



*Angels
of Darkness*



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ILONA ANDREWS
SHARON SHINN
MELJEAN BROOK



BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK



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Angel's Wolf

Nalini Singh

CHAPTER 1

Noel had been given a promotion in being assigned to the lush green state of Louisiana, but the position was a double-edged sword. Though the area was part of Raphael's territory, the archangel had assigned the day-to-day ruling of it to Nimra, an angel who had lived six hundred years. Nowhere close to Raphael in age, but old enough—even if age alone was not the arbiter of power when it came to the immortal race.

Nimra had more strength in her fine bones than angels twice her age and had ruled this region for eighty years; she'd been considered a power when most of her peers were still working in the courts of their seniors. Hardly surprising when it was said that she had a will of iron and a capacity for cruelty untempered by mercy.

He was no fool. He knew this "promotion" was in truth a silent, cutting statement that he was no longer the man he'd once been—and no longer of use. His hand fisted. The torn and bloodied flesh, the broken bones, the glass that had been driven into his wounds by the servants of a crazed angel, it was all gone courtesy of his vampirism. The only things that remained were the nightmares . . . and the damage within.

Noel didn't see the same man he always had when he looked in the mirror. He saw a victim, someone who had been beaten to a pulp and left to die. They'd taken his eyes, shattered his legs, crushed his fingers until the pieces were pebbles in a sack of flesh. The recovery process had been brutal, had taken every ounce of his will. But if this insulting position was to be his fate, it would've been better not to survive. Before the attack, he'd been on the short list for a senior position in the Tower from which Raphael ruled North America. Now he was a second-tier guard in one of the darkest of courts.

At its center stood Nimra.

Only five feet tall, she had the most delicate of builds. But the angel was no girlish-appearing waif. No, Nimra had curves that had probably led more than one man to his ruin. She also had skin the shade of melted toffee, a glowing complement to the luxuriant warmth of this region she called her own, and tumbling curls that gleamed blue-black against the dark jade of her gown. Those heavy curls cascaded down her back with a playfulness that suited neither her reputation nor the cold heart that had to beat beneath a chest that spoke of sin and seduction, her breasts ripe and almost too full for her frame.

Her eyes slammed into his at that moment, as if she'd sensed his scrutiny. Those eyes, a deep topaz painted with shimmering streaks of amber, were sharp and incisive. And right now, they were focused on him as she walked across the large room she used as her audience chamber, the only sounds the rustle of her wings, the soft caress of her gown against her skin.

She dressed like an angel of old, the quiet elegance of her clothing reminiscent of ancient Greece. He hadn't been born then, but he'd seen the paintings kept in the angelic stronghold that was the Refuge, seen, too, other angels who continued to dress in a way they considered far more regal than the clothing of modern times. None had looked like this—with her gown held up by simple clasps of gold at the shoulders and a thin braided rope of the same color around her waist, Nimra could've been some ancient goddess.

Beautiful.

Powerful.

Lethal.

“Noel,” she said and the sound of his name was touched with the whisper of an accent that was of this region, and yet held echoes of other places, other times. “You will attend me.” With that, she swept out of the room, her wings a rich, deep brown shot with glittering streaks that echoed the color of her eyes. Arching over her shoulders and stroking down to caress the gleaming wood of the floor, those wings were the only things in his vision as he turned to follow.

The exquisite shade of her wings spoke not of the cold viciousness of a dark court, but of the solid calm of the earth and the trees. That much, at least, wasn't false advertising. Nimra's home was not what he'd been expecting. A sprawling and graceful old lady with soaring ceilings situated on an extensive estate about an hour out of New Orleans, it had a multitude of windows as well as balconies ringing every level. Most had no railing—as befitted the home of a being with wings. The roof, too, had been built with an angel in mind. It sloped, but not at an acute angle, not enough to make it dangerous for landings.

However, notwithstanding the beauty of the house, it was the gardens that made the place. Cascading with blooms both exotic and ordinary, and full of trees gnarled with age alongside newly budding plants, those gardens whispered of peace . . . the kind of place where a broken man might sit and try to find himself again. Except, Noel thought as he followed Nimra up a flight of stairs, he was fairly certain that what he'd lost when he'd been ambushed and then debased until his face was unrecognizable, his body so much meat, was gone forever.

Nimra halted in front of a pair of large wooden doors carved with a filigree of jasmine in bloom, shooting him an expectant look over her shoulder when he stopped behind her. “The doors,” she said with what he was certain was a thread of amusement in that voice kissed by the music of the bayou.

Taking care not to brush her wings, he walked around to pull one open. “I apologize.” The words came out harsh, his throat unaccustomed to speech these days. “I'm not used to being a—” He cut himself off in midsentence, having no idea what to call himself.

“Come.” Nimra continued to walk down the corridor lined with windows that bathed the varnished floors in the molten, languid sunlight of this place that held both the bold, brazen beauty of New Orleans as well as an older, quieter elegance. Each windowsill was set with earth-toned pots that overflowed with the most cheerful, unexpected bursts of color—pansies and wildflowers, daisies and chrysanthemums.

Noel found himself fighting the desire to stroke their petals, feel the velvet softness against his skin. It was an unexpected urge, and it made him pull back, tug his shields even tighter around himself. He couldn't afford to be vulnerable here, in this court where he'd been sent to rot—it wasn't a stretch to believe that everyone was waiting for him to give up on life and complete what his attackers had begun.

His jaw set in a brutal line just as Nimra spoke again. While her tone was rough silk—the kind that spoke of secrets in the bedroom and pleasure that could turn to pain—her words were pragmatic. “We will talk in my chambers.”

Those chambers lay beyond another set of wooden doors, these painted with images of exotic birds flitting through blossom-heavy trees. Feminine and pretty, there was nothing in the images that spoke of the hardness that was part of Nimra's reputation, but if Noel knew one thing after his more than two centuries of existence, it was that any being who had lived over half a millennium had long learned to hide what she didn't wish to show.

His guard up, he walked in behind her, closing the painted doors quietly at his back. He didn't know what he'd expected, but it wasn't the graceful white furniture scattered with jewel-toned cushions, the

liquid sunlight pouring in through the open French doors, the well-read books set on an end table. The plants, however, were no longer a surprise, and they gave him a sense of freedom even as he stood stifled and imprisoned by his broken self, his pledge of service to Raphael, and thus to Nimra.

Walking to the French doors, Nimra closed them, shutting out the world before she turned to face him once more. “We will speak in privacy.”

Noel gave a stiff nod, another thought cutting through his mind with punishing suddenness. Some of the angelic race, old and jaded, found pleasure in taking lovers they could control, treating those lovers like . . . fresh meat, to be used and then discarded. He would never be that, and if Nimra expected it of him . . .

He was a vampire, an almost-immortal who’d had over two hundred years to grow into his power. She might kill him, but he’d draw blood before it was over. “What would you have of me?”

Nimra heard the menace beneath the outwardly polite question and wondered who exactly Raphael had sent her. She’d made some quiet inquiries of a scholar she knew in the Refuge, had learned of the horrific assault Noel had survived, but the man himself remained a mystery. When she’d asked Raphael to tell her more than the bare facts about the vampire he was assigning to her court, he’d said only, “He is loyal and highly capable. He is what you need.”

What the archangel had not said was that Noel had eyes of a piercing ice blue filled with so many shadows she could almost touch them, and a face that was hewn out of roughest stone. Not a beautiful man—no, he was too harshly put together for that, but one who would never want for female attention. He was so very, very *male*. From the hard set of his jaw to the deep brown of his hair, to the muscular strength of his body, he drew the eye . . . much as a mountain lion did.

Dressed in blue jeans and a white T-shirt, utterly unlike the formal clothing favored by the other men in her court, he’d nonetheless overshadowed them with the silent intensity of his presence. Now he threatened to take over her rooms, his masculine energy a stark counterpoint to the femininity of the furnishings.

It annoyed her that this vampire of not much more than two hundred could inspire such feelings in her, an angel who demanded respect from those twice her age and who had the trust of an archangel. Which was why she said, “Would you give me anything I asked?” in a tone laced with power.

White lines bracketed his lips. “I’ll be no one’s slave.”

Nimra blinked, realization swift and dark. It did her vanity no good to see that he believed she had to force her lovers, but she knew enough of her own kind to understand the thought wasn’t unwarranted. However, the fact that it had been the first one in his mind . . . No, she thought, surely Raphael would have warned her if Noel had been misused in that way. Then again, the archangel who held enough power in his body to level cities and burn empires was a law unto himself. She could assume nothing.

“Slavery,” she said, turning to another set of doors, “offers no challenges. I have never understood the allure.”

As he followed at her back, she had the sense of having a great beast on a leash—and that beast wasn’t at all happy with the situation. Intriguing, even if it did prick at her temper that there was so much power in him, this vampire Raphael had sent in response to her request. That, of course, was the crux of it—Noel was Raphael’s man, and Raphael did not suffer the weak.

Once inside the chamber, she nodded at him to close the door behind himself. She wouldn’t have

thought to take such measures even a month ago, she'd had such trust in her people. Now . . . The pain was one she'd had to live with for the past fourteen days, and it had become no easier to bear in that time.

Walking past the smooth and well-loved wooden desk situated beside the large window, a place where she often sat to write her personal correspondence, she lifted her hands to unlock the upper doors of the armoire against the wall. The curling tendrils of a fine fern brushed the backs of her hands, a whispered caress as she revealed—set into the back wall of the armoire—the door to what appeared to be a simple safe, but one no burglar would ever be able to crack.

Retrieving a tiny vial half-filled with a luminescent fluid from within, she turned and said, “Do you know what this is?” to the man who stood immobile as stone several feet from her.

A shuttered expression but there was no discounting the intelligence in that penetrating gaze. “I haven't seen anything like it before.”

So beautiful, she thought, watching the colors tumble and foam within the vial when she tilted it to catch the light, the crystal itself etched only with a simple sigil, signifying her name, and thin decorative lines in fine gold. “That is because this fluid is beyond rare,” she murmured, “created from the extract of a plant found in the deepest, most impenetrable part of Borneo's rain forests.” Closing the distance between them, she held it out toward him.

The vial looked ridiculously small in his big hand, a toy stolen from a crying child. Lifting it to his eyes, he tilted it with care. The fluid spread on the crystal, making the surface glow. “What is it?”

“Midnight.” Taking the vial when he returned it, she placed it on her writing desk. “A hint of it will kill a human, a fraction more will place a vampire into a coma, and a quarter of an ounce is enough to ensure most angels of less than eight hundred will not wake for ten long hours.”

Noel's gaze crashed into hers. “So your intended victim doesn't stand the smallest chance.”

She was unsurprised by his conclusion—it was nothing less than could be expected, given her reputation. “I have had this for three hundred years. It was gifted to me by a friend who thought I might one day have need of it.” Her lips lifted at the corners at the thought of the angel who had given her this most lethal of weapons—as a human older brother might give his sister a knife or a gun. “He has never seen me as fragile.”

* * *

Noel thought this friend couldn't know her well. Nimra might look as if she'd break under the slightest pressure, but she didn't hold Louisiana against all the other powers in the wider region, including the brutal Nazarach, by being a wilting lily. Not being as blind, he never took his eyes off her, even when she picked up the vial and returned it to the safe, her wings so exquisite and inviting in front of him.

Their tactile beauty was a trap, a lure to the unwary to drop their guard. Noel had never been that innocent—and after the events in the Refuge . . . If there had been any innocence left in him, it was long dead.

“Two weeks ago,” Nimra murmured, closing the armoire doors and turning to face him once more, “someone attempted to use Midnight on me.”

CHAPTER 2

Noel sucked in a breath. “Did they succeed?”

The relief that rushed through him when she shook her head was a ravaging storm. He’d been helpless in the Refuge, bound and trapped as pieces of glass and metal were shoved into his very flesh until that flesh grew over it, trapping the excruciating shards of pain—and though he had no loyalty to Nimra except through his ties to Raphael, he didn’t want to think of her with her spirit broken and her wings crumpled. “How did you escape?”

“The poison was placed into a glass of iced tea,” she said, shifting to touch her finger to the glossy leaf of a plant by the writing desk. “It is tasteless and colorless once blended with any other liquid, so I wouldn’t have noticed it, had no reason to consider that anything in my home might be unsafe for me. But I had a cat, Queen.” Her breath caught for a fragment of a second, sharp and brittle. “She jumped up onto the table when I wasn’t watching and sipped at the drink. She was dead before I even had a chance to scold her for her misbehavior.”

Noel knew the sorrow that marked Nimra’s face was, in all probability, an attempt to manipulate his emotions, but still he found himself liking her better for being saddened by the death of her pet. “I’m sorry.”

A slight incline of her head, a regal acknowledgment. “I had the tea tested without alerting anyone in this court, discovered it held Midnight.” Smooth honey brown skin stretched tight over the line of her jaw. “If the assassin had succeeded, I would have been insensible for hours—and those who knew of my incapacitated state could have come in and ensured full death.”

Angels were as close to immortal as was possible in this world. The only beings more powerful were the Cadre of Ten, the archangels who ruled the world. Unless they pissed off one of the Cadre, death wasn’t something angels had to worry about except in very limited circumstances—depending on the years they’d lived and their inherent power.

Noel didn’t know Nimra’s level of power but he knew that if someone were to decapitate a strong angel, remove his or her organs, including the brain, then burn everything, it was unlikely the angel would survive. Unlikely but not impossible. Noel had no way of knowing the truth of it, but it was said angels of a certain age and strength could regenerate from the ashes of a normal fire.

“Or worse,” he added softly, because while death might be the ultimate goal, many of the oldest immortals lived only for the pain and suffering of others, as if their capacity for gentler emotions had been corroded away long ago. He could well imagine what someone like Nazarach would do to Nimra if he had her alone and vulnerable.

“Yes.” She turned to the windows beyond that little writing desk—formed with a daintiness that would crumble under one of Noel’s fists—her gaze on the wild beauty of the gardens below. “Only those who are trusted enough to be in my inner court, and carefully vetted servants, are ever anywhere near my food.

“Because of this act of treachery, I can no longer trust men and women who have been with me for decades, if not centuries.” Calm, tempered words sliced with anger. “Midnight is near impossible to acquire, even for angels—which means the one who betrayed me is working in the service of someone who holds considerable power.”

Noel felt a spark within him, one he’d thought had been extinguished in that blood-soaked room

where his abductors had brutalized him for no reason except that it gave them a twisted kind of pleasure. They might have justified the act by calling it a political ploy, but he'd heard their laughter felt the black that stained their souls. "Why are you telling me this?"

An arch look over her shoulder. "I do not need a slave, Noel"—his name carried a slight French emphasis that turned it into something exotic—"but I do need someone whose loyalty is beyond question. Raphael says you are that man."

He had not been cast aside after all.

It was a shock to the system, a jolt that brought him to life when he'd been the walking dead for so long. "You're certain it's one of your people?" he asked, his blood pumping in hard pulses through his veins.

Her answer was oblique and it held a quiet, thrumming anger. "There were no strangers in my home the day the Midnight was used." Her wings flared out, blocking the light as she continued to focus beyond the windows. "They are mine, but one has been tainted."

"You're six hundred years old," Noel said, knowing she saw nothing of the gardens at that instant. "You can force them to speak the truth."

"I cannot bend wills," she said, surprising him with the straight answer. "That has never been one of my gifts—and torturing my entire court to unearth one traitor seems a trifle extreme."

He thought he heard a dark amusement beneath the anger, but with her face turned to the window, her profile shadowed by the tumble of those blue-black curls, he couldn't tell for sure. "Do they know why I'm here?"

Shaking her head, Nimra turned to him once more, her expression betraying nothing, the flawless mask of an immortal. "It is probable they believe the very thing you did—that Raphael has sent you to me because you are broken and I need a toy." A lifted eyebrow.

He felt as if he'd been called to the carpet. "My apologies, Lady Nimra."

"Do attempt to sound a fraction more sincere"—a cool order—"or this deception will fail miserably."

"I'm afraid I'll never be able to pull off being a poodle."

To his shock, she laughed, the sound a husky feminine stroke across his senses. "Very well," she said, eyes glittering with gemstone brightness in the sunlight. "You may be a wolf on a long leash."

Noel was startled to feel a different kind of heat within him, a slow-burning ember, dark and potent. Since waking in the Medica, his body destroyed, he'd felt no desire, had thought that part of him dead. But Nimra's laugh made his body stir enough that he noticed. It was tempting to follow that flicker of heat, to hold the ember up to the light of day, but he didn't allow her laugh or the exquisite caress of her femininity to wipe the truth from his mind—that the angel with the jewel-dusted wings was deadly. And that while she might be in the right in this particular game, she was no innocent.

He heard screams that night. The nightmare always surprised him, though he'd been having it since he opened his eyes in the Medica after the assault. Because the fact was, he'd lost the ability to scream several hours into the torture, remaining conscious only because his attackers had made it a point to never cross that fine line. Broken bones, torn flesh, excruciating burns—vampires could take a lot of damage without the escape of the cold dark of unconsciousness.

He didn't remember screaming even at the start, determined not to give in, but he must have—for the echo of it haunted his dreams. Or perhaps the screams rang inside his mind because that was the

sole place he'd had that had been his own, his strength, his dignity stripped from him with malicious force.

Throwing off the sweat-soaked sheets as he shoved away the memories, he got out of bed and walked to the window he'd left open to the honeysuckle-scented air. The heavy warmth of it stroked over his cheeks, fingered its way through his hair, but did nothing to cool his overheated flesh. Still, he lingered, staring out into the inky dark of the night and the slumbering silhouettes of the gardens and trees that sprawled out in every direction.

It was perhaps twenty minutes later, right when he was about to turn away, that he glimpsed wings. They weren't Nimra's. Frowning, he angled himself so as to be invisible from the ground and watched. The angel appeared out of the shadows a minute later and stopped, his face lifted up toward Nimra's window—a long, motionless moment—before he carried on.

Interesting.

Pushing away from the window when there was no further movement, Noel walked into the shower, realizing he'd glimpsed the tall male in the audience chamber earlier. The angel had stood on Nimra's right as she dealt with a number of important petitions, so there was no doubting the fact that he was one of her inner circle. Noel intended to find out everything else about him later today.

It was still dark when he walked out of the shower, but he knew there was no point in attempting to sleep now—and as a vampire, he could go without sleep for long periods. Part of him didn't know why he even tried to find such rest. Even on the nights when he didn't hear the screams, he heard the laughter.

Nimra walked out into the gardens the next morning to find that Noel had beaten her to the dawn. He sat on a wrought-iron bench beneath the branches of an old cypress, his eyes on the clear waters of the stream that snaked through her lands before joining a wider tributary that led into the bayou. He was so motionless, he appeared carved from the same stone as the silken moss-covered rocks that guarded the waterway.

She stepped quietly, intending to take the path that would skirt away from him, for she understood the value of silence, but he lifted his head at that instant. Even with the distance between them, she was caught by the wintry blue of those eyes—eyes she knew had been destroyed in the attack at the Refuge, his face beaten in with such viciousness he'd only been recognized because of a ring worn on a shattered finger.

Anger, cold and dangerous, slid through her veins, but she kept her tone easy. “*Bonjour, Noel.*” Her wings brushed the curling white and pink flowers of the wild azalea bushes on either side of her, and the dew showered a welcome caress on her feathers.

He rose to his feet, a big man who moved with predatory grace. “You wake early, Lady Nimra.”

And you, Nimra thought, do not sleep. “Walk with me.”

“A command?”

Definitely a wolf. “A request.”

He fell into step beside her, and they walked in silence through the rows of flowers nodding sleepily in the hazy early morning light, their petals seeking the red-orange rays of the rising sun. It was her habit to spread her wings when she was outdoors thus, but she kept them folded today, maintaining a small distance between her and this vampire who was so very contained, she couldn't help but wonder what lay beneath the surface.

A plaintive meow had her bending to look under the hedgerow. “There you are, Mimosa.” She plucked the elderly cat out from under the dark green shade of a plant dotted with bursts of tiny yellow flowers. “What are you doing awake and about so very early?” The gray cat, her fur sprinkled with white, nuzzled at her chin before settling down in her arms for another nap.

She was aware of Noel glancing at her as she stroked her hand over Mimosa’s fur, but said nothing. Like a wounded animal, he would not react well to pressure. He would have to come to her—if he even did—in his own time, at his own pace.

“Those tufted ears,” he said at last, looking at the comical puffs that tipped Mimosa’s otherwise neat head. “That’s why you call her Mimosa.”

It made her smile that he’d guessed. “Yes—and because the first time I saw her, she was standing near a mimosa plant, snapping her paw out at the leaves, then jumping back as they closed.” In the process, she’d managed to get several of the fluffy dandelion-like flowers on her head, a tiny crown.

“How many pets do you have?”

She rubbed Mimosa’s back, felt the old cat purr against her ribs. “Just Mimosa now. She misses Queen, though Queen used to tire her out with her antics, she was so young.”

Noel wasn’t used to seeing angels acting in any way human. Yet Nimra, her arms full of that ancient feline, appeared very much so. “Would you like me to hold her?”

“No. Mimosa weighs far less than she should—it’s only her fur that makes her appear so.” Her face was solemn in the hushed secrecy of dawn. “Grief has put her off her food, and she has lived so many years already . . .”

It was instinct to reach out, to rub his finger along the top of the cat’s head. “She’s been with you a long time.”

“Two decades,” Nimra said. “I don’t know where she came from. She looked up from her game with the mimosa plant that day and decided I was hers.” A slow smile that blew the embers within him to darker, hotter life. “She has ever accompanied me on my morning walks since then, though now the cold bothers her.”

The gentle care in those words went against everything he’d heard of Nimra. She was feared by vampires and angels across the country. Even the most aggressive angels stayed clear of Nimra’s territory—when to all outward appearances, her powers were nothing compared to many of theirs. Which made Noel wonder exactly how much of what he saw before him was the truth, and how much a well-practiced illusion.

She lifted her head at that moment and the soft gold of the rising sun touched her face, lit up those topaz eyes, so bright and luminous. “This is my favorite time of day, when everything is still full of promise.”

Around him, the gardens began to stir to life as the sky became ablaze with streaks of deep orange and a pink so dark it was almost crimson, and in front of him stood a beautiful woman with wings of jewel-dusted brown. A man could surrender to such a moment . . . but the very strength of that allure made him take a step back, remind himself of the cold, hard facts behind his presence here. “Is there anyone you suspect of being the traitor?”

Nimra didn’t protest the sudden change in the direction of the conversation. “I cannot bring myself to suspect any of my own of such an act.” Her hand moved over the slumbering cat in her arms, slow and with an endless patience. “It is worse than a knife in the dark, for at least then I would have a

shadow to focus on. This . . . I do not like it, Noel.”

Something about the way she said his name curled around him, a subtle magic that had his shields slamming shut. Perhaps this was Nimra’s power—the ability to entice people into believing whatever she wished them to believe. The idea of it made his jaw go tight, every cell in his body on alert for the danger he was certain lurked behind the delicate bones of that exquisite face.

As if she’d heard his thoughts, she shook her head. “Such mistrust.” It was a murmur. “Such age in your eyes, as if you have lived far more centuries than I know you to have done.”

Noel said nothing.

Soft ebony curls glimmered with deepest blue in the dawn sunlight as she continued to pet Mimos. “I will formally introduce you to my people this—”

“I’d prefer to meet them on my own.”

One eyebrow rose at the interruption, the first hint of true arrogance he’d seen. It was strangely comforting. Angels of Nimra’s age and strength were used to power, used to being in control. He’d have been more suspicious if she’d taken the interruption and disagreement with the unruffled tranquillity she’d shown to date.

“Why?” The demand of an immortal who held a territory in an iron grip.

But Noel had found his way again after months in the impenetrable darkness, would allow no one to push him off course. “If there is a traitor, it makes no sense to alienate your entire court,” he reminded her. “Which will happen very quickly if you make it a point to introduce your new . . . amusement to them all.”

She continued to watch him with eyes full of power.

Perhaps other men might’ve been intimidated, but, illusion or truth, Noel was fascinated by the layers of her. “Are your people truly dim enough,” he said, “to accept that story once you make it clear I have value to you?”

Nimra’s hand stilled on her pet’s fur. “Take care, Noel,” she said in a quiet voice that hummed with the reality of the strength contained within her small frame. “I have not held this land by allowing anyone to walk over me.”

“That,” he said, holding a gaze gone stormy with warning, “is not something I ever doubted.” Never did he forget that behind her delicate build and feminine beauty lay an immortal who was said to be so cruel that she caused bone-chilling terror in even those of her own kind.

CHAPTER 3

The first person Noel met when he stepped into the huge room at the front of the house was a tall, dark-eyed, dark-haired angel who had the look of arrogance Noel associated with angels beyond a certain level of power—but with an edge of condescension thrown in for flavor. “Christian,” the angel said, his wings a soft white with a few sharp threads of black . . . the same wings Noel had seen from his bedroom window earlier that morning.

Nodding, he said, “Noel,” and held out his hand.

Christian ignored it. “You’re new to the court.” A smile as serrated as a saw blade. “I hear you come to us from the Refuge.”

Noel didn’t miss the unspoken message—Christian knew what had been done to him, and the angel would use that knowledge to twist the knife deeper when he wished. “Yes.” He smiled, as if he hadn’t caught either the warning, or the implicit threat. “Nimra’s court isn’t what I expected.” There was no overt opulence, no miasma of fear.

“Don’t be taken in,” Christian said, his eyes as hard as diamonds though his facade of arctic politeness never slipped. “There is a reason the others fear her teeth.”

Noel rocked back lazily on his heels. “Been bitten?”

The angel’s wings spread a fraction, then snapped tight. “Insolence will only be tolerated so long as you warm her bed.”

“Then I better warm it for a long time.” Noel shot him a cocky grin, figuring he might as well play the part to the hilt.

“Is Christian giving you a hard time?” The question came from a long-legged female dressed in a tight black knee-length skirt and white shirt that flattered a slender figure with graceful curves. Paired with those legs and uptilted eyes of a deep impossible turquoise against sun-golden skin, it made her a stunner. Not an angel, but a vampire old enough that immortality had worked its magic on what had surely been a spectacular canvas to begin with.

Noel deepened his smile in response to her flirtatious wink. “I think I can handle Christian,” he said, holding out his hand once again. “I’m Noel.”

“Asirani.” Her fingers closed over his own. He allowed it but he felt nothing. He’d felt nothing ever since he’d been taken . . . except for that odd, unexpected ember of sensation stirred awake by Nimra’s laugh.

Releasing Asirani’s hand, he looked from the vampire to the angel. “So, tell me about this court.”

Christian ignored him, while Asirani twined an arm through his own and led him across the huge central room that appeared to function as the audience chamber when necessary, but was otherwise the center of the court. “Have you eaten?” Thick black lashes lifted, turquoise eyes looking meaningfully into his.

“I’m afraid Lady Nimra doesn’t like to share,” he murmured, thinking of the sealed bags of blood that had been left in the small fridge in his room. “I thank you for the offer.” Whatever her motive, it had been a considerate question.

Fact was, taking blood from a human or vampiric donor wasn’t something he’d had any inclination to do since waking from the assault. The head healer at the Medica, Keir, had been very good about providing him with stored blood without question. Maybe Nimra’s courtesy, too, was as a result of

Keir's influence. The healer seemed to command a great deal of respect from angelkind—even the archangels themselves.

“Hmm.” Asirani squeezed his arm, her fingers brushing his biceps. “You are a surprising choice.”

“Am I?”

A throaty laugh. “Ah, cleverer than you look, aren't you?” Eyes dancing, she stopped beside a window, her face to the room. “Nimra,” she said in a low tone, “has not taken a lover for many years. Christian always believed that when she chose to break her fast, it would be with him.”

Noel glanced over at the angel, who was now talking to an older human male, and found himself wondering why Nimra hadn't invited Christian to her bed. In spite of the appearance he gave of being a stuffy aristocrat, the man was clearly sharply intelligent, and he moved in a way that said he'd had training in how to fight. No useless fop, but an asset.

As Asirani was no vacant hanger-on.

“Do you all live here?” he asked her, intrigued that this court appeared to be made up of the strong

“Some of us have rooms here, but Nimra maintains a wing that is hers alone.” Leading him to the long table set with food to the side of the room, she released his arm to pluck a plump grape from an assortment of fruit and pop it into her mouth. Though vampires couldn't gain the nourishment they needed from food, they could digest and appreciate the taste—Asirani's hum of pleasure made it plain she enjoyed utilizing every one of her senses.

Noel had no interest in such sensuality, but he was moving to pick up a couple of blueberries so as not to stand out, when the hairs rose on the back of his neck. Not fear, but an instinctive, primal awareness. He wasn't the least surprised to turn around to discover that Nimra had entered the room. The others receded from his consciousness, his eyes locking with the power and intensity of her own.

“Excuse me,” he murmured to Asirani, crossing the gleaming wood of the floor to come to a halt in front of the angel who was proving to be an irresistible enigma. “My lady.”

Her gaze was impenetrable. “I see you have met Asirani.”

“And Christian.”

A slight tightening of her mouth. “I do not think you have met Fen. Come.”

She led him toward the elderly human man Noel had seen with Christian. He sat surrounded by papers at a desk in a sun-drenched corner of the room. As they neared him, it became clear the man was even older than Noel had first guessed, his nut-brown skin lined with countless wrinkles. Yet his eyes were dark little pebbles, shiny with life, his lips mobile. They lifted in a smile as Nimra got closer, and Noel realized the man's eyesight was deteriorating in spite of the flashing brightness of her gaze.

Nimra stopped him with a hand on his shoulder when he began to struggle to his feet. “How many times must I tell you, Fen? You've earned the right to sit in my presence.” A smile so vibrant, it cut a Noel's heart. “In fact, you've earned the right to dance naked in my presence should you so wish.”

The old man laughed, his voice cracked with age. “That would be a sight, eh, my lady?” Squeezing her hand, he looked up at Noel. “Have you let a man make an honest woman of you at last?”

Leaning forward, Nimra kissed Fen on both cheeks, her wings brushing inadvertently against Noel. “You are my only love, you know that.”

Fen's laughter segued into a deep smile, his fingers lighting on Nimra's cheek before dropping to the desk once more. “I am a blessed man indeed.”

Noel could almost feel the history that ran between the two of them, but no matter their words, there was nothing loverlike in that richness of memory. There was instead an almost father-daughter element to it, in spite of the fact that Nimra remained immortally young, while the march of time had

caught up with Fen.

Rising to her full height, Nimra said, "This is Noel," before returning her attention to Fen. "He is my guest."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" Twinkling eyes shifted to give Noel a closer inspection. "He isn't as pretty as Christian."

"Somehow," Noel muttered, "I think I'll survive."

The riposte caused Fen to laugh in that hacking old-man way. "I like this one, Nimra. You should keep him."

"We shall see," Nimra said, a tart bite to her words. "As we both know, people are not always who they appear to be."

Something unseen passed between the angel and the aged human at that instant, with Fen raising Nimra's hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to the back. "Sometimes, they are more." Fen's eyes lifted for a bare instant to snap across Noel's and he had the feeling the words were meant for him rather than the angel whose hand Fen still held.

Then Asirani click-clacked into his vision on sky-high heels and the moment broke. "My lady," the vampire said to Nimra, "Augustus is here and insisting he speak with you."

Nimra's expression turned dark. "He's beginning to try my patience." Folding back her wings tight to her spine, she nodded good-bye to Fen and strode off without a word to Noel, Asirani by her side.

Fen nudged at Noel with a cane he hadn't seen until that moment. "Perhaps not quite what you expected, eh?"

Noel raised an eyebrow. "If you mean the arrogance, I'm well versed in it. I worked with Raphael Seven." The vampires and angels in service to the archangel were powerful immortals in their own right. Dmitri, the leader of the Seven, was stronger than a large number of angels; he could take and hold a territory if he so chose.

"But," Fen insisted, lips curved in a shrewd smile, "have you experienced it in a woman? In a lover?"

"Blindness has never been one of my faults." The bitter irony of his words made him laugh within. After the assault, he hadn't even had eyes for the days it had taken his flesh to regenerate. "It's not yours, either, though it looks to me as if you prefer to give the appearance of it." He'd seen the way the old man's gaze had turned dull when Asirani neared.

"Smart, too." Fen waved him to a chair across from his own. Taking it, Noel braced his forearm on the gleaming cherrywood of the desk and looked out at the vast main area. Christian was deep in conversation with another woman, a curvaceous beauty with long, straight hair to the base of her spine and the most guileless face Noel had ever seen. "Who's that?" he asked, having guessed what role Fen played in Nimra's court.

The old man's expression softened to utter tenderness. "My daughter, Amariyah." Smiling at her when she turned to wave at him, he sighed. "She was Made at twenty-seven. It does my heart good to know that she'll live on long after I'm gone."

Vampirism did turn humans into almost-immortals, but the life was hardly an easy one, especially the first hundred years after the Making, when the vampire was in service to an angel. The century-long Contract was the price the angels demanded for the gift of being able to live long past the span of a mortal life. "How much of her Contract remains?"

"None," Fen said, to Noel's surprise.

"Unless you had her before you were born," Noel said, continuing to watch Amariyah and Christian. "that's impossible."

“Even I’m not that efficient.” A phlegmy laugh. “I’ve been in service to Nimra since I was a lad of but twenty. Mariyah was born a year later. Been some sixty-five years that I’ve served my lady—the Contract was written to take that into account.”

Noel had never heard of such a concession. That the angel who ruled New Orleans and its surroundings had done this said a great deal about both Fen’s worth to her, and her own capacity for loyalty. It wasn’t a trait he’d expected to find in an angel known far and wide for the harshness of her punishments. “Your daughter is beautiful,” he said, but his mind was on another woman, one with wings that had lain so warm and heavy against him for a fleeting moment earlier.

Fen sighed. “Yes, too beautiful. And too sweet a soul. I wouldn’t have permitted her to be Made if Nimra hadn’t vowed to care for her.”

Amariyah broke off her conversation at that instant to walk over. “Papa,” she said and, unlike the echoes of another continent that flavored her father’s speech, the bayou ran dark and languid in her voice, “you did not eat your breakfast today. Do you think you can fool your Amariyah?”

“Ach, girl. You’re embarrassing me in front of my new friend.”

Amariyah held out her hand. “Good morning, Noel. You are quite the topic of conversation in this court.”

Shaking that hand, with its skin several shades lighter than her father’s, Noel gave what he hoped was an easy smile. “All good, I’m sure.”

Fen’s daughter shook her head, the dimples that dented her cheeks making her appear even more innocent. “I’m afraid not. Christian is, as my grandmother would’ve said, ‘very put out.’ Excuse me a moment.” Bustling over to the sideboard, she filled a plate before returning. “You will eat, Papa, or I will tell Lady Nimra.”

Fen grumbled but Noel could see he was pleased at the attention. Rising, Noel waved a hand at his seat. “I think your father would prefer your company to mine.”

Amariyah dimpled again. “Thank you, Noel. If you need anything in the court, let me know.” Walking with him a few steps, she smiled again, and this time there was nothing guileless about it. “My father likes to see me as an innocent,” she murmured in a low voice, “and so I am one for him. But I am a woman grown.” With that unsubtle message, she was gone.

Frowning, Noel went to leave the audience chamber, skirting a young maid walking in with a fresh carafe of coffee. Then again . . . Turning, he walked back to snag a cup off a small side table. “May I beg a cup?” he asked, making sure to keep his voice gentle.

Her cheeks colored a pretty red, but she poured for him with steady hands.

“Thank you.”

Nodding, she dropped her head and headed to the main table, placing the carafe on the surface. No one paid her any mind, and—their potential complicity in the attempted assassination aside—it made Noel wonder just how much the servants heard, how much they remembered.

Nimra stared at Augustus across the length of the small formal library where she handled her day-to-day affairs. “You know I won’t change my mind,” she said, “and still you insist.”

The big man, his skin a gleaming dark mahogany, snapped out wings of a deep russet streaked with white, his arms folded across his massive chest. “You are a woman, Nimra,” he boomed. “It’s unnatural that you should be this alone.”

Other female angels would’ve done something nasty to Augustus by now. Theirs was not a society

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