

"A Gift of Words" **(A Fan Fiction based on Good Omens, by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett)**

Imperial City of Strassburg -- 1440 AD

"Oh, this simply will *not* do!" The familiar voice, tight with annoyance, floated out of the open doorway of the half-timbered, two-storied building. Crowley's attention flicked that way, then across the square to the recently completed cathedral. He shuddered but breathed a sigh of relief he at least wouldn't have to set foot on any consecrated ground. The printer's shop might be in the shadow of the cathedral, but it wasn't actually *on* holy ground, thank Satan.

He could only imagine how *that* would go down, downstairs. A demon charging onto consecrated ground just because he thought an angel might be in distress.

*That'll **definitely** go over like a lead balloon.*

Turning toward the open doorway, he strolled over and propped himself against the frame, peering into a dimmer lighting inside. A grin snaked over his face at the sight of a well-dressed -- in shades of white and ecru -- figure frowning over a sheet of parchment spread out on the table before him.

"Trouble, angel?" Crowley drawled the words, not bothering to move from his spot.

Aziraphale wheeled around toward him, surprise in his cerulean eyes -- and was that just a bit of welcome, or was Crowley imagining things? -- before he huffed out, "I didn't know you were in Strassburg. And if you must know, yes. I requested printings of several illuminated texts for my collection, but... Well, just *look* at these!"

Crowley grimaced. The only thing he liked *less* than consecrated ground was trying to read all the fancy-lettered writing poets and such created in the last hundred years. He *really* didn't care for the fourteenth century. He'd thought getting out of it would improve calligraphy, at least. So far, it hadn't.

Still, aware his angel was waiting expectantly for him to look at whatever was wrong with his wood-cut printed books, Crowley rolled his eyes behind dark glasses and pushed indolently from the door frame with a put-upon sigh that was only half annoyance and sauntered across the space between them. Glancing down at the

parchment Aziraphale held, Crowley winced at the streaky mess of illegible letters. No wonder his fastidious angel was so aggrieved.

"Can't you just miracle it clear?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Aziraphale muttered. "That would hardly be craftsmanship, would it?"

Crowley shrugged. "But it'd be legible. Take your pick."

The angel made a small, distressed sound. "That's the *point*, Crowley. It shouldn't *have* to be a choice. How are people supposed to have access to knowledge, to better themselves, if there's not a reliable, inexpensive option for creating books?"

"Got me there," Crowley muttered. "Don't read. Don't want to, either."

"Yes. Well, you *can*, though. It shouldn't stop people who *want* to learn, and *want* to read from being able to, now should it?"

"S'pose not."

Aziraphale's gaze flicked over him. "What are you doing in Strassburg, anyway? I thought you were in Avignon. Trying to stir up unrest in the Church, I believe you said."

Crowley shrugged. "They took care of that themselves, with a nudge or two. I'm supposed to be headed for Tiffauges. Something about a summons. Figure someone else can deal with it. I'll just take myself off to Bavaria for a bit."

Aziraphale *tsk*-ed and went back to scowling at his parchment. "I'd lecture you on duty, but I know you won't listen, and I'm too busy to deal with you causing trouble, anyway."

"There's that." Crowley tilted his head to one side, studying his angel. He didn't like that look. It was all well and good when Aziraphale was scowling at *him* with that put-upon little frown that said he'd stirred up just the right amount of trouble. It was quite another thing to see that almost *pained* scowl on the angel's face.

Aziraphale loved books -- ever since Alexandria, he couldn't seem to get enough of the written word. Crowley figured by now the angel could probably open his *own* library, yet he still sought out every scholar, writer, and poet he could find for more.

Crowley's gaze softened as he watched his angel fuss with wood blocks carved with letters, and murmured, "Is there something I can help you with, angel?"

Aziraphale sighed and shook his head. "Not unless you know a better way to get legible letters on a page, no." He glanced toward Crowley, and the shine of gratitude in his blue eyes nearly blinded the demon. "But thank you, dear boy, for putting up with my less than hospitable mood."

Crowley cleared his throat uneasily, not sure what to think of the tightness building behind his breastbone. "Right. Well, I'll just see myself out. Will you be here in Strassburg long?"

"I'm due in London in September for a blessing. It'll probably take me until then to get a decent printing of Messire Chaucer's final Tale for my collection."

Leaving Aziraphale to his mutterings over the printer's blocks and inkpots, Crowley went in search of someplace to find a halfway decent wine. People could say what they wanted about the French, but they at least made passable wine. Still, as he headed for the inns and vintners, Crowley couldn't shake the thought rattling around in his brain, or the memory of his angel's distressed frown. Perhaps he *could* find a solution. Something to put a smile back on Aziraphale's face.

His gaze lit on a goldsmith's shop, and he wondered. If the letters were printed using metal, rather than wood, would they be more legible? And perhaps there was a way to replace that sludge they called ink, these days, with something that made a thinner coat on the blocks, so it wouldn't run and smudge... Glancing toward a nearby vintner's shop, he remembered watching the wine presses work, when he'd been curious enough to look in on how it was made now, and a grin spread slowly across his face.

Striding toward the goldsmith's shop, emblazoned with the signage *Gutenberg's Golds and Fine Metals*, he swung open the door and enquired of the man bent over a workbench, crafting some trinket that no doubt would never matter, "Messire Gutenberg? How would you like to change the world?"

Whickber Street, Soho, London - 1800

It was a blustery, freezing New Year's day, but that wasn't about to stop Aziraphale from taking a moment to look up on the exterior signage on his newly-acquired building, declaring it the home of *A.Z. Fell and Co., Purveyor of Fine Books to the Gentry*.

Not that he planned to do much selling of the current contents of his new shop. Rather, it was a receptacle for his vast collection of rare scrolls and tomes, collected over

the centuries. He hadn't any plans of parting with them, if he could prevent it - and he had a jolly good plan on how to prevent it, too.

"What the Heaven are you doing out here in the bloody cold, angel? That your new shop, then?"

He turned in surprised delight at the sound of Crowley's voice. He hadn't seen the demon since Paris, seven years ago. Crowley stood a few steps away, looking as dapper as always, despite his taste in depressingly somber colors. Beneath his arm was tucked some kind of package, meaning either Crowley was out shopping, or some form of demonic trouble was shortly to follow.

He sincerely hoped it was the former. He wasn't really in the mood for any thwarting, today. As Crowley said, it was quite chilly out.

"Crowley! Good to see you. Yes, this is the place. Finally finished moving all my books in, yesterday." He eyed the package hopefully. "Out shopping?"

"Huh?" Crowley looked perplexed. Aziraphale sighed and gestured to the package the demon held tucked against his body.

"It appears you've purchased something."

Crowley glanced down, then held the paper-wrapped packet out toward Aziraphale. "Nah. This is for you."

Wariness licked through Aziraphale. "What are you up to?"

A disgruntled scowl twisted Crowley's face. "Nothing, for Satan's sake. Take it, angel."

He wanted to argue, but he was curious about the package's contents, too. Curiosity won out. He took the package from Crowley, instantly surprised by the heft of the packet. It felt like...

Surprise winged through him, and he tore away the paper. A soft exclamation murmured from him as he stared down at the two beautiful old leather-bound tomes in his hands. They had to each have been well over a hundred years old, but they looked as if they'd never been opened.

He looked up at Crowley. "How did you find them?"

Crowley shrugged and stamped his feet. "Can we go inside?"

"Oh! Of course." Aziraphale led the way to the front door, unlocking it before he turned to Crowley. "You're always welcome here, by the way. No need to ask."

Crowley inclined his head in a grateful bow, and Aziraphale chose to ignore the smirk tilting at the demon's lips as he sauntered past, into the shop. Cradling the books Crowley gave him carefully in one arm, he followed the demon in and closed the door behind himself. Inside, he laid the books carefully aside, then doffed his top hat and dusted the fine layer of snow from it in the entryway, so it wouldn't dampen any of the books as it melted. He removed his outer coat and scarf as well, laying them all over the low banister to dry, before turning to pick up the books again. He glanced at the leatherbound covers, perplexed to find no writing on either one. Opening the first book, he glanced over the first page -- which appeared to simply go straight into the tale it contained, without aid of a title page at all -- and stopped in his tracks as he realized what he held.

"Crowley."

"Hmm?" The demon responded, sounding distracted, before muttering, "Don't tell me you don't have any alcohol in this place. It's too bloody cold to not have alcohol."

"In the back room. Cabinet along the wall," Aziraphale answered him distractedly. "Crowley, where did you get these books?"

"Uhh..." Crowley's voice faded off, followed by a creaking door, then rummaging and clinking, before Crowley returned from the backroom, carrying a bottle of wine, a triumphant grin on his face. "Found something."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Huh?" Crowley glanced his way, then frowned. "Oh, some little shop in France. Can't quite remember. Why the deuce are all the walls in here yellow, angel?"

Aziraphale dropped his gaze back to the books he held, and pretended he hadn't heard the question. He was absolutely never going to admit to Crowley he'd been seized by some utterly unholy urge, when it came time to paint the interior, and he'd requested of the painters to find a way to cover the walls in goldenrod yellow. It hadn't been a cheap thing, but he found it soothing. He felt safer than he knew he should, surrounded by the same hue as the eyes now watching him.

Instead of addressing Crowley's question, however, he focused on the demon's gift. "These must be first printings, and early ones at that. They must have cost a fortune! Please, allow me to repay you."

"Nah." Crowley brushed him off, already using a knife to pry the cork from the wine bottle. "Got 'em for next to nothing."

Aziraphale narrowed his gaze briefly on Crowley. Something about the tone of the demon's voice told him there was more to the story than what he was telling, and he bet the books cost a lot more than Crowley claimed. Still, he didn't doubt Crowley would refuse any attempt to reimburse him.

He glanced around himself, and a small smile pulled at his lips. He knew Crowley kept rooms -- owned by Hell, he'd once confided during a long night of drinking -- but that he didn't feel safe in that space. So he would make *this* space safe for Crowley. That was how he would repay the demon. Crowley gave him a gift, so he would repay the kindness with his own gift -- sanctuary.

A.Z. Fell and Co Bookshop, Soho, London -- 1941

While he waited for Aziraphale to return from putting up his cloak and other magician's trappings, Crowley danced his fingertips along the spines of several special editions -- first printings of some of the oldest printed bibles in the world -- and swallowed back a sardonic grin. Your average priest thought waving a bible around would strike fear in the heart of a demon.

Little did most humans know, most lower-level demons didn't even *have* hearts -- not in anything but the strictest physical sense. Bibles only intimidated the ones who couldn't read and thought there was something in there they didn't already know.

Crowley knew the Bible front to back, and back to front (in 1918, just after the Great War, he'd decided on one drunken night, bored out of his mind in some fleabag motel in Kansas, to read the entire thing backward, just for something to pass the time). He found the whole thing funny, instead of intimidating. Maybe a little annoying, even, that despite his hand in so much of it, no one ever *once* thought to refer to him by name.

His fingers stopped on one old, leather-bound book, right between Aziraphale's copy of the Gutenberg Bible and the Buggre Alle This Bible, and an blend of surprise and recognition tugged at Crowley.

It wasn't a large tome, being less than half the size of the bibles around it, and definitely not of the ecclesiastical nature of the other books, either.

Crowley tapped one finger lightly against the old, but immaculate, leather-bound but unmarked spine for a long moment, until he heard Aziraphale return, the unmistakable clinking of wine bottle and glasses preceding him. Then, Crowley plucked the thin, leather-bound book from among the others, and turned, leaning his shoulders up against the bookshelves as he turned it over a few times in his hands.

"I'm surprised you kept it."

"Hmm?" Aziraphale glanced his way, before the angel's attention dropped to the book in Crowley's hands, and he smiled. "Why wouldn't I? It's a lovely book -- especially in its original Italian."

Crowley uttered a short laugh, shaking his head. Only his angel would think *The Divine Comedy* was a 'lovely book.' "Angel, it's complete rubbish, written by an idiot."

Aziraphale lifted one eyebrow. "You're the one who gave it to me. Did I ever thank you for those first edition printings?"

Crowley shrugged uncomfortably, turning to replace the book on the shelf. He didn't want to think about his motives in having Johannes Gutenberg print the fourteenth century Italian poetic narrative, along with a copy of the entirety of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. At the time, he'd passed it off as a "test run" for their newly crafted printing press. He'd let Gutenberg take all the credit for the machine, and even claim that the Bible was its first print. Didn't matter to him. He got what he wanted out of it.

Still, he'd kept the books he had printed safely tucked away until Aziraphale finally gathered all his books in one place and opened the bookshop in 1800. Not that he ever admitted where they came from. And he wasn't about to, now, either. No matter what he realized tonight, being that vulnerable wouldn't help him out any.

"Stumbled across them," he muttered, moving to the table to sit as Aziraphale poured them both wine. "Thought you might like 'em, is all."

His angel flashed a small, bashful smile his way that nearly had Crowley groaning. Before he did something stupid and cost himself his best friend, Crowley lifted the glass Aziraphale slid his way and took a fortifying gulp of wine.

How he was going to keep his feelings under wraps for the rest of however long they might have before Armageddon, he hadn't a bloody clue. He would, though. He wouldn't

do anything that might risk losing time with his angel, again. Even if that meant keeping how far he'd been willing to go just to see Aziraphale smile to himself for the rest of time.

A.Z. Fell and Co Bookshop, Soho, London – 1 Week After Thwarting the Second Coming

Aziraphale hummed to himself and settled more deeply into the comfortable confines of the plush settee, then *tsk*-ed under his breath when his attempt to turn the page of the book he was reading was impeded by the interlacing of long, nimble fingers with his own. Affection lacing his voice, he chided, "You promised to rest. Not that I'm complaining, but I think you'd be more comfortable doing so upstairs, in a proper bed."

"I *am* resting," Crowley mumbled, his eyes closed where he lay draped along the rest of the settee, his feet hanging over the opposite armrest and his head laying on Aziraphale's thigh. His demon currently had their fingers laced together, Aziraphale's hand held captive against his chest and the tartan blanket Crowley had wrapped himself snugly in when he first flopped down beside Aziraphale like a landed trout. "And I'm comf'ble right here, angel."

With a quiet laugh, Aziraphale set aside his book -- that delightful first printing of *The Canterbury Tales* Crowley had gifted him when he first opened the shop. It was clear he wouldn't be getting any reading done, right now, and he was all right with that. Book safely on the side table, he ran his free hand through the soft strands of Crowley's red hair, and mused, "You know, it seems silly, you staying all alone in that mausoleum of a flat over in Mayfair..."

Crowley's eyes blinked open, and Aziraphale froze for a moment, unsure if they were really ready to have this conversation. After all, Anthony was still healing. It hardly seemed fair to...

"You better not have stopped because you're getting ready to walk that offer back, angel." The warning in Crowley's voice couldn't be clearer. Aziraphale smiled to himself. Clearly, he was worrying for nothing.

"Of course not, love." He patted Crowley's chest with his semi-captive hand there. "I just don't wish to put you on the spot, as they say. You're still healing."

"Unbelievable," Crowley muttered, swinging his feet off the armrest and bringing them down to the floor as he levered himself upright with a wince. Aziraphale opened his mouth to chide his demon for moving so quickly when he was obviously still injured from their battle in Heaven, but stopped when he saw Crowley's expression change, the demon's beautiful yellow eyes widen as his gaze fixed past Aziraphale, to the stand

beside the settee, and the softest, most vulnerable look he'd ever seen on Crowley's face settled there.

"You actually read them," Crowley murmured, then, his voice full of absolute wonder.

Aziraphale's brow furrowed. He was having trouble following the twists of this conversation. Was Crowley more injured than he thought?

No, not possible. He'd examined the wound himself. Besides, Crowley seemed to get stronger by the hour since he woke up, which was a sign his body was healing itself, now that the holy water was no longer eating its way through him, poisoning him. "Read what, my love? Naturally I read. You know that."

Crowley leaned across him, their bodies brushing for just the briefest instant as the demon snatched up the book on the side table. Aziraphale bit back his protest of disappointment when Crowley straightened again, the leatherbound tome in hand, wagging it in front of Aziraphale's face.

"I meant *this* book, angel."

"Oh." Aziraphale smiled. "You thought I didn't read them because you gave it to me? Crowley, you're being silly. That's exactly the reason I *do* read them. I like to think of you seeing them and thinking enough of me to choose them as gifts."

Crowley froze for a moment, his eyes filling with a sunny softness Aziraphale was certain he'd never seen before, but he was equally certain he wanted to spend the rest of eternity seeing. Happiness looked good on Crowley.

"I didn't buy them."

Crowley's blurted confession startled Aziraphale, and he blinked, before the words registered. He sighed. "I see. Well, I forgive you for taking them. It's too late to return them, now, but..."

Crowley was staring at him again, like he was the most wonderful, amusing being the demon had ever seen. Then, without warning, Crowley dropped his head to Aziraphale's shoulder, laughing openly.

"I... I didn't... *steal* them," he chortled breathlessly, still laughing as he nuzzled in closer, his breath tickling the side of Aziraphale's neck, now.

Aziraphale's brow furrowed. "You said you didn't buy them. But you didn't steal them? Anthony..."

"I had Gutenberg print them for me." Crowley was murmuring now, his voice still laced with humor, but something infinitely more dangerous simmering there, too.

Gutenberg?

"You were in Strassburg when..." He gasped, pulling away enough to see Crowley's heavy-lidded eyes and the unholy light gleaming there. "Did you have something to do with his invention?"

Crowley grinned wickedly. "I gave him the plans, but let him keep the credit."

"Why?"

There was a light thumping noise -- like a book connecting with the floor -- and Crowley was somehow closer, now, his long fingers trailing up Aziraphale's arm. The angel's heart thundered in his chest, even as a hissing purr filled his ears. "Why do you think?"

He couldn't. Think, that is. He offered Crowley a wavering smile and a small shrug.

Crowley sighed, leaning in to touch his forehead to Aziraphale's, so their gazes met -- goldenrod yellow to his own blue. Then, in a whisper Aziraphale was certain he wouldn't have been able to hear if they hadn't been so close together, his demon breathed, "For you, angel."

Aziraphale's heart took flight at those words. Reaching out, he delved his hands into Crowley's hair and dragged Crowley in for a kiss, pouring all of the love he kept so carefully contained into this press of lips and tangle of tongues. If he ever needed proof his beautiful, wonderful demon did his greatest works in the name of love -- and he hadn't needed any such proof -- he had it, now.

Crowley had given the entire world a gift of words, just because he loved.

THE END