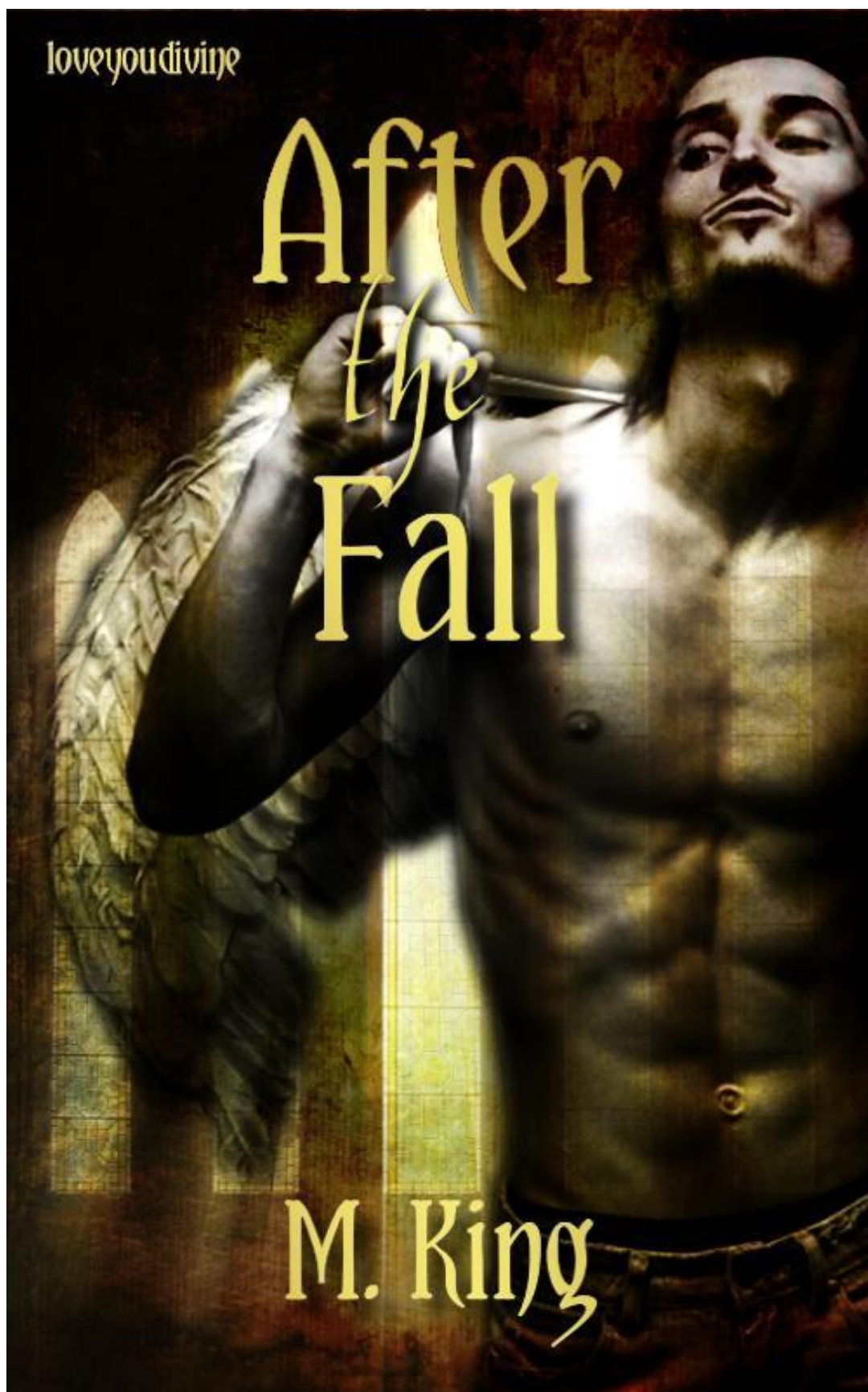


loveyoudivine

After *the* Fall

M. King



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After the Fall

By

M. King

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction & Repulsion, Reason & Energy, Love & Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

~William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

1.

No-one could be blamed for the way things had ended.

That much had to be made clear from the beginning. Both sides agreed to the bargain; far better than risking thousands of years of ill feeling, pitting each side against the other, staining the seeds of future generations with anger and guilt. No. It was supposed to be amicable...but the wreckage love leaves behind it is seldom benign, and there had been no love fiercer than theirs.

Hael sat, high above everything, watching the world below him seethe like an anthill, or perhaps like the twinkling, coiling gasses of a nursery of stars. He'd seen both before, and marvelled at their similarity. Of course, God had a knack for things of that nature, though humans rarely noticed.

They were strange things, in Hael's opinion. They pressed on with their lives – constant motion, constant movement, their little hearts throbbing away – and never once really stopped to consider the immense, complicated, ineffable pattern of which they were part. Perhaps they couldn't. Perhaps they hadn't been made that way.

It wouldn't surprise him.

After the Fall, God had tweaked the design a little; stopped keying in those parts of the genetic code that encouraged too much questioning, too much doubt.

Sapiens v.2.0: now with forty percent less inherent disbelief!

Ideal for all your blind worship needs.

Of course, it had really only counted as a fit of pique on the Almighty's part but – with the way humans bred – that trait had filtered through a great part of their population far quicker than even You Know Who had probably anticipated. So many of them now, and they didn't think, didn't feel...didn't love.

Hael exhaled slowly. Breathing. It was a luxury, a habit he shouldn't keep up, but he enjoyed it. Once – such a long time ago, now – he'd enjoyed so many other things humans took for granted, too.

Things had been good then. Heaven had been a beautiful place, though not perfect. Nothing's perfect – and nothingness is no place to spend an eternity.

He closed his eyes, the whispers of fingertips ghosting his cheeks, the memories of lips pressed against his neck. Sometimes, in quiet moments like these, he could almost believe they were still together. He held the breath he didn't need to take, savouring the imagined swell of kisses.

They'd made love almost everywhere. The tops of mountains, caught between the crags of rocks and the velvet sky, and the depths of oceans, beneath green crystal waves that towered over them in perfect moments of suspended bliss. His fingers buried in another's russet hair, his lips crushed against another's aching, wet mouth...his pulsing cock embedded in a body so much like his own. He could hear, if he tried, the sounds of hard muscle and lean flesh slamming against his, feel the pounding of another's spirit pressed close to his own chest.

Xaphan. His alpha, his omega, and his unending obsession.

The smell of his skin, the taste of him. That singular moment when he opened his eyes wide, his lips bowed around an unutterable word, as if every time it surprised him. His agony and his ecstasy, splattered out between them, and those extended seconds of wondrous amazement when he'd look down at himself, and then laugh, breaking the tension and wrapping them even closer together. That smile, rising from the still waters of his handsome face, sculpted by a divine hand with such tender respect for details—and Hael remembered every detail, even though he wished he did not.

His eyes, the length of his lashes, the creases around his mouth and nose...the dimples in his cheeks when he laughed, like he did in those secret, cherished moments. The sense of earnest urgency about him in other times. How he could plunder new sensations from Hael's body, rip the most sacred pleasures from him and make them profane, make him scream and cuss and beg, sweat-drenched and trembling, ready to endure anything except letting him go.

Anything but that.

Xaphan had always been a rebel. In those ancient days—when the world was less rimed with people, less clogged with their dark, metallic footsteps—they would swoop through cloudless skies together, shirking the duties they should have been heeding. They would sneak away from the Presence, from the eternal, changeless bliss of paradise, and skirt the fringes of a world not made for them.

Once, Xaphan led him into the dark heart of Eden.

The people were long gone by then and the garden had returned to itself, overgrown and humid with a primordial heat. They fucked right beneath the Tree of Knowledge, its bark digging in to the tender place between Hael's wings. His arms wrapped around Xaphan's neck, legs clasped around his waist; he remembered shouting until he grew hoarse, the whole valley ringing with the cries of their union. Afterwards, spent and sticky but so very far from sated, they lay in the grass betwixt those fibrous roots. Xaphan reached out one careless hand, picked a windfall fruit from the ground and brought it to his lips.

Hael remembered the gasp he gave, the way he moved so fast to catch his lover's wrist. Xaphan just smiled—that smile that thrilled, burned and broke Hael from the core of his soul outwards—and opened his mouth. His long, pointed, pink tongue slowly touched the fruit's dusky surface, tracing the soft swelling roundness as he held it in his long, slim fingers.

Don't. Please, don't.

It hadn't seemed so much of a game then, and a slight cruelty touched his eyes as he looked at Hael...as if he'd enjoyed frightening him.

Hael recalled straddling his lap, pushing away the hand and the fruit falling from it. Him, taking Xaphan's mouth in a deep, angry kiss, holding onto the sides of his head as if he was afraid even then of Xaphan turning away from him.

Leaving him behind.

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They killed long hours that way, in their eternal, unquenchable desire. He'd never thought the rebellion mattered to either of them, although at that time it had been little more than a few discontented mutterings on the sidelines of Heaven. No-one had thought it would come to anything.

He certainly hadn't. He hadn't imagined for a moment that it would be so awful, that there would be so much fury and grief. But betrayal is a terrible thing, and to be betrayed by one who was so beloved...

Everyone spoke now of how fair Lucifer was. True, certainly, though Hael had never really marked it. Neither had he believed the things he said, the plans for conquest and new order, all that subterfuge and stealth. He'd thought it had been nothing, and that it would come to nothing, and he had been wrong.

They rose up, and were cast down.

The retribution came, and it was swift and terrible. Xaphan said it was unjust, that they had wanted no more than a fair share of the glory, a sliver of the autonomy and grace He extended to humans. Why should it be that *they* were allowed their failures and their stupidities, when angels existed only to serve?

Xaphan had been the one to suggest setting Heaven ablaze.

Hael scarcely believed it when the accusations were read. Xaphan looked at him, a steely glance across the crowded chamber—he alone refused to bow or cower in the Presence—and Hael knew he wanted him to speak up on his behalf, to stand in his defence. Yet as Xaphan's face hardened, his eyes pools of blazing pride, he knew there was nothing he could say...and he knew that they would have done it. Everything would have burned, and all that hate would have left nothing but ashes behind it. His mind filled with the thoughts of flames tearing through all that had been created, burning even the garden in which they'd lain, and all he could do was hang his head and listen dully to the judgment pass.

Xaphan's hateful gaze bore into him, cold as the furthest reaches of the darkness beyond the stars.

It hurt.

He screamed for Hael, the day the highest Choir threw him from the gates, casting him down into the pit with his fellow conspirators. He struggled, fighting even after his wings had been cut away—and the stench of the blood still twisted in Hael's nostrils, even now, almost as bad as the memories of the agonized yells—but only one name was on his lips.

The others cursed God. All but Lucifer, whose pain had driven him to brooding, terrifying silence. The whole of paradise rang to their voices, warped and jagged with terror, fury and regret. Among them, Xaphan, calling for him over and over, naming him a traitor to their love, to their kind, and unworthy of all that they had shared.

I will never forgive you.

Hael held back until the very moment he fell, though it took all his strength to do so. He wished he'd stayed away entirely, had that been possible. It would have been better not to see any of it, than to inflict upon himself the image of Xaphan, falling through

time and space, the fires of Hell opening to claim him, his naked body burnished in the flames and his face a blank mask of hatred, eyes fixed on Hael.

At first, none of them had imagined the banishment would last long.

It wouldn't be indefinite, surely...their kind needed the Presence, the serenity of the divine. It sustained them. Without it, who knew how they would survive?

Hael had certainly not believed it would be forever. There had been an understanding. There had been promises of forgiveness, of mercy, and Hael had believed them. It was to be amicable. It was supposed to prevent a war, a division between the two sides that could never be bridged. Yes, they had to be punished, but not like this. He'd waited. He had been patient, obedient, and unquestioning, fulfilled his duties and done nothing to evoke suspicion or wrath.

Stories circulated of what Hell was like. At first, Hael thought they were probably grossly exaggerated. The godhead would not have been so arbitrarily divorced from those whom He had once so dearly cherished. Lucifer had been the best-loved of them all, and his absence must have grieved the Creator terribly; more, even, than he himself missed Xaphan, if it be possible.

And yet, no sign of clemency came, and the war began in earnest.

It raged for hundreds of years. Sides were taken, alliances forged and broken, and bitter, acrimonious curses slung. In between the two of them, Heaven and Hell, the humans thrived. They grew in numbers, thronging the planet like rats. They squabbled, lied...built nations and empires on their mismatched interpretations of the truth. Hael would have assumed that their Creator would take some kind of action, but He let it continue, encouraged the black-and-white way his children defined the war, and the things that lay behind it.

They did terrible things in His name. They pillaged, tortured, choked every spark of beauty out of parts of that wonderful world...until it grew hard to stop. Cruelty begot cruelty, which begot much worse. Hael, in his capacity as an arbiter of kindness, an angel of mercy and instigator of the appreciation of good things, found it more difficult to bear than some of his more militant fellows.

He grew bitter on it, the longer he stayed up here. Alone.

He saw so much pain, so much hurtfulness. So much intolerance, ingratitude, incapability and ugliness...and yet he knew they had within them a capacity for better things. Those funny little creatures, with their throbbing hearts and their pure souls, which could scale such unimaginable heights, if only they bothered to use them.

It was his job to watch them. His duty. The one thing to which his purpose was entrusted. To watch them, and to bring among them the seeds of kindness, of mercy and contrition, charity and goodness.

And what a fucking joke that was.

Hael would dearly have loved to turn away from them; from the constant sights of everything they possessed, everything they enjoyed, and every ounce of potential they failed to achieve. With their little agonies and their woeful burdens, they outraged him, and they reminded him so sorely of what he had lost.

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Oh, he'd taken comfort in it at first. Once. But his compassion wore down over time, down and down until the mountain became a tiny pebble, and even if he held it in the palm of his hand and squeezed until it hurt, he could barely remember what sympathy should feel like.

It would have amused Xaphan, he felt sure. Here he was, the one responsible for bringing mercy, charity and benevolence to the world, and it was all he could do to keep from weeping at the sight of it.

Some angel of kindness am I.

You would laugh, my love.

2.

It disgusted him, the unfairness of it all. It was what started the whole thing.

Oh, they talked now—in their histories, their texts, their ribbons of lies—of jealousy, of pride and vanity. That hadn't been the reasoning at all. Yes, the Shining One had expressed his dissatisfaction with the state of affairs. He had said that they deserved more. They were angels, the best beloved of the Lord, and the closest to the Presence.

The humans had Earth. What did they have? What did He make for them?

What special, private place, what gift crafted with love and tenderness, did they have to call their own? Nothing. For they were not His cherished pets. They were servants. *That* was what was wrong.

Lucifer had never demanded the Throne. Only justice, and freedom.

Should his reward for that have been eternal damnation? Should he have been condemned to the pit? Should any of them?

In Xaphan's view it was spite, not punishment, that kept them here. Spite, and an absurd sense of pride betrayed. Oh, yes...the most prideful one of all did not dwell among the flames.

Weakness. That was the worst of it.

When the rebellion started—when the first and bravest of them had whispered together in the secret corners of Heaven, and begun to voice the earliest inklings of displeasure—he had known they would need all their courage. He said as much at the time. They must stand together, or they would be doomed.

And yet so many of the angels had shrunk from the cause. He could understand it from the higher Choirs. Xaphan doubted they had free will in any degree, so fixated were they on the fire of love that came from the Presence, so filled by it, so...intoxicated.

Yes. Drunks!

But he would have thought that more of his fellows—the numerous lower-ranking messengers, the Powers and Virtues—that they would understand. Every day they had to come face-to-face with the inequality, the injustice, of the Creation. It wasn't fair. It wasn't...*right*.

He shivered. Stupid, really, but he'd been so long in the fire now that he felt the cold once he was away from it. Or, rather, he imagined he did. He suspected he had lost the ability to truly register pain or feeling. His soul had been numb for centuries, so whatever happened to his flesh mattered very little.

For a moment, memories he did not wish to recall flickered through Xaphan's mind.

A tree, a garden...the missing half of him. A body, very like his, but a being so totally different inhabiting it. A creature of light and beauty and kindness, the way he had once been, but full of such faith and trust.

Hael had always made him feel inferior.

Something about how sure he seemed of everything, how calm. He was the cool, deep water at which Xaphan slaked his thirst, and every time he was frightened of falling in.

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Had he been braver, he would have confided in Hael before the rebellion got underway. He'd planned to, that last day before the assault on the Throne. They took themselves away from the gates of paradise—as they used to do, so easy when you knew you could walk straight back in again—and went to a place hidden at the top of the world. There was ice there, sparkling and intricate, and great sheets of snow, touched only by the rippling wind.

Hael loved looking at the creations. The smallest things gave him pleasure, and that day he presented Xaphan with a snowflake, a tiny dot on the end of his finger.

"Look at it," he said. "Isn't that clever? It's just like a galaxy, only smaller."

His face, bright with joy and interest, flashed once more behind Xaphan's eyes. He'd taken Hael's wrists in his fingers, pulled him close. Kissed him. He remembered meaning it just as a spur of the moment expression of love, but then not being able to stop himself. The cool, dark waters closed over him and, before he knew it, he was laying everything bare. His fears, his apologies, his desperation and his anger...Hael felt them all. He'd wrapped his arms around Xaphan, held him tight as they broke and, breathing hard, he tried to pretend it had been nothing more than a kiss.

Xaphan remembered the smell of him, the warmth of his embrace. His arms slid tentatively around his lover, his fingers slipping into the dark, soft crevices beneath his wings. He'd wanted to hide there, to stay enveloped and protected, to forget all the things he was involved in, all the things to which he'd bound himself. But—as he realized in that moment—that was the very point of the rebellion itself.

They wanted freedom. The freedom to live, to love, to fail like humans. The freedom to be afraid, and to be fragile, and to know that it was all right to do so.

He put his lips to Hael's ear, murmured the first few words that felt so heavy, so very hard to say.

"Listen. I need to tell you somethi—"

"It's beautiful here, isn't it?" Hael had lifted his head, looked away over the snow to where a thin golden line marked the dawn. He smiled, and spread his wings to catch the warmth of the light, letting his arms fall from Xaphan's shoulders. "Isn't it?"

He hadn't wanted to know. He must have suspected, then, and he had purposely avoided it, purposely pretended ignorance.

Xaphan had stayed with him while the sun rose, and its light painted flares of red and gold across the white.

Like flames.

There had been a great deal of fuss made, during the judgment, over how he had suggested setting Heaven ablaze. Sure, it had been a moment of anger. A foolish, petulant thing.

It would have worked, though.

He thought that even now, even after all these long years. Burn it to ashes and start again. It was the only way to win their freedom, to start from a democratic and equal footing. Did they not deserve choice?

Of all the things they were denied—a home world, an identity of their own, an existence not defined by servitude—choice was the worst refusal. It made their kind

stupid, senseless and stodgy. Tall, bright, beautiful puddings, that's all they were. Even in the face of the worst outrages, the most terrible things, they said and did nothing.

The banishment was proof of that. It was clearly unfair. Not to say that You Know Who hadn't felt the pain of the betrayal—it must have hurt, of course—but any being capable of designing a system as perfect as free will and conscience must have been able to see that the rebels had a point. Lucifer's defence was the most eloquent plea Xaphan had ever heard. Had someone he loved spoken so beautifully to him, with such passion and grace, he could not have denied them.

But, for the sake of anger, ego, and the look of the thing, they suffered.

Their wings cut, they were hurled from Heaven, and the humiliation was made complete. A punishment never to be rescinded, simply because God couldn't face having to admit a mistake, or a flaw.

Was that fair?

And yet, after all this time, the fall mattered less to Xaphan than what he had seen as he plummeted. Hael. Just watching him, the same way he'd just watched in the chamber of judgment. Dumb. Mute. No word of defence, no protestation of injustice...no tears shed for him.

He'd just *watched*.

That memory would stay with Xaphan always.

Over time, it had chafed against his better memories, the sweeter recollections of what they'd shared. It had been potent, fierce, and indelible, but the lasting pain of that betrayal tainted it. Even so, there would never be another. No other than Hael. He'd tried to make himself believe that wouldn't be so, but he'd failed, and that failure annoyed Xaphan.

So, now, here he was...skulking in the shadows of an ugly, faceless, human town. His mission—his petty, pointless, spiteful mission—was to lay claim to a tempted soul. It should matter to him, this game. It used to, long ago.

He saw himself as a freedom fighter then, each soul they snared a victory in a guerrilla war that had to be fought, however undesirable, to keep proving their point. Contrition hadn't worked. After the fall, several of their number had prostrated themselves and begged for forgiveness. Every one of them had been denied. Not fair. Not just. Simply the hypocritical pretence of keeping face.

Xaphan used to justify everything he did that way. By making every sin a necessary evil of the cause, he assuaged his own guilt. These days, he barely even felt the guilt at all, long since inured to it, and to the lack of impact it appeared to have in Heaven.

Theirs was a war no-one could win, yet nobody remembered now how to quit.

Xaphan sniffed and shook his head, trying to clear away the insidious memories, the lingering anger, and the persistent sensation that he could smell the scent of Hael's skin, feel the softness of feathers upon his face.

He should concentrate. There would be time to bathe in remembered pleasures later, when he'd retire to his pit and chafe himself against his losses until he slept, the fires of his anger at the world damped down for the night.

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Xaphan bunched up the considerable muscles of his haunches and leapt, scaling the side of the building with ease.

The human slept in a chamber at the very top. He smelled the want of sin rolling off it, like a violet hue to the dark air. They were all sinners—hell-bent, or just pending, each and every one of them—because they had made themselves so many loopholes through which to squeeze.

The way it used to be, sinning was hard. You really had to try to be evil. But now, with so much doubt and cruelty inherent in their everyday life, so many religions proscribing and prescribing tenets entirely of their own making—in the names of gods they had not so much created as reinvented in their own, human image—there was really no hope at all for these poor bastards.

Trouble was, if they believed it, they damned themselves. With all the frills stripped away, all the unnecessary complications of years of scholastic wrangling forgotten, all that really mattered was belief.

Believe that it's wrong while you're doing it, and anything can be a sin.

Couple that with the proliferation of guilt and intolerance in human society—the basic compulsion of one monkey to fling faeces at another—and the poor little things tore themselves apart with almost no help at all from Lucifer and his demons.

Still, Xaphan supposed, as he scaled the iron ladder that ran up to the building's roof, it didn't hurt to keep a hand in.

He slipped noiselessly through the closed window of his intended victim's apartment—simply a matter of rearranging his atoms around the glass, which tickled a little bit, but caused him no real problems—and dropped to the faded green carpet of the bedroom.

Funny things, humans.

He and Hael used to laugh at them, at their odd little ways. They spent so much time being foul to each other, and just when you thought they weren't capable of anything else, one of them did something amazing and surprised you with an act of such goodness, charity or beauty that it was...humbling?

Perhaps.

The room was dark. Sparsely furnished, though Xaphan hadn't been concentrating for the past few hundred years, and wasn't sure what humans liked to have around them these days. There were definitely fewer oxen than there used to be. Lots of books, stuffed haphazardly into shelves. Discarded clothes on the floor, and a chest of drawers with junk piled high on the top of it. Coffee cups, pens, keys...and, in the middle of it all, a bed with the covers pulled high, and the shape of a body beneath them.

Xaphan smiled.

Time to get down to business.

3.

It hadn't been an easy week.

I'm an artist. I shouldn't have to deal with office politics. All I ever wanted to do was draw and, as long as I get paid and the integrity of my work doesn't get screwed up too badly, I really don't care who publishes it, or who's working for whom.

Of course, that isn't the way my boss sees things.

We're a small, independent publishing house, he says. We're a family. And, as Green Trout Comics own all the rights to Angelique—the crime-fighting, ball-busting, supernatural heroine I created in my last year of art college and so, so *stupidly* signed away creative control over—I can't really argue. But it still sticks in my damn throat to see them taking on people who, in my opinion, should be legally barred from being within forty miles of a pen.

I can't help it. I'm sensitive about Angelique. She pays for my apartment, my car, that holiday I had in Cancun...and I think she's the only woman I could ever love. Which is sad, given that she isn't real in any conventional sense, and I'm unlikely to meet a man who understands how important she is to me. So, it may not be surprising to realize that, at that time, I was a mess of visceral, furious emotions.

I'd not only been told that Chad—the one new writer at Green Trout I truly couldn't stand and would very much have liked to see impaled on a spike—was taking over Angelique, but that my storyboards for the #114 issue weren't going to be up to standard. They wanted another Doctor Diablo story, my boss said.

Worse than that, they wanted to wreck the whole chemistry of the pairing.

I was incensed. It was always my idea that Angelique—this beautiful, rubber-clad siren, the daughter of a fallen angel—was in love with Diablo, a criminal mastermind who was himself half-demon. It represented something really important to me about what people are, and of course through the whole cycle of the stories, they wanted to be together but couldn't, because of the differences in their essential natures. It was great.

But no. No, that wasn't good enough for the new management at Green Trout.

They wanted Angelique to ditch Diablo and get together with Sam Cage, the jerk wad San Francisco cop who came into the story after she fell to what should have been her death chasing a villain, and he rescued her, realizing as he did so that she had survived a fall no human could withstand. Cage would bring out the human side of her nature, my boss said. Cage was the reader's conduit.

Bull shit, I said. But, if I wanted to keep on working on the series, I had to say it quietly.

So, I couldn't wait for Friday to come. A whole weekend just to myself. Time to try and calm myself down, to stop feeling so outraged, so fucking angry at everything. If I had the money, I told myself, I'd walk away.

Only that wasn't true.

I could do it. I could probably afford to quit, to find another job. I'm good enough—sinful pride, that is—but just too damn stubborn. The Sunday services of my childhood

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rang out from memory and reprimanded me for the way I was thinking. Pride, arrogance, all those naughty things. Covetousness.

Even the language of the Bible is strange.

I went to a bar after work. Slung back a few drinks and ogled a hot guy at the pool table. Every time he bent over, his jeans clung tighter to his ass, rode up a little against the firm flesh that undoubtedly lay beneath them. I wanted to go over there and touch him. Pull the pants down and, at the most basic level of things, jam my rock-hard dick into his hot, yearning hole.

Obviously, I didn't. I would have been arrested.

I sat, drank my drink, and wished I had the guts to go over and at least say hello. Wished I'd gone home first, taken a shower and changed my shirt. Wished I'd brushed my hair before leaving the office, or wore glasses that actually flattered my face, instead of making my eyes look alien-critter-huge.

Wished my life away.

Lust and idleness both added themselves to my list of sins on a regular basis, sitting alongside what Father Buchanan used to call 'irregular motions of the flesh', during far too many lonely evenings in front of the DVD player. It was an uneasy truce, but I'd given up dating since my last boyfriend turned out to be more into his Jungle Juice than me, and being half of a couple—the worn-down, nagged at, bitched to half—really just lost its appeal.

I slunk home, skulked back under my rock. Showered, ate cold take-out noodles, called my mother and pretended to listen to her talking while I stared at the hunk calendar on the far wall and—finally—went to bed.

Sleep didn't come easy. The combination of alcohol and masturbation helped.

I had *weird* dreams. I mean, seriously weird.

There was a smell of, like, sulphur or something, and the room seemed uncomfortably hot. I tossed and turned—or dreamed that I did—and a voice kept calling my name.

"Nick. Nicky?"

A man's voice. Not one I knew, but one I would have liked to have known. Deep. Sexy. The kind of voice that could tell me to do anything without sounding silly.

"Wake up."

I did what I was told, inside my dream. Crouching over me, his face hovering just above mine, was the most incredible creature I'd ever seen. A man, so incredibly good-looking that he could have melted mirrors with the slightest glance, and he was staring at me. He was...on top of me.

If it hadn't been a dream, I would have panicked.

The covers were scant protection between us. The heat of his body enthralled and terrified me. I just lay there, vaguely hoping things would resolve themselves.

He tilted his head, first to one side, then the other. The shadows rolled around him, like he was a part of them, like he controlled them. He touched my lips with one finger and I yielded, pulling the pad of the digit into my mouth, suckling greedily, hopefully, at the flesh. Tasted like cinnamon bagels and wood-smoke. I wanted more.

He smiled. It was a megawatt weapon of mass distraction.

"Sinner," he said.

I found my voice. "If you want."

My hips lifted from the sheet, seeking closer contact with his body. I hadn't had a dream this good in years, and I wanted to make the most of it. He drew himself into a crouch, knelt heavily across my chest. My mouth watered at the thought of him fucking it, and it occurred to me that I didn't know if he was naked or not. He wasn't fully formed to me; like a wisp or a sensation out of the darkness, not a real thing.

"I want you," he said, but it sounded strange. Not like he *wanted* me, but like he wanted *me*. The words shifted while he said them, the emphasis odd. Was I a prize, a goal of some kind?

Why me?

I reached a hand out from the tangled mass of the covers, and touched him.

Hot. Skin, smooth and flawless, barely any hair, but the heat...strange. Not as if it came from within him, but as if it *was* him. He bent his head, mauled my neck with a mouth so talented I wanted to cry.

"Kiss me?"

My voice, but not the way I usually sounded. Hungrier. Needier. He obliged, and I thought I'd die on the spot.

"Give me everything," he whispered, and I wanted to. "Give me your soul."

This was a weird dream indeed. I fidgeted.

I thought souls were supposed to be wagered, not outright asked for like a charity collection. But, it wasn't real, so who was I to argue?

I was ready to say yes, almost ready to believe in it...but something stopped me. A soft noise, like feathers. Wings. A smell of flowers. Lilies, maybe, their rich and heady perfume teasing my senses. The darkness seemed to pale, a gold light sluicing through it from the underneath, the way the first touch of dawn makes the night translucent.

He stiffened, and sat up, looking towards my window. A wolf, disturbed in its meal. His face changed, mouth turning slack and eyes widening. I tried to sit up, to see what he saw, what had so alarmed him, but he put one large hand to my chest, pushing me back against the pillows with such ease it wasn't even funny.

That smell seemed stronger. Definitely lilies. Headly, and intense.

Something very complex coloured my dream-lover's face. I didn't like it, and I wriggled, fear beginning to snake through me for the first time. Dreams shouldn't feel so real. The weight on my chest grew heavier, discomfort spreading through my chest and starting to verge on pain.

The room grew light, suffused with bright smears of gold and warm gray. It lit the face and body of the man astride me, showed me the most beautiful creature imaginable...except for two black, bloodied stumps on his shoulders. He let out a long, rasping breath, and one word left his perfect lips. To me, it had a strange, foreign sound, like an incantation or ancient spell.

"Hael?"

After The Fall

To begin with, I had no idea what he was staring at, but that pale golden light kept on filtering slowly through the room and, over by the door, a figure revealed itself. Tall, fair...monstrously beautiful. A face like that looked too perfect to be human. Just like the creature currently squatting on top of me, this new intruder seemed more living marble statue than flawed thing of flesh and blood – yet there was no sense of malice. Whatever my new house-guests were, they were terrible, but kindly.

The strangest thing was the atmosphere. So thick, so choking...yet I might as well not have been there. They stared at each other as if I'd lost all interest for them, these two weird phantasms, imaginings, or whatever they were. Figments of my fevered brain. Both so finely moulded, so perfectly cast, ideal in their proportions and awesome in their glory.

The weight across me lifted, and the creature above me sprang off the bed, his movement graceful and catlike.

For the first time, I could see he was totally naked and I blushed, hot from the roots of my hair to the top of my chest. He wore his birthday suit with greater pride and confidence than most men achieve through hours of grooming and designer suits, and that in itself was intimidating. Every line of his body was broken up into a series of angles and planes, complicated layers of shadow licking across them as he moved over the floor.

The other one just stood, little visible of him in the gloom except for that grave, beautiful face. Fair, like a flame. He stared, but not at me, and then he stiffened, tautening as the other being approached him. I supposed he didn't want to be touched, though that's not what showed in his face. He winced and, with a sound like a fist hitting a pillow, he –

Holy fu.... Whoa. That just isn't right!

– unfurled his wings.

Everyone knows what angels look like. They come on greetings cards and TV shows, and shop windows and Christmas trees and I had never, ever, seen one that looked like this. But it's what he must have been. The wings weren't at all what I'd have imagined – had I ever really imagined seeing angels. Back when I was doing first-round sketches of Angelique, I thought about wings. I got bogged down in the whole complicated issues of whether she'd be able to fly if she had them, and how the bones of an otherwise human skeleton would have to adapt, how the muscles would have to be rearranged.

This guy had apparently never been bothered by such complications. It was impossible to picture any law of physics standing up to question or defy him. Rather, it would have shattered itself out of shame, too shy to go against such staggering beauty.

And those wings...!

They were massive. Powerful, broad; every feather thick and long, overlapping in wide, strong, white ranks. Outstretched, they curved like the span of some immense, proud bird of prey, both impressive and intimidating, preening and threatening.

I gazed on, afraid to look away, but frightened by what I saw.

4.

His job was to watch them, to bring them the grains of salvation and encourage them to nurture those seeds. No one required him to become personally involved. He hadn't even *wanted* to...until he heard of these new ploys.

There had been talk in Heaven for a while of dirty tactics in the war, of trickery and subterfuge beyond the reasonable expectations of evil. It wasn't right, in Hael's view. The whole point of free will was to allow humans to sin, if they so chose, but to condemn by so doing the *choice*...not always the action.

If they were targeted without understanding the offer of the choice, how could they resist? How could they sin?

Not that God wanted them to sin at all, he supposed. Though, as Xaphan had often pointed out when they were together, that in itself raised inevitable questions. Why, then, give them the opportunities? Why give them the capability? Why, above all things, make the rod for your own back?

Hael knew, or at least thought he did. Love is not love that is not freely given, and obedience is not obedience if there is no choice.

Even so, he didn't approve of this new style of play. Thieving dreams, and sliding insidious motives for sin into minds not prepared to resist them. It wasn't the way the game should be played. So he followed the stench of sulphur, followed the trail of smoke, and followed the demon into the human's lair.

It should never have been *him*.

The room was dark, though it mattered little to him. Hael didn't need light the same way humans did to see by; he simply held up a palm, opened out his fingers, and illuminated the scene in the soft, eerie glow of a different kind of darkness.

Shadow upon shadow, truth upon truth.

Xaphan. Of all those he might have met in this place, of every fallen soul, why should it be him?

His face, his form...still so much the same, still so unchanged, but for those hideous, scarred places where his wings had once been, and his eyes. They blazed out at Hael, much more noticeable than the torn stumps of dead feathers, and far more hurtful to look upon. Real pain lay in them. Not just the fleshly torment of millennia, either, but something worse. They burned, those eyes. Burned raw, hollow, and awful. And yet, when he said Hael's name—the silvered whisper of an ancient, secret tongue—nothing had ever really changed. There were no intervening years, no miles between them, and no furious plummet towards the pit blighting that one, sweet word.

Hael blinked and shook his head, forcing himself to look at Xaphan afresh. He knew what he was: a demon. Whatever else he had ever been must remain consigned to the past. The choices that had parted them—Xaphan's choices—could not be undone, and could not be ignored.

He glanced at the bed. The human they were both here to win—and wasn't that a bad joke of the part of each side responsible?—had clutched the covers up to his face

and now hunched somewhere in the middle of the bed, quaking, and making the occasional high-pitched whimper.

Xaphan came closer, his head tilted to the side, his body inclining a little towards Hael. The anger in his eyes seemed tempered by the attitude of calm inquiry –almost deference –in his pose, but Hael knew him better than that.

A scent he hadn't caught in so long, yet had never forgotten, prickled his nose and woke a host of different aches within him, blinding and suffocating. Alongside all of that, so much anger! Anger that tasted black and sharp on the back of his tongue, for all the wrongs and betrayals Xaphan had committed...and that he had done so alone, with no thought to share the burden of his cause, or even to confess his guilt. Worse, the fury at him for being here now, like this, and for causing Hael's whole being to wind itself into complex agonies of knotted confusion all over again.

Xaphan began to stretch out a hand –part gesture of peace, part unwelcome assumption –and Hael moved without quite intending to do so. He snapped open his wings, as a lizard might raise its frill, or a cat switch its tail in warning, and the look of dismayed horror of Xaphan's face gave him an ignoble pleasure.

Hael stretched them out, those twin emblems of everything that separated and defined Xaphan and him, and he gloried in it. The human whimpered again, reminding Hael of its presence, and he supposed he should not have let himself be so swayed, so moved by petty emotions.

Yet, when he looked at Xaphan, there seemed nothing remotely petty about it.

"You are here," Xaphan volunteered, still in the tongue of angels.

Hael scoffed. "Evidently. Is this your remit now? Seducing boys while they sleep?"

"Hardly. This one has been marked for some time. I have come only to claim it. Tying up loose ends, so to speak. You know how it is with mortals. If you don't make sure you have them properly filed by the time they're thirty, they might still run off and catch religion."

He sounded genuine, but Hael caught the smouldering fuse of callous flippancy in his tone.

"Really? Good grief. And then where would you be?"

Xaphan shrugged; a simple, proud, leonine movement that brought into sharp relief the stumps that marked his shoulders. Hael couldn't help remembering –couldn't help hearing again the snatches of screams, the curses and the pleas –and it irked him to realize Xaphan had caught him looking.

"Your people are the ones who open the way to damnation," Xaphan said smoothly. "Without prohibition, there would be no temptation to sin."

"And without your style of temptation, there would be no need to proscribe. Besides, they're your people too."

Xaphan said nothing to that, though Hael thought he caught the trace of a wince. He pressed his advantage, suddenly queasy and cold and wanting to be anywhere other than here. His solitary, rocky, mountainside haunt might have lacked comfort, but it came with none of these unpleasant complications.

"Well." As abrupt as his silence had been, Xaphan now spoke again, bright and sadistically cheerful. "It's a quandary. What do we do? What *are* we to do?"

Hael saw in his eyes the thrill of a new game, and wasn't sure he wanted to play. The prospect of telling Xaphan to take the human's soul and—aptly enough—be damned, though tempting, was hardly an option he could accept. He sighed.

"Will you fight me, then, Hael? Battle of wits? A game, maybe. Chess? You were fond of that particular mental torture once, I believe. I'd play you again. We could play."

"Enough. Stop it!"

Hael nodded to the bed, where the poor human looked fit to expire from fright. *Poor human? Hm. Perhaps not every grain of charitable kindness is yet forgotten.*

"He can't understand a thing, Xaphan. This isn't fair."

Anger sparked again in Xaphan's face. "Fair? No one ever said anything about *that*, my dear. Was it fair when I fell?"

"It was punishment. You were all treasonous."

"It was petty retribution!" Xaphan spat, looming closer, wrath bubbling just under the surface of his voice. "The act of an angry child, a jealous lover...and that much could have been forgiven. But to pretend it was justice? To pass that rash verdict, never to be reversed?" He flung out a hand, pointing at the quivering human. "Even the very worst of *them* gets the chance for forgiveness! Their child-rapers, sadistic murderers, mass killers...by the same laws, they can earn the chance to be forgiven. They can enter Purgatory. What of us? For one strike at injustice, we are cast down forever?"

After the great rush of words, his silence left a hole in the night, and Hael shivered. Still so fine, so passionate, so proud!

"It was not the way to ask for what you wanted. You planned to set Heaven alight."

"To make a point!"

"You would have burned it," Hael persisted. "Wouldn't you? Would you have burned everything?"

Even me?

Xaphan looked at him for a long moment, expression coloured with something darkly like hatred, perhaps the desire to lunge, to strike him, get his hands around Hael's neck and choke out the life, the memories...the defiance. He lowered his gaze and shook his head.

"No. Not everything."

Hael let a dry, angry breath loose behind his teeth. "It is *you* that made it a war in the first place."

Xaphan pulled his mouth into a snide, unpleasant smile. Hael stiffened, waiting for the inevitable retort, the cruel epithet, but nothing came. The moment stretched out, winding itself around the tension between them, sharpening the edges until they were honed to terrible clarity. They just kept looking at each other, neither willing to be the first to blink.

5.

Hael wanted him. He could smell it. Desire seeped out of his every pore; out from behind the cracks in that unblinking, austere façade, however much he would have preferred to hold it back.

It would be tempting to give in to it, to push him into acknowledging that need. Xaphan had to admit, if there was one thing he had a gift for, it was temptation...yielding to it or inflicting it, he had a skill. He glanced over his shoulder at the shaking, pitiful human.

Everyone has at least one weakness.

He sprung away from Hael, landing in a crouch on the end of the bed. The human gave a small squeak and tensed up, at which Xaphan suppressed a smile. He cocked his head to the side.

"Nick?"

He addressed it in its own language, the shapes of the words pale and lumpy in his mouth. The frightened little creature peered out from behind the coverlet, tousle-headed and wide-eyed. Xaphan gave it an encouraging smile, as kind as he could manage.

"Don't be scared."

The human stared at him, its — *his* — eyes wide, black pools of terror, but glimmering with interest. Excitement, even. That pleased Xaphan. He liked it when they fought back, but the thought of one of them taking an interest in the whole process was just as good...maybe even better.

"Y-y-you're...aren't you?" the human began, stammering around things he could barely conceive of, let alone understand.

Xaphan arched his eyebrows, gently encouraging. "Yes?"

"He's got wings." The human pointed at Hael, and scrambled up the bed, kneeling and dragging the covers with him, tight to his chest. "*Wings*. And you...you're...you *did* have 'em, right? Your...your back. It's — You're a demon. Aren't you? A fallen angel. And he —"

He pointed again, hand shaking. Xaphan heard Hael move behind him, the shifting of the air and the soft sound of feathers.

"Xaphan, don't do this. Please?"

Hael even sounded good speaking the human's language, damn him.

Bastard.

"Please?" Xaphan mimicked, not bothering to turn around. "Why would I do that? It's all about this soul. All about you, Nicky."

Xaphan shaped his lips around a kiss and blew it at the human, unable to help himself. Hael's hand landed on his shoulder, grip firm and irresistible. He pulled Xaphan around, half-off the bed, away from the soul. Wings out at full stretch, terrible ire and awesome beauty, yet all Xaphan could see in his face was a dark want, aching to be sated.

So easy to push them both over the edge. To kiss him, right now. He'd fight it, of course. Xaphan would kiss him, Hael would push him away, furious and outraged, but the seed would already have been planted. The memory, living again. It wouldn't take much more than that, and it would be wonderful.

"Don't," Hael said. A simple, static word, but tinged with the oppression of a dozen unspoken desires.

Conflicting, vengeful things warred with starker, easier temptations, and their power was such that Xaphan felt it too, singed by it in a way that almost reminded him of the pit he'd called home for far too long.

"I hate you," Hael whispered.

Xaphan reeled under the sweetness of the words, managing to pin together a smile and ease it onto his face. He leaned a little further in, the essence of Hael's proximity running through him like molten gold, scouring and burning.

"Me too, darling," he murmured.

One long breath hissed through Hael's nostrils. *Wonderful – all this time, and he still has that stupid habit!* They were so close, for a moment Xaphan thought the angel would break first and close the distance between them, but he moved away. Rapidly, and decisively...as if he had something to run from.

Then it's a start, at least.

He turned, watching Hael approach the mortal's bed, going into that whole 'cower not' thing. Light of God, every soul sacred, not too late to repent and save himself from damnation, et cetera. Xaphan yawned theatrically and swivelled himself around on the foot of the bed.

The human looked uncertainly between them and licked his lips.

"Um. Wait—just so I have this right. I'm not dreaming, right? I'm having some kind of spiritual epiphany...unless I accidentally drank drain cleaner and don't remember doing it, which is unlikely. And you're an angel? And you," he added, squinting uncertainly at Xaphan, "are a demon. So, you're...what? Going to fight over my soul? Each try to persuade me with some eloquent celestial argument?"

Xaphan allowed himself a quiet snigger. The passage of recent centuries had apparently been kind to humans' sense of metaphysics. In times past, they used to just either yield without much of a fight, or drop to their knees and start praying. He rather liked his new, interactive approach.

Hael shot him a reproachful glance before turning back to Nick.

"That's not really what's supposed to happen. This is...unfortunate, to say the least."

Xaphan snorted, and the human looked at him in wonderment.

"Y-you know each other, don't you? Um, like...*well*. Right?"

His voice rose in pitch, the clamour of a hound scenting quarry, and his eyes brightened. Xaphan was briefly struck by a mild impulse to rip the creature's head from its body. All those years in Hell had, he supposed, significantly lowered his irritation threshold.

"That is of no relevance," Hael said stiffly.

The corner of Xaphan's mouth twitched.

Lying, my angel?

It *was* relevant. It was the here and now, the beginning and the end, and the fabric of everything. Whatever happened here tonight, he felt sure both sides would be watching.

He eased down from the bed and oiled his way to the head of it, leaning behind the human, his hands on its shoulders, mouth level with its ear. Xaphan looked at Hael's taut, furious expression of disapproval, and smiled. He could already feel the human squirming beneath his touch, arousal and discomfort warring in its fragile little body.

"We both want you," he murmured, sending another shiver through the damp, mortal skin. "All you have to do is choose. Temptation or redemption?"

"I-I don't understand," the human protested, but Xaphan could smell the lie.

Hael shook his head. "Don't tease him. It isn't right. Look...what are you called?"

"Nick."

"Nick. Thank you. Look, Nick...you are right, to a degree. This *is* an epiphany. But it's not all that will decide your soul's fate. You know you have sinned?"

The human blanched, and Xaphan felt a slight resistance bloom beneath his hands.

"I-I've never done...I mean, I don't think I've ever done anything really awful. Lots of little stuff—does that count? Th-this one time, in fourth grade, I stole a Baby Ruth from the store on the corner near my grandparents' house—but I took it back. I smoked weed in college—oh, God. Is smoking weed a sin? Oh, G—shit! That's a sin, isn't it? Taking the Lord's name in vain. And cursing. Aw, crap...I'm goin' to Hell...."

Xaphan kissed the mortal's cheek and felt him melt a little in response. Watching the look of jealous rage cross Hael's face made it even more worthwhile.

"The only real sin," he purred, letting his breath graze the human's cheek, hands still massaging those tense shoulders, his gaze fixed on Hael, "is guilt. And you've felt so guilty, haven't you? About everything."

"Yes."

The word came out as a barely shaped rasp, and hot salt tracks graced the human's cheeks as he began to cry. Xaphan extended his embrace, wrapped his arms around Nick's chest and smiled as the mortal's hands slipped up to hold onto him, fingers digging into the flesh of his wrists.

Hael watched, his mouth a tight line of disapproval.

"The only sin," he said into the ragged quiet, the sound of Nick's tears lapping at its edges, "is evil intention. To do things even though you believe they're wrong. Those are your crimes."

"And they come from guilt," Xaphan snapped.

He held Nick tighter, surprised to find a wash of protective anger riled in himself. Utterly ridiculous, and yet....

"They shouldn't make themselves suffer for it," he heard himself say, not quite sure where the words kept coming from. "It's not even *his* guilt. They instruct themselves in it from the day they're born. They raise their young on it. Guilt, and shame...regrets."

Xaphan inclined his head, pressed his mouth to the mortal's hair. Nick smelled of sleep-sweat and cigarette smoke, of ink and male spice.

"Don't talk about regret," Hael said, his voice taut. "Not to me."

Xaphan didn't look at him. Of all the things he heard in Hael's tone, there wasn't one he could bear to see in his face. He listened to the sound of him move across the floor, the odour of sanctity and the gentle swoop of feathers coupled with the scent of his body. Even now, it stuck in Xaphan's throat, though he wasn't sure if he genuinely smelled it, or just remembered doing so. The taste of him. It all clogged his nose and mouth, a surfeit of painful recollection that roused and chastised him, and all he wanted was to have never come here tonight, for everything to have remained as it once been and, most of all, to never have fallen in the first place.

6.

I must have been going mad. There was no other explanation.

What started off as a naughty dream I was perfectly prepared to have—naked guy on my chest in a dark room, weighing down on me and asking if I wanted to sin—had changed beyond all recognition. The air in my bedroom tasted metallic and stale, like the heat left over from a bonfire, and the overpowering smell of lilies hung on that dark stagnancy, thick and choking.

I was caught in the middle. An angel and a demon, right here in my room, both dancing some complicated battle around each other that I at once did not understand—their words, an ancient language beyond all human knowledge—and yet saw so plainly, so obvious.

Lovers. I wouldn't have imagined that was possible.

I had thought angels were sexless, for a start, but the being in front of me certainly wasn't. He was huge; a tall, fearsome, terrifying vision of...well, masculinity seemed the only word, though he wasn't technically a man. There was nothing in the slightest effete or feminine about him, like all those white-gowned, blond-haired, solemn pictures of angels standing, gazing down into the Nativity crib. The lack of comparison to fat-assed little Cupids and cherubs didn't even enter my head.

The other one—the demon—was just the same. It struck me as strange at first, until I realized that devils are nothing more than angels who fell. How their torment stems from the very thing humans are scared of doing: reaching too far, and finding no forgiveness for it.

He called himself Xaphan. He kissed me, and it was like being consumed by fire. Not that it burned. The warmth of him lit me from the deepest part of my body, and I thought of nothing else but that. The desire for more—more of him, more of his touch, more of everything—filled my head, and I lapsed into what I suppose Victorian ladies used to call a swoon, barely conscious of anything except sensation. A lot passed between the two of them that I had no part of, like I wasn't even in the room, but when Xaphan touched me, I felt like the most important thing on the planet.

He wrapped his arms around me, my personal demon, and it seemed like he wanted to hold me safe. His lips against my temple, the weight of his embrace anchored me to a whole new way of understanding who, and what, I was. I think I was crying. Every feeling of worthlessness or failure I had ever had was compounded in me so that I knew—not just feared, but *knew*—how small, how insignificant I was in the grand scheme of things, the whole infinite glory of time and space. I could barely breathe for the terrible recollections, vivid and intense, of every fuck-up I'd ever made, every mistake and failure. And yet, it was okay.

Xaphan still held me, kissed me...appealed for me.

I reached for him, my fingers locking onto warm, firm flesh. I was definitely crying...but not for my sins. The angel—the one he called Hael, a beautiful word, like a golden sunrise—came forward, and his wings enfolded both of us. All of us. Wet heat

dripped onto my shoulder, and I realized Xaphan was shedding tears too. Tears for me, and for my race, and tears that had nothing to do with me, as well. The soft strength of feathers muffled the world and—all three of us piled into my small double bed—I saw something that, in any waking moment of reality, I could never have imagined possible. The angel touched the demon's face and—in that low, ancient tongue—said something which, to me, sounded like an incantation, an abracadabra that could open any hidden kingdom. Their mouths met; strong, hard kisses, the desperation of starving, thirsting prisoners. Hands lost themselves in a tumult of touching, and I was captive between all of them.

Breathing hard, feeling but not thinking, I joined in. I reached out, touching first one face, then another. They opened to me, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and accepted me between them, a willing sacrifice. I still half-suspected I was dreaming, but the feel of bodies beneath my hands—skin on skin, and the infinite truths that lay beneath—couldn't have seemed more real.

Feathers skimmed my face, my neck, my chest, caressing like extra fingers, and my lips found the smoothness of Hael's throat, all corded muscle and firm flesh. No pulse beat there and, for a moment, terrified me. I could probably be smited for this, if it turned out to be truly real. Brief, flimsy thoughts of childhood hours in church flitted through my mind—the terrors of guilt and regret and the perpetual fear of not being good enough, of failing to meet the standards expected of me by God, my parents and my priest—and I held my breath.

The shapes of hard fingers welded themselves to my jaw, and Xaphan turned my head. I caught a glimpse of his eyes, his whole face alight with a complicated mix of lust, surprise, gratitude and hunger. I knew I'd trespassed into some strange land here, rife with a history I wasn't part of, and it must be dangerous ground. Snatches of it, memories and visions that I couldn't understand how I was receiving, brushed against my mind like the kisses we three shared.

I saw the endless, whirling masses of stars, and the beauty of every snowflake. With the blackness of the universe laid out before me, I understood at last that it was not black; that every shade of darkness has as its mirror a shade of light and that, combined, they make something different and unique, a singular, shimmering vision. I walked—never leaving those impossible embraces—in a garden full of ferns and fruit, overgrown and verdantly stagnant, the dank smell of centuries in the sap and the leaves. My feet sank into rich earth, and bark grazed my back and my arms. The lovers' low moans hugged my ears, wound around with words strangely shaped from that ancient language, and they seemed to make sense, at least a little.

Xaphan...this is wrong. We are not supposed to—oh.

Supposed to what, lover?

Never mind. Is that your hand?

I smiled blissfully. I was part of something great, immeasurable, and ineffable. Angel, demon, and mortal as one, we stroked, kissed and rutted. Their shielded voices spoke to me of a love just as flawed, just as fragile, as any a human would know, and their pleasure was my pleasure. It lifted me to a whole new plane, an existence filtered

through the milky translucence of starlight, and peppered with the bursts of nirvana reflected back from the birth of suns.

They shared, and in sharing with me broke the wall between them. I was the catalyst and the medium of their reconciliation—the neutral middle way through which polar opposites met once more, and found their common ground.

As I kissed Hael full on the mouth, his tongue tracing a sacred dance around mine, Xaphan's hands teased my body. My own fingers sought a union between Heaven and Hell, and found it in my frail, human flesh. Their lips, my lips, their skin on mine. A demon's cock pressed tight against my ass...yet all that burned me was lust. No fear, no sin. I was above it, outside it, no longer bound by the hate and the trepidation, the rules people compose to keep each other in the rigid ranks of good behaviour designed and designated by the laws of men. Rising higher, into the shadows of bliss, I saw all of that—all that had governed me—for what it was, but I felt no anger at the lie.

Only pity, and forgiveness.

I wondered if they would devour me, between them. As Xaphan impaled me, arms wrapped tight around my torso, Hael's hand encircled my shaft. His mouth moving from mine to his lover's and back again, the air shivered with our sighs. I didn't know if a mortal body could take this kind of delight, but it would be a heck of a way to go.

Hael felt like a man in my palm; superior to most of my previous lovers, admittedly—bigger, thicker, hotter, harder—but no spotless, sexless being. All those things about being made in the image of God seemed finally to ring true...a matter of essence, of potential. Maybe that was the zenith of what we grazed, the three of us combined.

Xaphan's strangled cry, as he peaked within me, seemed to touch the roof of something beautiful, a sound that echoed inside my veins. We were all in synch, more or less, though I was so concerned with the rarity of that—a kind of 'whoa!' moment of disbelief, of all the many things I could have been incredulous about right then—that I almost toppled back over the edge. Hael saved me. Like angels are supposed to, maybe. He held me, jerked my cock hard and fast, latched his mouth to mine as Xaphan—sleepy lips dripping words of adoration—kissed his neck, and then we were both there, drenched in each other. All three of us. Sticky, sweating, and sanctified by it.

My eyes tried to close as my breathing slowed, but I didn't want to sleep. I knew I'd lose this if I did. That didn't frighten me—nothing frightened me anymore—but, even from the centre of the wave of tranquillity that enfolded me, I wanted to ask questions.

"They can wait," Hael murmured against my cheek, as the pair of them extricated themselves from my body, and my bed.

I mumbled some kind of assent, my lashes twitching at the feel of his lips on my cheek. Xaphan kissed me, too.

"Thank you," he whispered, and I cranked my eyelids up just enough to see he had Hael's fingers twined around his own.

It made sense, I supposed. For Heaven or for Hell, there would always be a no-man's-land between. A bald, neutral rock. A desert. An Eden. Even for those who fall, there is light to climb towards and, for me, whether I lived this impossible reality again

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or not, there was a safety net. I knew now: there would be no damnation that I did not forge for myself, and no fall so great that it could be without hope.

After all, even if judgments cannot be reversed, they usually come with loopholes.

About the Author

M. King lives and works in a damp, verdant corner of South West England, where she may usually be found behind a keyboard and a vat of coffee. She writes across a wide range of genres and styles, frequently with a strong GLBT focus. Her loveyoudivine titles include both gay and lesbian fiction, BDSM and more. You can find out more about M. King, and all the people she is, at www.flippedfrogcollective.com – where worlds, and authors, collide!

