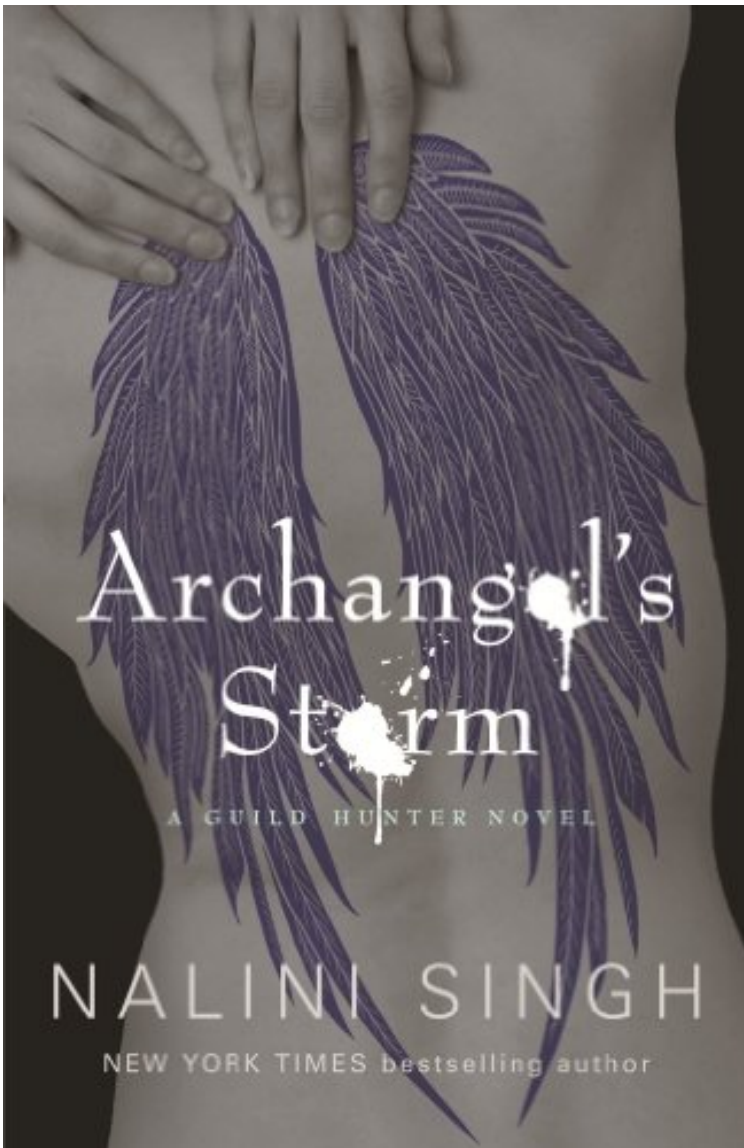


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Archangel's Storm: Book 5



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurRich, dark, sumptuous and evocative...bestselling author Nalini Singh is back with a stunning new tale in her deadly, beautiful world where angels rule and vampires serve.With wings of midnight and an affinity for shadows, Jason courts darkness. But now, with the Archangel Neha's consort lying murdered and her rage threatening cataclysmic devastation, Jason steps into the light, knowing he must unearth the murderer before it is too late.Earning Neha's trust comes at a price - Jason must tie himself to her bloodline through the Princess Mahiya, a woman with secrets so dangerous, she trusts no one. Least of all an enemy spymaster.With only their relentless hunt for a violent, intelligent killer to unite them, Jason and Mahiya embark on a quest that leads to a centuries-old nightmare...and to the dark storm of an unexpected

passion that threatens to drench them both in blood. ExtraitHushJason didnt know how long hed been hiding in the dark place in the ground where his mother had put him, telling him to hush. Hed waited so long, hadnt even crawled out when his stomach hurt with hunger, but she hadnt returned as shed promised, and his wings were cramped and hurting from the small space, his face wet with tears. She knew he hated the dark. Why had she put him in the dark? The sticky dampness that had dripped through the floorboards above, it covered him, the taste of it thick and ripe in the air. The smell made him nauseous, and he knew he couldnt stay here any longer, even if his mother was disappointed by his disobedience. Stretching his stiff limbs as far as he was able in the confined space, his wings still crumpled, he pushed up on the trapdoor, but it wouldnt budge. He didnt cry out, had learned to never ever cry out. You mustnt make a sound, Jason. Promise me. Digging his feet into the earth, he pushed and pushed and pushed until a tiny crack of smudgy light appeared at the edge of the door, the handwoven mat above thin enough not to blot out the sunshine.

Whatever was blocking the trapdoor was heavy, but he was able to wedge his fingers under the lip of the door, touch the mat hed helped his mother weave after theyd collected the leaves from the flax bushes. It felt rough against his knuckles as he pushed his hand through to the wrist, and the trapdoor hurt when it came down on that wrist, but he knew his bones wouldnt breakhis mother had told him he was a strong immortal, that hed already grown deeper into his power than she had by the time of her hundredth birthday. So strong, my baby boy. The best of both of us. He didnt know how long it took to wedge his other hand under the lip of the trapdoor, to twist his body around in the hole, the skin rubbing off his wrists, until he was holding the edge and pushing it up. He just knew he didnt stop until he shoved hard enough to slide off the blockage, the mat sliding away with it. The door came open with a dull thud, as if it had landed on something soft. Chest heaving and arms sore, he had to wait to attempt to climb out, and even then, his hands slipped, slick with the blood from his torn-up wrists. Rubbing them on his pants, he gripped the edge again . . . and sunlight from the sky-window hit his hands. He froze, remembering the dark and viscous liquid that had dripped onto him while he was trapped in the hole. Crusted and dried and flaky, it had turned into a kind of rust on his skin. Just rust, he tried to think, just rust, but he could no longer fool himself as he had in the dark. It was blood that covered his hands, his hair, his face, stiffened the black of his wings. It was blood that had seeped through the mat and the wooden slats below, to the special hidey-hole his mother had made for him. It was blood that clogged his nostrils with iron as he gasped in ragged breaths. It was blood that had spilled like water after the screams went quiet. No matter what you hear, you mustnt make a sound. Promise me, Jason. Promise! Trembling, he forced himself to stop looking at the rust that wasnt rust, and pulled himself out of the hole, closing the trapdoor with careful hands and averted eyes so it wouldnt make a noise. And then he stood staring at the wall. He didnt want to turn and see what lay on the other side, what hed pushed off the top of the trapdoor. But the wall was splattered with the rust that wasnt rust, too. Tiny bits of it had begun to flake off, baked by the hot sun pouring in through the sky-window. Stomach all twisted and his heart a lump, he looked away from the wall and to the floor, but it was streaked with pale brown, his feet having made small prints on the polished wood. The dirt inside the hole hadnt been wet. Not until after. After the screams went quiet. He closed his eyes, but he could still smell the rust that wasnt rust. And he knew he had to turn around. Had to see. Standing on velvet green grass still sparkling with dew, Jason watched Dmitri cup the face of the hunter he had just made his wife, the dawn sunlight kissing her skin, lighting up eyes that saw only the man in front of her. The grounds of the Archangel Raphaels home, Jason thought, the Hudson rushing past beyond the cliffs and a mass of fragrant roses in full bloom climbing the walls of the house itself, had seen centuries pass, but a scene such as this, they had never witnessed and perhaps never would again. A scene in which one of the most powerful vampires in the world took a Guild hunter for his bride. That Honor loved Dmitri was in no doubt. It didnt take a spymaster to read the incandescent joy in her every breath, her skin radiant with it. What startled Jason was the potent emotion he saw in the eyes of a vampire who had been a pitiless blade for all the centuries Jason had known him. Cruelty came easily to Dmitri, maybe too easily in recent times. The vampire was near to a thousand years old and jaded with it, blood and death no longer enough to cause him to break his stride, much less shock. Jason had seen Dmitri wield his scimitar on the field of battle to take off invaders heads, glory in the spray of their dying blood, and he had seen Dmitri seduce women with sensual elegance and a cold heart simply to amuse himself. Yet the man who touched Honor, who claimed her lips in a kiss of possession, had a tenderness about him that was as dangerous as it was gentle. And Jason comprehended that Dmitri would be a brutal weapon against anyone who dared harm his wife, that the darkness in him had not been tempered but merely leashed. He cannot deal with the Cadre if he is leashed, he said to the woman who stood next to him, a hunter with wings

of midnight and dawn. Feathers of a rich, silken blue flowed from the pure black at the inner curve of her wings, to segue into a softer indigo and the ephemeral shades visible in the skies when day broke, before becoming a brilliant white-gold at the primaries. Elena was Raphael's consort, and Raphael was Jason's liege. Perhaps that was why he felt an unexpected kind of ease with her. Or it might be that she was a stranger in the land of immortals, searching for a path that would take her into the centuries to come, as he once had. Or perhaps it was that, unbeknownst to Elena, they were linked by a far bleaker tie, a tie that spoke of mothers and blood. Iron-rich liquid matting his hair, soaking into his tunic, sticky on his arms. Elena looked up, shook her head, the startling near-white of her hair pinned back in an elegant twist, her body clothed in a simple ankle-length gown of a blue the shade of a pristine high-mountain lake. Her only ornamentation came in the form of the small amber hoops she always wore as an outward sign of her commitment to Raphael. Don't you see, Jason? she said as the bridal couple broke a kiss that had more than one sigh rippling through the crisp morning air. He is only this Dmitri for Honor. She joined in the clapping and cheering when Honor and Dmitri turned to the assembled guests, well-wishers moving forward to congratulate them. Having spoken to Dmitri before the ceremony, Jason waited for the crowd to thin. Elena, too, held her place, giving others a chance to speak to the newly wedded couple. As he had been with Dmitri before the ceremony alongside Raphael, Illium, and Venom, Elena had been with Honor, the archangel and his consort having turned over a suite in their home to the brides party. That party was composed of hunters, all certainly with a weapon or two hidden beneath the sleek, elegant clothes they wore for the wedding. Blue flickered at the edges of his vision, and he turned to see Illium spread his wings for a hunter who had made the request. Clad in the same formal black worn by the groom as well as Raphael and the others of the Seven here today, he had a flirtatious smile on his face. The smile was real as far as it went, but then, it did not go far. Jason had seen Illium love until his heart broke, and he had seen the angel mourn until there was no light in those eyes of molten gold. I understand, he said to Elena when she glanced back at him, reminded once again of the capacity others had for endless nuances of emotion. Jason had watched mortals and immortals alike for centuries, was able to glean even the most subtle changes in their emotional equilibrium, for no man could be a spymaster without that capability. Yet, through all that time, he had never been able to feel as they did. It was as if life skimmed across the surface of him, leaving his heart and his soul untouched. You are the perfect spymaster. An intelligent, gifted phantom unaffected by anything he sees. It was Lijuan who had said those words to him, four hundred years ago. The oldest of the archangels had also made him an offer: riches and women trained in the sensual arts; men if that was what he desired if he would change his allegiance, put himself in her service. Except Jason had already earned and created enough wealth for a hundred immortal lifetimes. As for the other when Jason wanted a woman, he had a woman. He had no need for anyone to act his procurer. Elena's wing shimmered lightly over his as she stretched a little, and he didn't shift away to break the fleeting contact. In many ways, he was the opposite of Aodhan, the angel so broken, he couldn't bear the slightest touch. Jason, by contrast, sometimes only felt real and not the phantom Lijuan had named him if he had the pressure of another's skin, another's wing against his own. It was as if all those years, decades, when he hadn't felt the touch of another sentient being had created a thirst in him that could never be assuaged. A sybarite drunk on sensation, that was what he might have become, but for the fact that those years of excruciating, endless aloneness had left him with other scars: scars that meant he meted out trust with a careful hand. Regardless of his need, Jason allowed very few people to touch him outside of the bedroom, for the touch of a friend, it was a far different thing than the caress of a lover taken in the dark of night and left behind when morning broke. It was a beautiful wedding, wasn't it? Elena said, her eyes soft in the way women often were at such things. Do you wish for one? Marriage was thought of as a mortal thing, but as today showed, some immortals continued to embrace it. Dmitri had been most insistent on the ceremony. Startled laughter from Elena. Raphael and I married above the wreckage of New York, when he fell with me in his arms. Raphael, too, Jason thought, was a different man with his consort, this mortal woman become an angel. Such a weak angel in terms of power, her immortality a flickering flame, and yet she had a strength that spoke to the survivor in him. So he had taught her how to remain unseen in the sky, watched her push her body to merciless extremes in an effort to achieve a vertical takeoff so soon after her becoming, and listened for threats to her life. For Elena was Raphael's biggest weakness. A tiny giggle, a mischief-eyed little girl running to Elena on wobbling legs, curls of bronze-threaded black captured at the sides of her head with ribbons of summer orange. Smiling in unhidden delight, Elena bent to pick up the child in her arms. Hello, Zoe, Warrior Goddess in Training. A kiss on one plump cheek, Zoe's flower girl dress a confection of lace over Elena's arm. Did you give your

mom the slip? Jason met the child's direct gaze as she nodded, saw that she held a silver-edged feather of distinctive blue in a careful fist. The daughter of the Guild Director stared at his wings for a moment before whispering something in Elena's ear. Jason heard what she said, understood none of it, her language that of very small children. Clearly not at the same disadvantage, Elena glanced at him, silver-gray eyes shining with laughter. The imps coveting more of your feathers for her collection, Jason. I'd be careful. She was distracted a second later by a tall man with long black hair tied neatly at the nape of his neck, his cheekbones sharp against copper gold skin. Ransom Winterwolf. Hunter. It was strange to see so many of the Guild on the grounds of Raphael's home. Located in the Angel Enclave, on the other side of the river from the gleaming glass and metal of Manhattan, it was undoubtedly elegant, but Jason knew the Sire had offered Dmitri far more stunning locations in which to make Honor his bride. However, the leader of the Seven had been adamant. Daybreak, he'd said a bare three hours before sunrise. We marry at daybreak. In those three hours, Elena and the Guild Director had managed to alert every hunter in the New York area who wasn't on assignment and was within traveling distance, while Jason, Illium, and Venom stood for the rest of the Seven. Naasir, Galen, and Aodhan had been told, had all three spoken with Dmitri before the wedding. United in their loyalty to Raphael and to each other, the Seven had forged bonds that were unbreakable, but even had there been more time, it was impossible for all of them to ever be in one place at one time. To keep the balance of power in the world, Raphael needed to maintain a presence in the Refuge and in New York, and now, in the lost city of Amanat, home to the Ancient who was Raphael's mother. That three of them stood here to witness Dmitri's wedding, it was an unexpected gift. There were other invited guests of course, the proud staff who ran Raphael's home, a number of men and women who worked directly under Dmitri at the Tower, and whose loyalty belonged as much to the vampire as it did to Raphael, two mortal policemen who were considered part of the Guild family. The well-respected man who'd officiated the ceremony belonged to that family, too, having headed the Guild before passing on the mantle. Raphael himself had stood at Dmitri's side during the ceremony, the friendship between the two men old enough, deep enough, that it was the archangel who had played the second this day. Jason didn't know of any other such friendships among those who served the Cadre of Ten, the archangels who ruled the world, but he knew this one had endured centuries, through anger and war and even a short defection by Dmitri to Nehas territory. That hadn't lasted long, and now Dmitri's lips curved at something Raphael said. While the vampire was dressed in a crisp black-on-black suit, his bride wore a gown of deep, vibrant green that caressed and embraced her curves before rippling in a liquid waterfall to the dew-laden grass, the fabric arranged cleverly at her left hip to give the illusion of waves. When her gaze landed on Jason, she smiled and came toward him, halting at the border of the invisible space that separated him from the world, one hand holding the wildflower bouquet Elena had created using the blooms in her greenhouse. Thank you, she said, her happiness so luminous, it outshone the diamonds at her throat, diamonds Jason had seen Dmitri buy as rough stones three centuries ago. It had taken the vampire another hundred years to get them finely cut and set into a necklace of exquisite beauty, until the stones appeared to be droplets of captured starfire. Who will you gift it to? Jason had asked at the time. Dmitri's response had been a sardonic twist of his mouth, the hardness in his eyes akin to the gems he held. A woman whose spirit dazzles brighter than these stones. The necklace had graced none but the honey-skinned neck it now encircled. For this amazing dream of a dress, Honor continued, stroking her hand down the fabric. I don't know how you found it so early in the morning. It fits like it was made for me. No thanks are necessary. So much of life he spent on the sidelines many times out of choice, sometimes because he didn't know how to belong but he'd needed to be a part of this day when a man he respected, and who was as close a friend as he was capable of having, claimed this woman for his own. Jason can find anything, Dmitri said, walking over to slide his arm around Honor's waist. The winds talk to him, tell him where to go. Honor laughed, husky and warm, and then she was being embraced by Elena, the hunter's wings iridescent in the white light of morning. Stepping a little to the right, Jason met Dmitri's gaze. The vampire shrugged, the words unspoken but not unheard. No one will ever believe it. No, Jason thought, no one would. Even he had thought himself mad when he was a boy on the verge of adulthood. It had taken reading Jessamy's history books once he arrived at the angelic stronghold that was the Refuge to understand he'd inherited his mother's ear, her ability to sense things happening hundreds of miles away, across oceans and beyond mountains. It was how she'd always had stories to tell him about people in the Refuge, though they lived on an isolated atoll surrounded by the shimmering blue of the Pacific. I will write this story down for you, Jason. You must practice your reading. He had. Over and over, until the parchment disintegrated, he'd read those stories and the others in the books in the house. Then he'd copied the words out

on wood, on flax, in the sand, forcing himself to remember that he was a person, that he should know how to read. It had worked . . . for a while. Im happy for you, Dmitri, he said now, allowing the ghosts of the past to fade into the background. This is my gift to you and your bride. As Dmitri glanced down at the small note card Jason passed across, Honors seconda long-legged hunter who had unique gifts of her own came to join Elena and Honor, and the women laughed and began to talk all at once. A safe place, Jason said when Dmitri looked up from reading the address on the card, the sun glinting off the simple gold band he wore on the ring finger of his left hand. Where no one will find you. Understanding whispered across the sensual lines of Dmitri's face. Moving a small distance away from the women, he said, I shouldn't be surprised at what you know, and yet I am. He slid the card away. How certain are you of the security? The house is mine, and no one has found it in two hundred years. Hidden in the dense forests of an otherwise uninhabited mountain, it could only be reached via a very specific route that he now shared with Dmitri, mind to mind. Even aerial entry is impossible unless the angel in question knows how to find a particular small clearing. He gave Dmitri the coordinates. Without that, severe damage to the wings as a result of the thick canopy and the safeguards hidden within is a distinct possibility. Dmitri's eyes gleamed. Good. His next words were spoken aloud. I didn't know you had another home in this country. I don't. He had houses he used when needed, but home was a concept that had no meaning to him, though Dmitri likely assumed he considered his apartment at New York's Archangel Tower home. You'll be safe there, and you can be private. Honors transformation from human to vampire would take time, and while Jason knew Dmitri would ensure she navigated it in a deep sleep, safe from any suffering, he also knew the other man would not leave her side during the process. There is no need to take a guard unit. I wouldn't trust those words coming from anyone's mouth but yours, Dmitri said, his face angled toward Honor. I don't know when we'll use your gift. I have her promise . . . but I will not rush her on this. You want to. Yes. Unvarnished ruthlessness. But you see, Jason, it appears I have a fatal weakness when it comes to Honor. Even should she change her mind and decide to remain mortal, I can't force her and still live with myself. Jason said nothing as Dmitri walked back to his wife, who looked up to offer him a smile Jason had seen her share with no other. Her friends moved away to give husband and wife a moment of privacy, but everyone continued to linger on the luxuriant green of the lawn, the birdsong a delicate accompaniment to the murmur of conversation. Champagne was sipped, greetings exchanged, friendships renewed in the glow of the joy that came off Honor and Dmitri. Unlike the others, Jason felt exposed out here in the sunlight, the unrelieved black of his wings a target, but he didn't give in to the compulsion to fly up high above the cloud layer, where no one could see him. A minute later, when the winds began to whisper, he listened. A single word. A name. Eris. The only significant Eris Jason knew of was husband to Neha, the three-thousand-year-old archangel the only one in the Cadre who had chosen to follow the mortal ceremony of binding. Eris was also her consort, but he hadn't been seen in public for some three hundred years. Many believed him dead; however, Jason knew the male lived, imprisoned in a palace inside Neha's sprawling fort. Except for when he'd attempted to escape early on in his captivity, he had not been physically harmed. Neha loved Eris too much to hurt him. It was why she hated him so violently for his betrayal. Eris. Sliding into the shadows of the trees that edged Raphael's property, a welcome respite from the light, Jason took out his cell phone. In earlier centuries, even with his considerable mental abilities, it had taken him days to communicate with his men and women, weeks to gather a single piece of information. Technology made it so much simpler. Unlike some angels of old, and though his chosen weapon remained a sword, Jason did not abhor the modern world. Now, he saw that he had a number of missed calls that must've come in during the ceremony, while his phone had been in silent mode. All were from Samira. She was a servant with clearance to work in Neha's private quarters, and technically his highest-ranking spy in the other archangel's court, though Jason had his doubts about her continued efficacy. Samira, he said when the call was answered. What has happened? Eris is dead. A hushed whisper. Murdered inside his palace. When? I don't know, but he was found an hour ago. Neha has not left the body. Mahiya is by her side. Jason had never spoken to Mahiya, but having done a subtle investigation when Neha first adopted her just over three centuries ago, he knew the princess was of Neha's bloodline. That relationship was accepted knowledge, but the facts behind it had long been buried. Many in Neha's own court chose not to remember, not to see the truth that Mahiya had been born of Nivriti, sister to Neha and dead as long as her child had been alive. No terrible secret that . . . except if you knew the name of Mahiya's father. Eris. 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