

GUARDING THE AMPIRE'S GHOST



Prologue

A brief window into the Great Quarrel

THE row that allowed Adrian, vampire prince and consort to Green, Lord of Green's Hill, in Foresthill, California, to be allowed into the Realm of Heaven caused two major earthquakes and a tsunami. Nobody in the Realm of Heaven was sure how it happened—it violated all of the laws that had been set down since the split of the God and the Goddess (or She Who Would Not Be Named), and it was just flat out wrong.

Vampires were not supposed to end up in heaven. They were the Goddess's creatures, along with the elves, sorceresses, were-folk, and the sons of man and the other. These folk should end up with the Goddess in their afterlife—that was the rule. But Adrian had gone out in a shower of blood defending the people he loved best—two lovers and a brother of the heart among them—and suddenly, the Goddess was there petitioning for him to be allowed where vampires should not be.

More specifically, she was petitioning for him to be allowed in the antechamber.

“His lovers need him,” she'd sniffled. “You know they're important to me—and they might not make it without some assurance that his spirit continues.”

Of course, God had put up a front about faith and belief and the resulting crack across His face had resulted in one of the earthquakes and the destruction of a mini-mall that night, and that particular line of reasoning had been dropped right quick.

But in the end, it didn't matter. The Great Quarrel (as the angels called it) could only be resolved by the Goddess's plan that involved Adrian's lovers and his best friend, and this meant that she had God over a barrel. The deity hadn't had his Goddess by his side in over two thousand years, and the state of the world showed that He was hurting. He'd give her almost anything to help her plan come to fruition—a vampire in the anteroom to heaven was really no big deal.

So the details didn't matter. What mattered was that an accident of divine politics put a vampire in the anteroom to heaven, and now he was the angels' problem.

And the angels really didn't know what to do with him.

Part I

Failing

SHEPHERD, Angel of Penitence, looked at Saint Peter unhappily.

“Us, really? Me and Jefe? We’re the best people for the job?”

Saint Peter looked Shepherd blandly in his angel-hazel eyes.

“All of the host of heaven are more than qualified,” he said dryly, and Shepherd gave him a pointed look. They both knew what he wasn’t saying, and damned if Shepherd was going to let it slide.

“Yeah, but you usually give this assignment to people you’re trying to get rid of. The angel of chickens—seriously? You think we didn’t notice that he....”

“*She*—she chose a gender when she fell....”

“Yeah, when she fell with the angel of oak trees!” Who was now an actual “he” and not just the gender-neutral sort of “he” that sounded better than the sexless “it.”

Saint Peter shrugged. “Some angels are simply ready to fall. It’s not permanent exile, you know. They can restore their grace whenever they repent.”

But they didn't. And neither had the two angels after them or the *three* angels after them! There was something about this assignment that seemed to send angels tumbling down to earth like baby birds out of the nest. The last three angels had landed in Las Vegas, and they were currently organizing a brothel. Shepherd was understandably upset.

"But... but Peter... it's *Jefischa!*"

And that was the crux of the matter right there. Jefischa was the Angel of the Fourth Hour of the Night. It was sort of an unstable time—and Jefe was just like it. He could be quiet and big eyed, all contemplation and expectation, or he could be playful, like a child escaping before bedtime. He could be melancholy and sad, like a mother after hearing a poignant story before sleep, or raucous and rowdy, like a young man on his last beer. He could be all of these things at once. Shepherd knew, because they'd been partnered since forever. Literally. The fourth hour of the night was an excellent time for repentance. Shepherd got a lot of calls in Jefischa's company, and the dour, placid Shepherd was grateful for the one angel in heaven who didn't roll his eyes and groan when Shepherd walked into the room.

"Jefischa is perfectly capable of maintaining the integrity of his own soul," Peter said mildly, and Shepherd glared at him.

"Jefischa," he said fiercely, "is an innocent—"

"So whatever unholy wiles the vampire is working on him should not have any effect at all." Peter's voice was firm and growing firmer, and Shepherd usually would have stood down, but... Jefischa! Sweet, mercurial, melancholy, playful Jefischa. He needed to be protected, even from himself.

“So he’s more easily led astray!” Shepherd countermanded, and Peter glowered at him until Shepherd finally stood down.

“Have a little faith in your partner, Shep,” Peter told him, gentleness in his voice. “Lord knows, being his partner is something you’ve not once had to repent.”

Peter disappeared, and Shep glared at the white fuzzy halo where the archangel used to be. “Oh ha-ha,” he grumbled, but then Jefischa appeared at his side. It was serene, “retiring for bed” Jefischa, and he smiled at Shepherd and asked him what was wrong.

“We’re guarding the vampire,” Shep said, keeping it short. Maybe if he didn’t give Jefe the details, he wouldn’t find out anything that could make him fall.

“Ohhh...” Jefe was suddenly all big eyes and child-at-a-bedtime story. The fourth hour after dark, indeed. “We get to guard him? Wow! Do you think we’ll find out why all those people fell? Why do you think they fell, Shep? I mean, I knew Anpiel—she was the sweetest thing. And she and Zerachiel—they were always fighting! I have no idea how they ended up down on earth together.” Jefe gave a mock shudder. “Weird.”

Shepherd raised a sour eyebrow. “Yeah. Weird. Look, Jefe. You’ve got to promise to follow me on this one. No....” If Shepherd hadn’t been a vague form of personified energy, his hands would have waved in the air. “You know how you get. No acting human, okay?”

Jefe bobbed his head and then stopped, puzzled. “Do I act human, Shepherd?”

Shepherd looked at him, feeling helpless. “You act... compassionate, Jefi. Empathetic. You... you forget, sometimes, that our job is to be a beacon of guidance for them. You seem to want to be their friend.”

Jefi's energy—his “wings”—turned an unbearable color. It was a murky sort of brown/orange/green, and Shepherd hated it. He suddenly found that he would say anything, *do* anything, to make that color go away.

“You... you don't like me when I do that, Shep?”

“No! No... no, I like you fine. It's one of the things that makes you, well, um, you, Jefi! No. Don't change that. Just... I don't know... keep it in check this time, okay? There's something about this guy. We're falling like mortals around him, Jefi. I don't want anything to happen to you.”

Jefi's wings brightened up a little, but they were still a troubled brown/green. “Okay, I guess. You'd... you'd let me fall alone, Shep?” There was a moment of absolute shock, and then Jefi covered his eyes. “Ouch, Shep... that color *hurts*. Make it stop—whatever you're thinking, make it stop!”

Shep was thinking of Jefischa, alone on the cruel, barbaric surface of the planet below. He was thinking of him being abused and suckered into the worst of what humanity had to offer, the drug hells, the brothels, the places where humans routinely threw away their lives, their souls, their humanity. He had no idea what his *wings* looked like, but the painful terror of Jefi left alone was enough to paralyze his very being for a moment.

“No,” he said roughly after a moment of getting himself under control. “I'd never let you fall alone, Jefi. No worries.

That's why we need to be careful on this one. We like it up here, right?"

Jefi smiled, his wings going bright and iridescent, and Shepherd knew his own appearance brightened up considerably. "Absolutely, Shep. Anything you say. Besides, what do we have to worry about? He's not a human. He's a vampire. I'm sure he'll be *very* different."

The two of them appeared over the entryway to the anteroom and paused. It was, after all, the gateway from a soul's seat on earth to its destination in heaven.

"Shep, what're the ropes for?" Jefi asked. He was naturally curious; the fourth hour of darkness was often a time for digging into secrets or children pattering down a darkened hallway.

Shepherd stared at the golden cords and frowned. "I have no idea." The cords seemed to be attached to all of the souls drifting about. They were brighter on the side near heaven and growing dimmer by the moment on the side near earth, and neither of the angels had any information on what those cords were supposed to be.

Their puzzlement was greeted with a soft laughter from a person coming *out* of the anteroom. There were plenty of people drifting *in* to the anteroom, and usually there was someone to greet them. That was the purpose of the anteroom: it was like an airport greeting area. Most of the people going through were in transit, and most of them had people waiting for them. Those that didn't, well, they had angels to help them through the transition—Yahudia and Zaranpuryu being the main two, but they often recruited help. Either way, the anteroom was mostly an exclusively

one-way proposition. Except for the young human with the white-blond hair and the sky-spangled eyes, weaving his way gracefully between oblivious souls.

He was so solid in appearance, so full of flesh and vibrancy that he was nearly blinding.

“Hey there... wait a minute!” Jefe said. His energy vibrated; his wax-perfect human shape all but bounced on its pale bare toes. “You’re not supposed to be coming out there!”

The young man laughed. “Yeah, mate, I am. I was a little out of it, but I swear even *I* heard the row that got me my weekend-pass privileges set in stone. Check with your boss, duckies, but do it on your own time. I’ve got somewhere I’ve got to be.”

Shepherd didn’t really have a mouth, but he knew that what looked like his jaw was swinging on its hinges. The young man faded out of the walkway to the anteroom, leaving Shep and Jefe staring at his narrow, retreating back.

“Was he wearing a black motorcycle jacket?” Jefe asked out of the dark of the night.

“Yes, Jefe. Yes he was.” And ripped jeans and a white T-shirt. He’d looked like James Dean—only better. The pale hair was in a layered, curly halo around his face, and the blue eyes had been open and guileless, inviting people in as opposed to smoldering and warning people away.

“He was very beautiful,” Jefe said in an admiring way. “By human standards, he would have been very coveted.”

Shepherd blinked his eyes, feeling very stupid. “Oh for the sake of heaven....” His angel form washed the color of

softest rose. They weren't supposed to swear. "That was Adrian, Jefi. Who else could it be? Weekend pass, inhuman beauty... dammit. We just let the vampire escape."

Jefi was silent for a moment, considering. "Well, technically he's got a pass. We didn't really let him escape."

Shep looked at him. Just looked at him. Jefi smiled charmingly, and Shepherd blew out a great chuff of air and threw his ass on a cloud with enough force to dislodge that sucker so it could float free. Jefi put his angelic "hands" on the cloud—it was about chest high—and instead of levitating or sweeping his mighty wings to and fro, he heaved himself up and clambered into a sitting position next to Shepherd like a toddler getting into bed with his big brother. Shepherd watched him silently, and when Jefi smiled that great, open grin into his face, Shep had no choice but to return it with a little smile of his own. You couldn't stay mad at Jefi. This quality wasn't one of his gifts as an angel. It wasn't in his realm of power—it was just Jefischa. He was probably the only reason the fourth hour of darkness had so much possibility—because the fifth hour of darkness was dark, brooding, and violent. Drunks got mean in the fifth hour of darkness when they were happy and sloppy in hour number four; Shep was pretty sure that was because Patrozhin was a dour, unsympathetic bastard who should have been made the angel of misers with pancreatitis.

"You're right," Shepherd said, just to reassure Jefi that all his goodwill wasn't for naught. "He's got carte blanche. I don't know why, but it's out of our hands."

"Mmm..." Jefi sounded distracted. "I still don't know what those ropes are for." Jefischa put out his hands and

made stroking motions. “They look... soft... and warm... and sweet to touch. I want to touch one....”

“No,” Shepherd said uncertainly. “I... Jefe, there’s something very... mortal about those. Look. They’re a direct link to earth. And did you see the size and the thickness of the vampire’s? It was....” He flailed for a comparison.

“As big around as the vampire’s wrist!” Jefe said excitedly. “Yes! And the cord leading to heaven, it was much finer than those of these people here. You’re right, those *are* mortal things.” Jefe turned a look of pure adoration toward Shepherd. “It’s a good thing you spotted that! I would have just run right in!”

Shepherd ducked his head and looked away. “Just looking out for us, that’s all.” And then, irritably, “You know, I really wish Peter had given us more of a heads up about this place. It’s really complex!”

“That’s because you’re not filtering out the white noise!” Peter tutted from behind them. Shepherd rolled his eyes. St. Peter liked to just pop in unannounced when someone was on assignment. The humans had a word for it, but one did not call the right hand to the Lord of Heaven an “officious asshole.”

Still, Shepherd and Jefe took Peter’s advice. They filtered out everyone who did *not* have access to the planet below. There was still the occasional soul—serene and filled with purpose—being drawn back to earth with those thick, almost pulsing cords of gold, but once the influx of souls was filtered out, it was an okay place. Shepherd heard a change of music—there’d been Mozart permeating the air earlier—and he raised his eyes toward Jefe with a wince.

“Isn’t that a little contemporary?”

“I like Death Cab For Cutie.”

Shepherd felt more than saw Peter’s rolled eyes, so he grinned and said, “You know, I think it’s a good choice myself!”

“Very cute,” Peter said through clenched teeth. “Look, he’s down on the planet, so I know you’ve already met. And he’ll seem very nice and very personable. Just don’t get personal with him, okay? That’s where the others slipped up. Don’t make that mistake.”

“We hear you!” Jefe turned that open smile to Peter, whose jaw relaxed in spite of what Shep assumed were the man’s best intentions. “Are you going to tell us what the gold things are?”

“Just don’t touch them!” Peter called, fading from their vicinity rapidly. Well, he was the head honcho here, off to do big important things.

Jefe stuck his tongue out at the empty place where Peter had been, and Shep choked back a laugh. “Very mature, Jefe.”

An actual circle of gold appeared over Jefe’s figurative head. “I *am* an angel, you know.”

Shep let the laugh escape, and Jefe preened.

After Peter left, though, the gig was pretty tame. Shepherd called up a great work of literature to read between calls of penitence, and Jefe lay on his stomach, peering at the world below, scanning for more music as the fourth hour of dark swept the globe. They could (and had been known to)

spend months at a time sitting doing just that, but they didn't get settled for more than a few hours when their boy showed up.

"Hullo. Glad to see you're still here!"

Jefi looked up, grinning. "Did you have a nice time?" he asked politely, and Shepherd glared at him. "I was only asking. I mean, *we* don't get day passes out of here. I thought it would be nice to go somewhere and visit friends."

"Yeah, mate. It was positively smashing. Here, I'll go and get out of your hair." There was something about Adrian's tone that told them both that a great deal of pain was involved in his "smashing time."

Shepherd and Jefischa met unhappy glances. They were angels. Part of their job description was to alleviate pain.

"I'm sorry, Adrian," Jefi said, sympathy written in angelic lines across his form. "Why do you go if it hurts you?"

Adrian shrugged, and something about his face told them that he'd clearly rather not talk about it. "They need me. I'd go if it was torture because they need me. It's not torture—makes the afterlife bearable if you must know the truth. I've got to tell you two, it hurts them the same as it hurts me. But we need it."

Shepherd and Jefischa watched then, at a loss as Adrian moved slowly back to the anteroom. The thick living cord of gold that seemed to bind him to the surface of the world was faded now and not quite as thick as it had been when he'd left earlier, but still.... It seemed to slow him

down, make his footsteps sluggish as he disappeared through the veil of mists that marked the entrance.

“Well,” Shepherd said fitfully, “that was disappointing. He doesn’t even look like a vampire, really.”

“I saw a little fang,” Jefe added helpfully, and Shep smiled at him to let him know it was appreciated. “Shep, your wings are gray.”

“Yeah.” Shepherd sighed. “Well, the sky feels like a sad ocean after that, doesn’t it?”

Jefe closed in behind him. It wasn’t a physical touch, not the way humans did it, but Jefischa managed to comfort Shepherd in his glow. “Why do you suppose he gets visiting privileges if they don’t make anyone happy?”

“Maybe sadness is as sweet as it gets if you’re a vampire’s ghost, Jefe. Sometimes not even heaven gives happy ever after, right?”

“Shep, that’s blasphemy!”

Shepherd sighed. “You don’t hear them down there. Everybody begging forgiveness, and the ones who really need it won’t acknowledge they’ve done anything wrong. It seems like penitence is... it’s like a novelty you can buy, a pretty bauble. You say something mean; you blurt out an ‘I’m sorry’ and think penitence is served. But that thing you say... it’s around forever, long after your penitence has been discarded and the next awful thing comes out of your mouth.” Shepherd cast a covert glance in the direction where Adrian disappeared. “But not that one. Now that we’ve spoken again, I remember him. That one, penitence was deep and it

was real. Maybe sadness is really a treat for that one. Maybe that's why he gets to visit."

Jefi's energy felt... well, it felt contemplative at Shepherd's back. "You like him."

Shepherd shrugged and pulled out another book—Dostoyevsky, a personal favorite. "Let's just say I'm on a first-name basis with his demons, and they're worthy. When he was on earth, I never knew he was a vampire."

Jefischa's energy blinked. "How could you not know?"

Shepherd sighed and situated himself, sprawling like a particularly large, long-legged human male might, had he not been an angel and wearing a form for the sake of the entering mortals. "He didn't repent the things he did as a vampire. I mean, they're supposed to have a mantra, right? No shame. But nobody can do that for real, right? Most vampires, they slip up: they kill somebody they didn't intend to, they turn someone who goes rogue. Even the ones who become vampires to just be evil—to kill indiscriminately—even *they* feel shame. But not Adrian. If he hadn't made his livelihood in sex and blood, I'd swear he was a saint."

Jefischa was quiet for a moment. "You liked him, when he was on earth."

"It was nice... a good man's penitence is a rare and precious thing. I was grateful when he was relieved of it, though. He bore the burden too long."

"Shepherd?"

"Yes?"

"All you know of humanity are the things they regret."

There was a dark silence then, and Shepherd didn't know how to make it lighter. "Yeah, Jefe. That's about right."

"Have you ever heard them, right before they go to sleep before a big, exciting day?"

"No."

There was a subtle fluttering near where Shepherd's shoulder would be if he had one. "You should. It feels like flying."

Shepherd had a sudden, irrational wish. He wished that he had real hands and not just constructs of energy. He wished that he could ruffle Jefe's hair—if he had any. He pushed the wish aside but managed to lighten his wings up to an open gray-blue. "I'll be sure to try that, Jefe. But for now, let's give him a day or two to himself and then go visit. I can feel his penance now, and he shouldn't be alone for too long."

"Why? What's he regret?"

"Dying and leaving his loved ones alone."

Jefischa made a suspicious sound, and Shepherd extended an energy-construct arm. Jefe draped himself across Shepherd's "body" and made himself comfortable. From the way he was bobbing his head, Shep figured he was listening to music. "C'mon, Jefe," Shepherd said after a moment. "You know it's no use grieving for that one. Mortals have a short time, that's all."

"Yeah, but Shep, he wasn't mortal."

Well, yeah. A vampire in love probably assumed he really did have worlds enough and time, didn't he?

“We’re all susceptible to ending, Jefi. Even you and even me.”

“I don’t believe that, Shep. Falling isn’t ending. I think there will always be a Shep and a Jefi. The world wouldn’t spin right without us.”

“And we’ll always be together, right?”

An affronted silence. “Otherwise we wouldn’t be Shep and Jefi!”

“Oh. Of course.” Shepherd was usually a restless, brooding sort of presence—unless Jefischa was this close, purring over him. So the reassurance actually made him happy. For a moment, a mere moment, he felt an anticipation of something unknown like Jefi had described, but it was immediately lost in the blissful hum of eternity ever after.

They gave Adrian a couple of turns of the sun and then went in during Jefi’s hour. He was draped on a couch, playing some sort of electronic game on a big screen with a recently departed teenager who had messy brown hair, jeans, and the rapidly fading marks of a fatal motorcycle crash. They were busy making lights and sounds for a moment, and then the teenager—who hadn’t heard the two angels come in—said, “Are you sure no one cares if we’re playing *Grand Theft Auto IV*? Because my mom kept telling me this game would fuck up my morals.”

Adrian caught Shepherd’s eyes and winked. “Well, mate, I think if you’ve ended up here, you’ve probably got nothing to worry about.”

There was a sad and quiet silence. On the “television” in front of them, a character took a clip in the gut, vomited cartoon blood, and died. “Yeah. Do you think she knows that?” The kid’s leather jacket repaired itself as he spoke, and what looked to be a fatal head injury knitted itself up as well. “I... you know. We were fighting a lot when I ended up here.”

Adrian pressed pause on the game—something about the movement suggested he’d had conversations like this many times before. “Mate, most mothers love their sons. If she was bitching at you to clean up your act, it’s because she loved you. She’s going to miss you, no two ways about it. But she’ll look at your pictures and cry, and then she’ll let you go, because she knows someday she’ll see her little boy again.”

There was a thoughtful silence. “Will I know?” the boy said. “Will I know when she’s coming?”

Adrian smiled at him, an insouciant, fuck-me sort of grin, and he fingered the cord emerging from his chest. “You’ll feel it here, mate. You can come meet her when it’s time.”

The boy felt at the cord as though he’d only noticed it, and even Shepherd realized that you couldn’t really see them unless you were looking. Suddenly the expression on the boy’s narrow, apple-cheeked face became dreamy... hooded... sultry.

“My girlfriend misses me too,” the boy said, and Adrian smiled sympathetically. The boy began to caress the cord, bathing his hand in its energy. His head fell back against the

couch and his body—or what he imagined to be his body—began to bulge at the crotch of the newly repaired jeans.

Adrian stood from what looked to be a beanbag chair made out of cloud and unobtrusively exited the room, closing a “door” behind him.

“Well, he’ll need to be alone for a while. Was there anything you blokes wanted, or did you want to do the voyeur thing some more?”

Shepherd wasn’t sure about Jefe, but he knew why it took *him* a while to answer. “I... we weren’t aware that humans... uhm... souls... could still do that here.”

Adrian raised a mocking eyebrow. “He was feeling his connection to the human world, mate. He was seventeen when he died. You could probably populate Mars out of what’s pumping through that gold cord.”

Jefe giggled. Shep glared at him and he subsided, but Jefe’s hand was set solidly over his mouth and his dancing angelic eyes showed that he was still amused. “It makes sense,” Shep said at last, slowly, and then Jefe moved his hand and interrupted.

“Do *you* do that, Adrian?”

Adrian’s smile was both devilish and kind at the same time. “Boy-o, I wasn’t even human. I was vampire. We fuck like lemmings on speed. I can *still* do that. And I often do!”

If Shepherd had actually been breathing, his breath would have absolutely stalled in his chest. As it was, Jefischa made a sucking, whooshing sound and almost choked on his own spit, which was pretty damned hard since angels didn’t have any.

Adrian laughed loud and long, holding his middle and whooping until he was wiping his cheeks for tears that weren't there and gasping for breath, and Shep tried to put himself together. Before he could get a handle on his shock—or his terrible curiosity—Jefi said guilelessly, “Oh, I get it. You were *kidding!*”, and that set Adrian off again. While he was rolling on the pale cloudy floor of heaven, Shepherd and Jefi met mortified eyes.

“Not kidding,” Shep said, feeling an odd temperature fluctuation. Jefi must have been feeling it too. His wax-perfect features were starting to turn a little pink.

“Thinking not,” Jefi answered back in a small voice. Adrian was starting to subside now, but he was still giggling a little to himself as he stood gracefully and swept imaginary dust off his blue jeans. He wiped another imaginary crimson tear from a razor-blade cheek and reached out and clapped Jefischa on the back. Jefi and Shep met shocked eyes when the slapping sound rebounded and echoed off the vaults of heaven's anteroom, but Adrian seemed unperturbed.

“That was priceless, you two. Thanks for that!”

“We didn't do anything, did we, Shep?” Jefi sounded so sad, so insecure. Shep wrapped his arm around Jefi's shoulders and squeezed reassuringly. He knew it was only his energy, but it felt more solid than usual. But that didn't matter.

“No, Jefi. I think Adrian was just surprised, that's all.” Shep glared at Adrian, daring the vampire's ghost to contradict him. To his surprise, Adrian was instantly contrite and instantly kind.

“Oh yeah. No worries, Jefe.”

“Jefischa!” Shepherd growled, surprising them all.

“Jefischa,” Adrian corrected smoothly. “No worries. I was not aware that you were not aware, that’s all.”

“We thought... you know... that....”

“Sex gets left behind with the meat sack?” Adrian filled in, and he rolled his eyes when Shepherd and Jefe both started to look shocked again. “Well, physically, yes. Sex is a physical thing. But... but it’s also a connection. When you do it right, it’s all energy, just like the two of you.”

Shepherd grew very still. “I don’t hear about that kind in my travels,” he said softly, and Jefe squeezed his hand reassuringly. Shepherd squeezed back before he realized they didn’t really have hands. “We’ve heard about it in general,” Shepherd admitted, “but... those people are very often happy when they get here. Not a lot of time for....”

“Serene souls, content to wait on their mates?” Adrian supplied with some irony, and Shepherd nodded. His throat felt dry, and in sheer irritability he conjured a glass of water, which he raised to his lips with shaking hands. Jefischa, who was clearly capable of conjuring his own glass of water, took Shepherd’s glass from him and finished it off.

“Well, I’m not one of those,” Adrian said sharply, and then, looking at them, he seemed to take pity on them. He crouched down and rubbed at the frosted froth of the floor like he was wiping a dirty window with his hand.

“Here, look at this, would you?”

Shep and Jefe both knelt on the floor of heaven and looked at the clear window Adrian had made for them.

"How do you know how to do this?" Jefe asked, and Adrian shot him a scornful look.

"I've been here for over two years, human wise. Do you know how many nights that is, longing for a look at them? Now here: I'm about to share some serious shit with you gits, and you'd best not blow it off."

"You don't have to," Shepherd said seriously. He was almost afraid to learn more about Adrian. In a few moments of conversation, the man... vampire... whatever! had managed to completely discomfit the two of them, and they were a pretty serene duo, all things considered.

"No, you have to guard me. You'll have to deal with me. And the first thing to understand is that *I'm not human*. I haven't been for over a hundred and fifty years, but it's okay. Because until about six weeks before I got blown into a powder, I thought the human race was pretty fucking overrated, if you want to know the truth. Now look at them. *Look at them!*"

They looked. Shep saw three... well, people for lack of a better word. Two of them weren't really human. "They're elves," he said to Jefe, who peered at them curiously.

"You don't see a lot of elves, do you, Shep?"

"Elves don't really have anything to repent," Shepherd said honestly. "And if they do, they're not talking to us. In fact...." Shep squinted through the little window. "That entire place—I know that place. There's over a thousand souls

there, but it's like a penitence vacuum. Hardly anyone there has any true regret."

"It's a faerie hill," Adrian agreed soberly. "Except it's got more than just the fey. It's got vampires, were-folk... and her."

"Wait a minute," Shepherd said, his eyes widening. "I know what they're doing together. Do you know how many people I've had repent *that* particular position right there?"

Adrian chuckled, the sound particularly gentle. "These three have never been your penitents, Shepherd. And certainly not for what they're doing right now."

Jefi cocked his head to the side and then his eyes got wide. "*Whoa....*"

Shep smacked him lightly on the back of the head, and Jefi recovered himself and remembered his job. "Is that your lover?" he asked with respect. "She's...." He faltered. And well he might, Shep thought with surprise. She wasn't beautiful. Adrian—well, Adrian sort of oozed human sex and human beauty, but this woman was plain as a potato. And she was young. Even by human standards.

But Shep was an angel, and he was used to looking at the heart of humans. "She's lovely," he said, and his voice was reverent, because she was. Seeing that, he looked beyond the inhuman (almost angelic, if he'd admitted it) loveliness of her two companions in the garden by the light of a waning summer sun.

"They're all beautiful," he whispered. "They're... bright. Even the one with the dark energy, it's intense and

grounded, practically growing granite roots.” He looked up at Adrian. “These were all your lovers?”

“Lovers is an easy word. I was lovers with most of the hill,” Adrian admitted without even a blush. “Two of them were my beloveds. The third, fuckface there,” the dark energy, “he was my friend.”

“But now you hate him?” Jefe asked, appalled, and a flicker of a smile passed over Adrian’s pouting, pretty, palely pink mouth. Shep wondered if Jefe longed for that pouting mouth to be open and laughing again.

“Still love him—just not like I love Green or Cory, my beloveds. Not any less, mind you. Just different. Do you see them? All of them down there?”

Shep and Jefe nodded.

“Now you... Shepherd—that’s the angel of penitence, right? You can listen to people’s hearts. Now listen. What do you hear from them? What’s the one sin that they repent?”

Shepherd swallowed and wished for another glass of water, but he didn’t conjure one. “They repent that they let you die.”

Adrian nodded. “Yeah, mate. That’s right. So there they are, and at night, when their longing for me gets too awful, when they can’t stand one more minute of knowing they can never touch me again, they reach out with their souls and let themselves miss me.” Adrian’s hands grasped the cord at his chest. It was thick and almost hurtfully bright. “You see that? That’s low ebb, people. They try... oh *Goddess*, I can feel them trying. They know it hurts me. They know it leaves me weak. Hell, they probably know that this is bad—and I

mean just plain bad—for all of us. So they stomp on it, and they love each other, and they forge a life together and go on. But sometimes.... I can't even blame them. It's agony. It's bloody, excruciating agony... but I live for it, you hear me? I'd give anything—the weakness, the pain in my chest that feels like claws, the knowing time is passing and I'm not even there to share—I'd give it all and take it all right in the pie-hole, just to be near them again.”

His voice was shaking, and Jefe—Jefe was always so compassionate. “Well, they won't be there for long,” he said, and Adrian turned a vicious smile at him. Jefe quailed, and even Shep shut his eyes.

“They're elves, Jefe,” Shep rasped, embarrassed. “They live forever, or they fade away. They don't get to come up here. That's part of the great quarrel. Her people and His people are apart in eternity.” Shepherd couldn't imagine why Adrian would have agreed to this terrible half-life in the anteroom, and he was going to ask when Jefe just had to try to make it better.

“But the girl... at least *she*....”

Adrian shook his head bitterly and dashed at his cheeks, where black-scarlet tears were dripping in a horrible death mask on the face of a man who had died twice. “She tried—Goddess knows, I've had two face-to-face talks with her already, because she's reckless and foolhardy and brave. But... don't you get it? The whole reason I'm here, mates—this entire perversion of life and death—it's all to keep them on the face of the planet. They almost died when I died. One of them goes, the other two topple like dominoes. I was crap under my beloveds' heels, or I should have been, but my

death alone, and the entire works goes. You're so fucking sharp, mate,"—he gestured at Shepherd—"what happens to the power in that hill when those three people go? What happens to the sanctuary, the peace, hell, the fucking weather?"

Shepherd's breath caught—he was getting used to it. The energy signatures of the three of them were woven into the soil, into the blood, into the souls of every creature on the hill... and beyond.

"Your people will die," Shepherd whispered. "They will scatter to the winds, naked and alone. That place, their power, it protects every soul in the hill."

"But the girl," Jefe protested, devastated by this much pain.

"You heard the row same as I did," Adrian said flatly. "Her High and Mighty-ness has some plan for my beloved. She's not coming here. She's *never* coming here. No matter how brave she is, the Royal Bitch isn't going to let her die."

"That's...." Shep met Adrian's eyes with naked sympathy. Even an angel, with no concept of human feelings, knew the absolute pain of Adrian's dilemma. "I'm so sorry, Adrian."

"I don't want your pity, mate. I'm good." The first part was the truth. The second part was a blatant lie. "And I'm sorry I made your bloke here feel bad." And that rang with sincerity. "But here's the thing. If something makes me laugh, I'm gonna fucking laugh. And if I want to sit in my little illusion of a room there and toss off until my wanker

bleeds, you two don't have a fucking thing to say about it, you hear me?"

Jefi let out a little moan, and Shep held his hand and stroked it. Poor Jefi. He liked bedtime stories, and those always ended so much happier than this one. But Shep never dropped Adrian's gaze. "I hear you, but you remember something too."

"What's that?"

"We minister to everybody, even you. If you want anything—even company—we're here."

"Bloody nice of you to offer," Adrian conceded. He ran an arm over his face, and stained his white T-shirt with blood-brine from his tears before he wandered off. Shepherd wondered how long it would be before Adrian—or the part of him that controlled his reality in this place—remembered that the body wasn't real. The blood-vampire tears weren't real. The white T-shirt wasn't real. They couldn't be. All that had been real about Adrian had died months ago, probably going up in flames when the sun rose. Everything, of course, except his pain. That alone would make the heavens weep, wouldn't it?

Jefischa was disconsolate, so Shepherd guided him to the nearest cloudbank and pulled him up carefully, wrapping an arm around him and pulling him against his chest.

"C'mon, Jefi. He can deal. He looks pretty, but damn, I think he was made to do this. Did you hear him laugh? It's like when he died the first time, only the best of humanity came back and walked his skin."

Jefi was an angel. He was supposed to cry prettily. Silver tears were supposed to track down unblemished golden skin and give an air of delicacy to their inhuman beauty.

Jefi's nose was swollen and red, and his eyes were swollen and red, and his chin was wrinkled and quivering in an alarming way. Shepherd was appalled. Not at the unattractiveness, but that Jefi should be so distraught. He rubbed Jefi's back and dropped kisses in his hair. He noticed as he did that Jefi was starting to look... different. Not bad, and not solidly, but... but sometimes, he would see a sharper line at his jaw or his nose, or a different highlight in what was supposed to be chestnut hair. But when Jefi gave a little grunt, a new sound, Shepherd forgot all about what he looked like.

"Mmm...." Suddenly Jefi arched his spine, undulating into Shepherd's touch like a cat. "That feels different, Shep. Mmm...."

Shep stopped his gentle stroking and looked at his partner curiously. "What feels different about it?"

Jefi paused. "It... my back tingles. Why does my back tingle?" Jefi frowned, some of the terrible grief easing from his face. He turned his head and then stood up and began turning circles like a cat with tape on its tail, and Shep had to laugh.

"Here—stop moving, dammit, and let me see!" He lifted Jefi's traditional "robe" from the hem, and Jefi giggled.

"You're looking at me naked, Shep."

Shep rolled his eyes. "It's not like angels have..." what was the current mortal word? "junk' to get in the way, Jefi."

"I wonder what that's like?"

Shep frowned at Jefi's back. "What what's like?" he asked absently. There was a handprint on Jefi's back. And it looked... solid. Real. Angels *looked* real. Inhuman beauty or no, they were supposed to look *real* for the humans. But this handprint.... Shep stared at it curiously, splaying his own hand out to match it, when Jefi interrupted his thoughts.

"What it's like to have external genitals?"

It was a common topic in the heavens, actually, and Shep shrugged. "How do you know you wouldn't have breasts instead?"

"You mean, like his female lover? There... touch... there...." Jefi wiggled, and Shep kept touching him just because it made Jefi happy.

"Yes, Jefi. Women traditionally have breasts. Men traditionally have external genitalia. Which one would you want?"

Jefi shrugged, making his skin, his angel skin and the disconcerting, hand-sized patch in the middle, ripple. "I don't want breasts. I think they'd get in the way."

"Well, genitalia certainly gives a man a weakness," Shepherd observed. He'd seen it often enough. Nothing made a man repent quicker than a solidly placed blow to the gonads.

"Does that mean you'd want breasts?" Jefi asked, shocked enough to turn around. It left his robe all rucked up

around his plain, smooth lower body, and Shepherd shook his head in certainty.

“No, Jefischa. I’m pretty certain I’d be a man. I wouldn’t worry about the breasts getting in the way, but I don’t deal well in the “acceptance and reformation” department. I don’t think my personality is equipped to come with a vagina, if you must know the truth. Testes, scrotum, and a penis are probably the way to go.”

Jefischa succeeded in turning all the way around and looked Shep in the eye. His eyes were lighter, Shep thought randomly. They were supposed to be an all-purpose hazel, but they weren’t anymore. Jefe’s eyes were gray, and they were rounder than they used to be.

“Adrian was lovers with a man.”

Shep smiled a little. “Yes, Jefe. I know. Lots of them. Women too.”

“Which would we be? Would we be like... Fuckface and Adrian, or would we be like....” Jefe frowned to remember the name. “Green and Adrian? Would we be friends, or would we be lovers?”

Shep swallowed then and swallowed again and wished desperately for some more theoretical water but couldn’t remember how to conjure it to save himself. “I don’t think I could ever call you ‘Fuckface’, Jefe, so I guess we’d have to be lovers.”

The anxious look relaxed a little, and the lines of tension around Jefe’s newly gray eyes relaxed. Shepherd put his hand out to rub Jefe’s back some more, but Jefe shrugged away.

"I thought you liked that." Shepherd felt inexplicably hurt.

"I do," Jefe said, swallowing too. He looked so sad. "It feels like humans do, when they go to sleep and something really big is going to happen in the morning."

Shepherd raised a tentative hand and rested it on Jefe's shoulder. "Then why don't you want me to keep doing it?"

"Because we don't sleep up here, Shepherd, and the morning won't be any different for us than it has been since the world began."

With that, Jefe threw himself on the misty ground and rubbed a clear space to watch the people below. Shepherd didn't have to check over his shoulder to know he was looking at Adrian's friends, trying to fit himself into the mysterious, complicated patterns of love that still bound Adrian into their midst. He'd wanted to keep Jefe from the frightening possibilities that this vampire held when all they'd known about him was that he seemed to make angels want to freefall into gravity and humanity like the humans themselves liked to freefall from airplanes with only silk and cords for safety.

As it turned out, the vampire's biggest evil was that he was more human than most of the humans who came to heaven. Who knew that being human would make a vampire such a danger to the two of them?

It didn't matter.

What mattered was that Shep had set out to keep Jefe from getting hurt. What really mattered was that he'd already failed.

Part II

Falling

AS IT turned out, Adrian liked to play chess. In fact, he was better at it than most angels. He was so good at it that it took Shepherd a while to figure out that he was *letting* Jefe win.

When the vampire asked the two of them if they'd like to play, it was almost like he was offering *them* something, throwing them a bone. *Well, these two blokes don't seem too inept, maybe I'll go play with them and make them feel better.* The really pathetic thing was, Shep and Jefe just sort of jumped at the chance, waggling their tails, turning their puppy-smiling muzzles up to him in supplication.

It sure beat making him cry, that was for damned sure.

He talked to them as they were playing, and they learned more and more of the complicated life that made up Adrian's past. They learned that his passionate love affair with the little human girl (who was not so human, he assured them) had lasted a terribly short time before he'd died. They learned that he and Green had been lovers for more than a century and nearing two, and that he and Bracken *had* been lovers but had never really meant to be "forever" that way. They learned that the beginning of his life as a vampire marked the end of his life as a victim and the beginning of his time as sort of a supernatural social worker.

He often brought the humans floundering in their world into the realm of the Goddess as either vampires or shapeshifters. They thrived there, it seemed, and he confirmed Shep's silent leanings toward the Goddess's side of The Great Quarrel. Shep heard a lot of people in pain; it was nice to know that someone out there was working to alleviate worldly pain instead of letting heaven be an all-purpose panacea, like a carrot on a stick.

And it seemed as though Adrian's "hobbies" translated into the afterlife as well.

While Shepherd and Jefischa watched (passively at first), Adrian would disappear for a time. They knew where he went—to the "lower levels," the place in heaven reserved for people who hadn't quite come to peace, either with who they had been when alive or with the manner of their death. Shep and Jefe weren't allowed there. It took a special sort of angel to work that section, and Lucifer and Gabriel pretty much had it locked. But Adrian would go (although he scornfully pronounced Lucifer "a git wank of the first order" and announced that Gabriel would be "a great bloke without the pretty blue stick up his arse") and return, usually with a smuggled refugee on his arm.

It was Jefischa who pointed out that the cord anchoring the refugees to earth was often a mix of pale gold and rabid, angry vermillion.

It was Shepherd who first noticed that Adrian seemed to be having unlawful heavenly relations with the refugees as soon as he closed off his "room."

And both noticed that the more time the souls spent in Adrian's company, the less angry the red until finally all that was left was the gold.

"What do you suppose he's doing in there?" Jefischa asked one day, after Adrian had given one of those insouciant, inviting grins and disappeared into his room with a very plain girl and her beautiful boyfriend on either arm.

Shepherd managed a droll look. "Playing cribbage."

"Oh ha ha—I see humans having sex, Shepherd. I have a pretty good idea of what he's doing physically, or imaginary physically or whatever. I just want to know what he's... you know. *Doing* with them, to make them so much less angry and so much more able to accept the love that will make them happy here."

Shepherd had wondered that himself. In fact, he'd wondered enough to listen in to their hearts, and he'd been surprised. "He's turned penance into an act of love," he said at last, not wanting to explain any further. Fortunately, he was friends with Jefe for many reasons. One of the principal reasons was that Jefe sometimes got exactly what he meant and didn't make him say any more. Jefe's (pouty, round) mouth made a little "Oh," and he nodded. He got it, and the conversation was tabled for the moment.

But not forever.

"What I don't understand," Shep said later, while Adrian was there, "is why you don't feel unfaithful. You *have* lovers. Even if you're waiting...."

"A millennium or so," Adrian supplied dryly.

“But still! Won’t it make them jealous?” Shepherd knew it would make *him* jealous. *He’d* be furious if Jefe was with anyone else. Jefe was *Shepherd’s*. It was a solid, irrevocable, permanent, forever. Four millennia in each other’s company gave him dibs, dammit—he would *never* share nicely.

“Now mate, you know as well as I do that the quickest way to lose a friend is to talk politics, right?”

Shepherd blinked and nodded. It was true. The Goddess’s children were often given permission not to adhere to absolute monogamy. It was almost written in their bylaws, if the Goddess believed enough in order to have such a thing.

“I’m not talking politics,” Shep argued weakly. “I’m just... you know... asking. Will they forgive you?”

Adrian smiled—his bittersweet smile, they had learned. The one that let them see into his true heart. “Mate, they would rather I be here, doing some good and making some friends, than caught in some terrible limbo with no touch at all. Wasn’t it one of yours who said ‘True love is not jealous’? We just take that literally, that’s all.”

Shep’s face fell a little. What he felt for Jefe wasn’t true? He’d been sure it was. Did that mean he’d have to share him, if they did fall? Suddenly Adrian was up close, smiling into his face and winking at Jefe, who seemed lost in the conversation.

“I’m not saying you have to share, mate. It’s just what works for us. There’s no reason to break up a team that’s worked since time began just because the nature of the team has changed. You feel me?”

Shepherd was not sure what his expression was. He was trying to keep it neutral because he didn't want either of his companions to know the true nature of his thoughts. It didn't matter, because Adrian put a hand over his eyes, and Jefe looked at him in delighted shock.

"Shep, you're not supposed to *do* that in front of anybody but angels! You know that!"

Shepherd immediately put a damper on his glory, but that didn't stop a little voice from singing *Mine, mine, Jefe's all mine!* Eventually, he learned that he didn't want to.

Just like eventually they learned that mostly, Adrian was a hell of a nice guy. Vampire or not, he'd had the good fortune to love so deeply and to feel that love in return so assuredly that he really could wait a thousand years to see his beloveds and his beloved friend again. It was worth it.

They would watch as Adrian, in the middle of chess, in the middle of whatever he was doing in his room, was called away. The cord at his chest, the one that should be fading and becoming more a memory than a reality, would grow thick and fat, would begin to glow, would throb in time to a heart that hadn't beat in a hundred and fifty years... and then would pull him toward the living who loved him.

No matter how tired he was when he returned to heaven after his visit, he always looked happy to go.

Jefe watched him go one night as Shep moved up to take his place at the board.

"What do you think that's like?" Jefe asked softly. "That much mortal love.... It's so intense, you know?"

Shep nodded and tried to figure out where Adrian was on the board—and whether he'd been planning to let Jefe win or lose. Ah-ha! That knight was about ready to be sacrificed, and then the whole house of cards would fall down. Jefe was going to win this one.

"Yes, I do know," he answered, moving the knight and preparing to fall. Jefe ignored the offer and moved a pawn for no reason at all. Shepherd sighed and pretended to study the board again. "Mortals love very intensely. That's why angels fall when they love like mortals."

Jefe looked up, surprised, and Shep blushed. He'd been doing that lately, having human physical reactions to emotional stimuli. In this case, the emotional stimuli was the suggestion of what the other angels might have done to fall.

"Too much gravity in our skin?" Jefe asked with quietly dancing eyes.

Shepherd returned the look with his own gentle humor. "Too much gravity in our hearts." He returned to the chessboard and once again put Jefe in position to win. This time Jefe took him up on it. They played in happy silence for a little, and then Jefe suddenly glared at Shep and conceded his queen.

"It's no fun when you let me win, Shep."

Shep stared at him, shocked. "Four millennia, and you haven't said anything!" he protested, and Jefe's scowl had nothing to do with the fourth hour of the night and everything to do with Shep.

"I didn't notice until Adrian didn't beat me. I mean, I could buy that maybe *you're* not the best chess player, but I

know *I* suck! Why do you do it? It can't be any fun to always play a guy you have to lose to!" Jefe was offended but not outraged or seriously hurt, and Shep breathed a sigh of relief.

"It *is* fun," Shep said, hating the new accident of energy and faux flesh that made him blush. "It's fun because I get to talk to you and we can... you know... be Shep and Jefe." *Lame*. How was it that an angel couldn't find a better way to phrase something as commonplace as simply being with another angel?

"Well then, why don't you just play me and win?" Jefe's voice rose, and Shepherd revised his opinion. He *was* hurt. Shep looked away. He'd never meant to hurt Jefe. In fact, quite the opposite.

"It's no fun being left behind. I don't ever want to do that to you. I figured, you know... I'd just stay equal with you. That's all." Shep smiled as appealingly as he could. He was used to scowling, to being the stern member of their duo, the saturnine bass to Jefe's sweet alto—but he couldn't stand that he'd hurt Jefischa's feelings.

Jefischa regarded him levelly. "How long have you been ready to fall, Shepherd?"

It was Shepherd's turn to cough on his spit. It had been a quiet thought, only in the deepest nights when he'd heard the ugliest secrets mankind had to offer. He'd never given voice to the idea that he didn't want to hear penitence anymore. He'd never even hinted that he wanted to live on earth and see if he could live, eat, run, laugh, fornicate, without ever repenting a damned thing.

“What makes you think I am?” he asked bleakly, putting off the inevitable. Angels couldn’t lie. It was in the contract. Jefe shrugged, looking down at the chess set. It was automatically resetting as he watched, all of the pieces shaping themselves into light clouds and dark clouds to look like marble, even if they didn’t feel cold and rigid to the touch.

“You blush all the time now. You... your appearance has changed. Your hair really is auburn, not the color of a watercolor picture, and it’s shaved close to your neck. Your eyes are deep, dark, brown, and you have wrinkles in the corner, like you scowl a lot. Your nose is a little big for your face, but it suits you, and your lips aren’t full—they’re lean, and they tilt up. And your face isn’t round or oval; it’s square, and so is your jaw. Saint Peter hasn’t said anything. I don’t think Adrian has noticed. But I have. You... you’re becoming closer to human. When were you going to tell me?”

Shepherd swallowed. Another human trait—one, in fact, he’d learned from Adrian, who, damn him, wasn’t supposed to be human at all. “I wasn’t,” he rasped. “You don’t want to fall. I don’t want you to fall. I don’t want to leave you behind. And I’m not. And in case you haven’t noticed, your eyes are round and gray, and your hair is the color of a sandy beach, and it’s long and wispy, like those boys who appear on stage. And your lips are full. And your face is narrow, with high cheekbones. And your jaw is square and your chin is pointed. And nobody here seems to notice. Nobody but me.”

They sat there in stark silence for a moment, staring at each other, recognizing that the other had changed, feeling the changes in themselves.

"I'd fall if you fell," Jefe said quietly, staring into his eyes like he had not another thing in the world to do. He didn't. Neither of them did.

"The world is an awful place, Jefe," Shep said, and he wondered when an angel's tears started to burn in his eyes. "I don't want you there."

"Better there with you than here without you," Jefe told him levelly.

Shepherd nodded, as though resolved about something. "Well then, the changes stop here. No more...." He was going to say *No more talking to Adrian*, but he couldn't. Adrian had done nothing, and they were his companions. They were, in fact, becoming friends. They couldn't go back to being Adrian's guardians; it would be cruel.

"No more changing," Shep finished weakly, and for once, Jefe was the sardonic one. He raised an eyebrow as though to say, *Yeah, that can happen*, but Shepherd had no answer for him. It was the best he could do. For a heavenly being, it wasn't much.

Adrian returned, and for a change of pace Shepherd suggested cribbage. It turned out Jefe could hold his own on a cribbage board, and they played cribbage or hand-and-foot pretty much from there on out. So it might have continued indefinitely, if not for two things.

The first was unexpected and frightening, because as often as people on earth report that it happens, the truth is the closest they usually get to seeing the afterlife is a brief glimpse through a long tunnel. It's not often that someone still alive just appeared in their midst.

They were playing cribbage, and Jefe was giving them a sampling of music. Adrian adored music—the two of them were sharing a passion for Linkin Park, and Shepherd had to admit, the band was growing on him. Suddenly, in the middle of “What I’ve Done,” Adrian’s golden cord pulsed *hard* and turned scarlet.

Adrian shouted “*Fuck!*” and he stood up, looking wildly around until she appeared.

It was his lover, the human sorceress, and she was mortally hurt. Blood was flowing down her throat, and Adrian took two anguished steps toward her before taking her hands in his own.

“You shouldn’t be here!” he told her, and she nodded and murmured something, nestling into his arms. They spoke then, important things, terribly important things, but Shepherd and Jefischa refused to listen. They put up a clear wall and stood, watching the two lovers touch when it was forbidden and talk face-to-face when they shouldn’t even have been occupying the same place.

They could both see when the girl was being called back. Her face contorted in pain, and she grasped Adrian’s hands tighter, and then she flickered in and out and was gone. Jefischa and Shepherd were there with Adrian before she’d even disappeared. The cord at his chest was no longer red, but it was still shiny, bright with need, and bigger than a man’s wrist. He raised a shaking hand, covered in the blood that had flowed from her wounds, and licked it off delicately, closing his eyes in pleasure and pain as he tasted his beloved in the most intimate of imaginary ways.

"I've got to go," Adrian muttered, touching his tongue to the corner of his mouth between words. "She barely made it. Green needs me. He doesn't know why she did it, and I've got to tell him... oh *Christ!*" He screamed, naked and angry and unapologetic about it. He turned a furious, blood-tear-stained face toward Shep and Jefe. "She takes such terrible risks! It would kill him, you understand? Kill him... kill us all if she died, and we wouldn't even be together. Goddess... oh sweet Goddess... I've got to make Green understand."

"Make him understand why she'd do that?" Shepherd asked, appalled. "*I don't understand why she'd do that!*"

Adrian scowled, impatient and upset. "*You of all people should understand why she'd do it. A friend was in danger, and she was trying to save him. She knows enough about grief by now to know you don't let anyone fall alone if you can help it.*"

He disappeared then, leaving Shep and Jefe alone and shaken. They sat numbly in a cloudbank and clutched hands. They'd been doing that a lot lately, and Shep took a moment to note that more and more, they were actually holding *hands* in his mind, and less and less *touching energy*. That was when he realized Jefe was stroking the back of his hand softly.

"Why does this upset you so much?" Jefischa asked quietly into the silence, and Shepherd shrugged. He should have been embarrassed to say this, but he wasn't. And it was something Jefe needed to hear.

"Because even though she was just here, defying every law we have to shed blood in heaven, when I see her, I don't see his girl, standing there, covered in blood and begging for

forgiveness,” he said at last. “I see you. I think being mortal could hurt very, very much. I don’t know if I’m strong enough for that much pain.”

Jefi’s hand began to shake in his. “Well, it’s a good thing we’ve decided not to fall,” he said, but there was something empty in his voice that made Shep look at him closely.

“Why is that?” Shepherd asked.

“It’s not like you’ve set high standards for the quality of your love or anything,” he responded bitterly, and then he dropped Shep’s hand and disappeared.

“Jefi? Jefi?” But Jefi was gone, disappearing into the ether. He’d done this before when they’d quarreled, flounced off and sulked somewhere alone while he kept watch. Shep had learned that he’d return, usually pretending nothing had happened. It was just that this time, Shep couldn’t figure out what he’d done to provoke this fit of the sulks. Of course he set high standards for a proposed life in the human world. Would Jefischa deserve anything less?

Adrian returned, nearly transparent with energy depletion, and retreated into his little “space” by himself without a word. Shepherd brooded, alone and feeling stormy and gray, and wished that Jefischa would return.

“What did you say to him?” Adrian asked after he’d recouped a little of his strength. Shep looked up from where he was contemplating a brothel. If he wanted to work himself into a good brood, a brothel was a place to do it. They repented everything: leaving their parents, giving children up for adoption, not listening to the people who loved them, and their last trick. Settling his soul into a brothel and soaking

up the regret and the remorse and the terrible pain was guaranteed to make Shep feel worse—and make the brothel close down. Once he sat there and saturated the place with forgiveness and blessing, the women who had a place to go usually went back to the people they felt they'd wronged and made their lives better. The women who had no haven except the brothel itself at least seemed to feel some peace about how it was they made their living, and develop a belief that survival was not a sin.

Shepherd was left with all of their regret, but he got to see them find their way in life, and it seemed to be a good trade. He watched now as the healing that was his trademark began to work and looked up at Adrian with bleak eyes.

"I don't know," he murmured, and then he felt the tug of something painful. That was a lie. He *did* know, and now he was obligated to tell the truth. "I told him that I didn't want us to fall because I was afraid I couldn't protect him from the world."

Adrian raised his eyebrows. "Well, no wonder," he said shortly, and Shepherd frowned at him.

"Why? What's he doing?"

There was a sardonic snort. "He's attending every children's choir practice for every religion known to man. I would too. What you said, that's bloody insulting!"

"What did I say?" Shepherd wailed, but Adrian had stalked off by that time. He was still looking transparent and un-Adrian-like, and apparently he didn't want to deal with Shepherd's ignorance any longer. Shepherd was left alone

again, healing another brothel, and now he was *really* wishing Jefe would come back.

Jefe did, eventually, right about the time Shep was thinking he should check on Adrian. Unlike the other times he'd flounced off in the millennia, this time Jefe didn't pretend that nothing had happened.

"Has it occurred to you," he asked, startling Shepherd by appearing next to him out of the clear blue, "that all I'd ask for if I fell would be you? Adrian and his lovers and his friend—they're heroes. It's obvious. They're the stuff of story and legend, and they're scary fearsome, but they don't have to be us. We're not leaders up here, or at least I'm not. They'd find a replacement for me soon enough. There's no reason I'd be any different down there. And I'd be happy with that!"

Shepherd was affronted. "Replace you? Jefischa, they couldn't *replace* you!"

There was nothing childlike or starry-eyed about Jefe's smile then. It was, in fact, frighteningly adult. "No, Shepherd. *You* couldn't replace me. Heaven will do just fine on its own."

"You don't fall for a second-rate human," Shepherd sniffed with dignity, and Jefe took his hand and kissed it. There was a mild tingling on the back, and Shepherd was acutely aware of Jefe's breath and lips on his skin.

"Why not?" Jefe asked softly. "You fell for a second-rate angel."

Shepherd scowled. "You're the best, Jefi. There is no better angel. You have the biggest heart and the biggest sense of wonder. You are what storybook angels should be."

"Michael's stronger."

"Michael's vain."

"Rafael is purer of purpose."

"He's dull as dirt."

"Lucifer is more dangerous." Jefi's eyes had started dancing, and Shepherd smiled into them, saying exactly what Jefischa wanted him to.

"I have it on good authority that Lucifer is a git wank," he finished with a quirk of his lips. He and Jefi were very, very near, their faces almost touching, their miraculously colored eyes close and mysterious to each other. There was something Shepherd wanted to do... something burning at his skin. He'd seen the humans do it, but he was pretty sure it would be the beginning of the end for them both.

Abruptly he pulled back, suddenly understanding the curse of the blush that had been haunting him since Adrian's arrival.

"I should go check on Adrian," he muttered, and Jefischa, whose gray eyes were big and round, nodded agreement and swallowed hard. Shepherd looked at his face, bereft and flushed, and swallowed too.

The act of walking away felt like an act of penance.

Shepherd presented himself at the door to Adrian's "place": his room, which had taken on the color and grace of—or lack thereof—any college dorm room on earth. Or any

college dorm room that came with really nice leather couches and a king-size bed. Shepherd knocked casually and then opened the door, and then stopped short, staring.

He hadn't been aware that Adrian had company—at least, he and Jefischa hadn't seen anybody go in. It took Shepherd a couple of moments to realize that the man in Adrian's bed wasn't someone who belonged in heaven... he was... a mirage. A memory. A physical manifestation of a memory. A ghost in heaven of someone living on earth.

It was Adrian's lover, the elf, Green.

He was beautiful, with long gold hair that rivaled an angel's, wide-set emerald eyes, and pointed ears. That's about all Shepherd got to see of him, because at the moment, he was kneeling between Adrian's splayed knees with Adrian's engorged cock in his wide mouth. He was bobbing his head and making vacuum-locked slurping noises around Adrian's flesh while Adrian lay back in the large bed, one arm flung over his closed eyes and the other hand reaching to clench in Green's long hair.

Shepherd's whole body tingled in that way he'd come to know was humanity overtaking his angelic form, and he must have made some sort of sound in his throat. Adrian looked up at him with half-hooded, knowing eyes and that devil-may-care grin.

"Stay," he mouthed. "Watch."

And Shepherd was powerless to move.

Green spent an eternity pulling Adrian's tender flesh into his mouth, and when he was done, he reached up and grabbed Adrian's hand, laced fingers with him briefly, and

pulled that hand down to his cock. Adrian squeezed himself and pulled up, and Green grasped his bottom in both hands and shifted Adrian's hips up, separated his bottom, extended a pink tongue, and began to lick.

Adrian seemed to forget all about Shepherd, frozen at his doorway, and Shepherd forgot all about pretending to breathe. Adrian's face contorted, and his hand began to move up and down, sinuously stroking. Green moved his tongue up to Adrian's scrotum and penetrated his body with long thumbs, and Adrian's stroking became faster and almost brutal. He started to gibber, "Please... oh God... damn.... Please, Green. Shit... need you... need.... *Please!*"

Green's face peered over Adrian's long body, and he grinned. "You want me?" The voice was far away and distorted, but Shepherd felt the joy, the humor of this act, of their bodies together.

"Fuck me now, you bloody git!" Adrian snapped.

Green's response was to delve deeper with his thumbs, and Adrian hissed and whined, and his hand tightened on his cock to the point where Shep could see it was purple and spend was starting to leak from the top. "*Please?*" he begged, and Green laughed softly.

"Since you asked, beloved."

Green moved up then and fitted himself against Adrian's entrance. Shepherd sucked in a breath just watching: Green was bigger than most mortals. His body was longer, his shoulders were wider, and his cock, marble pale and uncircumcised, was perfect and perfectly proportioned. He didn't see how it could....

Adrian howled, lifted his hips off the bed with a flex of his legs, and drove himself desperately, impaling his body *hard* on Green, who closed his eyes and thrust deeply.

“Hard, Green,” Adrian whispered. “Fuck me hard.”

Coarse words—earthy words, used in a purely carnal act.

But looking at their faces, Shepherd didn't see only carnal, physical sex—although there was that. Shepherd saw love. The things they were doing with their bodies were... painful. Awkward. But the love, the joy he saw, as Green framed Adrian's face with his hands and Adrian sucked a finger into his mouth and let it trail down his cheek, as Green's hips began to piston, as Green lowered his head to kiss his lover before he was moving too fast to make the gesture graceful....

All of it, all of it, made this an act of love.

Green threw back his head then, his gold hair falling like sunshine rain over his bare, white body, and Adrian—whose hand had never stopped moving on his own cock, even when their stomachs were mashed together—screamed just as Green howled in arousal.

“Do it, mate,” Green panted. “Do it now!”

Adrian came off the bed then, clasped his lover to his chest, brought Green down with him, and....

Bit his neck.

Shepherd hauled in a breath—and it actually felt like he needed it. He hadn't even seen Adrian's fangs extend, but there they were, long and lethal, and they buried themselves

in Green's slender neck and soft white skin. Scarlet blood pumped up, and Adrian opened his mouth and suckled, and Green... Green kept fucking him, the keening in his voice amped high and desperate as terrible, excruciatingly pleasurable aftershocks rocked them both into quivering nerve endings, tender and sensitized and beyond replete. They collapsed onto the bed, and Shepherd thought for a moment he could actually smell them, the collective odor of body fluids—sweat, blood, and come—that made up sex with a vampire.

"You don't always like that," Adrian murmured, nuzzling Green's pointed ear.

"Sometimes," Green mumbled back. His body was still deeply entrenched in Adrian's, and Shepherd had the feeling they might stay like that for hours, if the rules of physical contact could be bent to do something like it. "When I love you so much it feels like my heart is bursting through my skin."

"So every day then?" Adrian joked with a slight, but still familiar smile.

"Every goddamned night," Green affirmed.

"Love you too." They snuggled then, and Shepherd might have broken the spell and retreated, but Adrian met his eyes and gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head. And then Green fell asleep in his arms, his body fading from their reality as he did so.

Adrian flung his arm over his eyes again, but this time not to hide a grimace of pleasure. He stayed there, panting for a long time. When he finally spoke, Shep realized he'd

been studying Adrian's sex-flushed, come-spattered body with interest and... hunger.

"Elves remember when they dream," Adrian said softly, pulling Shepherd's attention from his dilated, used backside. "True memories. Sometimes, he lets himself dream of those moments... and then...."

Adrian's voice was choked, and Shepherd passed the back of his hand over his cheeks.

"That must be really awful," he said gruffly.

Adrian turned a blood-streaked face to him. "No, mate. It's really wonderful. You see? I *lived* that—I lived it, and it lives in my heart still, and sometimes Green visits and makes it real. It's a gift, and I'm forever grateful. That's why you spend time on earth. So you have memories like that in heaven."

Shepherd felt his heart slow down at the words, and his body, which hadn't stopped tingling, thumped sluggishly at his groin, and again, and then, painfully. His groin swelled, engorged....

Shepherd sucked in a breath, and, completely unconscious of how he looked, grabbed his crotch.

"Holy shit," he muttered. "I have balls."

Adrian swung his legs over the edge of the bed and wiped his face on the rumpled sheets. "Yeah, mate? Congratulations."

"Congratulations on what?" Jefe asked, and Shepherd almost groaned. Damn, Jefe... he must have gotten impatient.

“Nothing,” Shepherd said miserably at the same time Adrian—still naked to their gaze, his body glistening and still slightly erect—walked over to Shepherd and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Well, mate, let’s see. If you’re going to fall, let’s see what equipment you’re going to fall with!”

“You’re going to fall?” Jefi cried, unhappily, and Shepherd turned to him, confused and beleaguered, “I wasn’t planning to!” he snapped back. “Dammit, Jefi! I caught... I saw... and then my body... it just....”

Adrian glared at him seriously. “Own up, mate. It wasn’t what you saw. That’s not when it happened.”

“When did it happen?” Jefi asked curiously.

Shepherd shook his head. “Look. Nothing’s permanent. They can go away. I can make them go away....”

“C’mon, let’s see!” Jefi took liberties. Well, if anyone was going to, it was Jefischa, right? He gathered the folds of Shepherd’s heavenly robe and pulled it aside, and gasped.

“Oh my,” Adrian said with a smirk, and Shepherd looked down at himself.

“They’re... it’s... sort of... um....”

“Jesus, mate, you’re hung like a fucking bear!”

Complete with rust-colored pubic hair. Jefischa reached out a tentative hand and Shepherd realized that Adrian was watching and flinched away. Jefi looked up, hurt. “I just wanted to see.... Are they the same as Adrian’s? I don’t think so—yours isn’t completely human, yet—see, Shep? Adrian’s has veins and....”

And Jefe reached out that questing hand to actually *touch* Adrian's lush, playboy body, and Shepherd forgot all about trying to stay in heaven for Jefe, and a single word roared through him.

"*Mine!*" he snarled, and he grasped Jefe's hand inches away from Adrian's most personal parts.

Both angels gasped and looked at their hands as Shep held Jefe's.

Their hands had been... uhm, well, anatomically correct, but smooth and featureless. As they watched, Shepherd's hand became broader, harder, his fingers blunt and no-nonsense. Cinnamon-colored hair sprinkled the back of his wrist and (very, very lightly) the backs of his knuckles, and his skin was slightly rough. Jefe's hand in his was long-boned, finer, narrow, with long, tapered fingers and blond hair on his wrist only. And the skin was much softer than Shepherd's.

Shepherd watched as his thumb—almost independent of his will—caressed the inside of Jefe's wrist. Jefe sucked in a breath, and his body gave a wiggle and a convulsive little hop, and he looked closely at Shepherd. "I've got them too," he whispered.

Shepherd closed his eyes then and in a heartbeat, a wish, pulled his wings up around his shoulders and used them as a canopy over himself and Jefe. The wings pulsed around the two of them, wearing sort of a bright, embarrassed fuschia color, but they still did their job: instant privacy.

The men stood then, absolutely still. Shep's robes

swung back into place, but still the two of them were as naked as either of them had ever been in multiple millennia of existence. Shep raised the hand not holding Jefi's hand and caressed his beloved's cheek. His thumb, blunt and hard, with a slightly scratchy cuticle, painted a swath of blushing, fair skin under his touch, complete with a slight sprinkling of freckles. Jefischa closed his eyes, as though the slight touch was too exquisite to bear, and Shepherd raised his thumb again and traced Jefischa's closed eyelid, and then the other, and saw lashes appear, dark at the root and pale at the ends.

Jefischa opened his eyes, and they were the same round, stormy gray they had been in these past weeks, but now, they were full of wonder.

"I never meant this for us," Shepherd whispered. "I would have stayed here forever, just for you."

"What made your body change?" Jefi asked, as though knowing this would make peace in Shepherd's heart.

"Adrian." Shepherd's half-smile indicated how very many of their last few turbulent moments in heaven he attributed to Adrian. "He was living his lover's memory. He said 'That's why you live memories like this on earth, so you have them in heaven.'" Shepherd breathed in harshly. "I want those memories, Jefischa. Holy God, Heavenly Father as my witness, I want them with you."

Jefi grinned, and some very nonangelic tears leaked from the corner of his eyes. "Amen," he said softly. Shep captured one of the tears as it slid down a newly made crinkle in the corner of Jefi's eye. He raised his thumb to his mouth and tasted.

"It's not bitter at all," he whispered.

Jefi raised his hand to cup Shep's cheek, and they stood cocooned for heartbeats, actual heartbeats in their chests that they could feel throbbing at their throats.

Shep swallowed, feeling the burn all the way down his gullet. "I need to talk to Adrian," he said after a moment. He grinned cheekily, hoping Jefischa would trust him. "Wait here, would you?"

Jefi wrapped his arms around Shepherd's waist, and Shep realized that they no longer adhered to standard-angel-sizing. Jefischa was a whole head shorter than he was and far more slightly built. Shep was reminded of Green and Adrian again, and his arms wrapped around Jefi's shoulders, mindful of the wings tucked snugly against his back. He settled his wings lower, at shoulder level, and looked out from their tiny world at the ghost of the man who had started it all.

Adrian had dressed in the time it had taken them to talk and was sitting on his bed, waiting patiently for them to come out of their huddle.

"So, I take it I'll be getting some new guards in a bit."

Shepherd regarded him levelly. "Was this how the others fell?"

Adrian grinned. "Honestly, mate? I have no idea. You two liked me. You were fairly special."

Shepherd nodded and looked at Jefi, oblivious in the privacy of Shepherd's wings. "I don't know how to do this," he said desperately. "How do I make this good for him?"

“Lubricant,” Adrian answered without blinking. “Lots of lubricant. And baths. You need baths when you get to earth or things don’t taste so good.”

Shepherd opened his mouth and closed it again and then opened it, widened his eyes, closed his mouth, shook his head, and started again. “I meant living on earth,” he said after an awkward pause, expecting Adrian to laugh again as he had before.

He didn’t. “Come here,” he said softly, “and let Jefischa out so I can talk to you both.”

Shepherd pulled back his wings, and Adrian came up to them both and threw a casual, comforting hand on each of their shoulders. “Now, you two have seen me look at them enough. You’ve seen me watch my home, Green’s Hill. When the time comes, I need you to think about Green’s Hill for me, right? Just think about it. I’m pretty sure you’ll end up there, and then—well, Shepherd. There are some places on earth that aren’t frightening. They’re not terrible. Now, it may be filled with vampires and werewolves, but my home is still one of them, right?”

Shepherd nodded, relieved in no small way. He’d watched Adrian’s home. It wasn’t perfect, but it wasn’t walking the world alone either. Adrian cupped Shepherd’s cheek with a cool hand and leaned in and kissed his temple. Shepherd realized he was maybe an inch or two taller than the vampire, and Adrian wasn’t short. “Now I want you to do me a favor,” Adrian murmured close to Shep’s ear. “I want you to give Green one of these and tell him ‘hullo’ for me. Can you do that, mate?”

Shep swallowed and nodded, and then Adrian gave Jefischa the same sort of treatment. "And you, little man, I want you to do the same thing for my girl, right? Kiss them both, just like I kissed you. Touch their cheeks and kiss their temples and tell them Adrian says 'hullo, luv'. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, Adrian," Jefischa said soberly, and Adrian backed away and smiled so widely his fangs came out. Funny how Shep always forgot he had them, but he'd look out of place if they weren't there.

"And both of you, when he's not expecting it, give that fuckface wanker one of these for me, would you?" He gave them both a gentle smack on the back of their heads and then laughed at their earnest, albeit confused expressions as they nodded their promise to him. "Now you two blokes have other things to do. Safe journey, right?"

"Right." Shep nodded. Then, gravely, "Thank you, Adrian. Have some... have some peace, if you can."

Adrian's smile was... was sweeter than a real angel's. Shepherd would always remember it when he thought of heaven. "I'll do that. And you two have some fun. I'm sure I'll see you again eventually."

Shepherd smiled bravely. "Later than sooner."

"Later than sooner, my brothers."

And with that, they were outside of Adrian's room, wrapped in the cocooning quiet of their own bright, pale wings.

Part III

Flying

THEIR heartbeats were so loud Shepherd wondered that they didn't fill heaven with the thunder of their sin.

Then he lowered his head to Jefe's, brushed pink, pouty lips with his own lean mouth, and sin ceased to exist.

Jefe moved his head and caught the corner of Shep's mouth, the end of his chin, his cheekbone. He stood on tiptoe and rubbed his cheek against Shep's, his skin like satin, and Shepherd groaned softly.

"Am I doing it wrong, Shep?"

"No, Jefe... your touch makes me real."

Jefe exhaled softly and tipped his head back, and Shepherd kissed down his jaw line, down the hollow of his ear, and along his throat. He opened his mouth and laved the little divot where the clavicles met, and Jefe breathed, "Me too. You make me real, Shepherd. Touch me."

They did, slowly, and every touch was glory. Shep's lips on the inside of Jefe's arm revealed a miracle of soft, pale flesh with the occasional tiny mole or freckle. Jefe's palms, gliding under Shep's robe and down his chest, revealed thick, unyielding lumps of muscle under smooth skin. Kiss by brush by stroke of flesh, they painted humanity onto each other's skin with quivering, gentling, ravenous acts of touch.

Robes that had previously simply hung and swirled now became tangled around their hands, hanging up on sharp things like elbows and shoulders and knees. And wings. Shepherd grew impatient when Jefi was trying to gain access to his chest. He gave a roar of irritation and ripped his robe from his neck to the hem, and it fell in tatters at his feet. Jefischa gave the neck of his robe a few ineffectual yanks and almost succeeded in throttling himself. Shepherd rained tiny kisses on his forehead and eyelids before he seized the neck of the offensive thing and shredded Jefi's garment too.

Jefi was a marvel of engineering underneath.

"Oh, Jefi," Shep murmured. He circled around, palming the space between Jefi's wings. Adrian's handprint had faded into the rest of his skin, and now all that remained was the human flush that Shepherd's touch left on his beloved's body. Shepherd continued smoothing his hands along the backs of Jefi's shoulders and palming the sensitized quiver of his upper arms. He stood behind the smaller angel and placed gentle, reverent kisses down the perfectly assembled puzzle that was his spine and ended with a tongue-lave and a playful nibble at the divots that marked each bottom cheek. Jefi gave a high pitched, breathless squeak, and Shepherd moved to the backs of his knees, cupping the insides of his thighs with strong hands when he felt Jefi's legs tremble. Inside his head he heard Adrian's voice, *Lubricant—lots of lubricant*, but there were too many other marvels to discover before he went there.

They would only fall once. Shepherd wanted it to be the best, most glorious ride since the act of "falling" came into existence. He wanted Jefi to remember their fall with joy.

“What?” Jefi asked when he could get a breath. By now he was still standing, but Shepherd was on his knees in front of him. “Oh Jefi’ what?”

Shepherd looked up his body, all planes, angles, and secret shadows since his angel façade had faded. “You are so beautiful,” Shepherd breathed, and Jefi’s sex, which had become engorged and stiff with excitement, flexed against his thigh.

Shepherd extended a tentative finger and traced a careful line down Jefi’s cock. The skin—like all of Jefi’s skin—became more real as he did so, the surface of the thing becoming defined and rough with veins and ripples of erect flesh. Jefi drew in a harsh breath and held it, and Shepherd drew that careful line again.

Jefi’s foreskin had retracted a little, but it still hugged loosely around the crown, and Shepherd pulled it back just to hear Jefi hiss and moan a little in his throat. His other hand reached down to cup the heaviness of his testicles, and he was delighted with the almost transparent, coarse fur that covered them. “Look!” he murmured, and he very gingerly lifted Jefi’s cock so he could kiss the shadowed little valley between them.

“Shep,” Jefi whined, and Shepherd grinned wickedly. Jefi wanted more. Shepherd had just been given an explicit demonstration of how to give more. Very carefully, he stroked Jefi’s length and squeezed, being very careful to make sure the foreskin skated around the crown, making a thick, slurpy sound of flesh and flesh.

Jefi's thighs trembled, and he tilted his head back and grunted, long and drawn out, and Shepherd was much encouraged.

Shepherd stroked him again and again and one more time, and then, tantalized by the size and the shape and the wonderful sensitivity, he put that little head of flesh into his mouth and swished his tongue around. Jefi grabbed his head and groaned.

"Your mouth is *hot*," he panted, and Shep grinned around him. Then Shepherd moved his lips down farther, until the end of the thing was uncomfortably in his throat (another new sensation but not a pleasant one, so Shep didn't linger over it) and then moved his head back. He'd seen humans do this. He'd just seen Green do this to Adrian. Watching up Jefi's body to see his eyes close tight and his jaw go slack was reason enough to do this and do it often. Feeling Jefi's hands clench uncontrollably in his hair was another reason. All of it, the texture, the scent, the... oh... oh damn... the taste of Jefi's skin.... Shepherd pushed his head down past comfort just to have the taste of Jefi's skin fill his mouth completely.

Then there was another taste, a sweet and salty taste, and Jefi found his words. "You need to stop," he panted. "I feel like... I'm going to... I feel like I'm falling... I can't fall without you, Shep... come up here...please...."

It was Jefi's choice of the word "fall" that made Shep stop. He didn't think that God would be cruel enough to send them spiraling down into the world separately just because their new bodies had an unsynchronized involuntary spasm, but he didn't want to take the risk. He

wanted to be as close as possible, buried in Jefe's flesh, merged inside his skin, as close to being one person as two bodies could possibly get, just to avoid the frightening possibility of falling to earth and not knowing where Jefischa landed.

"Northern California," Shep said, releasing Jefe's body from his mouth and going into study mode immediately. "Foresthill, Green—you remember all that?"

Jefe reached down, and although his body stayed erect, he sheltered his wings over both of them and framed Shep's face with his hands. "I won't need to, Shep. You'll take me there."

Shep knew he had a heart now, because it stopped beating, then and there. What a terrible burden such trust was—but he wouldn't give it up or throw it off his shoulders for the world. He wrapped his arms up around Jefe's backside and rested his cheek against Jefe's thigh until his heart started beating again. Jefe's hands were stroking through his hair, and Shepherd looked up at him again, knowing that worship was in his lover's eyes and not sure if he'd take it out if he could.

"I won't let you down, Jefe. I swear."

He took Jefe's extended hand then and stood. Jefe took his face in his slender, soft hands and pulled Shepherd down into a hard, confident kiss. Shep found his mouth opening, being invaded, and the taste of Jefischa's tongue in his own mouth was an intoxicating revelation.

He could kiss Jefischa *forever*.

But eventually Jefi broke off the kiss to go exploring on his own. He slid down Shep's blank stomach and touched his tongue to the center. Shep gasped as a navel appeared, and Jefi giggled into the tender skin of his tummy, making Shep smile and gasp and then grind himself helplessly against any part of Jefi he could reach.

Jefi laughed some more, the sound deep and throaty and rich. He sounded... older. Grown up. Fearless.

And then he fearlessly engulfed Shep's cock with his mouth, and Shepherd forgot all about the richness of Jefi's laugh. His vision went black with stars, and heaven became a mysterious place, the kind of place he could fall into just by tilting his head back and....

"Not yet," he rasped. "Not yet. Jefi... Jefi, we've got to...." Jefi bobbed his head again, and Shepherd found himself in command again. "Lay down, Jefi. Lay down and spread your legs."

The rush that flooded Shep's brand-new bloodstream when Jefisha complied was wonderfully painful. Shepherd gave him a moment to situate his wings, spread out on either side of his shoulders, before he covered Jefi's body with his own and kissed him again. Their new bodies were heated, sweating, and their movements were no longer slow and exploratory. Their hands, their mouths, their chests, their thighs... every part of their bodies that came in contact was moving roughly, demanding to touch more of the other....

"Shep," Jefi panted, grinding his cock against the crease of Shepherd's thigh, "Shep, my body is *hungry*...."

Shepherd kissed him hard on the lips and whispered, “Trust me,” into Jefe’s delicate ear. Then he dragged himself down that pale, slender, perfect, fine-boned, surprisingly strong body, and positioned his head between Jefe’s spread legs.

First he spent some more time at ground zero... mmmm.... Jefe tasted so *good*! His thrusts in the back of Shep’s throat made Shep’s whole body writhe, but Shep was getting close, and his body and mind were playing a treacherous game of hurry-up-and-wait. His body wanted to hurry. His mind wanted to wait. His body was starting to win.

Jefe’s hands were clenching in his hair, and Shepherd took one of them, laced their fingers tight together, and then moved, wrapping Jefe’s hand around his own body and showing him how to stroke.

Jefe made a sound like “ooooooooohhhh” and did just that, and Shep moved his tongue and fingers lower.

Lubricant. Lots and lots of lubricant. Shepherd only had one kind of lubricant at his disposal, and he used it liberally. He’d seen Green penetrating Adrian—he knew that Green had prepared Adrian’s body, licked it, stretched it, made it slack and wet and ready to accept Green’s large body. Shepherd did the same thing, except it was better doing than watching. Jefe’s taste was exciting. The sounds he made as Shepherd stimulated his nerve endings were *hot*... and the sight of Jefe’s hand on his own cock was etching the word *sexy* into Shepherd’s brain.

By the time Jefe’s opening was lax and ready, Shepherd’s own body had been leaking for some time.

Shepherd pushed himself up and knelt between Jefe's wantonly spread legs.

"This may... I'm sort of big, Jefe," he said anxiously, but Jefe made a pleading noise, a begging noise, and Shepherd knew he couldn't stop now. There was nothing "angelic" about Jefe anymore. His eyes were glazed and half-lidded, his mouth was open, his pale blond hair was mussed around his head, and his cock was rampant, erect, purple, and glistening with spit and pre-ejaculate.

Shepherd's mind went blank as he pushed into his lover. He wanted. He needed. *They needed possession. MINE.*

The final thrust that seated him deep inside Jefischa made Jefe's eyes pop open widely and his lips quirk up.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh...."

"Does it hurt?" Shepherd asked.

"It's gooooooooooooood," Jefe sighed. "Hurts gooooooooooooood."

Shepherd chuckled and began to move slowly, holding his shoulders up with strong arms and sturdy muscles. Jefe let go of his cock and wrapped his hands around Shep's shoulders, urging him on physically even though he couldn't seem to make whole real words anymore.

"Oh... Shep... oh... please... please... yes... yes... damn... Shep... please...."

Shepherd growled and started pounding his hips against Jefe's thighs, burying his body inside Jefe's with determination and passion, and then... then... Jefe cried out and wrapped his legs around Shep's hips, and Shepherd's

vision went dark against his closed eyes, and for a moment, they were on a precipice, looking out at the night sky. For a moment, they hovered, the world at their feet and heaven gentle on their faces as Shep's body heaved and his lungs gasped and he supplicated... *Please, God... please. Let me be enough. Let me take care of Jefi like he deserves.*

For a moment, they hesitated, and then Shepherd opened his eyes and Jefi's wide gray eyes were fastened on him, drinking in the sight of his passion and his lust and his love.

Shepherd plunged one last time into his lover's flesh and then buried his face in Jefi's neck and roared as his body released, and then he and Jefi clung together, shaking in orgasm....

Stepped off the precipice.

And flew.

Part IV

Landing

ADRIAN knelt on the floor of his room, gazing through the window he was allowed and onto the crown of his home, Green's Hill.

"Do you see them yet?" Saint Peter asked over his shoulder, and Adrian shushed him.

"Wait...wait... there they are. See?"

Saint Peter knelt, right there on the floor of the vampire's room, and peered down to the earth below. In a lovely garden (with exceedingly interesting trees) two naked men huddled under a canopy of feathered wings, touching each other's faces in wonder.

"They'll be all right there?" Peter asked anxiously. "They fell with their wings intact. None of the others did—they all can pass for human."

Adrian looked up at Peter, troubled lines written across his eternally young, human face. "These two were purer than the others. Why did you set them to guard me?"

Peter blew out a breath and sighed. "Shepherd would have soured, Adrian. The only thing keeping his soul clean was Jefischa. I... I just wanted them to have a vacation, that's all. Shepherd's stubborn about things like duty and obligation. If you hadn't—" Peter waved his hands vaguely "—you know,

done whatever you do, he never would have chosen to fall.” Peter shook his head. “You’re a master, you know. How do you get them to fall so fast?”

Adrian shrugged. “It’s not something I do on purpose, guv’nor. I really didn’t even have to talk to the others. They just sort of fell on their own. But not these two.” He looked down again and saw Green emerging from the trap door that led to the garden. He looked shocked by the new residents of his hill, and when it appeared they were too wrapped in themselves to notice him, he sat on a marble bench, pulled out a book, and patiently waited.

“Was it worth it?” Peter asked curiously after they spent some time just looking at the happy couple, feeling the sort of pride a set of parents must feel when seeing their children married off.

“Always,” Adrian answered soberly. “Was what worth it?”

Peter looked disconcerted for a moment and then continued. “The time you spent with them—the extra effort. Was it worth it?”

“They were friends.” Adrian shrugged. “Anything to help friends, right?”

“But Adrian, it must have hurt, opening your soul like that...”

“Hush, dammit. Wait. The best part’s coming.”

If heaven was in Jefischa’s arms, a better heaven was in Jefischa’s arms on the top of Green’s Hill.

When their hearts quieted down and their breath was no longer deafening in their ears, they realized they had landed. Shepherd rolled to the side, pulled his wings up to shelter the two of them, and they lay, staring at each other under a feather canopy.

Gradually they became aware of small things. The grass below them smelled wonderful and real, but it was starting to itch. There was the fragrant smell of flowers in the sun being born to them on the breeze, but it was a little cool—almost uncomfortably so—in the shade. The sun itself slanted longways. It was autumn, probably early autumn, and early evening as well. Humans probably didn't wear shorts in these temperatures, and Shepherd stopped the study of his fingertips along the curves of Jefe's jaw to pull his wings closer for warmth.

"Look, Shep. Your wings have feathers on them," Jefe said in wonder.

Shepherd smiled and reached out a hand to caress the curve of Jefe's wing. They did have feathers—and musculature and definition. Nothing on their bodies was energy and a wish for a form anymore. Everything about them was muscle, sinew, blood, and bone.

Except their hearts, Shepherd thought with wonder. Whatever was swelling in his chest felt like the swelling chorus of... of... of angels.

For the first time in four millennia, Shepherd understood Jefe's love of music, and he let out a helpless, happy laugh as he buried his face in Jefe's sweaty shoulder. That realization alone was worth the fall.

"Where are we?" Jefe asked, bringing Shepherd to the here and now again.

Shepherd abandoned the idea of warmth and struggled to sit up. "I think we made it to Green's Hill," he said with something like hope in his heart.

"You did indeed, my boy-os!" There was a man... an elf, in fact, with pointed ears and wide set, alien features, a pointed chin, and long, long butter-colored hair, sitting on a marble bench with the likeness of Adrian sculpted on the side.

"You're Green," Shepherd said in awe, recognizing him. Green nodded and smiled and offered Shepherd a hand to help him stand up off the grass. Shepherd gratefully took it—and understood it for what it was. He and Jefe had not landed alone. They were not in a terrible, frightening place. They were on Green's Hill, Adrian's home. They would be all right.

"I am indeed," Green replied, his voice sounding like Adrian's but different. Different parts of the world had different accents, Shep recalled, even small countries like Great Britain, and Shepherd wondered at the sound of that accent here on a hill a continent away. He forgot that for a moment and bent to help Jefe up. Jefe immediately wrapped his arms around Shepherd's waist and tucked himself under Shep's arm.

"I'm Shepherd, and this is Jefischa." Shep spoke hesitantly, and then he looked at Jefe to see if this was the right time. Jefe shrugged and nodded, and Shep reached out his hand to Green's cheek. The elf's eyes widened, but he

allowed Shep to cup his cheek and then lean in and kiss his temple.

“Adrian says ‘Hullo, luv’,” Shepherd said carefully, and he was unprepared for Green to close his eyes and trap Shepherd’s hand against his cheek with a trembling hand. Green pulled in a breath that quivered and let it out slowly.

“Hullo, beloved,” he said softly, savoring Shepherd’s touch as though it were Adrian’s own. “Hullo.” Shepherd’s palm grew wet with tears, but he didn’t move it, not for a long time.

Adrian knelt on the floor of his room in heaven and pressed his palm against his viewing window as though he really could touch the elf’s cheek. “Hullo, luv,” he whispered. Through a trick of perspective, for a moment, just a moment, it looked to Saint Peter as though their flesh were really touching. For a moment, Adrian really did hold his beloved’s face in the palm of his hand.

“Yes,” he said out loud to Peter, although Peter noticed he never pulled his attention from the tableau below. “Yes, it was worth all of it, everything, just for this moment.” Blood-brine tears dripped onto the back of his hand, and he wiped them on his T-shirt and then put his hand back to pretend he truly touched his lover’s flesh.

Saint Peter watched soundlessly, understanding and accepting at once. Idly he wondered who else needed the prompt to fall, to take a “flesh vacation,” as he’d started to think of them, but the question could wait. The fact was, the

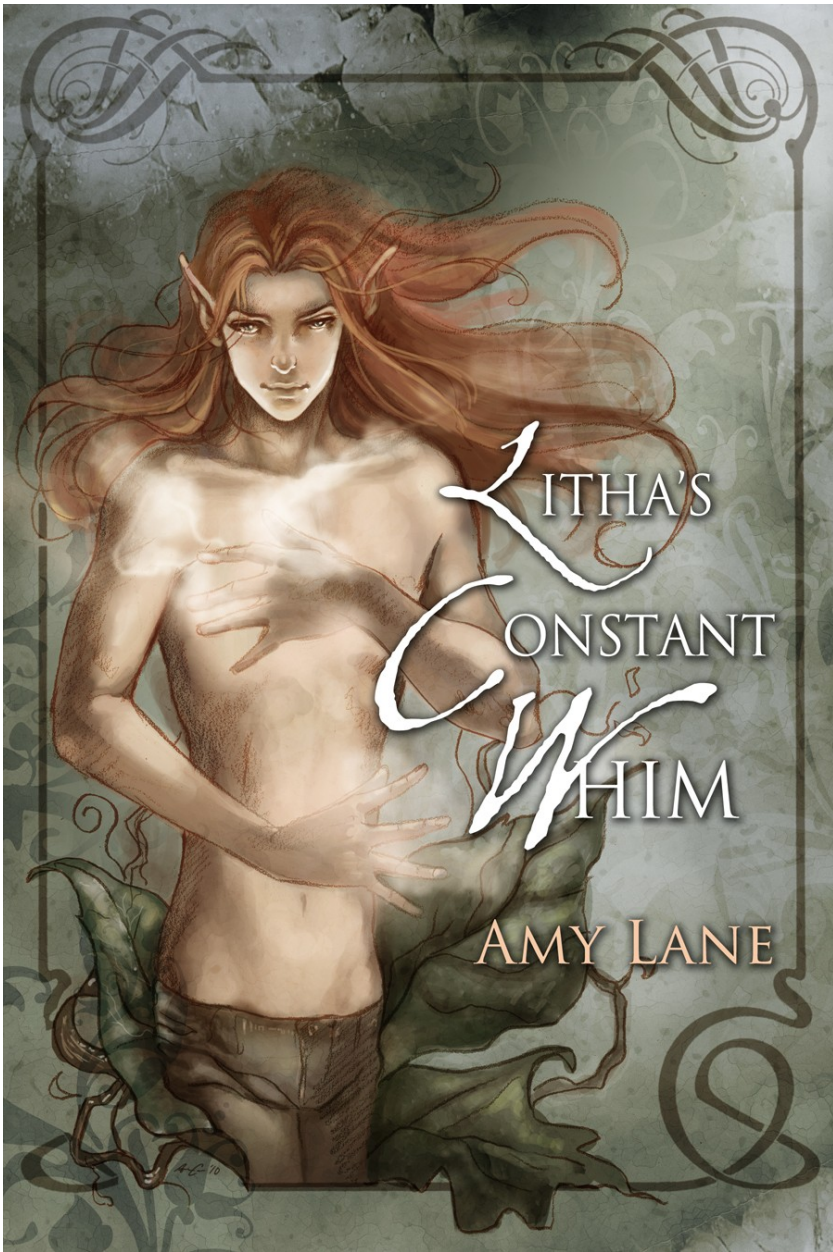
vampire's ghost didn't really need guarding, and Adrian deserved some time alone.

Saint Peter blinked and disappeared, and Adrian continued his vigil at the window to the world of Green's Hill.

AMY LANE teaches high school English, mothers four children, and writes the occasional book. When she's not begging students to sit-the-hell-down or taxiing kids to soccer/dance/karate—oh my! she can be found catching emergency naps, grocery shopping, or hiding in the bathroom, trying to read without interruption. She will never be found cooking, cleaning, or doing domestic chores, but she has been known to knit up an emergency hat/blanket/pair of socks for any occasion whatsoever or sometimes for no reason at all. She writes in the shower, while commuting, while her classes are doing bookwork, or while she's wandering the neighborhood at night pretending to exercise and has learned from necessity to type like the wind. She lives in a spider-infested and crumbling house in a shoddy suburb and counts on her beloved mate, Mack, to keep her tethered to reality—which he does while keeping her cell phone charged as a bonus. She's been married for twenty plus years and still believes in Twu Wuv, with a capital Twu and a capital Wuv, and she doesn't see any reason at all for that to change.

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