

Sarafin Lee Phoenix

# The Worlds That Divide Us

Touching Heaven

Novel

The Worlds That Divide Us - Touching Heaven (Volume 1)

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SarafinLeePhoenix@firemail.de

[www.SarafinLeePhoenix.com](http://www.SarafinLeePhoenix.com)

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## --- Prologue ---

*The world stops and each raindrop falls on its own. Frozen with horror, I look up at the low-hanging clouds above me. Panic-stricken, my eyes scan the shades of gray, trying to make out a remnant of them in every darker discoloration. Every time I think I have found something that breaks through the uniform gray, my heart beats faster for a moment in joy, until I realize my mistake and sink into myself in disappointment. In vain I search for what I have unconsciously longed for all my life. Empty, the gloomy sky stares back, mocking my naive hope of ever seeing them again. Indifferently, I let the raindrops run down me and soak through me. Resolutely I persist, for I do not want to bow to the fact that they have disappeared, do not want to believe that they have left me alone. But in this moment, which takes everything away from me for the second time in my life, I have to realize that they will not come back, and that I am probably the loneliest person on this planet.*

*No, I'm not. It would be an outright lie to claim that, because others know loneliness too. One or the other maybe even better than me. But sometimes it feels like I'm billions of miles away, far from any human soul in my own little cosmos at the edge of the universe. Because at some point everything around me had become lonely and the silence so loud that I felt like I was in a prison in my lost little world.*

*My name is Sarafin, even though no one calls me that. All those who did have long since disappeared, they no longer exist. No one ever lasted long in my presence, as if I were toxic and would sooner or later poison my fellows. Only my grandfather stayed, though he had his reasons.*

*But that is another story.*

*And I am different, though I wanted nothing more than to be like everyone else. Like so many, I was an inconspicuous teenager, going to school and trying to think about the future. But unlike others who dance through life with a smile, make friends, experience love, and face life together, I was always to myself. As if frozen, I remained in my initially self-chosen isolation, in my personal cage that I had created over the years and from which there seemed to be no escape. For years I lived in that distant time, which I thought to wash away with tears and yet which never wanted to let me out of its iron grip. Because I am inconspicuous. Because I am no one special. Because I am not worthy of attention.*

*At least that's what I thought.*

*It is not for a pitying smile that I tell my story or because I no longer wish to remain invisible; after all, I never knew anything other than the small world into which I once fled. But at some point, silence, which remained one of the few listeners throughout my life, was no longer my best friend or isolation my faithful protector, accompanying me through every stage of it, bouncing all insults and meanness off me like a shield. The day came when everything changed and I saw the world with different eyes. Only when a completely different, new world opened up before me, a world whose magic was able to touch the bottom of my soul, a world that held so much more than the familiar superficialities, did I manage to break my self-imposed shackles and dare to take the step out into life. Without this experience, I would still be living in seclusion and not doubting my dungeon existence. Without this knowledge, this night would not be so dark and I would not have been deprived once again of everything I thought I possessed.*

*No, I am telling this story for those it touches, because perhaps they know loneliness all too well in their own lives. For those who are outsiders, have no real friends, and somehow always find themselves on the sidelines of events like a mis-supplied piece of the puzzle, while the others are enjoying life to the fullest. But also for those who are on the other side and have never quite understood why nerds like me exist and why we are the way we are. But most of all, I tell it for those who are brave enough to look for more in life and explore their limits. Because my story is truly incredible. I never dreamed that something so great would happen to me, something I only ever read about in books or saw in movies. Not for a moment did I give in to the deceptive illusion that there could*

*ever be such a glorious moment for me, in which I would be rescued like Cinderella. Let alone did I suspect that I would land in the midst of a battle between good and evil, millions of years old, and play the decisive constant.*

*Like everyone else, I always wanted to leave my mark on this planet, achieve immortality, be someone special. Someone who influenced the course of the world. Someone who would not fade into insignificance after his passing, when his ashes would be carried away by the winds of time and lost in nothingness. I wanted to be someone who would leave his footprint forever. That I could ever succeed in this was not even a thought in my dreams.*

*But before I was allowed to explore the beautiful things in life, the distant worlds full of magic that are hidden behind the veil that surrounds our reality, before I outgrew myself and went on adventures that are so unimaginable that they still send goosebumps down my body, I first had to learn to go my own way and love myself on that night that left me lonely and soaked. Because if you don't know who you are and who you want to be, you can't live the life you were meant to live or do deeds that change the world. And until you love yourself, you cannot be loved by anyone.*

*Turn the page and dive into a world full of magic, a world which is able to put a shine in your eyes that will never disappear from it. Turn the page and come with me, accompany me on my way through heaven and hell, fight demons and save the world, be the hero you've always been in your dreams, the warrior who wins victories by night, and all that our heart longs for in its deepest place. Turn the page and join me in the adventure of your life.*

*Sarafin*

## Part I - Touching Heaven

## --- *A Fateful Encounter* ---

A shadow flitted through the darkness. Lightly he moved over the roof tiles, walking through a silent world that held its breath to watch the mysterious creatures of the night from unseen eyes. Except for the subtle twinkling of the stars, the world was as pitch black as the silhouette it concealed. On a seemingly random rooftop, he paused and looked around. Lurking, his gaze slid over the peacefully sleeping neighborhood. Only after a while did his tense posture loosen and his attention turn to the skylight at his feet. The blink of an eye later, he slipped through the hatch.

As silently as falling snow, Delorian glided into the room plunged into complete darkness. His feet gracefully touched the wooden floor, cushioning his jump so effortlessly that they made no sound. Searching, his gaze scanned the room, grazing various pieces of furniture and inconsequential objects, until his eyes lingered on the figure in the large bed.

In awe, Delorian held his breath. For a few seconds he watched the steady rise and fall of the sleeping body's chest and gave himself completely over to this regularity. In his mind he imagined a million possibilities of the appearance as well as character of the person lying there. He let run through his mind a million questions, answers and greetings that would have arisen if contact had been allowed, and saw the coming year pass by like a movie with all its highs and lows, with everything he would live through, with all the unknown constants still in the air, with all the perhaps beautiful moments that could be passed on as stories to his friends, with all the lessons he would learn from the experience ... For a moment he still hung on these images, then he expelled the air. All this time he had not dared to breathe, as if only a breath could desecrate the sacred silence and break the existing image into its component parts like a mirror.

*Everything is going according to plan*, he told himself, pushing back the sea of questions, expectations and uncertainties.

Delorian's eyes rested thoughtfully on the bed. He tried in vain to recognize further details of the dreaming figure. The darkness hid it too well and allowed only rough outlines to be guessed, so that he could not prepare himself for his task as he had hoped. A slight uneasiness ran through his stomach. He had never been inclined to spontaneity. He usually made a comprehensive picture of the situation in advance. Well prepared, he then mastered the task assigned to him to everyone's satisfaction. In this case, the file had been too sparse for him to feel well prepared, and above the darkness thwarted his plans. He would have no other option but to act intuitively.

Sighing, he stared into the darkness that surrounded him and pondered the chances that he would manage this test with ease, as everyone had prophesied. He could not quite share the confidence of the others. There was nothing he could do about the rising panic that overcame him at the thought of the year ahead. It was not that he had any reason to doubt himself. When he looked back, he had always managed to exceed all expectations, and he knew that he could do anything if he just tried hard enough. But a creeping, underlying uncertainty gnawed at him, raising the question of what if he failed to accomplish something for once. What if it was assumed simply out of habit that he would master this task as well? What if there was a first time for failure? And what if it happened right here, at the most important test of his life!

Dully, he felt the accelerating hammering of his heartbeat. His knees were suddenly as soft as on his first day of school and his mouth felt dry as dust, as if he were standing in front of the Sublime Board. He was dizzy with excitement and would have preferred to run off. For a moment, he wanted nothing more than to flee into his father's saving embrace like a child not yet ready to take that big step into the world. For one tantalizing moment, he longed to return to the carefree days when a smile was enough to send everyone into raptures, a time when he was one among many and expectations of him were no higher.

Once again his gaze slid over the sleeping figure in the large bed. *A human being lies there*, he told himself. *A very ordinary human being.*

And yet a being so incredibly strange!

No, he was not allowed to doubt. He was destined to master this task. Moreover, he was not the first one who would master it. It was ridiculous how he was behaving.

Delorian forced himself to calm down and tried to shake off the tension, but couldn't help but play out a possible failure over and over again in his mind. He saw the disappointment on his father's face, the disbelieving, wide eyes of his friends, and the rebuke in his teacher's gaze. Spasmodically, his stomach tightened. For the past few months, he had been longing for the day when the exam would begin, while at the same time dreading it. Unimaginable pressure weighed on his shoulders and the childlike fear of failing made his heart beat faster once again. There was too much at stake because –

It was only a fleeting, barely perceptible movement in the opposite corner of the room that promptly put him on alert and reflexively made him take a step back. Straining every muscle, he squinted in the direction in question, trying to figure out the cause of the movement.

Nothing. No matter how hard he searched the room, nothing could be located.

Had he been mistaken? With his superhumanly fine senses?

He was about to dismiss the whole thing as a trick of his overstressed nerves, when he again had the feeling that something was moving. Concentrating, Delorian focused his eyes on the darkness in front of him and searched every square millimeter of the indefinable black mass.

As if from nowhere, a shadow appeared in front of him.

Startled, Delorian jumped to the side. His first thought was: *Leave!*

He half whirled around to escape through the skylight. At the last second, just as he was about to jump, he stopped in mid-motion. Was he already going to give up now and just leave his protégé alone? Someone was here. He had expected to meet his opponent, but assumed he would have a chance to look around first. The fact that the other was already here allowed only one conclusion: He was not as lazy as he had believed. In fact, he seemed far more eager than *he* was.

Delorian turned around suspiciously and shortly after even took a curious step towards the other. Never before had anyone beaten him to anything. »Who ...,« he began in a voice that resonated through the room like the mysterious whisper of the wind.

Before he could utter another word, he was pushed back with unexpected force and pressed against the wall.

Delorian gasped for air. Confused, he blinked at his counterpart, as if an unknown being were standing in front of him. But that was exactly what presented itself to his eyes. A stranger. *The enemy*, he thought, as he recalled who he had before him.

The other's features also showed astonishment. Instantly he let go of him and took a step back, as if he had burned himself on him. »A celestial harpist,« Devin's voice rang out, carrying something dark and at the same time velvety. Amusement and a hint of surprise played around the corners of his mouth, as if he had expected anyone but an angel.

Delorian overheard the insult. Stunned, he had trouble getting his tongue to speak. »A ... devil angel,« he stated, disengaging himself from the wall to assume a more comfortable position that made his fear less obvious. He reminded himself that he had been prepared for this, but there was nothing he could do about the oppressive feeling he felt. Being so close to his adversary made him uncomfortable.

One silent moment followed the other, without either of them saying another word. Motionless, they fixed their gaze on each other until familiar features emerged from the shadowy contours. This time Delorian wasn't the only one gasping in surprise. Devin's eyes widened, but he didn't move. Like hunters ready to attack, they stood facing each other, trying to gauge the other's reaction, while the unspoken question of what was going on hung in the room.

After a seemingly endless period of time, filled with questioning looks and an oppressive silence that seemed to weigh tons, like the silence during a funeral that can't be overcome and drags everything with it into the depths of the grave, Devin asked the crucial question.

»What are you doing here?«

Delorian swallowed, for a moment still completely taken aback by the other's presence. When he had composed himself a bit, he replied, with clear distaste in his otherwise gentle-sounding voice, »I might as well ask you that.«

Silence again took over the room and palpable hostility stretched between the two, like a bow about to shoot its deadly arrow with cruel accuracy. An impregnable barrier opened up between them, capable of separating cities, countries, even entire continents. A chasm so deep that it could not be bridged.

»I was assigned to him,« Delorian finally said, taking another step away from the wall.

»No.«

»No?« he asked, surprised.

»No. I was assigned to him,« Devin pointed out firmly.

»But I've been assigned to protect him.«

»You're wrong. I was assigned to him.«

»No, I was.«

»It can't be!« Devin's voice rose, bursting through every sound like a thunderclap ripping through the air, like razor blades through delicate skin, and tolerated no further contradiction.

With fists clenched and undisguised anger in their eyes, the two sparkled at each other. The tension that hung in the air seemed graspable, dangling by a silken thread that was about to snap at any moment. One wrong word, one too quick move, and a confrontation threatened that could change the fate of the world.

A soft cry from across the room broke the dangerous silence.

The two angels flinched and turned their heads.

The sleeping figure had risen, sat blinking forlornly into the darkness, struggling for breath as if it had been running through alleys for hours. There was something panicky in the breaths and a tremor made its body shake. For a few seconds, the awakened silhouette continued to breathe heavily, then fell back into the pillows and surrendered to sleep once again.

All of a sudden, the look of the uninvited guests no longer reflected anger, but increasing confusion.

»What ...,« Devin began and slowly approached the bed as if he were approaching a dangerous predator, completely forgetting his counterpart for a moment.

Delorian followed him at some distance.

It was only a creeping suspicion, the feeling that something was wrong, that made the two of them step closer. Arriving respectively at opposite sides of the bed, they gazed at the outline of their protégé, trying to get a closer look at it despite the sparse light. Once again, dreams enveloped the figure, pulling it back with them into a world wrapped around the sleeping body like a protective cloak, to a place as enchanted as a forgotten fairy tale that did not know the wounds and bitter loneliness of reality, but instead held boundless magic and joy. It was a world that most mortal beings were only too happy to escape to, even though there didn't seem to be only good things there. The nightmare had brought with it a very different image from the realm of dreams. And yet, there was a magic in this world that even the two angels could not resist. Longingly their eyes lay on the sleeping being and hung on the question, how these dreams looked like.

Devin was the first to shake the enchantment. He cleared his throat and was about to turn away when the moon emerged from behind the clouds and cast its pale light on the features of their protégé. Simultaneously, the two angels wrenched their eyes open and stared at the figure that had sunk back into sleep.

»A girl?« whispered Devin, giving his counterpart a questioning look.

Delorian was no less puzzled, failing to take his eyes off the strange being. To all appearances, he did not want to believe what his eyes were showing him so clearly. »But how ... They meant ... Normally it's ...« he muttered more to himself before breaking off and shaking his head as if his senses were playing tricks on him.

»There's obviously been a misunderstanding,« Devin remarked, regaining his composure. Swiftly he stepped back from the bed to make his way toward the skylight. »I've been assigned to protect a boy named Phil. With *some* sky angel at that. But definitely not with *you*.«

»I've been given the same assignment.«



»That can't be. I'll sort it out,« Devin said. Without another word, he swung through the skylight and disappeared into the pitch-black night.

--- *Heavenly Misadventures* ---

A babble of voices pervaded the large hall adorned with columns, the ceiling of which was lost in the clouds. The place was reminiscent of an amphitheater from ancient days, especially considering the historical significance of these sites. They always witnessed far-reaching or even bloody decisions. They always hosted the elite of their time in their front rows and decided the fate of others. And always the architectural design has been the reason why all eyes could be turned on those in their midst, either in a curious or critical way, as they were doing at this very moment.

Even more beguiling than this unreal place were the creatures that had gathered here. They shone with such inconceivable beauty that a mortal's eyes would not have been able to bear the sight of them for long. Their features were sublime and perfectly formed, no flaw could be found on them. Their hair shimmered in all imaginable colors, while their eyes carried the light of heaven along with the breath of eternity. One more splendid than the other, they had wrapped themselves in robes that seemed to be woven of light and barely noticeably glided over the ground as if they were floating above it. A grace surrounded them like a gossamer veil that concealed and at the same time allowed enough to be seen. Excitedly the light figures debated with each other, one more beautiful than the other, as if the word *ugly* did not exist in the vocabulary of these beings, instead *beautiful* and *very beautiful*. But not only their appearance enchanted, also their voices were able to bewitch a person. They resembled a melody, rather song than language, whose strange sound seemed unknown and at the same time familiar, like the music of the heart of the world, on whose beat all life moved.

»Silencio!« it echoed through the room. The call was underscored by the thud of a stick digging into the marble floor.

The eyes moved towards the entrance, where an old angel had appeared. A floor-length gray robe clothed his body, bent by the years, and made him appear like a figure from ancient Greece. With whispers growing louder, he descended the steps as deliberately as if the word *time* had no meaning for him. The staircase led to the Orchestra Circle, which he walked through with measured steps, not caring about the whispering voices that followed him. Wordlessly, he returned the gaze of the members of the Sublime Body, who had gathered in a semicircle to the right and left of a speaker's desk on two stone benches whose backs were so high that they resembled a chain of thrones. The chairman nodded curtly to them, then mounted the podium.

»Silencio,« his voice rang out again, and the beings fell silent.

Expectantly all looked at the man with the long silver-gray hair, who clutched his left hand around an elaborately carved ash-gray cane. His eyes must have seen a thousand lives and more. The wisdom and fire that lay within them would make an ordinary person drop to their knees in awe. Even those present, who were not inferior to him in experience or age, bowed their heads slightly in respect.

Expressionless, Carmel gazed around the room from under his bushy eyebrows, and it was as if someone had stopped the grains in an hourglass in mid-fall. One look into the man's eyes made the concept of time seem lost, even forgotten that such a thing existed at all. »Take your seats,« he instructed the angels, »and let us begin the proceedings.«

»Why do you speak the Earth language?« someone from the other end of the hall asked.

A murmur went through the rows and made the babble of voices swell again.

»Because our heirs to the throne have to get used to it,« the chairman replied, straightening to his full height as everyone around him took their seats and it quieted down again.

»Flimsy reasons,« asserted the one from the far corner of the hall, whose face remained hidden in the shadow of a column. It was hard to tell whether it was coincidence or intention to be so mysterious. »Nonetheless, insignificant. More essential is that we finally begin. I'm anxious to get this over with as quickly as possible. I don't want to linger on your *sacred* ground any longer than absolutely necessary.«

A tremor went through the crowd at his words. Meaningful glances were exchanged. Only the chairman kept the light beings from breaking out into excited whispers again, but after all, it wasn't every day that they had a visitor from hell.

»Don't worry, Lucifer, we will. We don't plan on spending any more time together than necessary either,« Carmel retorted. The King of Hell hadn't brought many devil angels, but the few at his side were enough that Carmel felt as if someone had opened a tomb somewhere. Shivering, he reached for the writings on the desk as if they offered refuge from the gaze of the Antichrist.

»Then I would suggest we begin at last,« Lucifer said with a hostile smile and took a step forward, casting a fine beam of light on his face.

The crowd flinched. Quickly, their gazes were averted. Only a few daredevils furtively peered in the direction of the tall figure, attracted by the devil's smile, which aroused contradictory feelings. On the one hand they felt attracted, on the other hand repelled.

Lucifer's smile intensified, as if he enjoyed the dilemma of the intrepid gawkers. For a moment he feasted on the fear and enchantment that lay on many a face, then turned his attention back to the chairman. Rigidly, he remained in an upright posture, not intending to take a seat either. It almost seemed as if sitting down on the stone benches would be like bowing to heaven.

The chairman waited for a moment, as if the dark angel might change his mind after all. Realizing that his hope would be in vain, he nodded and turned back to the audience as a whole. »We have gathered here today to hear the case of Crom v. di Cruzino v. the Ministry of Processing,« he began, casting a glance around at the audience, who were looking at him with a mixture of confusion, uncertainty and indignation. Carmel couldn't blame them. He himself had been dismayed when word was brought to him of what had happened. For those who did not yet know, or who based their knowledge only on rumors, he summarized the events in a few sentences. »From all appearances, we made a ... mistake in this protection mission,« he concluded.

»Slight understatement,« Lucifer remarked.

The chairman gave him a weary look, but refrained from any comment.

»What do we intend to do?« the crowd asked.

»Where do we go from here?«

»This is an outrageous situation!«

Murmurs of agreement ran through the ranks. The next moment everyone was talking wildly, so that the chairman had to clear his throat loudly to restore calm.

»Shame!« shouted a lost voice before Carmel took the floor again.

»Well, it's an unpleasant incident and unique in our history,« he continued, measuring the two claimants on the stone benches before him with a brief glance. Delorian looked tense, Devin as indifferent as if the trial did not concern him. »But anger and vexation will get us nowhere. We must now deliberate how to proceed in this matter.«

»If you'll allow me to ask, Carmel, how could this have happened in the first place?« inquired a woman sitting a few rows in front of Lucifer, whom a bunch of hell angels surrounded while the rest kept a generous distance from him.

»I can only agree with that,« expressed a man at her side. »We have not made such a serious mistake in the last thousand years – if anything comparable ever happened at all.«

»A fiasco it is!« outraged a croaking voice that came from the front rows and belonged to a crumpled face that looked as if it had already known Adam and Eve personally.

»Mistakes happen,« Carmel replied.

»Mistakes? Surely this is no longer just a mistake!« the fossil croaked. »Absolutely inconceivable that you have referred Lucifer's son to the same protégé as God's son!«

»To a girl at that!« added a woman.

»Extremely negligent,« affirmed a being of light.

»You guys screwed up pretty good there,« Devin remarked, grinning merrily and taking no offense at the commotion. With his arms folded in front of his chest, he leaned in his chair and cast mocking glances around.

His counterclaimant stared wordlessly at the panel, seeming to share neither the other's carelessness nor his gloating. Serious was Delorian's expression, as if it was his fault what had happened. Again and again his eyes slid over the faces of the panel, wondering what their decision would be.

»It's no-«,« Carmel began, but didn't get to finish the sentence.

»I can't believe we have to negotiate something like this,« the aged angel, who Carmel wished had found himself a seat way in the back with Lucifer or stayed home, railed. »Where were the guardian angels in charge so far, huh? Why didn't they forewarn the heirs when they were relieved?« His voice spiraled upward as he grumbled about the incident. »A sloppy job this is. An absolute mess!«

Carmel screwed up his face. Everyone was allowed to speak, but in this case he wouldn't have minded a less democratic meeting. He was about to launch into a retort – the fossil had gone silent for a moment to catch his breath – when the first ones chimed in on the argument being made.

»Someone should have let it be known that it was a girl,« affirmed a thin, but more than upset voice not far from the fossil.

»How could the former guardian angels be so careless?« others joined in.

Once again, debate broke out among those present, which the chairman stopped by raising his hands imploringly. »Silence, my dears!« his deep voice rang out, echoing through the room, and again his cane touched the marble floor like a thunderclap.

Momentarily, the crowd fell silent, but an expression of annoyance remained on many faces.

»Admittedly, we made a truly serious mistake,« Carmel acknowledged. »We won't deny that. However, it doesn't change the fact that we now need to find a mutually acceptable solution to the problem. For one thing, there was apparently a mix-up, or rather an *oversight*, in the chosen protégé, because according to our records, the protégé in question is listed as *Phil*, which is why we assumed it was a boy.«

»What girl is named Phil?« asked a lady in a blue silk robe, whose hair shimmered almost white. »The earthlings are a truly strange people, but their naming does, for the most part, reveal a spark of sanity.«

»Now that really is clearly a boy's name,« said a bearded angel.

»Exactly,« affirmed other beings of light.

»So what is this girl's real name?« inquired a woman standing next to Lucifer, her head held high. Her look revealed that she showed no real interest in the trial and even seemed to despise most of the people present in the hall, as condescendingly as she treated them, but for some reason she had nothing better to do than attend the trial. Disparagingly, her eyes slid over the chairman, whom she eyed like a silly little child who didn't understand why there was a division between heaven and hell. »Why was *Phil* in the documents?«

»A good question,« the chairman took up the objection, nodding confidently that he could solve a mystery after all, and especially polite because he knew he could not let this lady provoke him. It was clear to everyone that that was exactly her goal, and he certainly did not want to give her that satisfaction. »In our files, she was listed only as *Phil Angell*, whereas her full name ... wait ...« He flipped through the paperwork. »Here we have it. Her full name is Philomina Faith Sarafin Angell.«

»What a name!« sneered Lucifer, who immediately burst into laughter, joined by his companions.

Devin grinned and could only silently agree with his father, while a spark of pity stirred in Delorian. Although he had only seen the girl for a moment before returning to the afterlife, it annoyed him that everyone was laughing at her name, and he had the absurd feeling that he had to defend her from the others. In his mind, he jumped up and made a flaming speech that rebuked Lucifer and earned him the recognition of the board. In reality, he remained seated and not a word crossed his lips. Silently he listened to the comments.

»These earthlings ...« several in the crowd sighed and shook their heads.

»Ridiculous that name. Just ridiculous.«

»However,« Carmel continued quickly, so as not to let unrest break out again, »it is not for us to judge. Rather, the question now is who will take responsibility for the protégé. As luck would have it, the heirs to the throne were assigned to the same protégé. You know that this was not intentional. For centuries, we have used numbers so that candidates remain anonymous and there is no temptation to cater to special requests. When Ismarel and Ezekiel

processed the file, they were not aware that the guardian angels selected for Philomina Angell were Devin and Delorian. Apparently –«

»Cheap excuses!« exclaimed the fossil, raising his hand clenched into a fist as if he had to emphasize his words with it. »In this case, the names should have been known! Such a thing must not happen!« Anger blazed in his eyes and for a moment it looked as if the angel was about to lunge at the panel despite its decrepit condition.

»These things happen sometimes, though,« Carmel said calmly. With an indulgent smile, he regarded the man seething with rage. For a few heartbeats, the fossil's anger seemed to increase, but Carmel's inscrutable eyes rested on the troublemaker in an almost hypnotic manner until his tense posture began to relax. When he had calmed down completely and slumped again, Carmel turned away and focused on the panel, whose members he looked at in turn. »According to our laws, chance decides which guardian angel is assigned to which protégé.«

»Maybe so, but someone should have noticed that it was a girl,« one of the chief angels reminded him.

Wordlessly, the other panel members nodded.

»Quite so. But don't forget that our clerks are allowed up to three mistakes in their work every two hundred years before they are sent for retraining.«

»Certain laws should be reconsidered,« grumbled an older man from the audience. »When I was a clerk, I never made a mistake in seven hundred years!«

»We are not going to change a passage of law today that has worked well for the last four thousand years. Some mistakes happen,« Carmel repeated.

»In heaven,« Lucifer remarked, receiving nods of agreement from the angels surrounding him.

Ismarel and Ezekiel bowed their heads, but refrained from explanation. The mistake seemed too obvious, a clumsiness that could not be denied, even less fixed, and was not a banality in this case, after all, it was the son of God and Lucifer's brat!

»Decisive is now who takes over the task,« Carmel steered the negotiation back to the actual facts.

»My son will certainly not waste his time with a girl,« Lucifer professed in his booming voice, shaking his head determinedly.

»There is no question that it makes no difference whether Devin and Delorian take on the protection of a girl or a boy,« Carmel lectured sternly. »At the end of the day, they both have to do a placement year, and in this case, we desperately need a new guardian angel for Philomina, since the last two ... how shall I put it ... well, it's ... how shall I say ...«

»Fallen,« Lucifer brought the stammering to a close.

»I guess they got fed up with heaven and are looking around on Earth,« added a dark angel at his side, contorting his face into a smile that looked more like a grimace.

»Anyway,« said the chairman now a little uneasy after all. »It doesn't matter whether a girl or a boy falls into their care, even if we prefer same-sex guardian angels.«

»A girl is out of the question, Carmel,« Lucifer firmly refused.

»That is not for you to decide!« it thundered from high above at that moment.

Reverently, the whispering crowd fell silent.

»Oh what, God himself present?« returned Lucifer in the most condescending tone that seemed possible to him. With his chin thrust forward and mock arrogance in his eyes, he looked up at the small gallery that seemed almost to float in the clouds, while the gazes around him slid humbly to the ground.

»The decision is up to your son and my son. It is not we who decide this matter,« God reminded, before retreating back into the role of an observer and remaining silent.

»They are old enough to make that decision for themselves,« Carmel confirmed. »No one else is making it for them.«

»Good. Devin?« Lucifer turned to his son, in a tone that seemed to say as much as: If you don't reject this protégé, I'll give you hell.

»Devin. Delorian. Which one of you would like to take over the protection of Philomina?« inquired Carmel, giving them both a look that carried the request to think carefully about this decision.

That the two had long since made their decision was reflected by the fact that they didn't need any time to think, because they answered without hesitation and simultaneously to the question put to them: »I will.«

»You will not —« Lucifer began.

»That's for me to decide, Father,« Devin returned, as vehemently as if this protégé had been his choice from the beginning and he was ready to fight for his decision if necessary. In reality, he didn't show the slightest interest in the mortal, and only a few minutes ago he was firmly convinced that it wasn't worth his while to take care of the girl. Much more interesting to him seemed one of those problem teenagers who already had one foot in hell. But it wasn't just his father and his father's ban that appealed to him, it was mainly God's son that made him forget whether he was making the right choice. Devin grinned to himself as he thought about outdoing Delorian.

»Are you sure, Devin?« asked Carmel.

»Yes. I want to take over this protection,« Devin announced. For a moment, his eyes twinkled in his father's direction, wrestling with his power and trying to assert himself against his will. There was something stubborn in it, but also determination. It was not often that he rebelled against his father, and when he did, it was rarely with success. Never before had he questioned any of his orders in front of others – and certainly not in heaven. But at this moment, Devin felt the time had come to make his own decisions. He would not be treated like a little child in front of everyone here. He was old enough. The very fact that he was going to complete a year of internship and then take the most important step of his life proved that. In the future, he would have to make even more important decisions and everyone should see that he was capable of doing so.

Lucifer's eyes literally hurled lightning and shone so ominously that even the dark angels at his side gulped. Some even claimed later that the Lord of Darkness had broken two fingers because he clenched his hand so tightly into a fist.

Devin withstood the gaze for about four seconds, then lowered his head in intimidation. From the same motion, he turned around so no one would see that he was inferior to his father.

»So am I,« Delorian let himself be heard, his eyes straying up to the gallery. Waiting, his gaze rested on the benevolent face, determining if he received approval for what he was about to do. For Delorian, there was no question that he would submit to his father's orders, for he knew that he would never make a decision that was not in his best interest. It was precisely this blind trust that gave him the confidence to accept whatever determination his father made.

»All right, my son,« God agreed. »It is your choice.«

Silence descended on the room. No one said a word, but Carmel was sure they were all thinking the same at that moment. In more than one glance, he read a fear that sent a shiver down his spine. After a few seconds, low murmurs arose. To forestall wild theories and the fossil angel who was already rising to say something, he quickly took the floor.

»Silencio!« he demanded, giving the light beings a moment to comply with this appeal before continuing. »While we always need a celestial angel and a devil angel to balance good and evil and allow people to choose freely, in this case, Delorian and Devin working together would hardly be ... advisable.«

»My sentiments exactly,« agreed the minute taker, who immediately found a few voices of support.

»I would like to take over this protection,« Devin repeated, without giving Delorian a glance.

»So do I,« said Delorian.

»Are you sure?« asked Carmel, eyeing the two inquiringly. »You'll have to work side by side for a year without interruption.«

»That's too risky,« a woman across the hall objected. »What if the two of them get into a fight?«

»A fight of this magnitude is not justifiable,« the bearded angel warned.

»Too dangerous,« others joined in.

Carmel nodded. »I also think this is too daring. First and foremost is the protection of the earthling. We can't risk her being harmed by some foolish quarrel.«

»But why not?« suddenly asked a sky angel.

All eyes turned with interest to the front benches of the hall to ascertain who had just spoken.

»What's in it?« Lucifer inquired through clenched teeth, and would have preferred to ask, »What's in it for me?« and gouge out the questioner's eyes.

»Why not both?« the man repeated, simply ignoring Lucifer, which made the devil rage inside. »Would be fair at least. After all, the girl has no choice if only one of the two sons is by her side. Then she always chooses the heavenly one – or the devilish one – because both are always at an advantage over other angels.«

»Tarquin is right. What would be fair is to have an equal partner,« underlined someone next to the minute taker.

»Why didn't anyone consider this before?« asked the lady in the blue silk robe.

»Sloppiness,« exclaimed the fossil, who seemed to have been just waiting for a cue.

»Who else do you intend to assign to this?« inquired a young angelic lady who was more concerned with catching a glimpse of Devin and Delorian sitting with their backs to her than paying attention to the proceedings. She would have preferred to sign up for the task herself.

»These are crucial points,« Carmel said, running the suggestion through his mind. »It would probably be the only just solution ...«

»In fairness, there's no way around it,« sighed the bearded angel, who didn't look happy.

»An interesting challenge, after all, even if I'm not thrilled about it,« Lucifer relented, having accepted Devin's decision for better or worse and seemed quite fond of some kind of duel. »I expect my son will accomplish his task with flying colors!«

There was a rustling high above them. »My son, Delorian,« God let himself be heard, »will also accomplish the task assigned to him with conscientiousness.« The pride in his voice was unmistakable.

A faint smile settled on Delorian's face.

A moment of silence passed, then more objections were raised.

»But a girl! That's outrageous!« a man near the stairs exclaimed.

»That is subject to prohibition,« added another.

»The fall is imminent!« prophesied the fossil.

»Quite correct. We usually use same-sex guardian angels to avoid the fall,« Carmel concurred. »Only for the highest angels exceptions are made.«

»But a fall of Devin or Delorian is highly unlikely,« the minute taker countered, looking up briefly. »They know what they would lose.«

»Moreover, they are among the highest angels,« informed a member of the panel, which otherwise kept wordless. »Therefore, an exception is certainly worth considering.«

»I also think that they can resist,« said a woman who had remained silent until now. Her silver hair shimmered in the light of the hall that broke a million times on it, her eyes looked like cracked crystals, and the fine smile at the corners of her mouth floated over the rows like a kiss. Once you had looked at her, it was hard to take your eyes off her again.

»And what if they don't?« croaked the fossil, who had something to say about everything. »Don't forget the danger!«

His warning set off a storm of theories, with some unquestioning and trusting that the heirs knew what was at stake, while others saw the worst disaster ever to threaten the afterlife coming. Energetically, heads were shaken and excitedly discussed.

»My son will certainly not fall! Fallen ones always have been and always will be,« Lucifer shouted above the din. »But not my son! He knows his place.«

»That's good to hear,« God spoke up and immediately all murmuring died down as his voice rose above the others. Those who had just been loudly second-guessing the heirs lowered their eyes in embarrassment. »I doubt as well – and for once agree with you, Lucifer – that our sons will have difficulty resisting temptation. An exception in this case is certainly justifiable.«

»Any other objections or comments?« inquired Carmel, looking around the hushed room for a moment. When nothing followed, he turned to the minute taker. »We hereby record that there are no objections to Delorian and

Devin taking over the protection of Philomina Angell regarding gender, and that this exception has been blessed by the highest authority.« He cleared his throat, glanced briefly at his desk, and then moved on to the question that had so far remained unresolved for him. »Now that we've decided that the gender of the protégé doesn't matter in this case, let's take a closer look at whether both, Delorian and Devin, should be appointed to this task, or just one of the two.«

»As Tarquin said, we have little choice,« the bearded angel grumbled.

»But don't forget the situation we're putting them both in,« the lady in the blue silk robe countered. »Conflicts are preprogrammed with that, aren't they?«

»Changing the guardian angels again cannot be considered reasonable,« another participant in the round remarked.

»That would indeed be disadvantageous,« Carmel admitted, but he didn't seem convinced.

»Let's take a vote,« a woman called out.

Her proposal met with approval among the beings of light, as the majority of the angels nodded, apparently uninterested in discussing the matter forever more.

Carmel exchanged a glance with the panel members.

»All right,« he agreed after their nods. »Are there any other objections or comments regarding the joint assignment of Delorian and Devin in the Philomina Angell case?« As Carmel looked around, an unusual silence fell over the room. Hundreds of pairs of eyes gazed at him expectantly. The question of what the highest angels would decide hung heavy as lead in the room. »Well, then, I hereby address the Sublime Council and ask for your votes. Those of you in favor of Delorian and Devin being assigned together as guardian angels to the protégé Philomina Faith Sarafin Angell, raise a wing.«

Delorian fixed his eyes on the oldest angels in the room who would decide his fate. Though he avoided any glance in the direction of the devil's son, he sensed Devin's tension like something tangible in the hallowed halls. The upcoming judgment was significant not only in terms of the internship, but also in terms of the duel between heaven and hell. It was like a taste of the trial of strength that they would eventually have to face. Although there had been a truce for a very long time, it was clear to everyone that a turning point was coming. That's why today's decision was so important: it would pick a favorite in this fight, should they not be assigned together for this mission.

After a moment's hesitation, Carmel raised his gray wing, which seemed infinitely heavy with the weight of time. Then he let his gaze drift over the rows to the right and left of him and counted the votes of the panel members.

»That is clearly the majority,« he announced.

Once again, the voices in the room grew louder. Excitedly, the light beings debated this revolutionary decision. How would the internship of the two heirs go? What difficulties would arise? And was it even possible for them to spend an entire year side by side without killing each other or even dragging heaven and hell into a bloody battle after half a million years of truce?

»I hope this decision was the right one,« Carmel murmured, addressing the minute taker, who, however, only shrugged his shoulders in perplexity and finished his notes.

Satisfied, Devin and Delorian exchanged a brief look that carried so much animosity that the crowd's fears were already threatening to come true.

Carmel hit his cane on the floor until silence returned.

»I now announce the verdict,« he began. »The celestial angel Delorian Nephangelos di Cruzino and the devil angel Devin Lucinder Crom are assigned as guardian angels to the protégé Philomina Faith Sarafin Angell for a period of one year. A single mistake by either of them« – his gaze moved to Delorian, who swallowed and hastened to nod, and then to Devin, who countered with a smile – »and the internship will be terminated and the resulting consequences have to be suffered without objection. The hearing is closed.«



*--- Pages omitted to show other scenes ---*

--- *A Study In Blood Red* ---

» *S*o, really, Eric?» came a muffled sound from the kitchen. Sarafin stopped dead in her tracks and listened. »I thought there was no such thing nowadays ... « continued the deep voice that sounded like a dinosaur with a cold whose vocal cords had not been used for a long time.

Sarafin swallowed and wondered whether she should sneak up to her room or go for another round of the neighborhood. Right now, she would have even preferred to go back to school. A floorboard beneath her feet squeaked treacherously as she half-turned. Instantly, she froze in mid-motion. With bated breath, she stood there.

»Dear, is that you?» she heard her grandfather say.

Sarafin sighed and pulled herself together. Slowly, she walked down the hall, hoping she had misheard. When she stepped into the kitchen, she found her grandfather at the counter, where he was busy wrapping a cut cake in foil. With a gleam, he greeted her. Sarafin returned his smile, then her eyes fell on the lady at the table and the smile faded.

Two piercing black eyes glared at her as if they wanted to pin her to the wall like two darts.

Sarafin tried hard not to look too startled. She politely greeted her neighbor, who as usual was wearing far too bright lipstick, most of which had landed on her yellow teeth, which contrasted sharply with the pale face. The blood-red line – Sarafin couldn't help but think of a vampire who had just eaten a victim and was flaunting his act for everyone to see – framed a third-degree smile and was accompanied by an expression of smug vanity. Condescendingly, the old woman nodded at her as if she were the Queen and Sarafin nothing more than a subject. The comparison limped, however, at the clothing, which had nothing distinguished about it, but rather reminded one of a color-blind gypsy. Several necklaces dangled around a wrinkled neck – including a rosary – and disappeared somewhere among the countless layers of clothing that covered the scrawny body and were probably the only reason why the wind did not take the old woman with it when she stepped outside the door. But the most strikingly ugly thing was the dark hair. It looked like an overrun bird's nest that had never been in contact with a comb. Sarafin wouldn't have been surprised if something was hiding in the scrubby thicket. She would be even less surprised if it burst into flames when she took a step toward the gas stove; after all, the hair looked like dry undergrowth just waiting for an opportunity to catch fire.

»What the hell is that?!« it slipped Devin, who stared at the visitor as if he were standing in front of a witch with a dozen warts.

»Mrs. Lockwood brought us a casserole,« Eric Angell told his granddaughter, beaming as if they had won a banquet.

Sarafin nodded wordlessly and without any enthusiasm. As far as she could remember, the last casserole was so salty that they could hardly get it down.

Mrs. Lockwood presented her saintly smile as if she had brought them their first meal after three weeks of starvation. She seemed to intend to stay longer, for not only had she taken possession of the table with the Bible, which she seemed to have with her at all times – perhaps it served as extra weight? –, but there before her was also a coffee and a plate with a cake that had just been started.

»Have a seat, dear,« Eric urged his granddaughter, pushing her toward a chair. »I just need to make a quick phone call ...«

A second later he was gone.

Almost fearfully, Sarafin looked after him and would have liked to disappear herself. Meeting Mrs. Lockwood's gaze, she smiled helplessly and took a seat across from her neighbor, sinking into the chair in a way that looked as if she was in a cage with a constrictor.

Devin settled down on one of the stools in front of the counter and eyed the strange guest. *At least something is happening*, he thought, although he showed little interest in the scarecrow.

Delorian was quite different, standing next to the table and giving the impression that he was about to witness a peace treaty, so eagerly did he look at the scene.

Peace, however, did not seem to be the reason for Mrs. Lockwood's visit. Her eyes fixed on Sarafin. »How are you, Philomina?« the neighbor asked in her deep voice.

Sarafin winced a little and mumbled a »Fine.«

Mrs. Lockwood rolled her eyes in her mind. *How she always looks startled when asked a question*, she thought. *As if she were on trial. Wonder what she's been up to ...* »How's school going?« she continued.

»Fine,« Sarafin said simply, striving for an indifferent expression. Mrs. Shirley Lockwood was not only an extremely religious woman with the deepest voice Sarafin had ever heard, no, she was also so curious that she secretly called her Shirlock.

»Good?« Doubtfully, one eyebrow raised.

Sarafin nodded.

»Do you like New York?«

»Yes.«

Mrs. Lockwood smiled, but judging from her expression, she was far from satisfied with the monosyllabic answers she was receiving. Her eyes roamed over the girl next door. *A beauty she is not*, she thought. *She's too quiet for that. What's more, she always sits there bent over like she's done something wrong. And heavens, the clothes she wears! As if she wanted to hide!*

Mrs. Lockwood took a sip of her coffee and considered the next question. »Are your classmates nice?« she inquired.

»The nicest,« Devin remarked wryly.

Delorian overheard him and waited anxiously for his protégé's answer. Perhaps now he would learn more about the enigmatic girl.

Sarafin made a meaningless head movement and Mrs. Lockwood mentally rolled her eyes one more time. *Well, maybe the shy thing will thaw if I ask a little more directly.*

»Are you going out with school friends this weekend?« she inquired, giving Sarafin such a penetrating look that she couldn't withstand the gaze for long.

Wordlessly, Sarafin lowered his eyes and shook her head.

*This lowering of the eyes*, Mrs. Lockwood thought contemptuously. *We are not in a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel here!*

In silence, not only she sighed, but also Devin, who had expected more from the conversation. So far, he had learned nothing interesting about Sarafin, nor was the interrogation particularly entertaining. Yawning, he sat there and considered whether to dump the coffee over the witch's head or put her in the oven to bring some action to the scene. He didn't have to avert his eyes and put his fantasies into words to know that Delorian would not approve of such a thing. If he was unlucky, he might even rat him out and the internship would be over. With an inward sigh, Devin let go of his plans. Gradually he got the impression that the real purgatory was on Earth and consisted of enduring monotonous daily routines or listening to meaningless conversations until one went insane with boredom.

Mrs. Lockwood, meanwhile, seemed to have stopped her question-and-answer game and went on the attack. »What do you think of my grandson Ferdi?« she got down to the real reason for her investigation.

Sarafin raised her shoulders, but this time her neighbor didn't let her get away with it. Fixedly, Shirlock's eyes were on her.

Sarafin swallowed and slid back and forth in her chair. »I don't know,« she finally said. »Interesting,« she added in response to her counterpart's expectant look. So far, she had only seen the neighbor boy twice. Once, when he'd yelled at the Girl Scouts for ripping him off over cookies, and another time, when he'd waddled to the mailbox in full-body pajamas. *Interesting* might not have been the first adjective she thought of for Ferdi – much more likely odd, choleric, or mischievous – but it was the only one that wouldn't turn Shirlock's eyes into darts.

»A good boy,« enthused Mrs. Lockwood, who was probably either talking about another grandson who happened to have the same name, or Sarafin had just been unlucky and experienced Ferdi's two appearances, which were just not particularly glamorous. »He's so helpful and smart. Last week he said that everyone should be given free food.« She laughed – or at least Sarafin thought the grumbling sound was a laugh. »Isn't that nice?«

Sarafin nodded, but secretly suspected that Ferdi was thinking only of food for himself.

Mrs. Lockwood pursed her blood-red lips. By all appearances, she had expected more enthusiasm. *Maybe she already has a boyfriend*, she mused, letting the thought run through her mind for a moment. *No*, she decided. *Impossible. No one would look at such a mute thing.*

Since Sarafin did not say anything more and did not ask her about Ferdi, as she had hoped, or at least blush, Mrs. Lockwood moved on to the next question. Perhaps something could be found out about the quiet girl who had been living next door for a few weeks. At the beginning, she wanted to set her up with her grandson. Now, she was no longer sure if that was a good idea. *Ferdi is such a sweet boy that I can't put him with just any girl*, she thought. *He deserves a special one who appreciates his qualities and who understands that a few extra pounds add charisma to his appearance.* Initially, Sarafin seemed just the girl; after all, she was polite, went to a good school, and didn't walk around with her belly hanging out. Plus, she had carried her groceries home twice. But the enthusiasm had long since faded. It was becoming more and more apparent how strange the girl was. She didn't seem like her peers, wasn't interested in fashion, boys, or parties ... *Perhaps she was quite different before*, Mrs. Lockwood considered, and a thought occurred to her. »Do you miss your old friends?«

Sarafin just shrugged.

Mrs. Lockwood made a face as if she had tasted her own casserole and bitten into a particularly salty piece. She was about to continue her explorations a little more vigorously when her host returned.

»Sorry, here I am again,« Eric apologized and set about preparing a salad. At the same time, he engaged the neighbor in conversation about her brother, who ran a candy store a few blocks away – presumably the reason why Ferdi took up a bit more room on the bus than others.

Sarafin listened in silence and considered going upstairs, but a glance at the clock made it clear that they would be eating dinner in the next ten minutes. Hopefully, Shirlock would be gone by then. Furtively, she squinted into the detective's coffee cup. It was still half full and the piece of cake was barely touched. Sighing, Sarafin braced herself for more questions.

»I see you've settled in well,« Mrs. Lockwood remarked after a while. The casserole was already in the oven and the salad ready, yet she made no move to leave.

»That's easy with such nice neighbors,« Eric cajoled.

Mrs. Lockwood made a hand gesture as if that was no big deal, but one could tell she had been waiting for just that compliment. »You do what you can.« A smile, followed by a glance at the Bible, as if it were every Christian's duty to annoy the neighbors with salty casserole. »Where did you live before?«

»Lysander,« Eric revealed as he set the table – for three, for the sake of politeness; after all, Mrs. Lockwood seemed stuck with her chair.

»And what brought you to Brooklyn?«

A shadow fell across Eric's face. »Work,« was all he said.

»Work?« Mrs. Lockwood's eyes narrowed. »Wasn't there any in Lysander?« She laughed her bleating laugh.

»Yes, there was,« Eric hastened to say, but suddenly he avoided his neighbor's gaze and his smile was gone. »Just sometimes a change does you good.«

»Do you like it better here, or would you like to have stayed in Lysander?« asked Mrs. Lockwood turning to Sarafin, whose eyes were resting on the tabletop as if a cell phone screen were embedded in it. *There's something wrong with this girl*, she thought. *But Eric dodges the question every time he's asked about it. Tragic story with her family. I'd love to know what exactly happened ...* »You sure left a lot of friends there, didn't you?« the aged lady added when her counterpart didn't respond right away.

Sarafin looked to her grandfather for help.

»You always leave things behind. There are new opportunities for that somewhere else,« Eric said, joining them at the table as the casserole took a few more minutes.

»You're right about that, Eric,« agreed Mrs. Lockwood, who seemed to have realized she was getting nowhere like this. »But it's a pity for such a young thing, isn't it?«

»Of course,« Eric agreed with a glance at his granddaughter. He wondered how she was doing in New York. He'd been so busy the last few weeks with the move and the new clients that he hadn't gotten around to address the subject. A creeping worry filled his heart that Sarafin might not have handled the school change as well as he wanted to tell himself.

Mrs. Lockwood resumed drinking from her coffee, which didn't seem to be diminishing, and steered the conversation to other topics. *No, she's not for my Ferdi*, she decided. *She'll get him on the wrong track and then he'll be such a bore who swallowed his tongue. Maybe she can become a nun, she is probably not good for anything else ...*

Devin came to a similar conclusion after the soberingly boring conversation and the events of the day.

He had no idea how wrong he was.