Principles of Angels

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PRINCIPLES OF ANGELS

JAINE FENN



CHAPTER ONE

Taro lay still, eyes wide, ears straining, an arm's length from death.

There it was again, the sound that had woken him: a shrill whistle off to his left. A moment later, it was answered by two longer ones, away to the right.

The sound of a hunt.

He stood carefully. He'd spent the night on a mazeway, one of the thousands of ledges lashed and pinned to the vanes hanging below the floating disc of the City. The labyrinth of open-sided mazeways and enclosed homespaces formed the twilight world of the Undertow, Taro's home. Below him, the early morning light broke the planet's barren surface into a mosaic of orange rock and black shadow. Taro looked away, blinking to clear the bright after-images of a quick and easy end to his troubles. *Gotta stay sharp.* The hunters were probably after a meatbaby, but since his world had gone to shit three days ago, he was fair game too.

He picked up the pack he'd been using as a pillow, stuffed his blanket in the top and, keeping his back pressed against the vane that supported the mazeway, began to edge sideways. After three steps, he froze. A shadow flitted across the T-junction ahead, where this mazeway ended at another, wider one.

Another whistle, closer, but coming from hubwards, the direction the hunter had gone. Looked like they hadn't spotted him. So he just needed to stop his legs shaking, get his breathing back under control and move off in the other direction – but cautious-like, as this was disputed territory. He'd been so tired last night that he'd just picked a quiet dead-end to stretch out on. He hadn't

even tethered himself, even though the gap between the mazeways ran to three metres here, and wasn't properly netted. That kind of carelessness would get him killed now he didn't have an Angel to protect him. *No, don't think about that, don't think about Malia.*

The next whistle came from further off.

At the junction he had a choice: rimwards or hubwards, the direction he thought the hunt was headed. He peered that way: the mazeway went off long and straight, with plenty of support ropes and a fully netted gap. The nets at the far end were swinging back and forth. Someone – probably the hunt's prey – had gone that way recently: a meatbaby's twisted limbs allowed them to take to the nets where most downsiders wouldn't risk it.

'Hoi, Angel-boy!'

The voice came from rimwards, behind him. Taro's first instinct was to run – but then he'd be heading into the hunt. And the speaker should've seen that Taro wore City colours in his hair, so he would think twice before attacking. Taro flicked a finger to release the catch on one of his wrist-sheaves and turned slowly, feeling the hilt of his fleck slide into his hand.

A lag a couple of years older than him was standing a few paces up the rimwards mazeway. He held a vane-cutter – not a good range weapon, but perfect for butcher-work – and wore strands of orange and green plaited into his lank pale hair. Limnel's colours. Resh, that was his name, Taro recalled, one of Limnel's seconds, with a rep for mindless thuggery and unquestioning obedience to his gang-boss.

Resh nodded at the blade in Taro's hand. 'Don't be stupid,' he lisped through the gap between his two missing front teeth. 'You ain't the dish o' the day. But yer in me way.'

Taro stepped back to leave the path clear. 'Mazeway's all yours.'

Resh sauntered up to him. 'Yeah. Some of us gotta work fer our food, y'know? Oh, wait, so do you now, doncha? Shame it's an invite-only hunt.'

Taro said nothing. Until three days ago he'd been one of the lucky few: Angel lineage, protected and revered. But since his line-mother had joined his birth-mother in the Heart of the City – or whatever paradise or hell really lay beyond death – he was on his own, as Resh couldn't resist reminding him.

He held his breath as the other youth passed him. In a world where water was currency, washing was a luxury, but Resh smelled bad even by Undertow standards, the rancid stink of sweat mixing with the sour reek of burnt mash on his breath.

A sequence of three short whistles came from hubwards. Resh glanced back at Taro and said with a sneer, 'Boss's offer's still open, y'know. Fer now.' Then he headed off purposefully. If the rumours were true, Resh would be in no hurry to finish off the hunt's prey. Meatbabies might have twisted limbs and simple minds, but they were more or less human. Resh would have other pleasures on his mind first.

Once he'd rounded a couple of corners and could no longer hear the hunt's whistles, Taro stopped. He was still shaking, and his throat was parched.

After checking no one was around, he sat down and opened the leather hammock that, now he had no homespace to sling it, doubled as his pack. His remaining possessions made a pitiful tally: the clothes he stood up in plus his flecks, the knives fashioned from slivers of vane material and worn at each wrist; and in the pack: a harness of twisted cord with a plaited rope tether; one thin blanket; a spare shirt, as dirty as the one he wore; a bent metal spoon and a bone-handled eating knife; a plastic bowl and cup; a rusty hand-mirror; and, wrapped in rags to cushion it, the flute carved from his birth-mother's arm-bone, his only memento of the stranger who loved him, but who had died before he had the chance to love her, leaving him in the care of her sister. He found what he was after at the bottom. The waterskin was all but empty. He sucked the last few drops from it, tipping his head back against the vane.

So, Limnel would still let him join his vagabond troupe of muggers, liggers, thieves and tarts. The gang-boss had made the offer the evening after Malia took the fall, striding into the homespace Taro had shared with his line-mother without a by-your-leave. 'So, boy, word is yer all alone now. I could use someone like you. Take up the old hobby full-time, neh?'

Taro, still in shock at losing his protector, his last surviving relative, had murmured, 'No thanks, Limnel. Don't think so.'

The gang-boss had looked around the central common-room, lingering on the dark stain on the nets strung across the gap in the middle of the floor. 'You won't hold onto this place long by yerself, y'know. Think about it.' Then he'd left.

The next morning, soon after dawn, a medium-sized troupe – five adults and three children – came round. They were armed with flecks and one ancient-looking boltgun, but they didn't want trouble. They wanted somewhere to live, and there was no reason why they shouldn't have this place. From the smell of them they were shit-gardeners and a large, isolated homespace that had once belonged to an Angel was perfect for their necessary but anti-social trade. They eased Taro out almost apologetically, waiting while he bundled his things into his hammock. He didn't take anything of Malia's. Her room had been out of bounds when she was alive and he couldn't face going in there now she was dead.

He had asked everyone in his small group of friends for a place to stay, but no one had space in their troupe for an extra mouth. He thought he might at least be able to beg safe crash-space for a day or two, but had no luck, though one ex-girlfriend had given him a refill of water. He couldn't be sure how much his cold reception was due to his association with a now-fallen Angel and how much resulted from Limnel putting the word out that he wanted Taro for himself. At the time he'd seen this rejection by those he'd considered friends as justice; he didn't deserve a break, because his line-mother's fall had been his fault.

For the last two days he'd been living in the mazeways, keeping

out of everyone's way, sleeping only when he was too tired to move. The unexpected meeting with Resh had fractured the numb self-pity he'd been wallowing in since Malia's death. Throwing his lot in with Limnel was the only sane option. The gang-boss would be a harsh master, but he would have a safe place to sleep and the protection of belonging to one of the biggest gangs in this quarter of the Undertow.

But first he needed money to buy himself in. And for that he had to go topside.

Taro stuffed the waterskin back and slung his pack over his back, then carried on walking rimwards, accompanied by the ever-present sigh of the wind below the vanes. He checked the daubed tags marking the gang territories and managed to get back into safer mazeways without having to stop and check water-trap colours – which was a relief, as he didn't much fancy hanging over the edge of a mazeway to check out the troupe colours fluttering from the ropes of the nearby 'traps.

He managed to get within a few mazeways of the edge without meeting anyone else; anyone around this early had probably decided to lie low in the wake of the hunt. He passed a few strangers near the edge, downsiders whose daily business was with the rollers and coves in the City above. No one challenged him, and some gave way to him. They weren't to know that he no longer had the right to wear City colours. He should un-plait the red-and-black from his hair, but he wasn't ready to cut that final tie to his line-mother, not with her death still on his conscience, her fall yet unavenged.

The vanes were shorter this close to the edge; Taro felt he could almost reach up and touch the underside of the City. Ahead, the sparkling orange of the forcedome enclosing the City marked the edge of the world.

A close-woven net about six metres wide hung down from the rim, its bottom edge bolted firmly to the outside edge of the wide mazeway where Taro stood. These were the best-maintained nets

in the Undertow, as they provided the only route topside. Every respectable troupe – those, that is, that didn't call themselves gangs – considered it their duty to check for damage and repair faults. Everyone's lives depended on it.

Though Taro had done it hundreds of times, that first step into the rim net always sent a surge of fear through him. Dry mouth and churning guts warned him unnecessarily how close he was to taking the fall. He wiped his palms on his breeches and stepped forward, using his long toes to grip the edge of the mazeway. The net was made partly from plaited rags and lengths of cord, though the support ropes that ran up from mazeway to rim were the real thing, bought or stolen from topside. The outermost mazeway was inside the rim of the City, so the net didn't hang vertical. You had to fall off the mazeway into it.

He leaned forward. As gravity pulled him off-balance his eyes fluttered closed and his hands spasmed as they reached for the ropes. The impact was gentle, but it still winded him.

He paused to catch his breath, then started climbing, slow and careful, always making sure he had at least two limbs anchored before moving on. Ignoring the hypnotic glow of the forcewall in front of him and the bleak, rock-scattered ground far below him, he looked only at his hands, thought only of the next move.

To get up the outside rim of the City, he needed to be on the other side of the net, to go from being inside facing out to outside facing in. He worked his way to the edge, then hooked his right hand round the reinforced edge of the net. *Right leg now, get a good solid hold.* A small pause – time for a silent prayer to the City, for all the good that might do – then he swung out and round.

He wasn't used to climbing with anything on his back, and halfway through the slow-motion pivot his pack slipped, pulling him off-balance. He felt his grip begin to loosen. The rope started to slide away under the sole of his right foot. He clawed for purchase, his head full of panic, his body too sluggish—

—until he caught the rope with his toes and curled them round

it, ignoring the shooting pains of a sudden cramp. The nets above him creaked, but his grip held. His flailing left hand came round, found rope and grasped it. The creaking subsided.

He hung still until the nets had stopped moving, deafened by his heartbeat, staring blindly back into the darkness of the Undertow.

When he'd calmed down he dragged his pack back up onto his shoulder and started climbing up the sloping rim until his nose was pressed against the grey material of the City. He inhaled its sharp yet comforting smell. Down in the Undertow the scent of the City was masked by the smells of people – sweat and piss, burning tallow and composting shit – but here it filled his head, a reek like mother's milk gone sour.

The rest of the climb was easier: the nets lay against the City itself, hanging from bolts that made safe, easy holds for hands and feet. The only problem was the gravity. With every step his limbs felt heavier, and each move took more effort than the last. Why the people who lived on top of the City's disc wanted gravity that made them twice as heavy as those who lived below, in Vellern's natural gravity, was just one more topside mystery.

When he finally pulled himself up onto the flat ledge at the top he was tempted to lie there for a few moments and catch his breath … but he knew better than to block the way. He rolled away and pulled himself onto all fours, getting used to being heavy, then stood, blinking until his eyes adjusted to the light. He kept his gaze down; looking up at the forcedome arching overhead could set off a vertigo attack worse than looking at the ground when you were downside. Behind him there was no sign of the route he'd used, which was as it should be. Topsiders did not go into the Undertow …

Only, one had, and that was how Taro came to be without home or lineage, with nothing in the world but the bundle on his back.

He started to walk sinwards around the ledge. On his left, a

couple of metres away, the fence that ringed the City hummed faintly, a warning to the ignorant. The pylons supporting the fence were thick, holding up the wire and fire, and supporting the circle-car tracks running overhead. The passage of an unseen carriage was announced by a faint swish and the pop of displaced air. Mostly the fence enclosed blank walls, some of the cleanest in the City – no one had any reason, or the opportunity, to tag or deface them. Every few metres Taro passed an alley mouth, giving a view through the links of the fence into the sidestreets. He stopped at the third alley and turned to face the fence. He drew in a deep breath, and reached out to it.

His fingers brushed cold, dead metal and he let his breath out, a subconscious sigh of relief. Long before he'd been born, this part of the fence had been cut to allow downsiders like him into the City proper. Unlike the semi-organic material of the vanes, this would never grow back. He moved the flap away from him and climbed carefully through the gap. Once on the other side he pushed the fence back into place, lining up the edges so the exit was hidden again.

In the sidestreets the light levels dropped to a more comfortable level. The walls were covered with cryptic graffiti and as he made his way down the narrow alleys, he stopped to check over his shoulder every now and again. The wedges between the main Streets were home to some smoky coves, citizens whose business made them as dangerous as any gang-lag in the Undertow.

This route topside brought him out in the wedge between Soft Street and Amnesia Street. Soft Street was where the rollers came for pleasures of the flesh, but every pitch was owned. Amnesia Street was largely free territory but he didn't fancy being a punter's drugged fantasy. Best idea would be to head for Chance, the next Street sunwise from Soft, though it was a long walk.

He turned a corner and spotted a group of topsiders unloading crates from a cart into the back door of a dingy building. Intent on their business, they hadn't seen him.

He doubled back and picked another route, taking him past one of the automated waste-reprocessing plants that lurked in the centre of the wedges, away from tourist eyes. The deep rumble of machinery was less of a give-away than the rotten-sweet smell drifting from inside. He looked down at a rustling by his feet; a rat sped by along the base of the building, intent on its own business.

Thanks to the distraction, he didn't see anyone step out of the door opposite the waste plant until it was too late. As soon as he registered movement he froze, and focused on the lone figure looking straight at him. He knew he should turn round and get out of there, but he couldn't run for long in this gravity. Besides, they might not be alone.

Then he recognised the person blocking the alley.

The man had a fleshy, almost jovial face, and no hair on his head other than girl-thin eyebrows. He wore a narrow-brimmed black hat and an improbably smart but unfashionably cut dark grey suit. He was as short as a topsider, and a little porky, but this was no ordinary cove. There was only one person in the world who looked like that, and though Taro had never met him, he had heard the description enough times. He was looking at the most powerful man in the City: the Minister, the head of the Kheshi League of Concord.

Taro stepped forward, crossed his wrists over his chest and bent his head, the downsider gesture of submission and respect.

The man approached. ' Taro sanMalia?'

'Me life is yours, sirrah,' he croaked. The Minister had called him Taro sanMalia, though he no longer had a right to that name; Malia had been his aunt, not his birth-mother, and though she had adopted him, with her death his lineage name should revert back to his dead mother's. Was it possible that the master of the Angels didn't know that one of his agents was dead?

'Your life? Indeed it is,' the Minister replied. 'But all I require is your service. I wish you to witness a removal.'

'Witness a removal? Aye, sirrah – to make sure it's legal?' By the rules of the Concord there needed to be ten witnesses, but they weren't usually downsiders. Removals were topside business, and the witnesses were most often tourists; that was what a lot of the rollers came here for. Taro was not sure why the Minister wanted him.

'There will be plenty of people watching the mark. I want you to watch the Angel. Or rather, to report on her performance and when she returns to the Undertow, to follow up on her movements down there. Do you think you can manage that?'

Taro's head was reeling. He couldn't believe he was here, having this conversation. After three days of hell, he was standing in a topside alley being given his first mission by the Minister, who knew nothing of Malia's fate.

He said the only thing he could. 'Aye, sirrah. I'll do me best to serve you an' me City.'

'Good. The Angel in question is Nual. I expect you'll need to do some research.'

Though any personal fame among the Angels was discouraged by the Minister, who preferred them to be held in awe and viewed from afar, Taro knew the names of all thirty-three Angels currently in the service of the City. He searched his memory for some fact about the Angel Nual, to show the Minister he knew his stuff.

'She lives under the Merchant Quarter, don't she?' he asked after a short pause.

The Minister nodded, waiting for Taro to continue.

'An' … I don't think she's a pureblood downsider.'

The Minister gave the ghost of a smile. 'You could say that. Nual is scheduled to remove Salik Vidoran, Second Undersecretary for Offworld Trade, in Confederacy Square later this morning. I expect she will take the shot from a vantage point beyond the City's rim, and she won't hang around afterwards, so you are unlikely to see her, but you will be able to watch the crowd and

check the reaction of the mark to the threat. I would also like you to note any unusual occurrences in the aftermath.'

Should he tell the Minister about the unusual occurrence in his own life, the death of his line-mother? Surely he must know— No, let the Minister bring it up. Stick to the task at hand. 'Nual's one of the best, ain't she?' he asked.

'She never misses,' the Minister agreed. 'She is also one of the most reclusive. I want to know anything you find out about her current activities downside. Quietly, and without attracting undue attention. I will expect full details after the removal, and updates every morning. You can make your reports from any public com booth in the Leisure Quarter. Just go in and ask to be shown *the one who has everything*. You'll need this to get into the State Quarter.' The Minister held out a small strip of pale grey plastic. Taro stepped forward, nervous of getting so close to this legendary figure, and took the credit bracelet. The Minister continued, 'The ID is valid for 24 hours, and there is enough credit for the circle-car fare there and back, plus a little extra. There will be more once you start delivering useful information. Any questions?'

'No, sirrah.' He should tell him now, tell him what had happened to Malia.

'Then go. I am a very busy man.' The Minister nodded in dismissal and stepped back to let Taro pass.

Taro had betrayed his line-mother. He had betrayed his City. He must confess.

But he found himself already walking away from the Minister into an uncertain future.