

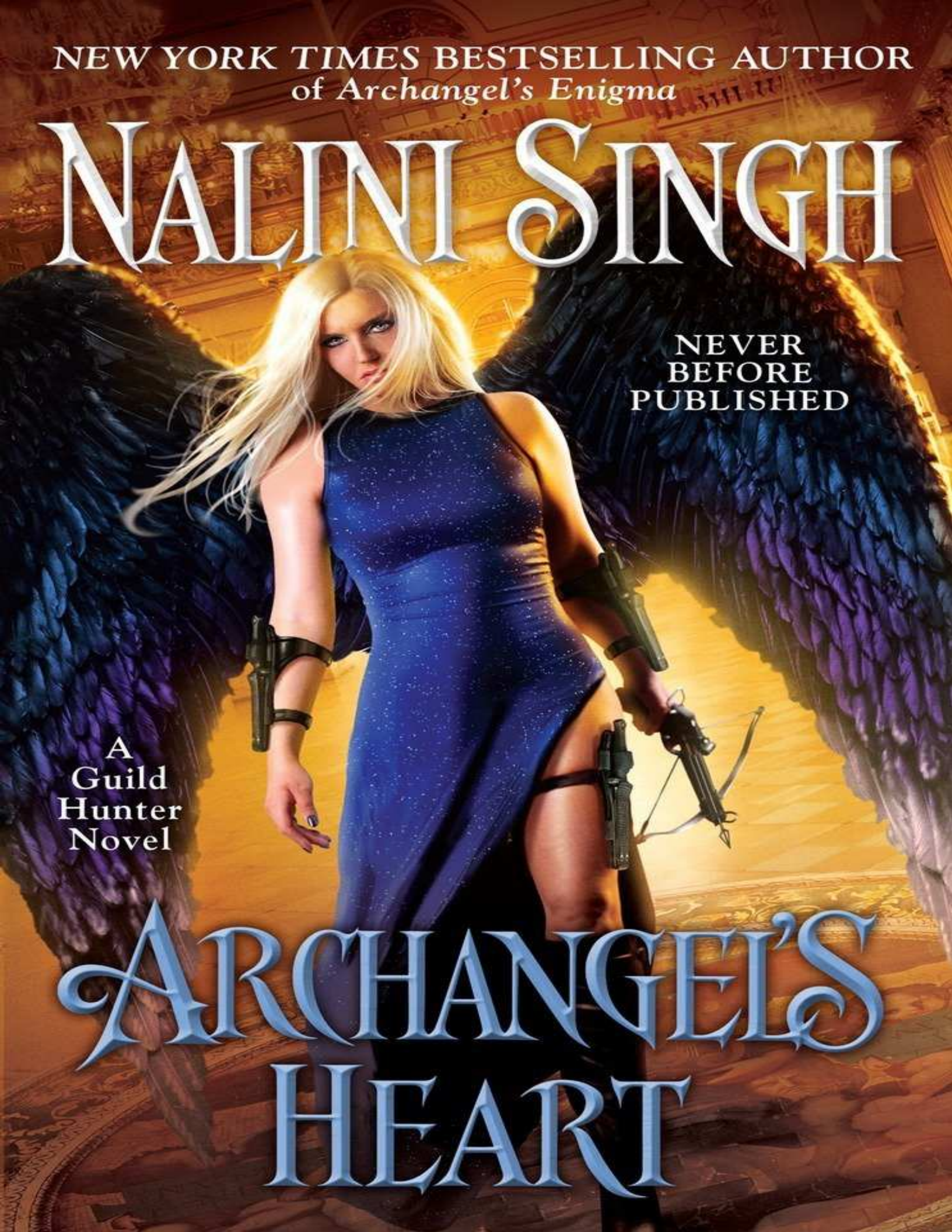
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Hide

She was tired.

Not old in years. Just tired. While her vocation called to her as powerfully as it had always done, the reality was a relentless workload that offered little time for the life of study and reflection that she craved.

But this was the life the Lord wished for her and so this was the life she would live.

The worn black fabric of her habit brushed the wooden floor as she walked down the aisle, checking the pews for items left behind by the faithful. Father Pierre was getting on in years so, though he always offered to close up the church, Constance was the one who did it every night. At least she didn't have to deal with the homeless. Her closest friend in the order, Maria, who was in a house of worship in a more derelict part of town, often had to nudge out those unfortunates.

It made her question her faith on a daily basis.

"Should we not provide sanctuary, Sister Constance?" she'd ask when they gathered at the order's simple house for their late dinner meal. "And yet I must push them out into the dark and the cold because, otherwise, they defile the church. Why, the other day, I found a vampire feeding from a drug-addled young man right out in the open."

Constance had no answers for Maria, but she'd volunteered to take charge of that church next year, to help balance the load. For they must all do their duty.

Ah, it looked like someone had left behind a coat.

They would surely return for it, she thought as she moved down the pew.

Then the coat moved. Heart thumping, she stopped . . . and realized that while the pale blue fabric *was* of a coat, that coat was on a person. A small person. A child.

Close enough now to see the peacefully sleeping child's golden-skinned face and soft hair so pale it was almost white, she looked down and saw the child wore a dress of soft pink broderie anglaise. The stockings on her little legs were white with blue butterflies along the sides, her shoes a shiny black.

This was a child who was loved, who'd been dressed with care.

A little bag sat next to her, printed with the image of a storybook princess.

Constance whispered a prayer and looked around in case she had somehow missed one of the faithful, but no, she was alone in the church but for this beautiful child, who couldn't have been more than five years of age. Not knowing quite what to do but aware she couldn't let the child sleep on the hard wood of the pew, she bent to lift her into her arms.

The child awoke. "*Maman?*"

It was a hopeful word but the little girl's lower lip trembled.

Constance replied in the same tongue. It was not her own, but she'd lived for many years in this land of corner bakeries and stylishly dressed people and hidden avenues cloaked in darkness. "Your mother is not here yet." She held out a hand. "Come, we will go have hot chocolate and cookies while we wait for her."

"I have toys," the child said, picking up the princess bag before slipping her tiny hand into Constance's with the sweet trust of a being who had never been hurt, who knew only love. As she walked the child to the back room, where she and Father Pierre often did the paperwork of an afternoon, she caught sight of a stark white envelope in the child's coat pocket.

She didn't reach for it until her small guest had taken off her coat and was happily eating a cookie, Constance having made her a hot chocolate in a chipped but pretty red cup she thought a child would like.

The envelope proved to be the size of a photograph. That was what lay within it, along with a letter written in a lovely hand:

To the sister and the father who care for this church—you don't know me, but you were so kind to me when I first arrived in this distant land that was not my home but that became my sanctuary.

I know your souls are full of light.

Please watch over my Marguerite and keep this photograph of us together for her. I will return for her within the week. She is the very beat of my heart. If I don't return . . . then I am dead and Marguerite is an orphan. Call her that if the worst happens, but please, please do not ever say that she was abandoned. Do not ever let her believe anything but that she was my greatest treasure.

The only reason I won't return for her is if there is no life left in my body. Even then, you must never allow her to become suspicious and search for the truth—that way lies only horror and death. I would have my baby live her life free of the shadow of fear.

Tell her I love her.

The child looked at Constance with eyes of silvery gray, a smudge of chocolate on the edge of her lips. "Will *Maman* be here soon?"

Constance swallowed, touched trembling fingers to that hair so delicately pretty. "Your mother loves you very much."

And the child smiled, as if that was a simple fact of life.

1

Two years had passed.

Two years since Alexander woke.

Two years since the last confirmed sighting of Zhou Lijuan.

Two years since Illium threatened to burn up in a catastrophic explosion of power.

Two years while the Cascade seemed to hit Pause.

Elena was fucking over waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Come on already,” she muttered up at the sky, Manhattan a toy borough hundreds of feet below the edge of the railing-free Tower balcony on which she stood.

“Speaking to your ancestors, Elena-mine?” The voice came from behind her, familiar and imbued with a power so violently deep that the mere sound of it engendered fear in the hearts of mortals and immortals alike.

It made Elena’s own heart ache, the love she felt for her archangel a painful, terrifying thing in these times of uncertainty. If she lost him . . . No, she couldn’t think that way. Even if that damn other shoe was still smirking at her, just waiting to thunk down on top of her head when she least expected it.

“Whoever or whatever it is that controls the Cascade, that’s who I’m talking to.” She leaned back into Raphael. The position trapped her wings in between, but with Raphael, she could be vulnerable, she could be weaponless, and still be safe. Not that she wasn’t armed to the teeth, but that was habit and none of it would ever be turned against Raphael except when they sparred—or when he pushed her buttons a little too hard.

Her archangel hadn’t quite got the hang of the fact he wasn’t lord and master over his consort. He tried but a thousand-five-hundred-years-plus of power had a way of messing with his attempts at seeing his once-mortal lover as an equal when it came to their personal relationship.

Elena cut him some slack every so often. “Some” being the operative word.

Today, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders from behind, his jaw brushing her hair as the two of them looked out over their city from their vantage point on the cloud-piercing form of Archangel Tower. New York. Brash and messy and noisy and full of color and energy and life. *So much* life. Elena could hear it on the busy streets far, far below, sense it with every beat of her heart, taste it in the myriad scents that clashed and fought and yet somehow made their peace.

Her blood hummed in awareness.

“I have news,” Raphael murmured. “It may inject a little excitement into your currently mundane life.”

Elena snorted. “I don’t need any more excitement. I just need the damn Cascade off Pause so we can get it done.” Her hand twitched to go for the lightweight crossbow strapped to her thigh. Unfortunately, she didn’t have anyone or anything to shoot at right now.

Raphael’s chuckle vibrated against her. “You sound a little tense, Consort.”

Elena would’ve elbowed him if her wings hadn’t been in the way. “Why are you in such a good mood?” The past two years had been as tautly tense for him as they’d been for her. All the archangels had stayed within the borders of their own territories—but for a few secret trips here and there—in preparation for further Cascade madness.

Only the unpredictable worldwide phenomenon that caused dangerous power fluctuations in the archangels as well as some angels, along with tumult across the earth in the form of storms, quakes, and floods, seemed to have decided it was finished. But of course, they all knew it wasn’t. Not by a long shot. Even Elena could feel the thunderous portent in the air, just hanging there, waiting to unleash itself.

“My good mood is because something has at last broken the stalemate of the past two years.”

“I’m not going to like this, am I?” Elena said darkly.

“Such a suspicious mind.”

“Yes. It keeps me alive.” She watched an angel with wings of an astonishing, haunting blue edged with silver rise up over a skyscraper in the distance, Illium’s physical strength back to what it should be for his age and development. There had been no other vicious and possibly deadly surges that threatened to tear his body apart from the inside out.

Even better, he was laughing again, was once more the playful angel who’d become her first friend in this immortal world. “Bluebell’s about to do a dive,” she predicted from the way Illium was soaring up into the crystalline sky.

And then he was turning and falling, a sleek bullet whose laughter she could almost hear.

“I bet you he’s planning to go low enough to freak out the pedestrians.” New Yorkers were used to angels in their city, turned up their noses at the tourists who gawped up at the sky, but angelic acrobatics could still make them jump. Especially acrobatics done by an angel as fast and as quick to maneuver as Illium.

“That is no bet,” Raphael answered. “He’s been playing such tricks as long as I’ve known him.”

And Raphael, Elena thought, had known Illium since the other angel was a child.

She reached up to close her hands over the arms he’d wrapped around her. Illium meant a great deal to her archangel; that was a truth most people didn’t comprehend. All of Raphael’s Seven meant far more to him than simply the positions they filled in his Tower or in his Refuge stronghold.

They weren’t just his most trusted warriors—the Seven were family.

Rubbing his jaw against her temple in a silent response to her touch, he said, “We are about to leave New York.”

Elena blinked; she couldn’t have been more surprised if he’d told her he wanted her to strip naked then and there and start chanting to invisible sky gods. “What happened to batten down the hatches and watch for an attack? All our enemies are still out there.”

“The Cadre has been called to meet.”

Rubbing at her face, Elena turned and took a step back so she could face Raphael, her wings a familiar weight at her back and the wind tugging lightly at her feathers as if in invitation for flight. The almost cruel masculine beauty of his face hit her hard, as it sometimes did when she

looked at him after glancing away. All clean lines and skin brushed with finest gold, he had eyes so shatteringly blue they had no equal on this earth, his hair a black beyond midnight and his lips shaped with a sensuality that hinted at passion and power both, wings of white gold arching over his shoulders.

Already, he'd been magnificent, but the Legion mark on his right temple—the violent, vivid blue and hidden white fire of it shaped like the primal manifestation of a dragon—added a wildness to his beauty that made him beyond beautiful, beyond magnificent. He was Raphael, Archangel of New York, and the man she loved so much that sometimes she couldn't breathe from the force of it.

And he loved her.

That truth she could never doubt, no matter if, at times, he crossed lines in their relationship that made her threaten to pull out a blade. Even if the Cascade messed with everything else, this one thing no one and nothing could ever mess up.

Lifting his hand, he cupped her cheek, brushed the pad of his thumb over her cheekbone. "Your eyes are even more luminous today."

Elena scowled. "I don't want luminous eyes," she said. "I want normal gray eyes that let me blend in, not silver eyes that make it obvious I'm an immortal."

Raphael's lips curved. "A pity about the wings then."

"Ha ha." Putting her hands on her hips, she turned her head to press a kiss to his palm before facing him once more. "Which one of the archangels called for the meet?" It would tell her which ones were likely to go—and which ones would be salivating at the opportunity to attack other territories while the archangels to whom those territories belonged were occupied elsewhere.

"None."

The single word fell like a gunshot between them.

Shaking her head, Elena reached up to tuck back a strand of hair that had whipped across her face. She'd left the near-white stuff unbound today since she wasn't on a hunt and had been planning to hang out close to the Tower and the Legion skyscraper.

"I know I've only been an immortal a zillionth of a second according to angelic time," she said dryly, "but I'm pretty sure there's no one more powerful than an archangel. Unless it's one of those Ancestor creatures Naasir told me about." She'd taken those Sleeping beings to be myth, but maybe not.

"There is no one more powerful than the Cadre," Raphael confirmed. "However, in one situation and one situation *only*, another group can call the Cadre to a meeting. Attendance is mandatory—anyone who does not attend can have their territory divided with the might of all angelkind standing behind those who are given the resulting pieces."

Elena whistled. "Sounds like an invitation to war." Especially since angelkind wasn't exactly united right now.

"Yes—which is why no one refuses an invitation. It's not worth the aggravation when all possible threats will be at the meeting with you." Raphael nodded to behind her. "Aodhan is dodging crossbow bolts."

Swiveling on her heel, Elena spotted the angel who seemed created of pieces of light, a thousand rays of sunshine sparking off the filaments of his wings, the glittering strands of his hair; he was darting this way and that while an entire squadron shot at him. The members of the

squadron were wearing wraparound sunglasses in an effort to track the piercing blaze of him in the sky.

Aodhan, meanwhile, dropped and dodged with uncanny skill.

“And the prize for most bored goes to . . .”

Raphael moved forward to stand beside her, his wing sliding over her own. “He’s just staying in shape for the battle to come.”

Unfortunately, that was true. The battle *would* come and that damn shoe *would* drop. “This group that has the power to force the Cadre to meet, what’s it called?”

“The members call themselves the Luminata. They are a spiritual sect—not religious in the human sense.” He paused, as if thinking of the right words to describe them. “The closest mortal analog is likely the Buddhist search for enlightenment. The Luminata seek to understand themselves individually and angelkind as a whole; their self-imposed task is to discover who and what we are in the greater scheme of the universe, and to accept whatever answer may come. They call it a search for luminescence.”

Spreading his wings, he folded them back in a susurrant of sound she’d never associate with anyone but her archangel. “Many mortals believe in gods, but when death is but a faint glimmer on a distant horizon that may never be breached, such beliefs fade into confusion. The Luminata attempt to find luminescence in the now, rather than hoping for it on the other side of that distant horizon.”

“I met a holy man once during a hunt in India,” Elena found herself saying. “He lived as a hermit, had nothing to his name but the clothes on his back, but his eyes . . . such peace, Raphael. I think he’s the most peaceful being I’ve ever met. Even Keir doesn’t have such a well of peace inside him.” And the revered angelic healer had lived thousands of years.

“From what I know, this is what the Luminata search for.” Raphael continued to watch Aodhan’s movements in the sky ahead of them. “A purity of soul that leaves them with no earthly questions or concerns.”

“Have they had any success in their quest?”

“The only Luminata I’ve ever met are those who have been asked to leave the sect, and the once-novices—those who walked away from the life after a short attempt. So I have no basis to judge the luminescence of those who follow the path.”

Elena raised an eyebrow, but kept silent, interested in this sect that could call a Cadre of archangels to order.

“At some point in our past,” Raphael told her, “a point so far back that no one remembers—”

“Did you ask the Legion? Their memories of the past are fading but they’re not totally gone.”

“I did.” Raphael’s eyes went to a nearby high-rise, one that had a shape unlike any other in the city, and that was covered in the fresh green of living things, a building that was designed to *be* a living thing. For the Legion were of the earth and it was in earth, in growth, that they thrived. “But those memories, if they existed, are gone. The Legion know the Luminata only from more recent times.”

“*Recent*” *being a relative term*, Elena thought. “So a long time ago in a land far away, the Luminata . . .” she prompted.

Raphael’s laughter was a caress of sunkissed waves over her senses, the power of him no threat but a promise. “I wonder what the sect will make of you, Elena.” Love surrounded her, so deep that she felt it in her bones. “As you say, long ago the Luminata were entrusted with a

certain task. This task was given to them because it was—and is—believed that they are the only group that can be trusted to be impartial with it.”

He raised one hand to stroke it over the arch of her wing, the touch an intimate one between lovers, as, not far in the distance, Aodhan took a crossbow bolt in the thigh. Pulling it out, he threw it back and kept dodging. *Yeah*, Elena thought, *he might be training to stay in shape, but he was also bored. So was Illium, if the screams floating up from the city streets were any indication.*

He'd clearly kept up the dive bombing.

“I think,” Raphael said, “I must tell your Bluebell to stop scaring our citizens.”

Illium appeared in view a few seconds later, a grin on his almost too handsome face that Elena could see from here. Dipping his wings toward the Tower in acknowledgment of Raphael's order, he joined Aodhan's “dodge the bolts” game.

One bolt went crazily wild at nearly the same instant, heading straight for Elena.

Snatching it from the air with a single hand, Raphael passed it to her. “Whoever this is needs further training.”

Elena recognized the markings on the shaft, grinned. “Izzy.” The young angel was still a baby in angelic terms. “You have to admit, he's brilliant for his age.”

“Galen wouldn't have recommended him for a Tower apprenticeship otherwise,” Raphael said before continuing to speak about the Luminata. “By dint of their spiritual quest, the Luminata have no earthly ties and no loyalties beyond that to their quest for luminescence. They take no lovers, participate in no wars, and when they become Luminata, they sever all blood ties.”

“A perfect neutral body.”

“Yes. Such neutrality is a necessity because the task with which they're entrusted is to call a meeting of the Cadre should a certain span of time pass with no sighting of an archangel.”

Elena nodded slowly. “A safety measure of sorts.” It made sense given the staggering impact the archangels had on the world. “Though,” she said with a frown, “two years isn't that long in immortal terms.”

“The period of time that must pass before a meeting is called has never been specified,” Raphael said, his eyes on Aodhan even as he spoke to her. “As a result, at some point—and weighing up all available knowledge on the situation—the Luminata must make a judgment call.” Taking the crossbow bolt from her, he threw it with archangelic strength. Aodhan barely avoided it before the bolt fell victim to gravity, to be intercepted by the squadron tasked with making sure none fell to skewer the mortals below.

The squadron had been intelligent enough to set up nets to catch the spent projectiles.

“The purpose of the meeting,” Raphael said as Aodhan and Illium began to dodge bolts in tandem, “is to determine if the missing archangel is dead or has gone into Sleep. If so, the archangel's territory must be divided, archangelic borders redrawn.”

Elena now understood why Raphael had never met a practicing Luminata. After Uram's death, the Cadre had apparently met within months to divide up his territory. Even when Alexander went to Sleep and his son attempted to take over the territory by hiding his father's withdrawal from the world, she'd learned the Cadre had rectified the situation within a relatively short period of time.

Yet it had been two years since Zhou Lijuan, Archangel of China and Goddess of Death, disappeared from sight.

2

“We all know Her Creepiness isn’t dead.” Elena’s lip curled at the thought of the archangel who’d sought to rain death on New York, and whose reborn were shambling mockeries of life. “That would be too easy.”

“Regardless, something must be done.” Raphael’s face was all brutally clean lines, his expression that of a being who was one of the most powerful in the world. “Xi is keeping Lijuan’s territory in check, the vampires under control, but for all his strength, he is no archangel. China is beginning to fray at the edges.”

Elena had no need to ask him how he knew—Jason was the best spymaster in the Cadre and he called Raphael sire. “You’re worried about bloodlust?” Powerful vampires like Raphael’s second, Dmitri, had iron control over their urge to feed, but the newer, younger vamps? Control was a gossamer-thin thread held in place by fear of the archangels.

Elena’s mother and two older sisters were dead because a vampire had broken the leash and turned into a ravaging monster.

Belle would never again throw a baseball because of Slater Patalis. Ari would never again scold then kiss Elena when she ran so fast that she fell and bloodied her knee.

And Marguerite Deveraux would never again laugh with her husband.

A husband who had died the day Marguerite took her life and who was now a man Elena barely recognized. Jeffrey might be walking and breathing, might even have another beautiful, intelligent wife, but he was no longer the man Marguerite had known, no longer the father Elena had loved before it all went so horribly wrong. Elena’s two much younger half sisters knew a stern, unsmiling, and distant father when Elena had known a father who’d once blown soap bubbles with her for an hour just because it made her happy.

I see memories in your eyes, Elena.

Raphael’s voice was the crash of the sea, the crisp bite of the wind in her mind.

They’re part of me. She’d accepted that, no longer fought them when they surfaced. And in return, the nightmares came less and less. Some nights, she still heard the blood dripping to the floor, still felt terror clutch her in a clawed fist until she woke sweat-soaked with her heart a painful drum in her chest, but other nights, she dreamed of racing through the house to hide behind her mother after Belle found her in her room.

“I was a bratty little sister sometimes,” she told the man who was her eternity. “I just wanted so much to be like my sisters that I’d sneak into their rooms and try on their shoes, their clothes, even if they didn’t fit.”

Raphael touched the back of his hand to her cheek. “Such is the way of younger siblings everywhere, is it not?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Her lips kicked up, though sadness was an iron hammer on her soul. “Belle was so hot-tempered. She’d threaten me with all sorts of things . . . then she’d take my hand and lead me to her room and do my nails or brush my hair.” Her oldest sister had possessed a wildly generous heart under the temper.

“I didn’t bother Ariel as much,” Elena added. “She was calmer, quieter, but she had this mischievous sense of humor only people who really knew her ever saw.” Memories cascaded through her, of helping Ari pull pranks, of sitting close to her sister’s warmth while she read a story aloud, of the stunning turquoise of Ari’s eyes.

Smile deepening as the wind rippled through her hair, she took a breath, released it. “I wish I could talk to Jeffrey sometimes,” she admitted. “He has so many of the same memories, things Beth wasn’t old enough to remember.” Her younger sister had been only five when Slater Patalis murdered Belle and Ari, and mortally wounded Marguerite’s soul.

He’d tortured her, too, but it was being made helpless while her daughters were brutalized that had broken Elena’s mother. “It’d be nice just to sit and talk about our family.” Instead, all they had between them were broken shards of grief and guilt and loss.

The blue of Raphael’s eyes turned dangerous. “He doesn’t deserve to carry the title of father.”

“Ah but we don’t choose our parents, do we, Archangel?” If anyone understood the complex emotions that tied her to her father, it was Raphael. His own mother had gone insane, murdered thousands, then risen over a millennia later apparently sane—and full of love for the child she’d once left shattered and bleeding in a remote field distant from any civilization.

“No,” Raphael admitted. “And I have promised not to kill Jeffrey, so let’s talk about something else before I forget my vow.”

“Fair enough.” At times, thinking of her father was enough to turn Elena homicidal, too. “Getting back to Lijuan—whether she’s dead or not matters less than the fact she’s vanished from sight?”

A short nod. “Bloodlust has already begun to rise, though only in isolated patches. According to the report Jason sent in an hour ago, a small kiss of vampires massacred an entire village four days past.”

Elena’s spine went stiff. “Xi have the kiss under control?” The angel was Lijuan’s most trusted general and a power in his own right—though he was nowhere near as powerful on his own as he was when Lijuan was feeding him energy. “Shit. Is Xi displaying signs of being cut off from Lijuan?”

“Jason has been unable to confirm either way, but Xi did eliminate the kiss very quickly.” Raphael’s tone cooled. “He can’t keep it up, however. No one who is not Cadre can. And these incidents are only the start—let it go and the vampires will swarm a blood red infestation across China.” His voice was so cold that she found herself running her hand firmly down the edge of his wing in a silent reminder that he wasn’t only an archangel, distant and lethal; he was her lover, the man who owned her heart and whose own belonged to her.

Raphael’s expression didn’t change, his voice still chilly, but he moved his wing so she could caress more of it. “If Lijuan rises again, new decisions will be made, but for the time being, we must work on the assumption that she overextended her new abilities to the point that she caused herself significant damage.” He nodded in greeting at a passing squadron. “I do not believe her dead any more than you do, but I do think she may have chosen to Sleep.”

And when an angel chose to Sleep, it could be centuries or millennia before they awoke. Caliane had Slept for more than a thousand years, and that was barely a drop in the ocean. “I guess I better pack for the Refuge then.” Raphael’s earlier words had made it clear he wouldn’t be asking her to remain behind in New York, as he had more than once before.

At first, she’d fought the restraint, frustratingly conscious that he wanted her safe within the borders of his territory rather than in danger by his side. Later, she’d come to understand that, at certain times, Raphael needed his consort to be visible in the heart of his territory while he was gone. It settled people, because surely no archangel would leave his consort behind were the storm clouds of war gathering on the horizon?

“It’ll be nice to see Jessamy and Galen again,” she said. “Naasir and Andi, too.” Venom was also still at the Refuge, but Elena didn’t know the snake-eyed vampire as well as she did the others.

Raphael’s response was unexpected. “I’m afraid we will have to wait to see our people at the Refuge. This meeting will be held on neutral ground, with no access to any strongholds or armies. Each archangel can bring their consort should they have one, plus one other.”

Elena felt like she was racing to catch up. “I didn’t know there *was* any other neutral ground.” The world was sharply delineated into areas of archangelic control. The Refuge alone stood separate.

“There are a rare few small areas,” Raphael told her. “Mere acres in each case. In this particular circumstance, it is the land that was given over to the Luminata so long ago that no one knows the names of those on the Cadre that made the decree.”

“Where?”

“Lumia, the Luminata stronghold, stands in the land your grandmother called home.”

“Morocco?” Delight kicked her bloodstream. “I love Morocco!” Though she had no ties there, she’d passed through the country during her days as a single hunter, felt its heartbeat sync with her own, as if her blood recognized the hot, desert land filled with a stark, golden beauty.

“From the covert flyover I did when I was a youth,” Raphael told her with a smile, “Lumia is located on a hilly rise, an elegant stronghold that has stood for eons. There are no roads to break up the wilderness that surrounds it—to visit Lumia, you must have wings or you must brave a harsh trek made no less difficult by the high walls on the very edges of their land.”

Elena was about to ask him to tell her more when her brain finally clicked. “Hold on,” she said with a scowl, placing her hands on her hips again. “Yeah, people can’t bring armies but Charisemnon’s will be closer than anyone else’s.” The disease-causing and cowardly bastard responsible for the horror of the Falling, an event that had seen New York’s angels plummet to the earth in an agony of fear and suffering and death, was the Archangel of Northern Africa.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Raphael’s own anger was frost in the air. “But Titus will no doubt mass his army on Charisemnon’s border when he leaves for the meeting, forcing Charisemnon to do the same or leave his border open to Titus.”

“I always knew I liked Titus.” Elena bared her teeth. “When do we leave?”

“Unless one of the Cadre refuses to attend, we go on the dawn.”

Implicit were the words that if someone did say no, it could set in motion a chain of immortal violence that would end with a devastated world. Because when archangels fought, people died and cities fell.

* * *

Two hours later, in the library of Elena and Raphael's Enclave home, that danger was no longer a concern. According to Jessamy, who was in touch with the Luminata in her role as the angelic Historian, every single archangel had RSVP'd to the meeting. "Except Lijuan, of course," Jessamy corrected, the other woman's fine-boned face up on the screen placed on one wall of the library.

Elena's blood began to pump a little faster. "That settles it then—we'll be on the plane tomorrow morning."

Raphael had already told their pilot to be on standby.

Had he been going alone, he would've probably flown on the wing, but Elena wasn't strong enough or fast enough to do that over such a long distance. She was getting there, could now achieve a vertical takeoff nine times out of ten—though it always cost her. Her body simply wasn't "old" enough in immortal terms, to have grown the necessary muscle strength. So when she forced a vertical takeoff, she did so knowing she'd have a shorter time in the air and could possibly rupture a tendon and be grounded until it healed.

In most cases, it made more sense for her to climb up someplace and take off from there, but at least she no longer faced being trapped on the ground if she couldn't find a handy launching spot. And once in the air, she had far greater endurance than when she'd first woken up with wings. Though that wasn't saying much, since she'd been about as graceful as a baby chicken on awakening.

"Has there been any word from Lijuan's court at all?"

The Historian—and Elena's friend—nodded at Raphael's question, her features lit by the delicate golden light thrown by the old-fashioned blown glass lamp on her desk, the Refuge yet swathed in the deep blackness of very early morning. "Xi confirmed receipt of the Luminata's request."

Had it been any other man or woman, Elena had the feeling the rest of the Cadre would've already acted. However, the general was so utterly devoted to his "goddess" that no one had any fear he'd forget who and what he was and give in to delusions of power he simply did not possess. Xi wanted only to hold the territory for Lijuan.

The thought of the archangel who considered herself evolved beyond even the Ancients triggered another thought. Glancing at Raphael, she said, "Did the Luminata invite Alexander and Caliane as well?"

Alexander had quickly become an active member of the Cadre, while Caliane preferred to keep to her small territory, but both were Ancients who should've never been awake, should've never been in the Cadre during this time.

The Cascade, however, had other ideas.

"Yes," Raphael answered.

"And," Jessamy added, "since saying no to the Luminata is unacceptable, both will be attending the meeting." The beautiful burnt sienna of her eyes lit with quiet humor. "I think Caliane might have a few words to say to *the* Luminata."

Elena caught the emphasis. "Head guy?"

A nod from the other woman. "The members of the sect do have names, but the leader is referred to as the Luminata as a gesture of respect. In direct speech, archangels use the