

And So We Come Full Circle

Von Hekateras

A nightingale sang in Berkeley square.

Hundreds of years later, an angel and a demon perch on the top of a pyramid, feet digging in against hot slanted stone and wings spread up to shield them from the sun. They look over the blazing white landscape to where the sphinx shimmers in the air.

"Oh dear," Aziraphale says. "That really has worn down a fair bit."

Crowley hums in agreement, looking down at the parched sand below. "Used to be a hell lot greener, too," he mutters. This part of the Nile had dried up a long time ago.

Aziraphale tuts. "This really is quite a shame," he says, for the hundredth time that month. "Do you remember when they built those, dear?"

"What, the slavery and oppression and bullwhips? Oh yeah, good times," Crowley grins bitterly. He takes a swig out of the bottle, then passes it to Aziraphale.

Aziraphale looks at the bottle and sighs, then tips his head back and drinks out, not bothering to wipe it off first. He fumbles with it, tries to set it down on the angled face of the stone. It slips away and skitters down the side of the pyramid, leaving a nearly blood-red trail in its wake.

Aziraphale stares in embarrassment. "Now that's poetic," Crowley mutters beside him. "Time to be going anyway." Carefully, he stands up, balancing with his wings. He reaches a hand down to Aziraphale.

The angel looks at it, then up at Crowley without expression. Then he nods, straightens his clothes and accepts the demon's hand. They teeter against each other for a moment, taking one last look at everything.

Then they slide down, the hot air currents catching their winds and carrying them forward, over the pyramid, the sphinx, over what used to be the lush river bed of the Nile.

They are circling over the ocean, just miles and miles of water as far as the eye can see. It makes Aziraphale uncomfortable. He thinks of the birds making a trip to warmer lands every year, with no landing in sight and no mercy if they wear themselves down.

He frowns down at the calm waves, squinting against the reflected glare of the sun.

"You're sure this is the place, dear boy?"

Crowley scowls and taps away furiously at the GPS in his hand. "I..." he pauses, looking down, then laughs humourlessly, shaking his head and pointing. "Yeah, I'm sure."

Aziraphale follows the gesture to where a weathervane and the tip of a roof are protruding from the water. Close by, the wall of an old church lies half-tilted on its side, half-eroded and stained glass windows reduced to soft-edged shards lining the edge. The waves wash over it, obscuring it from sight every now and then.

Crowley is silent, then says, "Remember that café from, when was it, 1579?"

Aziraphale frowns and looks at him. Crowley spreads his hands. "Hey, if it makes you feel better, it did take years and years for the water to rise this high. Supposedly. They probably up and left, one after the other."

Aziraphale stares at the wide expanse of water where Amsterdam should have been. His wings are starting to ache.

They circle gently away, riding the wind currents to return to landmass.

"Not that it'll make much of a difference, either way," Crowley mutters under his breath, much later.

They try flying over Mount Vesuvius, but it's turned active again and buried all the ruins that had been excavated over the course of centuries.

Aziraphale and Crowley crouch on the ground later, safely outside the volcano's spitting distance. Crowley twists and gags out lungfuls of ash.

He wipes at his mouth with his sleeve and grins at the angel, who's turned uniformly grey and is trying to dust off his wings. "Well, that was interesting," he says, sharp white teeth a startling contrast against ashen skin. "What's the next stop?"

Back in London (or what's become of it), they walk through the zoo and argue over how much the animals have changed since the Garden. By now, most of them can no longer be found anywhere else on Earth, other zoos notwithstanding.

"Oh come on, tigers didn't come in *white*," Crowley peers suspiciously at the huge beast lazing about on its rock.

"They must have, otherwise this one wouldn't be here, now would it?" Aziraphale says sensibly, tearing pieces carefully off his cotton candy. You only live once, after all. Especially right now.

"Yeah, like He needs to have created *everything*," Crowley rolls his eyes. "Bloody great load of minutae, if you ask me. Maybe he just set the mechanisms in place for some stuff to just create itself."

"That sounds rather blasphemous, my dear."

"Just doing my job. Still, I dunno if you've been following, but they've been discovering stuff. You know. DNA. Mutations. Selection pressures. That's a notch above your old dinosaur bones. I doubt he would've put that stuff there if it wasn't meant to do *something*."

"Still, over seven thousand years?"

"Sounds about right to me, angel."

They stand in silence for a while. Aziraphale tries tossing a piece of cotton candy to a duck in an ornamental pond. It rejects it in disgust, quacking confusedly as it dissolves in the water.

"Remember the unicorns?" Crowley says eventually.

Aziraphale blinks. "Unicorns?"

"Great big scary animals with one horn."

Aziraphale's forehead wrinkles. He gestures at a nearby enclosure.

"That's the rhino, you featherbrain."

"Well, it does fit the description..."

"They're more... dainty-looking," Crowley says.

"Great, big, scary and dainty-looking?"

"...Yeah." He peers at Aziraphale suspiciously. "You really don't remember them?"

"Well, the tapestries and such, I suppose, but I'm really not sure if I've ever seen one..."

"That's because they don't eat dusty books and scrolls, angel," Crowley says, turning away. "Me, on the other hand, I was out and about in the woods a fair bit in those times. Even saw a hunt, once." His gaze turns distant.

"Still, in the Garden?"

"Believe me, when you're crawling on your belly in the dust, you need to know all the things that can trample you."

"Whatever happened to them, my dear?"

"Humans."

Aziraphale thinks.

"A shame, then."

"Yeah, you've been saying that a lot lately. Come on."

They drive slowly through the streets, past old rubble. Soho is long gone, of course. Terrorist attack. Aziraphale had been at Crowley's flat at the time. If he hadn't, who knows whether he would still be here. They might have decided that giving him a new body wasn't worth the bother.

"I mean, there must be something I can do with it," Crowley's saying while Aziraphale looks out the window. "Something... poignant, you know? It should just seem right, like it's the only option there is. But I got nothing."

"You could just leave it behind somewhere. In storage, as it were." Aziraphale says eventually.

Crowley looks longingly at the interior of the car, all but caressing the upholstery with his gaze. The Bentley has long crossed the line from outdated to so bizarrely antique that everybody dismisses it as an eccentricity and doesn't look twice. "Yeah," he grinds out. "Suppose I could do that."

It's a while before they speak again, and it's Crowley who breaks the silence.

"Angel," he says. Aziraphale looks at him. "You know it's gonna be really bad, this time around," Crowley says slowly. "When the times comes, I want you to-"

"We should see how the Colonies are getting on," Aziraphale says quickly.

Crowley looks at him, but the angel won't meet his gaze. Finally, he sighs. "Okay," he nods, "Let's do that."

He turns the stereo on to fill the silence.

-to live forever, who wants to live forever? There's no chance for us, it's all decided for us, This world has only one sweet moment set aside for us...

Crowley reaches to turn it off again.

The angel stops him. Not looking at him, just a hand on his wrist.

He lets it keeps playing.

They leave the Bentley on a clifftop in Cornwall, in the end. Overlooking the sea, waves crashing underneath. He reckons it's as good a place as any.

He gives it one last once-over, then steps off the edge after Aziraphale.

They soar until the cliffside and the Bentley are out of sight, lost in the sea's blue horizon and the spray of foam in their faces. Not that Crowley looks back. He doesn't. Really.

They take turns leading, each hiding in the other's wind shadow whenever he tires.

When they reach the other end of the Pond, they are sore, exhausted and numb with cold.

It's night when they touch down amid a series of shallow lakes and stumble, collapse until they're lying flat on their backs.

"Wow," Crowley gasps, then groans as he stretches wings and limbs out, curls his toes into the muddy sand. "You know, I could stay here until the end of days."

They laugh at that, giddily, nervously. Aziraphale swats at him with the tip of his wing and nearly sprains a muscle.

They lie on the sand and look up at the stars, the nebulas and the Milky Way clear as diamonds.

"Rather clever of them," Aziraphale mutters.

"Hmm?" Crowley glances sideways. The angel stares unwaveringly at the sky.

"I mean to say, all that navigation, dear. With nothing but the stars. Rather inventive of them."

"Yeah." Crowley stares at the angel. "Remember that Chris fellow?"

Aziraphale smiles. "I remember you stowing away. You went in after some mice and then fell asleep in a barrel."

Crowley grimaces. "Downstairs wanted me in India, yeah. Bit of a mishap, that. Still, I did end up with a commendation for it. Turns out they approve of the mass scale slaughter of natives."

After a while, he sits up, grimaces, flexes his wings. They could've just wished themselves across, sure. They'd also fled from their respective rally calls days ago and have been in power-saving mode ever since. No sense in appearing on the radar.

"Come on up, then," he nudges Aziraphale with the tip of his wing. "Let's help you work off all those pastries you've been eating," he grins.

The angel rolls his eyes, pulls himself to his feet, a trifle unsteadily.

They rent a car and drive to New York City. A cloud of smog hangs over it, so it's just as well they hadn't flown in.

It's crowded and loud and busy and makes Manchester look like a retirement home.

They all but raid a liquor store and head to Central Park. The ducks are anxious and the squirrels jittery and none of them eat very much. Sunset finds them on the shoulder of the Statue of Liberty, surveying the city as its nocturnal web of lights awakens under the red-mottled sky.

Crowley lets his feet dangle down, stares at the black expanse of water beneath them. He reaches for the basket of wine bottles, but lets his hand drop. Neither of them feel like getting drunk today.

"We had some good times, though, didn't we, my dear?" the angel mutters beside him. Crowley turns to find the angel looking at him speculatively. He offers him a quick grin.

"Remember when I said 'here's to next time', angel? Well, this is it. Won't be much longer." Crowley gestures at the twinkling lights all around them, the city buzzing in worry, as if knowing what's to come.

They stare at the city. It's rather different from London, from what they're used to, but all cities are the same in the end.

"So what now?" Crowley mutters.

"I suppose we wait."

"Just like that?"

"Well... if you could indulge me a moment, dear boy..."

Crowley stiffens but lets the angel lean in, reach for his face and gently pull the sunglasses off. Stormy blue stares into gold, barely inches away.

Crowley swallows.

"Ah," he breathes. He gives the angel a shaky, nervous smile. "So that's how it's gonna be? Last night on Earth, and all that?"

Aziraphale looks at him sadly and nods. "Yes, I suppose it is. Crowley..."

"Aziraphale, you need to listen to me," the demon says urgently. "You were right back then. You probably *are* going to win." The angel looks taken aback, so he plunges ahead. "No, it's true. It's just the way things work out, in the end. My side doesn't really stand a chance. But you still need to stay out of the line of fire, you understand? I've seen some of the stuff we've been coming up with, the stuff we'll unpack for the big day, and it's *not* pretty. So you *ssst*ay out of it, you hear me? *Ssst*ay *out*. Don't worry about duty or the ineffable plan or whatever, just keep your *blsssst*ed head down, is that *bloody clear*!?"

Aziraphale blinks, stammers. "But-"

There is a flash and it nearly blinds them both. They shrink into each other, wings spreading up reflexively. The wine basket tumbles off into the black.

"What the hell..." Crowley mutters.

"Oh dear."

They squint past the feathers, past the smog to the bright streaks crossing the horizon. "M-meteors? Really? Isn't that a little old-fashioned?" Crowley all but sneers, pulling them both to their feet.

"I'm sure the more modern means of destruction aren't far behind," the angel huffs as a particularly white-hot one hurtles past them and crashes into a skyscraper, making them flinch.

His hand clenches on Crowley's shoulder, then finds the demon's hand, squeezes hard.

"Keep safe," he says desperately, as if that makes any sense.

Crowley snorts but nods and holds his gaze. "Yeah. Sure. See you around." His fingers squeeze back.

There's another flash, much brighter and grittier somehow and a deep, guttural bang. They both tumble off the ledge, wind breaking against their wings. They take one look at the rapidly spreading mushroom-shaped cloud mere seconds away, at each other.

A puff of smoke, a burst of blue light.

They vanish.

On a bench in Central Park, a woman with deep red hair looks up at the sky and smiles.

Some say the world will end in fire.

Some say in ice.

People liked to write poems about it.

Wingtip to wingtip, the angel host soars through the charred air. Fire has preceded ice – not a single ray of light has touched the Earth's surface since the first bomb went off, so impenetrable is the cloud cover.

Theoretically speaking, there should have been a break in the clouds, a glorious pillar of sunshine to outline so many great wings beating together, separate the wicked from the righteous.

But there is only shadow, and as they rush toward the army of demons, one immortal looks much like any other.

Aziraphale raises his flaming sword and brings it down at a demon, for the first time in millennia.

As the scream fill his ears, it occurs to him that he'd never met Robert Frost.

Great shame, that.

Crowley smears the blood off his face, more to give his shaking hands something to do than out of any real necessity.

He scrambles to where he dropped the curved, black-bladed knife and looks around wildly.

It's not going well for his side, but he'd known that much. He vaguely feels he ought to be doing more to change that, but can't really see the point.

He keeps his wings tucked away, crawling close to the ground, delaying the inevitable. Demons and angels clash around him and above him, blood spraying like sheets of rain. He automatically licks some off his lips, then catches himself and gags, spits it out.

A cry makes him spin around, stare at the cluster of demons who've lassoed an angel's foot with a length of barbed wire - plagiarist bastards – and brought him crashing to the ground, swarmed over the rumpled wings to keep him pinned.

Crowley whips into the mass of demons, shape somewhere between human and serpent, throwing them off with a twist of his coils, slicing them to shreds with a sweep of his knife, sinking himself into them tooth and claw and dagger. He sees one last demon and bites into his neck, tearing his throat clean out, pulling himself free in one sinuous motion.

He stops at the sight of a flaming sword leveled on him, bloodied fingers scrambling to keep the grip steady.

Aziraphale stares at him, eyes wide. He blinks, shakily lowers the sword.

Crowley laughs giddily and tries to think of something to say but only shakes his head. He wordlessly extends a hand.

Aziraphale smiles at him weakly and reaches for it.

A blast of divine fire hurtles through the air and Crowley stumbles back, dodging it by a hair's width. He looks up and freezes like a man caught in the path of a falling comet. The last thing he sees is Michael swooping down.

"He's dead," Aziraphale says. Michael and the two other angels frown skeptically at the bloodied figure sprawled on the ground, broken black feathers fluttering in the wind. "I'm quite sure of it," he repeats, holding up a mangled wing to keep them from coming any closer. "Come now, brothers, there are yet enemies who stand and are more worthy of our time," he hears himself say, summoning a righteous smile, gently steering Michael away. They hesitate, then break into flight.

He takes off after them, a touch of the archangel healing away the worst of his injuries.

Behind him, a heart still beats, too faint for any but his own to feel.

It's over.

Clusters of demons still remain, scuffles and skirmishes breaking out and dying like gasping embers.

"Well," Aziraphale says blankly, "I suppose that's that."

The angels next to him stare at him uncomprehendingly. Aziraphale reminds himself that Small Talk has never been among the Seven Virtues. He'd be better off conversing with a wall.

They stand in silence for a while. He shifts the bloodied sword in his grip, wipes it awkwardly against his robes, slides it back into its sheath.

They watch angels round up the surviving demons like so many cattle.

"What happens to them?" he asks quietly.

"They embrace the Lord, or perish," a powerful voice says, and the angels turn around as one.

Michael stands with his two bodyguards, a bloodied captive held at sword-point in front of them. "This coward was hiding in a ditch," he says with derision, then levels a look at Aziraphale, "after *you* left him for dead. You have a... history... with this one, I believe. Perhaps you had best settle this." He shoves a foot into the captive's back and the demon stumbles forward.

Aziraphale catches him before he can think, steadies him, smooths out the matted black hair out of his eyes. He keeps a soothing hand on his arm as he guides him to his knees, crouching beside him. He doesn't particularly care how it looks.

His demon tries to grin nonchalantly but it comes out bitter and twisted.

Aziraphale swallows and looks to Michael, who is watching him without expression.

"You said... You said they can embrace the Lord," he tries, and feels Crowley snort and start to shake his head. "Please, just consider it," he whispers desperately to him.

"If his regret is genuine, and his love for the Lord is true, he can be redeemed, and join us in the new world," Michael says, and somewhere in the back of his head Aziraphale wonders how often he'd practiced that particular line.

"You can forget it," Crowley grins with bravado, not looking at him.

Aziraphale glances at him in panic, then turns to Michael with what he hopes is a tactful smile. "If I could talk to him in private a moment? I may have more success that way..."

Michale gives the two of them a long, judging look, then nods solemnly. He and the other angels retreat to a safe distance.

He turns frantically to Crowley, fighting to keep his voice level. "My dear, I know you and Heaven don't particularly see eye to eye, but you need to think about this rationally-"

"That's right, we *don't* see eye to eye. They destroyed my planet. I *liked* that planet," Crowley hisses with sudden ferocity, leaning closer. "You feel the sssame way, you know, though if you've a shred of sense you'll be *damned sure* to keep a lid on it."

"There'll be a new world," Aziraphale says desperately, hoping that between the two of them, at least one might be convinced by that dangling carrot. "It might be just as good as the old one. Better, even. You just wait and see. It might even have a Bentley in it," he adds eagerly, knowing how ridiculous it sounds.

"Yeah, maybe," Crowley says flatly. "That's not what this is about. They'll get bored and destroy that one, too, or something will go wrong, or anything. It's not the point.. They can't just... mess people about like that, they can't keep tearing it down like it's all just some bloody doll house."

"...It is to them," Aziraphale says quietly.

"Yeah, because they never bothered to *live* in it. I can't keep going along with that. I can't."

"But Crowley, it's still better than... than..." Aziraphale blanches, gestures helplessly at the battlefield.

"You don't get it," Crowley smiles and it looks agonised. "I can't. As in, *can't*. Even if I wanted to – which I don't - I can't. That's the beauty of the whole thing."

"...What do you mean?' Aziraphale asks slowly.

"You heard the big guy. It has to be sincere. It has to come from the heart. And putting aside for a moment the fact that I simply *don't* feel any overwhelming urge to embrace the Lord right now, there's that ultimatum. Redeem yourself or die. Become a selfless little paragon of God-hugging virtue or *die*. No matter how sincere my hypothetical change of heart would feel to me, under these circumstances, deep down, I'd still be motivated by fear, not love. Self-preservation, not selflessness. And that's not in the contract." He grins bitterly and admiration creeps into his voice. "It's brilliant, actually. Catch-22 in its purest form. Gotta wonder where they learned that from."

"But.... But we could at least *try*..." Aziraphale stammers, but suddenly Michael is with them again. Aziraphale shifts to stand in the way.

"Have you come to a decision?" the archangel fixes his gaze on Crowley.

Crowley looks up defiantly, then meets Aziraphale's eyes. The angel looks to him imploringly and mouths a silent 'please'.

Something in his gaze softens. Crowley looks away for a moment, then sighs. When he looks back up and faces Michael, his expression is blank, open and guileless.

"I renounce Satan and proclaim my love for the Lord," he announces, each word clear and perfect. "Day after day, millennia upon millenia, I could only dream of being accepted back among his ranks, into the hearth of his Grace, of having never committed the foolish mistake of defiance that brought me here. I am deeply sorry. Please take me back among you."

The angels are silent. Aziraphale does not dare look at the archangel but keeps his eyes fixed on Crowley's face.

A minute passes. Finally, Michael steps close. Crowley doesn't break his gaze, but his eyes harden.

"You lie," Michael says calmly. Crowley looks away then, looks to Aziraphale, who feels himself going quite numb. "It was worth a try," Crowley says, mouth quirking up conspiratorially.

Michael raises his sword and takes a heavy step forward, like a landmass advancing.

"No," Aziraphale says desperately, shuffling in front of Crowley. The archangel looks at him calmly.

"He is damned. He must die."

"He saved my life," he says, staring at Michael pleadingly, willing him to understand, to make an exception.

"If he did, that debt is a burden you would rest easier *without*."

"No, no..."

"Aziraphale." His voice rings with authority. "Step away."

Aziraphale swallows. He fixes Michael with a level look.

"I will do it," he says in a voice allowing no compromise. He hears Crowley hiss sharply but pays it no heed.

Michael studies his face and nods once. He sheathes his blade and steps back expectantly.

"Angel, you *don't* have to do this to yourself," Crowley hisses frantically, and there's the slightest bit of fear in his voice.

"Hush, Crowley,"

Slowly, deliberately, Aziraphale turns around, grips the hilt of his sword, slides it out of the scabbard. He studies it as the blade lights up in flames, glowing...

Flamed like anything.

He breathes out, steadies himself, and only then looks up at Crowley. The demon is watching him with bitter mirth in his eyes.

Aziraphale looks to the flaming sword in his hand. Carefully, he extends the free one to Crowley.

The demon laughs, a short and harsh sound, and grips it tight, pulling himself unsteadily to his feet. Aziraphale lets him go and steps back.

For a moment they just stand there, facing each other.

Crowley grins helplessly, spreads his hands. "Well?" he says.

Aziraphale shudders. "I just... I feel I ought to say something, you know?"

"Yeah, I can imagine." Crowley looks down at himself, frowns and uses the last of his power to clean some of the blood off. He readjusts his torn clothes, smooths down the bloodied spikes of black hair into something resembling his previous, stylish cut, straightens into a confident, insolent posture.

"There," he smiles, and for a moment he's like his old self again. "I'm ready."

"...I'm not," Aziraphale barely whispers.

"Make my day, you sons of..." Crowley begins, then trails off. He looks at the other angels, lined in a circle around them. "I don't suppose there's much point in the good old 'facing the bullets' one-liner, is there?" he asks loudly, watching them shift in confusion. "It's not like you'd recognise the reference anyway."

He looks back to Aziraphale, then down, and the angel realises he's gone and grasped Crowley's shoulder. Slowly, deliberately, Crowley pulls himself free of Aziraphale's grip. He looks up at him, waiting.

"I..." Aziraphale's voice catches and he tries again. "My dear boy, I'd like you to know that you've always meant a great deal to me." It sounds trite and formulaic and he hates it, but there's no script for what they're going through, for saying goodbye to a friend you've known longer than the Earth has existed.

Crowley winces, shakes his head in embarrassment. "Hey now, let's not make this any more painful than it needs to be."

"This isn't right," Aziraphale mutters.

"It's the way things are," the demon says sharply. "Look, I don't mind so terribly much. I've made my peace with this outcome a long time ago. And besides, it's better than my side winning and me having to-" he breaks off, breathes out sharply, then grins. "...Yeah, I guess I'm just selfish like that. You'll be alright, though, won't you?"

Aziraphale briefly contemplates the rest of Eternity.

"....Not really," he murmurs.

Crowley looks at him then and the mocking smile fades. "No," he says softly. "I suppose not."

He looks at length at Aziraphale, at Michael, at each of the angels watching him in turn. He sneers at them. "Don't let the Earth hit you on the way out," he says smugly, sounding quite pleased with himself. Then he turns back to Aziraphale and nods once, spreads his arms.

Stormy blue stares into gold, seven thousand years of memories passing between their eyes.

Aziraphale takes a step forward and wills his arm to move, feels the blade shudder as it slices and burns through cloth, flesh, heart, to the ethereal core within. He twists the blade to make sure it's over quickly. He still has time to feel Crowley shudder against him and lets go of the sword to wrap his arms around him, lower him gently to the ground, encircle the two of them with his wings in one last attempt at sanctuary. There is a moment when he can feel Crowley's breath hitch against his cheek and his arms tighten around his shoulders, returning the embrace.

Then all goes still.

Aziraphale holds his demon and thinks of nothing at all.

For a while, it is again like in the Beginning.

The concept of time has melted down to an incomprehensible mush. At one point or another, Aziraphale hovers in the ether and watches the brew of a new Creation simmer towards completion.

It is calm and peaceful.

He watches the Creator tinker with the skies again, before arriving at a result that looks different but vaguely familiar.

Time shifts.

As part of airing the proverbial closet, their deeds on the late Earth are accounted for in one final tally.

He finds himself dubbed responsible for subverting the chief agent of the late Hell at every turn – a series of accomplishments that stacks up quickly over the centuries. He finds himself commanding both power and respect and distantly notices that the other angels now refer to him by a different title.

He can't bear to think of it long enough to object.

For a while, there is joy, and tranquility, and singing, and actual little harps, because the Powers That Be are nothing if not unappreciative of quaint ideas.

There is water and earth and night and day again, and time coalesces.

It is like everything that was Before had come in a dream and the world has woken up again, a butterfly released from its amber prison.

Aziraphale watches unfamiliar stars streak through the sky and feels a pang of loneliness.

He cannot remember why, and that terrifies him more than anything.

He asks the others what came Before, what they remember.

We have always been here, they say. There was nothing Before.

He stops asking.

The feeling of loneliness remains, but he has forgotten that they ever had a name for it, and so he convinces himself it isn't there.

He finds a new enthusiasm in his duties and fulfills them with relish. He is a perfect servant of the Lord, but different enough to be special, even if he can't remember why.

He sees the plants and animals the Lord is crafting and is awed at their beauty and ingenuity.

He looks at a thin, elongated creature, all shimmering scales and jewel-like eyes in its small head and not a single limb but for the pair of delicately feathered wings

stretching out as it flies.

An odd design, he supposes, but ultimately much like any other.

As it swoops near him, he swats it away.

There is a new place in Creation, and it is beautiful. Lush, vibrant foliage as far as the eye can see, populated by the most beautiful of creatures, the best of the best.

There are trees here that are unlike any other. Trees bearing gifts, at an unknowable price. He knows this because it is so – nobody has yet been foolish enough to approach them.

This day, there is something new.

He looks at the strange creatures ambling around awkwardly among the trees, their golden skin bare to the sun - they are the latest word in Creation. He shrugs – they are close enough to God's image to be acceptable, he supposes, unsure as he is what the fuss is about.

Something about them rubs him the wrong way, but that is not something to dwell upon.

He walks through the Garden, sandaled feet barely touching the ground, wings swaying luminous in the sun and breeze. Beautiful as it is, it gives him the strangest sense of... he's not sure what the word for it would be.

He glides through the Garden and the animals part reverently in his way, until he is at one of the Trees.

For the longest time he stands there, head tipped back and staring into the branches. He doesn't know what he was expecting to find.

He keeps walking until his feet take him out of the forest, to the edge of the Garden, towards an intricate golden gate. The angel there snaps to attention and greets him, raising his flaming sword in salute, a sweeping arc of fire.

He freezes and blinks.

Didn't you have a flaming sword?

The voice in his head is clear as a bell, pitch and tone, and he whips around, eyes scouring the grass, but there is nothing.

The angel at the gate watches him in concern and asks him if everything is alright.

"No, no... This is all wrong," Aziraphale mutters, and remembers.

He returns to the Tree and hides himself in its branches, cradling his knees, eyes shut. "All wrong, all wrong" he mutters again and again as he goes as deep into his mind as he has ever contemplated.

He remembers phrases, and slit-pupiled, golden eyes. He remembers the sight of yellowed, hair-thin sheets and red liquid in vessels like frozen air, and fire and shards of something hard and sharp exploding near him, and deafening noise, and tossing

white crumbs to water-bound creatures with wings and feathers and beaks and webbed feet.

He remembers a volcano – how it was born, how it erupted, taking so many lives with it. He remembers a sharp white grin on a face smeared with ash.

He remembers enough for an overwhelming sense of loss for what he will never have again, for everything he *doesn't* remember.

He struggles to remember a name.

"This is all wrong," he speaks again, much later, and the other angels look to him in shock, some with more curiosity than outrage. He explains what he can, charms and intimidates them for the rest. The thought of letting them go on as puppets to false memories horrifies him.

For the first time since Before, a new beast has awoken, and its name is dissent.

He speaks and the angels gather around him in a circle, and it is that sight that finally jostles something free.

He stops mid-speech, staring at nothing. After a while he speaks again and finishes, each word perfect and deliberate and under control.

When he is alone again, he heads for the Garden and walks slowly under glowing canopies, going over every moment in his mind, lest they slip from him again.

There's a circle of angels around them, but they are holding swords and watching him in condemnation. He feels the phantom sting of tiny cuts in his hands as they shift their grip on a bloodied sword. He remembers phrases upon phrases full of defiance and bravado, the voice as familiar to him as his own. He remembers warm breath brush against his cheek and go still.

He remembers a phrase in his own voice, so similar and yet so different to what he is now.

Hush, Crowley.

And suddenly he has a name.

And just like that, the other pieces fall into place.

He watches the new breed of humans play around in a creek and finally recognises the

feeling as bitterness.

He looks up at the sky.

"This is all wrong," Aziraphale says, meaning every word.

He doesn't regret what comes after.

It takes a while for the skies to stop burning.

He looks up the shaft of light from where they are hidden in the bowels of the Earth. It burns him, and he turns away.

The others are trembling, curled up on themselves, cocooned in their wings. He studies his own, the feathers stained dark with something more permanent than ash.

He's surprised at how little he cares.

Despite his own pain, he unwraps his wings and stands, speaks gently and clearly.

"What you are feeling is the Grace stripped from you by a Father who saw his children

as toys to be played with. It is a sign of condemnation by one who deserves it more than any of you. Do not take it to heart."

They look to him in hope and admiration. There are more of them than he'd dared expect, but some are stronger than others. A few already show signs of regret. Some are muttering to themselves incoherently, imprisoned in pain and lashing out at anyone who comes close. If they don't recover, he muses to himself, he'll need to let them out. Let them inflict themselves upon the world the Creator foolishly thought was worth destroying the previous one.

He stares through the shaft of light, through the pain. Somewhere up there is the Garden, with its naked little creations prancing through. The Lord may think these ones to be infallible, this time around. Perhaps he thinks they are worth the sacrifice. He will know better soon enough.

War and chaos settle into something resembling... not peace, but life, balance. Some of his followers have adjusted worse than others, and bitterness runs dark and deep like a poison. They unleash themselves upon the Lord's favoured world, causing mayhem and destroying anything they touch, but they are running out of distractions, craving for something more sophisticated on which to exercise their spite.

He finds himself minding it less and less as the time goes by. If the Lord saw it fit to throw away everything for this world, the burden of caring for it was his alone.

He sees a lone one poised under a shaft of light, squinting up at it with longing. He looks young – one of the new generation, certainly – and the delicate feathering of his wings reminds him of the winged serpent he'd seen early on in the new Garden.

The youngster looks up at him with something between respect and terror and offers a quick, sheepish smile.

"You have nothing to be afraid of," he tells him, "Nothing to regret. You did the right thing by standing with me."

"...I know that," the youth answers. "Uh, I mean. Yes, of course, thank you for reassuring me. Yep."

"You are young," he says gently. "You miss the Grace. You miss the surface. You even miss Him."

The silence speaks for itself.

"Perhaps I shall give you a very special mission," he says softly and sees the youth both light up and cringe in anticipation.

"Um... What sort of special are we talking?"

"You know the Garden. Glorious place, pinnacle of Creation. Many beautiful creatures great and small, all pass through it unnoticed. Quite easy to hide among them, but when you choose a shape, choose it well, for it is meant to last."

The youth stares at him wide eyed.

He steps towards him, grasps a hand and squeezes it reassuringly.

"Get up there and make some trouble," Zirah says, and smiles.