



# ANGEL

A dark Arabian flash-fiction

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Abdou rose up from his camel saddle and scratched. "My god that feels good," he said as he resituated himself. A fly landed among the coarse hairs that made a camel's ear look like a tan cactus. He wasn't sure if the ensuing twitch or the smell of the camel caused the fly to seek sweeter delights elsewhere. Sunset's ocher palette painted the Silk Road in muted browns and reds. Stones along the way cast impossibly long shadows, which pointed at him like a thousand daggers. He shivered. Adjusting his robes, Abdou tap-tapped his whip on the camel's flank and urged his mount westward.

How quickly night falls in the desert, he thought to himself. Abdou sought a narrow pass that would lead him into the Valley of Angels. "Allah, why have you forsaken me?" he asked aloud. "I beseech you, help me find this place of rest, or the Hashashin will cut my throat and feed me to the jackals before moonrise."

Moments later, a notch opened in the high rock wall to his right. "Allahu Akbar!" Abdou said as he turned the camel and squeezed through.

"Curse me for a fool," he complained later that evening. He had no slaves to set up the tent, light the braziers and feed the camel. But he did have something infinitely more valuable. An hour after entering the valley, hidden in the belly of the Alborz Mountains, Abdou removed his stiff leather shoes and ducked inside his shelter. The carpets felt good to his tired feet and he collapsed onto a pile of pillows. He removed his kufiyah and sighed with contentment as hot sweet tea soothed his dry throat.

"Let's have a look at you," he said, loosening the thong that bound the opening of a leather sack. Abdou put his hand inside, then paused and looked around the tent as if expecting the infamous robbers of Alamut to leap out at any moment. He shook his head and pulled out something covered by a sheet of dark silk. When he removed the cloth, shards of rainbow-colored light danced across the tent walls: *The Angel of Persia* – the emperor's crown. Rubies and sapphires set the golden cap agleam and the angel on top stared back at him through yellow diamond eyes.

Dare he put it on?

Hands trembling, Abdou placed it on his head. He held his breath. It felt much lighter than he expected. With eyes shut, he mentally searched his belongings; did he have a mirror? A sound like the wind rose in his ears. A shamal perhaps? Abdou shrugged. He would remain safe inside and the blowing sand would wipe clean his tracks.

He opened his eyes, preparing to put the Angel back in its bag, and fell back upon the cushions. Before him stood a black monster – a demon – wings raised in terrible parody of his beautiful prize.

"Didn't you know," the demon said, "before Allah cast us from Dar al-Baqa, we were angels, too."