

"The Stars Within His Wings"

By

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(Fan Fiction based on Good Omens, by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett)

Part I: Too Near the Sun

Rome -- 41 AD

He lied to Aziraphale. He hadn't come to Rome for any temptation -- well, except maybe his own. He'd been following a bronze sculpture around the Mediterranean for almost three hundred years, now. He'd first encountered it in Thebes, in a bronzeworker's shop. It'd captivated him, the muscular forms of what gave every appearance of being unclothed angels -- one whose wings shimmered with the golden rays of Heaven's light, the other flashing with the burning red arch of Hell.

The bronzeworker -- a talented young man whose name Crowley hadn't bothered to learn at the time -- noticed his interest and explained the piece was Icarus and Apollo, with Apollo gripping Icarus's golden wings as he moved to toss him further into the sky, to burn up and die in the sun's burning rays.

Crowley hadn't bothered to correct him that the sun couldn't be reached from Earth's atmosphere. He'd been too entranced, his mind filled with thoughts he had no business entertaining. An angel, whose wings shone with golden flashes in the sunlight, and whose hair was even more blond, until it was almost white.

In that instant, he had to have it. When he enquired on the price, the artisan told him it was commissioned by an Athenian politician. Crowley stopped listening after that. He was already devising plans of how to get his hands on the statue. He'd even considered just taking it and disappearing. Something about it wouldn't let him just steal it, though. He swore he heard Aziraphale's voice, chiding him that he was better than that.

Now, Crowley snorted at the idea of an angel on his shoulder. That was for humans. His was a voice -- a memory from the courtyard of Job's home -- and the desire to be worthy in a pair of cerulean eyes. He wasn't even sure why that mattered, but it did.

Still, he couldn't get the irrational obsession with the statue out of his head. Something kept him hunting it, up until eight years ago. Seeing Aziraphale at Golgotha had broken something in him. Knowing why he was there -- why they were *both* there -- had burned like that metaphorical sun he'd been chasing all these years. God's willful desire to kill a young man with a bright future -- a man who truly believed himself to be

God's son -- angered Crowley to the point he hadn't even been able to trust Aziraphale. He hadn't even been able to accept the angel he knew wouldn't kill innocents wasn't there out of some kind of misplaced, zealous glee. Until he flung that insult in Aziraphale's face.

"Come to smirk at the poor bugger, have you?"

Why he said it, he didn't know, other than he wanted to hurt one of God's brainwashed little cretins as badly as what was happening hurt *him*. Only, Aziraphale wasn't brainwashed or a cretin, was he? They had a fair amount in common, he and the daft, innocent angel. Maybe that's why he kept snapping at Aziraphale like a wounded dog. He wanted the angel to take away a pain no one could.

He couldn't say that, though, so he just snarled and tried to get the angel to go away. At least that way, he couldn't ruin one more life that was just fine until he got hold of it. He lied and focused his attention on the only thing he *could* keep. The statue. He knew where it was being kept, and he was going to have it, once and for all. Maybe then the strange sensation he experienced whenever Aziraphale was around would go quiet.

Maybe then he would stop feeling like he was spiraling toward a star set to turn him to ash.

Crowley's Flat, Mayfair, London -- Night after Armageddidn't (Approx 2000 years later)

Aziraphale didn't want to admit how badly seeing that eagle sculptured pulpit from the church rattled him -- especially not to Crowley. That would mean explaining thoughts and feelings he'd been trying to hide for over 6000 years. Scandalous thoughts he was sure would mean his fall if Heaven ever caught wind of them.

Even worse... Aziraphale drew a still-unsteady breath. Even worse, since the night of the church bombing in 1941, he'd begun to wonder if he even cared about getting caught or falling, anymore. More and more often, when he looked at Crowley, he only wondered what life would be like if he was brave enough to just tell his oldest and dearest friend the truth -- starting with *I don't mean it when I say we weren't friends* and ending with *I love you. More than Heaven. More than life. Can you ever love me back?*

He winced. Lately, the only thing holding him back was imagining Crowley laughing at him, telling him that it was a good joke, and how funny it would be if they really did feel *that* way about each other. Of all Crowley's jokes over the millennia, that one would be the cruelest, because if he bared his soul only to have Crowley laugh off his feelings, he... well, he wasn't quite sure what he would do, but he knew he couldn't recover from that. Their *friendship* couldn't recover from that.

If he took that step, he *needed* Crowley to love him back. No one else ever had.

Feeling out of his depths, Aziraphale made his way back into the plant room, feeling a little more at peace surrounded by living things. The rest of Crowley's flat felt dark and lifeless. How could the demon stand living like this?

Aziraphale mourned his lost books. He mourned the loss of all the small things he'd collected over the millennia. Not the items themselves, of course, but the *memorie*. He could touch any item in his bookshop and instantly recall the events it memorialized. After all, after 6000 years, one couldn't be expected to recall every detail of one's life without some kind of reminder. And now they were all gone.

He paused, hands clasped behind his back and his chin tipped down in consideration as he realized the only memories he could instantly recall, unprompted, all dealt with the demon whose flat he was currently pacing.

No surprise. He--

"Angel, where'd you go?" Crowley's voice preceded his entry into the room. The sight of his apologetic smile as he leaned against the doorframe sent Aziraphale's heartbeat skittering with feelings he repressed by rote, now. "Here you are, then. Sorry the place is so bare. Didn't really see the point in decorating it when I was never here."

Aziraphale turned his head, looking away, before he said something he'd regret. His gaze fell on a strange shape at the end of the short hallway on the other side of the room. Whatever it was, it'd been covered with what looked like a blanket, like Crowley was trying to hide it.

"What's down there?" He started forward.

Instantly, he sensed alarm from Crowley -- something else he'd never been able to explain to himself were the flashes of emotion he always picked up from the demon. Doubtful Crowley would be happy knowing Aziraphale could sometimes sense what he was feeling. Especially when those feelings just further confused the angel.

"That's nothing," Crowley muttered, moving quickly past him to block the hallway. "Doesn't even belong to me. I keep it covered so I don't have to look at it."

"Oh, can I see?" Intrigued, Aziraphale tried to move past him. However, doing so would require touching, and the angel was feeling far too vulnerable to get that close to Crowley, right now.

"Fraid not, angel. It wouldn't interest you, anyway. Absolutely tasteless artwork."

Aziraphale eyed the demon warily, quite aware Crowley was lying to him, but just not quite sure *why*. Still, it wasn't his place, and Crowley was being so kind to let him stay here. "Oh, very well. What do you propose we do to pass the time?"

A strange look passed over Crowley's face, but it was gone so quickly Aziraphale couldn't be sure he even saw it correctly, before the demon swallowed hard and muttered, "I have some of that wine you like. I'll open that and we can talk, yeah?"

Aziraphale repressed the urge to sigh, not sure he had much else to say, after the events of recent days. "Oh, I suppose. Thank you, Crowley. You're a good friend."

He couldn't help noticing the demon didn't correct him, this time.

Crowley's Flat, Mayfair, London -- 2 Hours After The Kiss

Crowley sprawled on the garish, burgundy-colored crushed-velvet monstrosity of a sofa Shax deemed fitting furniture and grimaced drunkenly at the plethora of mirrors hung all over the place before tipping the bottle of whiskey he held to his lips again, trying to wash away the memory of his angel's kiss. Of that little, needy whimper that told him Aziraphale wasn't as unaffected by the kiss as those three stinging words he uttered afterward.

I forgive you.

"*Fuck.*" He dropped his head back, his eyes closed, as he ripped away the shades he somehow forgot he was wearing until just now. He'd been so desperate to just get so drunk he couldn't think, or remember anything, he hadn't cared about whether or not he could see.

He held it together the whole way back to this depressing flat -- he refused to call it home -- before the shaking started. Like an earthquake that ran every fault line from his soul outward, it had rattled through him, dropping him in the foyer. He'd crawled -- *crawled* -- in here and up onto the sofa, stopping over and over to pour alcohol down his throat. The alcohol was the only thing currently numbing the painful, empty throb in his chest.

He rubbed the heel of his hand roughly against the center of his chest, hissing at the emptiness behind his breastbone. It opened up the instant the doors to the lift closed, and

it steadily carved the canyon through his chest he felt now. Like something vital to life ripped away the instant Aziraphale was gone.

How had he never noticed, before? There'd been plenty of times he and Aziraphale hadn't been near each other. Yet the only times he could even vaguely recall feeling like this were when Aziraphale got temporarily disincorporated during the Antichrist incident and when *he* got dragged back to Hell after Edinburgh. He'd mourned when he thought Aziraphale was gone forever, and never been so relieved as when he realized his angel was just disincorporated, and eventually made it back to Earth. As for Edinburgh, he'd just assumed at the time that the emptiness was a normal response to drying out in fucking Hell. Still, he hadn't wasted any time contacting his angel once he was back on Earth, had he?

He'd been so relieved to see Aziraphale, that time, he'd wanted to make absolutely sure Hell could never pull him back again. He'd wanted leverage. Holy water hadn't seemed an unreasonable solution, and he'd thought Aziraphale would be only too happy to help.

Had he ever been wrong. Instead of insurance against Hell, he'd alienated his only friend. Aziraphale refused to speak to him even when he tried to apologize. So, angry at himself for alienating his friend, he'd considered the best suitable response to just go to sleep for the next forty-ish or so years. Would've kept sleeping, too, if his brief break from sleeping in 1914 hadn't involved learning Hell intended to do away with his angel.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." He groaned, now, pitching himself forward to pound his forehead against the heels of his hands, the nearly empty whiskey bottle landing with a totally unsatisfying thump on the ridiculous faux-fur rug.

Not that he cared how bad Shax's taste in decor was.

"I need a plan," he muttered to himself. Yet, he didn't have a fucking clue what kind of plan there was to make, aside from spending the next thousand years or so getting utterly wasted. He already knew if he tried to sleep, he'd just dream of Aziraphale. Now that the bag was quite utterly devoid of cats, merely thinking the angel's name made him ache to the depths of his Hell-scorched soul.

There was nothing he could do, this time. Aziraphale made his choice. He chose Heaven. He chose an angel that no longer existed -- hadn't existed in over 6000 years.

And Crowley couldn't breathe, anymore.

Part II: Steps in Moonlight

A.Z. Fell and Co. Bookshop, Soho, London -- 2 Weeks After Thwarting Second Coming

"Crowley?"

"Yeah, angel?" Crowley kicked the front door of the bookshop closed, his hands full with the final box -- the last of his plants. Something about Aziraphale's voice, floating down from the upstairs balcony, made him pause. "Something wrong?"

"Wrong? Um... Oh, no, nothing's *wrong*. No, nothing at all."

Crowley's eyes narrowed. He knew that flustered tone. Carrying his box over to the counter, he dropped it there, slid his shades off his face and dropped them over the horse sculpture. He snapped his fingers, simultaneously locking the front door and flipping the *closed* sign, before sauntering to the bottom of the stairs and calling up, "You sure, angel?"

"Um... Yes. Absolutely. Why would anything be wrong?"

Crowley heaved a sigh, a smile tugging at his lips as he made his way up the spiral wrought iron steps. "I don't know, angel. You tell me. Because you don't sound very sure."

He stopped at the top of the stairs, lifting one brow in question as he took in the flush staining his angel's face clear to the base of his white-blond hair and the fiddly twisting of the angel's hands. Something *definitely* had him flustered.

"It's... It's..." Aziraphale stammered, looking at Crowley with his head tipped bashfully downward like the innocent angel he hadn't been in a very long time, and certainly not the past couple of weeks, but his blue eyes glittering with something decidedly *un-angelic*, before he heaved a sigh and managed a, "Well, it's *indecent!*"

Crowley's eyebrow lifted even further in question, until he moved to stand near his angel. Laughter burst from him in surprise, before he snaked an arm out, catching the angel playfully around the waist as he pressed a kiss to Aziraphale's ear and whispered, "What is it you think they're doing, angel?"

Aziraphale wriggled in his grasp, the excitement in his motion a delightful contrast to the scandalized expression on his face and in his words as he blurted out, "I should think it's quite obvious what they're doing! Why would you have something so... so...so *vulgar!*"

Crowley hummed in response, wrapping long fingers around his angel's wrist and tugging him down the short hallway toward their bedroom. "Let me show you."

Rooftop, A.Z. Fell and Co. Bookshop, Soho, London -- 2 Months Later

Nighttime in a city like London might not carry either the still wonder or sheer expansiveness of the blanketing stars the countryside held, but it carried its own certain charm, as well. Especially up above the streets, where the artificial light was dimmer, and the stars stretched on forever.

Aziraphale's lips curved in a sad, loving smile as he glanced toward his demon and saw the familiar combination of painful longing to hear and touch the stars and the welcome gratitude of knowing they were still up there. Something of his remained from before -- a final memory upon all of Creation of what he made for them.

Crowley hadn't opened his wings once since the battle in Heaven. He still didn't know, and Aziraphale wasn't quite sure how to bring the matter up. Emotionally, Crowley was still in so much pain, and he was just finally physically healed.

"You know," Aziraphale murmured, taking hold of Crowley's hand with a small squeeze. "The Almighty gave you what grace She could..."

A weary sigh pushed from Crowley. "I don't really want to talk about this, angel."

"As you wish." Aziraphale let the matter go. For now. But someday, they would have the discussion. He would hold onto the gift he had to give, until Crowley was ready to receive it.

A gift he was afraid his demon would reject, if it was pushed on him, right now. Crowley would wrongly assume it was God's doing, or some Heavenly effect from the battle to save Creation from the Metatron. He would reject it as he rejected Heaven. He would reject it, because Crowley claimed he didn't do what he did to save Creation.

Right now, he was unable to hear the truth. So, for now, Aziraphale let the matter rest. Tugging lightly on Crowley's hand, he pulled the demon after him, and heard a hushed laugh.

"If your idea for bringing me up here was to get rid of me, I'd suggest you find a taller building, angel."

"Oh, hush," he quipped back, shaking his head. At times, Crowley could be so ridiculous. "I have no reason to want rid of you."

"Glad to hear it." Warm sarcasm dripped from Crowley's voice. "So what the Heaven are we up here for, then?"

"That." Aziraphale lifted his free hand to point out the spot where he had everything set up.

Crowley made a small sound of consternation. "I'm confused."

"Just quit grousing and come with me." Twining their fingers together, he set off across the bookshop's roof toward the spot he'd prepared. As they reached the area where he'd spread out a blanket on the roof and set everything up, he sensed Crowley falter, even as the demon tugged back on his hand.

Worried he'd misread his love, Aziraphale turned to look back, and saw the curious, hopeful look on Crowley's face. "Angel..."

"Yes, love?"

"That's a telescope."

Aziraphale smiled. "It is indeed. I've had it in the back of the shop for years. I wasn't sure you'd recognize it."

Crowley's gaze turned his way, even as a wry smile curved the demon's lips. "I sure as Heaven ought to. I helped Galileo invent the bloody thing."

Pleasant surprise flowed through the angel. He'd been so worried this would end up a disaster. "I never knew that. But I guess I shouldn't be surprised, should I?"

Crowley closed the distance between them, squeezing Aziraphale's hand, while his free hand reached out, his fingertips skimming the freshly-polished brass of the old telescope. "How do you mean?"

"You, my love, are full of pleasant surprises," Aziraphale lifted his free hand to pat Crowley's chest lightly. "I don't know what humanity -- what *I* -- would have ever done without you."

Crowley scoffed. "I assume there's a reason behind this."

"This was the only way I could think of to give you back the stars, Crowley." *That you would accept.* "I know it hardly makes up for what was taken, but I wanted to do *something* because--"

His words were cut off by Crowley's mouth on his, stealing away both his words and his breath. He gave himself over to the moment, to Crowley, and just let the rest of his answer hang, unspoken, between them.

Because I love you.

Part III: A Peaceful Place

A.Z. Fell and Co. Bookshop, Soho, London -- 1 ½ Years After Restructure Began

Aziraphale *tsk*-ed to himself, a patient, loving smile spread across his face as he scooped his six-month-old daughter off the floor as she tried to use the baby gate at the top of the stairs to pull herself up from the floor. "You've certainly figured out crawling, haven't you, precious?"

"Fafa," Jemima garbled happily, patting his face with her little hands, before stretching slightly in his arms, toward the stairs with a definitive, "Owm. S'oeeee"

"She's gonna be trouble." Crowley's voice, from the hallway leading back to their bedroom, drew his attention that way, to find the demon leaning against the corner of the hallway, wry humor tipping up one side of his mouth.

"And whose fault is that?" Aziraphale responded with warm teasing. "Any trouble, she gets from you."

Crowley pushed off from where he leaned and sauntered toward them, a sparkle in his yellow eyes that matched the wicked smile on his face as he purred, "You sure about that, angel?"

"Quite sure." Aziraphale's lips trembled with the smile he was working to suppress as he lifted one eyebrow with a pointed glance toward the sculpture against the wall between the windows, then dropped his attention to Jem, who'd given up her struggle and was now cuddled in his arms, her head laid against his shoulder, her thumb in her mouth, and her inquisitive green gaze -- the perfect blend of his and Crowley's eye colors -- tracking between her parents. He shifted her weight in his arms so he could lift one hand to smooth back her strawberry-blonde curls, even as he offered Crowley a mild, "Perhaps it's time to move *that* someplace curious little eyes can't find it? Unless, of course, you want to be the one to explain your scandalous taste in art, when she starts asking questions. Because if she's anything like you, she *will*."

Crowley's rueful chuckle filled his ears. "Point taken, angel. I'll move it."

Humming Jem's favorite lullaby, Aziraphale unlatched the baby gate and started carefully down the stairs with his precious cargo, leaving Crowley to see to moving the inappropriate-for-a-child sculpture.

"Now," he murmured to their daughter as he reached the bottom of the stairs, "I do believe we were in the middle of a story earlier, weren't we?"

Jemima nodded her head against his shoulder, snuggling closer as she mumbled a garbled "s'oeee" around her thumb. He smiled, pressing a kiss to her forehead as he settled them both on the settee, tugging the blanket Crowley often wrapped himself in up to snuggle around Jem before he picked up the storybook they'd started before her nap, earlier.

"Where were we? Ah, here we go..." And, as he launched back into a tale about a brave little bear all alone in the big city, Aziraphale smiled affectionately. He'd never considered what it would be like to be a parent, before Jemima came into their lives. He'd barely let himself think what it might be like to have a true partner. For thousands of years, neither had seemed at all possible. Yet, from the moment he lifted Jem from her basket, he knew two things to forever more be true about his life: this beautiful little girl belonged to himself and Crowley, and he loved both the demon and the little starling with every fiber of his eternal being.

Art moving accomplished, Crowley paused at the bottom of the steps, a tender smirk tugging up the corner of his lips as he listened to the soothing timbre of his angel's voice, reading to their daughter. No doubt, Aziraphale's insistence of reading to Jemmy at every turn had almost as much to do with her cleverness as anything she inherited from either of them -- which was saying something, since Aziraphale was the most clever being he'd ever known.

And then there was the steady library of child-appropriate books that'd begun showing up around the shop over the past six months. Crowley didn't tease his angel about them, because if given the chance, Jemmy would monopolize her fafa's time asking for "s'oees." Crowley totally understood it. He could listen to Aziraphale talk all day, every day, too. Always had. The mere threat of losing the sound of his angel's voice had the power to inspire him to stop time itself, once. *Still* would, actually. Aziraphale's voice soothed the hellfire, like a cool balm to the scorched parts of Crowley's soul. And for every bit of innocent little angel in Jemmy's soul, there was an equally scorched little demon bit.

It hadn't taken long after Jemima's arrival for them to realize Aziraphale reading to her was the only thing that calmed the starling to sleep. Since she was *his* daughter, as well, Jemmy loved to sleep and got demonically cranky when she couldn't. Her teething would probably terrorize Satan himself, if not for Aziraphale.

Chuckling to himself at the image of a terrified Satan running from a cranky Jemima, Crowley pushed off from the bottom of the banister and made his way through the shop until he reached the end of the bookshelf leading to where his angel's desk was. Only,

Aziraphale wasn't at his desk. The angel was seated on one side of the settee, Jemmy curled up in his lap, bundled up in his blanket and out cold, her strawberry-blonde head against Aziraphale's chest and her thumb hanging limply from her bottom lip.

Warmth spread through Crowley, and he leaned against the bookcase to just watch for several long moments. The dotting light in his angel's eyes, and the adorable faces he made trying to make the story more interesting for their daughter, was almost too much to bear. He wanted to laugh -- not at the angel, but at the situation, knowing full well Aziraphale was trying very hard to find a way to read to Jemmy that didn't end in their baby girl going right to sleep.

"Aziraphale," he called softly as he took a couple of steps closer to the settee. "She's asleep, angel."

Aziraphale stopped reading, disappointment flickering through his eyes. "What, again? I thought for sure, that time..."

"Angel, you could be reading her a horror novel, and she'd be just as fast asleep." Crowley moved to stand directly in front of Aziraphale, gently bumping the angel's knee with his own, careful not to wake Jemmy. "No matter how many faces you make or voices you try to do."

The angel sighed regretfully, but his smile was tender as he looked down at their daughter's sleeping face. "I suppose you're right. She just loves the stories so much, I want her to be able to enjoy them the whole way to the end."

"It's not the stories," Crowley confided, leaning over the pair to lift Jemmy gently from Aziraphale's lap, snuggling her against his chest as she sighed and burrowed her face sleepily against the side of his neck. Stroking a comforting hand over her little back, he met his angel's gaze. "It's you. Your voice. She feels safe, and comforted. Loved."

The angel's brow furrowed. "I would be quite distressed if she felt otherwise. What does that have to do with falling asleep while we're reading?"

Crowley shook his head with a wry, loving smile for his angel. "After six thousand years, I'd think the reason why the sound of your voice stops the Damned in their tracks, calms my anxiety, and puts our daughter to sleep would be obvious."

"Well, it's not." Aziraphale's little pout, and his petulant cerulean gaze through the flutter of pale lashes above the tops of his totally unnecessary spectacles, tightened a familiar knot of raw want in Crowley's chest. Glancing at their daughter, fast asleep in his arms, pulled a wry chuckle from him. Of all the times for Aziraphale to pull that little move...

"It's love, angel," he managed to keep his voice steady, despite the conflicting feelings tugging at him. Brushing a kiss to Jemmy's strawberry-blonde curls, he smiled. "I'm off to put someone to bed."

As he headed back toward the stairs with their daughter sleeping peacefully in his arms, Crowley couldn't stop the spread of a contented smile across his face. He'd spent so many centuries -- millennia, really -- running away from the inevitable, he'd given himself anxiety over losing it. These days, he could look back and clearly see what an idiot he'd been. Benefit of hindsight and all that rot.

He'd known, as far back as Eden, that Aziraphale was a being of pure love. Only a being who operated purely from love would ever risk God's wrath, without thought of the consequences, to make sure a pregnant human would be warm, comfortable, and safe. Eve's comfort had mattered more than anything else to Aziraphale.

For Satan's sake, even Crowley's own sorry arse had mattered more than God's potential wrath, to Aziraphale. His angel had reached out at his first hint of need, offering him a loving wing to shield him from the storm God -- or someone -- unleashed that day. He just hadn't thought he was actually *worthy* of it, as much as he yearned for his angel's attention. He hadn't believed himself worthy of anything he asked of Aziraphale, even as he manufactured reasons to come to the aid of an angel who was probably the most capable being he'd ever known in his entire damned existence.

He understood better, now. Understood the reason why Aziraphale always acted so helpless, like he needed so much assistance. They'd been starving for each other, and not always in a carnal way. In fact, for most of their 6000 or so years' history together, just the presence of each other was enough. At least, it was for him, and assumed the same was true for his angel. Being able to see for himself that Aziraphale was all right, and hear the sound of his voice, removed so many layers of anxiety, he was actually amazed he hadn't figured out his feelings sooner. He had no idea how he'd held in the truth, after he realized it back in 1941.

Even hearing what God said to Aziraphale, after the battle in Heaven, Crowley still couldn't understand what drew his angel to the likes of *him*. For a long time, he thought it was pity. Then, he wondered if the angel really did need someone to protect him. Finally, he settled on the idea Aziraphale had some twisted notion of *redeeming* him and turning him back into the idiotic twat he'd been in the Before.

When he finally realized his angel really, truly loved *him* -- just as he was -- and didn't want to change him at all, it was... Humbling wasn't even the word. Transformative, maybe.

Ineffable.

He chuckled quietly to himself as he tucked Jemima into her crib and skimmed his fingertips across the side of her head and face, where the heart-shaped birthmark of blush-pink scales just beneath her ear shone iridescently in the lamplight. He'd come to accept there were some questions he'd *never* have an answer to. How an angel as pure of heart and devoted to God as Aziraphale was could love a demon as damned as him. How two pieces of a heart created from the same whisper of starlight could diverge so far from their origin point and still always find their way back together. How the child before him could even exist... Crowley gave up asking those questions. Instead, he would just accept that it wasn't for him to know, for fear if he questioned their existence, he'd lose them.

Losing Aziraphale and Jemmy wasn't an option. He'd thought he lost Aziraphale several times, already, and each one destroyed him a little more. To even think about losing his angel now, to consider losing this beautiful little girl of theirs, threatened to tear away something so vital he knew he would be forever destroyed if it happened.

"Sweet dreams, poppet," he whispered to the baby, before backing toward the doorway. There, he flipped the switch to turn off the lamps and the other to turn on the nightlight that swept the ceiling with glowing stars. He shook his head at them, then looked back at the crib. "Someday, I'll show you the real stars."

Smiling, he pulled the door around until it was cracked open just the barest amount, and made his way down the back hallway to his and Aziraphale's bedroom, one thought tugging at him as he slid the statue he'd nicked back in Rome out of the way enough to retrieve the envelope he'd hidden beneath it.

An envelope he'd been carrying around since 1941, too afraid to even voice his hope. His wish.

He'd been so terrified of losing everything, all this time...

Crowley slid the envelope into the pocket of his jeans, replaced the statue, and headed back toward the spiral staircase into the main bookshop, his mind already playing over how to tell his angel the truth about what he wanted of the future. What he'd wanted for the past eighty-four years.

Still, he learned from his mistakes. The biggest lesson he learned in recent years was there was no time like the present. Never a good idea to wait until it was already too late.

The angel was still seated on the end of the settee, though the book he held was considerably more advanced than *Paddington Bear*. In fact, it looked suspiciously like one of the two books he'd gifted to Aziraphale when the angel first opened the shop.

"Dante? Really, angel?" He quipped as he entered the space. "Haven't you had enough of that drivel?"

Aziraphale lifted one eyebrow, but continued to read as if he hadn't heard a word Crowley said. The demon laughed quietly, completely unoffended. After that little pout, earlier, he knew the game his beloved angel was up to. Supreme Archangel he may be, but there was still a great deal of the awkward, uncertain angel in Aziraphale -- the lost, lonely being who just wanted to be loved as much as he loved others.

That angel didn't need seduction. He didn't need tempted to anything. What he needed, and Crowley was more than happy to give, was the reassurance he was, in fact, loved utterly without reservation, just as completely as he loved.

"I have an idea, angel." He dropped down to sprawl across the settee, resting his head against Aziraphale's pillowy thigh as he smiled up at his angel. "Maybe it's time to buy a cottage somewhere. You can have your library, without having to worry about figuring out how to keep people from buying books..."

Aziraphale looked down at him with attentive blue eyes slightly obscured by the spectacles he wore and an adoring smile. "And what would *you* do?"

Crowley stretched slightly and sighed as a familiar, soothing lassitude slid over him. It was Aziraphale's presence. Just being near him soothed Crowley and listening to his angel speak... it was like a comfy blanket or a warm sunbeam to his soul. Yeah, he totally understood why their daughter begged Aziraphale for stories.

"Dunno," he mused hazily, closing his eyes. A smile stretched slowly over his face. "S'pose I could garden. Or I could raise goats. Jemmy would love that. Kids love animals..."

"Really, Anthony," Aziraphale's voice was full of gentle chiding, but the thread of humor underneath told Crowley his angel found his plan both ridiculous and amusing. "Do you think raising goats is a good idea? Last time you were around any, you were threatening to destroy them."

"That wasn't *my* idea. And I didn't actually hurt them at all."

"I know, love. But if we moved to the country, you'd be bored within a fortnight."

Crowley cracked one eyelid, peering up at his angel. "Who says fortnight, anymore?"

"I do. Quit changing the subject." Aziraphale stroked a hand absently through his hair, and Crowley groaned faintly, stretching into the touch, even as he reveled in the flow of his angel's voice over him. "Besides, I need to stay close enough Muriel can find me, if they need me. And I thought you liked it here."

Crowley's eyes opened. "I *love* it here. But that's because it's where you and Jemmy are. I'd happily live out of the Bentley again, if it meant you were with me."

Aziraphale's lips twitched in a smile. "Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that, shall we? I think stability is best for Jem, right now. We can revisit the cottage idea later. Maybe as a place to get away for a bit, but not permanently. I rather like what we have, now, don't you?"

Crowley froze, wondering if this was his shot. He'd been trying to figure out how to bring the subject up, even before Muriel showed up with Jem, six months ago. For Satan's sake, he'd been all ready to bring it up that morning, but things got out of hand, and before they knew it, they had a new daughter and all the chaos that came with that responsibility.

He hadn't been able to find the perfect moment, since. But maybe that was the whole point. Maybe *every* moment was the perfect one, and he was overthinking this, like Maggie kept telling him. Maybe *this* was the very reassurance his angel needed.

"Actually," he dragged the word out, trying to calm his galloping heart. He felt Aziraphale tense, and hurried through, "I think we should get married."

The angel blinked at him, then frowned, laying aside his book and removing his spectacles. "Come again?"

Shit. Am I fucking things up, again? He drew a calming breath, and reminded himself this was his angel, whom he'd loved even before he realized it. They were on the same page, now, about most things. He could do this. Still drawing slow, steady breaths, he slowed down his speech and repeated, "I said, I think we should get married."

Aziraphale's cerulean eyes widened, before pain and disappointment settled there. "That's not funny, Crowley."

Doubt crept in on Crowley. *Shit.* Was he rushing ahead, again, before his angel was ready? *Oh, well. Too late now.* "Good, 'cause I'm not joking. What d'you say, angel? You and me, forever?"

Pulling the small jeweler's envelope -- brittle with age -- from his pocket, he opened it and tipped out the two simple gold bands into his palm. Then, like he had on a morning

two years ago, Crowley held his breath, listening to the old grandfather clock's gears turn in the space between the seconds, as he waited on the love of his life's response.

Unlike the last time, however, Aziraphale's expression melted with so much love Crowley was forced to blink against very different tears from the last time, even as his angel whispered, "Yes. Forever."

Crowley fought down the tremble threatening to break free as he looked up into the love shining out of Aziraphale's blue eyes, and managed a hoarse, "Right now."

A flash of surprise passed through the angel's gaze, and Crowley feared for just a moment that he'd pushed too fast, again. But this felt right. Deep down in his soul, he knew it was right. It'd been him and Aziraphale against all the odds, for millennia. They didn't need anyone else present for this moment.

As he watched, a smile spread slowly across Aziraphale's face, telling him his angel understood, and agreed, even before his blonde head nodded. "Right now, love."

Closing his hand carefully around the wedding bands, Crowley swung his feet to the floor and sat up. Nerves trembled through his whole body. It wasn't that he wasn't ready, or that he had any doubts about this moment or his angel. He just hadn't let himself imagine, since that morning in 1941, that it would ever be possible to be here. A moment of optimism, fueled by feelings he hadn't been sure at the time he could contain, carried him into that jeweler's shop, so many years ago.

Now, knowing it hadn't just been a dream had his entire body running mad. He swallowed hard, opened his hand, and selected the ring he already knew would fit his angel perfectly -- after thousands of years of secretly watching the angel's hands and wondering how they would feel on his bare skin, he knew every detail of the hand he held long before 1941. Tenderly, he slipped the ring on Aziraphale's left hand, gazing into eyes bluer than the sky as he whispered, "I've loved you for longer than I knew what love was, my beautiful angel. All that I am, for as long as I am, is yours."

He watched loving tears gather in Aziraphale's eyes, until the angel's eyes seemed to glow under the lamplight. "Oh, Crowley..."

He felt his angel's hands shake and knew it was the same blend of nerves and excitement, as Aziraphale took the other ring from him. Crowley watched, barely daring to breathe, as Aziraphale kissed the ring in blessing, then brought Crowley's hand to his lips, as well, kissing just where the ring would eventually rest, before looking up at him through those long, blond lashes as he murmured, "I've loved you since before the word existed. You are my stars, and my night sky. All that I am, my precious demon, for as long as I am, is yours."

As the warm metal settled against his skin, a depth of peace he couldn't recall ever knowing -- not even in the Before -- settled over Crowley. Because of Aziraphale, he truly belonged somewhere. Now, all of existence would know he belonged somewhere, *with someone*. For eternity.

He liked the sound of that.

Leaning in toward his angel, Crowley cupped Aziraphale's face between his hands and brought their mouths together in a very different kind of kiss from that morning two years ago.

This time, when they finally broke apart, Crowley looked into blue eyes swimming with happy tears, as his angel remade him with three very different words, as well.

"I love you."

Part IV: Grace in Starlight

A.Z. Fell and Co Bookshop, Soho, London -- 7 Years After Restructure

Crowley smiled to himself as he ran the hairbrush gently through his six-year-old daughter's damp, strawberry-blond curls. It was a familiar routine for them, though normally she brought her brush to him in the interior garden Aziraphale had set up for Crowley's plants seven years ago. Jemmy liked to hear the story of the statue her fafa had transformed from the grim reminder of a terrible, dangerous night in 1941 into a symbol of what he saw when looking at Crowley. Their daughter always had a million questions about the statue, about the children depicted in the new sculpture -- including her namesake -- and about what happened in 1941. Crowley always tried to answer as many of her questions as he could, while keeping the story as child-friendly as possible. The last thing he wanted was to give his daughter nightmares -- or make his husband annoyed with him for doing so.

Tonight, they weren't in the "garden" -- as Jemmy dubbed it almost as soon as she could say the word. Crowley just couldn't handle talking about any of it, right now.

He could almost hear his angel affectionately chiding him for being silly for his hesitation, but the memories were harder to talk about when part of his heart felt hollow. With Aziraphale away in Heaven setting up the last stages of some new angelic program, the familiar empty feeling he got whenever his angel wasn't on Earth had him rattled. Despite Aziraphale's early assurance he would never be returning to Heaven permanently, his duties did take him there from time-to-time -- occasionally even for days at a time. Before Jemmy, whenever his angel was away at night and he couldn't distract himself from the hollow feelings any other way, he just drank himself into unconsciousness. Which normally wound up with him coming to on the settee downstairs, a blanket tucked around him and Aziraphale standing over him with a loving, worried look on his face.

He hadn't done that since Jemmy arrived, six years ago. He didn't trust himself to drink alone, in case she needed something. These days, when the emptiness got too heavy -- usually only at night, after the shop was closed and Jemmy was asleep -- he just sat either downstairs in Aziraphale's chair or here on their bed, and talked to the air, knowing Aziraphale would hear him, even if he couldn't always respond. Would be easier if he could just convince his angel to join the 21st century and keep a mobile phone on him. But Aziraphale hated talking on the phone -- even to him -- so they made it work.

He wasn't the only one feeling the emptiness, either. He and Jemmy both felt Aziraphale's absence in different ways, and their bond always got a little tighter whenever the angel was gone. It was more difficult to get her to go to bed -- she had a

difficult time getting to sleep without Aziraphale reading to her -- and she tended to cling more, like she picked up on Crowley's own anxiety at these times.

Tonight, after her bath and with pajamas donned, she'd gone and got her brush, then tip-toed into his and Aziraphale's room with a whispered request to have her hair brushed and braided, like always.

She was restless where she sat beside him on the bed, trying her best to sit still so he could work the intricate weaving of hair he knew from muscle memory, now. He couldn't fault her anxious energy, aware she was probably picking up on his own disquiet. Hopefully, she'd manage to sit still long enough for him to finish.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, she tilted her head slowly to one side, like she always did whenever she observed something that struck her curiosity. Jemmy was insatiably curious about literally *everything* -- a trait he was both proud and terrified she inherited from him. Fortunately for his peace of mind, she also inherited Aziraphale's sense of propriety, which kept her from just blurting out random questions at strangers.

"Keep your head still, poppet," he reminded her in a murmur, gently correcting her posture so he could finish her braid.

"Is that you and fafa, lee-lee?"

He followed her pointing finger as he wrapped the hair tie at the bottom of her braid, and barely managed to swallow a very inappropriate curse for a six-year-old to hear. *Shit*. He'd forgotten about the sculpture. Jemmy didn't usually come in their bedroom, so Aziraphale had insisted if he was keeping it, that's where it'd go back when Jemmy was just a baby. They weren't, his angel informed him with a typically adorable Aziraphale blush, explaining his "scandalous art" to their daughter.

He resisted the urge to swear again. Never mind holy water -- his angel was going to kill him slowly with that ice-cold shoulder when he found out about this.

Time for a well-played bit of misdirection. *Sorry, angel.*

To his daughter, he offered what he hoped was a blandly curious expression and a studiously nonchalant, "Why would you ask that, poppet?"

Please, if anyone other than Aziraphale is listening, get me out of this mess!

"That one's got gold in his wings, like fafa." Jemmy's tone was slow and slightly irritated, as if she was the adult and he a particularly dimwitted child. "And that one's got red in them, like you wears, sometimes."

Crowley could only stare at her as relief plunged through him. Could he be so lucky? Could her curiosity be so easily handled? He opened his mouth to offer her a suitably G-rated explanation, only for her to sigh, a small, annoyed scowl settling over her features and her green eyes shimmering with angry tears as she straightened her back and a small pair of lavender-grey wings spread out from the root bones on either side of her spine. She fluttered them in aggravation, glaring over her shoulder. "All I got's are these. They're small. And *boring*."

"Oi." The protest shot from him before he could even stop to think whether it was an appropriate response. He didn't care about that. All he cared about was his daughter's image of herself, and they were *so* not having this attitude.

He crouched on the floor in front of her, making sure they were eye-to-eye, so she could see how serious he was. He wasn't worried about frightening her. From the very first time he held her in his arms, she'd never been frightened of his eyes.

He wasn't sure exactly what to say. There weren't any precedents or instructions for dealing with the insecurities of a child born of starlight and bits of two souls that loved each other so much, they created one perfect little being. There'd never been any baby angels *or* demons, before -- not unless one counted the Antichrist, and he wasn't sure he could -- so no one knew *what* to expect from Jemmy.

What Crowley knew, with every fiber of his being, was Jemima was going to grow up to be every bit as beautiful as his angel, and every bit as mischievous as himself, and he was sure both Heaven and Hell should have trembled in fear the day she was born, because of the traits he and Aziraphale shared -- those being stubbornness, a tendency toward the dramatic, and an unwavering commitment to protecting what and whom they loved -- Jemmy not only got *all* of them, but she got them in spades.

"You listen to me, poppet, and you listen good," he hissed, his voice harsh with sincerity as he let her see every bit of his love and certainty in his gaze. "Your wings are beautiful. And they'll grow, my beautiful little starling, as you do. Someday, you'll wake up and you'll have wings just as beautiful as fafa's."

"And yours?" Her voice was small as she reached out and touched his cheek, her delicate little fingers skimming over the serpent brand on his jaw.

Crowley's throat closed, and he found himself at loss for words. How did he convince this beautiful child -- as full of love and grace as his beloved angel -- that she was beautiful as she was, when he looked upon his own wings -- scorched and tattered by his Fall -- and only saw pain. He hadn't even been able to look at them since the battle in Heaven. He was afraid of what his actions there had done to them.

"Better than mine, poppet. I promise."

"But they're pretty, aren't they? How come I never seed them?" Her voice was full of worry and confusion, before she touched her fingers to the fine lines by the corners of his eyes. "Your eyes are pretty, lee-lee. Fafa says so. He says that's why the walls are yellow."

Crowley stayed where he was, frozen beneath the touch of his precious child, unsure if he could breathe, let alone respond. The walls were yellow because...? How had he not realized the truth, in almost two and half centuries? From the very beginning of this place, Aziraphale had filled it with everything he loved. His books, his momentos... And apparently he'd surrounded all of it in the exact shade of *his* eyes. This entire bloody building might as well be the universe's biggest love letter.

Wait. That meant...

That time when Aziraphale drove the Bentley to Edinburgh... *Fuck me*. "Pretty?"

"They are. Very pretty." The hushed voice, from the bedroom doorway, reached Crowley's ears the exact moment his heart lurched back to full and vibrant life. Crowley rocked forward onto his knees, unable to remain crouched on shaking legs, even as he turned to find Aziraphale paused in the bedroom doorway, smiling at him and their daughter with so much love, the light of it was blinding. "I think you're both very beautiful. I also think," he continued, his smile morphing into a mock frown, "that certain little winged creatures should already be in bed."

"Fafa!" Jemmy squealed in delight, scrambling off the end of the bed to run to Aziraphale, who scooped her up in a hug, before setting her back on her feet, where she spun in an excited circle. "Look at how lee-lee braided my hair!"

"It's very lovely, my darling," he praised, then pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. "Now, why don't you go pick out a story, and I'll be there to read it to you in just a moment?"

With the promise of a story, Jemmy was off faster than a flash of lightning, her little feet making more noise than a storm rolling in. Crowley shifted so he could lean his back against the side of the bed, not bothering to get off the floor just yet, as relieved laughter spilled from him. "How something as light as she is makes *that* much noise..."

Aziraphale's smile widened as he crossed the room to sit on the bed beside where Crowley reclined, his fingers threading through the strands of the demon's hair. Crowley sighed, shifting himself so his head leaned against the side of his angel's knee.

"You really painted the walls to match my eyes?"

"Of course. I thought you figured it out ages ago."

Crowley shook his head carefully, not wanting to lose the feel of his angel's hand stroking through his hair. "*Why* did you do it?"

"I missed you," Aziraphale's murmur wrapped around Crowley's heart, settling that anxious part of him that always worried this might be the time his angel didn't come home. "I always miss you so when we're not together, Crowley."

"Missed you, too, angel," he mumbled back, soothed by both his angel's words and the stroke of those fingers through his hair. They'd spent so many millennia starved for each other's touch that every single touch over the last eight years felt sacred. "Do you have to go back, tonight?"

"No, my love." Aziraphale released a small breath that sounded as relieved as Crowley felt to hear it. "I do believe it may no longer necessary for me to return there at all, unless an emergency arises."

"Good. Because this being apart shit is getting harder by the day."

"On that," the angel's voice took on a note of weary humor, "I whole-heartedly agree."

"Too soon, angel," Crowley groaned, rolling his head back on his neck to look up at his angel. "Now, would you just kiss me, already?"

Aziraphale giggled -- he bloody well *giggled* -- as he leaned down to seal their mouths together in a kiss that always felt like coming home. Want and lust and love tangled together in Crowley's chest, but before he could act on any of it, his angel was pulling away with a fond, "I'm going to go read Jem her story. Perhaps, afterward, you'd like to join me for a drink?"

Not his preferred vice at the moment, but Crowley decided he could work with that. A little wine had a tendency to make Aziraphale more handsy than normal. In the past eight years, with no more need to hide or pretend there was nothing between them, "more handsy" became something altogether more salacious.

Crowley's smile turned devilish as he watched his gorgeous, angelic husband leave the room to go read to their daughter.

Oh, yeah. He could *definitely* work with his angel after a glass or two of wine.

Part V: Emissaries of Light

A.Z. Fell and Co. Bookshop, Soho, London -- 7 Years After Restructure

"Oh, dear. How did I not account for that?"

Aziraphale was muttering to himself, a worried frown on his face as he sorted through several sheets of paper.

"Something I can help you with, angel?" Crowley glanced up from where he was watching Jemmy studiously writing her alphabet, her tongue poked into one cheek.

After long discussion and one spectacularly disastrous event when they enrolled Jemmy in nursery school, it was decided -- and strongly hinted at by the human administrator at the local school -- that it was probably best in the long-run to tutor Jemmy at home. Neither he nor Aziraphale had a problem with this -- after all, they'd had plenty of experience in it when they'd tutored Warlock Dowling, back in the day -- and it wasn't as though Jemmy felt isolated. She already seemed, for the most part, to feel more comfortable around adult humans than she did around most children -- with the exception of the children belonging to two of Mrs. Sandwich's girls and the young son of one of the waitresses at *Marguerite's*, Jemmy seemed wary around other children. They even quit taking her to children's parks when it became clear she had no interest in being there.

Aziraphale had been particularly relieved when they decided to tutor their daughter themselves. Crowley knew his angel worried other children might treat Jemmy poorly because of them, after the incident at the nursery school. Crowley was frankly more concerned for the safety of any other human -- child or adult -- who decided to say something she didn't like about either himself or his angel. After all, it had been one nasty little brat's comments about Aziraphale that brought out her demonic fury and frightened an entire nursery school class.

Crowley was far from surprised when it happened. Jemmy had as much hellfire in her as she did sweet little angel, and she wasn't ever quiet about making sure those she cared about were treated fairly. Without either himself or Aziraphale there to curb her responses, the chances of Jemmy ending up causing havoc were considerable.

"No, no," Aziraphale answered him distractedly, then sighed heavily. "I just have angels who will be showing up here within the week, and nowhere to put them."

Crowley's attention, in the process of drifting back to what Jemmy was doing, snapped Aziraphale's way.

"Wot the..." He glanced Jemmy's way, then modified, "What are you talking about, angel?"

"Nothing, love." Aziraphale waved the subject off, like he thought that would be the end of it.

Not a chance in bloody fucking Heaven, angel.

Snapping his fingers to lock the shop door as he rose from the settee, Crowley smiled down at Jemmy for a moment. "Just sit here and work on your letters, okay, poppet? Fafa and I will be back in a moment."

She nodded, though her brow creased in concern as her gaze went back and forth between them. Crowley didn't move an inch until he was sure her attention was back on her letters. Then, crossing the short space between the settee and his husband's desk, he set his hand very deliberately on top of what Aziraphale was doing as he hissed, "A word with you, O Supreme Archangel."

Aziraphale flinched at the title, then sighed. "Crowley..."

"In *private*, Aziraphale."

The angel's gaze went to Jemmy, and his lips pressed in a tight line as he nodded. Crowley headed for the back room, confident Aziraphale was only steps behind him, even without the sense of one another they shared. He waited for his angel to clear the door, then closed it until it was only open a sliver, just in case Jemmy needed them. Then, hand still on the old-fashioned doorknob, he turned to glare at his angel.

"I love you like crazy, angel, but I swear to Satan, if you don't start talking..."

Aziraphale sighed. "I'm sorry, love. I thought I had everything in place, but completely forgot they're going to need someplace to work out of."

Crowley felt the rising crackle of lightning in his blood, and suppressed it, silently counting backward from ten until he felt in better control of his anger. Maybe there was a very simple explanation here he was missing. Aziraphale tended to get a little lost in his own head and not properly explain himself without prompting. "Who is? Muriel?"

"No. I told you about the Emissary program we've been putting together. Every seven months, two angels are chosen to come to Earth as Emissaries, to live and work among the humans for seven months. The idea is--"

"I don't care *what* the idea is, angel," Crowley hissed, letting go of the doorknob and taking a step closer to the angel. "The answer is no."

"Crowley, be reasonable. They're not going to be here in the bookshop. And this is really best--"

"The *only* thing I care about what is best for is this family. Us. Our daughter. How long do you think it'll take before Hell takes an interest in what's going on around here, if you've got random angels popping in and out like demented..." He waved a hand through the air, trying to think of a comparable analogy. "Flying monkeys."

"Monkeys?" Aziraphale's expression twisted in distaste. "Really, Anthony..."

"You know what I mean. How long before they start taking an interest in Jemima? Did you stop to think about *that*, Archangel *Raphael*?"

"Yes." Aziraphale's quiet response froze Crowley in place, his fury leached away by the gentle understanding, mixed with utter conviction, on his angel's face. "Don't think for even one second of any day that your safety, and Jemima's, aren't my very first thought, Crowley. Both of you are my *primary* concern, always. I would dismantle Heaven with my own hands if it came to a choice between the two of you and them. You already know that. And I have no plans to have these angels any closer to our home and the two of you than absolutely necessary, for only as long as is absolutely necessary to get this oversight corrected."

"Fine," Crowley hissed, still not liking anything about this situation. "But fix it *fast*, angel. Because the first time their presence brings Hell sniffing around, I'm loading their angelic arses in the Bentley and driving them to France. And I won't be bringing them back!"

"Lee-lee? Fafa?" Jemima's sweet voice pulled Crowley's attention to the door, where two big green eyes in a worried little face stared up at them as if her heart was breaking.

"Jemmy..."

"Shh, it's all right, my darling," Aziraphale was already soothing their daughter as he moved to crouch beside her, smiling gently. "It's just grownup stuff. But everything is all right, now."

That remained to be seen. However, as Jemima's gaze sought him out, looking for confirmation of Aziraphale's words even as she leaned into the angel's comforting embrace, Crowley lost the thread of his anger. Not that he stood chance of holding onto

it, anyway. He'd never been able to stay mad at Aziraphale for long, and his soul recoiled from even the *thought* of hurting their daughter as if from holy water.

"Yeah, it's okay, poppet," he reassured her. "Now, what are you doing lurking around, when you're supposed to be focused on your letters?"

"There's a man outside. I seed him and came to tell you."

"You mean you *saw* him," Aziraphale corrected gently, even as his gaze lifted to meet Crowley's, and the demon saw the concern in his angel's cerulean eyes.

"I'm on it." Crowley edged past them and strode through the shop, counting the whole way as he flexed his hands and tried to dissipate the remaining static charge coursing through him. After all, he couldn't just fry some random bloke who happened up to the door.

A sardonic smirk slid over his face as he caught sight of who was actually standing at the door. Nothing random about this one.

Snapping his fingers to unlock the door before he got to the main shop floor, he stopped at the counter, leaning one hip against it as their visitor opened the door and peeked his dark, dreadlocked head inside, iridescent granny-style shades tipped to the end of his nose. "This a bad time?"

"Would you go away if I said it was?"

"Considering I was invited, that would be a no. Is Raph... Aziraphale around?"

"If I said he wasn't?"

"He'd know you were lying," Aziraphale answered from behind him, his voice full of fond, chiding humor. "Come in, Lord. Ignore my husband. He's a little out of sorts with me, right now."

"Wouldn't have anything to do with the small oversight we seem to have made in our plans for the Emissaries, would it?" Jesus's gaze went to Aziraphale, before coming back to Crowley, his expression apologetic.

"Something like that," Crowley muttered, even as he felt Jemmy's small body lean against the outside of his thigh, pulling his attention down to her. Hers, however, was fixed on Jesus, that familiar, curious tilt to her head. Crowley resisted the urge to grin. *Here we go...*

"Do you work with my fafa?"

Jesus looked absolutely baffled by this. Amusement washed through Crowley to see the panic of not knowing how to answer, or what a "fafa" was, on the Son of God's face. Normally, he'd let the bastard stew with it for a bit, but he and Aziraphale always made a point to answer as many of Jemmy's questions as they could. Crowley knew first-hand how it felt to live with unanswered questions. "Yes, poppet, he works with fafa."

She processed this with that clever little brain of hers -- he was utterly convinced she got that cleverness from Aziraphale -- a small frown furrowing her brow. "You're a funny looking angel."

Crowley barely choked back a surprised laugh, even as he heard Aziraphale smothering a chuckle. Of all the things for their daughter to say... *Oh, poppet, we didn't get it half right when we named you, did we?*

Crouching down beside his straight-faced daughter, he pulled her into a half-embrace. "That's because he's not an angel, poppet."

He watched her mull this new bit of information over for a moment, before she came to some utterly random conclusion of her own, and her green eyes brightened with excitement as her attention whipped his way. "Are there demons in Heaven, lee-lee?"

This question didn't surprise Crowley in the least, but Jesus looked startled, and he could hear Aziraphale's muttered "oh, dear" from behind them. "No, poppet."

"But *I* came from Heaven. You said so."

"That you did, sweetheart," Aziraphale's voice was closer, now, and Crowley could feel the warmth of his angel's hand as it fell on his shoulder.

"And I'm half-demon."

A grin tugged at Crowley's lips. "Without a doubt."

Jemima's green gaze fixed on him, and the stubborn set of her little chin told him they were in for a marathon historical *you said...* argument, courtesy of their six-year-old offspring, who absorbed everything she was ever told or overheard like a pint-sized celestial sponge. "And *you* went to Heaven before I was borned. You said so."

Crowley's gaze flicked briefly to their visitor, wondering just how much of the events surrounding the Restructure he'd been working on Jesus had been made aware of. The dark man's expression was one of fascinated amusement.

"I did go," Crowley answered his daughter, careful to match her grave tone despite the humor of the current situation. "Couple of times."

"And you're a demon."

"Former," Aziraphale supplied. Crowley shot him a wink. They both knew that, despite Crowley's own comments to the contrary, there was no such thing as "former" when it came to demons. He just wasn't affiliated with Hell, anymore.

Fortunately, the correction sailed right over Jemmy's head. She was nodding like she had all of life and this whole supernatural thing all figured out, at the tender age of six. "So there *are* demons in Heaven."

Aziraphale's chuckle held the same humor and enchantment *he* always felt around their daughter, too, before the angel murmured, "My darling, I can assure you, your lee-lee is one of a kind."

Her gaze shifted to the angel, frowning in consideration, before it went to Jesus, as if his was the deciding argument here. "So, are you? A demon?"

"No, little one," Jesus answered with an affable grin.

"What *are* you, then?"

"Well, I'm a bit like you. I'm the son of God. But I also had a mortal mother. So I'm half of Heaven, and half of Earth."

Jemmy's eyes brightened. "Do you have wings, too? I gots wings, but they're not very big, yet. Lee-lee tolded me they're pretty, though, and they'll be big someday."

"I'm sure they're very pretty." Jesus's smile gentled. "And I'm afraid I don't have wings, little one."

"Do you gots a halo, like fafa? He says it's only for really important things, so he can't show me. Is yours for special, too?"

"All right, I think that's enough questions for right now." Crowley finally took pity on his old friend with a chuckle. "I think Jesus has important things to talk about with fafa, poppet. And *you* have half an alphabet to finish."

"But--"

"Letters. Now." He locked his gaze with hers, making sure she could see how serious he was.

With a little, huffed breath of annoyance that she *absolutely* picked up from Aziraphale, Jemmy stomped back toward the settee. Crowley watched her go, then met his angel's gaze with a shake of his head and click of his tongue. *Oh, angel. You will definitely be apologizing for this, later.*

"She's a trip." Jesus's amused comment drew his attention back around, even as he felt Aziraphale's hand tighten on his shoulder. With them in physical contact, Crowley couldn't be sure if the flare of protective emotion was more him or his angel. Didn't really matter.

"She's our *daughter*," Aziraphale responded in a fiercely quiet voice, before Crowley sensed him pulling himself together and his hand left Crowley's shoulder, allowing the demon to regain his feet. "Shall we talk in back, Lord? I'll gather my notes and join you in a moment."

Though he knew it wasn't necessary, Crowley leaned in to hiss, "Remember what I said, angel. Fix this, fast, or *I* will."

With a brush of his lips against his angel's cheek, he went to make sure Jemmy was back at her lessons. He trusted Aziraphale to do what needed done. They both had far too much to lose.

That Night

Crowley leaned his head against Aziraphale's bicep and shoulder, wine glass dangling loosely in the hand hanging from the back of the settee, and closed his eyes, laughing quietly. "Never expected to hear *that* out of Jemmy, today. Thought for a second I was back at Job's."

Aziraphale hummed his agreement as he sipped his wine, the hand attached to the arm Crowley was currently leaning against absently stroking Crowley's chest. "Perhaps I should take her up to see Heaven for herself. Might put an end to some of her questions, at least."

"And start a whole new lot," Crowley muttered, refusing to rise to the bait in those words. Especially when he knew his angel didn't really mean them.

"True." Aziraphale sighed, and Crowley heard the muted clink of his wine glass being set aside, before the angel nuzzled his face against the side of Crowley's head. "I owe you an apology, my love."

A smirk tugged up one side of the demon's mouth as he felt the light nip of his angel's teeth against the side of his neck. Draining the remaining wine in his own glass, he switched it between hands and set the empty glass on the floor before lifting his hand to capture his angel's wandering one on his chest. Bringing the captive hand to his lips, he nipped the fleshy pad of Aziraphale's palm and muttered, "Which particular transgression are you apologizing for this time, angel?"

He heard the catch of Aziraphale's breath and felt the shiver go through his angel, before he managed a flustered, "Um... the... the Emissary thing. And Jesus. And... well, *all* of it."

Crowley tongued the indentation at the base of his angel's palm, knowing how much a little pressure right there turned Aziraphale on. After eight years of learning the angel's corporeal form inch-by-glorious-inch, he knew all the best ways to torture his husband with pleasure. Watching Aziraphale lose that innocent air of propriety he somehow managed to hold onto despite everything they'd done over the years was Crowley's favorite turn-on. This little game they played, where Aziraphale tried to deny himself pleasure, let Crowley tempt his angel to give in, over and over.

"I knew you'd fix it. That's not what you *should* be apologizing for," he whispered the words against the strip of exposed skin around the angel's wrist, flicking his tongue just beneath the starched shirt cuff, following the warm pulse point, where his angel's blood was flowing a little warmer, already.

"Wh... Whatever d-do you mean, my love?" The angel's voice already wavered with a familiar weakness, laced with carnal want he always made a game of denying himself.

A little demonic glee slipped into Crowley's laugh as he shifted and rose off the settee, turning to trap his soft, beautiful angel against the settee cushions as he leaned in until their foreheads pressed together, and he breathed the same sweet, alcohol-laden air as Aziraphale.

"I mean," he muttered, punctuating his words with sweet passes of his lips against Aziraphale's, teasing them both with each brushing kiss, "I can't say no to you when you look at me with that distressed little pout, and someone else has caught on. Now, apologize for being so adorable I can't resist you, angel."

His angel was practically melting into the settee, now, those cerulean eyes full of adoration and desire, even as he whispered a shaky, "I... I'm... I'm sorry?"

"Oh, angel, I'm afraid I'm going to need more than that." He gave up the game, seaming their mouths together hungrily. There wasn't anything about this angel he didn't love without hesitation. Every cuddly, stubborn, beautiful part of him. He only had to look into Aziraphale's eyes to know his love was reciprocated a hundred times over.

Truly being an "us" was every bit as thrilling -- and terrifyingly beautiful -- as he'd once imagined it might be.

The Next Morning

Jemima had been hyper since she woke up, this morning. Currently, she was bouncing on her knees on the settee, chattering a million miles a minute, while she "braided" Crowley's shoulder-length hair. The demon lounged on the floor beside the settee, trying to answer as many of Jem's rapid-fire questions as he could while patiently allowing her to make a complete wreck of his hair.

Aziraphale smothered an adoring smile, while doing his best to work an important, adult conversation in edgewise around their offspring's endless curiosity.

"The Lord and I worked out a plan I believe you'll be content with," he informed Crowley, rising from his seat to hand his husband the draft of the Emissarial rules he and Jesus spent most of the previous day fine-tuning. He hadn't wanted to discuss them with Crowley last night, wanting to just have a peaceful evening with his demon after their daughter was in bed.

He fought down the flush threatening to steal over his face as Crowley took the thin sheaf of papers and met his gaze with a wicked smirk as the demon's fingers brushed over his wedding band. The things Crowley had whispered to him, last night...

"That man yesterday..."

Jemima's words dragged his attention back to their little girl, even as Crowley supplied, "His name is Jesus, poppet."

"Is he really God's son?"

"Unfortunately. But we won't hold it against him."

Aziraphale shot Crowley a warning glance, but the demon's sarcasm appeared -- like normal -- to have flown completely over Jem's head. Either that, or she was just too

focused on whatever questions were floating around in her head, waiting to escape. "Is there an unJesus?"

Aziraphale shared a baffled look with his husband, who shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Sometimes, their daughter's questions made sense only to her.

"An unJesus?" Aziraphale asked, unsure he really wanted to know. If Jem was about to inadvertently blaspheme, he was *absolutely* blaming Crowley's influence for it. The Almighty would understand if it was a demonic influence. "What do you mean, precious?"

Jem cocked her head to the side like she always did when considering a curiosity, her little brow furrowed and her lips screwed up in thought, before she patted Crowley's head, causing him to tip his head back to look up at her. "Who did you used to work for, lee-lee? Before I was borned?"

Crowley flinched and closed his eyes. "No one you need to concern yourself with, poppet."

"No. Who bosses demons? Like God bosses fafa?"

That startled a devilish laugh from Crowley. "Oh, poppet..."

"Crowley, behave yourself," Aziraphale warned. "We both know what she means."

Crowley was still chuckling as his goldenrod gaze came back to Aziraphale. "We do, angel. But you gotta admit, she has a way with words."

"*Lee-lee*," Jem protested, her tone exasperated, as she crossed her arms and pouted at Crowley. "Who bosses demons?"

Aziraphale sighed to himself. They weren't going to get around this one. "Satan does, sweetheart."

She gave a perfunctory nod. "Is there an unJesus, fafa?"

"Ah." He met Crowley's gaze as what she was asking finally made sense, silently asking if the demon wanted to be the one to educate their offspring on this subject.

"Oh, no, angel. You've got this one." Crowley grinned at him, a demonic twinkle in his yellow eyes.

Aziraphale sighed. "Very well. The word you're looking for, Jemima, is 'Antichrist'. And, yes, there is one. His name is Adam."

"Is he nice?"

Not certain how to describe Adam Young and not wanting to get into the events of the last time either of them had seen the boy -- who must be all of twenty-three or -four, by now -- Aziraphale settled for a non-committal, "Nice enough, I suppose."

Jemima went back to silently working on Crowley's hair, her expression one that clearly said she was mulling over everything in her head. Aziraphale took the opportunity of her momentary silence to inform Crowley, "The first Emissaries will be arriving day after tomorrow. They'll be housed in Maggie's old shop, for now. They'll work out of there for two months under the guise of a travel agency, while they get a bit used to how things are done here, then they have to move elsewhere for the duration of their time on Earth."

"Am I going to meet more angels? Like Muriel?" Jemima patted the mess of interwoven locks on Crowley's head and looked up curiously.

"Not if I can help it," Crowley muttered, flipping slowly through the pages. Aziraphale favored him with a loving, exasperated look. He understood Crowley's hesitation to let any supernatural entities they didn't know and trust around their daughter. The old Heaven, under the Metatron's iron fist and self-important bigotry, had mistreated Crowley terribly. For that, Aziraphale would've gladly destroyed them all himself, if Crowley hadn't beat him to it.

Since then, Aziraphale had worked very hard to make Heaven something better, and more tolerant. Someplace worthy of Crowley. Perhaps, one day, even worthy of the demon's forgiveness. But his demonic love was stubborn, and still a little paranoid about what he believed Heaven represented. Aziraphale knew memories of the only Heaven Crowley knew still lingered -- he'd held his husband through more than one middle-of-the-night panic attack when memories of his Fall haunted Crowley. The idea of exposing Jemima to any place capable of such cruelty terrified the demon beyond all reason. After many hours of listening to Crowley describe in detail both his Fall and what *really* happened when they had swapped faces to fool Heaven and Hell after Armageddon, Aziraphale never brought up the subject of Crowley even visiting Heaven again, and tried to avoid the subject of taking Jemima up, even just to see the starlight chamber where she was born and had so many questions about.

"Do I gets to meet demons, then?"

Aziraphale winced. Jemima was far too excited by *that* prospect for his liking, and... Crowley's silence pulled his attention that way, even as he sensed the immediate rise of his demon's panic. Concern pelted through him at the ashen horror on his husband's face. If Heaven had been cruel to Crowley, then Hell had been a pressure cooker of never-ending trauma his poor love had tried so hard to bury.

"No," Crowley rasped, the yellow color taking over his eyes entirely and his hands shaking around the papers he held. Aziraphale watched his throat move and his jaw clench, unable to help unless Crowley asked for it. Crowley insisted on this arrangement, and no matter how much Aziraphale hated it, he respected Crowley's right to have it. Now, those frightened yellow eyes met his, full of a plea for help even as the demon managed a strangled, "Angel..."

Aziraphale was on his knees at Crowley's side in a flash, one hand falling on his demon's shoulder, grounding him in the moment, even as he stretched the other out to take a suddenly confused and worried looking Jem's hand. "Precious, you need to be very careful about demons, all right? Remember when lee-lee brought you back here from Nina and Maggie's, that time, and you were scared and didn't want him to go back outside?"

Jem nodded, her green eyes shimmering with tears Aziraphale immediately hated the sight of, just as he had the day Crowley caught Dagon lurking outside the bookshop. "Most demons aren't like lee-lee. And if they get near you, they might hurt you, or take you places you won't like being."

"Like Hell?"

"Yes, sweetheart, like Hell. It's not a nice place to be."

Jemima's gaze went right to Crowley, before she slid from the settee on his other side and wrapped her arms around his neck, crawling into his lap with a quiet, "I'm sorry, lee-lee! Don't worry, I won't let them take me to Hell. I won't let them take you, neither."

Crowley's rasping laugh told Aziraphale the demon would be okay, even before he felt Crowley relax beneath his grip. His demon was still reeling, emotionally, but he was at least present in the moment, now. Crowley dropped the pages he held, wrapping one arm securely around their daughter, while reaching to grasp Aziraphale's wrist gratefully with the other.

"I would tear it down in an instant to get you back." He heard Crowley's rasping mutter against the side of Jem's head, before the demon's gaze locked with his. "I would destroy existence itself to get to you."

Shifting, Aziraphale wrapped his arms around Crowley and their daughter, resting his forehead against the side of his husband's head. With a delicate kiss to the brand on Crowley's jaw, he let a little tension-breaking humor enter his voice as he whispered for his demon's ears alone, "You might rethink that once you see what she's done to your hair, love."

Part VI: A Gift of Stars

A.Z. Fell and Co. Bookshop, Soho, London -- 4 Days Before Christmas

The cheerful strains of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* provided subtle atmosphere in the bookshop. Aziraphale hummed along as he finished wrapping tinsel and lights around the banister while he waited for Crowley and Jem to return. They always decorated the tree together -- it was Jem's favorite part of the holiday. Every year, she found new questions to ask about every one of the ornaments they hung on the tree.

He turned as the bell above the door chimed, just before Jem skipped into the shop, squealing when she saw the tree he'd miracled into place while she and Crowley were out delivering invitations. She ran to him, chattering away like always. "Fafa! Guess what? Justine gived us boots in oil and maybe lines!"

"Satan save me," Crowley muttered good-naturedly, as he off-loaded an armload of what looked like pastry boxes from *Marguerite's* French Bistro onto the counter, before removing his shades and shooting Aziraphale a wry smirk and a roll of his eyes. "Justine sent over a *Bûche de Noël* and madeleines for the party. And *your* daughter slaughters French even worse than you, angel."

Aziraphale narrowed his eyes at Crowley in mock disdain. "I haven't a clue what you're implying. My French is flawless."

"Maybe, but it's painful to watch, angel," Crowley teased with a small grin.

"I'm not going to dignify that with a reply. Perhaps I should start giving Jem French lessons."

Crowley groaned as he leaned back against the counter and tipped his head back before quipping, "If I have to spend *another* two centuries listening to the pair of you wittering on about aunts and gardeners you don't have..."

"Maggie says I can call her and Nina my aunties," Jem argued less than helpfully, her expression both serious and concerned as she looked up at Crowley, gripping his hand in both of hers. Aziraphale sensed her worry, even though he knew Crowley was just being Crowley, and was plenty happy to grouse about a holiday -- and a situation -- he found highly amusing.

Aziraphale met his husband's gaze and *tsked* lightly, shaking his head, before glancing down at their daughter with a patient smile. "You know to ignore lee-lee, precious. He does this every year. He enjoys acting like--"

"A Grinch!" The grin splitting Jemima's face just then was an exact copy of Crowley's wicked grin -- Heaven help them all -- as she named the character from her favorite holiday stories. The angel wasn't quite sure if Jem liked that the story had a happy ending, or that the Grinch was so terrible to begin with.

Either was a possibility. Which was, incidentally, why he was in absolutely no hurry to introduce her to the likes of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and Ebenezer Scrooge. He preferred to think she'd connect emotionally to Tiny Tim, but as she liked to remind them on the regular, she *was* half-demon.

Aziraphale sighed to himself in fond exasperation, then laughed at the mischievous grin creeping across Crowley's face just before he made the most ridiculously silly monster noise and swept Jem off the floor, tickling her sides while she squealed with laughter.

"Well, sounds like someone's having fun in here."

Aziraphale blinked as a new, but familiar, voice broke through the loving bubble of happiness he always experienced whenever Crowley let himself be a little silly and enjoy life. Still smiling, he shifted his gaze toward the doorway, where Nina stood paused, her arms crossed over her middle. She always looked a bit wary whenever she entered the bookshop, and guilt tugged at Aziraphale, knowing he was at fault for that. After all, he'd been the one to manipulate a situation he really shouldn't have, even if his heart was in the right place at the time. He'd already apologized to everyone involved -- and even more so to Nina and Maggie -- for that ill-conceived attempt at matchmaking.

"Nina. What a lovely surprise! Do come in."

She rubbed her arms nervously, which is when he noticed the envelope in her hand. "Can't stay long. Mags is watching the shop. I just came over to--"

"Fafa!" Jem's squeal interrupted what Nina was saying as the starling wriggled free of Crowley's grasp and pelted for Aziraphale, looking up at him with childish glee as she half-hid behind him. "Save me, 'fore the Grinch gets me!"

Nina smirked at Crowley. "Guess that'd be you, then. Fits with the eyes, I suppose. Here," she held out the envelope in her hand. "This came to us by mistake. Looks like it belongs over here."

With that, and a small wave, Nina left the shop, pulling the door shut behind her. Aziraphale laughed tenderly as he looked from the curious expression on Crowley's face to their daughter where she was half-hidden behind him. "I think it's safe to come out now, Jem."

Jem was instantly out from behind him, skipping back over to Crowley as the demon opened the envelope Nina gave him. "What's that?"

"A letter, poppet." Crowley tugged lightly on her ponytail with a smile that always melted Aziraphale's heart to see. From the moment Jemima came into their lives, no one could possibly love her more than Crowley did. Anyone who might ever have a doubt Crowley was meant to be a parent only needed to watch him with Jem. There'd be no more doubt, after.

Curious as always, Jem ducked her head and contorted herself enough to look at the outside of the envelope after Crowley removed the single sheet of paper inside. Aziraphale watched her mouth move as she silently sounded out the letters, her brow furrowing in confusion. "Lee-lee, what's a d-r-s?"

"It's how people shorten the word 'doctors', nosey," Crowley replied, bopping her lightly on the nose with the envelope, an easy smile on his face. How Aziraphale loved that smile!

Jemima giggled. "That's silly! Why's it have our name on it?"

Now curious himself, Aziraphale crossed the room to join Crowley. "Doctors? That won't be the British Legion. I already sent them a large donation."

Crowley smirked at him, but the demon's gaze was affectionate as, in a wry undertone, he replied, "Of course you have."

Aziraphale knew they were both thinking of that Christmas he served in the trench Casualty Station in 1914. He'd already been there for months when Crowley finally tracked him down, and even everything he could do without drawing Heaven's attention to where he was hadn't been enough to stem the tide of death. Aziraphale's gaze went to the boxes of decorations, waiting to be put on the tree. In there, somewhere, was a small, crude ship made out of an unused round of ammunition -- a gift made during the Christmas Truce and given to him bare days later, from the shaking, bloody hands of a young stretcher-bearer who'd been little more than a boy, and far too young to die.

Grief tugged at him along with the memory. He'd fought so hard to save that young man, and in the end...

"You did what you could, angel," Crowley's voice murmured against his ear, even as the demon's arm came around him, tugging him close. "You did more than any human could have possibly done."

Aziraphale blinked his way free of the memories of that dreadful war, and glanced around. "Where's Jemima gone?"

"Angel, you--"

"We're supposed to decorate the tree."

"Aziraphale." Crowley's voice was still caring, but threaded with the tone he always got when he was looking for Aziraphale's undivided attention.

The angel sighed heavily, turning toward his husband. "Yes?"

Crowley released his hold, lifting his hand to brush at tears on Aziraphale's face he hadn't even realized were there. "You need a moment, angel. Jemmy's over there," he nodded toward Aziraphale's desk, "finishing the maths assignment she begged her way out of, earlier."

Tenderness tugged at Aziraphale's heart as he turned to see Jem with her head bent over her assignment, looking for all the world as if she'd been sentenced to hard time. He smiled, giving his head a tiny shake. "Poor lamb. I suppose she got her distaste for maths from the both of us."

"Thank Whoever I have to for that. I'm really fucking glad we won't have a repeat of the nightmare we had with Warlock." The backs of his fingers brushed Aziraphale's cheek again, and the angel let his eyes fall closed with a tiny, blissful sigh. He so loved Crowley's touch. Then the demon's voice whispered over him again, "You gonna be okay, angel?"

He wanted to lie and say no, just so Crowley would keep stroking his face. Instead, he gave a little nod and opened his eyes, only to find himself staring into a goldenrod-yellow gaze as beloved as it was familiar.

"Pity," the demon hissed under his breath, his attention dropping to Aziraphale's lips.

Aziraphale wasn't in the mood for their normal back-and-forth. Right now, he was emotionally raw, and absolutely *famished* for the intimate connection of his husband's kiss. Reaching out, he twisted his hand in Crowley's loose tie and pulled him in for a proper, deep kiss.

When they finally broke apart, Crowley looked a little dazed, and the hellfire in his eyes telegraphed loud and clear what he'd be doing right now, if they were alone, and not standing in the middle of the bookshop with their highly-inquisitive six-year-old just a handful of steps away.

"I'm going to be just fine," Aziraphale murmured back, aware of the smug, triumphant expression spreading over his own face. "And you know damned well you don't need an excuse to kiss me."

"Clearly." Crowley still looked like he was one bad decision away from just pouncing. Then, after a long, hungry stare, he shook his head, blinked, and the familiar, wry smirk returned to his face. "Right. Not the time or place, angel."

Aziraphale just smiled and shrugged. "Felt like it, to me. Now, who's the letter from?"

Crowley lifted his hand and stared at the letter he'd managed to hang onto in clear surprise, before he scrubbed a hand over the center of his chest and muttered, "Right. Letter. It's addressed 'To the descendants of Drs. Crowley and McFell'."

Aziraphale's eyes widened. "You don't suppose..."

"Given the letter mentions 'McKinnon Family Farm and Inn,'" Crowley held the invitation out to him. "I think we can safely assume it has something to do with our wee graver robber."

Delight flowed through Aziraphale, and he reached to take the letter from Crowley. "Oh, I'm so glad to hear young Elspeth did as she promised!"

His gaze darted over the few brief lines of printed text, inviting them to visit -- that "rooms would be made up" for them to visit, shortly after the New Year. He glanced up at Crowley, a thread of unease working through him.

"They don't say *why* they want us to visit."

"So I noticed." Crowley's smile might fool someone who didn't know him well enough into thinking he was unbothered, but Aziraphale knew better. There was subtle tension in the demon's jaw and around his eyes, which were more yellow than usual -- a sure sign he was under stress.

"You think it's a trap, don't you?"

Crowley's arm slid around him again, as the demon pressed a kiss to the side of Aziraphale's head. "I don't know *what* to think, angel."

"We should go." Aziraphale wrapped his arms around Crowley's waist, letting out a sigh as he rested his head against Crowley's shoulder and looked over to where Jemima was now clearly doodling on her maths assignment. "Jem will love the train ride, and I prefer to think that it's an honest offer, love. I hate to think of that young woman ending up in Hell."

He felt Crowley's chest rise and fall against him, before the demon muttered, "Yeah. Okay, angel. We can head to Edinburgh straight after New Years."

Aziraphale smiled, disengaging one arm to lift his hand and pat the center of his husband's chest, before easing away.

"That's settled, then. Now, we need to finish getting ready for tonight's party." He glanced toward Jem, to find her staring out the window, chin propped in her little hands and a bored, glum expression on her face. "Jem, sweetheart. Done with your assignment?"

She turned, nodding. "Maths is boring, fafa."

Aziraphale elbowed his husband at the demon's chuckle. "Well, we'll just have to find a way to make it less boring, won't we? If you're finished, why don't you come help us decorate the tree?"

Jemima was on her feet in a flash, excitement shining from her eyes as she skipped over, latching onto Crowley's hand with a pleading look. "Will you teach me how to put the star on top, this time, lee-lee?"

Crowley glanced his way with a lifted eyebrow -- one of the silent communication techniques they developed over the years, to check in with each other and make sure they were both okay with whatever needed, or was about, to happen.

Aziraphale shrugged in return. Potentially dangerous pyrotechnic events were Crowley's department. Aziraphale trusted him to do whatever was best for both their daughter and the greater London area.

"Sure, poppet. C'mere." Crowley dropped down to sit cross-legged on the floor, scooping Jem into his lap, and bent his head near hers. His long fingers shaped her small, delicate fingers into the correct alignment, her middle finger pressed against her thumb and her index finger resting in a light curve against the top, while he made sure her other two fingers were tucked carefully under. Aziraphale watched them silently, aware of the concentration needed to pull starlight. Until a few years ago, he hadn't even been aware Crowley could still do it. *Crowley* had been surprised when he'd done it. When Aziraphale

questioned the Almighty about how it was possible, She -- in Her enigmatic way -- reminded him of the other gift Crowley had been given.

A gift Aziraphale still hadn't found a way to explain to his beloved demon. Even after all this time together -- or perhaps *because* of it -- the angel knew it would absolutely gut him if Crowley rejected his gift, no matter how inadvertent it was.

"Now, move carefully, poppet." Crowley's quiet instruction to their daughter sent concerned tension stuttering through the angel. Still, he held silent. If any being in Creation was capable of teaching their little girl to create starlight, it was Crowley. He would make sure she did it properly and safely. Aziraphale trusted him to never put Jemima in danger.

"Like this, lee-lee?"

"Just like that, starling," Crowley praised quietly. "Remember, we want *just* the light. Nothing else. Move your hand like this," he demonstrated with two small, side-to-side motions, then a standard downward flourish meant to draw power from Heaven. The motion looked stiff and unnatural from Crowley. Whenever he performed this miracle, Aziraphale noticed the demon drew power from below, not above. Of course, Jem could draw from either, but neither he nor Crowley wanted anyone in Hell to notice her, so of course Crowley would teach her to draw from somewhere safe. "And then, nice and clear, you say," he whispered the command words in her ear. Spoken aloud into the room, they would finish the miracle he'd begun with his motions, and this was about Jem learning.

"You ready, poppet?"

Jem nodded, her expression excited but just a little nervous.

"That's my girl." Crowley pressed a kiss to the side of her head. "Aaannnd... go!"

Jem, brilliant little starling that she was, followed the instruction she was given flawlessly, ending with a sweetly commanded, "Let there be light!"

There was a small popping noise, and then the twinkling glow of starlight filled the room as a bright little light settled, spinning slowly, in the air just above the top of the tree.

"Well done, sweetheart!" Aziraphale praised, finally able to join them, now that his presence wouldn't be a distraction.

Jem squealed with joy and turned in Crowley's lap, flinging her small arms around his neck in a hug. "I did it, lee-lee! I maked a star!"

"You sure did, poppet." Crowley hugged her back, and Aziraphale met the yellow, reptilian gaze that sought him out. The angel smiled at the loving pride in Crowley's eyes at what Jem just accomplished. Really, Crowley never gave himself enough credit as a mentor. After all, the demon had been teaching humanity everything it needed to better itself for millennia.

"Now that we have a beautiful star for the top, I think we should decorate the rest of the tree, don't you?" Aziraphale smiled when Jem nodded excitedly and bounced up from her seated position to go to the boxes filled with decorations waiting to be hung on the tree.

"I was really expecting to have to manage that one," Crowley admitted, once their daughter was out of earshot.

"I had absolute faith," Aziraphale assured him with a smile, reaching to take Crowley's hand in his own. "She had a brilliant teacher, after all."

The demon loosed a small, self-conscious laugh. "Now we just have to keep an eye out she doesn't create a supernova in her bedroom and burn down London."

Aziraphale's worried gaze went to their offspring, where she was happily pulling out decorations from the box she knelt beside. "Oh, dear. I hadn't thought of that."

Crowley laughed, bringing Aziraphale's captive hand to his lips. "I'll have a talk with her, angel. It'll be all right."

With that, Crowley unfolded himself gracefully from the floor and drew Aziraphale to his feet as well. Fingers intertwined in a familiar motion they both took comfort and joy in, they stood there, watching their daughter as she sorted ornaments into some arrangement that no doubt meant she was preparing to ask at least a million questions about one pile or the other. Maybe even both.

Aziraphale bit back a small laugh. Hopefully, they'd actually manage to get the tree decorated before their guests arrived, this evening.

Later That Night

Crowley leaned his head and shoulder against the doorframe to Jemima's room, crossing his arms over his chest and his feet at the ankles as he drank in the sight of the

two beings who were his entire world -- his *everything* -- bathed in the muted lavender light of the room's lamps.

Aziraphale sat on the edge of the small bed, near the headboard, with Jemmy -- snuggled up in her blankets -- curled in the circle of his arms with her head resting trustingly against his chest, passed out, as the angel read her favorite Christmas story. A small, tender smirk crossed the demon's face, watching them. Something about seeing the dignified, proper Supreme Archangel of all Heaven -- who read Dante in its original Italian and turned his nose up at reading the Iliad in anything but Greek -- reading the nonsensical rhymes of Dr. Seuss just struck him as humorously implausible and utterly beautiful at the same time.

As a demon, he'd never expected to love *anything*. Demons weren't supposed to love. He'd always been told they were incapable of it. Yet, from his first breath of Earth's air, he'd known love. First, for the beauty of the planet on which he'd found himself, and the innocent humans he'd been sent to betray -- he still wondered if he'd actually done that, or simply been a tool of their brighter future. And then, standing on the wall of Eden beside perhaps the most adorably awkward angel he'd ever met, he'd found himself enchanted by the pure love and absolute worry simultaneously radiating from Aziraphale. He'd been so fascinated he couldn't bring himself to go back to Hell. He'd stayed, telling himself and Hell both that he was looking for more opportunities to cause trouble for both humanity and Heaven.

He hadn't even realized he was lying to himself until 1941. The night he realized Aziraphale's survival was the *only* thing he cared about, his entire world changed. And it kept changing. Sometimes for the better. Sometimes, so painfully he thought at the time he wouldn't survive it. Through it all, one thing kept him going. One thought.

He *could* love. He *did* love. So deeply he risked annihilation over and over again, just to be near Aziraphale. As long as his ability to love stayed true, he was better for it, even when he ached so bad from missing Aziraphale he'd tried his best to drink himself into oblivion.

These days, he rarely thought about that time. His gaze skimmed over the soft, luscious form of his angel as Aziraphale smiled down at their sleeping daughter, shifted her carefully into the bed, and tucked her in, brushing a kiss over her temple with whispered words Crowley could hear, but didn't need to. He could feel the love radiating from his husband, from here. Watching them, he knew he'd never felt so absolutely *alive* with love as he was in moments like these.

He laughed quietly and shook his head as he studied Jemmy, currently a curled-up ball of gangly, childish limbs beneath her blankets. His gaze flicked to Aziraphale, to find the angel watching him with questioning eyes as he drew near where Crowley stood.

"How do you ever get all those limbs to stay in one place, angel?" He murmured, careful not to wake their daughter. Not that waking her was very likely. Jemmy might be a ball of energy when awake, but when the poppet crashed, she slept with utter abandon.

Aziraphale shrugged, a small, wry smile tipping his lips. "Luck, mostly. I imagine about two minutes after we're gone, she'll look like a landed octopus, again."

Crowley hummed his agreement, following the angel back downstairs, where he'd already cleared up from the party and poured them both glasses of wine. Sprawling out on the settee, he patted the spot beside himself, arching one brow expectantly at Aziraphale.

Confusion and a cold wash of fear crawled through him when the angel moved to turn the chair at his desk and sat there instead, facing Crowley somberly.

"Angel?" Crowley jerked forward, worry and panic cutting through him. Aziraphale *never* put distance between them. Not unless he was either angry or had something to say he already knew Crowley wouldn't like.

"Crowley, there's something we need to discuss," Aziraphale started quietly, his expression anxious and his eyes downcast in a way that drove Crowley's own anxiety even higher. He didn't like it when Aziraphale drew in on himself.

"If I've done something, angel, I'm sorry. Whatever it is, I'm so sorry."

Aziraphale blinked, surprise and concern filling his eyes. "What? No, it's not... whatever made you think you'd done anything?"

Which meant he had something to say Crowley wouldn't like. Not exactly an improvement, or a relief, but he'd take it, for now.

"It's nothing," Crowley tried to wave off his disquiet, forcing himself to relax. "Just the way you looked so serious."

"Oh." Aziraphale's expression smoothed, and a wave of love so great it momentarily took his breath away rolled over Crowley. "No, my love. This is... just difficult. After all, I know how you feel about Heaven."

Crowley froze, fresh fear pulsing through him. Was Aziraphale being forced to go back to Heaven forever? Around a throat steadily closing with panic, he rasped, "No."

"No?"

"You can't go back to Heaven. You can't leave me. Or Jemima. I'll do whatever I have to, to stop that from happening."

Aziraphale *tsk*-ed faintly, shaking his head as he rose from his seat and moved closer to Crowley. The warm touch of his angel's hand against his face, the feathering touch of those fingertips against his skin, shuddered through Crowley, releasing him from his fear. "You're letting your imagination run away with you, my love."

"It's a curse," he managed, his attempt at a joke falling flat.

"I'm so sorry I made you worry." Aziraphale sank to his knees beside Crowley, his hands falling to smooth gently against the top of his knee and thigh. "I've been trying for years, now, to come up with the words to talk to you about this, and either the timing was always wrong, or I feared you would be too hurt or angry to listen. And I so badly want you to be happy with this, Crowley. I love you so much, and all I want is for you to be happy. I hope you can understand that."

"I *am* happy. As long as you're not going off to live in Heaven, I'd go so far as to say I'm *deliriously* happy. What's this all about, angel?"

"I'm not going back to Heaven." Aziraphale laughed quietly. Then, he sighed, his somber demeanor returning and apology entering his blue eyes. "There isn't an easy way to do this, so I'm just going to say it, all right?"

Crowley tensed again, not liking those words, but nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak, right now.

"I know you were surprised the first time you created starlight. I mean, not the *first* first time, but the first time in thousands of years, I guess I should say."

Crowley relaxed at the flustered tone of Aziraphale's voice, and his stumbling words. The familiarity of his angel's awkward ramble soothed his frazzled nerves a bit. "I understood what you meant, angel."

Aziraphale sighed in clear relief. "Right. Well, I... I asked the Almighty about it. I just wanted to make sure She wasn't trying to change you against your will."

Crowley's brows lifted in surprise. He honestly hadn't considered the possibility God might do something like that. "And?"

"She reminded me of what happened when you were injured saving Heaven."

Crowley rolled his eyes. "I wasn't saving *Heaven*, angel. I was saving *you*."

"Yes. Well... The point is, you've never opened your wings, since then. And then I overheard what you said -- and what you *didn't* say -- to Jem the night she asked about your wings." Aziraphale suddenly looked hesitant. "Can I ask... *why* you think your wings aren't beautiful? Have you even looked at them once, since you saved me in Heaven?"

Crowley sighed, even as his heart clenched in pain he didn't want to share. Still, this was Aziraphale. They shared everything. Maybe it was time to come clean.

"Angel, my wings haven't been beautiful, like yours, since I Fell. You saw them, at Eden, and then at Tadfield. You know what I..." he shrugged helplessly, unable to find words to make his angel understand how much looking at his wings hurt. "I just don't like to be reminded. And no, I haven't looked at them since. They've felt different since the battle in Heaven. I'm afraid to look at how trashed they must be."

"That's the only reason?"

Crowley met his angel's gaze, curious when he saw the relief and hope there. "What else would there be?"

Aziraphale shook his blond head, a dotting smile inching across his face. "My darling, wonderful demon, you have this all wrong."

"Explain."

"I will," Aziraphale assured him, climbing back to his feet. "But to do so, I need you to trust me."

Crowley reached out, snagging his husband's hands. Lifting the angel's left hand to his lips, he pressed a small kiss to the ring on Aziraphale's ring finger. "With my entire existence."

Aziraphale tugged lightly at his hands. "Stand up, then. Stand up and open your wings."

Sighing in fond exasperation, Crowley followed his angel's instructions, careful not to knock into anything as he slowly unfurled his wings. They felt weird... Heavy. Yet, the weight felt like it should be normal. Like a memory he couldn't quite reach.

He heard Aziraphale's instant indrawn breath and scoffed. "See? I told you. They're probably--"

"Beautiful." The reverence in his angel's voice had Crowley craning his head around as he folded his wings forward, so he could see them. He froze, his eyes widening in shock.

Those were *his* wings?

Couldn't be.

His wings, from the day he Fell, had been burned with the pitch of Hell, scarred and blackened, the feathers ragged in places. They'd been dull, ugly. A source of shame for him, and something for others to either be disgusted by or to pity. He'd seen the flicker of shock and pity in Aziraphale's eyes, that day on the wall of Eden, and he'd hated it. He'd kept his wings carefully hidden, after that, until he was forced to reveal them in order to stop time at Tadfield.

There hadn't been time, then, to worry about how anyone saw his wings. And even *he* hadn't been thinking about how they looked during the battle in Heaven. They'd shielded Aziraphale, let Crowley be there in time to save his angel. That was all he cared about at the time. He'd barely felt the strikes, the burn of holy water across the radial and ulnare structures. His only thought had been saving Aziraphale.

His wings hadn't felt the same, when he woke up a week after the battle, but he'd just assumed they'd been more broken and marred by the battle and his wounding, and he'd made sure to keep them tucked away. At the time, he was pretty sure they were useless, and he wasn't about to give his angel a reason to pity him.

Then, after Jemmy came along, he hadn't wanted to frighten her. He *never* wanted her to have to know the level of cruelty capable of taking away an angel's -- or a demon's -- wings. He suffered enough for all of them; he was content to continue suffering, if it meant his beloved angel and precious child never had to.

He assumed his wings were hideous, broken, and no longer usable.

He'd kept them completely tucked away, until now.

What he could see of his wings, however, wasn't hideous at all. They were still black, but not the dull, flat black they were before. Now, they were the iridescent black of an oil slick, shimmering with flashes of blue and purple and pink as they caught the light. The feathers were thick, luxurious, and healthier than they'd ever been. And scattered across the shimmering darkness were a thousand points of light, laid out like a sky full of stars, where silver and gold speckles danced in the light.

"But that's... they're... *How?*"

"I've wanted to tell you, to show you, for so long, now. It seems, when I was trying to heal you, the love I have for you and my desperation for you to live, restored some of what was taken from you. I've wanted to give you back the stars you lost for so many centuries, my desperation to make you whole -- as *you* -- gave you the universe in the form of your wings, instead. I first noticed it when you were recovering from your injuries. You couldn't control your wings, because of the damage, and the more I tended them and tried to heal them, the more they healed and changed. Then you were up and about, and I was never sure how fully they healed. I just remembered how they *were* healing, and was hopeful they would heal as the rest of you did." Aziraphale was there before him, his cerulean eyes shining with tears of love and hope. "I thought, perhaps, the Almighty had gifted you back the ability to call starlight, again, after you did it that first time. However, She informed me in Her own way that I was mistaken. It was your return to the starlight chamber that restored your ability to touch the stars."

Overcome, Crowley stared at his wings as he tried to absorb what Aziraphale was saying. He couldn't speak, but that was fine, because there were no words capable of expressing the love and gratitude swelling within him, right now.

Love and gratitude for the angel who never gave up on him, and was now looking at him as if he was deserving of all the love in the universe.

He knew Aziraphale always lamented his loss of the stars almost as much as *he* did. His angel had spoken the wish aloud at least once every time their paths crossed, over the millennia. Just a small, quiet *I wish I could give you back the stars*.

For a long time, Crowley had simply shrugged it away, not letting the words touch him deeply, afraid it might destroy him to think such a beautiful creature pitied him *that* much. Then, after he realized what he'd been feeling all those years was love, the knowledge his angel was hurting for what had been taken from *him* was capable of breaking him.

Now, staring at the physical manifestation of his angel's unaltered wish, the symbol of every moment of love and devotion Aziraphale had poured into healing him, both body and soul, he was unable to speak more than a single, whispered word. A benediction of love and devotion spread over the span of 6000 years.

"Angel."

He wasn't sure who moved first, but somehow, Aziraphale ended up in his arms, held to his body by trembling arms and the fold of midnight wings, as he tipped his head down and worshipped his angel in loving kisses pressed to warm, eager lips and flushed, delicate skin. He knew his angel would find it scandalous -- and most likely blasphemous

-- but the world could have its altars and churches. The only heaven Crowley needed was the one currently whimpering muffled sounds of desire into his kiss.

THE END