

FALLING FOR GRACE

an original short story by Rachel Caine

Angels and Demons. Mankind has proper names for us, rankings in Heaven and Hell, as if he could understand such an alien hierarchy. He thinks of us as distinct and separate, as constant in his universe as the pillars of the earth beneath his feet.

Yet the earth shifts, and men die in its throes. The greater truth is the more heartbreaking -- Heaven and Hell shift as well, boundaries stray, Angels and Demons transgress. Nothing is certain, not even the most perfect of creatures.

The truth is, the difference between Angels and Demons is so small, sometimes even we are deceived.

Once a month, at an Irish bar called the Tipperary Inn, Raphael and I met to play a game of chess and hoist a pint. I drank Black and Tans, he drank Guinness, and we sat in the darkest corner while Irish bands wailed wild and beautiful music in the next room.

I always lost at chess, but then I didn't try very hard. It was the struggle I enjoyed.

Gordian Knot was playing the night he took my queen with a rook, sipped brown velvet Guinness, and said, "I will be leaving soon."

"Oh?" I studied the board carefully. He was going to trap me, skin me, and wear my pelt. I knew that gentle glint in his eye. "Going where?"

"Home."

That arrested my attention, and our eyes met. His were wide and blue as an untarnished summer sky, and I had to look away to keep from tumbling up into them. "Fortunate for you. Your work is done, then?"

Raphael punished my next ill-considered move with pawn-takes-knight. His silver-blond hair netted stars as he turned to signal the bartender for another pint.

"You would know better than anyone," he said. "Is it? Is yours?"

My work was, in fact, going as poorly as my chess game. Of the three thousand souls I had been assigned, fewer than twenty-five hundred had fallen; it was a terrible percentage, and I knew it. Worse yet, on the more than five hundred failures, two thirds of them were guarded by the Angel Raphael.

I look down at the board, sighed, and said, "I will miss you." It was truth, but I would have a better chance against a lesser player, and I knew it. I was no match for Raphael and never had been. "When do you go?"

"Soon." As always, vague. It was always *soon* and *patience* and *someday*. It had taken us more than four

hundred years to agree on the chess game, and another hundred and fifty to choose a place and time. I shuddered to think how long it might take him to choose another ale if ever the Tipperary ran out of Guinness. "Your game is getting better, Ariel."

He spoke the truth, but it was no compliment; my game had been abysmally bad, and was only a little better. I made another foolish move, and said it for him: "Checkmate. I concede."

I tipped my black king over and sat back to drain the last sips from my glass. Raphael picked up my fallen royal and toyed with it idly in his long fingers, his blue eyes half-closed as he watched me. Something of gentleness in him tonight, a hint of sorrow that made me wary.

"What is it you know that I don't?" I asked. A young laughing couple took a table near us and ordered Pete's Wicked Ale, fish and chips. Their American accent felt jarringly out of place for a moment until I remembered that I was, indeed, in America. One place was very like another, for my purposes. Temptations were universal. So easy, in fact, to tempt that young man into drinking too heavily, veering on the busy highway as his girlfriend screamed in alarm. I closed my eyes on the thought of the tearing metal and flesh, that Raphael might not see it.

Or perhaps, more appropriately, the young man might simply be tempted to pleasures of the flesh, and those twisted into my own purposes. Easy enough, especially now.

And yet, paradoxically, not so easy as it had been.

"I know very little," Raphael said at last, and I opened my eyes to look at him again, the hunger fading out of me. He sounded sad and defeated, and would not meet my eyes, hiding his thoughts as I'd hidden mine. "We'll meet again, brother. I feel certain of that."

He paid for his Guinness and went out into the cool clear night, a tall young man in faded blue jeans and a flannel shirt, nothing exceptional about him except a pure and burning spirit, radiant as a star. I hungered for him.

And I feared him, too.

I went to the bar for another Black and Tan, and when I returned I found a young woman sitting at my table in Raphael's abandoned chair, methodically resetting the chess pieces. It didn't happen often, but from time to time a woman would take an interest in me; it wasn't something I was at all averse to. I sat down in my accustomed place, cocking my head to get a better look at the pale sharp planes of her face. She looked up at me and I felt a stab of terror such as I had not felt since last I stepped through the Gates of Hell more than a thousand years ago, man-time.

I straightened slowly, setting my ale aside, and bowed my head to her.

"Your slave," I said. Her eyes were black holes to Hell, filled with things that even I dared not look on closely. I felt her pull like gravity on my flesh. "How may I serve you?"

My obsequiousness pleased her. "I am not as tolerant as your last overseer, Ariel. You do well to show me obedience."

This, then, was what Raphael had known in his sad eyes. My old overseer, Valariel, had been lax and more happily corrupt than most; he had allowed me liberties, such as these small pleasures of conversation with the enemy. My sense was that Valariel had been bitterly punished for his transgression.

I turned away from the possibilities in her face.

"Always and ever obedient," I said. "May I buy you a drink, Belial?"

She ignored the offer. My glass of Black and Tan began to bubble and steam unpleasantly. I took the hint and waited while she considered the board.

She opened with a sally of pawns, a demonic frenzy of suicidal charges, no surgery to it, no skill. I took her pawns, and they reappeared on the board, no worse for the experience.

When she took one of mine, her pawns turned to red-eyed lurching fiends and devoured mine as they screamed.

I played on, because she wished it, until my pieces were slaughtered and the board awash with their blood. When my king was dead, his severed head lifted by a victorious white queen, I whispered, "*Concedo*," and the illusion snapped and faded, and the board was only a board, the pieces neatly ranked. A drop of blood shivered dark down the side of my king.

"You have one chance to save yourself, Ariel," Belial said conversationally. "Bring me the soul of a child that Raphael guards. Bring me Raphael. Then I shall spare you."

Whatever my terror of moments before, it was nothing to the black-ice pain that went through me then. Belial was setting me a task beyond possibility – worse, beyond my desire. I did not wish to corrupt Raphael. Perhaps, on some shameful level, I even respected him.

But I could not refuse.

"The next time we play," she said, and smiled so that her bloodied pointed teeth showed, "we'll play a different game. Perhaps you shall win."

My flesh crawled. I knew better.

Her name was Grace Langer, and she was all of five years old. I had looked her over before but left her alone, because though sin certainly can begin early in life I sensed no predilection in Grace, and therefore more work. I had inspected her, marked her down, and gone on to easier prey.

But now Grace was perhaps my saving grace, if all worked correctly.

She had little to interest me in her, on the surface; a good child, loving, not rebellious (at least not yet). No siblings to fight with, but not much tendency to bratty selfishness, either. She had a precociously bright mind which with training might become brilliant. She had faith in God.

Faith, especially the faith of a child, is the weakest of all links. Strike at it from the corners, where it is weakest, and it frequently falls to pieces on the first blow. I studied Grace's family carefully before I sensed weakness in the mother, a pretty young woman named Iris with a deeply buried hunger for sex.

I met her in the grocery store, helped her with her bags, exerted my not inconsiderable charm and took her to a bar – not Tipperary's – where we sipped wine like civilized people and talked. I did not attempt to bed her that day.

By the fourth meeting, I had corrupted her so thoroughly that she felt no shame at all for what she did, only a vast and frenzied hunger. I buried my own fear and frustration in her with my thrusts. It could not be called making love, not even in Iris' mind. Whoever her guardian angel was, he stood no chance at all; there was no sin I liked better than lust.

Iris and I satisfied each other many times, in many places, in many ways, before I arranged for her husband to discover us. I had Grace's mother, but it was not her soul I'd come for. I left her to her own damnation or redemption, left her to a screaming, weeping fight with her husband Douglas, and went outside into the bright August sunshine.

Grace was sitting on the steps, crying. Not the most beautiful child, but her soft brown hair and big brown eyes gave her a certain appeal. I considered several approaches, but settled for the simplest. I tucked my shirt in and sat down next to her, both our feet dangling over the edge of the porch. As we swung our legs, the soles of our shoes brushed the fluffy grass. The day smelled of rich hyacinth and roses and approaching rain.

Grace said, in the way of five-year-olds, "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

"I'm not a stranger," I said, which was nothing but the truth. I had known her since she was born. I had seduced her mother. How much of a stranger could I be? "My name's Ariel. You shouldn't be crying, Grace."

She cried harder, her thin shoulders shaking as if someone beat her. I put my arm around her and rocked her close. The heat of her body against mine was utterly unlike her mother's – a gentler heat, stirring an emotion in me I didn't recognize or like.

"He hit her. My daddy hit my mommy."

I smoothed her soft brown hair. "You should pray for God to make everything all right."

This was the crucial point, because God would not answer such a prayer. Free will being what it is, God will not solder together the broken pieces of a marriage; he relies on humans to make those kinds of repairs, and is often disappointed.

Unanswered prayers were death to faith, and once faith was gone –

"Ariel."

The voice was Raphael's, but the tone was not the one I'd become accustomed to over our chess and ales. This was the stern, steel-bright tone of an Angel.

I looked up to see him on the sidewalk, and a surge of another unfamiliar emotion shot through me – love? Sorrow? Loss? There was no forgiveness in his eyes today, no gentle good humor.

He said, "Let her go, Ariel. She is not yours."

"She may be," I said, and comforted Grace with a small rub of my hand on her still-trembling shoulder. "Her parents are fighting. Grace is upset."

Bright as the heart of a sun, the light at the core of him. He stepped closer, and Grace, sensing his anger, shrank closer to me.

In that instant he faltered, and I knew that I would win. She was not perfect, his little Grace, any more than her mother had been, or her father. She was between Heaven and Hell, and would fall.

I said, quite honestly, "I'm sorry, Raphael," and looked away from the blank suffering in his eyes.

"There is no need," he said. "Don't destroy the child. She is not guilty here. You don't understand what you will do to her."

"I have no choice." I pressed my lips to Grace's fine soft hair. She smelled of clean sunshine. "Consider it a game. If you lose this one, there are other boards to be played."

He shook his head and walked away to lean against the white-painted fence, head bowed. Grace looked up at me and said, "Is my friend okay?"

"Yes," I lied. "He's fine. Come on, Grace, pray for your mom and dad. God will help you."

She put her small hands together and prayed. I watched Raphael's back as he wept.

By the time Grace turned 16, I had done my job so thoroughly it failed to thrill me. My overseer Belial had been indulgent of my slow process, perhaps relishing Raphael's suffering. The Angel could have turned his back and let the child go, but he tarried, his eyes full of love and suffering as I steered her down ever darker paths. She could always turn to him, but she had, instead, turned *on* him.

One thing I had never done, though Grace had offered often enough.

I had never laid down with her.

"Oh, come on, what're you afraid of?" On this winter morning, the whole world was cold except for Grace, sweet fallen Grace in her needle-stitched arms and her heroin smile. She collapsed in my arms, giggling. I held her there a moment, wishing, hoping, and then let her fall to the dirty floor. She stopped giggling and began to cry. "Don't leave me, please don't leave me, I need you, I need—"

She was far fallen, my Grace, but at her heart she was still that frightened, lost child I had so thoroughly corrupted. She wanted my compassion, and I had none to give her.

I no longer needed to visit Grace, but I did, just as my brother did. I told myself it was purely to be certain she did not turn back toward his light, but there was more to it than that. Partly, I knew that to see Grace was to see Raphael, a haunted shadow who even now stood on the street looking up at her squalid apartment. Partly it —

Partly it was, simply, Grace. I had never been able to forget that one unguarded moment of trust, of the warmth of a child's body pressed to mine, the feel of her silken hair against my hand.

She writhed on the floor and climbed my legs, pausing to undo my belt. She would have opened my pants and I remembered her mother Iris' face made vacant with lust, forgetting her child, her husband, her love, everything but the need for flesh.

I had taken a lot of pleasure in that, and yet the thought of doing the same to Grace made me weak and ill. *Belial watches*, I remembered. *Do this, and save yourself.*

I reached down and put my hand on hers to still them. She looked up, and our eyes met, hers blank and dreaming, mine far too clear.

"No," I told her.

"Why?" A slow smile on her face, a knowing lift of her eyebrows. "Don't you like it?"

I burn for it. I ache for it in every fiber of my corrupt soul.

"No," I said again. "I don't." I shoved her, hard, and she fell back to the floor and the tears started again. I walked past her to the door, jerked it open and started to walk out.

Raphael was in the hallway, and in the blue mirror of his eyes I saw myself clearly – oh, no less attractive to human eyes than he, but my eyes burned like Belial's, and my heart was as gray as dead ash. In that second of clear sight I was ashamed.

"Ariel." His voice was still soft and loving, forgiving of everything. *I*, corrupt Raphael? How could I? Let Belial try it herself, if she was so confident.

I didn't trust myself to speak. I nodded and turned toward the stairs, and I might have escaped all that was to come if only he had not reached out and touched my hand.

For that moment there was war in Heaven and Hell. It was forbidden for us to touch, and now we knew why; we remembered our bonds, or pain, our love, our hate.

My fingers went around his, holding him tight when he might have pulled away. We were trapped, the two of us, in a purgatory made of our own despair.

"Let her go, Ariel," he whispered hoarsely. His light was dimming in contact with the terrible gray of my soul. "I beg you, let her go."

"I can't," I said, as I had for years. The words tore open wounds in both of us. "You must do it. Save her."

There is one gift Angels have that Demons do not share – foreknowledge. I saw it darken his eyes as he said, "It's too late now."

This was how I might destroy him, this simple clasp of hands. The essence of a Demon is suffering and pride, and mine invaded him where he had no defenses – through his love. Only a little longer –

I staggered back, letting go of him, and it was like falling again into the maw of Hell to leave him behind. He collapsed against the wall, gasping the fetid air, his hands pressed over his face as if to block out the sight of me.

I ran like Belial herself were at my heels.

Grace died of an overdose the next day. I wasn't there. I watched her buried in a pauper's plain grave, her life marked with a cheap plastic tag. On the other side of the endless hole in the earth stood Raphael, his eyes no longer radiant, his light no longer bright. He had lost the game. Grace would never see

Heaven.

I think he hated me then, as much as an Angel could hate. We did not speak. I went to the Tipperary Inn, that haven of our lost friendship, and ordered myself a Black and Tan, and set the chessboard in place. I would play myself. I could pretend to be an Angel – after all, I had been one before.

In Hell, Grace would be screaming for mercy.

I moved a white pawn into danger and took it ruthlessly with a black knight.

She had leaned against me, so trusting, and the warmth of her body and the sunshine-clean smell of her reminded me of – of –

I picked up the fallen white pawn and turned it in my fingers. Snapped it cleanly in half.

A shadow fell over the board, and for an instant I feared it would be Belial, her smoking eyes and hungry mouth demanding what I could not give.

But, instead, Raphael's voice merely said, "I see you're expecting me."

There was nothing to say. He sank slowly into the chair opposite me, his long thin fingers absently picking up the shattered white pawn's two halves. We did not meet each other's eyes. After a moment I signaled the bartender to bring him a Guinness, and from the other room the music began, tonight by a band named *Roving Rogues*. They were singing defiantly of dead Englishmen.

Raphael said, after his ale was set before him, "I knew how this would end when last we played chess, do you remember?"

"I remember."

He flashed me a gentle smile and sipped velvet foam from the top of his glass. "I knew it would not end with her death. Perhaps you know it, too."

"Raphael –"

He set the pawn back on the board in its proper place. Mended, wholly and completely, without even a discoloration to mark the break.

"Let's play," he suggested. "Winner takes all."

He did not, could not know what he was saying – and yet, it was no great risk for him. I was no strategist, as well he knew. Like Belial, I was brutal and crass, and I fought with brute force. It would take very little for my elegant brother to step aside.

I took a white pawn on the third move, another on the fifth. A rook on the sixth. It was not, I realized, that Raphael was playing any worse than he had – I was playing better. He showed no signs of distress as I hounded his queen to her death, butchered his bishops, felled his knights.

An hour and one Guinness later, Raphael tipped his white king and said, softly, "I concede."

I sat, frozen, staring at the board. I had won. I had harried him into checkmate, and I had won.

Raphael reached out a hand across the wasted battlefield and said, "Congratulations, my brother."

I knew what it meant to take his hand. I'd done it before, in the hallway. I'd almost dragged him to Hell then.

"No," I said. Almost a plea. "Leave, Raphael. I give you the chance. *Leave.* "

"I can't." His hand remained outstretched. "Please, Ariel. Do this for me."

The shock of our opposites meeting was extreme this time, perhaps because we knew it was coming. I felt breathless, exalted, orgiastic. His peace and love flowed over me, into me, and out again, and my darkness –

My darkness consumed his light. I tried to release him but he held me too tightly, his eyes gone wide and very still. His light faded, faded . . .

. . . vanished, as if it had never been.

I screamed in horror and let go of him but it was too late, too late, *what had I done?* No light in him, no sense of Raphael at all. I had destroyed what I most loved in the world.

A hot presence at my back. The razor edge of Belial's fingertips sliced skin on my neck in a demonic caress.

"My lovely," she purred. "I never doubted you, my Ariel. The child and the Angel. He falls of his own free will. Will you rule in Hell, Raphael, or only serve?"

Raphael's blue eyes had gone ash-gray. He sat as if frozen, but tears glittered like stars in his eyes. I knew what he felt, the emptiness, the anguish, the soul-eating horror. Not right. *It was not right.*

Grace. I loved Grace, loved her with all my heart. And I had betrayed her, murdered her spirit, raped her will –

"We will do great things, you and I." Belial came around the table in her comely woman's form, sat on Raphael's lap and showered little crimson kisses on his neck. Where her lips touched, blisters bloomed like roses. She slid her hands into his shirt, her talons drawing bloody inverted crosses that soaked the thin cotton. *Great things. Destroy. Torture. Murder.* These things have always been forbidden to you but you're free now, Raphael my elder brother, free as you've never been before. No more God to fear. There's only yourself."

Within my breast, a bloom of heat. It caught me totally by surprise, so that I went still and turned inward, marveling. I had been cold and empty so long.

In the warmth, a light. A whisper. A word.

Raphael said, softly, "There is never anything to fear, Belial. If you had learned anything in your Fall, you would have learned that. Don't fear forgiveness."

He was speaking to me, not only to my ears but to the light blooming within.

"You are worthy of it. Stop fearing, Ariel."

"Grace," I whispered. Tears in my eyes, tears of joy and pain and anguish.

"You can release her, if you wish." It seemed as if Belial wasn't even there, sitting on his lap, her face contorting with fury. There were only the two of us, and my light blooming and heating like a new-born furnace. In Raphael, too, a trembling tinder-spark, shining golden. "I don't promise you it will be easy, or painless. But it can be done."

Around us the Tipperary Inn turned ghostly-pale, the music whisper-thin. Around us, flames and screams hardened.

"Welcome to Hell," Belial said. She had grown wings, razor-edged and black as the soul staring from her eyes. "Your love has no power here."

Raphael's eyes held mine. On the table, our chess game lay finished. I had won.

In winning, I had lost, and in losing –

Won.

I plunged my hand down into the simmering hot coals beneath my feet, reaching, reaching, calling her to me. Grace's hand touched mine and I drew her up into my embrace, her damaged spirit shivering and crying out in agony.

I poured light into her.

"Ariel." Belial's voice was dangerously soft. "You will never leave this place."

"The Devil is the father of lies."

I held Grace out to Raphael, who folded her in his arms. I took his hand.

My light leaped out to him, igniting the spark in him, and together we burned brighter than Belial, brighter than the flames of Hell, and the wings that formed out of the smoke and screams for him were pale as sunrise, soft as morning. In his eyes, the face of love.

"We will meet again, brother," he said, and his wings soared him high, higher than Belial's shout of rage, higher than the flames.

I saw him attain freedom before Belial's rage struck me down.

We are the same, Angels and Demons, with only the thinnest of lines between us. An Angel may feel rage and pride, and fall; a Demon may feel compassion, and rise to live as human, to earn another place in Heaven, though it is not an easy task, nor a small one.

Ariel remembers nothing of Grace, or Hell. He lives a simple life, resisting most temptations Hell sends his way. He still has a weakness for the flesh, but that is, perhaps, as it should be.

He does not know what he does when he goes to the Tipperary Inn and plays chess with his friend

Raphael. He only knows there is a sense of peace to the ritual, and happiness.

As always, I am his Guardian. I think he never knew it, all this time.

I think, today, he will win the game.

--end --