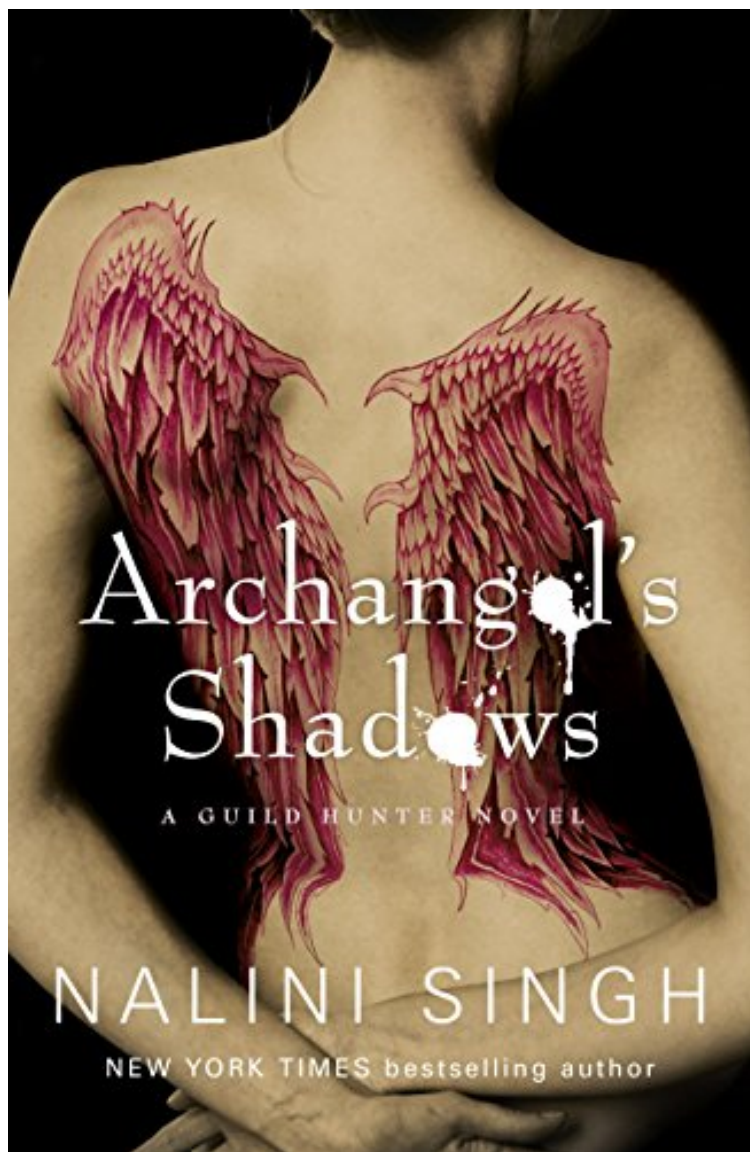


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Archangel's Shadows: Book 7



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurReturn to New York Times bestselling author Nalini Singh's sensual and painfully beautiful Guild Hunter world in her new novel of sacrifice, loyalty, and the choices of love that can shatter the heart.In the wake of a brutal war, the archangel Raphael and his hunter consort, Elena, are dealing with the treacherously shifting tides of archangelic politics and the people of a battered but not broken city. The last thing their city needs is more death, especially not a death that bears the eerie signature of an insane enemy archangel who cannot - should not - be walking the streets. This hunt must be undertaken with stealth and without alerting their people. It must be handled by those who can become shadows themselves...Ash is a gifted tracker and a woman cursed with the ability to sense the secrets of anyone she touches. But there's

one man she knows all too well without a single instant of skin contact: Janvier, the dangerously sexy Cajun vampire who has fascinated and infuriated her for years. Now, as they track down a merciless killer, their cat-and-mouse game of flirtation and provocation has turned into a profound one of the heart. And this time, it is Ash's secret, dark and terrible, that threatens to destroy them both. Nalini Singh, the NEW YORK TIMES bestselling 'alpha author of paranormal romance' (BOOKLIST), returns to her stunning world, as it braces itself for destruction. Extrait PARANORMAL ROMANCE DOESNT GET BETTER THAN THIS. Love Vampires Shadow Team Ashwini navigated the darkened stairwell with quick steps, careful not to make a sound. Given the layout of the stairs a kind of square spiral complete with a well in the center that went from the top of the seventy-three-story building to the basement the echoes would bounce off the walls into a thundering racket. It was unlikely anyone would hear the noise with the archangelic battle going on in the skies of New York while vampires fought the scourge of the reborn below, but getting cocky was a good way to end up dead. It was why Janvier had cut power to this part of the building, and why Naasir had set up a relay of small explosions to distract the enemy. A bead of sweat rolling down her spine, she plastered herself to the wall when a door opened on a higher floor. There's no light, the irritated male voice boomed, magnified by the terrible acoustics for what was meant to be an office building, albeit one designed by an architect known for his edgy work. Raphael's most recent strike must've damaged the building. No. A female this time. He has people on this side of the line. Lock the doors to the main part of the floor on both sides. Ill alert our people to do the same throughout the building. Ashwini's lips curved. She didn't need to get onto the floor itself to do what she'd come to do. Not in this particular building. Continuing up as soon as the enemy guards left, she found herself considering Naasir's name for their small team: shadow fighters. It was a far more apt description than spy or even soldier. Together, Ashwini, Janvier, and Naasir's job was to discomfort, discombobulate, and otherwise aggravate the enemy forces in the heart of the hostile encampment. For a three-person team, she thought they'd done one hell of a job. This would be the icing on the cake. Reaching the floor directly below the roof, she took off her small backpack and removed the charges. Ten seconds, that was all she needed to place and arm a device. The resulting explosion might not collapse the roof, but it should do enough damage to throw the invading force off its game. Set, she murmured into the mouthpiece of the sleek communications device she wore hooked over her right ear. Get out, cher. A voice as languid as a hazy summer's day if you didn't notice the steel beneath. Your presence has been detected. I'm moving. Backpack on, she'd barely covered two flights when boots thundered some distance below, intermingled with shouts and war cries. Time for plan B. She slid off the backpack and retrieved the rappelling rope curled inside. Once it was anchored to the stairwell rail, she could use it to slide past and below any pursuers before they knew she was gone. The leather half-gloves she'd added to her outfit weren't a fashion statement, but preparation for just this contingency. Else, her palms would be shredded by the end. Locking the heavy-duty carabiner directly to the railing after testing the metal would hold at least long enough for her to get below her pursuers she threw the rope down into the well at the center of the building. It uncoiled in swift silence, the metallic rasp of the carabiner moving against the railing hidden by the noise of the hostile fighters heading her way. Leaving the empty backpack, she went to swing over... and realized she could feel a draft of warm air on her nape. She turned, going in low, but she was too slow. The male who'd entered silently through the door at her back slammed into her. The carabiner clanged against the rail in a hard beat of sound this time, the lump of it digging into her lower back as her attacker shoved his arm to her throat. Fangs flashed in her face. It's so nice when lunch has the manners to present itself on the doorstep. Having used his self-congratulatory pause to drop a knife into each palm from the arm sheaths hidden under her jacket, she thrust up through his gut. Her trapped position made a deep cut impossible, but she got his attention, his blood on her blade. He howled in anger, punched her in the stomach and took a step back. It was all she needed. Breathing past the agony from his blow, she sliced out again. Connected hard and true enough to puncture a lung. It would've taken down a mortal, but her opponent wasn't mortal. A sound of frothing rage, his eyes appearing to glow in the dark. Bitch. When he swung back, it wasn't with his fist. Ashwini was skilled at close-contact combat, but she was in a tight space in the dark against a vampire who was clearly no neophyte in the art himself. And he had what felt like a broadsword. She brought up her knives to ward off the blow, but it was too heavy, too true a strike, the jarring impact brutal. Her blades clattered to the floor as he split her left palm and the underside of her right forearm open with the tip of the blade, and then that blade was cold fire across her chest. Iron scent, wet and dark, filled her nostrils, her breath coming in shallow pants. The vampire laughed. Conscious she couldn't get out of this now, not with the heavy clamor of enemy boots only a floor below and the sword-wielding vampire in front of her, she

managed to make her right hand work well enough to grab the gun from her thigh holster. Becoming a prisoner of war was not an option; never again would she let anyone lock her up. Of course, that was unlikely to be an issue given that Lijuan liked to eat people, the husk that remained after the Archangel of China fed turning to dust in the hand. Sorry, cher, she whispered to the man on the other end of the comm device, the man whod taught her to play long after the end of her farcical childhood, and fired. The blunt, hard sound of her gun spitting fire filled the stairwell, the bullets passing through her vampire assailant to ricochet off the walls. Grunting from the impact, the vamp staggered back. Only to recover to scream obscenities at her; in the flashes from the gun, she saw him lift his broadsword for a fatal strike. That sword clattered to the floor before it ever reached her, blood spraying her face in a hot gush. She stopped firing... and heard the dull, wet thud of his head bouncing down the steps, knew it had been sliced off by a fluid steel blade that wasnt a sword or a knife but something in between, as sharp as a scythe and even deadlier. No apologies between us, sugar, Janvier said and, scooping her up in his arms, ran up the stairs. No point in protesting. Wounded as badly as she was, shed only slow them down if she insisted on moving under her own steam. Instead, she reached her bloody left hand around his side for the gun she knew he wore in a holster at his waist. It took a second to get a grip, his breath warm on her neck, and his muscles bunching and flexing against her as he pounded up the steps. Trying not to think about the fact that her chest was all but sliced in half, she sat up and pointed both guns, his and hers, over his shoulders. Your ears are going to take a beating. Ill live. She pressed the trigger on both guns. Their pursuers fell back under the barrage, but she knew that wouldnt last. Not only would she soon run out of bullets and that was counting the two spare clips she had on hershe had to take out a vamps heart or the brain to kill with a gun. Even then, it depended on the age and strength of the vampire in question. Ashwini had once emptied an entire clip into a psychotic vamps brain only for him to lunge at her. Janvier jerked at that instant, but didnt slow his momentum. She touched his shoulder, felt the warm slickness of fresh blood. Her stomach roiled. Youve been hit by a ricochet. Dont stop, he ordered. Keep them distracted. The scent of his blood igniting her deepest, most primal instincts, she did as he asked, mowing down a vampire about to leap up to them. Three bullets in the brain, her aim true thanks to the eerily staccato glimpse she caught in the split second of a muzzle flash, and he stayed down, giving his fellows pause. Her gun clicked on empty on the final shot. However, when she tried to use the breathing room to slot in a fresh clip, she almost dropped the gun to the floor. Im getting fuzzy, she said, her tongue thick in her mouth. Leave me. Go. He could get out the same way hed no doubt gotten in by scaling the side of the high-rise. Janvier could climb even the sheerest wall without problem, his movements as beautiful as they were other, a reminder that he wasnt human. You can drink my blood. The words came out slurred, but she got off another shot when a clatter of sound betrayed an enemy vamp whod poked up his head. It bought them a few more seconds. For strength. I would love to. Pulse thudding against her as her face fell into his neck, the guns hanging limp from her fingers, he said, But Id rather you were sucking my cock at the time. She tried to snarl a response, but the words wouldnt come. Dont you go, Ash. Dont you fucking go. Harsh, unforgiving words as he came to a stop on the final landing, the same place where shed placed the charges. m here, she managed to mumble, patting at his cheek with a bloody hand. He was so sinfully pretty, was Janvier, with his green eyes and dark brown hair that got all coppery under the summer sun. She wished shed kissed him for real, wished shed hauled him into bed and bitten him on that tight butt of his. We can rectify that later, he said and shifted his grip to hold her full-length against him, one arm around her waist. Arms around my neck. Come on, sugar. Dont let me down now. Her limbs were so heavy, her blood dripping over her skin to soak the waistband of her jeans, but she managed to link her arms around his neck. Window? No, my entrance route will have been plugged by now. Were going down. Using a rope he mustve anchored to the railing when he arrived, he swung over the side and slid down at breathtaking speed. Shouts and screams came from above, but all Ashwini could think was that he wasnt wearing a glove. A slamming halt as he swung them to a stop on a lower floor, below their pursuers but not home free. It was perfectly timed: she heard the rope slither past a heartbeat later, having been severed from above. Janvier was already racing down the steps, Ashwini once more cradled against his chest. They rocketed past the first floor and down into the garage. A vampire with hair of metallic silver and eyes of the same startling shade against skin of rich, strokable brown was waiting for them, the door held open. Shoving it shut behind them, Naasir mangled the opening mechanism by bending part of it with brute strength. Go! Ill take care of any pursuit! A small boom reverberated through the building at that instant, dust falling onto her face from the concrete of the garage ceiling. We did it, she tried to whisper, but her throat wouldnt work... and her heartbeat, it was a sluggish crawl. As if her body no longer had blood to pump. Ashwini! Janvier's voice was

the last thing she heard before the lights went out.1A fetid breath on the back of the neck.A chill of bones. A cold whisper in the darkness. There are those things that should not exist, should not walk, should not breathe, should not be named. There are those nightmares that, once given form, can never be put back into the dreamscape. Scroll of the Unknown Ancient, Refuge Library There had been a war. Archangel against archangel. Squadrons of angels in the air and troops of vampires on the ground. Hed told it that when he returned. The being who no longer remembered its name, who no longer knew if it lived or was caught in endless purgatory, had heard the fighting. But it didnt care. That war existed on another world, not in the small darkness that was its own. Here, it fought its own war, screaming at the faint sound of the dragging scrape-shuffle that announced the monsters approaching footsteps. But even as it screamed through a throat cracked and raw, it knew it was making no sound, its chest painful from a lack of air. Panic had clamped its cruel hand around its throat and now it squeezed, squeezed. No, no, no, the trapped creature whimpered inside its skull, mouth remaining locked in that silent scream. Part of who it had once been understood that its mind was broken and would never recover. That part was a tiny kernel hidden in a distant part of its psyche. The rest of it was clawing horror and fear... and sadness. Tears rolled down its face, caught in its ravaged throat, but the haunting sense of despair was soon crushed under the suffocating weight of naked fear. Then light hit the eyes that must be its own in an agonizing blindness and its pulse froze. The monster was here.2Three weeks after losing most of the blood in her body, Ashwini was considering painting one of her living room walls pink with purple polka dots when her phone began to buzz. Grabbing it from the exquisitely scarred wooden coffee table shed restored the previous year, she answered to find Sara on the other end. The Guild Director had a job for her. Something weirds been happening in the Vampire Quarter, she said. Dogs and cats disappearing. First report was postbattle, but it couldve been going on for longer with the strays no one tracks. Faint rustling sounds, pages being turned. A canine body finally turned up in a sewer drain and reports are that its desiccated. Like a mummy, according to the vet who called me. I want you to check it out. You want me to investigate a mummified dog? Ashwini loved animals, would have a big slobbering pup of her own if she didnt live in an apartment in Manhattan, but this was hardly her area of expertise. Im no Egyptologist. I also dont like sewers. Dogs not in the sewer anymore, so youre safe, Sara said without missing a beat. Could be we have a crazy vampire feeding off pets. Just check it out. Narrowing her eyes, Ashwini glared at the view of the citys cloud-piercing Archangel Tower through the reinforced glass of the living room wall opposite the one shed been considering earlier, the oil-paint orange of the late afternoon sunlight brushing the angelic wings in her line of sight in shades of auburn and sienna. It was Ellie whod told her about this buildingthe other hunter had had an apartment in a similar building next door before she fell in love with the bone-chillingly dangerous male who controlled North America from that Tower. Seriously, Sara, she said, following the erratic flight path of an angel who appeared to be testing a lately injured wing, you couldnt find anything less dangerous? Like sending me to find a little old ladys lost knitting needle? The Guild Director laughed, utterly unabashed. Hey, you now hold the Guild record for the most stitches in one sittingenjoy the time off. I want a real hunt after this. She scowled, but her hand was fisted as she silently urged on the unknown angel who was attempting to make a landing on a rooftop adjacent to the Tower. Or Im going to hunt Janvier on principle. The damn vampire had been nice to her for weeks, ever since she got sliced up during the battle to hold New York against the invading force marshaled by the archangel Lijuan. The angel whod just made a good if shaky landing on that rooftop in the distance had no doubt been injured in the same battle. Excellent, Sara said, as if Ashwini had just told her that unicorns not only existed but were currently granting wishes in Central Park. Let me know when so I can buy tickets. Now go look at the canine mummy. Grr. She hung up after making the snarling sound shed picked up from Naasir during the time she, Janvier, and Naasir had worked as a team behind enemy lines. Walking into her bedroom, she pulled curtains of deep citrine across the sliding doors that led out onto her tiny balcony. That balcony was what had made Ellie recommend this apartment to her when shed seen it go on the marketAshwini had once told Ellie how much she liked the way Ellies balcony offered a sense of freedom even so high up in a skyscraper. The block color of the curtains was vibrant against the crisp white walls Ashwini had left untouched, and a vivid contrast to the fuchsia pink of the throw pillows on her bed. The sheets were cream with fine pink stripes, the carpet a pale gold. A spiral sculpture of cerulean blue glass sat on a tall black wooden stool in one corner; shed found the sculpture on the curb in Greenwich Village, after the previous owner threw it out just because the base was chipped. Their loss if they couldnt see beauty in the fractured, the scarred. The room might hold too much color for many, but after the genteel elegance of the place in which shed spent five months of her fifteenth year of life, she couldnt stand the stark or the

minimalist. Texture, color, story, that was what she wanted around her, why she collected pieces others had discarded and gave them new life. She, too, had once been considered too broken to be of any use. Her fingers brushed the scar that diagonally bisected her chest as she pulled off her gray tee, the mark a reminder shed almost been fatally broken. Opening up her closet door to reveal the tall mirror mounted on the other side, she took in the clean line that stated the skill of the vampire whod wielded the sword. It was no longer raw and red, and it would eventually fade to the pale honey that was the shade of the other, smaller scars on her skin. The memories, however, those would never fade. Dont you go, Ash. Dont you fucking go. Janvier's voice had been the last thing Ashwini heard before blacking out, and the first after she woke. Its bad manners to snarl at the nice doctor, Ashblade. In truth, shed been too weak to snarl, but shed made her dislike of the institutional setting clear. So Janvier had brought her home, tucked her into her own bed, and made her soup. From scratch! Who did that? No one else ever had for her and she didnt know how to handle the strange, lost feeling the memory aroused in her. So she just shut the door on it, as shed been doing for the two weeks since shed kicked him out, and focused on the scar. Early on, shed worried the wound had caused muscle damage that would limit her range of motion. A visit with the Guilds senior medic a week prior, in concert with her increasing mobility, had erased that concern. Since she planned on keeping her recovery on track, she picked up the bottle of special oil Saki had given her. Rub it in twice a day after the stitches dissolve, the veteran hunter had said. Itll help with deep-tissue healing. Given Saki's impressive record of injuries, Ashwini wasnt about to argue. The sweet-smelling oil rubbed in, she wove her hair into a loose braid, then took off her yoga pants to change into winter-appropriate jeans, hunting boots, a mohair turtleneck in vibrant orange over a thin, long-sleeved tee designed to retain body heat, and a thermal-lined black leather jacket that hit her at the hip. She found her gloves stuffed into the pockets of the jacket, so that saved her from hunting for them. Deciding to leave in the dangly hoop earrings she was wearing if the poor dead dog managed to rise up and attack her, it deserved to rip off her earlobes she began to slot in her weapons. Knives in arm sheaths as well as one in her left boot, plus a gun in a concealed shoulder holster and another in a visible thigh holster. Grabbing her Guild ID, she slipped it into an easily accessible pocket. Most of the local cops knew the hunters who lived in the area, but there were always the rookies. Since it would suck to be shot dead by a trigger-happy hotshot, especially after surviving an immortal war, shed make it painless for them to confirm her identity. That done, she considered her crossbow. Though she adored it almost as much as the portable grenade launcher she stored in a weapons locker at Guild HQ, it seemed a tad extreme for a visit to a vet. God, Sara, she muttered into the air at the reminder of her so-safe-it-was-a-joke assignment. Im almost convinced youre punking me. However, even that was better than sitting around twiddling her thumbs or destroying her apartment with boredom-induced decorating choices. Before she spun the dial to lock the weapons safe hidden in the back of her closet, she slipped on the glossy black bangle Janvier had sent her in the mail a year before. Snap it apart to reveal the wire within, and you were holding a lethally effective garrote. The damn male knew her far too well. Which was why she couldnt understand his behavior after her injury. The two of them had an understanding; they irritated and challenged one another, and yes, they flirted, but the rest... the kindness, the tenderness, it was crossing a line. Hed cradled her against his chest when she had trouble sitting up, fed her soup spoonful by spoonful. It had felt warm and safe and terrifying and enraging. Because he was the one thing she could not have and now hed wrecked her hard-won equilibrium by showing her what she was missing. Angrily hiding a few more knives on her body for good measure, she strode to the front door and yanked it open. There you are, sugar, said the two-hundred-and-forty-seven-year-old vampire on her doorstep, his hair the rich shade of the chicory coffee hed once made her, and his skin a burnished gold. She bared her teeth at him in a way that couldnt faintly be taken as a smile. I thought I told you to go away. Last time hed been in the neighborhood, hed brought her mint chocolate chip ice cream. Her favorite. Shed taken the ice cream and shut the door in his face in an effort to teach him a lesson. Hed laughed, the wild, unabashed sound penetrating the flimsy shield of the door to sink into her bones, make her soul ache. I did go away, he pointed out in that voice accented with the unique cadence of his homeland, his shoulders moving beneath the butter-soft tan leather of his jacket as he folded his arms. For an entire week. In what version of going away does it mean you send takeout deliverymen to my doorstep? Eyes the shade of bayou moss, sunlight over shadow, scanned her head to toe. How else was I to make sure you werent lying collapsed in the bathroom because you were too stubborn to call for help? I didnt get hit with the stupid stick anytime in the past couple of weeks. And, despite the somber predictions of her father in childhood, she had friends. Honor had been by every couple of days, alternating with Ransom, Demarco, and Elena. Naasir had filled her freezer with meat before he left for Japan forty-eight

hours after the battle. Protein will help you heal, had been his succinct summation. Eat it. A number of other hunters had dropped by to compare battle scars after they escaped hospital arrest. Saki had stayed for two nights, caught Ashwini up on her parents in Oregon. The older couple had once done Ashwini a great kindness, and while she'd been too damaged then to trust them enough to forge an emotional bond, never would she forget their generosity. As she couldn't forget the way Janvier had held her in his lap in the old armchair by the window, his hand stroking her hair as snow fell over the city. It was a moment she'd wanted to live in forever. But she couldn't. Out of the way, she said, her anger at fate a cold, clawing thing inside her she'd never been able to tame despite her decision to live life full throttle. I'm heading to a job. No more lazy grace, his expression grim. You're not fully recovered. Stepping out and locking the door behind her, she strode down the hallway. The doctor gave me a clean bill of health. Even if he hadn't, Ashwini knew her body. It had been in hunter condition before the injury and she'd begun exercising as much as she could the instant there was no longer any danger she'd tear the wound open. Ash. Janvier touched his hand to her lower back. No touching. Gritting her teeth against the impact of him, she reached out to push the button to summon the elevator. Janvier used his body to block her. I'm coming with you. Her mind flashed back to the last time he'd said something similar, to the first mission they'd worked together. Back then, they'd been antagonists who'd declared a temporary truce, and the problem had been a clusterfuck in Atlanta. Now, he was openly attached to the Tower, which technically put them on the same side. They'd worked like a well-honed partnership in Atlanta, fallen back into the same flawless rhythm during the battle. As if they had always been meant to be a pair. And that just sucked. Fine. Refusing to face the awful, painful grief that lurked beneath her anger, she stepped into the elevator when it opened to disgorge one of her neighbors. Janvier waited until after the other woman was out of earshot to say, I don't trust it when you cooperate. Narrowed eyes. Don't come, then. You're not getting rid of me that easily, cher. Slamming out one hand to block the closing door, he got in. The first time he'd called her cher, it had been a wicked flirt. Somehow, the term had become more in the years since, an endearment reserved for her. Never did she hear him use it with anyone else. Today, he stood too close to her on the ride down, his scent a sexy, infuriating bite against her senses. A great big part of her wanted to haul him down to her mouth. She knew full well that seconds after she did, he'd have her slammed against the wall, her legs wrapped around his waist as he pounded his cock into her, their hands and mouths greedy to touch, to possess, to taste. Her and Janvier's chemistry had never been in question. When he walked out the elevator in front of her, she couldn't help but admire the sleek danger of him. Built long and lean, his muscles that of a runner or a swimmer, he moved with a sensual grace that fooled people into thinking he wasn't a threat. Ashwini knew different. Just under a year prior, he'd sent in three decapitated heads to the Tower to signal the end of an execution order. Those heads had belonged to vampires who'd sliced Ashwini up after cornering her in a pack. She'd killed two of the cowards, wounded the others, and it was the others Janvier had delivered. Of course, he'd never claimed responsibility for the act; most everyone thought the vampires had been executed by their angel. Ashwini knew the truth only because Sara had had it direct from Dmitri, second to the archangel Raphael and the most powerful vampire in the country. One eyebrow raised, the Guild Director had repeated Dmitri's response to her notice that the Guild was sending in a team to capture the rogue vamps. No need. The Cajuns taken care of it. The dead morons touched his hunter. That was when Ashwini had first tried to put distance between them, first tried to cut off the connection that could not be permitted to grow. Janvier had made that an impossible task. He'd tracked her down in remote corners of the world, aggravated her to the point where she'd once tied him up and emptied a large pot of honey on his head, before pretending to leave him for the insects. He'd laughed in delight and cut himself free using a hidden blade, then chased her through the trees, threatening to make her lick every drop of the sweet, sticky stuff off his body. The interaction had left her feeling more alive than she had in all the weeks since she'd decided to walk away from him. And so she'd been selfish, continued to play with him without telling him their flirtation could never be anything permanent. Her wishes didn't matter. His didn't, either. There was no choice. Straddling the hot red of his motorcycle, parked illegally in front of her building and gilded by the rays of dense orange that shot out of the winter sky, Janvier lifted up the helmet he'd left hooked on the handlebar and held it out to her. You realize this is Manhattan? she asked with a pointed look at the foot traffic, not sure it was a good idea to get that close to him. The fact was, Ashwini didn't trust herself around Janvier. Not anymore. Not when the angry part of her wanted to steal time with him any way it could. Strangling the voice that said it'd be much more fun to ride him and not the bike, she folded her arms. Did you leave the key in the ignition, too? He shrugged, lips curving but eyes sharp, watchful. This bike doesn't need a key, my khoobsurat Ash. Hop on

and Ill show you my darlings fancy electronics. His use of the language shed learned at her grandmothers knee didnt surprise her; he had served out his hundred-year Contract in Nehas court, after all. Chaque hibou aime son bb, she said in return, having discovered the quirky saying online while trying to figure out something hed said to her. A sinful grin that lit up his eyes and made her stomach somersault. I protest at being labeled an owl I havent eaten any mice lately. But I do love this beast. Come, let me give you a ride. Accepting the helmet despite her reservations, she put it on, scowled when he remained bareheaded. Vampirism doesnt protect against no-brain syndrome. She rapped her knuckles lightly against the back of his head. You better have another helmet. Just checking if you still care. He retrieved a second helmet from where hed apparently left it hooked somewhere on the part of the bike not in her line of sight. The man really wanted to get his stuff stolen. Then again, she thought, her eyes landing on the small set of black wings on the glossy red paintwork of the side panel, itd be a stupid thief who took property marked as belonging to the Tower. Junkies dont care, she said, pointing at the emblem. Their wiring is too scrambled. Thats why I asked the doorman to keep an eye on it. He winked at her for having jerked her chain this long, his lashes thick and curling slightly at the ends. Where do you want to go? I am but your loyal steed today. Swinging over behind him, she put one gloved hand on his shoulder and told him the address of the veterinary clinic. He smelled even more delicious up close, the dangerous bite of him layered with an earthy undertone that echoed his personality: Janvier could pull off sophisticated, of that she had no doubt, but his real skin was full of sexily rough edges. The motorbike came to life with a throaty roar that vibrated between her legs. Sucking in a breath, she grabbed his wrist when he wouldve reached back to stroke her thigh. Hands and eyes front. Chuckling, he put his hands back where they should be after tugging on his gloves. Hold on. Ashwini controlled her position with her thighs as he slipped into the heavy traffic, keeping just the one hand on his shoulder to balance herself. His beaten-up leather jacket did nothing to insulate her from the intimacy of feeling his body move, muscle and tendon and bone shifting under her touch as he maneuvered the bike through the sea of cars. When an angel swept down to skim over the vehicles, the distinctive blue of his wings causing motorists to slow down in a wonder that never faded, Janvier raised a hand in casual acknowledgment. Rather than returning the salute, Illium pointed to the curb and Janvier immediately slid the bike out of the flow of traffic and to another illegal parking spot in front of a fire hydrant. Illium landed on the sidewalk at almost the same instant, folding in his wings in a susurrous whisper of sound. Golden eyed with ink black hair dipped in blue and flawless bone structure, he was one of the most astonishingly beautiful angels Ashwini had ever seen. Yet he did nothing for her, might as well have been a marble sculpture created by a master. It was only Janvier whod penetrated the wary steel of her defenses, made himself at home. As he had on her couch two and a half weeks back, his arm wrapped around her while they stretched out to watch an old black-and-white movie. When shed started to fall asleep, her body not yet at full strength, hed tucked her in with a kiss on the forehead she could feel even now. Ash, Illium said, a distinct glint in the gold. I thought for certain Id be organizing Janviers funeral when he said he was planning to beard you in your den. I even called an undertaker. She pushed up the visor of her helmet. Keep the number. It might be useful one of these days. How you keep wounding me. Janvier slapped a hand dramatically over his heart before flipping up the visor of his own helmet. Why did you pull us aside, sweet Bluebell? Can you not see that Im acting as my Ashblades chauffeur? Illium thrust a hand through his hair, pushing back the overlong strands that had fallen across his face. Give me one of your blades, he demanded. I need to cut this before it blinds me. You do it here and therell be a stampede to get the discards, Janvier pointed out. Not to mention the distress such barbarity will cause in the tender hearts of all those who worship your fine form. Illium muttered something uncomplimentary about Cajuns who should be dropped off buildings that did nothing to dim Janviers amusement. His hair brushed his nape, too, but he was comfortable with that length, and Ashwini liked it on him. Too much. Running her fingers through the heavy silk of it was a bone-deep pleasure shed indulged in only a rare few times, all too aware it could become an addiction. Theres a situation I need you to handle, Illium said after pushing back his hair again. Details have been sent to your phone. Ashwini met the angels gaze. Shall I plug my ears? Hunters had fought alongside immortals in the battle to hold their city, would do so again should the situation call for it, but when it came to everyday existence, getting involved in Tower business could be perilous to a mortals health. Or I can jump on the subway, she offered, taking her hand off Janviers shoulder. No, he said, at the same time that Illium spoke the word. There, cher, Janvier added. You would not break both our hearts, would you? Whats the situation? she asked Illium, trying to ignore the way Janviers voice wrapped around her, as sensual and luscious as caramel. Despite the fact that hed been Made over two centuries before, hed lost neither his

bayou roots nor its music from his speech, though the rhythm of his words had altered over time. A vampire's cattle are charging him with ill-treatment. Ashwini winced at the derogatory term used to describe humans who volunteered to act as a particular vampire's living food source but couldn't take Illium to task for using it. These people chose to be kept by vampires, chose to be seen as livestock, petted and cosseted though they might be. I didn't realize cattle had any rights. Janvier was the one to reply, his eyes on the screen of his phone as he scrolled through the information he'd been forwarded. Not every vampire enjoys seducing his food anew each night, or relying on blood banks. It is bad for the vampiric population for such arrangements to turn abusive. Illium folded his arms, the clean line of his jaw set in a hard line. If word spreads, mortals might become gun-shy. You'd think so, wouldn't you? Ashwini said, recalling the hundreds of thousands who petitioned to be Made every year, despite witnessing countless examples of the brutality and violence that might be their lot. Because near-immortality came at a price: a hundred years of service to the angels, after which eternity awaited. If you survived the Contract period with your mind unbroken. There will always be self-destructive idiots in the world. She squeezed Janvier's shoulder in an unspoken coda. He was a vampire not because of a lust for endless life, but because he'd fallen in love with another vampire as a callow youth. His own words. She felt for the mortal man he'd been, because she knew in this way, she and Janvier were the same: when they loved, they loved desperately, holding on even when it threatened to destroy them. Is it urgent? Janvier leaned back into her touch. Ash is headed toward the same general part of the city, so we can deal with her task and go on to this. It's a relatively low-level rumor at present, Illium said. An hour or two won't make any difference. Spreading his wings to their full breadth, to the delight of the teenagers who'd gathered in the portico of the building behind him, he readied himself for flight. I almost forgot there's to be a celebration in just over a month. Ashwini blinked. Not an angelic ball? As far as she knew, Elena had an avowed dislike of the excruciatingly formal events. She'd been heard to mutter that she'd rather stick a fork in her eye. Ashwini couldn't see her fellow hunter changing her mind in the aftermath of a war. Even if she was hooked up with a scary-ass archangel. Illium's laughter lit up his eyes and sent a woman on the sidewalk into a swoon broken by the thick arms of a nearby cop. Ellie has threatened to shoot anyone who even suggests such a travesty. Thank God, Ashwini said with a shudder. I thought for a second that she'd lost her mind and we'd have to stage an intervention. This is to be a block party, as Ellie terms it, open to any and all citizens of the city. It's to be held in the streets and on the rooftops around the Tower. That's a really great idea. While crowds weren't Ashwini's thing, she wouldn't mind ending up on one of the rooftops with a group of friends. Each and every one of them had mourned in the aftermath of the war, for the fighters, mortal and immortal, who'd lost their lives. Now it was time to lift a drink to their fallen comrades, and to fully reclaim their city from the shadows of war while giving a giant finger to those who'd sought to cripple it. Janvier revved the bike at that instant. Ill report back once I've checked out the abuse report. Ill be at the Tower. Illium took off in a powerful beat of wild blue accented with silver. 4 Wondering if the Cajun would catch his dark-eyed hunter this time around, Illium rode the winter winds directly to the balcony outside Dmitri's office. It was swept clear of snow, a task usually assigned to the youngest in the troop ranks, vampire or angel. Right now, with so many of the young injured, it was done by whoever had ten free minutes and didn't mind a little manual labor. From the damp in Dmitri's hair where he stood behind his desk, his body clad in a simple black T-shirt and black cargo pants, Illium had the feeling Dmitri had cleared this himself. Not many who stood second to an archangel would do such a task, but this was why Dmitri was so trusted by Raphael's men. Despite his power, he was, and had always been, one of them. Glancing up at Illium's entry, his eyes having been on a map that showed the current position of Lijuans' forces in China, Dmitri said, Did you find it? Trace did. Illium had asked the slender vampire to follow the trail because most vampires outside the Tower had no idea he was Raphael's man. It's called Umber. He placed a tiny vial of a reddish brown substance on Dmitri's desk, but while the color echoed the pigment for which it was named, the texture was unusual. The contents glittered like tiny shards of glass or crushed hard candy. Dmitri picked it up, angled it to the light. It was, Illium saw, oddly beautiful, despite the fact that light revealed the crystals to have an undertone of sickly yellow. Chewed? He nodded at Dmitri's question. That seems to be the preferred method of ingestion with the users. Trace was able to pinpoint. The supplier is taking extreme care to keep this underground and available to only a select clientele. Exclusivity makes it more valuable. Dmitri put the vial back down. Effects? Sexual high and addictive with a single hit. Trace had reported seeing the woman from whom he'd seduced the sample quivering in carnal pleasure after she ate a sliver, her hands cupping her breasts and her eyes heavy-lidded. Long-term effects are unknown. Trace was able to confirm the drug only hit the streets two days past. We were lucky to pick up on it. No. We weren't lucky; we were prepared. Dmitri

had begun to create a network of informants throughout the city during the lead-up to the battle, and it was those informants who had reported a rising excitement in the wealthy vampire populace. All of it related to a mysterious new high. Many of these new informants were human and a number were blood donors, specifically genetically blessed donors who came into contact with older, more powerful vampires on a regular basis. The trick was that none of the informants knew they served the Tower. One set of exclusive donors, for example, reported to the woman who ran the city's top vampire club, in return for the cachet of being in her inner circle. The idea of the subtle but powerful network had come from Raphael. Elena, the archangel had said, has made me realize we were not fully utilizing all our assets. They'd been standing on the Tower roof at the time, the wind a savage beast. When Raphael turned to Dmitri, midnight black strands of hair had whipped across his face. The mortals see things we do not, pay attention to those we might otherwise dismiss. Facing the wind once again, Raphael had continued. We need that information, but I will not drag Elenas friends too deeply into the immortal world. An instant of piercing eye contact. Such can end only badly for them. Dmitri knew Raphael was no longer talking about Elenas friends, but about the horror of Dmitris own past. I do not blame you, sire. I never have. He blamed the vicious angel who had tortured them both. Without you, I would've carved out my heart and been lying dead in a distant grave an eon ago. I blame myself, Dmitri, and I would not have Elena feel the same. Set up the network using mortals who have freely chosen to linger on the fringes of the immortal world as the base. Raphael. When the archangel turned to look at him with those eyes that burned with power, Dmitri had extended his arm. The past is past, and if there ever was a debt between us, it was wiped clean the day you Made Honor. Those vampires Made by an archangel were stronger from day one, harder to injure or kill. You are my liege, but you will always first be my friend. Raphaels hand had closed over his forearm, his over the archangels. I hope to hear the same words a thousand years hence. You will. Both Dmitri and Raphael had come close to losing themselves to the insidious cold of eternity, but that was no longer a threat. Today, it was Illium who concerned Dmitri. The majority of people, mortal and immortal, saw charm and a vivid zest for life when they looked at the blue-winged angel. Dmitri saw increasing power and an increasing darkness. All that held the darkness at bay was Illiums tight-knit connection to Elena and Raphael, and to the Seven. But there would come a time when Illium became too much a power to remain in the city. Then who would keep him... human? How long does the Umber high last? Dmitri asked, making a mental note to speak to Raphael about Illiums slow and near-imperceptible descent into the icy abyss that had nearly consumed the two of them. Unlike the others in the Seven, Illium couldnt be seconded back to the Refuge to assist Galen and Venom; the distance from Elena and Aodhan, in particular, would indisputably hasten the ravages of the kind of power at Illiums command. Longer than the high from a honey feed, the blue-winged angel said in response to his question. Dmitri frowned. A vampires metabolism differed from a mortals, meaning normal drugs, no matter how hard, metabolized too quickly to be worth the cost or the bother. A honey feed drawing blood directly from the vein of a drug-addicted mortal who'd just shot up, snorted, or otherwise ingested their poison of choice, provided a trip that could last for up to ten minutes. How much better? An hour per half gram of Umber. Dmitri went motionless. An hour. No other known drug on the planet had such an intense effect on the vampire population. Unsurprising, then, that its become so coveted so quickly. Trace has been able to pinpoint ten users so far, all gilded lilies. Dmitri knew the type: pretty but useless. Older, wealthy vampires who existed only to discover new indulgences, new sins. Anything to break the ennui. Dmitri had once, during the worst of his pain, joined them only to discover he couldnt spend his days doing nothing. It was a vapid, empty existence, and even as self-destructive as he'd been, he couldnt sink into it. They're probably the only ones who can afford the drug. Its not all good times. Illium shoved his hair back with an impatient hand. During the high, a percentage of the junkies are hit by the urge to feed voraciously. At least one of the lilies is currently going through a vicious detox because he refuses to touch the stuff again. Dmitri raised an eyebrow. Not much worries them in their pursuit of sensation. Numb inside from centuries of indulging their every whim, the lilies need to grasp at the new, the bright, held a pitiable desperation. This lily is part of a long-term pair, Illium told him. He fed on his partner during the high and he wasnt gentle her neck was raw meat by the end, her spinal cord exposed. A few more minutes and he might've severed that, killed her. Dmitri understood the depth of the males horror. Such deeply loyal connections were rare among immortals, much less in the world of the lilies, and to be protected. Dmitri would end himself before laying a finger on Honor in violence. Drop this downstairs, he said, tapping the vial. Have it tested for everything. Illium took the vial. Tell Trace he can report directly to me, Dmitri added. I want you focusing on the men and women the healers have discharged. A significant percentage of the Towers forces remained

down, but enough injured fighters were now walking under their own steam that he needed Illium to take charge of their physical training. It would take skillful work to get them back to full strength in a short time frame. Talk to Galen, come up with a workable regimen. The weapons-master couldnt leave the Refuge, especially after the recent tensions there, but that didnt mean he wasnt available to the rest of the Seven. Hes already sent through his first set of orders, has people moving. Illium bowed deeply, adding an elegant flourish with one hand. Yes, O Dark Overlord. Lips twitching, Dmitri hoped with every cell in his body that Illium would find his way through the crushing pressures of immortality and power, that he wouldnt lose the joie de vivre that had been a part of him since he was a fledgling. Dmitri had once witnessed a tiny blue-winged baby angel fall hard to the earth after tangling his wings, his flight path prior to the fall that of a drunken bumblebee. Despite running full-tilt, Dmitri had been too far away to catch him. When hed reached the site of the accident, hed expected to find a sobbing, hurt child. Hurt he had been, one wing crumpled, but Illium was already on his feet, his bruised and scraped arms thrust up and his hands fisted, face aglow. I flew so far! Did you see? Dmitri had never forgotten that first meeting with a boy whod reminded him of the irrepressible spirit of his own son. Illiums life had not always been painless, and it had left scars, but none of it had been as dangerous as the power now gathering inside him. However, the issue wasnt critical. Not quite yet. Begone, Bluebell, he said, an image of the tiny boy hed carried home to his frantic mother that day at the forefront of his mind. The Dark Overlord needs to talk to a certain spymaster. Walking backward to the door, Illium said, Jasons back in the country? He returned from China last night. From the territory of the insane archangel who thought herself a goddess. Managed to get past the border and all the way to her innermost citadel. Dmitri had no idea how, but that was why Jason was Raphaels spymaster and Dmitri was his blade and his second. A rustle of wings announced Jasons presence at the balcony door. It was time to discuss the heart of enemy territory. Ashwini and Janvier reached the veterinary clinic in a comparatively short time thanks to Janvier's skill at weaving through the traffic, the blue of the sky still edged with puffs of orange-pink that bathed everything in a forgiving light. Nothing, however, could soften the impact of seeing the body that awaited them at the run-down but clean clinic in Chinatown. Sara had been right. This small, helpless animal victim needed a hunters attention rather than the vets. Not only was the cocker spaniel shriveled and bloodless, its throat had been ravaged as if by a wild beast. Setting aside the loss of blood, she said to the vet, is it possible these wounds couldve been made by another, bigger animal? The tall, mixed-race woman, her features sharp, striking, pushed her glasses farther up her nose and dragged her eyes off Janvier. The dirty water in the drain where he was found did a good job of messing with the wound, and Im pretty sure rats have been at this sweet boy, too. She touched her hand to the dogs emaciated head. No telling how long he was down there. Could be days, could be weeks. Even if it was a vicious dog... Yes, no animal sucked out every drop of blood in his body. A chill in her bones, Ashwini checked the cocker spaniels teeth, the dogs skin having tightly retracted to expose the gum line; the enamel was stained and cracked. Even if he had bitten his attacker, the evidence was already too contaminated to be of any forensic use. Who found him? A homeless man who hangs around the area. Poor thing was heartbroken over it. A sudden stiffening of the vets body, her eyes flashing behind the clear lenses of her glasses. Hes harmless Im sure he had nothing to do with this. Im not planning to hunt him down. What Ashwini was looking at wasnt a mortal crime. It had all the hallmarks of immortal involvement though shed dig up information on the subject of natural mummification, too, on the off chance that it was a possibility. Can you autopsy the body? Its called a necropsy when its an animal and sure. If someones going to pay for it. Her gaze went from Ashwini to Janvier and back. As you can see a wave around the shabby examination room, the paint peeling off the walls and the linoleum worn I dont exactly charge my clients a lot, so I need the money from those who can afford it. Guild will cover it. Look for anything strange beyond the obvious. Itll have to be tomorrow. I promised my daughter Id be home for dinner tonight. The vet took off her glasses to pinch the bridge of her nose between forefinger and thumb. With the battle and all, she needs her mom. Ashwinis throat grew thick; she knew all about needing her mom. Coughing slightly in an effort to clear the obstruction, she said, Call me when youre done. She didnt really expect the vet to find anything significant, but better to check and make certain than miss a crucial fact. You understand this is confidential? Im not about to mess with the Tower or the Guild by blabbing. Exiting the clinic a few minutes later, Ashwini glanced at Janvier. Has an animal ever become infected with vampirism? Its not a disease, cher. You know what I mean. As far as I know, he said, passing her a helmet, no animal has ever become a vampire, but Im comparatively young in immortal terms. Do you want me to check with Dmitri? Yeah, I guess if anyone would know, itd be him. His thighs defined against the denim of his jeans as he straddled the bike, Janvier picked up his own helmet. The body, he said, holding

her gaze, it reminds me of the atrocity we witnessed during the battle. A shudder rippled through her. Me, too. Ashwini, Janvier, and Naasir had watched Lijuan bury her face in the neck of one of her soldiers, her mouth open and teeth glinting. When she lifted her face back up, the lower half was a macabre mask of red, and she was bloated with power, her wounds healed, while the soldier lay a dead husk at her feet, a willing sacrifice. But, Ashwini pointed out, even if Lijuan has somehow resurrected herself since the battle though she couldn't imagine how, when Raphael had blown the crazy bitch to smithereens I can't see an archangel who believes herself a goddess feeding off animals. I think she'd rather starve. Janvier slipped on his helmet. The dog was also not desiccated enough for this to be Lijuan. You're right. The empty husks that evidenced Lijuan's feeds had been so fragile, Naasir had crumbled one into countless fragments when he tried to carry it off as proof. In the end, they'd had to leave the husks where they'd fallen after Ashwini took multiple photographs using her phone. When Janvier and Naasir returned to the site after Lijuan's defeat, it was to discover the reborn had stampeded through it, crushing the remains to dust. What's the chance that Lijuan is fully dead? Putting on her helmet, she got on the bike behind Janvier. Low, he said over the throaty rumble of the bike's engine. Archangels don't die easily, and Lijuan is the oldest of the Cadre, if we don't include Raphael's mother. It wasn't the news Ashwini wanted to hear. Because who the fuck knew what a half-dead archangel could do even after her body had been annihilated?

Elena stretched her shoulders as she sat on the rooftop of the building given over to the Legion, her legs hanging over the side and her wings resting against the rough concrete surface. Her position gave her a direct view of the Tower, its windows blazing with the reflected glory of what promised to be a dazzling sunset. Beside her crouched the Primary, in the Legion's distinctive gargoyles-like resting pose. Wings arched high and one arm braced on his knee, he was dressed in what had been unrelieved black, but was now dusty, the dark of his hair the same. He still wasn't human in any sense, but he no longer made the hairs rise on the back of her neck. Most of the time. You are tired. Elena reached up to fix her ponytail, her hair damp from the quick shower she'd grabbed, else she'd be as covered in dust and grit as the Primary. Busy day. She'd spent it ferrying materials to facilitate the repair of one of the outlying high-rises that had been damaged during the battle. How are the modifications to this building going? It was not built for winged residents. The eerie, risen-from-the-depths male was getting verbose on her, she thought dryly. Yes, there's a lot of work to be done. Railingless balconies had to be added, internal walls knocked down, windows turned into doors what was safe and comfortable for mortals and vampires was annoying and stifling for winged beings. The overhaul would take time, but a technical assessment by a specialist team had shown it would still be faster and more efficient to modify an existing building to the Legion's requirements than to build a new one from the ground up. Are your people handling it all right for now? One thing the Primary had told them was that while the Legion did not need sleep, his men didn't do well cut off from one another so soon after their rising. Yes. We gather on the roof. Elena knew that. The first night she'd looked across from the Tower at midnight and seen their crouched forms, those hairs on the back of her neck had stood straight up. She wondered if the Legion had any idea how seriously other they could sometimes be. If the snows too cold, we can organize. The roof is acceptable. Do you miss the sea? A long pause, the answer halting, as if she had asked him a question he hadn't considered until that instant. Yes... there was peace... and wonder... more than mortal or immortal eyes... ever see. Elena could do nothing but nod; she'd had but a glimpse of the Legion's domain, and it had been of haunting beauty in the endless dark. I had another home, too, once, she told him, pointing past the Tower. An apartment in that building with the serrated roof. The Primary's response appeared a non sequitur, but she could almost see how he'd worked his way to it. You are not mortal and yet you are. I guess that describes me pretty well. Angling her face to the caressing wind, she drew in the myriad scents of her city. A city made of spirit and grit and sheer bloody-mindedness. Just like its people. And then the fresh kiss of the rain, the crash of the sea was in her mind, Raphael's wings magnificent in flight as he took off from the Tower balcony where he'd been speaking with Dmitri and Jason. Breath in her throat at the power and skill of his flight, Elena didn't move. Five seconds later, he brought himself to a hover a few feet from her, making the maneuver look effortless when Elena knew from experience that holding a hover took brutal muscle control. Dressed in sleeveless combat leathers similar to the Primary's, though his were a deep brown, he looked to the leader of the Legion. My second wishes to speak to you. A ray of the setting sun struck the violent wildfire blue of the complex and extraordinary mark that ran from his right temple to the top of his cheekbone. A stylized dragon, that was what Elena's mind had said of the mark the first time she'd seen it as a whole, but the truth was that it was difficult to clearly describe. The impact was visceral, as if the jagged lines held an impossible power. Sire. The Primary took off in silence. Elena shivered. I can't get used to the fact that their wings don't rustle. The

Legion had wings more comparable to bats than angelkinds, strong and webbed and frighteningly quiet. They are built for stealth, Raphael answered, the shattering hue of his eyes focused on her alone, the blue so pure it almost hurt. Homeward, hbeebti? Everything in her resonated at the incredible power of that question, of the foundation that lay beneath it. Home was a truth for them both now. Yes, unless the drug situation you mentioned means we have to stay at the Tower. She didnt like the sound of this Umber stuff. Dmitri has the matter in hand, and Illium will take the night watch over the Tower, with Aodhan for company. A glint of laughter in his eyes, her archangel who was no longer the glacial, inhuman being whod made her close her hand over a blade, her blood dripping hot and red to the Tower roof. Naasir is to arrive this eve. Elena scowled. Raphael continued to refuse to tell her the truth about Naasir, the vampire who was unlike any other vampire shed ever met. Revenge will be mine, she threatened. Id sleep with one eye open if I were you. The covetous wind pushed strands of the obsidian silk that was his hair across his cheek. I remind you of your own conclusion that our butler would not be impressed with blood-drenched sheets. His solemn words startled her into a grin. Im surprised Naasir was able to get back here so soon. The vampire had returned to Amanat, the territory held by Raphaels mother, Caliane, just over two and a half weeks past. Dont we need him to keep an eye across the water at Lijuans territory? Jason went in and out, but the spymaster couldnt always be in one place. Venom has taken Naasirs place temporarily. This time, the amusement that shaped Raphaels lips was acute. My mother called to ask what else I have in my menagerie. Elena snorted, in no doubt of Calianes acerbic tone. Can you blame her? First you send her a tiger creature who eats people he doesnt like, and then a vampire with the eyes and fangs of a viper. She held up a finger. Oh, and lets not forget the mortal you keep as a pet. My mother does not consider you my pet, Elena. She is very kind to pets. Oh, ouch! Amusement fading, Raphael closed the distance between them to cup her jaw. You were in the infirmary after you bathed. Yes. It had become habit to drop in a couple of times a day. And if it continued to terrify her to build bonds with so many men and women who could die in the battles to come, each death cutting away another piece of her heart, she was taking it one day, one friendship, at a time. Mood is upbeat, she told Raphael after wrapping her arms around his neck, especially since Galen has given the order that anyone remotely ambulatory is to be up and active or else. Her lips curved. I heard him cursed in at least eight different languages, threatened with murder and other more creative forms of revenge by a number of very sweaty angels and vampires. All of whom had been injured either in the Falling or in the fight against Lijuan. My personal favorite had to do with marmalade, spiders, rope bondage, and a giant vat. Then it is as well my weapons-master is in the Refuge. As if any of that would faze Galen. Hed probably eat the spiders and tear the ropes apart with his bare hands. The angel, built like a tank, was a force of nature. But beneath the complaining, all I saw was relief. The ones whore up are happy to be worked so hard, treated like the warriors they are, and the ones who arent yet mobile have both a source of amusement and a goal. Raphael slid his arms around her waist and pulled her off her perch as he turned at an impossible angle, his wing arching across her vision before he brought them to a vertical hover. So, tonight, he said, his breath a kiss against her lips, our people are safe, the city is under watch, and I can spend the night with my consort. Stealing a kiss from the archangel who was her own personal and very private drug, Elena said, Now, and he released her. She spread her wings, swept out into the cold breeze, her joy in flight a living thing inside her. The sky was a brilliant show of scarlet and orange now, the snowy sprawl of Central Park ablaze and the skyscrapers glowing like faceted gemstones. In contrast to the wild color of the sky, the air was crystalline, frosty with cold. Her lungs expanded in pure physical pleasure. Then she glanced to the left and felt her forehead wrinkle. Raphael had dipped lower than her, and the white fire that had become more and more apparent to her licked sunset-kissed flames over his feathers. Youre burning again, and dont tell me its an illusion. Banking right, Raphael soared up, then swept back down beside her. It makes no rational sense for my wings to become aflame what use is an archangel who cannot fly? Are you having any difficulty at the moment? No. A short pause. In point of fact, Im cutting through the wind more smoothly than usual. Given that Raphaels usual skills were phenomenal, that was a serious asset. The edge of your wing is totally engulfed in white fire all the way up to your secondary coverts, she told him. Come closer and under me so I can touch your wing. Elena was getting better at flight with every day that passed, but that kind of a fine maneuver was currently beyond her. Raphael shifted into the position shed requested, part of his wing under her hand. Reaching out, she touched her fingers to the white fire. I can feel your feathers beneath the fire. Silky and strong and as theyd always been. But the flame is playing over my fingers. Its cool to the touch and it feels like you. Impossible as it was to explain, she could feel the rain and the wind against her fingertips, sense the crashing sea. Raphael swept up to fly beside her. Once again we have company. Damn it.

I wish they'd wear bells or something. She'd totally missed the Legion fighters who'd come alongside them, both of them dressed in basic black combat leathers, no sleeves. When she glanced at the one to her left, it was to find him staring at her. Black haired and golden skinned, he had pale, pale eyes ringed in a pure blue that echoed Raphael's, his wings a beaten gold where an angel's largest flight feathers would be. In contrast, where the Legion fighter's wings grew out of his back, the leathery texture was a black identical to the black in Elena's wings, the color bleeding into a midnight blue that merged with the gold. It was the same exact coloring as the Primary had, the Legion all minted on the same press, but she knew this wasn't the Primary.

While the leader of the Legion gave off a sense of terrible age, of infinite memory, this fighter appeared oddly young to Elena's senses. As if he'd been barely formed before their eons-long Sleep in the deep. Raising her hand, she waved, just to see what he would do. Only the Primary had spoken to Elena and Raphael thus far. Interaction such as she'd had with him on the rooftop that day was even rarer. Hello! she called out in concert with her wave. The Legion fighter tilted his head to the side like a curious bird and swung closer. Then he raised his hand and echoed Elena's move. Delighted, she laughed and waved back. His lips moved, as if he were trying to figure out how to laugh or smile. Though he gave up the attempt soon afterward, he stayed by her side across the Hudson. Do you wish me to command them to stop the escort? Elena shook her head at Raphael's question. They seem to like doing it for some reason and it's harmless enough. The escort homewhether to the Enclave or to the Tower had begun quietly, soon after the initial postbattle repairs were complete, and was now a ritual. Unless you're planning to sweep me up into a dance... Are you agreeing to be naked above Manhattan? Not this century. Skin heating at even the idea of it, though not all of that heat was mortification, she swept down to the river. The Legion fighter dropped with her and skimmed over the rippling water at her side, a puzzled expression on his face. I think he's trying to figure out why I'd want to do this. *Revue de presse* PARANORMAL ROMANCE DOESN'T GET BETTER THAN THIS. Love Vampires Praise for the Guild Hunter novels of Nalini Singh A breathtaking journey. Romance Novel News Powerful, raw, intense, dark and so intimate. Smexy Books Amazing in every way! Gena Showalter, New York Times bestselling author Stuns with intensity. Romance Junkies A roller-coaster ride of a series. The Romance Reader Intense, vivid, and sexually charged. Publishers Weekly (starred review) Mesmerizing Fascinating world-building. Bitten by Books Completely awe-inspiring. Fallen Angel s Stunning, original, beautiful, intriguing, and mesmerizing. Errant Dreams s [Ms. Singh] has a knack for writing characters that are truly believable, and admirably strong and resilient. Dark Faerie Tales World-building that blew my socks off. Meljean Brook, New York Times bestselling author A fabulous addition to the paranormal world. Fresh Fiction Ms. Singh has a way of storytelling that reaches out and pulls you in It keeps you coming back for more. Night Owl s [A] powerful, riveting novel. I found myself wholly absorbed. Dear Author