



THE ANGEL'S LAIR



He sat at the end of the bar, wearing a crisp tan trench coat, shoulders hunched over an empty old-fashioned glass. Through the smoke and strobing lights, she saw him for what he was and licked her lips. An angel of melancholy. Hers.

She stilled the thrashing of her tail, smoothed the dress down over her hips. The black lycra couldn't have been tighter if it had been painted on. She tugged the sleeves over her wrists, adjusted the zipper to cover her breasts. Once she was cloaked from knees to collarbone, the only thing the dress left to the imagination would be his downfall. She smiled. Let's see if this one could be won without a fight.

The angel didn't look up as she leaned across the zinc bar at his elbow. She waved the bartender over. "Absinthe Suisse," she shouted above the music, "and whatever he's drinking."

Service was fast here; wouldn't want to give the prey time to sober up. Clanking her newly arrived glass against the angel's, the succubus sipped the bitter liqueur. It shimmered in the lights. Her eyes picked up the glow. She leaned against him, his shoulder between her breasts. He slumped on his bar stool.

"Thank you, Lorelei," she prompted. He didn't answer.

Lorelei licked her lips, so close to his ear that he shivered. "What's your name, Angel?" she purred.

"Azazel."

Perfect, she thought. Not yet fallen, but hers.

"Wanna dance, Aza?"

Righteous anger flashed through him. In her peripheral vision, she saw heads turn.

“Leave me alone, temptress.”

A shiver coursed through her at the timbre of his voice. She dropped her arm from around his waist and stepped back to finish her drink. When she was sure of her composure, she said, “I think you’ve been alone too long, Angel.”

She traced the tip of her tongue around the sweet curl of his ear. Rather than swing at her, as she expected, rather than fling her away, he drew a shuddering breath. She felt a connection made down deep in her hips.

Sighing happily, she stepped away and collected a nearby mortal with her gaze. The man trailed her doggishly.

Lorelei turned so she could watch the angel. She set her feet on the dance floor and let her hips find the rhythm of the music. The mortal stood too close. She stiffened him with her smile, then watched Azaziel drain his glass and leave without a backward glance.

The taste of him lingered in her mouth. She pushed the pointed tip of her tongue between her lips, savoring. Myrrh, beeswax, a shadowy cell in the rock, years of solitude...cast out, certainly.

She sensed Floria behind her and opened her eyes. Floria, her scarlet dress barely thigh-length, burned in the strobe lights. Lorelei smiled at her sister and accepted the glass she offered.

The mortal glanced between the two of them, uncertain if he was being dismissed. Lorelei grinned at him and mouthed, “Ready to go?”

“All of us?” he shouted back at her.

Lorelei nodded, holding the glass out toward him. He drained it. Lorelei caught it as it slipped from his suddenly nerveless fingers. Floria caught him. Between the two of them, they got him out of the club. They arranged his hands on their bodies as if the party had already started. The security guards stared after them, shifting awkwardly, aroused but on duty. Floria grinned, not helping their situation in the least.

Lorelei dropped her purse and bent to retrieve it. Floria knelt beside her. Their new friend stumbled, uncertain where they’d vanished to, and stepped off the curb into traffic. Brakes shrieked, too late.

Floria calmly handed back a tube of blood-red lipstick. “Go after that angel.”

“Thank you.” Lorelei brushed a kiss across Floria’s lips.

Someone shouted for an ambulance. A crowd gathered, drawn by the blood. A cab driver shouted, “What the fuck, man, what the fuck!” as Lorelei faded into the neon shadows. She didn’t pause to watch the mortal expire. Floria would handle it.

“Where have you gone, Azaziel?” Lorelei purred.

He’d sought mortal company, but hadn’t dressed the part. That meant he tried this once, as an experiment. Solitude must be wearing on him. Lorelei unfurled her wings, letting his loneliness summon her.



The streets of the warehouse district looked as if a bomb had gone off. On the buildings, graffiti swirled and screamed, naming names, making accusations.

Lorelei flew low to the ground, glorying in the rush of air through her thin dress. She found Azaziel at last when she crossed the old train tracks. A block away, a figure walked down the center of the tracks, head down and hands in pockets.

Folding her wings, Lorelei dropped to her feet. She hid her wings and tail, then smoothed hair over her horns. She’d meet him as a mortal.

He didn’t look up when she joined him. She let the silence stand, matching her stride against his.

The angel nudged her with his elbow, offering a pint bottle. Whiskey burned pleasantly down her throat, kindling a fire that glowed inside her as she passed the bottle back.

His eyes were appreciative. She resisted the urge to preen. She wanted to pet his soft blond hair. She wanted to wash his deep-set green eyes with her tongue. She wanted to kiss him until she tasted bruises.

“Have you come to hear about Heaven?” he asked.

“No.” She let firelight flicker in her eyes. “What do you know about Heaven, anyway?”

“It lives in me. I never forget it.” He saluted a streetlight with

the flask and said, "Behold the Breath of God, which taketh away the sins of the world."

He knocked back a long swallow and handed the flask to her. She sniffed at it, then passed it back. "I thought drinking was a sin."

"There's no prohibition against drinking, only drunkenness. It'll take more than this to get me drunk." He sucked down the rest of the whiskey, then flung the bottle against a warehouse. Shards of glass shimmered off into the night. Somewhere, a dog barked.

"Which do you prefer of the sins of the world?" Lorelei asked.

He stared at her. He was, she understood, very old. He'd seen the beginning of the world, the Wars in Heaven and the Fall, yet remained loyal. Subservient. But here he was, trapped in the mortal realm, longing.

Instinct took over. She pressed against him, felt the sharp corners of the trench coat's buckle and the solid flesh beneath it. He didn't push her away. Instead, he clung to her, crushing her against his chest. His lips brushed her hair as he asked, "Can you show me Paradise?"

"I can give you bliss."

"And the price?"

"Your fall."

"Too high," he said. "Kiss me and go."

"If I don't kiss you, can I stay?"

He lifted her off of him, set her three-inch heels carefully on a railroad tie so that she didn't stumble. "Begging is uncharacteristic of your type."

She shrugged. "Call it begging, if you like. I prefer to think we're striking a bargain."

He shrugged back at her and started walking again. She tentatively brushed the back of his clenched fist with her fingertips. He snatched her hand up and gripped it, just on the edge of pain. She felt arousal gathering in her mortal body and missed a step.

He twisted her to face him. "My conditions..."

"Yes?" she hissed.

"You retain mortal form as long as you remain with me. You

do not attempt to seduce me. If you do anything more than kiss me, I will tear you apart."

She gazed into his eyes. Did he think he was serious?

"I know how your kind are," he continued. "I know what your promises are worth. So don't promise me anything; simply understand."

"As you like, Angel." She tipped her face back so it would catch the distant streetlight and closed her eyes.

Laughter choked him. "Nobility doesn't suit you, succubus."

He drew her down a side-spur of the tracks. Rusting cans and the occasional abandoned hammer made footing treacherous for a girl in heels. Azaziel didn't slow his pace or release her hand, so Lorelei was forced to focus on where she placed her feet. Any injury to this mortal body was going to hurt. The idea somewhat intrigued her.

They passed the homes of urban campers, walls constructed of blankets and cardboard and shopping carts full of their belongings. Eyes followed their passage. Lorelei wondered what fear felt like, if she should be feeling it now. The angel owed her nothing. He'd laid his conditions on her without discussion of extenuating circumstances. Would he abandon her to see if she kept her bargain?

Would she die to keep her bargain?

She hoped her sisters would rip the angel to shreds and rouge their lips with his blood.

"In here," Azaziel said. He tugged keys from his coat pocket and fit one of them into a lock on the rolling metal door. Lorelei was curious to see an angel's lair. Perhaps he'd asked her to take mortal form to allow her to enter here. She doubted it. He'd accepted her company as a shield from loneliness, but took no responsibility for her. Yet.

She followed him into the building. When he rolled the door closed, darkness filled the room. She took a step simply to hear her heel ring against the cement. Long, narrow, the echoes said.

The angel led her forward. She leaned against him for safety's sake. He didn't push her away. The building held its breath.

Rattling keys, he unlocked another door and shoved her across the threshold.

With a rush of wind, a hundred candles burst into light. Wax heaped up around them, as if he'd been living in this space for a while. The wax was a creamy golden color, not white. She pondered the significance of that.

On the eastern wall, he'd built a shrine. A shattered mirror had been attached to the wall in a starburst pattern. A small casket held his ritual implements away from her gaze. Traces of myrrh lingered in the air.

In the corner of the cell lay a single futon. It had neither sheets nor pillow. A wad of blankets curled at its foot. "Make yourself at home," the angel sneered.

Lorelei stepped out of her shoes and sat on the edge of the futon to rub her feet. She considered taking off her dress, but decided not to press her luck.

He hung his coat on a bare wire hanger on the back of the door. Then he knelt before his shrine, laying his hands on the casket. He prayed silently.

Lorelei sorted out the blankets and stretched out on the futon, pulling the blankets over her. She wasn't sure what caused the chill she felt.

The angel came to lie beside her, also fully clothed. He didn't share the blanket.

"I'm cold," she said.

"Hold your hands out," he answered.

She pushed them, palm up, from under the covers. In one unexpected movement, he swung his weight over her, pinning her beneath him. As she struggled to claw him, he snapped a metal cuff around one wrist, then dragged her toward the head of the futon, where he wound the connecting chain around a bare pipe before handcuffing her other arm.

He pushed her over to face the wall. As she tested the strength of the steel, the pipe, her flesh, he arranged the blankets over her. He stretched his legs out along hers, then laid his arm across her midriff.

"Sleep," he commanded.

She didn't have the will to resist.



She snapped awake suddenly. The angel's cell was dark now but warmer, as if extinguishing the candles had heated the air. He lay still behind her, his arm draped loosely over her waist. His breath tickled the top of her head.

He'd arranged her weight in such a way that she wasn't straining her arms. The zipper up her left arm itched. Her thighs were humid above her stockings. She hated sleeping in clothing. She snuggled her hips back against the angel's. The movement forced the hem of her dress to ride up enough that she felt the fabric of his chinos against her bare bottom.

Her slight moan woke him. He flung himself out of bed.

"I just woke up," she explained quickly. "This dress is really uncomfortable to sleep in."

He was doing something in the darkness. If she'd had her true form, she would've been able to see what. She kept talking, hoping to calm him, to calm herself. Her heart was pounding hard enough that she knew he could hear it.

"I was trying to get comfortable..."

He knelt at the edge of the futon and put his hand unerringly on her knee. Without uncovering her, he lifted her legs, blankets and all, and helped her to curl up without tugging on the handcuffs.

Once she stopped fidgeting, he lay down behind her again.

"What are you going to do with me?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

"I'd sleep better if I aroused you a little."

He barked out a short laugh.

"At least get back under the covers with me."

He obeyed. Perhaps she *was* enduring this all for a reason.

"I have another condition," the angel whispered back. He rested a cold steel blade against the warm side of her neck. "Don't move again."

