'd have to give, but with Crowley so close and so flustered just a moment ago, he'd dared hope that he had finally been properly interpreted.

"Excuse me!" Aziraphale said again. "I really was in the middle of a *very* important argument!"

"Angels shouldn't argue," a voice said.

Aziraphale turned around to see a man and a woman in white robes walk into the room.

"Perhaps not," Aziraphale said testily, "but it's rather a larger misstep for humans to summon an angel. We aren't genies who will grant you wishes."

The man smirked at Aziraphale. "We don't want favors from you, angel. We just want *you*."

He held up a small jar, painted dark red, with a few very odd golden symbols marked on the outside.

"Oh," said Aziraphale heavily. "I see."

The pain started then, as the chalk sigils blazed up around Aziraphale, putting a light smoky haze between him and his captors. The angel sat down carefully on the floor, trying to find the most comfortable position from which to bear the pain as the spell cast by the humans drained him of his angelic essence.

Humans often tried to insert themselves into ethereal and occult magic, to force the universe to speak benedictions to them. But most people were not skilled enough to do something like this. The red jar would function as a battery, storing angelic power for future use in a larger spell. A spell that required killing an angel would be powerful indeed.

"What will you use it for?" Aziraphale asked. "I imagine I have the right to know."

The humans looked at him as if they were surprised to hear him speak. "A position of power, and the wealth to keep it," the man said with a sneer.

"Mmm," Aziraphale said politely. "Original."

Fortunately, it wasn't much longer before the *humans* were interrupted, as Aziraphale knew they would be. In 6000 years, Aziraphale had never been anything but happy to have his day blessed by a flash of fire-bright hair and golden eyes. But he was a little more grateful than usual this time.

Crowley appeared suddenly in the room, and he wasn't wearing what he'd had on at the bookshop: red shirt, gray trousers. He was dressed all in black now, jeans so tight they must have been miracled on, and a shirt that clung to his body as well. Crowley wore no sunglasses, and as he took in the sight of Aziraphale in the chalk circle, his serpentine eyes glittered with a cold pleasure.

Aziraphale did his very best to pretend to be frightened of this terribly fierce-looking demon.

"Well," said Crowley, to his surprised hosts, "I see you've captured an angel!"

"Who are you?" the man demanded.

Crowley shrugged. "Oh, I go by many names. But this here—" Crowley pointed at Aziraphale. "This one *I* know. Aziraphale. Guard of the Eastern Gate. We go way back." Crowley crossed his arms over his chest, smirking at the angel. And then he turned to glare at the humans. "Release him."

"What?" the man asked.

"I said *release him*. I've been working on him 6000 years and I won't lose my prize to a group of humans. Release him now or I'll see you both dead and then do it myself."

The man gave him a cold look. "That's not happening, demon. I've cast a protection spell over us." He pointed at Aziraphale. "That circle doesn't break until either he's drained of power or I decide to let him out. And we've put too much planning into this, sacrificed too much. So you might as well just enjoy watching him die."

Crowley made a motion with his hands, testing the protection spell. Aziraphale could read the tension in his shoulders. The spell was clearly a powerful one, which made sense if these people were skilled enough to build this circle.

Crowley's eyes flicked to Aziraphale, and his left eyebrow raised a bit, which was rather rude, really. Aziraphale was the injured one, after all, it wasn't fair for Crowley to pass this off to him already. But needs must, he supposed. Aziraphale struggled to his feet, despite the pain that caused. "That's right!" he said triumphantly, pointing at Crowley. "You can't get to me now, demon."

The corner of Crowley's mouth twitched. Again, Aziraphale thought it was rather impolite of him to be so judgemental about Aziraphale's acting skills. He *was* in pain. He glared back. "It's an easy death for me. No more tortures, fighting, nightmares. I'd rather go like this than at your hand any day. Why, if *you'd* ever thought this up, trying to steal my essence, you'd be enhancing the circle at this point!"

"Enhancing the circle," Crowley echoed, with a smile stealing onto his lips. "Right." He laughed. "You think these humans will be more merciful to you than I would? I don't know, angel. I'm pretty good at tempting. I think I could talk them into it."

"They won't do it," Aziraphale protested. "They aren't demons."

"Do what?" the man asked, looking at Aziraphale, all hunger without a trace of guilt.

Crowley shrugged. "Oh, it's just a way for you to get more power out of him. Of course, it would hurt him worse, but you don't seem the type to care about that. At least, I'm hoping."

"No," the man said hastily.

To Aziraphale's eyes, Crowley was quite clearly blustering, but the humans seemed to believe him well enough. "Yes, it's a spell known only to demons," he said, waving his hands about. "We do our share of angel draining, you know. Takes demonic power to make it work. But I *could* help you. For a price."

The humans started whispering to each other. Their attention diverted, Crowley gave Aziraphale a softer look. "Go ahead and sit down, angel," he urged quietly. "Looks like you're about to fall over. You'll need your strength to withstand this, won't you?"

Aziraphale sat down once more, marking how Crowley winced a little to watch it. "The pain's not as bad as you might hope, demon," he offered.

"That's too bad," Crowley said gently.

When the humans had finished their conference, they looked up at Aziraphale with greedy eyes. "I think we'll take you up on that plan, demon," the man said with a cruel smile.

"And my price?" Crowley asked.

"Name it."

Crowley pretended to consider, a hand to his chin. Aziraphale raised his eyebrows in such a way as to suggest what he thought of Crowley's acting skills. Crowley scowled at him, no need to hide that.

"This your house?" he asked the humans. They nodded. "What's in your kitchen?" Crowley asked. "Got any dessert?"

The humans looked confused. Crowley folded his arms over his chest, looking quite menacing, until he said, "Demons are fond of sweets."

Aziraphale put a hand to his mouth to mask his laugh.

"We have biscuits," the woman spoke up. "Made them last night."

"I'll accept it." He stole a look at Aziraphale then. "Something for me to look forward to when all this is done."

Aziraphale gave him a very well-practiced look that was stern in the mouth but happy in the eyes.

As the man returned with the biscuits, Crowley clapped his hands together with a bit of a real smile. "All right, where's your spellbook? I'll show you how it's done."

The humans produced a thick book with a red cover and pointed out a particular page. Crowley looked at it for a moment, and then he strolled closer to the circle, crouching down so that he was on Aziraphale's level. "Get a good look at this,

angel," he said. "The spell that will finally put an end to you. Looks fool-proof to me."

Aziraphale hastily scanned the page as Crowley angled it toward him. "You might be right about that," he said softly. "Enhancing is possible, like I—like *you* suggested, but as to breaking it—" He looked up to meet Crowley's eyes.

"It only breaks when you're out of power. Or if they say so." The demon's fingers slid over the page, and Aziraphale's fingers found themselves tracing a similar path on his own forearm. It felt nearly as calming as if it had actually been Crowley's touch.

Crowley stood up and started conferring with the humans and then leading them in a little chanting and waving of hands in order to enhance the circle. It all looked ridiculous to Aziraphale, but the humans seemed to buy into it.

Enhancing the circle wasn't actually possible, of course. What Crowley did, following the idea that Aziraphale had given him, was to "enhance" the chalk sigils with a little demonic energy, making them blaze up brightly. They didn't actually do anything, but they did look rather pretty. The point of it was that by putting all that occult power into the outside of the circle, the flow of Aziraphale's energy into the jar was cut off. Demonic power was, by definition, chaotic, and its presence in the room should mask the fact that there was no longer any angelic energy moving about.

Aziraphale gave a tiny sigh as the pain ended, and Crowley's eyes fixed on him. There was a slight lessening of the tension in his shoulders that showed his relief. But he was sure to say, "This is going to *hurt*, angel."

"Yes, I did catch that part, thank you," Aziraphale reminded him crossly, and he made a good show of it, at least enough for the humans, groaning and crying out as if he was in even worse pain. Crowley ignored it, giving his attention back to the spellbook.

The angel's torment had ceased now, but Crowley was clearly still suffering. Aziraphale could see it in every movement, the fluttering of his fingers against the pages of the book, the way his walk had lost its usual obscene sway as he paced the floor.

"I'll still win," Aziraphale told him quietly. "I'll get out of here somehow."

Crowley met Aziraphale's eyes above, where the sigils flared with demonic energy. "Awfully confident," he said, in a voice that wavered just a touch.

"You underestimate me," Aziraphale said, in a polite tone that Crowley knew full well was quite rude.

Crowley snorted. "Oh, do I? I think it's you, angel, who—" Aziraphale saw when a solution came to him, Crowley's eyes widening a little, shoulders squaring off.

Crowley slammed the spellbook shut with a clap. "You underestimate me," he growled, but Aziraphale heard the relief in his voice.

Crowley started pacing again, but with his saunter restored. That sight alone gave Aziraphale hope. And, um, other feelings best not named at the moment.

"So," the demon said, grandstanding again for the humans, who were only too happy to watch the demon taunt their captive. "How does it feel to know you're about to die, angel?"

Aziraphale gave him a bit of a weary look but played along. "It feels just peachy, demon. How do you think it feels?"

It was probably not a good thing that both of them instantly heard, in Aziraphale's voice, *I like peaches* because they nearly both laughed at it.

Crowley trained his eyes elsewhere for a moment as he got himself under control.

"It's a shame, though," he said. "I had a whole plan for when I was finally going to do you in, you know. After 6000 years, I was finally going to get to tell you my secret. I *could* tell you now."

"Why the hell should I care what your secret is?"

Crowley shot a look at the humans, making sure he was holding their interest. "Oh, but you'll like this, angel. We've been enemies for 6000 years, and yet you never quite managed to smite me, did you?"

"Aren't you wily?" Aziraphale snipped.

Crowley grinned. "That I am. But didn't you ever wonder about all those miraculous escapes I had? Every time I was injured, somehow I was healed? Every time I was in danger, I was rescued? Demons don't do that for each other, you know."

Aziraphale was proud of the way he delivered the line, "Demons don't rescue people?"

Crowley huffed at him in a way that suggested he was unappreciative of Aziraphale's ill-timed attempt at humor.

"Of course not," he snapped. "Clearly *I*'ve had some help, though. And do you want to guess who it was? Healing me?"

"No, I don't."

"Oh, go on."

"Please, just enlighten me."

"It was an angel."

Aziraphale blinked at him. "Um—"

Crowley grinned. "Course, angels don't heal demons either, do they?"

This was the party line, and Aziraphale was used to it, it practically delivered itself. "No, of course not. Angels hate demons."

"Right. So what's your conclusion?"

"That you are very playing a very tedious game and I'm not interested."

"Wrong!" Crowley said, rather triumphantly, looking right at the humans now. "The proper answer is, of course, that *I am an angel*."

Aziraphale was taken by an unexpected coughing fit. When he could breathe again, he said, "You most *certainly* are not."

"Oh, ye of little faith," Crowley countered, looking extremely pleased. "I saw you in Heaven, ages ago, so sweet, so pretty, so *good*. I couldn't stand you. So I've spent the last 6000 years tormenting you. You see, I'm much more powerful than you, O lowly Principality. Powerful enough that I can take on the guise of a demon."

Ah, so that was the plan. Aziraphale could see it now. The only problem was that it was a rather brilliant plan and Crowley was going to be boasting about it for the next few centuries.

Aziraphale couldn't help asking, "So what you're saying is that we're on the same side?"

Crowley's smile almost broke through to where the humans would notice it. "Always have been."

Aziraphale got to his feet, wincing with unfeigned soreness. "You talk a good game, *demon*. But I don't believe you."

"I don't have to prove anything to you."

"Oh, dear. Feet of clay, have you? Someone as mighty as you, stronger even than a Principality like me, a member of the angelic royalty? What are you claiming to be, an Archangel? Higher still? A Throne, perhaps? Or a Seraphim?" Aziraphale watched the eyes of the humans widen at this. "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, wouldn't you agree?"

Crowley gave him a withering look that was full of appreciation for Aziraphale's contributions to the plan.

"Fine," he snapped. "It's easy to prove it." He nodded at the red jar that held Aziraphale's stolen essence. "Bring that over here."

The woman gaped at him. "That's angelic power! It will burn you! Unless..." Aziraphale could see the humans' minds turning it over now, running from surprise to disbelief and finally over into what seemed the default setting for these two: greed.

Crowley smiled. "It won't hurt me a bit."

It had started over five millennia ago on a beach in Japan when Crowley (Crowley then) had cut his foot on a seashell. Aziraphale had reached for him, this interesting demon who was ever ready to engage Aziraphale in mostly-friendly conversation and to give him what the angel would later recognize as loving looks. Aziraphale had brought Crowley close and used angelic magic to heal his foot quite before either of them had realized that it shouldn't have worked. They also shouldn't have been able to form some sort of psychic link between them, but anytime Crowley had been injured, Aziraphale had easily found him, just as Crowley could always locate the angel when he was in trouble.

It had just come naturally, neither of them purposefully creating this unorthodox bond between them, but more importantly, neither of them ever wanting to curtail it. It was, perhaps, ineffable.

The humans brought the red jar to Crowley with haste that betrayed their ever-growing excitement. Crowley held it easily in his hands.

"See?" he asked. "Angelic essence doesn't hurt me."

Unfortunately, it was going to take more, Aziraphale could tell.

"Open the jar," he ordered. "There's no way a demon can withstand that."

Crowley cracked the lid just for a second, and the tiny bit of Aziraphale's power that escaped the jar washed over Crowley in the same way that it always had, covering him for a few seconds in a gentle, loving glow.

Ironically, Aziraphale could see it that feeling Aziraphale's essence *did* hurt Crowley this time. Not physically. But it was hard for him to feel a part Aziraphale and not be able to reach the angel himself. Aziraphale marked it the slumping of his shoulders, the way the demon's golden eyes grew overly bright.

The humans were looking from Crowley to Aziraphale, calculating. But unfortunately, it still wasn't quite enough. A bird in the hand was nearly always worth two in the bush.

"You don't look like a Seraphim," Aziraphale said mockingly.

Crowley met his eyes sharply, and Aziraphale gazed back, letting him see the answer in the tilt of his head, the way he clasped his hands together. It was the only way.

Crowley tipped the jar away from the humans, a little sleight of hand, and then cracked open the lid enough to let all of Aziraphale's stolen power free. And the demon drew it all into himself.

There was a burst of light and when it cleared, something stood there, as near a Seraphim as Crowley could make himself look—six wings, a great deal of fire, eyes everywhere. The rush of angelic power in the room made everything glow and snap with static electricity.

The illusion held until Crowley found himself seized by the humans, thinking they'd taken him by surprise. Thinking the words they chanted weakened him. He let it all play out until he was in the circle and Aziraphale lay on the floor outside of it.

It had been a while since Aziraphale had felt this weak, and there was nothing left in the red jar now for him to reclaim. But he was alive, and he was free, and his essence would repair itself eventually, with time and rest. Aziraphale drew himself up to sitting and for the first time since Crowley had appeared, looked upon his best friend and gave him a full smile. Crowley smiled back. It turned into a smirk when he looked at the humans.

"Oh, you've caught me," he said with mock horror. "Whatever shall I do now? A seraphim in an angel trap."

The humans were fumbling with the red jar and starting to chant again. Nothing happened with the sigils now, though. The white chalk remained cold and quiet.

"So what do you think a protection spell actually does?" Aziraphale asked him, rubbing one of his sore shoulders.

Crowley shrugged. "Dunno. Can't kill them, I suppose."

"Could we move them, do you think? Deserted island, perhaps?"

"Why not the moon?"

"I think that would count as killing them, dear."

The chanting had started to break off now and the humans were staring at them. The woman examined the red jar carefully, and then gingerly removed the lid. She gasped.

"Looking for my power?" Aziraphale asked. "I'm afraid it's been used. As have you. Crowley, my dear, if you wouldn't mind."

"Anything for you, angel." Crowley strolled out of the circle with a grin on his face, fingers stuck lazily in his pockets. "These sigils don't hold demons," he explained helpfully to the terrified humans. "You know, there are some very cold deserted islands up near Canada," he mused to Aziraphale.

The angel shrugged. "As you like."

Crowley snapped and the humans disappeared. And then Crowley was on the floor, kneeling by Aziraphale.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, checking over the angel as if he might have physical wounds.

Aziraphale grasped Crowley's hands in his own. "You made a lovely angel, my dear."

Crowley laughed. "I never did, Aziraphale, believe me."

"Well, you really do make quite a wonderful demon."

Aziraphale had thought that this suggestion might earn him another push against the wall, but Crowley didn't seem to want to be rough with him now. He just rolled his eyes.

"Shut it."

All right, then, Plan B. Aziraphale caught Crowley's gaze and then let his attention drift to Crowley's mouth.

Crowley sat back, releasing his hold on the angel.

"What are you doing?" Aziraphale asked in surprise.

"Taking you home." But Crowley looked aside as he said it, grabbing the plate of biscuits. "You know, these don't look half bad—"

Aziraphale, for once, ignored the treats.

"But aren't you going to—"

"Going to what?" Crowley asked slowly.

"What I have been giving you *signals* about for six months!" Aziraphale snapped.

Crowley growled at him. "I can't function on *signals*, Aziraphale!"

Aziraphale stared at him in disbelief.

"We just hatched and carried out a very complex rescue plan without discussing it once! I tacitly gave you permission to use my essence, which I cannot get back, may I remind you, to make a Seraphim glamour, and now you can't even follow when I take off my bow tie and—"

"Because I can't afford to be wrong about this!" Crowley exclaimed. He met Aziraphale's eyes with a look that was half angry and half terrified. "Aziraphale—"

that night, in the Bentley, when you gave me the holy water—I wanted to kiss you then. And not just then, I wanted to kiss you when we fought about it a hundred and five years earlier. I have wanted to kiss you every time I’ve seen you for thousands of years, you know that, and you’ve wanted the same thing, I’ve seen it so clearly. But you said it, that night in 1967, you said it *with words*. That you weren’t ready. That I was going too fast.”

Crowley ran his hands through his hair, mussing it.

“I cannot lose you, not now, not after everything. We didn’t survive holy water and hellfire and angel traps just to have you pull away from me again.” His voice broke. “I’m not going to kiss you until you tell me, with words, that you want me to. I have to hear it, angel.”

“Oh,” Aziraphale breathed. “Well.” He tried a smile. “I suppose that would be much simpler, wouldn’t it?” And then he put a hand to Crowley’s cheek. “Crowley, my love. Please. Will you kiss me?”

DANNYE CHASE CAN BE FOUND ON FACEBOOK, INSTA, AND TWITTER AS DANNYE CHASE. THEY CAN BE FOUND ON AO3 AND TUMBLR AS HOLYCATSANDRABBITS.



"Garden," M. G. (d-o-s-s-i-e-r)

PLEASE SILENCE YOUR CELL PHONES
MICA

Nearly empty movie theaters are one of the weirder kinds of liminal space. They've got the timelessness of a windowless grocery store, blended with the isolation of a Walmart parking lot at three am, with the barest touch of sitting in an airport for a two-hour layover turned six-hour delay.

Luckily, weird and a little ways off this plane of existence were exactly where Conrad wanted to be. The past three weeks had been, to put it simply, Too Goddamn Much, and he was more than happy to turn everything off for a few hours and just stare at mindlessly entertaining movies.

Whatever he was watching, it certainly ticked that box. It was his third movie of the day, and he'd had to rush in to avoid being spotted by the employee who'd scanned his first ticket, the only one he'd actually bought. And although he'd managed to sneak in without being questioned, he'd quite missed the title above the door. It was some kid's movie. He was pretty sure the kid's movies of his childhood hadn't been so heavy-handed with pop music. Whatever. It was bright and cheerful and plotless, and that was perfectly fine with Conrad. As long as he didn't have to think or interact with anyone.

Not that there was much danger of that here. There were only three other people in the theater: a mom with a toddler who was more interested in the safety lights on the steps, and a middle-aged guy wearing a leather jacket who seemed to be doing the same thing Conrad was. Actually, he probably had it worse, if the sunglasses on in a dark theater was anything to go by. This movie was on its last leg, after all. Conrad had been seeing ads with the bird looking things on the screen for months which meant a quiet, empty theater, and the perfect place for Conrad to bury himself in popcorn and horrifyingly catchy music.

He had just started to really get into the budding romance between the purple, soprano voiced bird and the green, tenor one when a sudden blast of electric guitars made him fumble his cup and spill soda all over his lap.

"Awwww, *fuck*," he muttered, more upset at the loss of the soda than his soaked jeans. He'd been hoping to stretch that drink through at least one more movie. The cup was certainly big enough.

Well, there was still enough left to get him through *this* movie. Maybe his pants would be dry by then, too. He felt gross about sitting around in wet jeans for another hour, but the thought of trying to clean it up with paper towels in the bathroom was worse. And leaving when he'd only seen two and a half movies was just unthinkable.

He looked back up at the screen, expecting to see some new punk-rock bully birds there to tear the lovebirds apart before the power of pop music would pull them together again, but found that they were still belting out Shawn Mendez. The electric guitar hadn't even been noticed, loud and insistent as it was.

It took the man a few rows ahead shifting in his seat and reaching into a pocket for Conrad to realize it was a ringtone. For the first time, he regretted his choice to sit all the way at the back of the theater. If he had been ahead of the redhead, he could have shot a withering look his way.

As it was, though, all he could do was watch as the man's face lit up in blue from the too-bright screen and glare uselessly as he just let it keep ringing in his hand.

"What the hell, mate?"

It was one thing for your cell phone to go off accidentally. It was another to *not stop it*.

Finally, after a solid minute of staring at the phone, the man tapped the screen and brought it to his ear. The theater fell into sudden quiet, the singing birds caught up in some solemn moment, but Conrad couldn't bring his focus back to the movie with the man hissing into his phone so dramatically.

"I'm completely fine, angel. What on *earth* made you think I'm not?" Technically speaking, he wasn't actually being that loud, but the anger in his tone cut right through the empty room. "I am absolutely grand. Hunky-dory. One hundred percent *tickety-boo*." And with that sarcastic jab, the man hung up and slumped back into the seat.

Conrad rolled his eyes but shifted into a more comfortable position himself. Or, he tried to; comfortable was hard to manage in damp jeans sitting in a small puddle of spilled soda. Actually, yeah, that was just disgusting. He moved over a seat. The perks of an empty theater.

Twenty minutes later, the love birds were talking about each other forlornly to their best friend birds, the toddler had made eight and a half trips up and down the stairs, and Conrad was feeling pleasantly braindead again. It was hard to be stressed about work or irritated with his new roommate when all of his attention was on those poor birds getting back together. He gasped in delight when the green one stood determinedly, ready to go find his lady bird, and opened his beak to start singing—"No Scrubs?" That didn't seem right. "Just sits on his broke ass" did not seem like the kind of language they were putting in kids' movies these days.

Jaw dropping, Conrad watched as the man up ahead pulled out his phone *again* and watched it ring *again*. Who the fuck does that? Who doesn't put their phone on silent after it goes off in the middle of the movie the first time?

And he just *kept letting it ring*.

"Oi," Conrad hissed down, making the man jerk around to find him in the dark. "Could ya turn that off? 'M tryna watch here."

For a moment, the man sneered, and every brave nerve that had let Conrad speak up in the first place packed its bags and fled. But just as he was retreating back into the safety of his seat, the snarl dropped.

"I *could*," Sunglasses said, looking down at his phone in wonder. "I *could* turn it off."

And, with a flourish, he did just that

"Thanks," Conrad squeaked out.

He regretted it almost instantly when the man looked up at him again. That smile was downright *creepy*. "No, thank *you*." And to Conrad's immense relief, he sat back down and returned to watching the movie.

Just his fucking luck, right? Picked the one theater with the scary guy who changed his ringtone and never thought to turn off the phone. Conrad made a mental note to make sure the man left before him when the movie ended. He didn't really want that guy walking behind him. His teeth had looked almost sharp.

As if it hadn't been weird enough within ten minutes another distraction entered the theater. In the dark, Conrad didn't notice the new figure until he was standing in the middle of the front aisle, right smack in front of the screen.

"You're fucking with me," he started to complain.

Wet jeans, scary guy with loud ringtones, and now large blond man blocking the bottom of the screen. He shifted upright in a vain attempt to see over him, but it was only a moment before the new man spotted the first one and made a beeline for him.

Conrad nearly dropped his popcorn bucket flinging himself back into his seat. The guy in the leather and sunglasses had been creepy, but this one was straight-up *terrifying*. Even in the dim light from the screen, he looked absolutely murderous as he climbed the steps. He smiled at the toddler and nodded to her mother as he went past, but Lord above did Conrad want to do everything in his power to avoid ever being the recipient of the glare he was directing at Mr. Creepy.

He had given up on the movie by the time Terrifying sat down primly in the seat next to the first guy. Inexplicably, Creepy didn't even look over, didn't react at all to Terrifying joining him except to shift his popcorn to the far side of his lap.

"Dear," Terrifying began, his voice perfectly calm, but sharp as anything. Conrad shivered and sank further into his seat. Creepy, on the other hand, had the balls to *shush* him. Terrifying sputtered. "Don't—don't you *hush* at me! I'm trying to—"

"Shh! Movie's on."

"Dearest, don't be—"

"Rude? Don't be *rude*, angel? What, like talking during a movie?"

Terrifying huffed. "Well then. If you're going to be like that."

Conrad sighed in relief as the man stood up and headed back towards the steps, then choked on thin air as he turned *up* them and sat back down *directly in front of him*.

There was no chance in Hell of following the movie now. Not with such intense irritation coming off Terrifying as thick as smoke.

He had worked himself up so much that he had to bite down on a shriek when early 2000s boy band music started blasting out of nowhere. The man sitting right in front of him grumbled apologetically and took out an ancient flip phone, silencing it before the opening of "Bye Bye Bye" was even over. Okay, so maybe he wasn't quite as bad as Creepy, at least in some respects. He tapped at the phone for another minute before gasping in offended shock and sitting up to call down over the seatbacks.

"That was *entirely* unnecessary," he hissed.

The man below twisted in his seat to look back. "Shh!"

"How on *Earth* am I supposed to change my ringtone back?"

"Shh!"

"*You* shh! You're the one who got us into this!"

With that, the redhead began to look truly offended. "I'm the—I'm the one who got us into this?!?" He had by now fully turned around on the seat to better yell at Mr. Terrifying. "You stood me up!"

The blond scoffed. "I did not *stand you up*."

"You stood me up at dinner last night!"

"Darling, I told you, I *forgot*!"

"Okay, fine, you *forgot* about dinner last night!"

"Oh for *Heaven's sake*, dear, would you—"

"Oh my god, am I the *only one* aware that we are in a *movie theater here*?" Conrad shouted. The bird on-screen was crying. The purple one was crying, and he had no idea why, and his pants were damp, and there was a popcorn kernel stuck behind his tongue, and was it really *that hard* to get away from people for an hour? "You are literally screaming at each other in the middle of a movie theater, while there's a movie on. And it's the *sad* part, what the actual Hell are you thinking?"

He thought he heard Terrifying mutter, "actual Hell, likely" under his breath, but ignored it in favor of going lightheaded and collapsing back into his seat.

"It's a *movie theater*," he whined to himself. "I'm tryna watch a goddamned *movie*."

Mr. Terrifying cracked a smile and leaned over the seatback towards him. "Oh, it's not quite that bad, my dear. Though the music is a bit... well. Much, I suppose."

"It is, isn't it?"

"Mm. Lots of bass."

"Yeah. Um." Conrad peered around him. "I think your guy's leaving without you."

Terrifying turned just in time to see Creepy go around the corner out of the theater.

"Blasted snake," he muttered and moved to follow him. "I'm terribly sorry about this whole mess," he called back. "I believe you may find something about your day has gone better than expected."

And with that vaguely threatening line, Terrifying chased Creepy out of the theater.

"What," Conrad said aloud, unable to keep this madness in his head, "the actual fuck."

Apparently whatever thing was supposed to go better for him was not this because the toddler was, of course, right at the top of the stairs, and the look he got from her mother made it very hard not to curl down and hide behind his popcorn bucket.

Well, so much for avoiding interaction. That cause was lost in a haystack by now, and if Conrad knew anything it was when to cut his losses. Anyway, he had no idea what was going on in the movie anymore. Something involving a big, white bird murdering an Ed Sheeran song, but the drama going on with Misters Terrifying and Creepy had blown the thing between Purple Bird and Green Bird out of the water. So he gathered up his popcorn and his cup and his jacket and stepped in the puddle of soda on the floor, and narrowly missed tripping over the toddler on the steps, and was so blinded by the bright light of the hallway that he ran into the door trying to close it.

Holy fuck, all he wanted was to go home and finish his cinema snacks in peace.

That was, of course, too much to ask. Despite having a solid headstart on him, Sunglasses and Waistcoat were only halfway down the hall, still shooting glares at each other and occasionally kicking up the argument at a barely contained volume.

Conrad's control slipped, and let out a weak whimpering sound. Behind the men, thoroughly blocking the door to the parking lot, was a group of kids chatting and laughing like there wasn't a tangible wall of marital tension two feet ahead. Clueless. Oh, to be young and innocent again.

Waistcoat hissed something at Sunglasses, who was seething behind the dark glass. Without a word, he reached into the cardboard bucket under his arm, and, a look of no remorse on his face, flung a large handful of popcorn at his husband.

Conrad stopped breathing.

So did Waistcoat, for a moment. His face dropped into sheer shock. Sunglasses sneered harder. Waistcoat's face hardened. Then he pulled his arm back, and, somehow, chucked the scattered popcorn back in Sunglasses' face.

If Conrad was the praying type, he would have been on his knees with his hands clasped.

As it was, he was probably safer where he was in the doorway as the men began pelting each other with popcorn with inhuman ferocity, Sunglasses making a mess and Waistcoat throwing it back at him. The kids by the door were staring now, and idly he watched the tall girl whisper something to the one in denim and the boy with slightly greasy hair smack her hand away from their own bucket of popcorn.

Just when it seemed they could go on forever like this, Waistcoat aimed a particularly direct throw, and they both froze as Sunglasses' sunglasses were knocked off-kilter. Conrad didn't even have a chance to see his eyes before the glasses were fixed, but it was clear that a line had been crossed.

"Dear..." Waistcoat began, but before he could get anywhere Dear thrust the whole bucket at him and stalked toward the door.

"I'm going home, angel!" He slammed through the door, which the kids had wisely scattered away from.

Angel followed, shouting apologies that still sounded more angry than remorseful.

Conrad stayed where he was. He was going to wait long enough that they would be gone by the time he left. Then he was going to go home, hope none of his flatmates were hogging the TV, and finish his goddamn popcorn *alone*.

But he was beginning to think Angel was a bit of a liar. Because so far, everything about his day was going worse than he could ever have guessed.

In other words, *they were still on the fucking curb when he finally went out.*

"Crowley, dear, talk to me!"

"Well, I was *going* to talk to you last night, but guess who didn't show up to dinner?!?"

"I've said I'm sorry!"

Conrad squeaked and pressed himself back against the door. It was tucked into an alcove on the outside of the building, so he wasn't right out in the open, but they were standing right at the front of it, blocking his way *again*. Feeling desperate, he tugged on the door handle. Predictably, it was locked on that side.

No longer hampered by the close walls of the hallway, the arguing couple had gotten louder and even more animated. Angel looked close to actually stomping his foot, and Dear flung his arms out to the side so hard Conrad ducked.

"Who does that?" he said in a near shout. "Who blows off dinner at the Ritz?"

"Dearest, please—"

"D'you know how long I was sitting there for? D'you know how many other people couldn't get reservations? But no, no harm done, I suppose it's alright. You just *forgot*."

"OH MY GOODNESS, yes, I forgot *one dinner* in *six thousand years*." Angel was genuinely yelling now. Conrad was once again thankful not to be on his bad side. "And you have made me regret it with every fibre of my being. I shall never neglect to write an engagement in my diary again. Now, can we *please* get on with things and go back to normal?"

Dear shoved his hands in his pockets. He muttered something bitterly at the ground.

"What was that, darl—"

"You didn't use to even need a diary!" he shouted.

Angel threw his hands in the air. "Almighty, take me now!"

"Used to be the one reminding *me* about... 'bout concerts, and plays, and dinner, and nevermind that I never needed you to. Like I could *ever* have forgotten a date!"

"That was before! Things were different then. Every chance I got to see you was a special occasion."

"Oh, so it's not *special* now?"

"No! Of course, it isn't!"

Dear looked like he'd been slapped by that. After staring for a moment, he turned away, eyes locked on the ground and shoulders hunching up protectively.

Angel must have realized his mistake right away because he ran a frustrated hand through his hair and exhaled loudly.

"Oh, damn my..." He sighed again, and then he softened, face going gentle and apologetic. "I'm sorry. I don't think that sounded nearly the way I meant it."

They both stood there for a long moment until Conrad started to wonder whether he'd be better off scaling the wall than waiting for them to move. Finally, Angel reached out.

"Come here, darling." Dear kicked at the ground but didn't move any closer, and Angel's shoulders slumped. "My love, every moment I have with you is a gift. It's always been that way." He took a step towards him, and Dear didn't move away. "But nowadays I get to be with you all the time. It's *normal*, now."

Dear's voice was ragged at the edges. "And it's not good enough anymore."

"No!" Angel sounded shocked and horrified. "No, oh, my dearest, of *course* not. That's not what I mean at all."

Conrad flinched when Angel touched Dear's shoulder, ready for him to lash out or start running, but instead, he just leaned into the contact.

"It used to be that I *had* to get the most out of every moment with you. We got so few, I had to make them last." His hand skated up to the sharp cheekbone. "I forgot last night's dinner because I didn't have to worry about it. Because we can go to dinner any night we want. We can go tonight, and the next night, and every damn night from here to eternity. It's *normal* to be with you now."

He lifted his other hand to Dear's other cheek, and the redhead finally looked up at him.

"That's all I ever wanted, love. *This*."

Conrad looked deliberately at the floor, sure Angel's dramatically romantic exaggerations meant there was about to be a kiss. So he was surprised, and terribly concerned, when what he heard sounded more like a quiet choke. Looking up, he found Dear had buried his head in Angel's neck, his shoulders tense like he was struggling to stop them from shaking. Angel was holding him close, stroking a hand through his hair, and making gentle, reassuring sounds. Conrad blushed and hurriedly looked down again. Somehow, that was much more intimate than a kiss would have been.

"I'm sorry," Dear said after a minute. His voice was tight with restrained tears.

"*I'm* sorry." Angel sounded a little rough, too.

Suddenly, Dear giggled wetly. "You've—angel, you've got popcorn in your hair."

Angel huffed, and the errant piece of popcorn bounced towards Conrad's feet. "I wonder whose fault that is."

"'S a mystery. D'you, ah... you wanna go home?"

"Do you?"

"Weeeeell," Dear drawled. "You know, I didn't get to see the end of the movie."

Conrad heard what sounded like a finger snap. "Well, I *believe* there's another showing in twenty minutes."

"*Is* there? Who woulda thought?"

"Indeed."

There were a few shuffling steps, and Conrad cautiously looked up. They were still there, but now they were standing next to each other, and Dear had an arm held out for Angel to take.

"So. Whaddyou say to a movie date, angel?"

Angel looped his arm through Dear's, smiling so bright he could only be in love. "I think that sounds just lovely, dear." And finally, *finally*, they walked away, back towards the box office entrance.

Conrad stayed put for another ten minutes. He'd been burned too many times that day to risk running into them again.

It wasn't till a week later when he was doing laundry that he realized there was no soda stain on the jeans he'd worn to the movies. Despite sitting with it for more than an hour, and forgetting to do anything about it when he got home, they weren't sticky or gross at all.

Apparently, angels do keep their promises after all.

MICHA CAN BE FOUND ON AO3 AS MICKYRC AND ON TUMBLR AS MICKY-R-C.

DOGS WILL HAVE THEIR DAY
MIRA WOROS

"Crowley, what did you do?"

"I got you an anniversary present. Well, two anniversary presents, technically."

Crowley attempted his most persuasive, aren't-I-a-good-demon-husband smile. But Aziraphale wasn't having it.

"Our anniversary was four months ago," he said, folding his arms. "I'd suggest you try some other argument, dear."

But before Crowley could change tack, one of the two hellhound puppies he'd brought up from his last visit to Hell took it upon himself to rip the mailbox out of the ground and toss it across the yard. Then both hellpuppies bounded after it, vicious fangs rending everything they passed to shreds while leaving a trail of sulfuric saliva in their wake.

"My begonias!" Crowley shouted in dismay, giving chase immediately. "Get back here, you bloody hellions, and behave yourselves, for somebody's sake!"

"We can't possibly keep them, Crowley," Aziraphale called after him. "The damage to my books alone would be catastrophic. Not to mention the rest of the neighborhood."

Having corralled the hellpups into a corner of the garden, he distracted them with a giant leg of miracled mutton and backed toward Aziraphale again, maintaining a line of sight with the dreadful monsters.

"Adam has a hellhound, and Tadfield is still standing."

"Adam had the powers of the Antichrist to form the hellhound into whatever shape he desired."

"We don't need special powers," Crowley argued. "Hellhounds are designed to fulfill the will of their masters."

"And who exactly is their master?" Aziraphale demanded. "Really, Crowley, I'm surprised at you. You don't even truly like your plants. What makes you think you'll like taking care of two bloody great dogs? With stalactites for teeth and breath that smells like rotting flesh, no less?"

Aziraphale was at a loss to understand how Crowley had even made it all the way back to their cottage with the beasts in the first place. There was no way in Hell he'd let them into his beloved Bentley.

"I don't know, angel. Perhaps it was a bit rash."

"A bit rash?" Aziraphale repeated incredulously. "Darling, deciding to ditch one's reservation at Le Bouchon last minute is a bit rash. There is no word for *this*."

He gestured toward the hellpups, who had finished the mutton leg and were digging cavernous holes beneath the stone wall surrounding their garden.

"I just..." Crowley started, then stopped, recalibrated. "Hastur said they were slated to be destroyed, and he looked so bloody tickled at the idea. It really was all to thwart Hastur, I swear. And... you know... it was just so damp and greasy in their cell..."

Aziraphale bit his lip, tempted to call Crowley a sentimental old fool of a serpent. But something stopped him. Partly, it was the hellpups themselves, gamboling in the grass and tussling with each other, clearly as overjoyed with life as younglings of any other species would be. Partly, it was the look on Crowley's face as he watched them playing, wistful and perhaps a little heart-stricken, not that he would ever admit it, of course.

The angel sighed heavily, giving up the battle for lost. He was going to have to invest in miracle-reinforced, glassed-in bookcases. And hand sanitizer. So much hand sanitizer.

He placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled piercingly, calling the hellpups to attention. If he was going to cave to Crowley on this, then he was for damned sure going to be the master. The hellpups immediately stopped their game and looked at him expectantly.

"Gracie! Prince! Come!"

Instantly, both hellhounds shrunk to the size and shape and general fluffiness of two adorable Pomeranian puppies, one an all-over creamy-white with a single black paw, and the other black and tan with white spots on either side of his nose.

The hellpups trotted up to Aziraphale, standing on their hind legs and twirling with excitement, eyes glowing red for the briefest of moments. Aziraphale bent down and picked them up, one in each arm.

Handing the cream-colored pup to Crowley, he said, "I hope you realize that you have just volunteered for permanent dog-excrement eradication detail."

And with a grin larger than it had any right to be, Crowley answered, "Whatever you say, angel."

Celestial Harmonies Zine



Honorable Mention of Cover Art Contest, Orpheus-art (orpheuseclipse on Tumblr)

We could only choose one design for a cover, but we wanted to showcase the work of the submitter who also submitted! We are very thankful for receiving submissions for this contest!

OF HUMAN FLORISTS AND 'ANGELS'
L. HOLLY

Technically, legally, Anthony wasn't supposed to park his car where he had.

But... he'd only be in the nearby shop for a minute or two while he grabbed the plant pots he was after, and the spot in front of the bookshop next door was the only place he could park it in a reasonable amount of time and a reasonable distance away from his destination. That was how he was justifying it to himself.

The closeness to the former shop was of somewhat particular interest to him. It was pouring with rain today, and he didn't care to be walking around in it for too long.

Hasn't rained all week, had to water the outdoor plants myself all bloody week, he complained internally, and now, the one time I properly head out to do things, it starts tipping it down. Typical. Fucking England.

Anyway, he'd be in and out. Just a minute, less than that, even. There'd be no issues with parking his car there, surely.

The owner of A.Z. Fell's book shop—Azira Fell, as his shop's name alluded to—had a different opinion.

He hadn't seen the car outside his shop while it was in the process of being parked. He just saw the aftermath, as he walked past the front windows. And there it was, sitting rather illegally outside his shop. Didn't its owner know that double yellow lines exist for a reason?!

He sat by the window, watching, waiting, for the car's driver to come back. He'd be having a word with them when they did. Rather more for their sake than his own—but while he did primarily want to educate the driver so they didn't get into future trouble, he'd prefer not to have any crimes occur on his property.

How old is that thing anyway? he pondered to himself. *That car has to be from at least the thirties. It's in rather good condition, in that case.*

And yet, somehow, someone with enough sense to have managed to have kept a car *that* old in *that* good of a state still ended up parking said car in such an inappropriate spot.

Azira wondered what kind of person could manage to fit that description, and continued to wait by the window. Until, at last, he came along.

A tall, thin man, with fiery red hair tumbling down to his shoulders, wearing... sunglasses? On a cloudy, rainy day like this?

Well, Azira wasn't here to judge. Not for that, at least.

The man rushed through the rain and back to his car with an armful of plastic plant pots, of all things, and with his free hand, he was fishing in a pocket on his tight trousers for his car key.

After a moment of watching as the man (who was admittedly quite handsome, but that was irrelevant, no matter how the thought stuck out to Azira) battled with his clothing choices and got progressively more soaked, Azira headed outside, grabbing his umbrella—the white one—from the stand by the door as he did.

Why, why, *why* did Anthony not think to get his key out before he left the damn shop?!

It hadn't occurred to him, and now here he was, stuck beside his car while he cradled a number of plant pots in the crook of one arm and searched his pockets for his key with the other. His desire to be speedy about it wasn't helping - rather the opposite, in fact, his rushing was only causing his hands to fumble further.

He was going to be soaked by the time he finally got in the old Bentley. Hell, he was already feeling the chill of his dampening shirt against his skin and he'd only just about gotten hold of his key. He felt like *King fucking Arthur* pulling Excalibur from the stone when he finally got the ridiculous little thing free.

But then came the struggle of getting it in the car. No fancy little fobs to press a button on to open the door when your car's *this* old. Just the manual approach.

He fumbled with the key and the lock. Some plant pots were dropped. Swears were uttered.

A voice, directed at him—somewhat near, but somewhat distant—went unheard behind the sound of the downpour of rain and his own mumbled curses.

"Fuck's *sake*," he hissed.

Then, in his anger, he stomped a foot. His snakeskin-booted foot went down on a grate—a now very wet, very slippery grate...

...and slid straight off it, sending him crashing down to the pavement, his face smacking the bonnet of the car with a loud *thunk*.

"Excuse me, sir!" Azira called, trying to be heard over the sounds of the rain.

The man didn't hear him, only continuing his attempts to get into his car.

It was almost endearing—his struggles with the exact silly situation he'd created himself, the way his eyebrows nearly disappeared behind his sunglasses with how he was scowling, the occasional brush of his now-soaking hair out of his face to be able to see what he was doing. And it was almost adorable, how he stamped a foot, irritated, like a child not getting their way.

What was less adorable was the sound his head made upon colliding with his car when he fell.

Azira froze in panic for a moment. That was, to say the very least, *not* a good noise he'd just heard. He rushed over faster, then, and knelt down beside the man, who was still lying on the floor, his plant pots scattered around him and his shades having cracked upon impact.

"Sir?!" he exclaimed, wrestling with himself as to whether to reach out a gentle hand. "My good fellow, are you alright?"

The man was unresponsive. Unconscious, as far as Azira could tell. He looked around just a little frantically, hoping to find some help. But there was no-one. Well, no-one he felt he could bother—just people rushing to get out of the rain again.

He checked the man's pulse and breathing, as he realized he probably should do—both were perfectly fine, thankfully—and then his head, where it had collided with the car—also fine, save for the bruise already beginning to form.

Should I call someone? he wondered. He discarded the thought, however—he didn't have a mobile phone, just a landline, and he didn't want to risk leaving the man alone in his current state.

Fortunately, it wasn't much longer before the man began to stir, and a groan escaped him. He rubbed at his head with one tentative hand, wincing when he touched the bruised spot there.

"Oh, *thank the lord*," Azira sighed, somewhat relieved when he saw eyes open halfway behind dark, cracked glasses. "Sir? Are you alright?"

Anthony's vision was foggy when he came to, not long after his little fall. His hearing, too. His whole brain was frazzled, like cotton wool was stuffed in his head. It was unpleasant, and that wasn't even mentioning the dull ache in his head.

The fact that he was flat on the pavement was the first thing that hit him. He could feel the cold rain on the wet floor soaking into his clothes and hair, and the hardness of the concrete beneath him.

"Oh, *thank the lord*," he heard. "Sir? Are you alright?"

He forced his eyes open with some effort. The image before him swam around in his vision, then eventually cleared up into something more focused. It was clear, besides the raindrops and cracks on his sunglasses.

There was whiteness above him, filling his vision. Pale white, a whole sky of it, everywhere, bright enough that it was almost glowing. And amid the white, there was a figure. A man, kneeling beside him, leaning over him to study his face,

concern plastered all over his own. He was round and soft, both in body and face, with bright blue eyes and short, fluffy, pale blonde hair.

Beautiful, was the word that first came to mind. *Almost like an...*

"'ngel...?" he mumbled.

The other man blinked at Anthony's half-formed speech. "I... Pardon?"

"I'm..."

Anthony took a second to gather his muddled thoughts. The blanket of pure white above him, the sheer *angelic* look of the man, his kind eyes, the vague recollection of smacking his head, *hard*, against his car...

"Y'r an angel..." he muttered simply. The words rolled off his tongue without any consideration for what they were. "...Gorgeous enough to be... 've died and... and gone to Heaven. Took a tumble... 's killed me."

The man blushed. "Oh, my, I... um... is this... are you... oh, I think you might be concussed..."

Anthony looked around groggily as the stranger fretted over himself. Ah, the streets of London were still here. He most definitely was *not* in Heaven—he could tell that, even as maybe-concussed as he was. The whiteness turned out to be... a stark white umbrella, and the little daylight that was peeking through the clouds shining through it.

"What is it that they do...?" the man uttered to himself, before snapping his fingers with an "Ah!" and turning back to Anthony. "Can you tell me your name, my good man?"

"...Anthony. Anthony Crowley," he answered.

"Good. Can you tell me what the date is?"

"*Fucking*... haven't been keeping track of the calendar lately, no, sorry..."

"That's alright—do you know where you are?"

"Soho... was here for the... the shop over there..."

"And can you tell me who the prime minister is?"

"s... ugh..." Anthony scrunched his eyes shut, trying to think. "Tory cunt, that's who."

"...Close enough," the man said with a shrug. "Are you feeling alright?"

Anthony took a deep breath and mentally looked himself over to check. "I'm fine, I think. Everything's a bit... spinny, though."

"Spinny?"

He tried to twirl a finger. "Spinny."

"Oh, dear." the man sighed. "Look, let's get you inside. Do you think you can stand?"

"Wh—No, I'm fine, I just need to... drive on home and have a nap—"

"You're in no state to be driving anywhere right now, Anthony, look at you. Come, come, let me help you up."

The man reached for his hand, but Anthony protested, having acquiesced to the idea of not going home, but with his priorities on other things than getting off the floor. "Pots," he said simply.

"Pots?" the man questioned, before looking around and remembering the scattered plant pots. "Ah, right. Just a moment." He gathered up the pots and stacked them together again, then handed them to Anthony, who cradled them in one arm.

"There we go. Now, up you get."

Anthony couldn't be sure whether this *angel* was just strong, or if he was just as twig-skinny as he and his mates liked to joke that he was, or even if he was just delirious, but he suddenly found himself being pulled to his feet with ease, his free arm being draped over the man's shoulders as he carried him to the nearby bookshop's entrance, still holding that umbrella of his over them both.

"My name is Azira, by the way. Azira Fell. Just in case you were wondering."

"Mmh... Azira...?" Anthony repeated, seemingly testing out the name. "...Yeah, sounds like a name f'r an angel... Gonna keep calling you that, though. Angel."

Azira laughed sheepishly. "If you must, I suppose."

He set Anthony down on the nearest wooden chair he could find, making sure he wasn't at risk of falling off of it before stepping away. Then, he put away his umbrella and turned back to the other man.

"Stay right there, I'll be back in just a tick—I'm just going to grab some towels for you."

He hoped Anthony would do as he was asked while he rushed upstairs to his flat above the shop, and dug out a number of clean, dry towels for his soaking wet guest. Thankfully, he was still sat in the chair where he had been left, just swaying slightly.

Azira headed into the back room of his shop, and laid down some of the towels on the sofa he kept back there before making his way back to Anthony and helping him stand up again. It was easier this time, and they were soon making their way towards the sofa.

"Let's get you somewhere more comfy, shall we?"

He let Anthony down once they'd reached the back room, and coaxed him into laying down on the sofa.

"There we go. Oh! One more thing, just a moment!"

Azira disappeared off to his flat once more, putting some ice and water in a small plastic bag and wrapping it in a tea towel. When he returned, he gently brushed Anthony's hair aside to find his bruised skin.

"Still with me, Anthony?" he asked, to make sure.

Anthony nodded slowly. "Yeah, yeah... The spinning's... stopped. Mostly."

"Good to hear," Azira smiled at Anthony, and placed the compress he'd put together atop the bump on his head. "Now, keep this held here, won't you? Should help ease the pain a bit."

Anthony reached up to do as he was instructed. His hand rested on the other man's own for a moment before Azira retracted it.

"Thanks, Angel," Anthony piped up, after a moment of adjusting the compress's position. "For, uh, for this, and... for helping me in. And stuff."

"Ah, think nothing of it, my dear fellow. How could I *not* help, after that nasty fall?" Azira brushed off with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Say, you don't have anywhere to be right now, do you? I'd assumed your rush was to get out of the rain, but... perhaps not?"

"Nah, 's my day off. Shitty day for it, eh?" Anthony responded, gesturing towards the door.

"Quite." Azira chuckled. "Might I ask—your day off from what?"

"This little florist's I run elsewhere in the city. 's what I needed the pots for, actually."

"Oh, how lovely! I shall have to visit sometime."

"Yeah... it'd be nice to see you there—ow, fuck—"

Anthony flinched, apparently having shifted his hand a bit and aggravated the bruise.

"Ah- are you alright there?" Azira asked, a little panicked.

"Nah, yeah, fine, just... touched it wrong."

"Dear, me... does it hurt terribly?"

"Aches a bit. I've had worse, though."

Azira hummed thoughtfully to himself and looked at the damage done. On top of the injury, he somehow hadn't yet noticed, Anthony's sunglasses were cracked from the fall.

"Oh, look at your poor sunglasses." he tutted. "Those can't be easy to look through with all those cracks in the lenses now. Shall I get them off for y—"

Azira's reaching hand was batted away before he could even get near the shades, with Anthony muttering "Nope, you don't wanna see what's under these."

His head tilted in confusion. "Why not?"

"Hmmh... Weird looking eye condition. Freaks people out sometimes."

"Oh, come, now, they can't be *that* terrible. Whatever they look like, they'll be fine, I'm sure. In fact, I'm only *more* interested in seeing these things off of your face now..."

Anthony went quiet, clearly debating with himself whether it was a good idea... and then reached up to take them off by himself with a sigh. "Alright, Angel, don't say I didn't warn you."

When the shades were removed, he blinked a few times, adjusting, then met the other man's gaze with his own. "Go on, then, let's hear it. Scale of one to ten, how weird?"

Azira had never seen eyes like Anthony's before, his pupils looking like they had been slashed, almost like some kind of animal in how they were darn near slitted. His irises were a pale, pale green, practically yellow, a gorgeous contrast to his fiery hair. Were Azira to describe them, even from his first thought upon seeing them... he'd start out by saying they were *beautiful*.

"My word..." he caught himself saying, enraptured by the eyes before him.

"That bad? Yeah, thought so." Anthony sighed.

"Oh, no, you have it all wrong, my dear!" Azira quickly answered. "No, I... sorry, they're just so unique, and so... I might be a bit bold, here, but... well, they're so very pretty, if you don't mind me saying."

Anthony stuttered for a few seconds, trying to form some kind of response, and settled on "That's, uh... that's a new one. Haven't heard that before" when nothing else seemed to come out. He brushed a wet lock of hair from his face awkwardly.

That brought something to Azira's mind, finally, and he gasped.

"I almost forgot! You're entirely soaked through! Oh, I can't possibly send you back out there in those clothes on a good conscience—here, I'll go and get a spare set of clothes for you, and I'll leave you to get changed."

He had worried that the stress of the situation had gotten him into a line-crossing territory of helpfulness, which was only exacerbated when Anthony shook his head and said: "No, no, you don't have to do that, it's fine, please, you've done enough."

Azira's fears were lessened, however, when Anthony truly revealed what was on his mind. "Besides, I don't think you'd, uh..." he said, looking Azira up and down. "...have anything in your wardrobe that'd fit my style."

Azira glanced down at himself—at his shirt, waistcoat, and tailored trousers, all tinted in pale cream and beige colours—and then at Anthony's attire—an almost entirely black ensemble consisting of a shirt, jacket, and trousers tight enough that he had trouble even imagining how the other man got them on or off.

He smirked at Anthony. "You'd be surprised at what an old silly like me keeps in his wardrobe. Don't go anywhere, I'll be with you in a jiffy!"

The last time Azira had been up and down the stairs to his flat this often in one day, he thought, had to have been when he first moved in and was carrying boxes of his things from the moving van up to said flat. It wasn't often that things *happened* around the bookshop—this was actually a welcome change of pace, even with the worry for the health of the stranger on his sofa on the brain.

Azira's wardrobe was, as Anthony had implied, filled with clothes not dissimilar to what he was currently wearing. However, it didn't take him long to find an old shirt (black), a jumper (also black) and a pair of jeans (not black, but a very dark blue denim—probably 'cool' enough for the other man's aesthetic) that he'd been gifted over the years, all of which were in near-perfect condition from never having been worn. He thanked whatever God might be out there for the coincidence of these gifts from old, inattentive friends and acquaintances having become perfectly handy at present.

Azira headed back downstairs, clothing in hand. It occurred to him, then—was Anthony in a capable enough state to be getting changed? Surely. Hopefully. He *had* to be, didn't he? It wasn't as if Azira could—

An image implanted itself in Azira's head. A scenario wherein he didn't have to leave the room when he got back to Anthony.

—*help*.

Azira felt his face flood with heat—he'd just met the man, for God's sake! It was beyond inappropriate to think that kind of thing, *especially* with the situation at hand!

His footsteps fell a little faster to keep up with his racing heart and head. He had important things to attend to right now, and damn his newfound *interest* in Anthony, he couldn't let it get in the way of those things.

"Here you go!" he said in the most overcompensatingly cheery voice he could muster as he entered the back room, only to find...

... Anthony had fallen asleep.

Azira certainly hadn't been expecting that, but today was full of unexpected things, apparently. Recalling what little medical knowledge he had, he let the man rest, since it would be alright to, and put the clothes on a nearby chair, writing out a little note on some paper and placing that atop the clothes so Anthony knew what they were there for.

He supposed, then, that he should tend to the shop while he waited. He'd already forgotten to turn the sign on the door to 'Closed' while he tended to Anthony, he thought he really shouldn't leave the front of the shop unattended for too much longer.

And Anthony snored peacefully in the room behind him.

Anthony awoke alone in the unfamiliar room, refreshed and far, far less dizzy, but still with a small aching pain in his head.

Right, he said to himself, putting his thoughts in order. *Smacked my head. Bookshop guy—Azira—got me out of the rain. This is his sofa. He's been... way too sweet to me.*

He glanced around the room while he properly came to. Everything was in order—at least, from what he recalled before nodding off—apart from the addition of a pile of fabric on a chair in front of him. There was some paper on top, with some incredibly neat handwriting on it. His curiosity practically *forced* him to read it.

'Some dry clothes that should appeal to your 'look', I should hope! —Azira'

Absolutely too fucking sweet.

After arguing with himself as to whether he should take up Azira's offer, and then checking that the other man was not, in fact, anywhere in the room so that he could see Anthony (though, really, he wasn't sure if he'd complain if Azira *was* there), he divulged himself of his clothing and put on the spare garments, drying himself with one of the sofa towels as he went.

The shirt and the jeans were a bit loose, but what could be expected when the *Angel* was on the thicker side and Anthony was his rail-thin self? Besides, they were comfy—Azira had apparently managed to find the perfect balance between comfort and appearance with his clothing—and Anthony had a belt, so it was no big issue. And they were warm, too, even if it was just in comparison to his soaked clothes beforehand. And on top of that, most importantly, Azira's judgment had been spot-on. The outfit looked *good* on him, as far as he could see without a decent mirror around, at least, even if it was off from the Anthony J. Crowley brand by a few degrees.

Was it too soon for him to be feeling a flutter of excitement at wearing those clothes, like a teenager in a boyfriend's stolen hoodie? Was it too soon to even be

wearing them? Should he have ignored the offered change of clothes, even with the chill of the rain settling into his skin? Was it ridiculous, already harbouring a bit of a crush on Azira? Could said slight crush be attributed to his smack to the head?

... Was he overthinking things?

He shoved every single one of those thoughts aside and made a mental plan, heading to the front of the bookshop. Get out there, thank Azira, go home, give the borrowed clothes a clean and bring them back ASAP, then maybe...

The formulation of his plan was interrupted when the Angel entered his line of sight.

He became sure, at that moment, that the head injury had nothing to do with anything—with his head clear now, seeing Azira smile sweetly at a customer on their way out, he was still of the opinion that he was gorgeous. And that wasn't even to mention how ridiculously nice he'd been to Anthony. Yeah, he had a crush, and not for no good reason.

Anthony only noticed that he'd been staring when Azira noticed him off to the side and perked up.

"Oh! You're awake!" he exclaimed, still wearing his smile and heading over to Anthony, looking him up and down for a second. "I see you found the things I set out for you—I must say, they look even better on you than I'd hoped! Did you have a good sleep?"

Anthony felt himself blush under the attention. "Uh, yeah, great, thanks."

"Are you feeling any better? I know from experience the wonders that a decent nap can do, sometimes."

"Still hurts somewhat," he responded, touching the bump and wincing at the resulting pain as if to prove it. "But much better, yeah. So, hey, uh, I guess I should probably get going—I don't wanna take up any more of your time, and I think I should be good to drive now, so... thanks for everything. I'll see you around, yeah?"

"Oh, absolutely not," Azira objected. His words confused Anthony for a second before he continued: "No, as much as you do seem to be doing better, I couldn't live with myself if I let you drive off now and something awful happened to you."

"So, what, you're... keeping me here?" Well, Anthony couldn't complain too much about that.

"Heavens, no! I know I've already imposed on you enough; I'm certainly not going to go *that* far. I was just thinking—is there somebody we could call to accompany you home?"

Anthony knew he couldn't win an argument with the other man, and so he thought for a moment. There was one person he could *maybe* trust with driving him back in his car.

"Well... Bee should have gotten off work by now, I think... And they shouldn't be too far away, either." He checked his watch, then looked back at Azira. "Yeah, let's go for them."

"Wonderful! Would you like to call them yourself, or shall I?"

Anthony waved a hand dismissively. "Nah, don't worry, I'm on it."

"Perfect!" Azira said, clasping his hands together. "Well then, you get on that, and I'll put the kettle on while we wait."

It didn't take too long for Bee to arrive after Anthony had called them and explained the situation. Just long enough for a cup of tea and a chat. Azira didn't know why, but he'd expected them to be taller. And not so scruffy. But he wasn't judging—he was just glad Anthony had a friend who cared enough to make sure he was safe in getting home.

"Alright," they'd said as they walked into the shop. "Where's the bastard with the cracked skull, then?"

"Bee! Good to see you!" Anthony called back. "It's not cracked, though, 's not *that* bad. Would've called someone more capable if it was."

"Aw. Shame." Bee said with a chuckle, then gestured to Azira. "This the guy who helped you?"

"Sure is."

"Azira Fell." Azira greeted happily. "And you're Bee, yes? It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Yeah. Likewise. Anyway, I'm gonna go get in the car. Come on out when you're done talking to your, uh... new friend. No rush."

Anthony nodded. "Yeah, sure thing. See you in a mo."

Bee left, and Anthony looked back at Azira.

"Hey, so... thanks again. Like, a whole lot. You really didn't have to do all this for me, you know. I appreciate it."

"Nonsense. After all, what kind of *angel* would I be if I didn't intervene after you'd hurt yourself, eh?" Azira giggled. "Even if I *was* going outside to admonish you for your parking."

"Heh, yeah, I suppose. But really, I wanna pay you back for helping me out."

Azira's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, no, my dear fellow, I couldn't let you do that, I was just doing what I felt was right!

"Yeah, and so am I. Look, just let me do this." Anthony went quiet for a moment, thinking to himself. "Hmm... hey, you said you were a bit of a foodie, right? What about I get you lunch sometime? Wherever you want, my treat."

Azira considered the offer, ignoring the part of his brain that screamed '*He's asking you out on a date!*' and smiling once more at Anthony. "Ah, alright, if you insist. Lunch sounds positively fantastic."

"Oh! Great! Here, let me give you my number, and then you give me yours, and we can set this up whenever."

And then—after some surprise from Anthony that Azira only had a landline, and no mobile phone—they did, in just enough time to hear a particularly loud honk of a car outside as they finished.

"Y'know," Anthony said, putting his phone in a pocket on his borrowed jacket and taking a look out of the window, at his car, currently occupied by Bee. "I can't believe the car hasn't been ticketed or anything yet. You'd think it'd be, it's been long enough."

"Hm. Yes, I suppose no-one's noticed yet. Or perhaps the rain deterred anyone from stopping beside it for too long. Miraculous, isn't it?"

"A miracle from my guardian angel?" he asked with a smirk, looking back at Azira.

Azira couldn't repress his chuckle at that. "Oh, that it were true, dear. My *powers* don't extend that far."

Bee honked the car horn harshly again, and Anthony rolled his eyes.

"*'No rush'*, they say. *'No rush'*, my arse. Honestly."

"It seems as though you're wanted outside."

"Yeah, I'd better get out there before Bee starts taking out their frustrations on the car. I'll, uh... see you later then?"

"Indeed—I'll see you soon, Anthony."

Anthony turned and left after grabbing his things, and the pair exchanged waves and bright smiles as he exited through the door.

Azira's smile would linger for the rest of the afternoon. He couldn't wait for that lunch with Anthony.

"Took you long enough." Bee chided as Anthony (strangely, uncomfortably) climbed into the passenger's seat of the car. "Finally dragged yourself away from that stuffy old bookshop?"

Anthony scowled at his friend as he strapped on his seatbelt. "Shut up, Bee, it's nice in there."

Bee leaned forward onto the steering wheel, smirking, pondering the aggrieved tone Anthony had taken. "...You think he's fit, don't you?" they teased.

"*Shut up.*" Anthony groaned. He took out a spare set of sunglasses he kept in the glove box and put them on, feeling the blood rushing to his face again. "Maybe. Shut up."

Bee let out a laugh. "You *do*. I heard you call him 'Angel' on the phone, you can't pull the wool over *my* eyes."

"Ugh, *fine*, yes, I think he's 'fit'. Now are you gonna shut it and drive the damn car or what?"

"...You gonna ask him out?"

"Yes? No? Maybe? I think I already did?"

Bee looked intrigued. "Oh yeah?"

"I mean, I invited him out for a meal... Do you think that counts?"

Bee's smirk returned, and they started the car. "Well... it's a start."

A start.

Lunch with Azira couldn't come soon enough.

L. HOLLY CAN BE FOUND ON AO3 AND ON TUMBLR AS LOLLYHOLLY99



"Look at you looking at me," C. Albro (disgustiphage on Tumblr, Twitter, Deviantart)

SOME BY VIRTUE FALL
MIRA WOROS

Crowley ambled down the pavement, tangled in thought, toward the pub where he was meeting Aziraphale. He was annoyed that he'd had to walk three whole blocks from where he'd parked the Bentley. Aziraphale had decreed they take a break from miracles for a while because *darling, we have all we need and if we are truly to live among humans now, we need to take care to behave more like them* and then also, *keeping off head-office radar is never a bad idea, you know*. Crowley was convinced there was more to it, but the angel wouldn't admit it.

Crowley wasn't familiar with this particular pub, which was saying something, given his familiarity with most of the pubs in the East End. Must be new. He hoped they'd good scotch, as he was not in the mood for the generic nonsense served in most new establishments. *Chains*, the humans called them, and Crowley thought it fitting. You'd have to be in chains to appreciate them.

Crowley stopped to tie his shoelace, irritated all over again at not being able to miracle them to behave. Especially today. Anniversary of the Fall, and all.

Aziraphale had worked it out a few months back, using star charts that Crowley himself had drawn up for him. When Crowley had discovered the purpose behind the angel's project, he was far from pleased. Aziraphale having a date connected with Crowley's greatest sin was the last thing he needed. A yearly reminder of the fact that Crowley was cast out from grace. *Unforgivable. That's what I am*.

Normally, Crowley couldn't care less what the world, above, or below thought of him or any of the decisions he'd made in his long life. But Aziraphale... Aziraphale mattered. His opinion mattered. And his knowing the date of Crowley's angelic demise was a hard pill for the demon to swallow, especially when trying to smile encouragement at the angel's excitement over the discovery.

It didn't help matters that Crowley couldn't seem to shake the strangeness of their meeting at the duck pond the day prior. Aziraphale had seemed distracted, out of sorts, as if hiding something. But he wouldn't say what was on his mind. The only conclusion Crowley could draw was that it had to do with the impending anniversary of the Fall. It had been one thing to know about it intellectually, Crowley supposed, and quite another to be face to face with it.

He and the angel had been exploring a romantic relationship—if that was what it could be called—since the world hadn't exploded. They'd been taking things excruciatingly slowly, in Crowley's opinion, for the last seven months or so. Aziraphale had been reluctant to progress beyond the profession of feelings until Christmas-time when he'd gone positively giddy over slipping his hand into Crowley's and leaving it there as they strolled through the market. While Crowley would never dream of pushing Aziraphale into anything he wasn't ready for—he'd

learned over the years that doing so was the surest way to set their relationship back centuries—he did very much look forward to the day Aziraphale was ready for the next step.

But. With the weight of his Fall settling onto his shoulders, he couldn't help but worry that Aziraphale was having second thoughts. Or third thoughts. Actually, it would be more like three-hundredth thoughts at this point. In any case, the angel could easily be rethinking this whole *our side* thing for the millionth time, and Crowley couldn't do a thing about it. Couldn't even blame him, really. Crowley was a demon and was fine with that, he honestly was. He'd come to peace with it millennia ago. But he couldn't force Aziraphale to do the same.

Maybe it was time to give the angel an out.

Crowley looked up at the sign over the door to the pub. *World's End* it said.

"Seems appropriate," Crowley said glumly as he pulled open the heavy oak door.

"Happy birthday, Crowley!" came a roar from within the pub, startling the demon so much that he instantly miracled himself up into the nearest chandelier, hissing in defiance.

"Crowley, darling!" Aziraphale called from somewhere within the crowd. Crowley couldn't see him yet, but his voice alone was enough to at least slow Crowley's galloping heart. "Please come down, dear."

The angel finally managed to push his way to the front where Crowley could see his white-gold curls, fussy coat, and anxious expression.

"I'm so sorry we startled you. We were just trying to surprise you."

Oh, for Satan's sake.

Crowley unwound himself from the light fixture and dropped to the floor. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked, both cross and completely flummoxed, and perhaps slightly embarrassed about the chandelier business.

Book-girl came forward then, placing a supportive hand on the angel's arm. Crowley narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Aziraphale planned it," she explained. "For you. For your birthday."

"I don't have a birthday," Crowley said. "Angels and demons weren't born. We materialized from the firmament."

"Well, happy materialization day, then," said Adam, stealing a bit of cake with his fingers.

"Wait..." Crowley said, finally starting to put a couple of pieces together. "Angel, does this have to do with the anniversary of the Fall?"

Aziraphale stepped toward him again, fiddling with his cuffs nervously and clearing his throat. "Yes, well, sort of. I mean. Well... er..."

"Spit it out, angel," Crowley said, eyeing the crowd. He *really* did not want to have this discussion in front of witnesses. And—bloody Hell—was that Shadwell?

"We thought—That is, *I* thought... it might be nice to—to celebrate your, you know, transformation, as it were, with some cake... and—and presents."

Crowley was even more confused. "You wanted to *celebrate* me becoming a *demon*?" he said, reflexively hissing the sibilants.

Aziraphale's eyes widened, his expression one of barely disguised dismay at Crowley's reaction.

"You see, i—it's just that, I... er... we love you so much. Just as you are. And w—we wanted to show you that. You matter. *You*... do."

Crowley stared at Aziraphale, at a complete loss for what to say. He was certain he hadn't actually breathed for the entire last exchange, so there was not much chance of getting his vocal cords to work at this point anyway.

Book-girl walked toward him, her eyes a little dewy, and handed him a puzzle piece. "You gave us knowledge," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

"And the stars," said the woman Aziraphale had possessed—Tracy something, he thought. She handed him a tarot card and kissed him on his other cheek.

"And you saved the planet," Newt said, handing him a small rock with a smiley face painted on it. "Hope you don't mind if I skip the kissing. I'm a little shy."

Crowley gaped at them—a whole crowd of people he barely knew, who were all there to do what exactly? Crowley's brain was having a hard time processing.

"And you give excellent advice," Adam added with a cheeky grin. "Can we get on with the party already?"

Aziraphale stepped forward then, blushing furiously and darting bashful glances at the others in the room.

"One more thing," the angel said, thoroughly invading Crowley's personal bubble and looking up at him through his eyelashes. "You also stole my heart, and then saved me with it."

He reached up and touched Crowley's face, sliding his fingers along Crowley's cheek to his hairline and cupping his jaw. Then he leaned forward and brushed his lips ever so lightly across Crowley's, causing spontaneous combustion inside Crowley that had nothing to do with hellfire. Rather, the sudden storm of elation crashing all

his senses, demonic and otherwise, felt most akin to the fierce joy he'd experienced creating the stars.

After an astonishing moment that distilled the entire length of six millennia into the measure of a single heartbeat, the angel pulled back a mere inch from Crowley's face.

"Did I do it right?" he whispered, soft as a white down feather.

Without conscious thought, Crowley snaked his arms around Aziraphale, pulling him flush against his chest. Then he captured the angel's mouth in a searing kiss that left him, and hopefully the angel, deliriously dizzy.

The entire pub broke into whoops and cheers and riotous applause, but Crowley heard none of it.

"You did amazing, angel," he said, pressing his forehead to Aziraphale's and beaming like a bloody idiot.

So this was it, then. This was what being a demon could get you, if you were wily enough to snare the heart of an angel, and you were wise enough to recognize when the angel snared yours right back. Not bad. Not bad at all.

"Hang on," Crowley said, suddenly realizing something. "How long have you been planning this?"

"Oh, months, I suppose," Aziraphale said, a dreamy look on his face. "Why?"

"The miracles?"

The angel looked confused at first, then caught on. "Oh, that. Well, I couldn't have you popping in unannounced when I was in the midst of sensitive communique."

He waggled his eyebrows at Crowley, and the demon nearly disincorporated from sheer desire.

"You—you really are a fucking bastard," Crowley said, kissing his angel softly. "A lovely, ethereal, disaster of a bastard."

"Well, I say," the angel replied, blushing as he pulled back and dragged Crowley by their joined hands toward the cake table.

MIRA WOROS CAN BE FOUND ON AO3 AND TUMBLR AS MIRAWOROS.

Please note that the explicit section begins on the following page.



"Worship," Jace Evers (jace_of_arts on Instagram, ChubbyHornedEquine on AO3) and Jackal (paranrmljackal on Twitter, paranormaljackal on Instagram)

The author would like to warn the audience that this work contains major character death, alcohol use, and thoughts of suicide.

HUSBAND, GUARDIAN, MUSE
F. H

I.

Crowley hated working over his vacations.

Wasn't the point of being a semi-famous artist that he got to make his own hours, work alone, and spend as much time at home with his husband as he wanted?

Not this time, apparently. Not since Alciston & Selmeston Village Hall decided to do a complete renovation, including replacing their hospitality-grade art with original work from local artists. He had been stuck in meetings and consultations all week while his husband occupied himself at their cottage.

Aziraphale said he didn't mind since he was doing renovations of his own – a new workspace for Crowley, an extension to his library, expanding the wine cellar. Being alone gave Aziraphale the opportunity to putter over fabric samples and color swatches in peace without his husband intervening every five minutes with his supposed "expert eye for nuance".

But Crowley had enough of forgoing lunches with his husband (as well as afternoon delights) in favor of another discussion over whether or not a Monet-inspired acrylic of waterlilies would be appropriate for the treasurer's office. He launched his escape when an argument over abstract sculptures for public spaces broke out. He grabbed a blank canvas under the guise of starting a new piece and slipped away in his Bentley. He hit the interstate and sped off like a bat out of hell, making it to their cottage in record time.

Crowley loved how secluded it was in their small patch of heaven. Tucked far and away from any other living souls, no one complained about their activities—amorous or otherwise—be it at three in the afternoon or three in the morning.

Crowley shed his jacket, his keys, and his phone at the front door, then wandered the rooms, the canvas from earlier tucked beneath his arm, making as much noise as possible to alert his husband of his arrival.

"Aziraphale!" Crowley called, walking through the kitchen in search of his muse.

"Aziraphale! Where are you, angel? I miss your ass!"

"I thought you had to work this afternoon."

Crowley smiled. "I *am* working. I'm doing a portrait of a gorgeous man, as soon as I find him."

"No ..." Aziraphale chuckled. "You're supposed to be doing a landscape for the city planner's office."

"No," Crowley insisted, inspecting another empty room. "I'm painting *you*. Naked, if I have my way."

"You just want to snog," Aziraphale teased.

"Nothin' wrong with that. Now where are you? This cottage i'n't that big."

"Out here, installing the track lighting."

Crowley turned the corner to the patio – a space they'd recently added to give Crowley a protected outdoor area to work. There was Aziraphale – his intrepid Aziraphale – braving their rickety, eighty-year-old ladder to install a row of lights. The chrome runner and bonnets gleamed in the midday sun—right in Aziraphale's eyes—so he was installing them blind, his eyes shut against the reflected light, feeling around for the holes to put the screws in. Crowley winced when the ladder shivered beneath Aziraphale's weight, but Aziraphale seemed oblivious, balancing precariously on his toes to screw the fixture to the wall.

Crowley put the canvas down and held the ladder secure beneath his husband. "I really wish you'd let *me* do that. Or wait 'til we buy a new ladder."

Aziraphale looked down at Crowley with playful blue eyes. "This ladder is fine. Besides, I don't have much more to do. It'll only take a—" Aziraphale leaned sideways. The ladder lurched. Luckily, Crowley reacted in time to keep Aziraphale from toppling headfirst into the retaining wall.

"Okay, that's enough," Crowley said, pulling on Aziraphale's pant leg. "Get down now."

"But I only have one screw left!"

That's an understatement, Crowley thought bitterly in reference to the dozen or so times he'd asked Aziraphale to wait on this project. "I don't care. Get your ass down off that ladder."

"Geez," Aziraphale huffed, carefully navigating the rungs. "You certainly have a fondness for my rear."

"It happens to be a glorious rear." Crowley grabbed Aziraphale's behind and squeezed for emphasis. "I don't want anything happening to it." He drew Aziraphale close, relishing the way their bodies fit together as if some higher power had carved them both from the same slab of stone.

Like they'd been made specifically for each other.

Aziraphale tilted his head, pouting in mock offense. "So, you only care about my rear?"

"Among other things." Crowley captured Aziraphale's lips, not waiting for an invitation, trying his best to kiss the pout from Aziraphale's face.

If Aziraphale's whimpers were any indication, Crowley was winning.

But Crowley's cellphone, ringing where he'd left it, called a foul on his game. He had no intention of stopping, but Aziraphale annoyingly felt that job and responsibility came before snogging.

"You should get that," he struggled to say, voice muffled by Crowley's lips pressing insistently against his.

"Nope."

"But it's probably village hall, wondering where their artist is."

Crowley frowned as his husband squirmed out of his arms while laughing at what Aziraphale called Crowley's "sour mug". Crowley narrowed his eyes at his husband.

"I'm going to go answer that, but just to tell them to get lost, and then I'm getting you naked."

Crowley peppered Aziraphale's cheeks with kisses to a symphony of his giggles. Then, with a heavy-handed swat to his backside, he reluctantly released his husband and ran inside to answer the phone.

Despite his frustration at having to put his escapades with his husband on hold, Crowley couldn't help smiling. He loved his life. He loved his marriage. He especially loved the time they spent at their cottage in the South Downs. He'd always be a city dweller, but this place was paradise. He loved bringing his husband here and having him all to himself.

Crowley and Aziraphale had been blessed with a wonderful five-year-long honeymoon, and he didn't see that ending anytime soon.

"Coming, coming," he yelled at his insufferable phone, but he wasn't exactly rushing to get it. By the time he reached it, it stopped ringing.

"Oh, no," he joked. "I didn't get here in time. Whatever shall I do?"

It didn't matter to him anyway since no power on heaven or earth could have convinced him to leave his husband right as he was preparing to ravish him.

And to make sure they weren't interrupted again, he turned his ringer off.

"Well, now that that's settled..."

A sharp noise pricked at Crowley's ears. Nothing too alarming. In fact, it could have been a bird chirping. But it filled him from head to toe with dread.

He didn't know how he could possibly feel the ladder tilt from inside the cottage, but he felt the sway of it as if he were standing on it instead of Aziraphale. After a swoop of sudden and inexplicable nausea hit him, everything happened absurdly fast. He heard Aziraphale yelp, a loud metallic clatter, then a horrifying crack, like pottery hitting pavement.

"Aziraphale?" Crowley called, and then he waited. When his husband didn't answer, he started to panic. "Aziraphale!" He ran for the patio, having the sense of mind to

start dialing 9-9-9, knowing in his heart that his husband would need an ambulance. "Aziraphale! Are you alri—?"

Crowley got his answer the second he burst through the patio door.

No, Aziraphale wasn't alright.

Aziraphale definitely wasn't alright.

It rained the day they buried Aziraphale.

This weather was such a marked change from the weeks of sunny skies and no clouds. Aziraphale had mentioned how they needed a good, all-day rainstorm to trap them indoors where they could snuggle together on the sofa with mugs of cocoa and listen to the drops fall. Aziraphale was a quintessential pluviophile. He found peace in the rain.

Crowley hated the rain. He hated getting wet. He hated when his soaked clothes stuck to his skin and cold water ran into his socks. He hated sloshing inside his shoes, and the way they never completely dried. But as much as he hated the rain, he loved Aziraphale, and the rain made Aziraphale happy.

So Crowley became a pluviophile for Aziraphale.

Crowley stood by Aziraphale's casket beside his open grave and waited in the rain. He waited while the mourners paid their respects. He waited while everyone hugged and cried. He waited until the final mourner wandered somberly away. He waited until they lowered Aziraphale into the ground, and even after there was nothing left to witness, he waited until nightfall, when the rain stopped, the clouds parted, and the stars came out.

Crowley had painted stars hundreds of times. They were one of his favorite subjects to paint.

Now, he didn't want to look at them.

Tracy, one of Aziraphale's dearest friends, and her husband, Sergeant Shadwell, returned to the cemetery a little before midnight in search of their missing friend, to convince him to go home, but Crowley refused to leave. So they waited with him, not pressing the issue even though Crowley was sopping wet and stifling sniffles he knew would bloom into a full-blown cold later on.

At some point, Crowley finally came to the conclusion that Aziraphale wasn't going to magically return, so he took Tracy's hand and let himself be led away from his husband's final resting place. Crowley's forehead burned with fever by the time the couple got him back to the cottage, but Crowley turned down Tracy's offer to stay. As much as Tracy objected, in the end, she didn't have the strength to battle her own grief *and* Crowley's, and they left the man alone.

Crowley walked through the unlit cottage, straight out back to the patio, shoving aside a morbid sense of déjà vu. He dropped heavily into a wicker chaise and

looked up at the clear night sky, but his vision was obscured by something shiny hanging a few feet above his head.

The light fixture.

That stupid track lighting.

Crowley stared at it in shock as it dangled on its two screws.

The fixture was there, brand new out-of-the-box, installed except for one damn screw, but because of it, Aziraphale was dead.

Crowley snapped.

He spotted an abandoned hoe over by the retaining wall, a few feet from where Aziraphale had fallen. He grabbed it and, with a renewed vigor, attacked the lights.

"Goddamned lights!" he screamed. "What the fuck did we need these for, Aziraphale? Why did you have to put them up when I asked you to wait!? Why didn't you wait, Aziraphale!? Why couldn't you just sit on your ass and fucking wait!?"

The sound of the hoe hitting the lights and the brick behind it echoed. The force of the blows caused the hoe to vibrate painfully in Crowley's hands, but he only tightened his grip and struck harder.

"Fuck you, Aziraphale! Why did you have to put up these stupid lights!?" Crowley screamed, shattering the bulbs and sending a spray of glass falling over his hair and clothes. "I told you to wait! I told you I'd do it! I don't need the lights, Aziraphale! I need *you*, Aziraphale!"

He pounded the bonnets flat, chipped away a good portion of the brick wall, but it didn't make him feel better. He didn't feel avenged. He could pick those lights apart piece by piece, chop them up until they became dust, but that wouldn't bring his husband back. And why was he taking out his anger on the lights? He should turn that hoe on himself. Why the fuck hadn't he held the ladder till Aziraphale finished? He knew how stubborn his husband was, how determined he'd be to finish something he'd started. Why didn't he take Aziraphale's place and screw in the lights himself, get it over and done with once and for all? Those lights didn't kill his husband, nor the ladder. And it wasn't Aziraphale.

It was *Crowley*.

He was the only one to blame.

Panting hard and with blistered palms, he dropped the hoe on the ground at his feet.

He's the one. *He* did this. He killed his husband.

He destroyed his muse.

He stumbled into the cottage and rifled through the cabinets, searching for a fresh bottle of whiskey. He couldn't stand being sober any longer. His hand came in

contact with a bottle that felt mostly full. He grabbed it and pulled it down. Except this bottle wasn't his spare bottle of Jack.

It was a lone bottle of Hennessy... and it had belonged to Aziraphale.

Crowley's first instinct was to toss the bottle up against the wall and smash it. He looked around for an open space to hurl it when he caught sight of his paintings—a new crop he had started working on for a show in the fall, all of them featuring his muse.

Aziraphale.

Crowley hadn't set them up in here. *Aziraphale* had. He was so proud of them, he'd displayed them. That way he could look at them while Crowley toiled down at the village hall, wasting his talents painting hillsides and sunsets.

But Crowley couldn't look at them. They represented everything he'd had and lost in an instant. Being in their presence made him realize that he couldn't go on this way. He couldn't keep being the artist he was when the only subject he enjoyed painting was gone.

He didn't want to keep existing when the only man he'd ever loved was dead.

He took a swig of the Hennessy to steady his nerves. With his body burning hot and fire in his veins, he grabbed up the paintings, every last one, and carried them outside, dropping them in an undignified pile on a patch of bare earth a distance from the cottage. He doused them with the cognac, gritting his teeth as the liquid assaulted the paint, causing it to bleed, distorting Aziraphale's face, twisting it, like Aziraphale's body would eventually be, decaying inside his coffin.

When the bottle was just about empty, he rummaged through his pockets for his silver Zippo. He didn't smoke, but he liked keeping a lighter on hand for emergencies. And why carry around a common plastic BIC when he could spend over a hundred dollars on something he only used once or twice a year? But that was the man Crowley was.

Frivolous.

Over-the-top.

Who in their right mind chooses to make a living as an artist anyway? He didn't even want to be a painter initially. But when his trust fund matured and he gained control of it, he realized that he had more than enough money to live the life of a rock star and never work a day in his life. On a whim, he began to dally with watercolors and voila! He unlocked a secret talent.

But he should have done something respectable—gone to law school, or medical school. If he'd done either of those, Aziraphale might still be alive.

He'd give it all away, call a complete do over on his life, to get Aziraphale back.

He flipped the lighter open and an orange flame sprang to life. Crowley tossed the lighter into the pile. The flame barely touched the heap before the whole thing went up in a blaze. Crowley stood back and watched it burn, watched the past three

months of his life go up in smoke. The paint melted, the canvas crackled, sparks of color went flying into the sky.

"There, Aziraphale," Crowley grumbled, his throat raw from screaming. "It's done. All of it. No more muse... no more you... no more paintings. I've buried it all with you. I'm *done*!"

Weak, tired, and sick, Crowley drank the dregs of Aziraphale's cognac while fire devoured his paintings... and the love of his life.

It seemed too much work to trudge back to the cottage and climb into bed, so he lay down on the hard-packed earth next to the destroyed canvases. They maintained a slow burn, the air around him reeking of chemical smoke. Crowley hoped it would seep into his sinuses and suffocate his brain. Or maybe an errant cinder would jump onto his alcohol-soaked clothes and he would burn to death in his sleep; a sudden temperature drop freeze him to the ground where he lay. Either way, without Aziraphale, his bed wasn't his bed, his home wasn't a home, and Crowley wished more than anything that he could find the quickest and most efficient way to die.

Crowley prayed that he would black out, surrender to an unconsciousness where time passed outside of memory, but he had no such luck. Locked inside sleep, he had the same dream, over and over—Aziraphale falling from the ladder and cracking his head on the wall. And no matter what Crowley did, no matter how fast he ran, no matter if he didn't go into the cottage to answer the phone, Aziraphale still died.

That was an absolute. It never changed.

Which meant that doctor, lawyer, or artist, Aziraphale would still die.

Before dawn, Crowley had no idea *when*, he heard a rustle, followed by footfalls on the ground, and he wrestled through the fog in his brain to open his eyes. If he was about to be mauled by wild animals, he wanted to know. But what he saw was a man—a *beautiful* man—approaching the charred pile, focused on it as if a sick, drunk, and urine-smelling Crowley wasn't lying mere feet away. The man bent over the burnt canvases, a trembling hand pressed to his lips, and a gasp escaped his mouth.

Crowley had an overwhelming urge to reach out to the man, apologize for setting the paintings on fire, but why, he couldn't explain. Crowley groaned, trying to form words with his sticky tongue. He rolled slightly, blinking to get a better look at his paintings' solitary mourner, but when he opened his eyes, the man was gone, and Crowley fell asleep once again.

Crowley awoke after sunrise to the sound of laughter breaking through the haze of his fever-induced stupor. It was high-pitched, familiar. It sounded like heaven and home and the future Crowley had always dreamed of having, starting during those days when Aziraphale was completely clueless that Crowley had a crush on him. He could punch himself in the eye for the time he'd wasted not outright saying, "Aziraphale, I'm in love with you!"

Time he could use now.

Time he would never get back.

Back then, it took him longer than necessary to realize what he'd known from the beginning, from the first moment they met.

He wanted Aziraphale. Just Aziraphale.

Crowley peeled open his eyes and craned his head in search of the laughter, fixing his gaze on the cottage, and the patio he planned to tear out brick by brick by hand as soon as he was physically able. Somewhere in the midst of his pounding headache and the fog that refused to lift, he spotted piercing blue eyes—blue like the sky in summer—staring at him from behind a golden hibiscus. It was that exact spot Crowley had planned for his painting—the one he'd rushed home to start, of Aziraphale lounging on a chaise in front of the outdoor fireplace, the hibiscus behind him, its golden hue mimicking the highlights in his hair.

Crowley sat up too quickly to see who the eyes belonged to. His head swam, his stomach flipped, and before he knew it, he was on his hands and knees, vomiting over the ground. Crowley heaved until there was nothing left, eyes squeezed shut as his body wrung the past several hours' worth of alcohol from him. As quickly as he could, he looked back at the cottage with watery eyes, but this time, he saw nothing. He dropped his head. It felt too heavy for his neck, so he let it hang while he blinked what remained of his tears from his eyes. He caught a glimpse of his hands, filthy and paint-stained, the ruined cuffs of his suit reminding him that he still wore it. He pictured himself covered in dirt and vomit and knew that if Aziraphale could see him, he would be sorely disappointed.

Slowly, ever so slowly, with that thought lodged in his mind giving him an impetus to move, he crawled back to the cottage on his hands and knees. He felt lousy with fever, but his head began to clear. Small pebbles cut into the palms of his hands, but, unable to get to his feet, he continued to crawl, distracting himself by considering his options.

By the time he made it to the patio, his path seemed certain.

Crowley didn't want to live, not without Aziraphale. His mind was made up.

He would settle his affairs.

He would finish his commissions, complete his obligations.

And when the cottage and his flat were put up on the market, and all was said and done, he would find the quickest, most foolproof way of being reunited with his husband again.

II.

Crowley spent five days fighting his fever, barely able to move, completely unable to keep anything down, and he was grateful for every excruciating second. It gave him something to think about besides the inevitable. Part of him hoped he wouldn't

get better, that the illness would do his job for him. He slept so deeply during that time, he thought he was dead, but instead of a peaceful eternity spent with Aziraphale, there was nothing – endless darkness until he woke again.

And that scared him most.

Because if there was nothing to go to after death, Aziraphale wasn't only gone in the physical sense. It meant he no longer existed. And after their relatively short life together, Crowley would never see his beloved husband again.

On the sixth day, he had enough. His legs trembled and his stomach threatened to turn him inside out with every step he took, but he didn't care.

It was time to get started.

Crowley refused to look at his phone. He wasn't going to check his messages or his emails. He didn't want to see pleas from their friends begging him to call them back, wondering how he was doing, asking how they could help. He got a taste of that at Aziraphale's funeral, and each idea they had was the same. From short vacations to year-long trips around the world, they all wanted to take him away from his life, from his troubles ... from everything that reminded him of his husband. Crowley knew that they meant well but he couldn't. He had a connection to this cottage, not because it felt like a home, but because it felt like a mausoleum.

He couldn't leave.

He did feel like a heel for not letting anyone know that he was alive ... for the time being. Especially Tracy Shadwell. But if he texted Tracy or called her, Crowley would probably spill the beans, then everyone Crowley knew would be on his doorstep, ready to spend 24/7 sitting vigil by his bedside to make sure he didn't down a bottle of pills.

It had occurred to Crowley that planning on killing himself was the worst way he could repay their friends, all of them, for their kindness, their love, and their never-ending support.

In that vein, what Crowley was doing could be considered unforgivable.

But he couldn't concern himself with that, so he switched gears to something that aggravated the heck out of him, something he wouldn't be sorry to leave behind.

Crowley knew he'd probably accrued over a dozen messages from village hall, calling with ideas for his painting, and he couldn't care less. They had paid him in advance. They would get what he chose to paint for them and like it.

So what if they threatened to sue him?

He'd like to see them try.

This first painting, the one Aziraphale had chided him for putting off, was supposed to be a dramatic landscape view from a hilltop east of the county where they lived. He had planned to drive up there and map out the area, do some preliminary sketches, gauge his perspective. But those plans had also included a picnic lunch

with Aziraphale, and then outdoor sex on their favorite blanket. Considering that that was no longer an option, *Screw it*, he thought. *I'm gonna wing it.*

It wouldn't be a stretch. Crowley had this particular location set to memory. He and Aziraphale had driven all over it in Crowley's Bentley. They knew the place by heart—where the roads led, the dips and curves that passed beneath the tall trees, where the creek crossed the old cow road, and the man-made trails that carved their lazy ways up and up.

He and Aziraphale had made love along most of those: in the back seat of his car, parked hidden from view, even lying out on the grass under the sun on one or two more adventurous occasions.

One time in the rain.

Crowley sighed.

He was torturing himself now.

He needed it to hurt, or he might find himself content to live with the memories.

He chose a blank canvas from a pile of prepped ones on the floor and dropped it unceremoniously onto his easel.

This wasn't going to be his best work. Far from it, as a matter of fact.

Why put one hundred percent into it? If you've seen one stinking landscape, you've seen them all. As long as it was a step up from something he'd find hanging in a Marriott, it'd be fine.

Crowley barely regarded the canvas before he started dropping paint on it, not giving a single fuck when the grass bled into the sky too far on one side or how the hill looked more like a humpbacked snake than a majestically sweeping expanse of green. In his head, he could hear Aziraphale chuckling, high-pitched and giddy. Crowley grinned at the thought of Aziraphale standing beside him, teasing him over how lopsided his painting was, how it looked like someone taking hallucinogenic mushrooms had created it.

Crowley would shut him up by reaching out a stained hand and threatening his favorite coat.

"Crowley!" Aziraphale would screech. "You wouldn't *dare*!"

"Try me," Crowley would reply. The painting abandoned, Crowley would chase Aziraphale throughout the cottage, skidding past furniture and dodging drying canvases along the way. Aziraphale would head outside in the hopes of saving his precious books, stacked on every flat surface, from being knocked to the ground. Crowley would follow, purposefully keeping several paces behind.

Because Aziraphale running was adorable to watch!

But not far from the patio, Aziraphale would grow tired and slow up, an old service injury in his knee flaring and causing it to ache. He'd call out breathlessly, "All right, you wily serpent, you! You win! I give! Just ... stain it somewhere it won't show!"

But Crowley wouldn't ruin Aziraphale's favorite coat. Not for the world.

Somewhere along the route he'd have grabbed a rag to start cleaning himself up.

He'd still win, of course—overtake Aziraphale in the end.

But only because it was fun.

Which meant he deserved a prize.

He'd grab Aziraphale round the waist and drag his body against him, panting and flushed and simply perfect in every way. The coat would be safe, but bits of paint would end up stuck to Aziraphale's hair by the time they finished making love, clinging where Crowley ran his fingers through it, streaking the pale strands shades of rainbow. Aziraphale would catch it in a reflection somewhere and frown, but then he'd laugh, his eyes lighting up, the love radiating from them too magnanimous to contain.

Crowley stopped daydreaming when he felt tears leave his eyes. He wiped his cheeks on the sleeve of his work shirt, shoving away memories of an afternoon spent a colorful mess.

Crowley looked at his painting, prepared to mock the disaster he had wrought as a way of leaving that memory behind. He pictured the travesty of having this worthless piece of shit hanging at village hall with his name emblazoned on a brass plaque underneath and felt wryly satisfied. But then he stopped. He stared. His pallet slipped from his hands and crashed to the floor, spattering his shoes and marking the wood.

Gone were the globs of paint and the humpback snake.

During his fantasizing, he had fixed the painting, changed it from monstrosity to memory (and a vivid one at that) of the hillside in spring: wildflowers dotting the grass, the sun a suggestion in the quality of the light and the shadows it threw. If he had been aiming for perfection, consciously attempting to convey beauty and the promise of new life, he could never have been able to come close to this.

But recognition of his own exceptional technique wasn't what drew his eye.

It was the stretch of road in the distance.

On it, a Bentley drove along with two passengers inside. Crowley assumed he was the one behind the wheel, but the man in the driver's seat was most definitely Aziraphale, turning to gaze over his shoulder, sublime smile on his face.

He looked so happy, so carefree.

He looked so *real*.

Crowley reached out a hand, fingertips hovering over the place where Aziraphale's face looked up at him.

"What the—?"

Honk, honk!

Crowley jumped at the wail of a car horn coming from his driveway. But once surprise subsided, it swiftly turned to annoyance. The idea that someone who couldn't get him by phone had driven out to his cottage *infuriated* him!

Crowley considered not answering out of spite, but the urge to throw open his door and hurl insults at this intruder was too overwhelming to resist. He left the painting on its easel and stomped through the cottage to the front door.

Honk, honk!

"Yeah, yeah, I get it!" Crowley growled. "You're so important, you can't even get out of your car and ring the damn bell!"

Honk, honk!

"Come on, Crowley! Hurry up! We're going to be late!"

Crowley stopped cold in his tracks.

He stood paralyzed, gaping like a dying fish, choking on the million words rushing to come out but couldn't. He couldn't do anything—couldn't swallow, couldn't breathe, couldn't move. For what seemed like forever, he couldn't make himself do anything.

Honk, honk!

"Crowley! You promised me a picnic! I have the blanket!"

"A—Aziraphale?" Crowley ran for the door. "Aziraphale? Angel?" He couldn't believe he was saying it, as if Aziraphale would actually be there. He wanted to slap himself for even thinking it was a possibility. But there he was, reaching for the knob, hoping against hope for what he would see once he opened it.

Honk, ho—

The sound cut off when the door flew open, and for a second, Crowley heard a laugh and saw a flash of blue eyes in the passenger seat of his Bentley.

A Bentley that had been kept covered since the funeral.

He didn't drive it home from the cemetery. Generous associates had it delivered when they heard it had been towed.

Crowley had been indifferent.

He didn't think he'd actually drive it again.

Crowley stood in the doorway, his brain trying to reconcile what he was looking at.

A car.

It was just a car.

Nothing supernatural about it.

Crowley stepped outside and looked closer, examining it to find out why it had been honking on its own.

How a cover that fit snugly had suddenly blown off.

Especially when there was no wind at present.

Crowley searched the driveway, the cottage, and the field beyond for some sign that someone, probably some stupid neighbor's kid, had been pulling pranks. He covered the Bentley again, concentrating on that other than Aziraphale standing in the driveway honking the horn.

Praying it would stop his hands from shaking.

Crowley took one final look around before retreating back to the cottage. He double-locked the door behind him, feeling ridiculous when he did. He returned to the painting, to the peaceful hillside and the happy couple in the car driving off into the sunset.

A revulsion filled him.

It was too much.

It was all too much.

He couldn't let village hall have this memory, and he couldn't put on public display something that would never be again.

He grabbed a bottle of paint thinner and doused the painting, watching the colors run, the couple in their little car smearing down the canvas and dripping over the edge. He watched until the picturesque hillside was reduced to nothing more than slop. Then he turned his back on his memories and went to bed.

"Crowley! Are you going to wash my back or not?"

"Hold up, angel! I'm ... uh ... doing something"

"What are you ...? Oh, God! Tell me you're not masturbating ... or something equally vulgar!"

"Ha! What if I am?"

"You know, my love, I'm pretty sure you're going to wear that thing out with over use!"

"Never!"

"Wait ... are you ... sketching me!? I'm in the shower!"

"I know. That's why I'm sketching you."

"But I'm naked! And I ... wait a minute ... it ... it can't be that big, can it?"

"Yup."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"Are you ...?"

"Aziraphale, I just spent half-an-hour with your cock in my mouth. I think I know how big it is."

"Oh. Well, continue on, then."

Crowley woke to the sound of his own laughter. He felt so light, so happy. He laughed so hard, tears leaked from his eyes. It shook his head, which caused him to wake. The more conscious of his surroundings he became, the more aware he was of two things: a grainy texture on his fingertips, and the muted sound of falling water.

It was raining again.

Crowley opened his eyes. He didn't want to, but he was curious about the substance on his skin. Eyes adjusting to the low light, a sketch pad and charcoal pencil came into view, lying beside him on the bed.

He'd been drawing in his sleep.

Unusual, but it had happened before.

He lifted up on his elbows to get a better look at the drawing. It was crude, but amazingly, one of his best. He blinked away more sleep in order to identify the subject.

Realization shot like an arrow through his chest, but he wasn't surprised.

He had drawn Aziraphale taking a shower, hands tangled in his hair, steam rising around his body, a sly smile on his lips at being watched.

Crowley loved that smile.

He could get lost in that smile.

He got lost in it now, so lost, he barely remembered the rain. But not rain, he realized as the memory dissolved and Crowley's mind began to wake.

The shower.

And above the sound of falling water, he heard another, more magnificent sound.

Someone humming.

Crowley bolted from his bed. It had to be real this time! There couldn't be any doubt! The shower was only a few feet from where he lay. He heard the water and the humming as clear as day. Crowley raced into the bathroom, air thick with steam, mirrors covered in condensation. His heart leapt as the sounds became louder.

"Crowley! Is that you? I ..."

Crowley threw the curtains open, ready to embrace his wet husband with open arms.

Everything stopped.

No water.

Steam gone.

The mirrors dry.

He stood in shock, staring at an empty shower of cream-colored tile.

Crowley found himself caught between emotions—a desire to howl in anger along with the beginnings of a complete nervous breakdown.

He chose anger, feeling it best if he stayed sane a little longer.

He tore down the shower curtain. He stormed through the bathroom and pulled the mirrors off the walls, tossed bottles left and right. He punched the tile, cracking the porcelain and cutting his hand. The stab of pain pulled his focus. He stared at his bleeding hand, his chest burning as his heart pounded to break through his ribcage. He stood among the wreckage of the master bath and sighed.

So much rage.

So much sadness.

So much useless destruction.

None of it was going to bring Aziraphale back.

Crowley made his way to the kitchen, past the wasted pallet on the floor, past the painting still dripping acrylic, and headed for the sink. He turned on the cold water and stuck his hand underneath. Head bowed over the basin, he watched the blood from his cuts rinse away. His eyes drifted closed as the water soothed his stinging hand. He imagined Aziraphale draping an arm around him, fussing over him, kissing his temples, massaging his neck, telling him everything would be alright.

When his hand went from stinging to numb, Crowley fumbled for the faucet with eyes closed and shut the water off.

In the silence, Crowley heard a sigh that wasn't his own.

He didn't open his eyes.

He wanted Aziraphale back.

But he was done seeing ghosts.

He wanted it all to end.

"Paint it," Crowley heard a quiet voice say. "Paint what you want."

When Crowley opened his eyes, the blue eyes he knew had been there were gone.

III.

The voice told him to paint what he wanted. Now, Crowley had to decide what that was.

The answer was simple.

Crowley wanted an ending.

That's what he had thought right before he heard that silent command.

He wanted it all to end – the pain, the sadness, the hallucinations. But mostly, his life without Aziraphale.

So that was the secret then. He would paint an ending to it all – *his* ending. How this all plays out starting with Aziraphale dying, these days of torture, and then ... well, however Crowley thought to do himself in. He hadn't given it any thought. It was a simple thing to say that he wanted to end his own life, but the logistics of it were another monster entirely. He'd spent the past few days feeling like his days were numbered, that his body would tear itself to pieces, but he was slowly getting better.

So the task fell on him.

Crowley returned to his easel. He tossed the ruined canvas aside and replaced it with a longer one, one with enough room to paint a multi-paneled work. He collected up his pallet, satisfied with the acrylics that were left and not giving a second thought to the puddle of paint he was standing in. He picked up a brush, not particularly concerned with whether it was camel hair or synthetic, medium tip or broad, and held it over the churning sea of tacky paint. He needed to choose his first color, one that would tie together the overall theme.

That should be relatively simple. He was painting a triptych of his own death. He would start with black or red.

But when he tried to dip the bristles into one of those two colors, he found the brush called somewhere else. He clenched his teeth and tried again with the same frustrating result – he'd reach for the red, but the brush was pulled to the blue.

"Fine," he growled. "Fine, fine, fine, fucking *fine*!" He pulled up a huge dollop of blue and hurled it at the canvas, letting the paint land carelessly with an obscene *sploitch*, the hulking mass grotesquely crawling south.

"Well that's mature." Aziraphale watched as Crowley put the finishing touches on his latest painting. "I don't think the gallery is going to want that one."

"I don't care," Crowley returned, not bothering to look at his husband standing by his side. "Paintings are about emotion, how they make you feel, and this one's making me feel better."

"A painting of us barbecuing the neighbor's dog?" Aziraphale tilted his head to the side to take in the vivid imagery of a smug Crowley, dressed in a toque and a gingham apron that read 'Kiss the Cook' across the front, tongs raised

triumphantly, and in their metal grip, the charred leg of Roy and Sylvia Harding's Airedale Terrier, Mitzy.

"You know, I'd think you would have more sympathy. The little jerk bit me!" Crowley griped, indicating his bandaged hand.

"You bit him back!" Aziraphale chuckled. "I think that makes you even."

"I don't," Crowley mumbled.

Aziraphale inched closer to the painting, quietly appreciating the detail Crowley had put in—the grain in the wood of the red-washed picnic table, the springy hair on the carcass of the dead dog, even Aziraphale's own ensemble—his favorite khaki pants and blue button down, his soft velvet vest, his light grey coat. Crowley watched his husband's eyes as they traveled over his work, lip pinched between his teeth, his brow furrowed in concentration. Aziraphale turned his head suddenly, blushing at getting caught admiring his husband's handiwork on such a gruesome subject.

Owing to love, knowledge, and familiarity, added with a dash of the fact that, after so many years of sharing the same heart and the same mind, they often thought alike, both men moved in at the exact same time for the kiss that seemed to linger in the air, waiting for them to experience it.

Aziraphale gave a sidelong look at the painting and chuckled when he noticed how close his face was to a screaming and horrified Sylvia Harding, rending her clothes in an expression of her grief.

"Okay, I've got to get away from this thing." Aziraphale ducked his head and caught a glimpse of Crowley's bandaged hand, a spot of red blossoming on the wrapping. "Oh, my dear boy!" He took Crowley's hand in his and started to undo the gauze. "We have to re-wrap this so it doesn't get infected." Aziraphale tutted disapprovingly. "I wish you would let me take you to the hospital."

"Why? When I've got you here to play my nurse?" Crowley put his pallet down and wrapped an arm around Aziraphale's waist, dragging him close. Crowley wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. Aziraphale pulled a face of mock horror.

"Come on, Aziraphale," Crowley whispered. "I think I need to undress so you can take my temperature."

Aziraphale threw his head back and laughed. Then he kissed Crowley on the mouth, chuckling when his husband released him to undo the buttons of his shirt one-handed.

"You know," Aziraphale whispered against Crowley's lips, grimacing at the confession he was about to make, "charred dog notwithstanding, it really is an excellent painting."

Crowley stepped back to view his work, but once again, what had started out as one thing had developed into another. He had painted several paintings within a painting – an image of himself standing and staring at a painting with Aziraphale by his side, staring at a painting of Crowley staring at the same painting with Aziraphale by his side, standing and staring at the same painting on and on for

infinity. In the painting, Crowley wore the same clothes he did now, his untidy hair plastered flat on one side of his head, his pallet dangling from his hand with the paint swirled together in a blotchy mess. Crowley regarded the painting closely, his heart racing. If Aziraphale was standing a bit behind him and to the right in all these paintings, could that possibly mean ...

Crowley jumped when a hand touched his shoulder.

He turned, and a face closed in on his—cool lips pressing gently against his mouth. Crowley's heart stopped when the face pulled away and he saw those blue eyes that he missed more with every passing day.

Aziraphale looked perfect, his ethereal beauty completely intact, the way Crowley remembered him. Aziraphale smiled at his husband, sorrow shifting his features.

"It really is an excellent painting," he said, motioning to Crowley's artwork with a nod of his chin.

Crowley didn't want to look away, but he felt compelled to look back at the painting when Aziraphale mentioned it. Crowley had painted forever—the two of them together, stretching on into the future for an eternity. If he had to be honest with himself, that's what he wanted.

He didn't want to die.

He wanted his husband.

He turned back to Aziraphale, to ask him how he could make that happen, but Aziraphale was gone.

Crowley spent the following three days straight at his easel, the words *paint what you want* repeating in his ears. He didn't eat, didn't sleep. All he did was paint. He wanted his life with his husband back, so he started from the beginning, when he and Aziraphale first met. Crowley painted Aziraphale standing by the pond in St. James Park, watching the ducks swim by, the sun shining behind him creating a halo effect around his soft, blonde hair. He'd looked like an angel in his long white coat, so much so that Crowley had been afraid to talk to him. Crowley painted the way Aziraphale's eyes held his the first time they spoke to one another, when Crowley remarked about the current state of affairs and it took Aziraphale a whole half-minute to realize someone had addressed him. He painted the blush that had risen to Aziraphale's cheeks when Crowley made a particularly randy joke (in a failed attempt at flirting), and his admiration when he told Aziraphale what he did for a living.

He painted Aziraphale opening his bookshop, Crowley rushing through the door in the background with a bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates to celebrate. He painted Aziraphale walking the rows and stacks for hours, reading each novel as if they were a part of his own private library, which they might well have been since he consistently avoided selling anything.

He painted every lunch they shared at The Ritz on a wall-size canvas in multiple panels, changing their features as they aged, and on their respective ring fingers—faint at first, but becoming darker as time passed and they fell deeper in love—a single red thread that connected them.

During the course of those days, Crowley burned through his acrylics and had to call in a favor to another local artist to get more. While he waited for his shipment to arrive, he sketched. He went through sketch pad after sketch pad, finally resorting to paper from his printer, and, after that, the newspapers stacked by the front door, never read but waiting to be recycled. He painted and sketched his and Aziraphale's entire life together, and when he was done, when the final painting was set aside to dry, he waited for something to happen. A voice. A giggle. Another kiss.

Anything.

Crowley climbed into bed, his muscles sore, eyes crossed from exhaustion. He fell asleep waiting and awoke the next morning to the sun warm on his face, his skin and clothes thoroughly stained, and his husband nowhere to be seen.

He felt like a fool. A grief stricken fool, which made his actions understandable, but still a fool. He had made it all up in his mind, indulged in this fantasy for far too long, missed his deadlines and pushed aside his plans.

Well, not any more.

Crowley knew what he needed to do, and he had the adrenaline coursing through his body to do it. In his stash, he had a bottle of Xanax, a bottle of Halcion, and two bottles of vodka.

If he took them together, with any luck, it would be quick and painless.

He hurried into a living room littered floor to ceiling with pictures of Aziraphale, paintings of Aziraphale, charcoal sketches on every possible surface of Aziraphale, moving to the walls when he ran out of paper and his replacement paints and canvases had not yet arrived. There were so many images of Aziraphale throughout the room that Crowley almost missed him, wandering through the paintings, fingers hovering over, tracing outlines of his own face. Crowley came within inches of him on his way to the kitchen, stopping short at the intense look in his eyes.

Aziraphale still looked ethereal, but he also looked *real*.

"They're *beautiful!*" he gasped. "Every single one is just ... *beautiful!* They may be your finest work!"

Crowley choked. This had to be a dream because the reality was too fantastic to believe. But Aziraphale's eyes looked sad, and Crowley didn't understand why.

"Are you really here?" Crowley asked. "Or are you going to haunt me forever?"

Aziraphale quirked an eyebrow. "Do you want me to?"

"I want you *here!* I need you, Aziraphale! I need you to come back to me!"

Aziraphale looked at the paintings, the drawings. "You painted my past, Crowley." He reached out to caress an image of the two of them locked in an embrace, eyes closed as they kissed, caught up in their own little world as parents with children and park vendors raced by, eager to get out of the sudden downpour. Even Crowley had to admit it looked so real, he could almost see the people move, the children struggle to break free and splash in the puddles, Aziraphale's lips against his.

It was their first kiss.

An *epic* kiss.

"I need you to paint my future," Aziraphale explained, beginning to fade. "Then, you can have me."

Crowley shook his head, exhaustion turning desperation to anger. He had painted for three days straight to have Aziraphale. Now he was disappearing again because Crowley hadn't done enough!?

"What future, Aziraphale!? You didn't get a future! You didn't get a future because of *me*! Because I fucked up!" Crowley was screaming even though he didn't mean to. He was lost, lonely, felt like he was going bonkers. He was standing in the center of what could easily be labeled the creepiest memorial to his dead husband ever, arguing with a ghost. But none of that mattered because Crowley was tired of waiting, tired of being tested. He had a future planned for him and Aziraphale, and he was ready to get back to it.

"You're here now! I don't care if I never paint again! I don't want to paint! All I want is you!"

Aziraphale shook his head, backing away, his body becoming more and more faint with every step. Crowley panicked. He rushed at Aziraphale, determination in his blood-shot eyes, ready to reclaim his life and his husband. But as Crowley reached Aziraphale, he dissolved into thin air. Crowley stood alone in the mid-morning light, listening as the rest of the world sprang to life outside—birds singing, insects chirping. Crowley hadn't realized that while Aziraphale was there everything had gone quiet, like time had stopped. But now it marched on with absolutely no respect at all for Crowley's frustration and pain.

"Fine," Crowley scowled. "If that's the way you're going to be about it, we'll play this game *your* way!"

Crowley put a blank canvas on his easel and grabbed a pallet containing oils – a medium he wasn't fond of, but he didn't want to waste time rummaging through his acrylics for the colors he needed when this one was available.

Besides, Crowley considered oils a bitch to work with.

Seemed fitting.

Crowley didn't take a moment to regard the canvas, search out the painting within. He knew what he wanted. He wanted *Aziraphale*, naked in bed, panting with want, skin flushed, writhing against the sheets as he dreamed of Crowley joining him and relieving him of his agony.

Crowley attacked the canvas, and not just with his brush. He moved through the paint with his fingers as he defined the lines of Aziraphale's arms. He cut through the oil with his pallet knife, giving depth and dimension to the comforter on the bed. He sliced and manipulated, the colors blending until what he had intended to be a simple portrait of his husband lying in bed became the culmination of all his passion, bleeding through his pores and coursing from his fingertips. Unlike his other paintings, which only took a matter of hours, this one he worked on all day. He didn't notice when the sun began to sink into the horizon and the room went black.

He knew Aziraphale's body so well he could paint it with his eyes closed.

And the image was *perfect* – Aziraphale's skin glowing against a frame of red satin sheets, plump lips parted, eyes searching, arm outstretched, pointing to where Crowley stood beside his masterpiece.

Crowley stared at the painting. And the more he stared, the more he could swear he saw Aziraphale breathing.

Crowley set his pallet down and ran a grungy hand through his hair, spreading paint along the strands. He was worn out, breathless, almost completely spent, but one word from Aziraphale would have sent him running to their bed.

If Aziraphale were there.

If Aziraphale was still alive.

He touched the frame of the canvas as a breeze spiraled through the room, carrying with it the most incredible sound.

"Crow—ley! When are you coming to bed?"

Crowley sucked in a breath and held it. He couldn't let it go. A single noise, a single movement, and the voice might go away.

But he needed to know.

"A—Aziraphale?" Crowley stammered, sure that only the silence of the cottage would answer him.

"Crowley ..." The voice—so light, so fair, so enticing and heartbreaking and miraculous—answered instead. "Please, stop painting and come to bed. You have all day to paint. We only have the night to spend together."

Crowley backed away from the painting, gazing in reverence, expecting it to do something other-worldly... or maybe disappear. But it didn't. The painting remained, and so did Aziraphale.

"Crowley! I am going to count to five and if you don't..."

Crowley made it to him in three seconds flat.

That night, while making love to the man he thought he'd never see again, Crowley realized something so incredible, so indefinable, he felt no reason to try and explain it.

What good would it do?

He could spend the rest of his life with his husband, as long as he painted it that way.

"Oh, Crowley!" Aziraphale whispered, clutching his husband's arm. "They're *gorgeous*! Every single one of them your best work, hands down!"

"Is that because you're in every single one?" Crowley walked Aziraphale from painting to painting, stopping long enough in between so that his husband could examine the details at his leisure.

"I do lend a certain, how do you say, *sophistication* to your art. I won't lie."

"Of course not."

Aziraphale didn't go out in public often – at least, not where anyone knew them. But being photographed by the paparazzi couldn't be avoided. Crowley had shot from semi-famous to super stardom in a few short months, all thanks to his muse.

Crowley tried his hardest to make Aziraphale as inconspicuous as possible so he could accompany him to the gallery and see his artwork hung and lit properly. That was a magical moment, Aziraphale said—wandering through the paintings the night before the public got the chance to see them, knowing that he was one of the first people to lay eyes on them.

Crowley had dressed Aziraphale to go out in head to toe black by way of a simple suit, with leather gloves, top hat, and glasses to match. Aziraphale had never been a big fan of black, but it was a necessary evil.

Whoever he was to prying eyes, he had to appear in mourning.

Speculation spread like wildfire, when Crowley emerged from his cottage after months of isolation with a stack of new paintings in the back seat of his Bentley, that he had found himself a new muse.

That he was no longer the grieving widower.

At first, the art community criticized him harshly, but they quickly forgave him, falling completely in love with his latest work – an homage to the brief but brilliant life of his husband, bookshop owner Aziraphale Fell.

Only their closest friends knew the truth.

And they didn't care, as long as they got Aziraphale back.

Tracy said she wouldn't care if Aziraphale were the devil himself. She was ecstatic to have her best friend, in whatever form, back on earth.

"How many are there?" Aziraphale gazed down the line of paintings, trying to take them all in at once, including the one that made this trip possible – a painting of him and Crowley strolling through the gallery, dressed the way they were now, admiring Crowley's art. It was the painting that greeted visitors on their way in, and was titled (appropriately) "An Afternoon at the Gallery with Aziraphale".

"Right now ... about one-hundred and fifty."

Aziraphale snapped his head left to look into his husband's proud face, jaw dropped in disbelief.

"One-hundred and fifty? That's almost ..." He did some calculations in his head, coming up with an answer that boggled his mind "... five months we get to spend together!"

"Try two-and-a-half years," Crowley corrected, preening with delight at the wide-eyed stare his revelation earned him.

"Two and a half..." Aziraphale gasped. "But... but *how*?"

"*This* is how." Crowley escorted Aziraphale through a set of double doors to a larger room, the walls re-painted white to better display the art. The room held easily eighteen wall-sized murals, each with a multitude of different panels depicting Crowley and Aziraphale vacationing in Paris, sitting in a gondola in Venice, exploring the Grand Canyon, or just 'living'—washing dishes, walking a dog, shopping at the supermarket... and quite a few of them making love.

Aziraphale stayed quiet for a long time, staring at the next few years of his life as Crowley had planned them.

Crowley felt an unnerving weight settle in his chest. For a moment, he feared this wasn't what Aziraphale wanted. He didn't want to lose Aziraphale. Not again. But what had he forgotten? What was missing?

"Aziraphale? For the love of God, Aziraphale! Tell me ..."

"I love them!" Aziraphale threw himself into Crowley's arms. "I love it! All of it! Our life together! It's *wonderful*!"

"You really like it?" Crowley asked, overwhelmed by Aziraphale in his arms.

"I do!"

Crowley wasn't done holding him, but Aziraphale pulled away, eagerly leading his husband farther in the room to examine those paintings as well. "But now we have to start planning ahead. I expect you to make me age gracefully—no premature balding or pot belly. I mean, my normal belly is fine. Just nothing too extreme. Father Christmas belly. That's fine."

"Good to know."

"And my bookshop. I have every intention of going back."

Crowley's eyes grew wide. "But ... but *how*?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Aziraphale said, waving a dismissive hand. "I'm sure Tracy can help me figure something out."

Crowley rolled his eyes but listened carefully, setting Aziraphale's notes to memory. "I'm sure she can." He placed a kiss to the top of Aziraphale's head. "What would you like to do now? The show doesn't open till tomorrow. We have the whole day to ourselves."

"The whole day, hmm?" Aziraphale's lips curled. He walked straight to a painting done in muted, neutral shades of the two of them in bed, Crowley hovering over Aziraphale's body, looking down at his husband with lust blown eyes, occasional highlights of black and red suggesting exactly what moment of desire it portrayed. "This one." Aziraphale's voice turned silky, a wash of seduction that made Crowley burn to take him right there. "I want this one."

"You just want to snog," Crowley teased, offering Aziraphale an arm.

Aziraphale's eyes twinkled as he pulled Crowley towards the door. "There's nothing wrong with that," he said, biting his lower lip and giving Crowley inspiration for his next painting.

F.H CAN BE FOUND ON TUMBLR AS LADY DIVINE WRITES AND ON AO3 AS WHITE QUEEN WRITES