



STEPHANIE BWABWA

NATALIA

— IN THE BEGINNING —

ELJE DELJE

Copyright © 2025 Stephanie BwaBwa

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, permitted by law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or have been used to create this work of art. Any similarities to actual persons, living or dead, events, etc. is completely coincidental.

Published by: Elledelle Entertainment

Elledelle Entertainment | Elledelle.com

Natalia. 1st ed.

Cover Illustration by: Colour Anomaly | Angelika

Formatting by: Elledelle Entertainment

*To the girllies who had to go back to the office, I see you, and
Ehyeh does, too... IYKYK.*

READER NOTE

Dear Elledellien,

For your convenience, you'll find a glossary towards the back of this book to help you with pronunciations, definitions, and translations.

Wings high! Enjoy the tale.

— Stephanie



CHAPTER I

THE NEW EMPRÀR

In the beginning of Empràr Lucièn's reign, I knew that egotistical, dung-eating baboon would bring chaos to our freshly groomed wings. The new emperor ascended the throne, and in the same breath, began upending the Emphyrean as a whole.

The telleverb glowed from across the room, casting fractured light against the walls of my living chamber. Floating above its projection base like a suspended sphere of mist, the screen shimmered with shifting hues of copper and gold, painting every surface in warm, royal tones I no longer had any reverence for. I nestled into the cloudcouch, frowning at the screen of the telleverb.

Anchor Sondessa stood center-frame, practically sparkling with joy. Her skin—sandy-brown with

constellations blooming just beneath the surface—caught the studio lighting and flared like she was carved from stardust. Every rise in her tone lit up her skin like a celebration.

It made my stomach churn. Her voice was too sweet, too high-pitched, like candied fruit—bright and syrupy enough to rot teeth and incite violence.

“Our new Empràr has already been neck-deep in changing the Emyrean for the better since his recent crowning,” she beamed.

I groaned as her wings—elemental, of course—fluttered behind her. They looked like long ribbons of light, delicate and deceptive, like they could slice through vein and bone. The sparks in her galactic eyes twinkled with adoration, and every blink of hers felt like an insult to my intelligence.

Her curls were in place—tight coils stacked high and draped to one side like a coronet. Even her cosmetics glistened like it had been blessed by priests. I could almost smell the primer and glam-dust from here.

Perfect. Obnoxious. Controlled.

I wanted to ruin it.

One good splash of ice-water, and the style would disintegrate. So would her dignity and pride.

“Not one to follow in his patara’s footsteps,” she continued, “he’s already shifting how the palace will

govern this Age. This is all in complete contrast to how his father, the late Empràr Luthèr Andarre, ruled the empire. What a time to be alive! The Epherellien Empyrean is finally rising in glory again!”

I snorted.

Rising in glory again.

“Rotpot,” I muttered. “You’re as stupid as you are pretty. An embarrassment to the Empyrean.”

I clucked my tongue and ground my teeth. My wings twitched, tense and folded tightly across my back. The chill in the air couldn’t cool the heat crawling up my neck.

My fingers trembled against the plush, cloud-woven couch I sat on, each tremor a drumbeat of mounting irritation. I wasn’t sure who I wanted to throttle more—Sondessa, or the entire upper chamber of angels who’d allowed Lucièn’s crowning in the first place.

The Imperialists.

How in all the bleeding suns did the Imperialists allow this to happen? The Empyrean wouldn’t last under the rule of Lucièn. Fools. For the Imperialists to be composed of the most scholarly angels to live throughout Epherelle, yet for this to be our fate, made me want to tear out every follicle on my head.

“Get off my screen.”

With a flick of my wrist, I summoned my ethèr. The power awakened beneath my skin with a low hum. My

mahogany-toned hands shimmered as my veins ignited with a supernatural current pulling from deep within—burning lines of soft gold and starlight threading through the contours of my palms. Ethèr gathered, coiled, and surged toward my fingertips.

I fired a pulse of energy into the tellevorbs control node. The projection flickered, then swiped sideways into a new channel.

Another anchor. Lucina.

She, too, was smiling. Praising. Adoring our new Empràr.

My lips curled.

“Oh, for Pasaille’s sake—”

Swipe.

Another.

Swipe.

Every channel. Every burning one.

Each anchor was fully enamored with the new Empràr and his backwards, blazing reforms. They wore his victory like it was prophecy fulfilled. But all I saw was doom gift-wrapped in politics and polished lies.

And I hadn’t even had a proper cup of kràf yet. I licked my lips in thought of the dark liquid and it’s bitter, familiar taste.

“Ehyeh, please,” I groaned, dragging a hand down my face. “I’m looking for peace, not trauma. There has to be something else on! Anything but this rubbish.”

I slouched deeper into the cloudcouch, plush and warm beneath me, but none of it bringing me comfort. Outside my window, the clouds drifted past like lazy rivers of light, golden and soft, stretching over the litany of aerial villas. The dawn was still new, and already I wanted to curse it.

Next to me, curled like a jeweled guardian, lay To-braxi—my shien. The oversized dog looked like a youngling vùlp—wolf looking beasts with the loyalty to boot. She was easily the size of a small chariot. Her crystal-furred body shimmered with opalescent hues, catching the soft light and refracting it in patterns across the walls. Her long tail curled over her hind legs, and her translucent ears flicked lazily every few moments. She turned her head toward me, those iridescent eyes catching mine—prismatic pools of understanding.

“You seem upset, Tali,” she said, her voice a melodious purr.

“Because I am,” I sighed, not bothering to hide the weight in my voice. “It shouldn’t have been Lucièn who was crowned. It should’ve gone to Lexandre.”

“But Lexandre is his younger batara. He is secondborn.”

I reached out and ran my hand over her glittering mane. The sensation was cool, like brushing gemstones soaked in moonlight. Her fur always calmed me.

“I know. However, it doesn't matter that Lexandre is Lucièn's younger brother. Crownings aren't about birth order. They're about competence. The Empyrean's angels choose, *vote*, based on character, calling, and merit.”

“So... the angels voted for Lucièn?”

Her words were soft, innocent. But they landed like weights on my wings.

I let out another breath, this one heavier than the last.

“They did,” I said. “A piss-poor decision, if you ask me.”

“But maybe—”

A chime rang from the heart of my laboratory. The sound was deep and resonant, echoing through the cloudstone halls of my villa with the low roll of thunder. My next work call was about to begin. I groaned and buried my face in my hands.

“We'll finish this later, Tobi.”

I kissed her head and nuzzled the top of her snout, pressing my forehead to hers.

“Have more fun than me.”

“I always do,” she said before nuzzling my side and pawing at my thigh. Tobraxi flickered her tail and shifted deeper into the cushions.

With one final exhale, I rose from the couch, floating upward in a smooth glide. My wings fanned out

just slightly behind me as I drifted toward the spiral ramp that led to my lab.

Below me, the room dimmed, lights responding to my departure. I groaned, beginning my descent. I knew, once the calls started, the chaos Empràr Lucièn planned to unleash, would begin.



CHAPTER 2

UNEXPECTED ABRUPTIONS

Floating through the glass doors of my laboratory, I curved around a marble pillar, soared past three long tables cluttered with beakers, vials, data-pads, and stray crystal samples, and rushed to reach the astroprobe—an angelic technological device—before it stopped ringing.

The light of early dawn spilled through the domed ceiling, pooling in waves of soft blue, rose-petal pink and gold over the cloudy floor. It curled under my feet like mist as I landed, wings folding sharply behind me.

Leaning forward, I waved my fingers through the smoky spill of the tall, cylinder-shaped device. The clouded core blinked once—then unfolded into a luminous, translucent screen, its surface flickering with the familiar faces of my team.

“Wings high, Statizens,” I greeted, nodding to each of the seventeen angelic statisticians now shimmering on-screen.

“Wings high,” they chorused in return, voices overlapping like chimes in a canyon.

For a moment, I just watched them. Their celestial faces glowed against the soft light of the astroproge, each one distinct, each one a world of brilliance to their own credit. Each one of them was of Saerel rank—angels of power and presence. The third, highest rank of angels throughout Elledelle's vast universe.

Their starlit skin gleamed in tones of rose-gold, deep onyx, sapphire frost, and bronze-light. Their galactic, multi-colored eyes pulsed faintly with energy—some hues shifting with their moods, others steady and burning. Seven pairs of elemental wings hovered behind each angel like veils of living magic—some made of molten flame, others of mirrored mist or silver leaves. Each wing told a story of who they were, and what they carried.

Some sat perched in hovering cloudchairs. Others floated at lab stations, working mid-air. One sat curled on her bedcloud, her face scrunched in quiet misery.

“Saniyah,” I said gently.

Her golden-hued eyes lifted to meet mine, glassy and heavy-lidded.

“One of those dawns, huh?”

She opened her mouth to respond—

Then she unleashed a storm of sneezes that rocked her tiny frame. Saniyah's wings fluttered. The starry light beneath her skin fizzled out for a moment. She barely managed to clutch a tissue in time.

“Hey,” I said, already nudging the call settings, “cloudout for the dawn and get some rest, yeah?”

Her face flooded with relief, and she sneezed again—then collapsed into a coughing fit that sounded like a forest fire breaking through a portal gate.

“Thanks, Natalia. I seriously apprecia—”

Another hacking gag stole the end of her sentence. Her screen winked out in a shimmer of kaleidoscopic light.

“Bless it,” Katriyah muttered, grimacing.

“Mhm. Poor thing,” Khadijah, murmured.

“Yeah, well... Samson was at her place the other dusknite,” Damaj said suggestively, not even trying to hide his grin. “For all we know, he may have caught it. Careful before he spreads it to the rest of us. I told him not to go over there, but his lust was too greedy.”

I chuckled, shaking my head as Damaj waggled his brows. Damaj, broad as a small Taétàn—a species of giants who dwelled in our planets moons—had the kind of face sculpted by storms—handsome, with a sharp jaw and eyes that flickered like twin blue novas. His starry black skin glowed like liquid midnight.

“Snitch,” Samson growled, glaring like he could split him in half through the astroproge.

The rest of the team laughed.

“I don’t care what you all have going on in your personal lives. It has nothing to do with our scroll-ports,” I said, rubbing my arms as the lab chill slithered around me.

With a wave of my hand, the thermostone vents responded, releasing waves of heat into the air—warmth that wrapped around my ankles and shoulders like a familiar shawl.

“Have we collected all the data we need from the Fire Seraphs?”

A chorus of groans echoed immediately.

“*Fire Seraphim*. Bleh. Can’t stand ’em.”

“I’ll be glad when this project’s over,” someone added. I missed who spoke, but it sounded like Samson again.

“Burning, bleeding rotpots,” someone else muttered. “Just because they can turn into fire...”

“As if we can’t snuff them out in our sleep,” another mumbled.

“They’re *below* us in rank! But they act like they own the atēmos. As if the cosmos belong to them. Imagine that! Loweranks parading about as if they were Higher-anks! Rotting pieces of—”

“Enough,” I said, slicing clean through the commo-

tion. The sixteen remaining Statizens present all twitched in their screens, their disdain for the Seraphim plain. “I didn’t ask if you *liked* the Seraphim. I asked if we collected the data.”

A beat passed.

Then a reluctant voice spoke up. Katriyah.

“No, Natalia. Not all of it. We still haven’t determined the difference between Fire Seraphim with affinities for humid heat versus dry heat.”

“And we’re still analyzing the ones with molten-lava fire versus magma,” another chimed in. “Honestly, we won’t be done for a few wèks. It’s a lot of work.”

I crossed my arms, wings twitching behind me.

“You have three dawns. Max.”

“*Dawns?*” Katriyah said flatly. “That’s not going to work. We need wèks.”

“It’s going to have to. We have to publish our—”

Suddenly, the astroproje flared—a burst of sharp white light flooding the screen, silencing everyone. Someone had overridden my control. My mouth dropped open, already forming a righteous drag across all twelve realms—

Until I saw who it was.

My breath caught.

Upperexec Natorria Edenji.

Her image filled the center of the astroproje, stately and striking. Her celestial glow pulsed a deep lavender,

contouring her slender frame. Her wings, elemental with a gradient sheen and laced with sapphire smoke, hovered behind her like ancient script.

But it was her face—the frown etched between her brows, the tight pull of her lips, that made the air turn cold again.

“Wings high, Statizens,” she said, her voice clear and measured. “I have to interrupt your call to deliver some unfortunate news.”

Silence.

No one moved.

No one said a word.

If an Upperexec was on our call, without warning, something was seriously wrong. I thought back to the rise of the new Empràr and swallowed an unsettling feeling growing in my chest.

“Empràr Lucièn has begun rewriting the creeds for all Empyrean departments,” she continued, “with full backing from the Imperialists.”

The words hung in the air like heavy cloudstones.

“For your team specifically... there is a high probability he will sign a new creed ending villa work.”

What?! What did she mean he was changing one of the longest standing laws? Former Empràr Luther had established that creed, and it had greatly benefitted the Empyrean. Why in the burning Hyèls would Lucièn change that?

No one breathed.

The lab was silent. My team's faces were frozen on the screen, caught somewhere between annoyance and mounting disbelief.

"Once signed," she said, gaze locking onto mine, "you'll be required to shut down your villa labs and report to the Empràr's palace—permanently."

The breath I'd been holding escaped all at once—jagged, broken, like glass cracking across tile.

"Bleeding, rotting suns," someone cursed, sharp and low. I was too stunned to parcel out who let the words slip. My Statizens just stared, eyes wide, some blinking rapidly, some not blinking at all.

"How soon?" I asked, throat dry.

Natorria's eyes softened—but only slightly.

"As early as next wèk."

Next week.

I drew in a sharp breath. A long pause hung in the air.

"Ready yourselves," she said. "Everything may change without notice."

And just like that, her screen vanished—snapped out of existence like it had never been there.

I floated in my lab motionless. The glow of the astroproge flickered across my face. My wings trembled behind me, silent and still. And for the first time in many dawns, I had no idea what to say.



CHAPTER 3

TERROR OF THE EMPIRE

“**T**his is a load of bullrot!”

Samson’s outburst cracked across the astroproge like thunder. His square, furious face snapped into focus, every muscle in his jaw twitching as his wings flared and pulsed behind him. Sparks of ethèr shimmered across his shoulders, betraying just how barely contained his outrage was.

Diagonal from his screen, Damaj sat rigid at his desk, lips pressed into a flat line. His starlit skin glowed faintly, but steam—actual steam—rose from his forearms. His ethèr was reacting. Visibly.

No one spoke.

The silence was louder than any roar.

I gripped the edges of my cloudchair, the plush surface pressing into my palms as I tried—*tried*—to

breathe. A tremor, sharp and seething, began at the outermost tips of my wings. It slithered inward through the membranes, crawling down each bone, one by one, until it reached the talons at the core of my back.

My ethèr surged.

Uninvited. Uncontrolled.

A pulse of amber light radiated from my spine and rippled across the room, turning the lab into a hazy gold cocoon for half a breath. I clenched my fists, fingernails biting into the glowing softness of my skin. Power sizzled under the surface.

I was unraveling.

But I couldn't afford to break.

"I know this is unexpected," I said at last, forcing calm into my voice like stitching shut a wound. "And frankly, not what we wanted to hear."

Katriyah snorted. Her screen flickered—cloudy mist distorting her background. The edges of her projection blurred as her cloudy home pulsed behind her like a living entity. Her thin locs swayed gently in the breeze from her open windows. She rolled her eyes, frustration flashing bright in her elemental gaze. Her hands flew up in exasperation.

"There's still a chance it doesn't affect us," she argued, voice climbing in pitch, desperate for logic. "I know Natorria said what she said—but we have exemptions, right? We're with the Interplanetary Center for

Elemental Stats. Our lab setups are *designed* for remote function. The Empyrean and Imperialists can't just override that. They can't."

She shook her head harder this time, the panic inching in around her edges.

"We're scientists. Researchers. They know that. This is just... a miscommunication. We'll explain, and they'll listen. We'll fix it."

But before I could respond—

A soft *ding* echoed from the astroproge, the wingnote notifying the team of an angel incoming.

Another wingnote rang again, the *ding* almost blaring to my ears. The light on the call dimmed. A presence filtered in—one so unfamiliar, it turned the whole room still. A hush fell over my entire team as a small, floating figure emerged at the center of our screen. She was no taller than my hand. Clad in colorful glimmers, she was cloaked in sharpened grace.

A Vertù.

"What in the rotting ashes is a Vertù doing here?" Samentha muttered, her voice low and wary as she chimed in for the first time all call.

Beside her screen, Khadijah leaned forward in hers, her seven glowing wings pulled taut behind her. Her multi-colored eyes narrowed like they were slicing through illusions.

We all stared.

Vertùs didn't show up like this. Not on secure work calls. Not uninvited. And definitely not with that smug gleam behind their fluttering lashes.

"Hello, Statizens of the Interplanetary Center for Elemental Stats," the Vertù said smoothly, her voice clear despite her miniature size.

"I am Manouchka, a newly appointed courier from the Pearl Palace."

My throat tightened.

Vertù—the seventh lowest ranking angels and four lower than saerels—were angels born to serve. Aid. They maintained palaces, estates, and the lives of angels who could afford to hire their services for generations. They were only trusted by those in power. And power never brought good news for teams like mine.

I glanced at the cloudy clock in the corner of my screen. It was barely past the second light of dawn.

Why is a courier here this early?

Manouchka floated with an infuriating level of poise, her tiny form perfectly upright—her multi-colored skin of forest green and ocean blue hues shimmering proud—her face calm. Too calm.

"As you know," she continued, "Empràr Lucièn has begun enacting new creeds. He has also repealed several—including many that directly impact this division."

“This couldn’t have been sent via airriemail?” Katriyah snapped.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing, but even my own restraint wavered.

Manouchka turned toward Katriyah with a sneer so thin, it could slice glass. On anyone else, it might’ve been intimidating.

On her?

It was almost *cute*.

Almost. Until I remembered Vertùs could disarm and destroy with a single flick of their wings. Still, I caught Katriyah pinching her fingers together in her lap, slowly narrowing the space between them to mime Manouchka’s height. I had to press my knuckles to my lips to hide my smirk. Around me, low snorts broke out—stifled laughter trying not to become full-on hysteria. But the moment shattered when Manouchka delivered the final blow.

“The Empràr has extended a generous offer to this division—and to your adjacent teams within the department. He is giving you until Gibordawn of the coming Mekàd.”

We had until the twelfth day of the month to do *what* exactly? I sat up straighter. So did the rest of my team. All sixteen of them froze.

“Gibordawn to do...” I let my words trail off, though I already dreaded the answer.

Manouchka smiled. The kind of smile you wear when you know a bomb is about to drop and you want to watch it detonate.

“By the twelfth dawn of the mekàd, Emelle,” she said sweetly, “your Statizens may choose to accept a generous severance package.”

She paused.

“Or... every last one of them will be terminated.”

Her words hit like a guillotine. Not reassigned. Not relocated.

Terminated.

“You have until the end of this dawn to begin submitting your acceptances,” she added with a wink. “Consider this a final act of kindness from your Empràr. Decline it, and you risk facing the full ire of the Emphyrean.”

And just like that—

She vanished.

Her screen clouded out in a flash of glimmering static. The silence that followed was worse than before. It expanded—wide, breathless, and final. Then—

Chaos.

Voices collided. Wings flared in pixelated bursts. Screens shook. Desks rattled. Some of my angels were yelling. Others had gone pale, whispering frantically off-screen. A few sat still, staring into nothingness. It was too much. Too loud. Too *sudden*.

The noise swallowed me. Wrapped around me like smoke in my lungs. I couldn't move. I couldn't think. I slid from my chair, my knees buckling as I sank to the floor. Palms pressed flat against the soft clouds of my lab floor, I bent low, trembling. The fog in my chest expanded until it was pressing on every bone, every breath.

Anger.

Dread.

Fear.

Panic.

It all swelled, pouring from every part of me until my wings trembled and a light inside of me dimmed. My vision blurred. My throat burned. And no amount of blinking would stop it. Tears stung the edges of my eyes. And this time—I didn't fight them. I bowed my head. And I let myself break.



CHAPTER 4

EVERYTHING'S ON FIRE

“**W**hat are the chances we can convince the Fire Seraphim to light Lucièn’s hide on fire until he’s fully set ablaze?”

Khadijah’s voice rang out over the astroproge, every syllable laced with exhaustion and barely veiled fury. Still bent to my knees, I couldn’t even respond. I didn’t have the strength.

“Or we get the Water Seraphim to drown him,” Damaj muttered, quieter this time, like he was speaking to the air itself.

That dragged my attention back. My head lifted—just barely. The lab felt heavier than it had in all my cycles. Like grief had settled into the clouds and thickened the very breath I was trying to draw.

“Statizens! You do know it’s high-level treason to joke about killing an Empràr, right?”

I tried to sound stern. Controlled. But my voice cracked at the edges, stretched thin by fatigue and dread.

“Who’s joking?”

I didn’t catch who mumbled the words. My eyes widened as I gaped at my scientists. Across the astroproge, my Statizens didn’t flinch. Didn’t apologize. They didn’t even pretend to care. And honestly? I couldn’t blame them.

I sighed, shoulders trembling as I exhaled slowly through my nose.

“Let’s reel it in,” I said, voice more prayer than command. “First off, you’re not getting fired. I don’t know how, and I don’t know what it’ll cost me—but I won’t let that happen. Not on my watch.”

Their faces flickered in and out of clarity as static from the astroproge distorted the screen. I could see Damaj’s jaw tighten. Katriyah’s eyes were wet but fierce. Samentha’s lips trembled with the effort not to cry. I straightened my spine, wings stretching slightly behind me.

“Second,” I continued, now looking into every single face, “none of you—and I mean *none*—will take that severance package. The Emphyrean can keep its dirty coin. None of you will be bought so easily.”

My voice turned sharp.

“My Statizens are not expendable. We are not pawns. We are scientists. Innovators. We don’t get to be dismissed like baboon dung. Are we clear?”

“Aye, Supervisor Natalia.” Alexsef’s voice rang out like a stone in the ocean—steady, grounded, ancient. I turned toward his screen. He didn’t look away. “We’re going nowhere.”

The quiet confidence in his words sank into my chest like a weight. A rooting weight. I nodded once, letting the strength of his solidarity settle into my trembling bones.

“Good,” I breathed. “Now. Let’s do what we do best. We work. We execute excellence. We make the Empyrean suffocate beneath the weight of our worth.” My eyes flashed. Their chins lifted imperceptibly, lighting a fire in my gut. “Who’s got the latest stats on the Electric Seraphim?”

“I got it!” Samentha jumped in, her voice brighter than it had been all dawn. Her curls bounced slightly as she grinned into her astroproge, and for a few heartbeats, I could feel the familiar rhythm of our work begin to hum again. Samentha waved her hand, channeling her ethèr. The energy spilled into her device like liquid light, coiling upward before dissolving into a clean, clear projection.

A living graph spun in front of us—four Electric

Seraphim hovering mid-air, their skin aglow with power. Two aèls. Two aèn. The females and males were all clothed in radiant ivory silk, the glow of their bodies turning their garments translucent in places. Their skin—dark, rich, gleaming like fresh obsidian—was laced with shimmering blue-white bolts of light. Ethèr pulsed visibly beneath their flesh.

Then they began to fyuse. The supernatural morphing of their bodies from flesh to ethèr was astounding.

My breath caught in my throat.

One of the aèn shimmered violently, the males torso splitting open like a crack of thunder, the lower half of his body unraveling into arcs of living lightning. Across from him, the aèl's fyusing was smoother—the female's shape softening into voltage lines, her form dancing with contained currents rather than chaotic bolts.

“This second aèn,” Samentha explained with awe, “morphs almost exclusively into lightning flashes—raw, unbridled energy. The aèl beside him leans toward controlled voltage streams. Interestingly, this divide appears once Seraphim pass their thirtieth cycle in the First Age...”

Her words rolled on, smooth and practiced, as she narrated the stunning dance of elemental change. Her passion, her intellect, her joy in the work—it lit up my chamber. My laboratory seemed to come alive at the

cadence of Samentha's voice as she took us through one data report after another. And for just a moment, we were anchored again.

We were in our element.

Then—

The *ding* came.

Not loud. But deafening nonetheless.

I closed my eyes, my body already bracing for the next blow.

“I swear,” Khadijah said through clenched teeth, “if one more wingnote goes off—I *will* cloudout and never return.”

“He just got here!” Katriyah snapped. “His crusty backside hasn’t even warmed the throne yet. How is every long standing pillar of the Empyrean already burning?”

“Someone make it stop,” Damaj muttered, slamming a palm down so hard the image blurred as his wings disappeared from view.

The air grew thick again. Tense. Suffocating.

My temple throbbed in time with my nine pounding hearts.

I whispered a desperate plea.

“Ehyeh... please.”

Then louder:

“Guys, breathe. We’re going to get through this. We’re going to figure out—”

“Figure out *what?*” Katriyah snapped. Her voice cracked like a whip. “Were you not listening to the airriemail?”

I flinched. I wasn't expecting the rage in her tone. Not directed towards me. I swallowed it down refusing to lash out in retort.

“Let's see what this one says, yeah?” I said.

I didn't wait for approval. I swiped to open the airriemail. A scroll appeared. Another reader's voice—an aèn of Saerel rank this time, emotionless, and heavy with unshakable authority. *Why hadn't they used the Vertù again?* I wondered.

“Statizens of the Interplanetary Center for Elemental Stats. As of this moment, all elemental projects must be halted. All interdepartmental communication is suspended. You are forbidden from publicizing or sharing research. The work of this division... ends now. By direct order of Empràr Lucièn Andarre.”

The scroll disintegrated. My wings sagged behind me. I felt a piece of my spirit crack. My Statizens didn't speak. They didn't move. Some of them looked frozen in disbelief. Others were already breaking apart on screen.

Then—

Samentha gasped.

“My graph—it's gone!”

Her voice pitched upward in panic as her screen

flickered and dulled. She waved her hands, summoning ethèr. Nothing. She tried again. And again. The screen remained blank.

“Oh my skies,” she whispered. “I’m locked out. My ethèr’s not working. They—he—*they locked me out.*”

“Isn’t that what he wants?” Samson growled. “He wants us powerless.”

Another *ding* rang out.

“I swear—” Khadijah began.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Katriyah wailed.

“Someone burn the whole Emphyrean down,” Damaj barked. “I’m done.”

The temperature in the lab dropped. My skin prickled.

“Guys,” I pleaded, “breathe. Just... *breathe*. We’ll figure this out—”

Another scroll unraveled. This time, a soft-voiced aèl read it. Sweet. Almost motherly. Where in the burning suns were all of these angels coming from? I wasn’t used to our department being affronted by so many couriers of the Emphyrean.

“Statizens. Empràr Lucièn requires that all previously published scrollports and articles be amended and republished by end-of-dawn. Personal airriemails will contain the exact deletions required. Any unedited scrollports will be reviewed by the palace. The original scribes will be held accountable.”

The scroll vanished.

My skin went cold.

“On that note,” I said sharply, louder than intended, “this call is over. You heard the command. We’ve got until the end of this dawn. Do what you can. What you must. *Focus*. Get through this dawn. With excellence. Got it?”

“Yes, Supervisor Natalia.”

Their voices were paper-thin.

“Wings high.”

“Wings high!”

“Cloudout.”

One by one, the screens winked out.

Silence.

And then I broke again. I fell to my knees, hands trembling against the cloudy floor, wings curled around me like a failing shield. The sound of my breath came in shallow gasps as the weight of it all finally fell squarely on my shoulders.

“Ehyeh,” I whispered. “I pray. I’m faithful to Temple. I’m rooted in my beliefs of the Saint Script. Why—why would you let this happen? What did I—*we*—do wrong?”

Tears slid silently down my cheeks as I collapsed inward, sobbing into my hands, unable to hold back the pain that poured from every fiber of my being.

“Where are you?”

I whispered it over and over. Until even that faded

NATALIA

into breathless weeping. Until the floor below me felt like the only stable thing left in my world.

And still, there was no answer.

In the quiet of the lab, there was only the sound of my hearts breaking.



CHAPTER 5
ALL HOPE ISN'T LOST

A soft brush against my cheek tugged me back to the present. Tobraxi's cool, crystalized fur nudged beneath my chin as she curled against my side. She didn't speak. She didn't need to. Her presence was enough—especially when Ehyeh, our great eternal King, felt galaxies away. After sobbing until my hearts ached raw, I launched into the air, wings flaring wide.

I looked down at my shien.

“Let's go. We're getting some air. We're going to the Peak!”

I shot out of the lab like a comet, wings slicing through each level of my villa. Tobraxi tore after me, paws pounding the clouds at full speed down the halls. I wouldn't let the Empyrean smother what little joy I

had left this dawn. With a swift motion, I snatched my sandals and satchel mid-flight—slipping both on without slowing down—and burst through the entry of my home into the cloudy landscape of my community.

I paused, letting the cool breeze settle across my cheeks. The clouds around me curled in thick, iridescent whorls—interwoven around villas of varying sizes, all floating in delicate balance above the golden atmosphere. Billows Garden was tucked away in this pocket of sky—densely packed clouds lit with faint shimmer, reflecting the passing stars drifting through the galactic atèmos above. Most villas had two or more gilded chariots glinting in the light, parked on a stretch of golden road that wound lazily through lush gardens.

I glanced at mine and smiled.

The burst of colors from the flowers I'd planted over the cycles bloomed in defiance of the chaos storming through the Empyrean. Rich ambers. Deep violets. Creamy golds. All blossoming beneath the blaze of the triplet suns.

I turned from them, slowly spreading all seven pairs of my wings. Their elemental golden-amber hues shimmered with tired light. I let the tri-sôlsunes above warm them for a beat.

"Tobraxi, this way."

Pitching southward, I angled my wings and

launched into the clouds. I could have taken one of my chariots. But this dawn, I needed to fly.

The wind rushed past me like a balm. I closed my eyes for a moment, savoring the tug of it through the thick, wavy coils of my hair. My skin tingled where the breeze kissed it.

Below me, Tobraxi ran across the clouds—crystalline paws padding silently over vapor trails. We traveled together in silence, both of us clinging to the momentary peace of flight.

As I curved around the bend of a larger cloud cluster, a group of angels flew toward us—wings flared, laughter on the wind. They were beautiful, their starlit skin catching the light, their wings radiant with elemental brilliance. I recognized one of them immediately.

"Wings high, Alisha!"

She glanced up, her multi-colored amber and scarlet eyes blinking warmly.

"Wings high, Natalia! Headed to the Peak?"

"Yeah. I need flowers and solace." I hovered near them. "Any news?"

One of her companions snorted and shook the tight tufts of his afro.

"Too much. Honestly, burn the entire Empyrean down at this point."

We all laughed. But it was that bitter sort of laugh—

the kind that meant we might actually agree. I couldn't help but think of Damaj saying the same earlier.

"It's that bad?" I looked at Alisha.

"Depends on who you ask," she replied, her wings pulsing lightly as she tucked a curl behind the winged curve of her ear. "It's either we've entered Pasaille and reached heaven—or—"

"We're in the bowels of the Hyèls," her friend cut in. He snorted again. "And I'm apt to believe we're flying in the latter."

I shivered. The thought of being cast into Hyèl—trapped with the Fallen for endless time—made my hearts skip.

"Well. I suppose I'll find out soon enough. Is Gigi still open?"

"To her own regret," Alisha laughed. "At this rate, we might lose her. Everything's unraveling."

A beam of sôlight crossed my cheeks, briefly warming my bones.

"We're definitely not losing our favorite florist."

I patted down the sides of my gown and gave them a parting smile.

"I've gotta cloudin soon. I'll see you again... with better news, I hope. Wings high!"

"Wings high, Natalia! Don't work too hard."

"I'll try not to!" I chuckled, ruffling Tobraxi's crystal mane. She purred and nuzzled into my side.

"Come on, Tobi. Let's get us some flowers, hm?"

We flew deeper into the sky, leaving Alisha's group behind. The endless sweep of cloud shifted into the vibrant energy of the Peak. The marketplace thrummed with life. At its center stood a towering glass spire, wrapped in radiant flowers and flecked with crystals that sparkled like shards of fallen stars. Shops and boutiques spiraled around it—music and conversation floating in the air, mingling with the scent of sweet herbs and etherien spices.

"Are we going to Teyonna and Christophe?" Tobraxi panted beside me, doing her best to keep up.

"The one and only." I beamed. "They always have the best flowers—and the inside scoop. Plus, you deserve some fetafa."

Her head snapped toward me, those shimmering eyes wide.

"Really?"

"Really, really."

"Don't play with my emotions, Tali."

"I'd never do that to you, Tobi. Come on."

I landed lightly on a golden perch and let my wings flutter, soaking up air to recharge. My spine stretched and compressed, wings gradually restoring their strength. With one hand on Tobraxi's head, I began weaving through the crowd.

The Peak was packed.

Most angels were Saerels like me, but I caught glimpses of Seraphim, Cherubim, Syëlles, and even a few Vertù gliding above the crowd. Angels of every rank, shape, and ethèr signature moved through the space—some laughing, others locked in tense whispers.

And then there were the beasts.

Some angels brought their shien—the oversized dogs barking after one another, some more aggressive than others—while some angels flew with winged animals or glass-scaled serpents. The most jarring were the darkerèth—beasts of stone and smoke, glittering scales, with gleaming fangs and elegant terror in their eyes. Beautiful. Ancient. Dangerous.

I kept my head down, pushing through, until I reached the entrance of my favorite shop.

"Teyonna?"

A shorter aèl, barely past my waist, zipped around the corner in a flurry of bright fabric and flower petals. Her reflection danced across the many mirrors in the shop—two-toned skin, mahogany and sand, shining in the light.

Teyonna was a Cherubim through and through—colorful, fierce, and full of opinions.

"Natalia!" she cried, a flower sticking out of her wild top-knot. "This entire Empyrean is going up in flames! I'm this close to jumping ship and planting myself in

another realm entirely. I swear—if Lucièn sneezes one more edict—"

"Teyonna, breathe," I said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Let me guess. You've been hit with... changes, too?"

"Changes?" she shrieked. "CHANGES?"

She barked out a laugh.

"No, what you mean is the burning flames of Hyèl! Every Saerel that's flown in here this dawn has been shaking like a fouled spell. Lives are being upended. And Empràr Lucièn? He's just warming up."

"Maybe there's a strange method to all of this madness? Maybe it's some kind of experiment and then eventually everything will go back to normal?"

Teyonna froze, then turned slowly. Her smile was sharp. Unsettling. Something dark flashed in her eyes. My chest tightened at her chilling glare.

"Oh. So nothing's changed for the Statizens, then?"

I flinched.

She knew.

How much more had spread?

She sighed, gaze softening.

"It's happening to more of us than you think." She glanced out the shop window. "And this? This is just the beginning."

I followed her gaze.

The street outside pulsed with motion. Some angels

rushed like they were late to destiny, their faces painted with beaming grins. Others strolled past, heads down, faces locked in hideous scowls. A divide had cracked the Empyrean wide open.

"A few lavenders and peonies to cheer you up?"

I nearly wept.

"Yes, please. Also—do you have any fetafa? I promised Tobi. I really don't want to drag myself to Dezten's this dawn. And where's Christophe?"

"Hiding." Teyonna snorted. "He said he wasn't dealing with anymore pissy angels for the next three dawns. He's probably already home, yelling at the tellevorb. And yes, darling, I have fetafa. One moment."

While she fetched the order, I worked on my breath.

Inhale.

Stretch the lungs.

Let the ethèr swell and recede.

When Teyonna returned, I had little left to offer—just a small smile and a quick hug before I took my flowers, the fetafa, and a sack of disappointment and flew back into the clouds, Tobraxi in tow.



CHAPTER 6
BETWEEN ROCKS AND
HARD PLACES

"**H**ere you go, Tobi. Just don't be messy. I don't want honey and cheese all over the place."

Back home and preparing for another meeting, I quickly ripped a chunk of fetafa and placed it in Tobraxi's favorite crystal bowl beside her water orb. After washing my hands, I descended back down into the lab.

Tobraxi and I had a quiet, swift flight home, my head buried deep in thought. My world had shifted too fast—my normal obliterated before I could even fully prepare to transition into another. It felt like the rug had been yanked from beneath my wings. Like I'd been pushed through a portal without warning.

I felt... betrayed.

By Ehyeh.

And the anger, mounting like a spiraling wave, was beginning to eclipse everything else. I wasn't the only one. The other Saerels in my department—fierce, brilliant, tempered by fire—were all feeling it too. And it was skyrocketing.

Flying into the lab, I settled into a cloudchair and released a deep, tired sigh. I should've brought some peonies down—something to calm my mind, something fragrant and grounding. But I was too frustrated to even reach for beauty.

"What are you doing, Ehyeh?" I asked aloud into the quiet.

Several vials bubbled over with forgotten chemical mixtures, little trails of steam curling toward the ceiling like ghostly ribbons. I'd need to clean them up once I was up to it.

The stillness of the lab unnerved me.

Usually, I thrived in this silence. Found inspiration in the sacred hush. But now, the quiet felt hollow. *Vast. Wrong.*

"Where are you?" I whispered. "Why are you allowing this? You're a king of peace. So why allow all of this endless chaos?"

No answer.

A single *ding* echoed in the lab, snapping me from

the edge of a spiral. A reminder—I had only a little more time before my next meeting.

Burning skies.

I didn't want to see my astropurge again for the next mekàd. Hearing anymore wingnotes sound off before the next month would be too soon. I'd had *enough*.

I floated up from my seat, resolving to center myself in the only thing that made sense—work. I crossed the chamber to one of the long tables, its surface glowing with overlapping blueprints of Fire and Water Seraphim.

With a flick of my wrist and a sharp snap, I summoned music into the space. A low, calming melody filled the air—soft strings and atmospheric hums. Something ancient, sacred. The kind of sound that gave structure to silence.

I leaned over the data spread. Their bodies were outlined in radiant element—the Fire Seraphim bathed in deep, flickering reds, the Water Seraphim etched in layered shades of blue and silver. I could see where each stored the bulk of their power. Where the ethèr entered. Where it flowed. Where it surged outward when called.

Fire Seraphim had always fascinated me.

Their raw intensity. The sheer range of their power.

The multiplicity of it—how they could burn, shield, flare, cleanse, and destroy in the same breath. The way their energy flared wide, alive and unpredictable. Placed against Water Seraphim, they seemed unstoppable. And yet... there was a quiet grace to the Water seraphs. A reverence.

The cords of power flowing through their bodies gleamed like rivers of light. Vibrant. Thrumming. Endless. Their ethèr wove through every limb, anchored in their abdomen and back—like chasms of stillness that ran so deep, you might drown before you ever reached the bottom. Their range was limited, sure. But the depth of their ethèr? It was immeasurable. They weren't showy. But they were steady. Enduring. Sacred.

I was still lost in that thought when the second *ding* went off.

This one louder.

"Rotting skies," I grumbled.

I rushed to my desk, waving my hand to summon the astroproge. The cloudy device crackled into existence, light coalescing into a clear projection. I could only blink when the screen cleared and revealed the angel's face within.

Natorria Edenji.

Upperexec. Stone-faced. Regal. Every inch of divine authority.

"Natorria!" I exclaimed, startled.

She smiled. It didn't reach her ears.

Something was wrong.

"Natorria..." My voice trailed into a breathless space. The air shifted. The lab felt smaller.

"Good news or bad news, Natalia?" she asked, her voice smooth but distant.

I swallowed.

That sinking stone I carried in my gut shifted, pressed harder. My winged ears twitched against the loose strands of hair falling around my temples. My head throbbed. My palms grew slick. Everything in me screamed that something was coming—something I wasn't ready for. I tried to take a deep breath.

A mistake.

The air lodged in the channels of my hearts, refusing to rise.

"Does the good outweigh the bad?" I asked.

Natorria's smile wavered.

That was answer enough.

Rotting, burning suns.

"Unfortunately," she said, "it doesn't."

The words sat thick in the air. A breeze slipped through the thermostone vents. It brushed against my shoulders, too cold, too sudden. I shivered.

I heard a soft rustling upstairs—probably Tobraxi, sneaking more pieces of fetafa than she was supposed to. For a moment, I envied her innocence. Envied that she didn't have to face dawn-to-dawn issues like I did.

I straightened in my chair. Planted both feet. Smoothed my expression into something resembling optimism.

"Well," I said, voice clipped but trying, "let's go with the good then."

Natorria smiled.

It didn't reach her eyes.

"Very well." A breath. "Your position as SES, Supervisory Elemental Statizen, over the Plans and Ops divisions in the Interplanetary Center for Elemental Stats is secure," she said. "You will not be terminated. You will not be placed under random review. You may remain working in your lab from home, with full clearance."

I nearly screamed.

A jittery relief tore through me like shooting stars. I felt it bloom across my chest, light-headed with glee. My wings even fluttered slightly. This—this was *everything*. Exactly what I'd wanted. My hands flew to my chest over my racing hearts, and I nearly laughed.

Maybe I'd jumped the darkerèth too soon.

Maybe my world wasn't all falling apart.

Maybe I owed Ehyeh a thank-you offering at Temple after all. Smile stretching wide, hope rising like dawn over the sea, I looked back at Natorria.

"What's the bad news?"

She frowned. She tried restraining her emotions

and failed. A somberness filled her gaze that sent a crack through my chest. Everything froze.

Natorria didn't speak for some time, gathering the nerve to deliver the blow. She didn't blink. Didn't shift. Her multi-colored, starry eyes dimmed. My breath caught.

"Why do you look like that?" I asked quietly. "Why won't you just say it?"

Silence.

"Natorria?"

She sighed. The kind of sigh that comes with heart-break. Her shoulders sagged. Her wings drooped in resignation. And when she finally lifted her chin to speak, it was with effort.

"Your entire team will be terminated."

I stopped breathing.

"They will not report to the palace. Their work will cease. Their access to classified information and resources will be severed. As of now, they've been placed on the Empyrean's evaluation list. And come the end of the coming dawns..." She paused. "...they will be removed from this office. They will work here no longer. Only you will remain."



CHAPTER 7

A DESPERATE CRY

I sat back in my seat, stunned.

Silence permeated my laboratory like a deafening roar. It wasn't quiet—it was a pressure. A presence. A force that pressed into my ears, sank into my skin, and stole the breath from my lungs.

I blinked back at Natorria, unable to form words. What she'd just said didn't make any sense. No matter how many times I ran it through my mind, it refused to compute.

I refused to receive it. Refused to process. Refused to accept any of what she said.

My entire team, terminated?

No.

No.

"I don't follow," was all I could manage, my voice hollow, flat.

I sat erect in my cloudchair, stiff and bracing, waiting for her to confirm that this was all some twisted, ridiculous joke. That the comm had glitched. That the scrolls were wrong.

The air in my lungs constricted. My breaths came short and shallow, catching between my hearts. I could feel my wings pulling taut, the membranes trembling—brittle, tense, ready to snap.

Anger bloomed like wildfire beneath my skin, heat swelling in my stomach, rising up my throat, begging to erupt. I teemed with mounting vexation begging to be unleashed.

Natorria swallowed, and I caught the glimmer of grief in her eyes. She didn't look like a messenger. She looked like a mourner. She was hurting, too.

Natorria loved her teams. She'd fought to find the right angels—those with the heart and skill to build the Empyrean into something meaningful. She'd read their scrollports, memorized their credentials, and made room for their potential. She'd fought for them, trained them, believed in them. And now?

Now she was being told to cut them all loose.

I could see it in the weight of her galactic stare. The bow of her shoulders. The quiet quiver of her wings. I wanted to hold space for her. But right now? I couldn't.

Because this meant I'd have to carry her news to my team. But I wouldn't.

I would not.

"This is a lot. I know," Natorria said, voice quiet. "Frankly, most of it doesn't make sense and—"

"Alexsef can't afford to retire yet," I breathed, my quiet voice sharpened like a knife.

Natorria flinched, clearly taken aback. Her mouth opened, then shut again, her starry skin dimming, her innate glow growing dull.

"He lives on his own," I continued, my tone hardening. "His younglings don't even live in the Empyrean. I'm not sure they're even in this realm anymore. He is his own provider, and his benefits haven't kicked in yet. His scrolls are still being processed. He's got no safety net."

"Natalia—"

"Khadijah just welcomed her first youngling," I pushed on, a fire unfurling in the pit of my stomach. "Alone, might I add, because her mate had their soulu bond *broken*. So he could turn around and bond again." I paused, letting it sink in. "To her satara."

Natorria's nostrils flared. "I had no idea Khadijah— ooh, I would've had my sister clipped!"

"Yeah, well, Khadijah doesn't have that luxury. She has to raise her little one on her own. And she just moved provinces. Had to relocate to the Shaded Clouds

just to afford the space for her and her seedling." Fire coursed through my veins. I clenched my fists, seething. "You know how far the Shaded Clouds is from the palace?" I asked, my voice sharp as a blade.

Natorria sighed, but said nothing.

"At least three hôrs by chariot. But I'm pretty sure she sold her chariot, Natorria. So she'd have to fly. That's five, maybe six hôrs of flight. One way. And our wings can only carry so much weight for so long. That's ten to twelve hôrs of flight, *per dawn*. And she's doing it just to make ends meet."

"I know this is going to be hard—"

"Then there's Damaj," I said, cutting her off. "He moved to our Empyrean from another realm. Another *realm*. He's not originally from the Elvriel realm. I'm pretty sure he came from Astraea. He's hardly even had the chance to get familiar with living in Epherelle. You remember what it took for him to get clearance? The documentation? The trials? The endless tests? The actual *crossing* from one realm to another? Let alone making it into our cosm? You can't just move from elsewhere to our planet without extensive processing!"

I was shaking now. My nails pressed into my palms. My blood boiled.

"He worked himself to the bones of his wings to be here. Am I supposed to crush his dreams now? Tell him

‘Oops, sorry. The Empràr says you need to go back to your planet’? Is that what you want me to say?"

Natorria's mouth hung open slightly. Her expression was stricken—lips trembling, wings half-folded, like she was trying to brace herself against the weight of everything I'd thrown at her.

"You've lost your rotting mind, Natorria," I spat. "Especially if you think for one moment that I'm going to stand before the angels I care for and deliver that kind of death sentence. Because that's what it is. It's not a termination. It's a burial."

I stood, trembling.

"This is happening because one egotistical, sadistic, power-hungry, newly-crowned Empràr thinks he can toss departments like stale bread to noireagles in the square!" I wrestled with my ethèr as it flared, demanding to be free. It was a fight of will to hold onto the reins of my composure. "I won't do it. I *will not* deliver this news."

I stared her down.

"Now, if there's nothing else you're here to tell me, I need a moment."

Natorria loosed a slow, long breath. Her cheeks were flushed. She opened her mouth, looked as if she'd say something, then closed it again. Her shoulders sank as if I'd poured the full weight of the skies upon them. Without another word, she clouded out.

I sprang to my feet and launched into the air. I raced out of the lab, up the ramp, and flew straight for my prayer chamber. My hearts were pounding. My wings burned. My vision swam. The moment I entered the intimate, veiled chamber, I rushed to my Saint Scrypt and flung it open.

The holy scroll unfurled at my touch—and as it rolled out, verses lit onto the page as if freshly written, glowing ink trailing into place like stardust spun by otherworldly hands. It never ceased to awe me. To see the Scrypt *alive*.

But right now, I wasn't in awe.

I was in rage.

"No, Ehyeh. I don't accept this."

My scream bounced off the walls like a wave of thunder crashing inside a canyon.

"How could you let this happen?" I paced the chamber, wings flaring with the rise of my anger.

"What is happening? Why are you letting it? What have we angels done to deserve this punishment?"

My chest heaved.

"Why won't you end this madness? Why won't you intervene? Lucièn must be stopped!"

I turned, spun in fury, and slammed a wing into the cloudy floor. The impact sent tremors through the room. Gentle scuffs echoed on the other side of the

veiled door. Tobraxi was there, pressing her paws to the door, trying to get in.

"Not now, Tobraxi."

She whined at the hiss in my voice.

"I said not now!"

I spun back to the Scrypt.

"And you!" I shouted. "You tell us to serve with excellence. To steward our angels like we wish to be stewarded. To obey the commands and receive the benefits!" I pointed, seething. "Well, where are the asheating benefits, Ehyeh?"

Tears streamed down my face. My voice broke under the weight of my grief.

"In one dawn, everything has changed. And there's nothing I can do about it. If I have to make peace with that, so be it. But my entire team, too?"

I bent over my knees, heaving as air constricted in my lungs.

"Are you sitting on your throne of gold and iron, twiddling your thumbs while we burn? Where *are* you?!"

I collapsed to my knees. Wailed. Sobbed until I was breathless. Pounded the cloudy floor until my hands were numb.

Tobraxi scratched at the door again. Soft, persistent. But I didn't move. I stayed there—head bowed, body

trembling—pouring every fragment of my soul into the quiet between us.

I didn't know how long I cried. Only that, eventually, the sobs subsided. My hearts slowed. My vision cleared. And the rage gave way to ache. To yearning. To prayer.

"Please, Ehyeh," I whispered, voice hoarse. "I have only one request. Just one."

I swallowed around the swollen knot in my throat, blinking away the blariness in my vision.

"If I must return to the palace, so be it. If I must endure hardship, so be it. But *please*—let all of my angels be spared. My entire team, Ehyeh. Not one can be terminated."

I took a breath, stabilizing myself on my hands and knees. My wings trembled under the weight of my stress. I curled on the floor, too weakened to do anything else.

"That is my humble request. I will go. But they must be spared."

The words escaped from the deepest part of me, carried out on my breath like incense.

And as the final syllables left my lips, a rush of peace swept through the chamber—warm, immediate, unnatural. It wrapped around me like wings. Like arms. Like breath.

Like an answer.

He didn't respond audibly.

But I *felt* Him.

And that was enough.

I rocked back on my heels, eyes closing, as I leaned into the presence that had flooded the chamber. I was being held. I was being *heard*. When I opened my eyes, I caught the streak of fading gold through the window. The clouds were painted with the soft hues of coming dusk.

“Shoot! My scrollports!”

I scrambled to my feet, wrenched open the door.

Tobraxi barked as I flew past her.

“Sorry, Tobi! I’ve got so much work to do—you’re on your own for now!”

With a flick of my wrist, I opened the back door of the villa.

“Close it behind you!” I shouted over my shoulder as I dove toward my lab. I raced past the open doors, shot into my cloudchair—landing hard—then swiped my hands in a wide arc. The astroproge flared to life, scrollports stacking like stars across the screen.

“Rotting skies,” I muttered.

A *ding* sounded from my other desk.

I ignored it.

I opened the first scrollport. The amendments blinked in red.

Forty percent.

If I were a cussing angel, I’d have let loose a string of

words long enough to burn holes in the clouds. Grunting, I threw my hair into a messy bun and dove in. The *ding* kept sounding behind me.

I ignored it.

It dinged again.

Then again.

Suddenly, the tellevorb in my lab opened itself. Anchor Sondessa's voice filled the lab. I sneered at the screen, wanting to claw her eyes out.

"Breaking news, Epherelliens! We've just learned Empràr Lucièn has begun keeping his promise to all of our angels by initiating mass cuts—starting with the Interplanetary Center. As of now, twenty two million workers have been terminated. The divisions of these angels are no longer operational."

I whipped around and slammed my wings together. All seven pairs. The resounding *crack* echoed through the lab. The tellevorb winked closed immediately.

"That's enough of you, Sondessa," I hissed. "Asheating traitor. I hope you choke on it."

I turned back to my scrollport.

There was still work to do. Deadline or not. Burnout or not. This would not be the end. Once I finished, I *would* find a way to get my angels spared. Lucièn could kick a stone and rot. I didn't care what had been decreed. My team would be spared, and I would find a way.



CHAPTER 8

BUT EHYEH!

Back creaking, I sat back in my cloudchair, slumping with exhaustion. I'd managed to knock out seven scrollports just in time before the end of the working dawn arrived.

"Rotting ashes, I am wiped."

My wings slumped behind me, finally releasing all the tension stored up in them as I worked nonstop—article after article, edit after edit, without a single break. I'd rewritten my fingers sore, my wings stiff, my fôrs dimming with every blink.

I pushed myself up from the seat, opting to walk—more like scuffle—to the washroom. My joints protested. My muscles groaned. My wings dragged behind me like a defeated banner.

I yawned as I made it into the washroom, relieved

myself, washed my hands, and came back out into the laboratory.

I paused in the center of the room, eyes sweeping over everything I loved.

The glass walls shimmered in the low light, vials glowed from their nests, scrollbooks were scattered across the counter like relics. Notes were pinned to floating boards, ideas and half-theories left mid-thought on data-screens still hovering in the corners.

“Guess it’s going to be time for me to say goodbye.”

The words cracked gently in my throat.

I looked around at my space—the one place where my mind could wander and wonder, the one room where my thoughts were free to take root, bloom, and evolve.

This wasn’t just a lab.

It was my sanctuary. My womb of discovery. My personal cathedral of creation.

“I can’t believe I have to leave the comfort and safety of all this,” I breathed, slowly turning in place, taking in the lush-but-lived-in beauty of the space.

Everything here pulsed with *me*. My energy, my thoughts, my devotion. The thermostone panels. The luminescent boards. The cluster of cracked crystals from the last explosive test. The remnants of genius and chaos interwoven like spirit and soul.

I loved my lab. It wasn't just where I worked—it was where I came alive.

"I have no idea what's going to happen next," I said softly. "I'm just trusting Ehyeh has my back. That he's going to work this all out. No matter what it looks like."

I yawned again, the chill of the cloudy floor curling up into my toes. I shuffled back to my desk, wondering what I could eat for supprèst. My stomach was beginning to gnaw at itself. I needed something warm and easy for dinner—something I could cook quickly, eat fast, and follow with a long bath before collapsing into bed.

Reaching my seat, I plopped down with a heavy groan, stretching out my arms, back, toes, and all seven wing pairs. Bones cracked. Joints popped. My body sang in relief as I released a contended breath.

Wiping my face with both hands, I clicked open the last scrollport I had edited, dragged it to its proper folder in my astroproge, and began clicking out of every tab for the dawn.

Just as I reached for the final one, a soft *ding* echoed through the lab.

"I'm about to make everything work-related silent," I grumbled.

I was ready to swipe it away—already mid-motion—when my wrist brushed the edge of the astroproge,

accidentally triggering the alert. The device flared to life before I could stop it.

“No,” I breathed, panicking. I moved to close the window before anyone saw me.

“Ah, Natalia! Just the angel we were waiting for.”

Burning skies.

A smile snapped onto my face—a tired, awkward smile that instantly wavered the moment I registered who was on the call.

My entire team.

My blood iced over. My limbs locked.

There, front and center, was Natorria. Her screen glowed at the top of the astropoge like a crystal at the peak of a crown, while the rest of my team’s screens orbited hers in a tight formation.

All of them wore wary expressions—faces scrunched in cautious confusion. Their eyes darted across the screens, silently trying to ask me: *Did you know about this? What’s happening?*

Why was Natorria calling us this late?

And why now, right before cloudout?

My pulse quickened. My hearts pounded in my chest. My ears burned.

“Natorria,” I said, flat and dry, “to what do we all owe the pleasant surprise?”

Samson snorted.

Damaj grunted—his galactic ocean-blue eyes locked on Natorria with slow-burning intensity. The contrast between his dark, ebony skin and those luminous multi-blue eyes always reminded me of stars against night.

Natorria, to her credit, wasn't fazed by our sharp tones or our exasperated glares. On the contrary, she was glowing. Unlike earlier in the dawn, her smile was wide. Blinding, almost. Her wings fluttered softly behind her. Her eyes gleamed like the atèmos themselves, and her hair floated like a halo, radiant and unshaken. She looked like joy incarnate. I loved that for her. I did. But it didn't do anything to erase the nerves clawing their way through my gut.

"Natorria, spit it out," I said, sharper now. "We need to cloudout. Seriously. This dawn, I don't care for a single blink of overtime."

She laughed.

Laughed.

What in all the Elledelle realms was happening?

"I have just one more bit of news for you this dawn," she said, voice musical, practically singing. "Then you can all cloudout."

Her gaze landed on me. Held me.

"You're all covered."

I blinked.

What?

Her grin stretched even wider.

“Yes, Natalia. You’ll have to come work at the palace.” She paused, smiling like she was holding the biggest secret in all the surrounding galaxies. “But your Statizens—every last one—are covered. No one gets cut. Not a single angel is being released. Not from your team.” Her eyes glowed like luminescent orbs in the dusknite. “And the Empyrean will provide chariots for those in need, until they can acquire their own.”

She laughed again, joy bubbling over. It made her eyes shine brighter.

“You’re all covered,” she said, voice cracking slightly. “Every last one.”

Her words finally clicked.

I shot from my seat like a meteor launched through a star gate.

“Yes!”

I leapt into the air, wings flaring behind me, arms thrown wide as I twirled mid-lab. I slammed my wings together with a thunderous clap that echoed through the chamber. Tears welled in my eyes. A scream burst from my throat—loud, unintelligible, triumphant. A scream of relief.

Of victory.

I wasn’t the only one losing my mind. My angels were cheering. Shouting. Crying. Laughing. Spinning in

their chairs. Whooping so loud, it was hard to even hear them individually. We were spared. The threat had passed. Millions had been cut.

But *not us*.

Not my team. Not the division I fought for. Not the angels I led. Prayed for. Pleaded for.

We were spared.

My chest swelled, hearts beating like a war drum. I rushed back to my seat, beaming, breathless, nearly trembling with joy. Every single one of my Statizens grinned from ear to ear.

“Thank you, Upperexec Natorria,” I whispered, my words thick with tears. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Natorria’s smile trembled. Her eyes shimmered. She was trying not to cry.

“You’re my Statizens,” she said softly. “I will do whatever it takes to have your back. Your division was being prepped to be chopped. But then, at the last moment—” She paused, blinking. “Other Upperexecs changed their minds. Suddenly. They said they love you and the work you do. All of you. And they’re keeping you. This was approved all the way from the top, by the Imperialists themselves!”

“And that’s all that matters!” Khadijah blurted out, clapping her hands together and spinning in her cloudchair.

“Okay! And a chariot provided?” Damaj called out, his voice rising two octaves. “Ha! I may not hate this new Empràr after all!”

We all howled with laughter. The tension of the dawn shattered like obsidian glass. We could breathe now. I knew this moment would live with us for the rest of our dawns. It would bind us even tighter as a team.

I looked over at Alexsef just in time to catch him bowing his head, swiping at his eyes. He thought no one saw. But I did.

All of my nine hearts squeezed. This was why I fought. This was why I couldn’t back down. Because these angels deserved to *stay*.

I exhaled. Long. Deep. The kind of breath that reaches your bones.

“That’s all I have for you, Statizens,” Natorria said, smiling. “I look forward to seeing you at the palace.”

“And we can’t end it any better than that!” I piped up.

My team nodded, still glowing with joy.

“Wings high, Statizens.”

“Wings high!”

“Cloudout,” I grinned. “And I’ll see you at the palace.”

One by one, their screens blinked out.

And the moment I was alone, I screamed. Again and again, unable to contain it. Then I flew. I shot from my

NATALIA

chair, wings spread wide, and raced out of my laboratory. There was only one place I needed to be—

My prayer chamber.



CHAPTER 9

ENDLESS GRATITUDE

Throwing myself into the prayer chamber, I found the Saint Script exactly where I'd left it—sprawled open, half of it tumbling from its post on one of the higher tables, curling across the cloudy floor like a sleeping ribbon of light.

I spun around in place three times, trying to wring out the trembling nerves still clinging to my limbs. The range of emotions I'd experienced this dawn alone was a feat that deserved its own scrollport. Someone should study *me*.

I realized I'd forgotten to shut the door, but before I could even move, Tobraxi raced in—her soft crystalline paws barely making a sound as she darted forward and dropped herself beside me.

I sat, lowering myself slowly onto the cloudy floor,

and reached out to nuzzle her thick, shimmering fur. Her head rested against mine, and I tilted my own toward the Saint Scrypt, still glowing faintly in the fading light.

“Why’d you let me stress out like that,” I murmured, stroking Tobraxi’s ears, “knowing full well you were working it all out, hmm?”

I stared at the open scroll, willing—just for a moment—for Ehyeh to appear out of thin air. To walk through the veil, sit beside me, and have a real conversation. No mystery. No delay. Just him and me.

Really, if I wanted to see him face to face, I’d have to go to the Mihzienien cosm—to the planet where he resided. Entry to the Mihzienien cosm was nearly impossible. Especially with Defandres barring the way to the cosm portals. I had no desire to go up against the highest ranking angels across all of Elledelle’s twelve realms throughout its universe.

Mihziene was home to endless trillions of Defandre and Iris ranking angels. The holiest of us all. The most powerful of us all. The two ranks which of whom rarely frequented other planets, and certainly not other realms. I’d have to undergo a full cleansing rite just to be granted the right to enter Ehyeh’s cosm—or I’d die on sight, overwhelmed by the sheer weight of his glory permeating the entire planet.

I sighed, leaning against Tobraxi’s warm body.

“Really, you work so mysteriously,” I whispered, jutting my chin toward the open window. “But why? I mean, you let me have a whole meltdown. A full spiral. And you said nothing. *Nothing*. Knowing the entire time it was already going to work out.”

“Maybe Ehyeh did it so you would learn to trust him in all things,” Tobraxi purred beside me.

Her voice was soft, lyrical—soothing and ethereal, like a song made of wind and lullabies. It never failed to surprise me how wise she could be for such a youngling shien.

“Maybe,” she continued, “you trusted too much in yourself and your abilities. And he needed you to trust *him*.” She nudged my side with her nose. “Besides, you invest so much of yourself in your work and your team. Perhaps he needed you to let them go. Because they’re your team... but they’re *his* angels. And if you’re in the way—how can he get to them?”

I pursed my lips, not answering.

Tobraxi was right.

She was always right when it counted.

I reached over and nuzzled her ears, fingers curling around the gem-soft fur as I mulled her words over. She was absolutely right. And beyond her words, I could feel it—like a shift in my soul. An invitation to release control. To finally admit that maybe this was never just about my job or my division. This was

about pivoting. I hated pivots. But they were necessary.

Did I want to go to the palace?

No.

Would it change my life in ways I couldn't yet see?

Yes.

And maybe that was the point. Maybe all of this—this fire, this fear, this fight—was the only way Ehyeh could move me where he needed me next.

I bit my lip.

I still didn't like it.

But I understood it now. I looked back at the Saint Script, the glowing symbols gently curling like breath across the parchment.

"Well," I whispered, "I thank You. Thank You for sparing me. For sparing my team. Not one will be gone. I know Natorria did her best, but beyond her—I know this was really you. And to that end, Mighty Ehyeh... I thank you."

I bowed my head for a long moment, breathing in the sacred silence.

And there it was again.

That gentle nudge of peace. That brush of unseen presence. That shift in the air that made your hearts settle and your breath still.

I smiled.

Somehow—through the subtle change in the

atmosphere, through the warmth curling into my chest—I knew the Great King was smiling at me, too.

I took a deep breath and pushed to my feet. Moving around the chamber, I rolled up the Saint Scrypt, tied it gently, and placed it back on its carved pedestal. I closed the windows and blinds, picked up the scattered scrolls and stray artifacts I'd left behind, and headed out of the chamber—Tobraxi at my side.

"Come on, Tobi," I said with a sigh. "Let's get some supprèst going. Then, I have a date."

"A date? *You*?" Tobraxi blinked up at me, puzzled.

My jaw dropped.

"Don't look so surprised!" I said, swatting the top of her head playfully. She shook out her brushed mane, walking closer to my side, her tail swaying in smug amusement.

"I have an expected date," I continued, "with a very hot and *very long* bath."

Tobraxi snorted.

"Now *that* makes a lot more sense."

I kicked her side, gently, sticking my tongue out at her ridicule. I laughed, choosing to ignore the insult, and scuffled toward the kitchen, wings dragging lazily behind me through the cloudy floor. My stomach grumbled, loud, demanding for nourishment.

While putting out supplies so I could begin cooking, I thought of all the dawn's events and how they ended

up playing out in the end. Everything wasn't what I thought it would be...

But it had all turned out exactly the way it needed to. And that was all that mattered.

I opened the food freezer and leaned against the door, glancing over my shoulder with a grin.

“Should I make pot roast... or tenderloin soup?”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

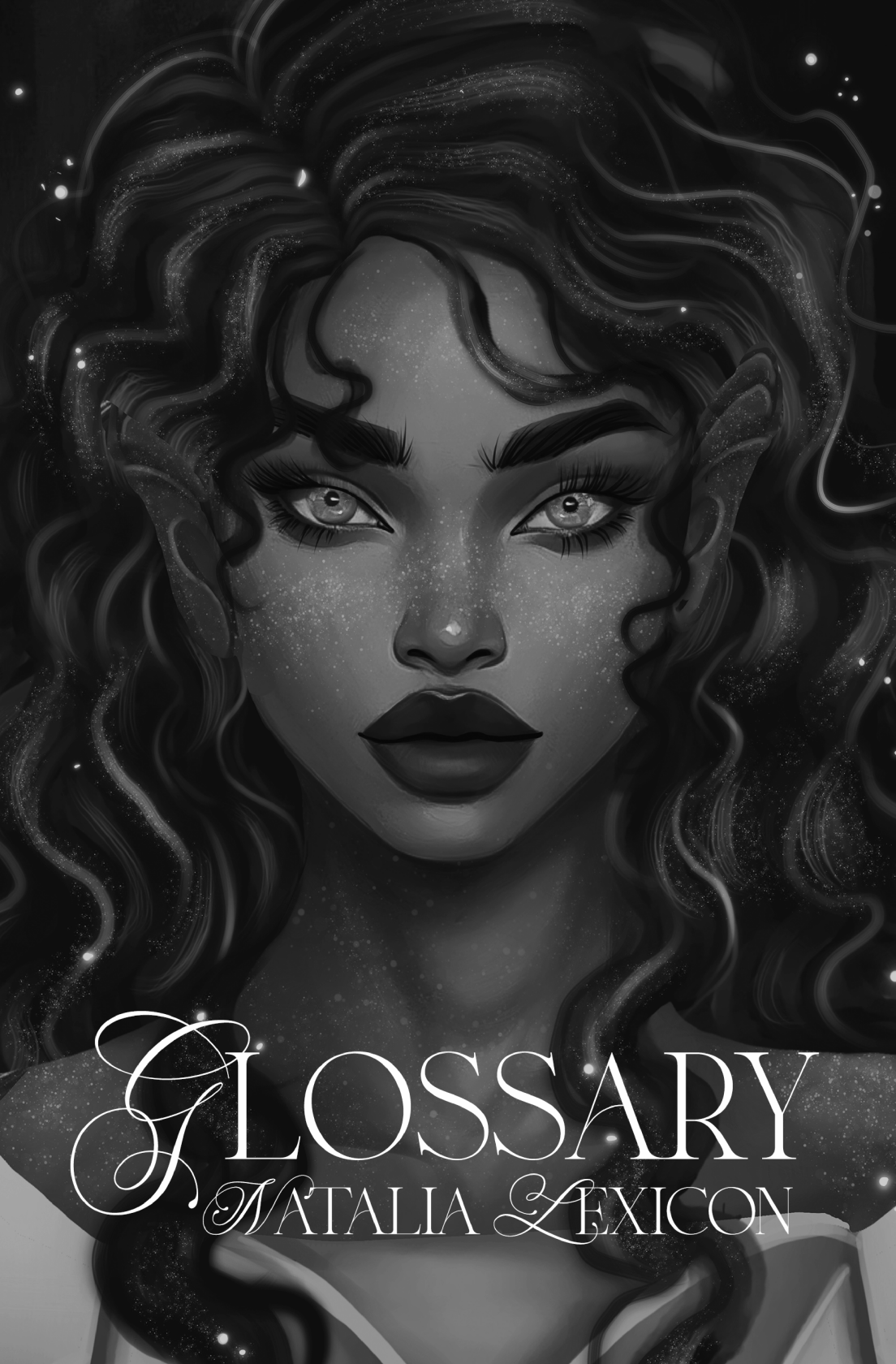
Hello Elledellien,

I'm grateful for you. Thank you for taking the time to read Natalia. I hope you loved reading it as much as I loved writing it.

If you enjoyed this story, would you mind **taking a moment to write a review on the Elledelle website?**

A few words on how you felt about the story will help me in more ways than you know. Thank you. See you in the next adventure.

Continue your journey: Elledelle.com



GLOSSARY

NATALIA LEXICON

NATALIA GLOSSARY

- Astroproge** (ASTRO-PRODGE): An angelic technological device which materializes landscapes, regions, angels, and any desired images from thin air, cloud, and *ethèr* to produce a clear, visual picture that can be viewed, analyzed, and used to communicate.
- Atèmos** (AH-TEM-MOS): Space; galactic atmosphere; the expanse in the outer universe surrounding the planets.
- Aèl** (AH-YELL): The angelic term for *woman* or *female*.
- Aèn** (AH-YEN): The angelic term for *man* or *male*.
- Airriemail** (AIR—RHEE-MALE): The angelic term for *email*.
- Astraea** (AS-TRAY-UH): An Elledelle realm (dimension). Filled with planets that mid-level ranking angels call home.
- Batara** (BA-TA-RA): *Brother* in the native language of Saerel angels.
- Bedchamber** (BED-CHAMBER): Bedroom. Also interchangeable with differing alcoves within an enlarged bedroom suite.
- Bedcloud** (BED-CLOUD): An angelic bed made entirely of clouds and ethereal matter.
- Bond** (BOND): An ethereal, living, golden cord, sometimes ivory, of life and power woven through the center hearts of angels that eternally binds the angels to one another for eternity and allows them functions such as, speaking to one another telepathically and sharing a measure of their *ethèr* with each other.
- Bonding** (BOND-ING): The act of marriage and eternal mating between angels which creates an eternal Bond between angels for their lifetimes.
- Clipped** (CLIPPED): Federal punishment for angels who have broken the law. Delinquent angels have every one of their wing pairs broken at the jointed points as clips of steel and *ethèr* are snapped

into the former points of their wings rendering the angels disabled for eternity.

Cloudchair (CLOUD-CHAIR): A chair. Also interchangeable with a single-seater couch.

Cloudcouch (CLOUD-COUCH): A couch. Also interchangeable with loveseats, L-couches, and chamber sitting.

Cloudin (CLOUD-INN): The angelic term for *logging in*.

Cloudout (CLOUD-OUT): The angelic term for *logging out*.

Cosm (KOH-ZUM): Planet.

Creed (CUH-REED): The law.

Cycle (PSY-CULL): One year.

Darkerèth (DAR-KEH-RETH): A race of dragons who live in the Dèrneveil cosm and throughout the Caelesti realm.

Dawn (DAWN): One day.

Dusk (DUSK): Night. Also interchangeable with evening.

Elledelle (ELLA-DELLE): The universe in which the Elvriel realm and the Rèvaillèl cosm is located.

Elvriel (ELLE-VRIE-UL): An Elledelle realm (dimension). Filled with planets that higher ranking angels call home.

Emelle (EH-MELLE): The second month of the year.

Empràr (EMP-RAR): The angelic term for *emperor*.

Empyrean (EM-PEA-RIEN): The angelic term for *empire*.

Epherelle (EH-FUR-RELLE): One of the many cosms (planet) in the Elvriel realm.

Ethèr (EY-THAIR): Innate, supernatural, magical powers of Etherien angels.

Fallen (FALL-LEN): Disgraced angels who were once Etheriens but have been stripped of their original order and been made into reprobate Fallen.

Fetafa (FUH-TA-FA): A delicious treat of multi-layered cheeses roasted with sweet nuts and rolled in a cylinder fashion, stuffed with thick globs of honey.

Fòrs (FORCE): Angelic life energy and spirit. The spirit of angels is a

distinct being that dwells inside of them, embodying their *ethèr*, able to communicate with the conscious of the host angel while fully submissive to commands given by the angel.

Fyuse (FUSE): The supernatural morphing of angel bodies from flesh and skin to *ethèr* and their innate powers.

Gibordawn (GIH-BUR-DAWN): The twelfth day in every week.

Higherank (HIGHER-RANK): The title for angels of a higher rank.

Hôr (OARS): Hour.

Hyèl (HI-ELLE): One of the innumerable names for “hell” in the Elledelle universe.

Imperialist (IM-PEER-IA-LIST): The angelic term for *governor* or *ruler* within the legislative body of a kingdom in Elledelle’s worlds.

Mekād (MAY-KAD): Month.

Mihziene (MIZZ-EYE-NE): Planetary home of Ehyeh, Defandre and Iris ranking angels.

Pasaille (PA-SIGH): Paradise. Interchangeable with eternity or a celestial place angels transcend to after death.

Patara (PA-TA-RA): *Father* in the native language of Saerel angels.

Rotpot (ROT-POT): A derogatory term to call someone an idiot or a piece of rot.

Saerel (SER-RUL): A rank of angel in the Elledelle universe. The third rank of angelic hierarchy.

Saint Script (SAINT—SCRIPT): The Holy Scroll. A sacred, holy compilation of scriptures Etherien angels live by.

Satara (SA-TA-RA): *Sister* in the native language of Saerel angels.

Scrollports (SCROLL-PORTS): The angelic term for *article* or *report*.

Seedling (SEED-LING): An infant. Interchangeable with toddler.

Seraphim (SARAH-FIM): A rank of angel in the Elledelle universe. The eighth rank of angelic hierarchy.

Shien (SHE-YEN): An oversized dog resembling a small wolf.

Sôl (SOLE): Sun.

Sôlight (SOLE-LIGHT): Sunlight.

Sôlsunes (SOLE-SOONS): Suns.

Soulu (SOUL-YOU): Mate. Interchangeable with spouse.

Statizen (STAT-IHZEN): The angelic term for *statistician*, an angelic scientist.

Tellevorb (TELE-VORB): An angelic technological device that projects channels and networks showcasing news and entertainment for angels.

Thermostone (THERMO-STONE): The angelic term for *thermostat*.

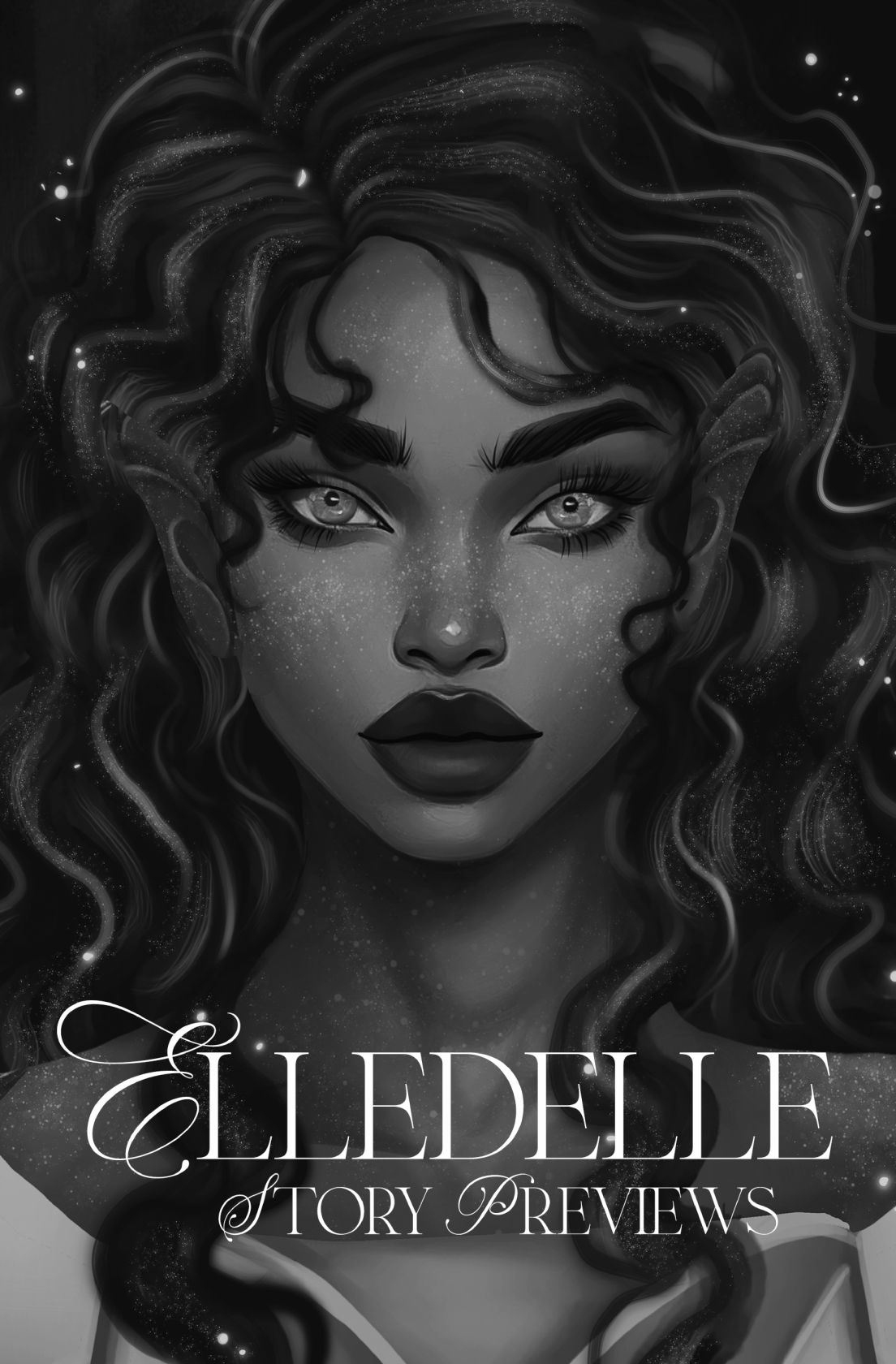
Upperexec (UPPER-EXEC): The angelic term for *boss* or *manager*.

Vertù (VAIR-TOO): A rank of angel in the Elledelle universe. The ninth rank of angelic hierarchy.

Wèk (WEH-K): One week.

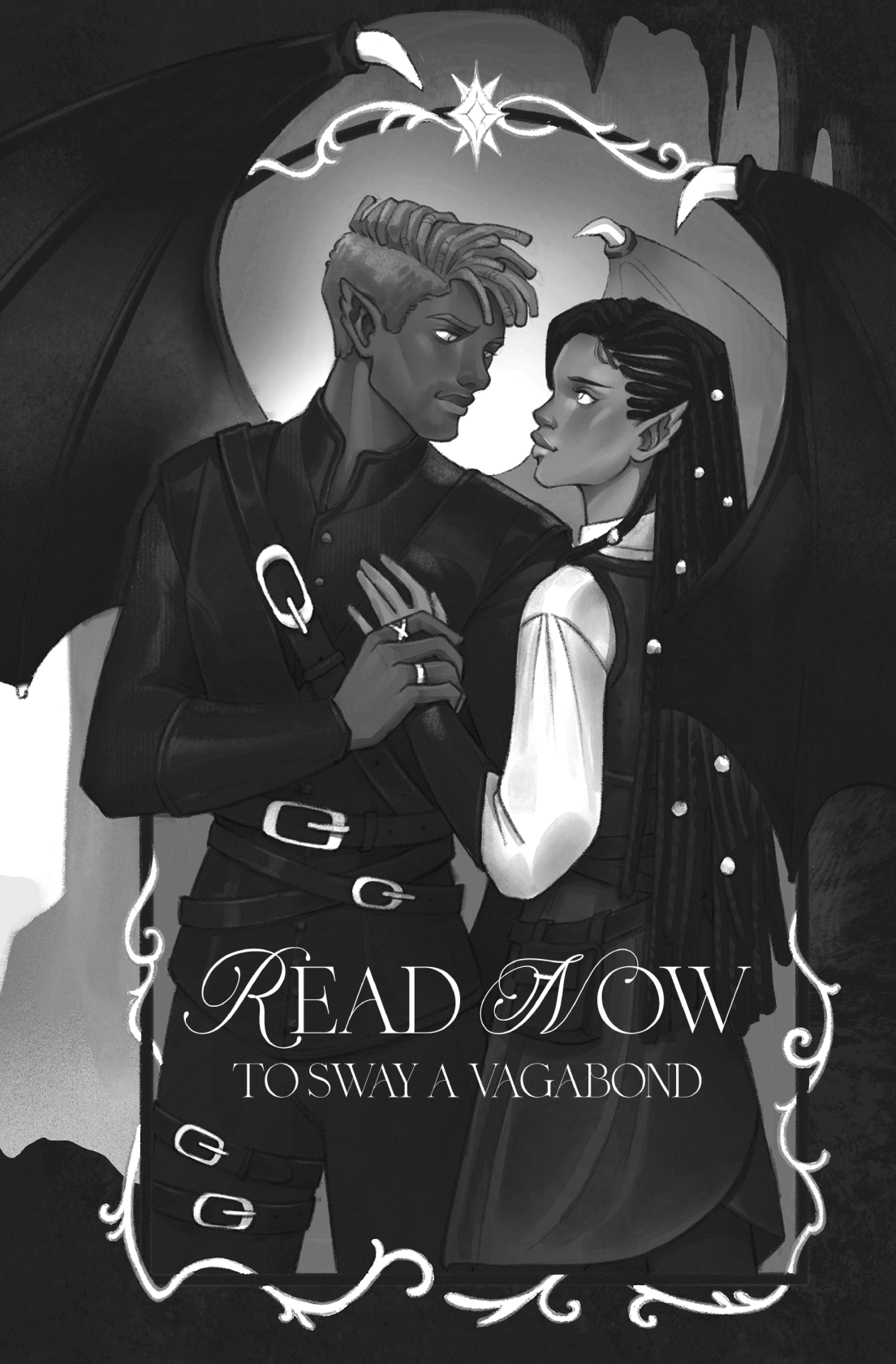
Wingnote (WING—NOTE): The angelic term for *notification*.

Youngling (YOUNG-LING): Young angel. Interchangeable with adolescent or teenager.



ELLEDELLE

STORY PREVIEWS



READ NOW
TO SWAY A VAGABOND



CHAPTER I

FABIENNE

Everyone knew kings were meant to be robbed. Especially from their graves.

But this dusknite, Fabienne Evruel wasn't here for corpse's and their treasures—no, she was here for her ticket to freedom.

Fabienne blinked, breathing in the cool, crisp air. It filled her lungs, her veins, and enlivened her wings. A gentle breeze passed through the bedchamber where she hovered, wings pulsing lightly, as she keenly watched the Armand's snore away below. They slept like the dead, their chests rising and falling, completely unaware of her presence in the shadows.

Fabienne frowned.

With precision, she noted the subtle pulse of their wings. All six of their membranous pairs intertwined,

layering one atop the other, as their bodies rolled over between the plush coverlets. The Armand's were arrogant, pompous, and greedy angels who held power throughout the dark, and corrupt, megalopolis of Xodom.

Too much power.

Fabienne catalogued every breath and movement. Every dreamy whisper they muttered, secrets she was sure they'd want hidden until their graves called them home. She had planned extensively for this moment, spending the better part of twelve dawns in preparation.

The Armand palàs—a gargantuan palace of high walls and fortified entries—was a mighty fortress lined with gilded halls and celestial barriers, home to Xodom's eldest ruling fanmèri. The Armand family were affluent and had held immense power over the angels of Xodom's southeastern sector for ages. They also had a knack for hoarding relics of value long before Fabienne's bloodline existed. This dusknite, Fabienne planned to help herself to one of them. The most valuable one of all.

Wind whispered through the high arched corridors, brushing against the stone columns etched with Domènn script. For a moment, Fabienne paused, reading the words of power and pride in the native language of her angel-rank, Domenent.

Kun nous vini, nous wè. Kun nous wè, nous konkeri. Kun nous konkeri, nous diriye. Kukaan ei kenbe tèt non résiste.

When we come, we see. When we see, we conquer. When we conquer, we rule. None can withstand us.

Fabienne's nostrils flared. Trespassing into the Armand palàs was bold, and dangerous. She continued floating just below the vaulted ceiling, wings spread wide, her movements silent as the shadows. Muted lights flickered below. Six pairs of obsidian, membranous wings framed her silhouette, nearly identical to that of the Armand lords, the faintest shimmer of her ethèr casting a soft glow against their edges. She needed to be careful with the use of her angelic powers. Ethèr was not only visible when drawn for use, it was also traceable.

Fabienne's eyes locked onto the pretty glass case with her mark inside. She sucked in a sharp, silent breath as her hearts, all six, pounded wildly in her chest with growing adrenaline. She couldn't look away from the target, her mouth salivating at the thought of how it felt to the touch.

Zazràs. That was her token to freedom.

It was an enchanting, silver locket looped through an iridescent ring, the ivory stone at its center pulsing faintly, alive. The fôrs of a Fallen was inside. How the spirit of a fallen angel had been siphoned from its body, then fused into the stone, trapping the angel for an

endless eternity, she'd never guess. The Fallen was still alive, just with no physical body to return to, shackled to this piece of rock. It was a miserable way to live. She almost felt bad for the Fallen.

Almost.

Zazràs had remained in Armand possession for nine Ages, spanning too many generations to count. This dusknight, that would change.

Fabienne took a steadying breath and let herself drop. Air rushed past her, the controlled descent precise. She landed without a sound, her booted feet meeting the luxurious carpet as she straightened, wings folding neatly behind her. Her movements were calculated, deliberate. She couldn't afford a single mistake.

A quick sweep of the bedchambers confirmed what she'd planned for. She was completely alone. The Palàs Watcher was somewhere in the hall with drool dribbling down her chin as she slept like an idiot. If everything went like expected, Fabienne would be gone before the rotpot stirred.

Fabienne wore darkness like a second skin, clad in a muted, silver tunic beneath an onyx, battle-kaftan to the knees over matching angel-tights for ease of movement. Twin daggers, made with shadowglass, lay tucked against the curve of her waist, hidden beneath the dark folds. Her fingers brushed against their hilts out of habit.

The chamber was vast, relics encased in glass pedestals lining its perimeter. At the center of it all, atop a marble dais, rested *Zazràs*. The ivory stone pulsed, almost as if sensing her presence.

Fabienne drew a slow, measured breath. She lifted both of her palms, opened the eyes of her *fôrs*, and began drawing on her *ethèr*. Her spirit came alive as her powers began surging through her body, warming her blood. Power coursed through her veins until they reached her palms. She concentrated on the flow, making sure to keep the golden, shadowy substance muted, as not to wake the Armand's. She flexed her palms, extending *ethèr*. The chamber trembled faintly in response.

Fabienne froze.

She didn't dare move. Breathe. After a long pause, she loosed a small, heavy breath. Sweat beat at her temples. She got annoyed, almost calling herself a rotpot out loud. This was supposed to be an easy job and already she was making silly mistakes.

Focus.

Nothing stirred. The draw of her *ethèr* wasn't enough to alert the Palàs Watcher, but it was enough for her to feel the pulse of life threading through the air. Domenent *ethèr* was enhancement-based. In her case, her distinct affinity allowed her to amplify precision. She was expert in locating a weakness in any angel, or

thing, and exposing it. She focused on that now—heightening her senses, sharpening her awareness. Searching for the weak points of the glass case so it could be broken, then she could take the heirloom.

A rustle of wings caught her attention.

Fabienne stilled, listening. The Watcher was stationed beyond the archway, now pacing. Fabienne fought the urge to suck her teeth. She could hear wings brushing the floor with each step the Palàs Watcher took. Burning ashes. The Watcher was supposed to be sleeping. The tincture should've kept her unconscious for several *hòrs* yet. It hadn't even been a full hour and already she'd woken up.

Fabienne's frown bowed lower as she lengthened her ears, listening further. She had mapped the Watcher's rotations for six dawns, learning the rhythm of the Watcher's steps and flight trails as intimately as she knew the breath in her lungs. She allowed her breathing to slow, calming her nerves. The Watcher wouldn't enter the bedchamber unless disturbed.

Fabienne still had time. She just needed to be extremely quiet.

With a flick of her wrist, she produced a thin glass shard, its edges laced with *ethèr*. Pressing it against the pedestal's locking mechanism, she channeled a controlled current through it, unraveling the wards woven through the glass with practiced ease. A soft *click*

sounded. The seal broke. Fabienne watched the protective shield shimmer before vanishing. She reached forward, her fingers grazing the cold silver of the locket. The moment her skin made contact, a pulse of something ancient, something wicked, rippled through her fôrs.

The chamber seemed to breathe.

A warning.

Fabienne barely had time to retract her hand before movement surfaced beyond the bedchambers archway. Fabienne's blood ran cold.

“Drop it, Reaver,” snarled the Palàs Watcher.



CHAPTER 2

FABIENNE

Fabienne grew still, meeting the eyes of the Palàs Watcher. In the Watcher's honey and earthen colored eyes, a brewing storm promised brutal punishment for Fabienne if they caught her. Fabienne swallowed around a tight knot in her throat. For a moment, everything froze as the two stared one another down. Then, quick as a flash, Fabienne slammed all six pairs of her wings together. The clap was deafening, stunning the angel with temporary shock. Fabienne spun around herself while securing *Zazràs* in her pocket, then bolted.

"Watchers, wings high! The Reaver has come!"

The Watcher's voice thundered with a current of hatred so strong Fabienne felt it flow through her bones. Like clashing cymbals, the Watcher's voice rever-

berated against the palàs walls. Chandeliers flared to life on their own, flooding the bedchamber with light. The hum of ethèr crackled in the air, angelic power swelling and suffocating. The pounding of beating wings sent a fresh surge of urgency through her veins.

Rotting ashes.

Fabienne unfurled her wings in a single, powerful beat, launching herself upward just as armored Watchers flooded into the bedchamber. A bolt of crimson ethèr whistled past her ear, missing by mere inches. Fabienne twisted mid-air, soaring toward the upper ledges, her fingers skimming the cool, pulsing, stone as she propelled herself forward.

The Watchers shouted, their wings spreading as they took flight, but she had the advantage. Fabienne had spent twelve dawns memorizing every inch of this palàs. They could chase her down all they wanted, but she would get out. Finish this job. Pay her debts. She would be *free*.

Somewhere below, amidst the fray, the Armand's had stirred.

"Zazràs! The locket is gone. She took Zazràs! Get it back you rotting imbeciles. *Now*."

Fabienne could have laughed. The screaming came from Ayella Armand, an overweight asheater who couldn't lift a finger to protect what was valuable to her, even if all of her angelic life-cycles depended on it.

Ignoring them all, Fabienne locked in, focusing on getting *out*.

Dipping low, Fabienne weaved between golden archways and sweeping columns. The vast hall blurred around her, speed turning the world into streaks of light and shadow. The cool air roared in her ears, the pulse of her ethèr fueling every passing sèkon.

"I will drench you in shale-acid, and set you on fire, until your fôrs dissipates into the ashes you belong in," the Palàs Watcher seethed. "You will not survive this, Reaver. Having your wings plucked and snapped, like your brittle neck, will be a mercy."

Fabienne snorted.

"You clearly like running your mouth," she mumbled, spinning over herself in the air. She raced across the palàs heading for freedom. She had the stone and that's all that mattered. With it in her possession, everything would change. Her life depended on it.

So did Tatiana's, her sisari.

The thought of her little sister was like a stab between her ribs. The pain was sharp and poignant. Exactly what she needed to concentrate and get out of this skies-forsaken palàs.

The escape route was ahead. A hidden passage behind the grand biblion. If she could just reach the library before they closed in—

A bolt of ethèr shot past her.

Fabienne barely managed to twist her body, avoiding the searing energy by a hair's breadth. The heat singed the edge of her sleeve. Fabienne pressed harder across the palace, forcing her wings faster. Her hearts raced as she fought for escape from the Watchers who were still screaming behind her.

She clenched her jaw and pushed harder, diving into a steep drop before catching the updraft, using the momentum to slingshot herself forward. The biblion's towering entrance loomed ahead, its gilded doors parted just enough to slip through. At the back of the library, her exit awaited her.

She leaned forward in her flight, racing for the opening. Then—

A sudden force slammed into her from behind.

Pain exploded across her back, a searing jolt that locked her wings for half a breath. She tumbled, vision spinning, and barely managed to right herself before she crashed into the floor. Palàs Watchers descended like Bloodwood hyenas, wings spread, weapons drawn. She counted four. No, five. Six?

Too many.

"Xodom dung. It's time we were rid of your existence, once and for all."

Blighted skies.

That didn't promise a happy ending.

Fabienne's fingers brushed the hilts of her daggers.

Felt a swell of ethèr warm her blood. She could fight. She could make them bleed. Sift out their weak points and unravel their minds from within before obliterating them. But that would mean delaying her escape. Wasting precious time she didn't have.

Tatiana's face flashed in her mind again.

Fabienne exhaled sharply, steeling herself.

Then, without hesitation, she flung herself toward the nearest Watcher. He reacted on instinct, swiping at her chest with a pair of wings. She twisted mid-float, evading the strike with effortless grace, and used the momentum to propel herself upward. Her wings snapped open, catching the air, and she vaulted over them in a fluid arc. Bending backwards, careening past the slew of Palàs Watchers, Fabienne shot down to land on the other side.

The moment her feet touched the floor, she *ran*. Flying would do her no good where she was trying to enter. The biblion was no longer an option. Fabienne pivoted for her next choice—the hidden passage by the obscure fireplace in the guest wing. It wasn't too far from where she was. She ran with all her might, cutting around a hall racing across the lush carpet floors. The hidden panel was within reach. She shot for the small door, bending low. She pressed her palm against the etched sigils, pouring ethèr into the ancient lock.

Nothing happened. Her stomach twisted.

The mechanism had been jammed.

"You can't be serious," she seethed. "I swear this is Ehyeh repaying me for my sins."

A heavy presence loomed behind her. Palàs Watchers.

Fabienne pivoted just in time to see one raise her wings like weapons, their membranous edges sharpened like blades, gleaming under the blinding lights of the hall.

The Palàs Watcher struck.

Fabienne dodged—barely. The edge of the Watcher's wing nicked her sleeve, cutting through fabric and grazing skin. Pain flared, but she didn't falter. There wasn't any time.

"Ehyeh, come on. *Please*. Help. I need your *help*."

Fabienne tried the small door one more time. No luck.

It didn't budge.

"Now what is the actual point of praying..." She trailed off.

Fabienne blinked over her shoulders at the Watchers closing her in from behind. She huffed. Then made a decision. Forget the hidden passage. She'd ran out of time. She had to get out of the palàs *now*.

Fabienne pivoted sharply, shooting to her feet from her crouch, throwing herself into a ram-rod dive, like a spear with perfect aim. The Watchers lunged for her,

but she was already moving, already slipping past their reach. She unfurled her wings in a violent snap, thrusting herself through the nearest stained-glass window. The explosion of glass and ethèr shattered the dusk. Lights began flickering on across the length of the palàs.

Wind howled as she shot into the open air, shards of colored light cascading around her. The city sprawled ahead, an endless labyrinth of towering spires and twisting alleys.

Behind her, the palàs raged. And Fabienne grinned.

Drips of blood trickled down her arms where the glass shards had sliced through the sleeves of her tunic. Some of her knuckles had also tasted the bite of their sting.

But she had *Zazràs*.

All six wing pairs spread wide, Fabienne shot into the dusknite, weaving through alleys and towers with supernatural speed. She chuckled to herself, proud of the feat. The dusk should've gone smoother, but now none of that mattered. She'd finished the job. Gotten the stone. Which meant, she could now pay her blood debt, and finally be free.



CHAPTER 3

EMMANUEL

Every angel with breath in their lungs knew kings were meant to be robbed.
But robbing a thief?

That was a game to play with the right partner.

Emmanuel Alfonse hovered high above Xodom, his six pairs of membranous wings spread wide, gliding through the city's dusk-thick air. His wings, dark as midnight with iridescent veins of molten gold, caught the moon's fractured glow as he rode the shifting currents. Xodom sprawled beneath him—a labyrinth of towering spires, crumbling bridges, and twisting alleyways drowning in shadows and aged blood. Ethèr-lit lanterns flickered like fireflies below, some steady, others sputtering from the grit and filth that coated the Megalopolis.

Even from this height, Emmanuel could taste the city—stone dust, the bitter tang of oil-fueled torches, the acrid bite of the Onyx River, slithering like a diseased serpent through its belly, with a putrid stench of rot to boot. Xodom was alive, in the deadliest way, and like all angels, it had more than one heartbeat. Which turned out more often to be a curse. Xodom was home to a dark, restless rhythm of crime and power, of rulers and rebels, of angels who had long since abandoned their celestial charge. The streets pulsed with secrets whispered in the tongues of merchants selling fraudulent wares, and empty bargains, beneath flickering torchlight. Lovers met in shadowed corridors, breaking oaths to the mates they'd bonded to in an Age past. Beggars and thieves navigated the veins of the city like flies coursing through a decaying corpse.

Xodom was the city that never slept.

Now, it pulsed beneath Emmanuel, its towers clawing toward the forsaken heavens as if it could reach beyond its own depravity. The hum of energy, the low vibration of millions of lives interwoven into the fabric of the city, was almost hypnotic.

Emmanuel loved Xodom almost as much as he hated it.

And at its pulsing core, the Armand palàs blazed like a beacon against the gloom, golden halls shimmering beneath the ethèr-fueled illumination. It stood

tall and proud, a mockery to the rising poverty among the cities depraved Domentents. He let his gaze track downward, to the shattered remnants of a stained-glass window that glittered across the rooftops like fallen stars.

A clean escape.

A dark, vicious grin curled his lips as he adjusted his grip on the silver locket dangling from his fingers. The air around it vibrated with an unseen force, making his skin itch with residual energy.

"Wings high, Reaver," he purred, even though she flew far into the dusk away from him. "So close to a job well done... yet still so far."

Emmanuel *tsked*, his voice a whisper. Then he chuckled, the low rumble filling his chest, as his gaze traced the rushing flight of the thief.

Reaver.

Emmanuel almost shivered at the thought of her name. Throughout Xodom's darkest alleys it brought fear. Terror. She was a Void Reaver, a Domentent angel able to sift out weaknesses and utterly ruin whoever had the gall to get in her way. Domentents who were Void Reavers weren't common. Their abilities were rare, making them even more terrifying. And she was the most powerful one, ever lurking in Xodom's shadows, finishing job after job for her bosses.

Emmanuel grinned wide with pride.

Calculated as Reaver was, he'd still been able to pawn the locket in the middle of her heist while she fought off the Palàs Watchers. Messing with her plans, by waking them up, had all been too easy. A shame.

She was so precise. Methodical.

Boring.

He had been watching her for dawns now, curious. She'd stalked the Armand Palàs each dawn, often making notes in some unseen scroll. She was skilled, meticulous—way too careful for a thief.

Emmanuel preferred a little chaos. A little spontaneity. It made things more interesting. More fun. Now, because of that difference between them, he held the very stone she'd risked everything to get her hands on. He sucked his teeth, shaking his head. All her efforts had been a waste.

The wind shifted, carrying with it the distant clang of metal on stone, the rustling of wings in the dusknite. Below him, a squadron of winged guards sliced through the air, their emerald and obsidian armor gleaming under the half-light. Their wings—stiff, disciplined—flared in perfect formation as they scanned the streets below. Looking for her.

Emmanuel squinted to get a better look.

It *was* the Palàs Watchers.

He yawned. They were such bores. Full of order,

structure, and a need to obey the creed. As if Xodomite angels actually took the law serious.

Stretching until his bones popped, Emmanuel sighed, contended, tilting his wings, descending in a slow spiral. He wasn't worried. He had played this game too long to get caught. Now what he needed was some warm angel-wine and a pretty thing dressed in silk to go with it.

Emmanuel landed silently atop a domed cathedral, the cracked mosaic tiles shifting under his boots. Xodom stretched before him in all its sprawling, corrupted glory. The city pulsed with life and he was ready to join it. A certain tavern was calling his name. He flipped the locket between his fingers, watching the silver stone at its center pulse faintly. Warm. *Alive*.

His ethèr twitched in response.

This thing was dangerous.

He had stolen plenty of relics before, but nothing quite like this. He didn't know much about why the Armand's had hoarded *Zazràs*, but he knew it wasn't just an heirloom—it was power. And power always came with a price.

His multicolored eyes—amber and honey—narrowed slightly. *Why was she after this?*

A disturbance rippled through the air, arresting his attention. A shift. Subtle, but enough to put him on edge. He pocketed the locket and turned.

A presence was watching him.

Emmanuel didn't startle easily.

He rolled his shoulders, feigning nonchalance as he scanned the rooftops. Nothing but the city's shadows stretched around him. Then, a whisper of movement.

Another shift in the air.

Emmanuel flexed his hands, letting his *ethèr* unfurl just slightly, amplifying his senses. The dusk deepened. The shadows thickened. Then he saw them. Perched across the way, just beyond the edge of another tower, stood a figure wreathed in darkness. This was no common *Domenent*. Not a *Watcher*. Not even a *Sherèf*—although officers were usually out patrolling at this time.

He shuddered.

It was a *Shaith*.

Emmanuel's blood went cold.

The wraith-like creature was still, its lanky frame wrapped in a haze of shadow and oblivion. Its deformed wings barely twitched, a mockery of what they once were. Its eyes—dark, endless, swimming with unnatural life—locked onto him with predatory intent.

Rot.

Emmanuel let out a slow breath. *Shaiths* weren't just monsters, brutal killers; they were also messengers, serving masters for a high price. And their payment was never in coin.

Emmanuel felt a rising terror bloom in his chest. If he was being tracked by Shaiths, he was in a rotting realm of trouble.

The Shaith tilted its head. Its voice slithered across the night.

“You're a fool for crossing the Fraetèn.”

THE ADVENTURES CONTINUE

I hope you loved Natalia's story as much as I do. If you're hungry for more, the universe continues to expand.

If you're ready to keep reading, visit: **Elledelle.com** to find your next adventure. Until next time, see you in Elledelle.

- Stephanie

ELLEDELLE STORIES

In the Beginning

Natalia



Tempting Thieves

To Sway A Vagabond



Of Seas and Tides

Trapped By Pirates



The Ethereal Kings

Barbarian of the Stars



Starry Kingdoms of the Fae

Bound By Watchers



Legends of the Obedayas

1. The Beginning of All
2. Summons of the Realm
3. Journey Into the Realmway
4. Monsters Hidden In the Void

ABOUT THE IMMERSIONEER



Stephanie BwaBwa is a best-selling angelic epic fantasy author who writes cinematic, immersive, character-driven stories where angels rise through darkness and corruption to find freedom, healing, hope, and love.

She's the founder and immersioneer of Elledelle Entertainment, a company dedicated to publishing and producing stories in: Elledelle—the fantasy universe of angels, captivating readers worldwide.

Also a christian and afro-caribbean, you can usually find her reading with too many snacks. Wings high! May you fly where the angels are.

Get Connected: Elledelle Entertainment |
Elledelle.com

