

CHAPTER 1

The hand blistered deep red as fire scorched its tortured host. Small, pale creatures burst from open cysts to feed on his many sores.

Azarias recoiled as the wretched hand groped for his face. The walk through the carpeted amborlite fields had always been a source of a peaceful retreat from Al Birka's busy center.

Not this time.

This horrific, inescapable vision stalked him even in this remote part of Heaven.

"Azarias, help me." The voice strained to be heard above the sound of his sizzling arms. "Help yourself. Don't let the Creator do this to us. We belong here in Heaven. You're next. You'll see..." Who was this? A putrid cloud of smoke veiled the angel. How could God allow one of Azaria's soul mates to burn? The flame scurried up the victim's transparent wings, shriveled them, emblazed them, and finally devoured them with ferocity.

Azarias turned his chin to the mantle above. "How could you do this to him? We're here to serve you, to love you." Tears etched his cheeks as the smoke rose, twisting into menacing clouds. He placed his hands over his face.

"Stop it, Lord, please!"

Even before he could finish his last word, the vision released him. The aromatic scent of Heaven returned.

Azarias collapsed, fingers sinking into the grainy silicium. He wanted to claw the images and the raw, broken voice from his mind. "How could you? Why would you?"

Movement on the prismatic horizon caught the corner of his

eye. No!

A mass of dark acrid smoke metastasized into a great storm, devouring the skyline as it moved in his direction.

This was not Heaven. Azarias knew Heaven. He knew it from the pastel lavender skies. He knew it from the glistening turquoise brooks. And he knew it from the distant mesas dripping with golden amborlite. But not this boiling accretion of rage. Fiery pillars churned and spiraled high into the atmosphere, gutting the tranquility that existed just a moment ago.¹

Azarias scurried to his feet.

How had things changed so quickly? First, the violent vision, now the hunt by this tempest. Why?

Panic propelled him up the dune.

The rolling clouds growled as they chased.

Flying was out of the question. He needed the Lord's Spirit to fly long distances. And try as he might, he couldn't summon that help.

He stumbled, fell. Silicium coated his face, grains cutting into his mouth, suffocating him.

Keep moving!

Ahead, the beckoning mesas, with their embracing alcoves, called him to safety, but he couldn't reach them by foot.

He imagined his flesh burning like the angel in his vision, cysts bursting with infection.

Again, lightning flashed, fracturing the Heavens and casting its image on a turquoise profundo brook in the ravine below him. His heart pounding, he staggered down the other side of the steep dune that sucked at his feet. Golden amborlite flowers on high stalks, neither aware nor oblivious to his fate, parted in response to the Lord's Spirit that always accompanied him.

"Oh!"

He tripped. Frantically he tried to lift his feet out of dune's craters, but it was too late. The dune won. He threw his arms forward and tucked his chin. He tumbled. His world went spinning before

1 Ezekiel 1:4

his eyes in a blur of sky, silicium, light, and dark. The slope seemed to go on forever until he splashed into a small brook of hot spiritual profundo snaking between the dunes. It infused energy into his arms and saturated his robe with a turquoise glow.

"No, no please," he pleaded with the profundo spirit. "I can't bask now." He used the stimulating jolt to aid him to his feet. When he emerged out of the brook, the turquoise bled out of the robe, returning it to its white color.

He shot a glance over his shoulder. The clouds clawed at him within striking distance, their black fingers casting ravenous shadows. He ducked. Each bolt of lightning seemed to burn him, to incinerate his thoughts. This emotion choked him, and he could no longer smell the sweet scent of Spirit. Azarias couldn't move his wings. The world spun; he fell.

His unfaithfulness. That must be it—he was being judged.

"Lord, please, have mercy." He dug his fingers into the silicium and wrapped his wings around his face. He closed his eyes. Why had he let his pride take hold of his spirit?

"Azarias, do not fear,"² said a deep voice.

Fear? Was this strange emotion called *fear*? Azarias labeled this feeling. He did more than label it. His mind dwelled on it. But why not *fear*? The Heavens were crashing upon him.

"The Lord's Spirit is upon you."³

"The Lord?" Azarias risked a miniscule peek outside the haven of his wings.

A hazy, gray mist surrounded the once serene countryside. He hardly recognized the area.

Azarias paused and then climbed to his feet. He unfurled his wings, but without the Lord's Spirit to guide them, he couldn't go far. Was the haze part of the same treacherous cloud? The thunder had stopped. An eerie silence lurked in the dim rays of light in front of him.

2 Luke 1:30

3 Luke 1:28

Azarias stole a step. He waved his arm at the mist. It parted.

He squinted. Four pairs of intersecting wheels hovered before him, just inches above the surface.⁴

He froze, refusing to breathe. The wheels were covered with eyes—countless eyes.⁵ Maybe if he didn't move, maybe his white color would blend into the haze, and they wouldn't be able to see him...

Then the eyes shifted and rolled. Pinpointing his presence, they seemed to cast daggers into his soul.

They *knew*. Knew he'd questioned the Lord. Knew he doubted. Knew he'd been unfaithful. He covered his face and turned away.

The mist, however, didn't climb over him, didn't fill him with dread. Instead, a strange feeling of peace tugged, pulling back at his fear.

Curiosity egged him on, and he turned. This time, he did not look into the eyes but raised his gaze to the pair of bronze legs attached to the wheels. They were similar to his legs yet emitted a glow so vibrant, it refracted in the mist around them, and the reflection in the bronze seemed to multiply.⁶ The being had four wings, not six. This was not a seraph.⁷

The clouds separated. A powerful torso and the silhouette of a head issued from bronze-edged mist and towered over Azarias. Frenzied spirits of fire spiraled round and round its thumping immensity.

Azarias trembled.

It spoke.

"Azarias, I am the Guardian Cherub⁸ of the Creator and a member of the Holy Order of Angels."

The voice shook the surface where he stood, almost causing

him to lose his balance. It didn't resonate like that of a seraph, with melodic tones. And it certainly wasn't the Lord. The Lord's voice originated softly⁹ from within angels with love and compassion, not through energy waves from another source.

He risked a full-on look. The face of a giant eagle¹⁰ gazed down from within the clouds. Its piercing, unyielding eyes could only mean one thing. God judged him through this strange being.

And yet.... *Fear Not*....

The cherub's head rotated to the face of an ox.¹¹ Its hot, heaving breath, like a raging bull's,¹² seemed to create the stormy vortex.

Azarias froze. He tried to imagine where this being hailed from. The level of the Holy Order to which Azarias belonged didn't have guardian cherubim. This angel must dwell at...

Azarias collapsed to the surface. It must dwell at the Lord's Throne.¹³

He closed his eyes. He didn't know what to say. Thoughts shot through his mind at riveting speed, but none coalesced. He had never seen nor addressed anyone from the Lord's Throne. Only special angels dwelled at the Throne.¹⁴ But he had to speak. The silence cut deeper as he lay there.

"I—I am at your service, O Great Guardian Cherub."

The cherub's head rotated again. Sharp incisors protruded from the mouth now. It struck Azarias with an intimidating majesty. It was a lion's face.¹⁵

What kind of being had God sent him? A warm sensation started first with his hands, circulating through his body to land with full intensity at his feet. He stiffened as hot explosions deto-

9 1 Kings 19:11-12

10 Ezekiel 1:10

11 Ezekiel 1:10

12 Ezekiel 1:10

13 Revelation 4:6-8

14 Revelation 4

15 Ezekiel 1:10; 10:14

4 Ezekiel 10:9

5 Ezekiel 1:18

6 Ezekiel 1:7

7 Ezekiel 1:11; (Revelation 4:8 states six wings)

8 Ezekiel 10:3

nated throughout his wings. He leapt up.

The cherub's eyes shot out beams of light, cutting into Azarias's soul. Some unknown power convulsed his body. His knees buckled and hit the surface again. He wanted to run, but fear paralyzed him. Again, the head of the powerful cherub turned. A new, beautiful, yet unfamiliar face mesmerized him. Hazel eyes, filled with more gentleness than he could bear, high cheekbones that framed a kind smile. The beauty caught and drew the fear from him.¹⁶

Heaven always immersed angels in God's joy, but this was different. As he continued to stare into the cherub's eyes, he had a sense he might be looking at the likeness of God Himself.¹⁷

"Azarias, the Lord has chosen you."

For what? And why? Shouldn't he be judged?

He covered himself with his wings. He had questioned the Almighty too often during his missions. He tried so many times to suppress them, but his inquiries were relentless. Just like during the vision, when he questioned the Lord's motives in burning the angel. No angel had that authority.

"He has chosen you because of your inquisitive nature. It is the foundation for your gift of discernment. Because you question, you can discern. This is the reason."

Inquisitive? But he had all but doubted the Lord. Even here he wanted to demand an explanation, but only little gasps escaped his lips.

Azarias bowed his head. "The Lord's Will is my desire."

The cherub raised two of his four wings. Azarias noticed his unusual arms. They did not have the seraph's golden radiance, laced with scintillating channels. No, the color was softer and the texture more translucent.

"Azarias, you have found favor with the Lord. There are angels conspiring to reject His Will and to dwell outside of the Spirit. They

16 ibid

17 Genesis 1:27

have been deceived by a leader who believes he is as great as God.¹⁸ It is the Almighty's Will that you seek out these rebellious ones and cast them out of Heaven. You will lead God's warriors."

The phrases rolled in his mind. He tried to imagine an angel as great as the Lord. Then he shifted to that word: *rebellion*. Angels didn't rebel...

Coldness pierced his soul.

The cherub continued. "Their leader's pride has twisted their spirits and infected their souls. He has tricked them into believing they are as great as the Lord. This angel thinks of himself as a creator and not as the created.¹⁹ His pride remained unchecked and untested and grew as a fatal, spiritual disease. The only remedy is to expel him from Heaven."

Azarias's mouth dropped open. An angel could not just *will* himself from created to creator, could he? His eyes drifted down toward the wheels again, but this time staring, not seeing. Even as he digested each of the cherub's accusations, he still could not grasp such a possibility.

The cherub glided his wings back and forth. They directed the mist. "If this angel and his followers are left unchallenged, their poison will infect the entire Holy Order, perverting the holiness of Heaven. God's Will would no longer be relevant, and His love will no longer be desired by those who rebel."

This last explanation made Azarias tremble. His eyes jumped to the cherub's face again. He found his voice. "God's Will would no longer be relevant? That can't be. Angels need God's Will to perform and God's love to exist. It seems impossible that any created being would reject God's love."

He furrowed his brow. How could God allow a being...a created being, to think *he* was God? There must be some misunderstanding.

But as he searched the cherub's face, he saw only fierce surety.

No...it couldn't be. The cherub was asking him to save Heaven

18 Isaiah 14:12-13

19 Isaiah 14:14

from...a false god.

To *expel* him.

Azarias bowed. "O Great Cherub, who am I to challenge these angels? I am not of great stature or ability."²⁰

No response. Azarias looked up and stepped forward, opening his hands. "There are other angels more capable and equipped than I."

The cherub's gaze burned into him.

"My gifts are merely discernment and reflection, and I don't speak well in front of others. Why would the Lord entrust the ultimate mission to one so flawed?"²¹

The sound of a choir saturated the mist. Though faint, it resonated deep within Azarias's soul. He recognized the music as the *Holy, Holy One* song sung at the Lord's Throne.²² He longed to see the Throne someday, but as a seraph ranked low in the Holy Order, he could not travel there. Instead, he imagined the beauty of the Throne by this music when he walked alone among the mesas. He tried to suppress this elation, still overcome with the magnitude of his mission. But it was no use.

The cherub smiled and then whispered, "Only the Lord knows the reason."

Azarias closed his eyes, still absorbing the Spirit's sensation.

"He has granted you the use of other angels to help you achieve your objective. The Spirit of the Lord will choose an alliance for you. The Lord also will expand your gift of discernment to approach omnipresence."

The mist parted, exposing a small rectangular object at Azarias's feet.

"As long as the angels in your command remain in the Lord's Spirit, you will be able to observe them through this Tome as they perform their missions throughout Heaven—however, you will

20 Exodus 3:11

21 Exodus 4:13

22 Revelation 4:8-11

not be able to communicate with your angels when you are not in their presence. Moreover, you will not be able to use the Tome as you travel on your own missions."

Azarias picked up the grayish film, turning it over in his hand. It slightly eclipsed his open palm and did not boast of possessing any power, but Azarias knew better. God revealed His power in the most unlikely places in Heaven. He slipped it into his robe.

He looked up. The cherub collapsed his wings, expelling a mist with a clap of thunder. He drew back from Azarias, rescinding the storm with him, and vanished in the distance. The turbulent skies calmed. The radiant glow and sweet scent of the Lord's Spirit were all that were left.

But serenity did not return to Azarias.

SQUATINIDALE LOVED THE LITTLE AMBORLITE THAT CARPETED the Ephesus²³ countryside. As he flew through this heavenly plain, these shimmering little flowers parted for him, bowing on their long stalks in reverence to the Lord's Spirit that guided him. As he had done so often before, he agreed to meet Abaddon²⁴ away from Ephesus's great theater.²⁵ It was no burden to come this far; the Spirit's sweet, savory aroma seemed more apparent out here. The active part of Ephesus, like billions of Heavenly districts, brimmed with angels working their missions. He just had to escape occasionally to grow closer to his Lord on his own terms.

The flat area didn't brag of any spectacular features. Distant jagged outcroppings resembling posted sentries encircled it. The district of Ephesus glinted in the distance, marking its precarious presence midway up the side of one of these outcroppings.

A bearer of God's good news, Abaddon had the gift of a herald. One time, as he stood at the center of a stadium addressing thou-

23 Acts, 19:1-41; Ephesians 1:1; Revelation 2:1-7

24 Job 26:6; Revelation 9:11

25 Acts 19:28-31

sands, the Lord's Spirit infused his message so intensely that jubilant angels nearly stampeded him in their eagerness to start their missions. During such times, his delphinium blue eyes sparkled with excitement.

Squatinidale, on the other hand, had no apparent gifts, at least in his opinion. He performed his missions joyfully, with precision, never asking for more than his share of attention from other seraphim. His stout and impish frame strained to reach an inferior height of nine feet. Yet he was grateful for his beautiful voice and chrysolite skin. Were these his gifts? He wasn't sure.

Ahead, at a distant outcropping, Abaddon rounded a corner. As always, Squatinidale recognized him with wonder. Abaddon sashayed these days, a *signature* stride as he walked—swaying his wings from side to side with an uncommon gracefulness. Squatinidale found this recently adopted flair comical. How did he get away with such affect? No matter, he just did. Squatinidale, meanwhile, would never attempt such an act. Even if he wanted to, his stout frame would not allow it.

"*Mai Deus Exsisto vobis*," the two angels said, greeting each other. "May God be with you."

Squatinidale sat and drew circles in the silicium particles while he waited for Abaddon to speak.

Yet, he said nothing.

Squatinidale looked up. Something didn't seem right. Abaddon's face glowed as blank as the semi-barren surface in front of him. "I know this will sound foreign to you, my dear friend," Abaddon began, "but what I have to tell you has changed my whole purpose of *being*."

Squatinidale's eyes strayed from Abaddon. He was in for another of Abaddon's long-winded speeches, and this mildly depressed him. He could see angels in the distance flying into Ephesus. They may be attending the performances at the Odeum Amphitheatre. He thought about performances he had attended there. Someday he might find the courage to perform a song he had written. He heard

that other angels who performed there had grown closer to God after their performances.

Abaddon's voice cut in. He threw his arms out and turned toward Ephesus. "I never realized my significance until I destroyed these restrictions, these walls, these things that kept me from becoming who I was meant to be."

Humoring Abaddon, Squatinidale turned back and smiled. "What walls, Abaddon?"

"The walls that kept me from understanding the universe."

"But we don't need to understand. Just to obey. Isn't it enough that we are given full access to the Lord's love even though we may not understand why we perform some of our duties?"

"That's just it. The Creator prevents us from knowing so many things. How did He create the universe? What does the future hold? Am I here just to serve the Creator? What is my true essence?"

Squatinidale rubbed the back of his neck and stood. Prevents? True essence? What was he talking about? "The Lord reveals to us what we can understand, my friend. Moreover, we must have faith in what He will do with us in the future. Why ask questions about things we may never understand because of our limited ability to comprehend? I am immensely happy with who I am because I know that I am loved by the Lord in boundless ways, and always have access to Him through His Spirit."

"How do you know that?"

Abaddon's voice bit too low, with an unfamiliar overtone.

"How do I know what?"

"How do you know the Creator loves you, and how do you know that you cannot understand all heavenly knowledge unless you are allowed to view it?"

When Abaddon paused, Squatinidale could feel something seeping into his spirit—speculation, a lack of trust, doubt? This hadn't happened before. Abaddon always amused him with his teachings. When he felt lost and insignificant among billions of angels, Abaddon showed affection and kindness to him.

Squatinidale shook himself. He couldn't let Abaddon detect this uneasiness. Angels don't doubt. He hoped that his demeanor didn't give it away. His lack of self-confidence sometimes seeped out when he spoke with Abaddon. This would be nothing new. He looked off at the distant outcroppings where jagged peaks dominated the flat plains.

Abaddon continued. "You understand these things as mysteries that are meant to be revealed by the Creator, but instead, they are secrets that are meant to be kept from you."

Squatinidale tensed. "Abaddon, how can you mutter such mutinous concepts when you know in your heart that the Lord has provided all the love, understanding, and knowledge that you can comprehend?"

"*Has* the Creator done that?" Abaddon snapped back, eyebrows lowering.

Squatinidale opened and then closed his mouth. "Of course, the Lord has done that." Confusion and agitation filled Squatinidale about this exchange. This wasn't the Abaddon *he* knew. "Why ask such a foolish question?"

Abaddon kicked a small othelite sphere away and stepped toward Squatinidale. "You are a submissive little pet that glows with delight every time the Creator calls you to a mission. Don't you get it? Why are you so naïve? Why are you so blind? The Creator fools you into believing this because He doesn't want you to know the truth."

Squatinidale stepped closer. "What truth do you mean?"

"That you are as great as the Creator. The reason that you have not realized this is because the Creator keeps your true nature from you."

Squatinidale's face heated as he stood only inches from Abaddon's nose. He could never match Abaddon's oratory and debating skills. He had always just accepted what his friend said as truth. But not this time, he had to say something.

"You speak blasphemy that is not based on truth and wisdom."

Abaddon smirked. "What if I prove it to you?"

"Prove what?" Squatinidale glared into Abaddon's eyes, now on fire with passion.

"Prove that an angel can be as great, beautiful, and powerful as the Creator," whispered Abaddon, as if avoiding an eavesdropper.

As great and powerful as the Creator? How...

Squatinidale cut his voice low. "Perhaps an angel could have greater gifts than other *angels*, but not as powerful as the Creator..."

Abaddon just smiled.

"But wouldn't there be knowledge of such an angel? Certainly, that information would spread quickly throughout the entire Holy Order." Squatinidale heard the faintest edge of panic in his voice. What was Abaddon doing to him?

Abaddon peered into Squatinidale's eyes. His smile grew cold and sinister.

"I know one," he said, lifting the weight off his eyebrows.

"Y-you know what?"

"I know an angel that is as great as the Creator."

Squatinidale mouthed the words as his eyes searched the ground for understanding. "As great as the Creator?"

Abaddon's face glowed with excitement. "This angel is not merely an angel. He redefines the Holy Order. He did not hesitate in leaving the Lord's Spirit and discovering himself. As the most beautiful angel that has ever graced Heaven, he has found his true essence and offers to share his secret with any angel who has the courage and wisdom to believe it."

Squatinidale's breathing intensified. Was Abaddon speaking the truth? He had never known any deceit in Heaven. If Abaddon were in the Lord's Spirit, he could not speak a non-truth. But how could an angel be as great as the Lord?

Abaddon pointed to the distance. "I can take you to him in another district."

"What? I don't understand." Squatinidale scowled. "We can only travel between districts where the Lord's Spirit takes us." He felt

Abaddon wanted to steer the debate to God's motive for creating an organized Heaven for the betterment of His subjects. But this debate would be silly. Squatinidale wanted to turn his back and walk away, but something kept him from doing so.

Abaddon clapped his hands together. "That is the first truth I will teach you. You can go anywhere you desire by the power of your own spirit. You do not *need* the Creator's Spirit. You have the power within you to go anywhere you desire."

How could he go anywhere he desired? What did he mean by the power of his own spirit?

"No, I will not defy the Lord's Spirit," Squatinidale declared, finally tearing himself away from this morbid curiosity.

"Defy?" Abaddon replied with surprise. "Who said anything about defy? The Creator gave you the ability to make a choice, and all you would be doing is exercising the free will that He gave you."

Squatinidale turned back toward the Ephesus amphitheater, unable to face Abaddon. "But wouldn't that bring consequences from the Lord?"

Squatinidale could feel Abaddon's hot breath on the back of his neck. "That's just it—there are no consequences. The great angel has already proven this by being the first being to exercise his will independent of the Creator. If he were in error, as you argue, wouldn't the Creator have stopped him? Why would the Creator give you the ability to exercise your free will if it wasn't *meant* to be exercised? We all know the Creator creates perfection, and He wouldn't have created free will by mistake. Unless...you think the Creator made an error in judgment?"

Squatinidale turned. "Abaddon, you know the Lord is perfect in all ways. To make a statement like that is preposterous."

"Exactly, my friend. Then why wouldn't the Creator inform you of your free will and ability to travel where you desire? Did He just conveniently forget to tell you?"

Abaddon had a point. One he clearly enjoyed making by the way he stepped back, with folded arms.

Why didn't the Creator inform him he could travel under his own power? Perhaps exercising a free will was not an act of defiance. But, how was this done? In addition, what about this *super angel*? Would it be an act of defiance to go meet this being? A small introduction would simply just satisfy his curiosity. If God did not want him to go, He would certainly stop him.

Squatinidale sighed. "I'll go meet this super angel—not because I think you are correct in everything you say, but because I want to prove you are wrong. You must be mistaken."

"Very well, then. I want you to be fully informed about such matters. Let's go. I don't want to miss his entrance."

Entrance? Squatinidale looked around. From where? "Okay. So, how do I move under my own spirit?" Squatinidale recalled a vision of the earth. "Flap my wings as the birds do in the material world?"

"Take my hand and walk with me, my friend."

As Squatinidale took hold of Abaddon's hand, a sense of uneasiness pricked him.

"Now think of yourself. Focus on yourself and not the Creator. You are in control, you are capable, and you are righteous in what you are doing. You cannot do wrong in Heaven."

Squatinidale closed his eyes. His wings grew cold, starting at the tips and then moving down into his back. He lurched and then moved forward in a steady motion.

The cold grew so intense. It burned. Even his wings, legs, and arms burned by this intrusion. Maybe he should stop. But how?

Uneasiness washed over him and then developed into a sickening feeling that consumed his spirit. Yet, even as he traveled, he experienced a measure of freedom, power, and independence. Maybe he was making the right decision.

As the two sojourned across Heaven, Squatinidale stared at the unfamiliar surroundings. Jagged outcroppings reached towards them as they passed deeper into other districts.

As they descended into fields, Squatinidale gasped. "Abaddon, look. The amborlite stalks did not sway away. We are passing

directly through their flowers like they're...they're vapor."

Abaddon shot a glance at him and smiled.

Squatinidale placed his hand over his mouth.

What had he done?

CHAPTER 2

The unfamiliar surroundings taunted Squatinidale as the journey swallowed him deeper into Heaven's inner spirals. No longer flying under his own power, he now traveled at Abaddon's mercy. He could no longer smell the fragrance of God's Spirit that had embraced him throughout all of his previous existence. Has this new type of flying stifled it? His resolve slipped away like the dissolving amborlite. The golden petals shined only in little patches here and there—where were the massive fields that Squatinidale was accustomed to?

He scoped the terrain from side to side. He wanted to find something, anything that looked familiar.

"What's the matter?" Abaddon asked. "Why are you making that high-pitched noise?"

High-pitched noise? Squatinidale captured a deep breath and tried to relax. He didn't look at Abaddon but skittered his gaze over the surroundings for something, anything familiar. "This district is very far away from the Lord's Throne. I have never spiraled this far in."

"Of course, it is. You cannot find yourself unless you move away from the Creator's influence. If you want to experience your true nature, you must move away from the Throne that encases all of Heaven."

Squatinidale didn't respond. He had to fight the crushing feeling that controlled him, suffocated him.

The atmosphere darkened. The lavender sky gave way to a morbid gray. Light beams jostled for space. Squatinidale gripped Abaddon's arm, horrified by his inability to stop this feeling that