

# A Matter of Convenience

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## Kapitel 1: Dancing on eggshells

The Crusades were a messy time for everyone.

In one of the many forts surrounding Jerusalem, the usual messiness was punctuated with a side order of the kind of gory bloodshed and impalement that comes when scores of armored men try to force their way past scores of spear-wielding men behind barricades by pretending to be something they're not, namely a giant, armored human centipede.

The barricade had already been broken through in some places. Up on a tower, a rather violent confrontation was taking place that nobody seemed to be paying much attention to.

In very short notice, the two figures both tipped over the edge, and although it seemed like gravity might look the other way just this once, a moment later there was a solid crunch down below.

Downy feathers exploded in a small mushroom cloud all around them.

For a long while, the night was silent but for the very loud screams and clanging of swords.

"You know," Crowley rasped as he struggled to scrape himself off the ground, "I can't shake the feeling that there must be an easier way to go about this."

"What... what do you mean?" Aziraphale gasped as he pulled himself into a sitting position with an audible cracking of ribs.

"Er... I dunno." Crowley stopped. He was lying flat on his back in a shallow crater of the shape you get when someone decides to play 'snow angels' in mud and gravel, and the night sky above was a very strange mass of smoke and shifting twinkling. A numbing pain in his wings suggested he wouldn't be leaving the ground any time soon.

He lifted his head to see Aziraphale sitting in the dirt, looking around with a slightly dazed, vacant expression. The angel was similarly battered, wings and feathers bent out of shape, the white robes stained red in places.

"I think your sword landed in that ditch over there," Crowley said absently with a vague jerk of his chin. His head was spinning and he let it drop against the ground again.

The angel looked at him blankly, then over to the ditch in question – which, judging by the smell, had not been constructed for defensive purposes, per se. A silvery hilt protruded slightly from where it was stuck in the slope.

"That is... rather far away," Aziraphale said hesitantly. He looked back at Crowley. "Er. I think your scimitar is on the other side of the wall. Sorry," he said sheepishly.

"Uh-huh," Crowley said, not bothering to open his eyes.

The angel kept talking. "Don't you think we should be... er... getting on with it? I suppose I could lend you a dagger for, er, fairness's sake.... where did I put it..."

Crowley listened to the angel patting down his robes and armour and belt in search for the elusive dagger for a minute before saying, "Um. The one with the small ruby, was it? I couldn't help noticing. I think I, uh, stabbed you in the foot with it."

There was a brief silence as the angel looked down at his outstretched legs, wiggled a toe. He whimpered in pain. "I see. And then what?"

"Must have dropped it."

"Oh. Well, that's... We could do it without weapons, then, even if that is somewhat

barbaric-

Crowley lifted his head and fixed the angel with a look. "Can you *stand*?" he demanded.

Aziraphale's face twisted. "...Probably," he said.

"Yeah, thought so. Just... give it a rest for a minute, will you?"

The angel frowned slightly and straightened up a bit. "You will not tempt me into complacency, demon."

Crowley groaned in frustration and twisted in an effort to face away from him. "Whatever, angel."

Eyes shut, he listened to the sounds of battle for a while. It was not a particularly comforting ambience.

"Say," the angel said after a while, "Are you sure you don't remember where you dropped my dagger?"

Crowley frowned and briefly opened an eye to peek at the angel, who was peering at the ground around them listlessly. "I think it was up on that tower," he said. "Could've fallen off, though, I suppose. Why?"

The angel hesitated. "It has... sentimental value." At Crowley's lifted eyebrow, he specified, "A gift from the Pope a few years back for my assistance with some ancient scrolls and the bit of trouble he had with attempts on his life..."

"Don't *you* just have friends in high places," Crowley whistled. "You do realise they're all just money-grabbing, kid-sodomising, corrupt bastards these days, don't you?" he grinned twistedly.

Aziraphale bristled. "They manage to do good work, many of them. In *spite* of your fiendish influence," he added acidly.

Crowley snorted, "I think you'd be surprised at how little influence there is. They come up with all the *really* good stuff all by themselves, you know."

Aziraphale sniffed skeptically.

"Demon's word," Crowley insisted. "I mean, look at them *right now*. *I'm* not doing anything. Neither are *you*. They've got it all figured out." As if to punctuate his words, a soldier fell off the tower with a scream, hitting the ground not far from them with a sickening crunch. Aziraphale shuddered.

"You started this," the angel said.

"It takes at least two to start a war, angel."

"I didn't do this," Aziraphale huffed, affronted.

"No, probably not. They make their own messes. We just help a little," Crowley muttered, pulling his arms up behind his head.

Aziraphale stared speculatively up at the fortress again. He could just spot somebody getting their head bashed in. He sighed.

"It all seems so rather pointless, doesn't it?" he mused quietly.

The demon gave him a curious look. "What does, angel?"

Aziraphale was silent for a while. Finally he spoke, "I should be putting an end to this, you know. All this needless bloodshed, and all because they are so caught up in their beliefs that they feel only hatred for others."

The demon looked like he might say something but stayed silent, watching the angel unwaveringly.

"We could stop this," Aziraphale continued. "It would perhaps be a tad too conspicuous, but it would be within our ability."

"And by 'we' you mean..."

"My side," the angel said absently.

"Oh," Crowley said, something in his face closing up.

The angel kept talking. "Influence a few minds, calm a few hearts in decisive positions. We're supposed to care for humanity. Surely preventing such mass-scale slaughter would fall under that."

Crowley snorted. "So what's stopping you, angel?"

"Heaven," Aziraphale said, then looked mortified. He lowered his voice to a guilty whisper. "They seem to... er.... prefer a little... clearing the air, as they call it. Resolving tension, that sort of thing."

"Oh yeah, I'm sure living without global wars for decades is some *real* wear and tear on those poor human nerves," Crowley drawled. "They could use the relaxation of some good old religious squabbling over whom Daddy loves best."

Aziraphale looked at him sternly, forgoing comment. "They view it as something of a publicity stunt," he admitted meekly. "Cultivating a more solemn, intimidating... er, awe-inspiring image. It is... confusing, sometimes," his voice trailed off, growing more and more quiet, "I mean, not to question the ineffable plan or anything, but sometimes I wonder if I mightn't have missed a memo or two, what with everything that's going on nowadays..... Er. What?"

Crowley was staring at him unabashedly. "You're telling you've got orders to have these people keep fighting each other," he finally said, shaking his head in exasperation.

"Er, I wouldn't put it quite like that, but I suppose s-"

"Would you like to hear what *my* orders are, angel?" Crowley's voice whined like a cheap fiddle.

Aziraphale looked at him blankly.

"My orders," the demon began dramatically, then slipped into an overwrought baritone, "*Good news, Crowley. You are to instigate as much conflict as possible up there, Crowley. This crusade shall give His followers a bad name and turn people away from him, Crowley. This is a great opportunity, Crowley.*"

"Er." Aziraphale sat back in discomfort. "Do they really talk like that?"

"Yes," Crowley said flatly, dropping the tone. "Did you actually pay attention to what I said?"

"Well," the angel looked away sheepishly. "I suppose it does sound a bit, er, similar-"

"It's the same bloody crap in a different package," Crowley snapped. "If you can't see it, *take a look around.*"

Aziraphale did so, worriedly. Up on the fort and around them, Saracens and Christians alike were locked in bloody skirmishes. Occasionally someone would glance in the direction of the two winged figures sprawled in the dirt and very quickly dismiss the sight. A panicked scream from the walls above drew his gaze and he saw fire catch hold of the wooden scaffolding that supported the half-ruined guard tower hanging menacingly above them.

"Well..." he began, not knowing for certain what to say, when he looked back to Crowley and saw him struggling to his feet with a wince. "What are you doing?" he asked.

The demon shot him a look. "Getting out of here," he said. "I've stuck around for a bit, done my part, I'm off to greener pastures for now. Ciao, aloha, and all that."

"Wait," the angel said impulsively, then paused in embarrassment as Crowley waited for him to continue, eyebrow raised. "Er. What are you... erm, where are you going?" he said lamely.

Crowley scratched his arm thoughtfully and slapped away the dirt on his clothes. "Not

sure yet. Haven't really thought about it. Just... away from here."

"I, er, I know a Christian monastery near here," the angel volunteered. "They have quite good wine."

Crowley stared at him.

"Well, I suppose, I just think, we've *both* done our part for the day, so to speak, and your people and mine are probably busy enough, what with everything going on, that they're not paying much attention to us anyway, and of course I'm not suggesting anything traitorous, as it were, but maybe we could... um... talk," Aziraphale finished feebly.

The demon kept staring at him, dark eyebrows climbing higher and higher above his golden eyes. Aziraphale felt himself going red. "What?" he sputtered.

"...Talk," Crowley repeated dully.

"Er... Yes?"

"You do remember what happened the *last* time we 'talked', angel?"

"Well.... Yes, but I thought-

"And the time before?"

"Things are rather different right now, don't you think?" Aziraphale snapped indignantly. "We don't have conflicting orders, for one. There is no pressing reason to try to get the drop on each other right at this moment, is there?"

"And you know that by going off what I told you?" Crowley said with something like awe. "Have to admit, didn't really see that one coming."

"Are you implying that you've lied to me?" Aziraphale frowned.

Crowley hesitated. "...No," he said, shifting. "Not about that, anyway. Honest."

Aziraphale looked suspicious but said, "In that case, I give you my solemn word that I shall not try to smite you in the immediate future unless given good cause. Will that do?"

Crowley grinned. "And I promise I won't try to bite through your neck or pluck out your wings without giving a healthy advance warning, yeah? Demon's word."

"...Very well," Aziraphale said hesitantly. He was beginning to doubt the wisdom of it, but backing out now after he'd been the one to suggest it would be most unseemly. He started to struggle to his feet, keeping his weight off his injured foot and propping himself up with his wings, and so missed the ominous creaking above him and Crowley's quiet 'Oh crap' and change in expression.

"Hurry up, you lazy- Move!" Crowley snapped, and half-shuffled, half-ran towards the angel, grabbed a handful of robes and hurled them both away just as the burning tower above them completed its ponderous acquiescence to gravity and crashed to the ground where they'd been moments before.

They hit the dirt, narrowly missing the undesirable ditch, and covered their heads with their arms as burning shafts of wood and dislodged slabs of stone rained down around them.

"Come on," Crowley hissed, pulling them both back up again. They shuffled forward until the fortress was at a somewhat safer distance.

„Er, thank you," Aziraphale said awkwardly. Crowley realised he still held a death-grip on the angel's robes and let go with a wince.

"Don't mention it," he said flatly.

He waved a grimy finger clean, lifted it to his lips and whistled sharply, making the angel jump. In obedience to the universal laws of narrative convenience, two saddled, fit horses came cantering out of a nearby copse. The animals came to a stop in front

of them, rolling their eyes warily at the two winged strangers, calmer than they suspected they ought to be.

Crowley approached the tall black one and whispered menacingly, "Now, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. Either way, you are going to do your job and do it *well*, you overgrown sheep, is that clear? No funny business, or there will be, quite literally, *Hell* to pay."

The horse nickered.

"I'm glad you see it that way," Crowley said graciously and scrambled onto its back, awkwardly half-folding his injured wings around him. "Well, this is going to be just *fun*," he muttered to himself, hissing in pain as he shifted his posture in the seat. He looked down at Aziraphale. "Coming, angel?"

Aziraphale frowned up at the intimidatingly tall bay gelding, who watched him with overly intelligent brown eyes. "...Yes," he said meekly, and awkwardly climbed into the saddle after two attempts. He heard the demon sigh but ignored him.

Aziraphale sat in the saddle absent-mindedly, wincing and shifting his weight to reduce the strain on his injuries.

"Well?" Crowley asked.

"Er. What?" the angel peered at him quizically.

"The monastery, angel," Crowley rolled his eyes in exasperation. "You were going to show me to the monastery, right? Or have you changed your mind already?"

"Oh, no, no, it's quite fine," Aziraphale said primly. "This way," he said, after getting his bearings for a moment, and took off toward a stripe of road on the horizon at an uncomfortably bumpy trot. The demon followed suit.

"Mind you," Aziraphale mused some time later, "I'm really not sure I should be doing this, truth be told. You're not an altogether bad sort of fellow, Crowley-

"Gee, *thanks*."

"-But you are, after all, a demon, and as such not to be trusted..."

"And you're an angel, and yet here I am, apparently, following you into holy ground like you're the bloody Pied Piper."

"Erm. Who?"

"...Forget it. How much farther, angel?"

"It's about four hours' ride from here, at this pace, I would say."

"You're kidding, right? I'm not drunk enough for four more hours of this."

The angel looked vaguely affronted. "What are you implying, pray tell?"

"Why would I imply anything, angel?" Crowley asked irritably, his elbows flapping uncomfortably as the horse took the rough terrain. "I'm just saying, if I'm to spend any stretch of time with one of you winged sanctimonious gits – *nothing personal, you understand* – I'd damn better be well and truly drunk first."

There was a silence.

"That was rather unnecessary," the angel said coldly after a while, staring straight ahead.

There was another silence that might have seemed embarrassed if it weren't too busy trying to fold itself into a corner somewhere.

"....Maybe," Crowley admitted uneasily.

Aziraphale gave him a hesitant, sideways look of appraisal. "You could always try to get intoxicated now, I suppose," he said cautiously. "I imagine it might somewhat dull the discomfort of the injuries, as well," he added with a very careful omission of any guilt from his voice.

The demon stared at the space between his horse's ears, hands clutching tightly at

the reins. "Nah. Then I'd just be drunk and trying to stay in the saddle in the middle of nowhere, instead. I've all but burned myself up getting the horses, anyway. Wasn't too shabby, though. I mean, as ideas go," he added, politely enough.

They rode in silence for a while. The moon emerged from the clouds, lighting their way, even as it crept ever closer to the horizon.

"The weather is nice," Aziraphale said desperately, then caught Crowley's incredulous look. "Very clear," he elaborated. "For this time of year, especially."

Aziraphale looked at him in silence, then carefully steered his horse closer, close enough for him to reach out and tap the demon on the shoulder, so casually that he barely saw it coming.

"Ow!" Crowley flinched as Aziraphale's hand withdrew. "What did... you... Huh." He looked down at himself, feeling, now that the unpleasant stab of divine heat was fading, a lot less pain than there used to be.

He turned sharply to Aziraphale, who had retreated to the usual distance and was watching him with a carefully innocent expression.

"It's only fair," the angel said reasonably, before the demon could level an accusation.

"You, er, *did* provide the horses, after all."

Crowley looked at him, then turned away, resuming his contemplation of the patch of horizon between his horse's ears with even greater zeal than before. "Fine," he ground out. "Just don't do it without warning, will you? Um," he added snappishly, then stopped, mortified by how he'd made it sound like a habit.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the angel's face clouded over, disquietingly sincere. "I didn't think..."

"Forget about it," Crowley grumbled, feeling his face going red. "Where are we going, anyway?" he asked desperately.

Aziraphale's face lit up, eager for the distraction. "Oh yes, I don't suppose you've had cause to visit before. Which is, er, just as well, I suppose, if you'll pardon me. It's a reasonable little place on a hill, walls and such. Well-fortified, considering. Would you like to hear more about it?" he asked with the ill-conceived glee of enthusiasts and lecturers since time immemorable.

The demon gave a noncommittal hum and kept sulking, swearing under his breath at the horse every so often.

"The monastery is over six hundred years old," Aziraphale continued in a bout of inspiration. "Built on the burial site of a saint, though it's been captured and passed along between different splinter factions and religions so often that no records have survived of *which* saint it had been, exactly. The current holders are a pleasant enough bunch, for fundamentalists. Scribing and meditating and retracing old manuscripts, and sometimes they come together at dawn, for prayer, and give their thanks to the Lord, and underneath there's the most wonderful caverns with wine cellars and great casks of this nice-smelling dark wood..."

Aziraphale rambled on and on, and Crowley listened, and if the horses found the ground beneath their hooves hurtling past somewhat faster than one would expect, they were in no position to complain.

## Kapitel 2: And your enemies closer

Dawn extended its lazy rays over the two riders.

"I spy with my little eye.... Er...."

"Angel, we've been over this. There's nothing here."

"Er, something that begins with 'e'."

"Really?" Crowley glanced at him, intrigued, then looked around haplessly. "Um." He peered at the distant, featureless horizon. "Is it the *end* of this journey, by any chance?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Pity. Let's see.... E... eeee.... " Crowley cast a suspicious gaze over the barren landscape, then looked speculatively at Aziraphale and gave him a sly grin. "Um. Eunuch?"

"Oh, *very funny*," Aziraphale rolled his eyes, or came as close to it as an angelic representative of Heaven could dare.

"Careful there, angel, I think you just used *sarcasm*. So what else, then? What else is there in this Go- in this forsaken piece of land?"

"We're quite close to the boundaries of the Holy Land, actually."

"Eeech. That explains why it's been giving me the heebie-jeebies. So what? Maybe you're hallucinating. I don't see anything. There's nothing here, angel. Certainly nothing beginning with 'e'."

The silence emanating from Aziraphale could only be called triumphant.

Crowley groaned. "Oh, come on, you're *definitely* hallucinating. *What?*"

Aziraphale held his silence a while longer.

"There is an eagle circling directly above us," he said finally, as smugly as he could manage.

Crowley scowled as he looked up, then cursed. Then he looked again. "That's a vulture, actually," he announced cheerfully. "It's been following us for a while now, it seems. So, you know, no 'e'."

"A vulture?" Aziraphale blinked up at the sky. "Er, it looks terribly like an eagle to *me*," he insisted.

"How much longer, angel?"

"We should be there very soon, I believe. I think you'll like it, the holy aura aside, of course. One of the acolytes is quite the hand at the lute, when he can get away with it, perhaps I might get him to show you – on the condition that you do nothing untoward, naturally, he's a very nice lad and I'd much prefer he stayed that way – he copies manuscripts otherwise, you see, very diligent, just hours and hours of careful work, and such *beautiful* penmanship..."

Aziraphale trailed off when he realised Crowley was no longer beside him. Pulling at the reins, he stopped and twisted in the saddle. The demon was standing up in the stirrups a ways behind him, body tense and motionless, nostrils flaring and vague apprehension written across his face. The black horse shifted nervously back and forth.

"...What is it?" Aziraphale asked, his hand twitching to where his sword should be.

Crowley turned to look at him, yellow eyes focusing suddenly. He breathed in once, sharply. "Can't you smell it?"

Aziraphale hesitated, then carefully took a whiff, and a deeper one after that.



He swallowed and spurred his horse.

"Hey- wait up," Crowley hissed, breaking into a gallop to catch up with the angel.

Aziraphale was motionless at the crest of the hill, his hands white-knuckled on the reins. The bay horse whinnied nervously and tried to pull its head free, without much success.

Crowley pulled his horse to a stop next to him and took a long, hard look down the slope. A gust of wind hit him in the face, smoke burning his eyes. The angel squinted but didn't turn away.

They watched the vulture dive down. A murder of crows dispersed in its path with harsh cries. They settled down again soon after, little black dots among the pillars of grey.

Crowley bit his lip, shifting anxiously. "Uh, before you ask, I didn't have- I mean, this wasn't-"

Aziraphale breathed in sharply for the first time in minutes. "We need to look for survivors," he said in a voice allowing no argument, then started his horse down the muddy, slippery path.

After several minutes, he lost patience and slid out of the saddle, unfurled his battered wings and glided the rest of the way down. Crowley swore quietly but followed suit after giving his horse an apologetic pat.

His wings shaking with effort, he touched down behind Aziraphale, who was staring at what had once been the main gate of the monastery's outer wall and now resembled a chunk of splinters and ash. Crows swarmed the piles of bodies outside and the pungent stench of burned and rotting flesh wafted through the air.

The angel stood still, head cocked and listening intently. It was very, very quiet.

Aziraphale stepped across the shattered gate and into the monastery's main yard. Crowley followed. He'd likewise stopped breathing but still had to fight the urge to gag.

He stumbled through piles of debris, then nearly slipped, his foot giving way to something in the mud. He scraped his sole free of the object that had stuck to it. "Crap," he hissed, recognising it as a tattered cloth doll, and very carefully avoided looking anywhere but straight ahead after that.

Not much was left. The well had been soiled and partially buried, the stables burned down. Only the church and cloister remained, looming and implacable, weathered and charred with smoke.

"Hello?" The angel was standing in the centre of the courtyard. His voice carried far and sounded vaguely lost. "Hello? Anybody? Ahem. Is there anybody here?"

Crowley awkwardly shuffled closer, not knowing what to say.

"I guess the wine's cancelled," he blurted with a nervous laugh before he could kick himself. Aziraphale turned to him sharply and stared, eyes wide and inhuman and cold as stone.

Crowley instinctively shrank away, keeping his eyes on Aziraphale. Still as a statue, not disturbed even by the lightest rhythm of breath, gazing silent and unblinking at his adversary – this was an angel, alright.

"Maybe sssomeone hid in the church," he offered weakly.

Aziraphale shifted and blinked, then nodded, brushing past him with newfound purpose in his stride.

The massive oaken double doors were intact, if smashed wide open. Crowley followed the angel, crossing the threshold of the church with trepidation. Whatever whiff of holy presence there might have been... was still there, actually, contrasting and

overlapping with the aura of death and destruction in a most stomach-churning way. He buried the urge to claw away at his skin and stepped inside.

Up in Europe people were starting to take the fancy approach to church construction. Crowley approved – he could easily see it blossoming into outright decadence in a century or two, and the irony would be hilarious. This, however, was an older building, squat and thick-walled and no-nonsense down to the last massive slab of coarse stone. High up in the walls were small, slit-like windows barely allowing light, and ideally even less permissive of arrows. Near the entrance, a heavy stone pedestal still stood, the water basin upon it undisturbed. Crowley edged around it carefully.

“Aziraphale?” he called, peering into the dimness. As he teetered down the nave, glancing sideways between the roughly-carved wooden benches, his vision adjusted, exposing the darkness to him with more clarity than he really wanted at the moment. Rats scuttled out past him. He swallowed and looked away. “Aziraphale?” he called again, his voice unsteady.

“Hmm? Yes, what?” the angel's voice answered. It sounded empty.

The thing about churches built to be fortresses rather than works of art is that people tend to take shelter there when the going gets rough, when it's the last resort. It's the sort of place you might stick your most precious civilians in, if the enemy is rolling in and there's nothing you can seem to do to stop them.

Aziraphale was standing in front of the altar. He was not looking up at the crucifix or the mosaic up high. His gaze was cast downwards, held flat on the form of the half-naked woman on the floor, dark tresses matted with blood and her bruised arms cradling a child.

“Aziraphale,” Crowley said quietly, cautiously wandering closer and stepping over bodies.

When he came to stand behind the angel, Aziraphale turned, finally looking up. Aziraphale blinked at him. “I'm surprised you can stand to be here,” he said.

Crowley's face twisted uneasily. “...Yeah, don't remind me. I'm this far away from getting sick all over your pretty robes.”

“...Not... precisely what I meant,” Aziraphale said quietly, staring at Crowley like he'd just seen him for the first time.

Crowley laughed and flinched at how it sounded, echoing and far too loud in the tomb-like room. “I'm not about to start hugging any Bibles, I'll give you that. What now?”

Aziraphale's gaze turned distant. “I will inspect the catacombs and the cellar,” he said. “Stay here,” he added as an afterthought.

Crowley jerked to a stop, then watched as the angel made his way down a set of worn stairs in the corner. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Stay here with the... with the bodies, okay. Great.”

He perched on the corner of a bench, then slumped back against it. “Great,” he said again, absently. “Well, fine. Not like I want to be crawling around dank and closed spaces, anyway.”

He looked up at the ceiling. There were some spatters of blood there. Impressive, really, when you got down to it.

He looked at the crucifix instead. The roughly-hewn undernourished-looking figure nailed to it looked vaguely unhappy about its situation.

“And fat lot of good *that* did, buddy,” Crowley muttered.

He'd been stepped on by a horse once, when he was drained and grubby and entirely too exhausted for limbs. It had been most unpleasant. Then he'd found himself being

picked up and carried away and lowered gently into thick grass, when just about any form of smiting or otherwise calling in a favour from Daddy would have done. Odd thing to remember, really.

He heard slow, scuffling footsteps and looked down – *no, not that far down, and wow, that is a lot of blood* – looked midway to where Aziraphale emerged. “Did you find any...” Crowley started, then trailed off.

The angel was alone. He was carrying a lute – holding it gently, one hand grasping the neck, the palm of the other supporting the back.

Not looking at Crowley, the angel laid the lute onto the altar, then arranged the torn strings flat across it in an illusion of functionality. His face was blank.

“I believe we're done here,” he said absently, as if to no-one.

Crowley blinked slowly as the angel stood still, his face cast unmoving towards the lute. “...Okay,” he said. “I'll just see myself out, then. Get some air or... or something.” He turned and shuffled past the aisles, towards the exit yawning with the light of dawn.

Just as someone stepped in from outside.

Crowley froze, the burst of relief vanishing as he stared at the hulking figure. The man was a soldier, cheap armour and wrappings grimy and bloodied, and holding in one hand a naked broadsword and in the other a cloth sack that clinked with something valuable when he dropped it.

The man, for his part, took one look at the blood-smeared body and the dark wings and the yellow eyes emerging from the gloom, and cried, “Demon!”

“Shit,” Crowley hissed, narrowly dodging a swipe of the blade, then oofed as the man's beefy fist caught him in the kidneys. just before the edge of the sword zinged across his ribs.

He grunted with pain and tried to move, but stumbled over a corpse and went flying backward, landing painfully on his hips and elbows. Then he looked up and froze.

The man was gripping the rim of the water basin on the pedestal beside him. With a yellow-toothed grin, he swung his arm around and flipped it forward. Droplets raced through the air...

Golden wings fanned out, catching them.

Aziraphale folded them back, stepped around Crowley and advanced on the soldier, who, to his credit, recovered quickly enough.

As he did, Aziraphale noted his cheap, mercenary's armour, the worn tabard, the boots caked with mud. It wasn't uncommon to find stragglers – deserters - after the main raiding group has moved on – looting, scavenging, finishing off the wounded.

Most had the fortune not to run into Aziraphale.

He felt a cold serenity settle over him. He looked up at the man, and *burned*.

The soldier cried out incredulously and jerked to motion, broadsword sweeping in a powerful arc. It occurred to Aziraphale then that he was unarmed.

He fought the impulse to swear, dodging the blow and grabbing onto the mercenary's sword arm, then wincing as the man barrelled into him and slammed him against the wall. The man stepped back, jerking his sword from the angel's grasp and levelling it to stab. Aziraphale sent him flying to the ground with a mighty buffet of a wing, feathers following everywhere. Already the man was picking himself up, even as he struggled to push himself upright.

“Angel!” he heard Crowley call, and turned in a heartbeat as the demon sent something skidding across the floor. He bent down and his fingers closed around a

hilt.

He spun sharply and caught the sword's blow on the dagger's guard. If he were human, such a move would never have held. As it were, it had to settle for looking functional but ridiculous.

The broadsword's edge was bloodied, he realised as he forced him back, and it was not just the demon's blood he smelled on it. No mercenary worth his salt would leave his blade uncleaned too long. This meant a recent kill – more likely a coup de grâce.

Aziraphale breathed then, a tight, controlled puffing of air out of nostrils. He'd seen humans do it. However it was meant to quell rage, it didn't seem to work.

His swordsmanship smooth and deadly – not only with the skill of the Heavenly Host but with the resourcefulness of one who has spent centuries learning from humans – Aziraphale attacked, dagger flashing to and fro as he danced around the mercenary in circles. The man panicked and struck out, overbalancing, and the angel took the opportunity to knock the sword from his hand and kick him across the waist.

The man went sprawling to the ground, coughing painfully. He pulled himself to hands and knees and looked up, eyes widening when he saw Aziraphale walking toward him, dagger held loosely in his hand. It shone with something not quite fire but neither like the natural glint of light.

"Please," the man rasped. "Don't..."

"You should have fled with the others," Aziraphale said coldly, his hand tightening on the grip. He watched with some satisfaction as the man's eyes widened in fear. He moved to strike...

The demon laughed, and he froze.

It wasn't a particularly evil sort of laugh. It didn't sound malicious or mocking or gleeful. It was quiet and probably not meant for anyone's ears, halfway between a choke and a snort, and filled with the bitterness of someone who has seen it all.

Aziraphale blinked and swallowed against the taste of something hot and acrid and oddly reminiscent of shame.

His eyes stinging, he stepped forward and touched the man on his forehead. His eyes rolled back in his head and he toppled down, unconscious.

Aziraphale found himself breathing raggedly, his body shaking. His fingers shifted restlessly on the dagger's familiar hilt.

He blinked again and raised the weapon, turning the hilt to the light.

It had a little ruby in it.

His breathing stilled. Very slowly, he turned to look at the demon, still seated awkwardly on the floor.

"...Oh shit. *Shit*," Crowley gulped, golden eyes wide. He scrambled back, legs kicking against the floor and hands groping blindly behind him for a weapon. They landed on a stiff body and he flinched, jerking them back hurriedly.

"You lied to me," Aziraphale said flatly, uncertain as he was about why he was taking this personally.

Crowley stopped moving and stared back at him in apprehension. Then he gulped and smiled nervously. "Technically, no. I *did* drop it, though I picked it up later. And it *did* fall down, roughly at the same time I did. And it's true enough that it *could* still have been on that tower and okay, yeah, really not the point, I get that..." he rambled frantically.

"Were you planning to stab me in the back all this time, then?" Aziraphale wondered absently, his fingers shifting across the hilt.

Crowley's face twisted in a grimace and he bit his lip. "No, I... *Look*, I wasn't... I just...

Bless it! It's just the way these things *always* turn out in the end, *alright?* No sense in getting caught bloody unprepared," he added glumly.

Aziraphale stiffened and inched closer, wings and body still aflame with his essence. The demon seemed about to start scrambling away again but stopped himself, hands splayed taut across the flagstones. "Fine then," he grinned humourlessly, "Go on. 'Get on with it,' and everything, like you meant to at the ssstart. Sssee you later," he snapped, then added to himself in a laughing whisper, chest shaking, "Great, just great. Back to Hell, then."

Aziraphale stopped. He looked at the demon, sitting with his legs stretched out in pools of blood and grime, dark wings battered and messy, head bowed.

His expression softened. His fingers relaxed and he lowered the dagger, letting it hang limply from his hand. He folded his wings. The burning glow faded.

Crowley looked up, eyes wide.

"Don't be daft," Aziraphale said. "It would be highly unsporting to attack you with the very weapon I only reclaimed at your courtesy."

Crowley's face closed up. His eyes flitted ever-so-briefly to the unconscious mercenary on the floor.

Aziraphale's throat tightened and he struggled with the inexplicable urge to lower his eyes. "I'll not be judged by the likes of you," he said stiffly. Seeing the demon tense again, he sighed and slid the dagger back into the empty sheath at his hip, shifting his posture to 'at ease'.

"I haven't actually *said* anything," the demon protested glumly. He watched Aziraphale for a moment, then grabbed a bench for support and pulled himself to his feet.

Aziraphale wandered past him, walking slowly to the altar. A rat was chewing on the lute. He swatted at it in fury.

"I *was* going to give it back, you know," Crowley called after him. He was standing in the entrance, leaning against the heavy door. "If... y'know. If it had worked out."

Aziraphale nodded silently. Crowley hesitated a bit, then sauntered out.

Outside, the sky had brightened to a gangrene yellow-blue, and the fresh breeze brought fresh waves of stench from all over the monastery.

"Right," Crowley said, shaking himself. He began to shuffle towards the exit, kicking at debris that got in his way.

After a while, he stopped.

He turned to look at the empty doorway of the church. There was no hint of movement save for the scuffling of vermin.

After another while, he sighed again, and trudged back to it.

He peeked inside.

The angel stood still and silent in front of the altar, a lone figure amongst the bodies - staring, as far as he could tell, into nothing. It was a thoroughly miserable sight.

"Hey," Crowley said softly.

Aziraphale didn't turn but his body shifted to attention. "You're still here?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm..." he broke off, not sure *what* he was, exactly. "You're just gonna stand there?"

The angel looked at him oddly. Then he turned and disappeared back down into the cellars.

"...Er. Right," Crowley muttered. He hovered in the entrance, torn between following and staying on the side of marginally fresher air. He realised he'd started breathing again. It was an unnervingly difficult habit to break.

The mercenary lay where he had fallen, untouched. Unless you counted the rats, of course, but they had plenty of other things to do.

He nearly flinched when Aziraphale turned up again, brushing past him and striding away from the church in determination. Crowley scrambled after him and the angel slowed, allowing him to catch up.

"Where are we going?" Crowley asked.

"Just... away from here," the angel said, mouth quirking in faint amusement.

"Uh-huh," Crowley snorted, then paused. The angel was holding a bottle of wine in one hand and two wooden goblets in another, hugging both to his chest as he walked. "You..." Crowley started and found himself stuttering. "You're still going through with that?"

This time the angel did smile, the corners of his mouth turning up in a way that looked pained and bitter and not at all at home on his face.

"Apparently so, yes."

They walked until the ground beneath was no longer grimy and trodden flat by hundreds of feet. They trekked up another hill, balancing with their wings and gripping each other for support when needed, until they reached the top – a flat plateau with a view of the surrounding plains and crop fields that looked almost idyllic if you didn't squint. The air was fresh here and the ground patchy with grass. Up on the crest, a lone tree resided.

They plopped down beneath it.

Crowley groaned gratefully and kicked off his boots, wriggling his toes into the grass. He wished he had the energy to miracle himself clean. Or a stream nearby. Although, truth be told, there was something of a line to be drawn between drinking with the enemy and bathing together, as much as he could try and pretend that several thousand years of human habits hadn't rubbed off on him.

Beside him, Aziraphale sat down carefully with his legs crossed, then patted down the grass and set the two goblets on top in a strangely formal gesture.

"Do I even want to know where you found that?" Crowley asked, looking at them apprehensively.

"I believe you can answer that question for yourself," the angel said, and he snorted in agreement.

Crowley watched the angel struggle with the cork for a moment, then held out his hand. "Give me that."

He took the bottle and pulled out the cork with his teeth, spitting it away. The angel held up the goblets and Crowley poured, taking care not to spill. Some of it sloshed over anyway. The tremors in his hand were probably due to exhaustion.

Crowley raised the goblet. "Cheers," he said.

Aziraphale nodded, his gaze lost somewhere in the space in front of him.

They lifted the goblets and downed them as one.

Crowley peered mournfully into the empty cup, then down at the bottle. "'S not nearly enough in there to get properly drunk, though. Or... at all, really."

"It's just as well," the angel mumbled. "It's best we stay alert."

"...What for?" Crowley glanced at him sideways. Aziraphale didn't answer.

Crowley took the bottle and poured himself another, then did the same for Aziraphale. He took a careful, measured sip. "You weren't pulling my leg back there," he said, humming appreciatively. "This ain't half bad." He realised the angel had turned to look at him, face blank. "What?"

"I'm fairly certain I don't pull people's legs, Crowley," the angel said seriously.

Crowley goggled at him for a moment, then snorted, shaking his head. ""Sss a figure of speech, angel. And you're plenty smart enough to figure out what I meant. Unlike some of you other bastards. Couldn't recognise a metaphor if it metaphored up to 'em and bit them like a... like a... like a simile of some kind. No offense."

Aziraphale stared in fascination, cocking his head. "Are you... are you *making* yourself drunk?"

"I'm improvising." Crowley lifted the goblet to his lips and flicked his tongue out briefly, tasting. Then he took another delicate sip. ""Sss besst of both worldsss. Good year," he added graciously.

Aziraphale stared into his own cup. "...Yes," he said. "I suppose it is."

Silence reigned for a moment as they both mentally tiptoed around the rest of the day so far.

"Hey," Crowley said finally. Aziraphale turned to look at him. "Hey... You don't want to... bury them, or something?" he asked, jerking his head sideways.

Aziraphale looked sad, his gaze distant. "...Their souls are elsewhere by now. We of all people should know that, Crowley."

"...Yeah. Guess so."

Crowley took the bottle and pointedly refilled Aziraphale's cup. The angel looked at him questioningly.

"Hey, you're the one who came up with the drinking idea, might as well indulge," Crowley said defensively. "Threw me for a loop, by the way. Well done with that."

Aziraphale frowned thoughtfully. He slowly unfurled his wings, flexing them, his palms cradling the goblet. Somewhere on the tree above them, a bird chirped.

"This is nice," the angel said eventually.

"Nice?"

"Mmm, yes."

"Care to elaborate?"

"I just can't help but think... It's a shame we can't ever seem to hold a civil conversation for long, don't you think? Always with the sides and the... the assignments. But it *is* only business, technically speaking. No sense in letting it.... spill over.. into personal matters."

"So much for 'nothing traitorous', huh?" Crowley muttered to himself.

"I'm sorry, what?"

Crowley hissed, suddenly tense with exasperation. His hands shook, sloshing some of the wine out. "Just... You know what your people'd say if they caught you thinking like that, don't you?"

Aziraphale was silent. His expression was far-away and unpleasant. "I suppose it's a jolly good thing my thoughts are my own, then," he said stiffly after a while, then huffed. "Honestly, they're rather out of touch at the best of times, anyway. I don't see why I ought to be so worried about what *they* think I should be doing with my time."

"...What?" Crowley was staring at him.

Aziraphale turned to him, gaze solemn. "I, er, I don't pretend to imagine that it's remotely similar to what *you* go through," he began. "But, well... for what it's worth, I don't enjoy it either. Going... Up There. When I have to."

Crowley shook his head. "You're kidding, right? It's *Heaven*," he added in a whisper, speaking the word flatly and without the usual awed inflection.

"It is rather high up," Aziraphale said slowly, knitting his brow. "One tends to... lose sight of what's important, I find, while up there."

Crowley stared at him some more, then grinned, incredulous. At Aziraphale's

offended look, he chuckled, "Sssorry. It's just... It's funny. Pretty much anyone I could ask would say you usually sssee things *better* when you're on top of the world, not *worse*."

"...Not if what matters is the little things," Aziraphale replied quietly.

"...Well. I'll drink to *that*," Crowley nodded and raised his goblet. He clinked it against the angel's, some of the wine sloshing over between cups. He laughed suddenly. "Didcha know? I mean, that'sss how it started. The whole... toast thing, I mean. Clinking glasses together. You'd have a dozen of people in the room all vaguely out for each other's blood, but only an idiot would try to poison the drink, ssee, if it all ended up sloshed around like that, anyway. Nothing breeds culture like paranoia, I tell you."

"...I suppose there's something to be said for the assurance of safety," Aziraphale said thoughtfully, sipping at his own wine.

Crowley was quiet for a long time. Eventually he turned to the angel, face open and earnest. "Hey," he said. "Can I ask you something?"

"I sincerely doubt I can stop you from trying."

"Touché. No, but really... Indulge me. How come... How come you never used, you know, *that* stuff?"

Aziraphale looked to him in confusion. The demon's face was tense and apprehensive. He gestured again, jerking his head somewhere in the direction of the church.

"...Oh," Aziraphale said. His face clouded over in the way typical of someone having trouble wrapping their mind around something.

The demon leaned forward, eyes burning with wary curiosity. "I mean it. It's not like you couldn't carry *bucketfuls* around. And not the cheap, dirtside little church stuff either, where they just pop in a little cruficix and call it a day and it sizzles and stings a little. Hell, you could get some from the Pope's own washing basin, just snap your fingers and have it. It'd put me out of commission for centuries, at least. If not worse. All that, and I've never seen you use it. What gives, angel?"

"...I... I couldn't really say...", Aziraphale said, quiet and uncertain. "I suppose it doesn't seem... right, perhaps. Something so... irrevocable."

Crowley slowly raised an eyebrow and held his gaze. He didn't gesture to the church, but he didn't have to. A thought formed between them, hanging like a lead weight.

Aziraphale's jaw tightened and he pulled away stiffly. "That man is a murderer," he said.

Crowley slumped and hissed out a laugh, bitter and sardonic. "And who bloody well *isn't*?"

Aziraphale looked away, his face twisting in something like pain. He groped for the bottle and unsteadily poured himself a full cup. The bottle wisely neglected to point out that it should have been empty three cups ago.

Aziraphale sniffed into his cup. "There's something backward about you lecturing me about morality, don't you think?"

Crowley sighed and let himself drop back, stretching flat across the grass. His dark wing brushed Aziraphale's. "Yeah, well, that's the new millennium for you. Backward." The watched the sun rise – the demon flat on his back and staring up at the sky, the angel hunched over his drink.

Eventually Aziraphale turned his head, studying Crowley thoughtfully. "May I ask you something?" he said quietly.

Crowley raised a quizzical eyebrow and snorted. "Bring it on, I'm sure I can't stop you." "You... changed your name," the angel said quietly, as if confiding a secret.



"Yeah, ages ago now. What's your point?" the demon shrugged.

"I, er, I am not precisely getting at any *particular* point, per se. It is only... It strikes me as a bit strange, that's all."

"Me changing my name?"

"Well, yes. How could you even... Why would you do something like that?"

"It was cramping my style. *You* try getting taken seriously with a name like 'Crawly'. It just didn't feel like me."

"It is your *name*," Aziraphale said furiously. "Of *course* it's you. Who else would it be?"

"Fine, then, maybe it didn't feel like who I *wanted* to be. Does that make more sense to you?"

Aziraphale frowned. "I suppose so," he said slowly. "It's only... I've never heard of any of our kind changing their name before. It would never have occurred to *me* in a thousand years."

"Guess I'm a pioneer, then," Crowley said with a hint of smugness, shutting his eyes. After a few moments he opened them again, peeking at Aziraphale in curiosity. "...You've really been wondering about that all this time?"

Aziraphale blushed. "Er, yes." He fidgeted, fingers plucking idly at the grass.

"...You can be who you want if you really try, you know..." Crowley said quietly, staring at the sky. ""Sss not that hard. Don't have to get all your choices made for you."

"I can't imagine your superiors being charitable toward *that* attitude, either," Aziraphale observed.

"That's okay. I don't spend much time there, anyway," Crowley said casually. His expression darkened. "When I can help it," he added, looking away awkwardly.

Aziraphale wasn't sure what to say to that, so he carefully took the demon's cup and filled it to the brim. He looked Crowley in the eyes and held it out to him silently.

"Thanksss," the demon grunted, sitting up to take it.

"You're welcome," the angel echoed apologetically.

Crowley drank.

A companionable silence reigned for a while. If they had been more attentive, they would have seen a shuffling figure making its way very slowly up the hill.

"You know," Crowley said carefully after some time, "If you wanna be technical about it, we are, er, technically, having a civil conversation right now."

The angel looked vaguely guilty. "It has crossed my mind, yes."

"I don't currently see any pressing reason for things to turn non-civil, do you?"

"Not as such, no."

"Good."

Crowley plopped down flat on his back again and forced himself to relax. It was surprisingly easy. You just needed to make your muscles go all limp like a doll's and close your eyes and wriggle your face into the grass. He found that the thought of the dagger with the little red ruby didn't worry him quite as much as the creepy-crawlies trying to crawl into his ear canals. He twitched and swatted in irritation at something tickling its way up his cheek. In approximately a minute or so, it would occur to him that he might have been tempting fate just a bit.

Suddenly, a long, heavy moment settled in when he got the most awful sense of premonition and his eyes flew open. He heard the angel make a slight choking sound.

"*CROWLEY*," said a horrid voice behind him.

"Eep," he said.

He nearly fell over in his hurry to scramble up and turn to face the voice. The angel had stopped breathing and was staring wide-eyed at something over his shoulder. He

spun.

*"CROWLEY, ARE YOU THERE?"*

A dead body stood in front of him, largely unconcerned by its deadness. It had belonged to a villager, sometime before last night.

"Er... Yes. Hello," Crowley swallowed. He made frantic shushing gestures to Aziraphale.

*"WHAT WAS THAT, CROWLEY?"*

"Er, I mean, Lord. Hail Satan. Yeah."

*"WE HAVE NOTICED YOUR LOCATION. EXCELLENT WORK WITH THAT MONASTERY, CROWLEY."*

"...Th-thanksss, hehe," Crowley swallowed, feeling ice run down his spine. He heard Aziraphale shift slightly. Suddenly, the dagger with the little ruby didn't seem quite so irrelevant.

*"YOUR WORK ON THE FORT HAS BEEN NOTED AS WELL."*

"Right, right..."

*"WE HAVE ANOTHER ASSIGNMENT FOR YOU, CROWLEY."*

"Joy," Crowley muttered dryly.

*"YOUR ENTHUSIASM IS REFRESHING. FIFTY MILES SOUTH OF HERE YOU WILL FIND A TOWN CALLED WATCHER'S REST IN THE LOCAL TONGUE. SEE TO IT THAT IT IS DESTROYED, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER."*

Crowley gulped, his throat going dry.

*"IS THAT UNDERSTOOD, CROWLEY?"*

"...Yeah. Uh. Lord."

*"EXCELLENT. WE AWAIT YOUR RESULTS EAGERLY, CROWLEY."*

"...Sure."

*"AHM."*

"Hail Sssatan," Crowley said lamely.

*"INDEED."*

Whatever unholy spark of life there had been in the body abruptly went out. Its knees buckled and it folded back spectacularly like a limp rag doll.

"Great," Crowley breathed and struggled to his feet, shaking faintly. "Just... great. Perfect. You try to get *one* moment of peace, try get to away from the bodies, and whaddyou get? They end up coming to *you*, the creepy bastards..." He stumbled over to the corpse, blessed under his breath, stumbled back, pulled on his boots, walked over to the corpse again and proceeded to try and roll it down the hill by kicking it with his toe.

"Crowley...."

"No." He spun and pointed a shaking finger at the angel, who was on his feet, watching him. "Don't you even *ssstart*. I told you, I had *nothing* to do with what happened here. This sssort of thing *always* happens. They go all, Hello, Crowley, nice job on that miscellaneous deed of horrific evil, Crowley, and I just go Yeah thanks and pretend it'sss not the first *I've* heard of it, 'cause all I did was hang around in the fifty-mile radius or ssssomething, but some tool or another *alwayssss* ends up blaming demonic influence for whatever crap the humans have come up with *this* time around, and who gets the credit if not the resident demon, eh?"

He was still rambling and kicking at the corpse by the time Aziraphale walked over to him, bent down, reverently traced a cross pattern onto the body, then lifted it and carried it to the steeper part of the slope, where he proceeded to let it topple down spectacularly.

They watched as it rolled down.

"Bit morbid, that," Crowley muttered to himself, watching the limbs spin around loosely in its descent.

He shook himself, then wandered stiffly over to where he'd been sitting and let his legs give out under him. He searched the grass for the discarded bottle.

"I imagine it does make it easier to stay on their good side, though, doesn't it?" the angel mused quietly behind him.

"They don't *have* a good side," Crowley grumbled. "Great, just great. Amazing. Smashing. Perfect. Just what I needed. Okie-dokey. Destroy. Yep. Classic."

He finally found the bottle and took a deep swig right out of it, not noticing that it had, by that point, finally gone empty.

Aziraphale sat down in front of him.

"You... do not wish to do this," he said slowly. It wasn't really a question.

Crowley grinned. It looked more like a grimace. "Whatcha talkin' about? *Of courssssse* I wanna do this. It'ssss my job, innit? Of courssse I wanna do my job. Love my job. Great. Perfect. Sssssspreading mayhem and desssstruction. Yep. Great. Evil. Excssssellent." He fumbled for the bottle again, finally noticed that it was empty and tossed it aside with a hiss. He buried his face in his hands and clawed at his hair, his chest heaving.

Aziraphale's brow furrowed. He'd read about sarcasm, of course, and could, when sufficiently provoked, choose to occasionally dabble in it himself, but had little experience with identifying it in the wild, as it were. He was beginning to suspect that the demon was far more prone to it, as well as outright denial, than he'd previously realised. In retrospect, it put some of the things he'd said over the centuries in a different light and explained a great deal.

"I'm an artisssst," the demon kept muttering. "I tempt people. It'ssss an art. I ferret out their hidden desirssss and everything. Pssssychology. Dessssstroying things is *grunt work*. I shouldn't have to do *grunt work*. It'ssss undignified. They could've just ssssent two dozen imps insssstead, but nooo, let'ssss heap it up on Crowley, shall we? *He'll* take care of it, sure enough."

The angel cleared his throat loudly. Crowley looked up at him in startlement.

"They, er, they didn't seem to know I was there," Aziraphale said tentatively.

Crowley's expression shifted. "Oh. No, no, I shouldn't think so. Would use up *way* too much juice, if they could see as well."

"Well then..." Aziraphale said slowly. "It occurs to me that, er. As an agent of Heaven, I have just found myself with unexpected access to enemy information, as it were. I would be remiss not to take advantage of the opportunity. See to it that evil wiles are thwarted, and all that," he added bashfully.

Like watching a sunrise, Crowley's face very slowly transformed with comprehension. He started grinning.

"I probably ought to follow you and properly foil your efforts, you see," Aziraphale was saying. "It would, without doubt, be in the ultimate interest of my cause."

Crowley laughed unsteadily, shaking his head. He stared at the grass between his feet. Then he got up. "I'm sure I can't ssstop you," he said, a trifle giddily.

Aziraphale smiled.

Down at the foot of the hill, the stench didn't seem quite so oppressive now. It felt like something you could put behind you.

"No, I've got this," Crowley said. "Watch." For the second time that day, he shook his finger clean and whistled. This time, Aziraphale was expecting it.

The two horses they'd previously left behind on the top of the other steep rise came galloping from somewhere out of sight, nearly running them over in the process. They looked vaguely miffed.

"How did they get down?" Aziraphale asked.

"Beats me," Crowley grinned. "No idea how they do it, they just do."

He climbed into the saddle.

Minutes later, he looked back.

"You're taking this 'following' thing pretty seriously, aren't you?"

Aziraphale *was* following him, by a technicality of around ten feet. "It wouldn't do to let you out of sight," he said reasonably. "No telling what kind of mischief you might get up to."

"And your enemies closer', eh?"

"Quite."

Crowley sighed. "Well, then. Fifty miles. This will take a while."

It didn't, not really.

This was mostly because, some two miles in, the landscape changed and they kept coming across the most diverse plants on the side of the road. Aziraphale turned out to have a nearly encyclopedic knowledge of them. He also felt compelled to share every bit of it, preferably while the plant was still in sight. It was a good thing he didn't need to breathe.

Crowley was having trouble keeping up with the steady litany.

"How'd you know all that, anyway?" he asked at some point.

"One picks up things when living with the locals, you see. I'm sure your experience has been similar enough. Oh look, that one's called witch's bane by the Christians – no, no, the one with the small purple flowers, look where I'm pointing..."

During the trip, Crowley had, possibly, fallen asleep in the saddle. Once or twice. The angel didn't seem to take offense.

By the time they had put half the distance behind them, their wings had healed enough that they could safely tuck them back in. It seemed to calm the horses a fair bit.

Five miles from their destination, the inevitable wrench in the plan came bearing down.

More specifically, it was shining down, as Crowley noticed when he stopped his horse to ask the angel why he was lagging behind.

Out of the conveniently low clouds, a dust-laden, vaguely blue ray of sunlight descended at an improbably upright angle.

The angel was bathed in blue light and was looking up in utter mortification.

"*Aziraphale*," a voice rang out like the tolling of a thousand distant bells.

"Er, yes," the angel squeaked with as much dignity as possible.

"*Cherub... correction, Principality, yes?*"

"...You don't really need to keep rubbing that in," Aziraphale said sulkily.

"We have work for you."

"Jolly good," Aziraphale sighed.

"Your enthusiasm is refreshing."

Aziraphale twitched.

"There is a town southwest of here the locals call *Watcher's Rest*. It is most fortuitous you are already in the vicinity."

"Ah, yes." Aziraphale brightened. "Worry not, I shall keep it safe."

"...Keep what safe?"

"...The town, I assume?"

"Don't be presumptuous. We need that town razed to the ground."

Aziraphale's smile flickered out.

"Is that understood?"

"Er."

"Answer the question."

"Er... ah, well, see... I suppose the issue is... *why*?" Aziraphale asked. An annoyed silence answered him. "Er, it is only, it doesn't seem like our usual *modus operandi*, I suppose," he plunged on, "What with... razing towns to the ground."

"It is not your duty to question your orders, *Principality*."

Aziraphale swallowed. "Er, of course not. Even so, it may... help... in the *fulfillment* of my orders... oh good *God*... if I were to know the reasoning behind this... decision."

There was a thoughtful silence.

"...The town has a *spiritual significance*," the voice finally said. "*It is the birthplace of one of the local beloved spiritual leaders, and the inhabitants of the area pride themselves on having never had it fall into enemy hands. Its elimination would further fan the spark of the conflict and ensure the spread of our cause and its glory.*"

"...Of course," the angel said stiffly.

"Do not disappoint us, Aziraphale."

"I'll... I'll try not to," he said grimly.

"See to it."

The light remained. The silence turned expectant.

"Hail the Lord," Aziraphale said sullenly.

"Quite."

The light faded.

Aziraphale slowly let his hands unclench from around the reins.

"Well then," he said numbly, staring in front of him. "I suppose that explains why this area generates so much interest, at least." He turned and looked around. "Crowley?"

The black horse was munching on grass and throwing suspicious looks at Aziraphale. The saddle was empty.

"Er... Crowley? Oh dear..." the angel looked around wildly.

Movement caught his eye. He peered into the thick grass. Very slowly, a terrified-looking serpentine head emerged out of it.

"Oh *there* you are," the angel said with audible relief.

Crowley shifted and stood on his legs again, brushing himself off. He was staring at Aziraphale in bewilderment. Aziraphale stared back.

"Y'know," Crowley said finally, "I think I liked it better when we *did* have contradicting orders."

Aziraphale laughed at that, quickly cutting himself off in embarrassment. He fidgeted. "What do we do now?" he asked.

Slowly, a grin that was nothing if not mischievous spread across Crowley's face. "Well," he said lazily, sauntering close. "It occurs to me... as an agent of Hell... I would be remiss not to take advantage of the opportunity, wouldn't you say? Subvert the efforts of Heaven at every turn, and all that." Aziraphale smiled. "I dare you to try."

The midday sun stood hot and scorching over the rooftops.

"Die, foul demon!" Aziraphale cried dramatically and swept a newly-procured sword in an impressive glowing arc. He let his wings manifest just enough to draw gasps and shouts from the people down on the street.

"You're overdoing it," Crowley hissed, ducking the blow and bringing up his own scimitar – likewise newly-stolen, because you needed to have standards about this sort of thing. He let black smoke trail after his limbs and obscure what little he showed of his great sweeping wings. From a distance, it must have looked like the angel was fighting a piece of the night at high noon. He was sure it looked very impressive.

"I'm sorry, I don't have nearly as much experience in stage appearances as you do," the angel hissed under his breath.

"Don't worry about it, just act natural. Your days are numbered, featherbrained tool of a dead god!" he added in a shriek. He tackled the angel and sent them sprawling across the rooftop, then aimed a foot at his head with just enough delay for Aziraphale to wriggle safely out of the way. "Get it? *Featherbrained*," he whispered.

"Yes, yes, very clever, *get thee behind me, spawn of Hell!*"

"Better." Crowley realised he was fighting the urge to grin and gave up, letting it spread across his face in some semblance of a malicious leer.

The angel snorted, promptly disguised it as a grimace of pain, and brought out his wings in full force, taking them both higher and higher along the rooftops to the towers of a modestly-sized castle.

Some time later, there was a mutual beat of wings, a dramatic grapple, and both figures went toppling off a guard-tower, past the wall and down the side of the cliff on which the town was situated.

A mighty stroke of wings at the last moment and they landed gently on the ground, shifting themselves out of mortal sight.

Crowley grinned, catching his breath, and looked up at the tower. "Seems we've just about come full circle here, don'tcha think?"

"Don't be silly," Aziraphale smiled. "This landing went *far* more smoothly."

"Come on," Crowley said, clapping the angel's shoulder. "Let's see what they have up there. Drink's on me."

The wine was good, though not nearly as good as the bottle they'd had at the monastery. Sitting back in his chair, Crowley closed his eyes to the steady din of the voices in the tavern and stretched luxuriously.

He opened his eyes to see the angel watching him.

"Do you really think we'll get away with this?" Aziraphale said quietly, leaning forward.

"Don't see why not," Crowley said. "Sss not like our people and yours are pen-pals or anything." He considered it for a long, alarmed moment, then shrugged. "That'd be

just weird."

"I suppose so."

Aziraphale looked away, watching the people in the tavern. "I've been here before," he said. "I've even heard the story. Truly great man. Perhaps even saint material, one never knows. Ought to have realised it sooner, really."

Crowley cocked his head at him. "You just know everything about these people, don't you?"

"Oh, no," said Aziraphale solemnly. "Not even close."

"...The little things, eh?" Crowley said softly, smiling.

Aziraphale chuckled bashfully, drowning his response in the wine. He looked down thoughtfully at it.

"You conjured the money to pay for this," he said with soft accusation. "I saw you."

"Comes with the territory, angel," Crowley shrugged.

Aziraphale frowned at him. "It's not proper."

Crowley laughed. "You can pay next time, then."

And froze, choking on the laugh.

He hesitantly raised his eyes to Aziraphale's. The angel stared back, turning gears all but visible in his gaze.

There was a long, pregnant silence, and neither breathed.

"Maybe we could-"

"Perhaps there's a-"

"Ugh." Crowley stopped, mortified.

"Oh, sorry, go on," the angel blinked.

"Ngh. You first," Crowley said cagily.

The angel hesitated, then said, "It, er, it simply occurred to me we could make this sort of thing a more permanent sort of arrangement."

Crowley swallowed. "Go on."

"Well, I... Not much else to it, really. Simply... when the occasion calls for it, when our respective superiors are acting slightly more out-of-touch with reality than is customary for them... It would be a form of damage control. And it would certainly save time and resources for both of us, don't you think? Particularly if we cut down on the time spent... Up and Down There, respectively. A matter of convenience, really."

Crowley slowly blinked at him. "And the catch?"

The angel looked at him thoughtfully. "I'm fairly certain I wouldn't be able to sell my soul even if I tried, if that's what you're getting at."

The demon stared.

Aziraphale suddenly looked very embarrassed.

Crowley stared some more, then laughed incredulously, the tension draining out of him. "That was an awful joke, angel."

Aziraphale's face was red. He tried to hide it behind his drink.

"Seriously, though," Crowley said. "What's the catch?"

Aziraphale gestured vaguely. "Well, I suppose we could agree to stay out of each other's way..."

Crowley's face fell.

"...where *legitimate* work is concerned, and all that. Minimise interference, that sort of thing. I, er. For my part, I'm willing to restrict my activity to acceptable bounds, if you do the same."

Crowley leaned forward cautiously. "We'd need to meet up occasionally, though," he said hopefully. "To... compare notes, that sort of thing. The odd favour or two, like

with this job. Or something."

"Well, yes. Of course," said Aziraphale.

Crowley smirked. "Deal." Then he winced. "Sorry. Bad choice of words. Agreed."

He held out a hand with trepidation. Aziraphale glanced down at it, reached out and shook it.

A moment passed.

He looked down at their clasped hands.

"I don't sense an aura of doom settling over me," he observed. "That bodes well, I suppose. What now?"

Crowley hesitantly let go, leaned back and raised his mug. "We get plastered. Cheers."

He drank.

"Cheers," Aziraphale said and let himself slump back bonelessly in his chair.

He had a feeling it would be a tolerable century, after all.

Many decades later, a dark-haired young man stiffly followed an older one through what passed for a hospital in this time and place.

Crowley was not enjoying the 13th century. The way current events were pointing, the 14th was shaping up to be even worse.

"It is an art, you see. A most delicate art," the other man was saying. He was almost unnaturally tall, bald head stretched over with blotchy and weathered skin and a gaunt face that would have looked sickly if not for the unholy light shining in his eyes.

"You would not *believe* the amount of research involved. And the test runs, of course. One must never forget the test runs."

"Test runsssss. Sure," Crowley nodded along. He'd stopped feeling his toes and fingers some time ago, even though he kept curling them mechanically. All things considered, he really wasn't sure how to interpret that.

"It must never spread too quickly, you see," the man kept speaking in an educational timbre Crowley had come to be familiar with through a very different association.

"Not while you are still ironing out the... ah... all the little *details*. It must never spread out of control during that... *delicate* phase."

Crowley nodded again. Somehow, he found himself speaking. "The, uh. Back in the 6th and 7th. Didn't work out, then?"

"Oh my, no. Far too unpredictable. And I can never get the progress rates just right, most infuriating, really... Let me show you what I mean."

The man stopped in front of one of the patients – an older woman with a fever-flushed face, sprawled on a grimy-looking mattress – and gestured to the apple-sized swellings in the armpits. "Fourteen days after first contact and counting." He slowly walked to another patient, a muscular man who was babbling to himself, blood flecking the corners of his mouth. "Three days, here. Take note of the skin."

Crowley looked at the lumps and the scattering of dark spots, almost like rose petals.

"Ngh," he said. "Three... three days?" he managed to grind out.

"Ah, yes, you've noticed. Most inconsistent, no? I confess, I am somewhat neurotic about this sort of thing. Unpredictability drives me *mad*, it does. Which is not to say



that the occasional surprise cannot be a delight, of course, why, that is how progress usually happens, don't you think?"

"...Sure." Crowley said. His throat was beginning to feel itchy and there was a horrid pressure behind his eyes. He shuddered.

The man gently grasped his shoulder and he flinched. "Take a look at this one," the man said, steering him away. This time, it was a girl not older than seven. She wasn't on a cot. She was playing with a doll in the corner, skin peach-smooth and flushed with health. Crowley stared at her.

"Downright conundrum, this one," the man said quietly. "She followed her mother in, you see. Doesn't seem to have any other family, the poor thing, so I let her stay. Seven days and counting. Plenty, *plenty* of exposure, and not a mark on her, would you believe it? Sometimes even your best isn't enough." He sighed, leaning forward with an absorbed, predatory glint in his eyes.

"...Right." Crowley said, mostly to try and drown out the other sounds. His chest felt heavy and his body kept itching. He really wanted to be *anywhere* else. Abruptly, he realised discorporating himself right then and there would be a vast improvement. Hell really wasn't *that* bad, come to think of it.

But that wouldn't be fair to Aziraphale.

"I'm sure you've encountered such problems yourself," the man kept speaking softly.

"Your occupation is, after all, likewise an art." He turned to Crowley and smiled. "Say hello to your people for me, will you? Pleasant crowd, but they just can't think in numbers the way we two can, don't you think? Sometimes you just need to let your imagination fly and... see where the boundaries are." He turned to Crowley and stepped close, whispering conspiratorially. "This one is going to be a beauty if I do say so myself. I've had a downright epiphany about it, too. Why, just the other century I was walking down the street, and there they are, all just scuttling underfoot..." he trailed off. "Ah, well, nevermind. I'm sure you'd just as rather enjoy the surprise yourself."

Crowley twitched. "That's... that's okay, actually. I don't mind... advance knowledge. Makes my... work... easier. Yeah."

"Oh, no, I really shouldn't, come to think of it. An artisan must never share their secrets." He turned thoughtfully to the rows of cots, smiling to himself.

"Uh-huh," Crowley grunted, then sniffed in irritation at a tightness in his nose. He affected a busy air and casually edged towards the door. "I, uh. Should be going. People... to tempt, and all that. Thanks for the... the tour. It was..." he paused. "Made an impression. Yeah." He swayed slightly, shaking.

"Yes, yes, of course, I imagine you're terribly busy. So nice of you to stumble in, I really don't get enough visitors these days," the man said mournfully.

"Right. Bye," Crowley rasped and stumbled toward the door.

Before reaching it, he had to stop, screwing his eyes shut and quivering at the irritating sensation.

He sneezed, loudly. His nose felt puffy and stuffed.

"Bless you," the man called after him with a chuckle.

"Nggh," Crowley said and bolted out the door.

Days later and half a continent away, he stumbled through the street, ambling through the throngs of people.

The.... the symptoms seemed to be fading with distance as his own power reasserted itself, thank Someone, even if too slowly for his liking. Crowley did his best not to think about any of it.

"Watch it!" someone yelled, and Crowley barely dodged the horse that pushed its way through the crowd.

Shaking with adrenaline, he weaved and jostled his way to the edge of the stream of people and caught himself unsteadily on the wall. For a moment he leaned against it, eyes closed.

"Oh dear, are you alright?" a muffled voice spoke. Suddenly hands were pulling him upright.

He looked up into a black, long-beaked mask.

Crowley squinted. "That you? What's with the bird get-up?"

"It reduces probability of infection. I've been trying to get more of the local medicine men to wear them. Without much luck so far, I'm afraid. No centralised organisation at all."

Aziraphale reached a thick-gloved hand to pull the mask up. A tired face looked down at Crowley. The scent of herbs wafted toward him. "You look awful," Aziraphale said.

"Are you alright?"

Crowley laughed.

"I missssed you in Paris."

The angel looked apologetic and started to speak.

"Never mind, never mind," Crowley gestured loosely. "We.. we need to... go ssssomewhere. Or ssssomething. Compare notes. 'N I need a favour."

"A favour?" the angel frowned at him. "Crowley, are you *drunk*?"

"Sseven days and counting," he hissed with a brittle grin. "And I really, *really* need ssssomeone to watch over me and make sure I'm not thrown out when I get even *more* plastered and ssstart raving like a madman."

"Crowley, what are you talking about?"

"The 14th is going to sssssuck," Crowley said with determination. "Possibly the 15th as well. It is going to *suck*, I tell you."

"Now, don't be unreasonable, you're just setting yourself up for a confirmation bias. Things have been looking up lately, why would the 14th be any different?"

Crowley told him.

"...Oh," the angel said after a while. He looked pale. He stared at the crowds with a wide-eyed, apprehensive look, then grimaced when someone jostled him. He looked back to Crowley and bent close. "He's at it again, then?"

"Angel," Crowley said, slumping in exhaustion. "*Drink*."

Aziraphale gave him a wan smile.

"Of course, my dear," he said and began to steer the demon away.

Rats scuttled underfoot.

The 14th century was going to be awful. Crowley was certain.

But with the right wine, and the right company...

...There might just be other centuries to see.

