

grounded!

*More
Confessions
of an
Angel-in-Training*

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Grounded!

dedication

For anyone who has ever wanted to fly.

chapter 1

Behold!

My.

Halo.

Is.

Awesome.

In our darkened room, I admire it in the mirror, turning my head left, then right. The shimmers cast heavenly highlights onto my light curls. I mean, if I couldn't get my wings at the Ceremony, this is the next best thing, right?

"Would you shut *that* thing off?" Faith snarls. Her button-nosed, innocent face doesn't match the ferocious tone. "Some of us are *trying* to sleep." She flops to her other side facing away from me, folds the pillow over her head and huffs. Really loud.

So. Should it upset me that my luminescence has Faith in a snit? Maybe. But it doesn't.

It isn't bothering Mercy either, who's mumbling in her sleep. She always has. Mumbled, that is. And Faith annoys me—a lot. She always has. I leave the halo lit.

Confession: This isn't very angelic of me.

"Your alarm will go off in exactly four minutes," I say. "You don't want to be late to your job." It's kinda different—me bossing her around. Usually Faith is the high and mighty one.

Grounded!

Faith works as an intern in the Department of Prayers, Answered and Otherwise. Funny story: I met her boss, Destiny Goodewind, and learned about this position four months ago on Declaration Day while I followed the Archangel Michael to his office for special instructions.

Declaration Day—or as I’ve always called it, D-Day—is this formal event when each individual Angel-in-Training meets with Our Head Honcho for, like, thirty seconds and tells Him what career path they’d like to pursue for their final three years of school. My meeting was, *uh*, a teeny bit longer because I asked to skip school and go straight to Earth on a Mission as a Guardian. Surprisingly, The Big Guy said okay. Or at least the Divine version of that, which is, *It will be done*.

The Archangel Michael, who’s in charge of all things Guardian, was not at all happy about the way my Declaration went down. But he had to give me instructions anyway. So on the way to *his* office, he decided to stop at the Prayer office, and there was this totally awkward moment when Faith’s boss Destiny mistook me for a Dominion. She asked me if I wanted the job Faith now has. Can you say, *Hell, no?* But it’s perfect for my roommate’s bossy Dominion nature, and I’d bet she’s loving stamping prayers *Accepted* or *Rejected*. The alarm signals a wonderful day of power-tripping ahead of her.

Faith turns on the lamp next to her bed and combs her fingers through her spiky, pixie-style hair. “At least I have a job.”

“I do, too!” *Right back at ya’.*

“Wrong, Grace! You *had* a job. That Mission is complete. Good luck getting another.”

Ordinarily her snark can really drive me off my cloud, but I know today it’s all about the halo. I got one. She didn’t. And the pair of scales she did receive—to help weigh decisions—must come in handy at her job. But seriously, which would you rather have? It’s not too hard, right?

A halo is *so* much better!

Faith stalks to the closet and grabs a terry wrap. “You’ll see what I mean at that special Conclave for Guardians. It should be enlightening for you.” With that sweet message delivered, she heads out the door and down the hall to the showers.

After she’s gone, I switch off my halo, which leaves me feeling a little less brilliant. Does she have the scoop on why The Conclave was called for today—three months ahead of the regular schedule? Is there some kind of bad news for Guardians?

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All the Guardians from every Assignment on Earth flock to the outdoor stadium where The Ceremony was held. It’s as full today as it was two weeks ago when we received our gifts. Which just goes to show how

Grounded!

many Angels skip the Ceremony, since all nine kinds of Celestial Beings were there. Correction. We're *supposed* to be there.

I settle into my seat in the tippy-top section, the spot reserved for Angels-in-Training. I search the crowd for heavenly Victor, and then even for Aisha, my only Full Angel friends, but with all the wing-flapping going on, I'll never be able to pick them out.

A guy with bright blue eyes eases into the seat next to mine and glances my way, flashing a quick smile that creates dimple madness. I smile shyly while wondering if I'm supposed to know him.

He does a double take. "Hey! You're that AIT. What's your name again? Grace?"

My shoulders slump. I'd hoped that no one would recognize me. I mean, it was only one episode of *Angelic Bloopers* and not everyone watches that show. I attempt to sit straighter and draw deep from the well of angelic composure. "Yeah. That's me. I'm the blooper Angel."

"That's cool. I'm Justice." He holds out a hand, and I shake it, which is totally dorky. Even for me. "It must have turned out okay," he continues, his eyes darting up. "Look. You got a halo."

That's right. I did. And suddenly I feel better about my starring role in that show.

"Thanks," I say. "What'd you get?"

"A scepter." He shrugs. "It's better than scales."

"*Way* better." Conversation with a fellow AIT is kinda nice, because when I went on my Mission, I missed out on hanging with my classmates. As a bonus, he's training to be a Guardian, so he can understand the stigma of subsisting at the bottom of the angel heap. Almost every Celestial Being thinks they're better than Guardians, because our interaction with humans taints the job. If you ask me, it's *truly* a bum rap.

Unfortunately, before I can get to know this future fellow Guardian guy better, Gabriel sounds his trumpet, bringing The Conclave to order. The Big Kahuna glides across the stage and stops at the center. He's in His formal Elegant Old Man attire. Every eye is focused on Him.

"Greetings," His voice booms. "I'm sure many of you are wondering why we called The Conclave at this time. Michael will address everything in greater detail, but I want to impress upon you the severity of our situation."

He doesn't have to use the word *impress*. And so far, this doesn't sound like good news.

"I trust you all will recognize we have no choice in this matter and will continue to serve with all your spirit. Thank you."

He's so inspiring, but completely different one on one. Much more relaxed. During my Declaration He changed from Santa to an owl to a traffic light and more. This must be His go-to look for important occasions.

Michael joins Him at center stage and extends his wings to their full span. He gives one huge flap as he

Grounded!

clears his throat. “There is a crisis of faith on Earth. It’s been building for quite some time—as many of you well know—but it’s reached epic proportions never before witnessed. When humans believe they can handle everything they stop praying to us, and when they stop praying to us the number of Missions and Assignments drops drastically. We suspect, and hope, that this unfortunate phenomenon is only cyclical. In the meantime, I’m afraid downsizing and restructuring our Guardian workforce will be necessary.”

There’s a buzz, like a hive of worker bees, flowing through the stadium. I’m so stunned I can’t even speak to Justice. Did Faith know this from working in the Department of Prayers? Is that what her comment was about? And why the heck does she still have a job?

“I can certainly understand how upsetting this is to all of you. It’s upsetting to me too.” Michael clears his throat again and his shoulders droop. Despite the fact that Michael can be a tremendous pain in the *you know what*, he really is a good guy. This can’t be easy for him. He flaps his wings again sending out a gust, and the buzzing stops. “Now for the details of how this will be handled. We have a procedure in place that will be make this as painless as possible.” When he says *procedure*, a paper appears on my lap and the lap of every other Angel in the stadium.

MEMORANDUM

From: Archangel Michael

To: Guardians

Re : Restructuring of the Workforce

In an effort to address the current environment on Earth with regard to faith, we will take the following steps to bring balance to our workforce. These steps will be expedited in a thoughtful and timely manner to ensure no lag in matching our remaining Guardians to Assignments who are in need of assistance.

Step 1 – Identify *senior* Guardians who are interested in taking a sabbatical.

Step 2 – Evaluate and place Guardians who request reassignment as Thrones, Powers, Dominions, or Virtues. Every attempt will be made to match the nature and skills of the Angel to his or her new responsibility. Once matches have been made, Guardians will be reassigned to their newly chosen vocation based on *seniority*.

Step 3 – Evaluate how this impacts the disparity between Guardians and Missions.

Step 4 – If further reductions are required, Guardians will be reassigned to serve in Paradise.

Assignments in Paradise will be based on *seniority*.

Step 5 – Match the remaining Guardian workforce to Missions using a formula of appropriate matches and *seniority*.

Michael holds his sheet overhead. “You can see from the procedure we’re making every attempt to have this be a voluntary reduction. If you’ve been thinking about relaxing on sunny beaches in the Caribbean, by all means, we hope you take advantage of this opportunity. If you’ve ever wondered if you made the wrong career choice and dream of working with the Heavenly Bodies, please ask for reassignment as a Virtue. It doesn’t have to be permanent.”

All Celestial Beings, and especially Guardian Angels, were made to work. It’s our purpose to have a purpose. And while the beach with Victor sounds nice, it’d be a total bore after a day or two. This sounds like it could be longer than that.

Mercy wrote to me while I was on Earth that Raphael had said there was great job security for Virtues with the expanding Universe. Did he know this was coming even then? Everything on this list—and I mean everything—is based on seniority. I have, like, none. My chest and stomach tighten. Suddenly, I feel claustrophobic surrounded by all the other Guardians and trainees. I’d like to fly far from here, but the reality is I’ve got one Mission to my credit and no wings. Where does that leave me?

Confession: I don’t want to know.

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When I get back to the dorm room, I slump onto my bed and fiddle with Michael’s memo. Mercy has her nose stuck into a book about comets, which is her world without end.

“Don’t you think you’d better start packing?” I say.

“Oh, darn! I’m at a really good part—” *yeah, right*, “but when you’re right, you’re right.”

Confession: This doesn’t happen very often. Both things: Me being right, and Mercy taking my advice.

She’s been picked for a special workshop where they’ll spend one week in outer space before starting regular classes. It’s a pretty big deal; only ten of the smartest Virtue trainees were selected. Even though she doubted herself for weeks before they announced the chosen, I always knew Mercy would be one of the ones to go.

She moves between her closet and an open suitcase on her bed, her waist length sheet of blonde hair swaying from side to side. I’m overcome with a strong sense of *deja-vu*. It’s almost a reverse of our spots four

Grounded!

months ago when I was packing for my first Mission on Earth.

I sigh. Really loud.

Mercy never really looks at me but instead counts how many pairs of underwear are already in the suitcase. “So they made the announcement about the downsizing, huh?”

“You knew?”

“Faith told me.”

My mouth drops at the same time my stomach does. I can’t believe she didn’t tell me. She let me go there totally blind. And of all things, she talked with Faith about it! I can’t even find the words for this betrayal, so my mouth merely flaps like a hummingbird's wings.

“It's probably a good thing. Last semester was hard on you with all those mistakes and that *Bloopers* episode and everything.”

Finally I manage to speak. “It wasn’t *that* bad. I got a halo, you know.” I’m really tempted to fire it up in a completely show-offy way.

“You didn’t actually think they were going to let you go to Earth on another Mission, did you?”

“*Actually*, I did.” I crumple Michael’s memo into a ball in my hands. I’m not feeling slumpy anymore.

Mercy stops packing and looks at me with sad eyes. It seems like she feels bad about what she just said. Then she opens her mouth. “Maybe during classes this year, you’ll change your mind.”

“About?”

“You don't have to be a Guardian, you know. Isn’t reassignment part of the deal? There’s still time to change your Declaration. It’s not set in stone.”

Set in stone. “Like the ten commandments, you mean?”

Mercy huffs. “I don't get why you care so much about humans.”

“Well, I don't get why your head is in the stars. You’re just impressed with the bright lights and the splendor of it all. Did you ever wonder why He made it?”

“It’s not my place.”

She can be so maddening sometimes. For someone so smart and so enamored with space, how can she continue to refuse to see the big picture? “If you went to Earth one time—just once, Mercy—you’d understand why people are so important. Look, one quarter of Heaven is dedicated to them. Don’t you think that means something?”

Mercy screws up her face like she’s confused. “You mean Quadrant Three?”

“Yeah. Quadrant Three,” I mimic. The name she uses says it all. Why does she refuse to call it Paradise? “It seems to me like it’s a big deal. Even a lot of the reassigned Guardians are going to end up there.”

Mercy makes a *pfift* sound, shrugs her shoulders and goes back to packing.

Grounded!

Rrrrr. “How can you say I should be a Virtue? You know I was happy when the Mission was a success. You know I love my halo.” I take a deep breath. “When you say ‘Quadrant Three’ you sound like Faith, like you think you’re superior to me.”

“Don’t blame me. I didn’t come up with The Hierarchy.” She balls up a top and tosses it into her suitcase. “It’s just the way it is.”

I look at my bookshelf with Victor’s plume displayed front and center. *Write me*, he whispered.

I’d like to do just that, or talk to someone who fully gets Guardians. Writing him would take too long, but maybe I could phone him and tell him my long-time-roomie-slash-angel-sister thinks she’s going to live amongst the stars. Or that she thinks she’s going to take some kind of thrilling rocket ride. Instead, I say to Mercy, “The part you don’t get about Virtues is that you all eventually end up back on the ground.”

Mercy’s face turns cardinal red, her mouth open, but before she can get her comeback out, the door to our room opens and in walks my nemesis. Yeah, it’s Faith.

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