

ANGEL LAND

By P.S Scott

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For my Mother

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 : Gabriel	1
Chapter 2 : A Messenger	15
Chapter 3 : Wings	27
Chapter 4 : Aftermath	39
Chapter 5 : The Holy Guild	49
Chapter 6 : Without Wings	66
Chapter 7 : Wing Growth Formula	82
Chapter 8 : Adventure	97
Chapter 9 : District -18	111
Chapter 10 : Brother	124
Chapter 11 : Hadraniel	135
Chapter 12 : Battle!	143
Chapter 13 : A Touch of Darkness	154
Chapter 14 : Training	166
Chapter 15 : Malpas	183
Chapter 16 : Insider	199
Chapter 17 : The Dawn of Darkness	212
Chapter 18 : The Final Showdown	229
Chapter 19 : Rise	235
Chapter 20 : A New Beginning	246
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	258
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	259

CHAPTER 1: GABRIEL

Being an angel without wings is a tough business.

For one, you can't fly anywhere and have to depend on the Seraphim City Mass Transit (SCMT), which is always late.

"The next train will arrive at 1:30 PM," the pre-recorded announcement says, which doesn't fill me with much hope because the last time it arrived at 1:30 PM was well...never.

I twiddle my thumbs, looking up at the sky shielding Station No. 6 of the central line. When I'm the ruling archangel of Celestia, I'll never have to take the SCMT.

"My name is Gabriel Perez, I'm thirteen years old, and my dream is to become the ruling archangel of Celestia," I shout to nobody in particular, watching my reflection in the glass panels between civilians and the landing spots.

The silver-haired woman standing next to me stares at me, adjusting her spectacles, then turning left and right. Her wings are old and bruised, probably the reason she's taking the mass transit instead of flying to her destination. Only the old, the sick, and those without wings, ever end up having to contend with flying trains. Sometimes regular folks take it to travel long distances.

"He doesn't have wings," she remarks to herself with a giggle.

"I don't," I confirm.

I fall into the third category of 0.001% of angels, who are born without wings.

"Must be hard," she remarks, sizing me up with squinting eyes. "Don't people like you usually live at the Healing Guild?"

I shake my head. “Not me. I’m going to get into the Holy Guild and become a ruling archangel.”

She squints at me like I have a few screws missing in my brain and turns the other way.

I turn too. No one can pop my bubble because the Guild Trainee Entrance Examination results come out today.

“You, do you polish wings?” a deep voice asks.

“Yes sir,” I reply brightly, scouring my bag for a brush. “Would you like a super shine?”

Unfortunately, it is only now that I notice that this man is an Angel Patrol officer, and I’m facing him armed with a toothy smile, wing polish in one hand and brush in another, the worst possible combination.

“No soliciting, boy. Do you hear me?” Dressed in signature red and gold robes, wearing a menacing expression, he lifts me up using a finger and I’m helpless to resist.

“Yes, sir,” I say, my voice a panicked stutter.

“Train arriving. Stay clear of the golden lines,” a recorded voice announces- honey to my ears. Bright golden light hits my face. The policeman drops me and crosses his arms over his chest, giving me a distant, apprehending look. I hurriedly follow the other passengers into the train and close my eyes, praying for the door to close.

The Angel Patrol officer points at me. “If I ever see you again...”

“You won’t,” I say, as the glass door closes. The train climbs up into the air and the patrol officer gets becomes more and more distant until he’s a dot on the ground. Angels, displaying their beautiful white wings, are flying all around the train. Fallen feathers float in the blue summer sky, making my heart thrum with

a sense of joy that I always feel when I'm in the air. If I had wings, I'd never set foot on the ground.

"Next stop, District 74," the pre-recorded voice announces. I sink down on one of the empty silver-cushioned chairs when someone stands up. Outside the window, the eternal blue sky stretches forever, filled with tiny specks of white angels flying to their destinations.

I press my nose against the glass and try to follow the thousands of angels hurrying in different directions. The train comes to a stop at a traffic light and more angels dart past. My destination, the Holy Guild, is ten stops away in District 32, Central Quarter.

"That's Ruling Archangel Michael," the woman behind me whispers. On the TV screen I see Michael Hunter, wearing a white robe and golden "N" pin. He has bright blue eyes, a powerful build, and pale gold. "Isn't he so cute?"

"He's not cute," I say, getting to my feet. "He's amazing! He's the most powerful ruling archangel ever. And the smartest. And the kindest. Not to mention he's been elected twice already. His Divine Blast special ability is out of this world..."

Two ladies narrow their eyes. "Are you a fan or what?" one of them, a pink-haired, gap-toothed angel remarks, bubbling with suppressed laughter. One of her wings is bandaged, which must be why she's taking the mass transit.

"His biggest fan," I announce proudly, with a grin bigger than my face. "I've seen his final match at last year's tournament a hundred times."

"You must have a lot of time," she remarks, pointing a finger at me. "You don't have wings."

“Uh...yeah...I was born without wings. It’s a rare condition,” I say, turning my face to the TV where RA Michael is saying, “The government, in partnership with all eight guilds, has formed a special investigation unit to look into the attacks.”

“What attacks?” I ask, trying to detract her from the uncomfortable topic of my wings, or rather the lack of them.

“You don’t know about angels disappearing from the Northern Quarter?” the green-haired angel asks.

The screen flickers, then pictures of disappeared angels come on. Some faces are blurred. The scene changes to a picture of District 21.

“That’s District 21,” I say, looking at sketchy streets lined with deserted shops and run-down houses. I used to polish wings there on weekends.

“Someone’s been attacking angels in District 21,” the green-haired girl says. “Twenty of them have disappeared this past month.”

“That district is notorious for illegal activity,” the pink-haired angel goes on.

“So, where are you headed off to, wing-shine boy?” she asks, pointing to the brushes sticking out of my cross-body bag.

“The guilds.”

“Hey, aren’t the GTEE results coming out today or something?” the green-haired angel asks her friend.

“Yes,” I reply, keeping my fingers crossed. “I hope I make it this year.”

“Wow, you applied for guild training?” The pink-haired angel leans in. “That’s tough.”

“I want to be a ruling—” I pause. “Work for the government.”

“But don’t you need wings to get into a guild?” the green-haired one asks. “Not if you’re going to the Venus Guild, of course.”

I don’t want to go to the Venus Guild, but I don’t correct her.

“I heard entrance is pretty competitive. Didn’t The Daily Messenger say acceptance rate was five percent?” She looks to her pink-haired friend, who nods vigorously in agreement. “Is this your first try?”

“Yes.”

She laughs. “I hope the odds are in your favor, then.”

“Thanks.”

“Once you get into a guild, your life’s set,” she goes on, leaning back. “It’s a lot of work...”

“Four years of training, one year of apprenticeship,” her friend fills in.

“But who can complain? Guild members control the top ranks of every profession in Celestia. Getting into a guild is pretty much the passport to success.”

I nod.

She sighs. “Man, I wish I’d gotten into a guild.”

“Next stop, guilds,” the pre-recorded voice says, making my ears stand up.

“Gotta go,” I say, swinging myself to my feet, clutching a pole.

“Good luck!” The green-haired woman smiles.

“Be careful, kiddo,” the pink-haired one says. “I’d stay away from the Northern Quarter if I were you.”

“Uh...thanks for the advice,” I say, hanging next to the TV. Archangel Michael’s face is gone, to my disappointment, paving the way for the next news item.

The train descends to the ground, and the glass doors open.

“Thank you for using Seraphim City Mass Transit. Have a good day,” the pre-recorded voice says, but I’m in too much of a hurry to pay attention to her.

Dashing out of the train station, I pummel onto the large roads, swarmed by angels. I come here every day, but today is different. After that train ride, I can’t wait to find out if I made it.

Young students pour out of the train station, all flying to one destination—the Holy Guild, where exam results are posted.

The Central Quarter, a hub of commercial activity, engulfs me. Glass skyscrapers surrounded by white cotton clouds touch the sky, offering a tantalizing peek of what a future here holds. Angels fly all over, dropping messages and exchanging news. Anxious parents accompany their children, and pager phones buzz and click around me.

I pass the Fire Guild, the home of a few past RAs. It’s colored a vibrant orange today, with a red wing flag imprinted with a yellow “F” flying over its dome. The Fire Guild is the second-most prestigious guild, and its trainees have gone on to become police officers, lawmakers, and law enforcers. But it’s not where I want to go.

I hear a melodious song drifting out of the Venus Guild, which ranks fifth despite not having produced a single ruling archangel, mainly because its graduates make a lot of money. My grandma watches movies starring their graduates on TV all the time.

On its right is the Z Guild, a gray, dilapidated building with flowering climbers growing all over, that doesn’t have the budget to fix the large crack on its stony front wall. It’s ranked eighth out of the eight guilds, which means it is at the bottom.

In the distance, I see the enormous Messenger Guild's control tower rising over the entire city. It has five hundred stories, of which the top hundred are restricted access, open to only to guild members. A long needle-like antenna sticks out the top, transmitting waves. There's another, smaller silver one that infuses the air with regular squirts of perfume and disinfectants throughout the day. I remember reading that any liquid vaporized through the smaller needle can spread over the entire city in just thirty minutes.

Grandma and I have been inside the tower several times, though we never got further than the hundredth floor. Visitors aren't allowed to go over Level 400, but looking at the number of tourists dotted like ants on the tower, it's no mystery that the Control Tower remains the most popular tourist attraction in the city.

Skipping on the pavement, I reach a large white palace with open golden gates. A wing-shaped flag with a golden "H" flies on the top arch of the main building—the Holy Guild's official symbol. Students in white coats, pants, and skirts with golden buttons dot the school grounds, chatting with each other, looking forward to welcoming their junior trainees. My heart lights up as if recognizing its home.

This is where I want to be, where I belong.

There's a nervous lump in my throat and it transforms into energy. Years of dreams buzz in my bloodstream, humming a cheerful song. My day is here, at last.

The Holy Guild is ranked number one among the guilds and has trained three previous ruling archangels, excluding twenty

others. The guild leader is always an archangel. Their teachers are some of the best-known people in Celestia.

Gathering my dusty duffel bag, I step in front of a results machine, butterflies dancing in my stomach.

That's when I see a ball of light heading for me. I use my special ability, Quicksilver, to dodge the energy ball at a superhuman pace.

"Sorry." An angel hovers over me, casting a shadow on my small body. "We were trying to practice, but I missed."

"Uh...no problem," I said, dusting myself off. The brown-haired angel lands on the ground, and I see that he has ink-blue eyes. "You have a really cool ability."

"Thanks," I say, ruffling my hair.

"But you need to do a lot better than that if you wanna get in," he says, his midnight blue eyes serious. He turns to leave, but stops. "Wait, you don't have wings?"

"Uh...no." I swallow.

He clicks his tongue, casting me a sympathetic look, before flying away.

I stand in a queue, waiting for the results machine to be free, watching the Destiny Guild's cross tower over the horizon. It's ranked third among the guilds and has produced many teachers, spiritual guides, and one tournament winner.

Three students later, I'm second in line. The boy in front of me crushes his paper and I know he's the fourth in a row who didn't get selected. Well, I could always be the first.

"Enter your ticket number," the machine says.

Swallowing, I pull out my exam receipt and enter my ticket number on the touchscreen.

”Just a moment, please,” the female voice announces, as an hourglass fills the screen. I tap my foot impatiently, looking over my shoulder at a blue-eyed angel with pale hair tied in a ponytail. Her clean white wings spread behind her.

“Ariel, did you enter your number correctly?” a tall lady dressed in expensive clothing fusses at her side. Ariel looks worried as she enters one number after another.

”Thank you for waiting. Your results are on the screen,” my machine announces. My head snaps up, my eyes boring into the screen that bears my fate in five words...

Sorry, you did not make it.

“Did you enter the right number, Ariel?” the busybody mother next to me says, placing her hands on her hourglass hips framed by a baby blue dress.

“Yes, Mom,” Ariel replies in an airy voice. “We need to wait.”

I hear her feet tapping on the ground, unable to move. I read the words over and over again, but they don’t change.

“Are you done?” the next person in line asks.

“Uh...yeah...just a minute,” I say, returning my attention to the screen. The result is still the same. I quickly press “print” and pretend to wait.

“You made it,” Ariel’s mother says, her thin lips curving into an approving smile. No hugs, no kiss, no screaming, nothing. “Your father will be happy to know we didn’t waste money on hiring a private tutor. Now, all you have to do is pass the practical exam.”

Ariel, too, prints out her results. Pulling my sheet from the machine, I move away and look at the mother and daughter. Neither of them looks happy, especially Ariel, whose freckled face hangs low.

“We mustn’t waste time,” her mother chatters on. “You scored low on your mock flight test. We need to improve your wing stamina before the practicals. You, boy, come here.”

Only when she stops and snaps her fingers, do I realize that she’s talking to me. Her blue eyes, the same color as her dress, fixate on me, narrowing to annoyance.

“Me?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says. “Give her a wing polish.”

“Uh...” I look from Ariel to her mother. This Ariel girl looks terribly disappointed, even downright bleak, at the news of having gotten into the most prestigious guild in the country. Shoving the test result into my pocket, I get my brush and polish ready. “Do you want the wing shine or the super wing shine?”

“Super wing shine. How much?” she asks.

“Ten Celestia Dollars,” I reply, spreading some of the superior polish on my brush. Ariel sits down before me while I rub her wings, giving them a glossy finish. When I’m done, Mrs. Bluestone gives me a pleased hmph and drops three bronze coins into my palm.

“The competition’s tough this year. We need to start practicing right away...” she’s saying to Ariel, as they walk away. I tuck the three bronze coins into my pocket and look up at another customer who has lined up.

“Super wing shine,” says a silver-haired, blue-eyed male angel wearing the Holy Guild’s uniform. On his chest is a silver “H” pin, which means he’s in the second year of his training.

“Three coins,” I say mechanically, as he proceeds to sit before me. In my pocket, I feel the weight of my test result. “It must be so cool to go to the Holy Guild. I wish I could go.”

The silver-haired angel turns around, narrowing his icy blue eyes. “I didn’t pay you to talk.”

“Sorry.” I get some polish on my brush and begin scrubbing his wings. The wing muscles twitch and I can feel their majestic strength under my soapy fingers. He must’ve trained really hard to get those strong muscles.

“Wow, you have a powerful pair of wings,” I say, running my hands over his white feathers. How nice it must be to have wings and be able to fly whenever you want. That earns a glare from him. “Sorry. No talking. Right.”

“Hey, Cael, up for a practice match?” another student with fiery orange hair calls out.

“Anytime,” he says, his eyeball sliding in my direction. “Are you done?”

“Gimme a minute,” I say, scrubbing harder until his matte wing is all glossy. He throws three coins at me so quick that two of them roll onto the ground. Before I can thank him, he’s flown off, his wings leaving a gust of wind that makes my coins roll farther. I run behind them, almost being run over by someone who puts his foot in front of two coins.

“You can keep them from rolling away using this.” A dark-haired boy with a prominent nose picks up the coins using a magnet.

“Thanks.” I get my coins from him, noticing he has a result sheet in his hand. “How’d it go?”

“I got in,” he says, showing me his sheet, which says “Congratulations, you made it.”

“Wow. That’s amazing,” I say. “You want a wing shine?”

“No thanks. I’m Raziel, by the way. You can call me Raz.”

“I’m Gabriel,” I say, shaking his hand in a rather formal gesture.

“I’m guessing you didn’t make it,” Raz says, reading the sheet of paper that’s flown from my pocket to under Raz’s shoe.

“Not this time,” I say, grabbing the paper. “But I’m going to be the ruling archangel someday.”

Raz doesn’t say anything to this. “I hate to point this out, but have you ever thought about getting clip-on wings? It might increase your chances of making it through the practicals next time.” He turns his pager screen at me, showing me a picture of a pair of white wings with straps that reads “Clip-on Wings.”

“What are those?” I ask, peering closer.

“Clip-on wings for people without wings,” Raz says. “My dad works in a scientific inventions company. Basically, they make new stuff for angels. He came out with these just last week.”

“That’s so cool,” I say, drooling at the screen. “I need that. Where do they sell those wings?”

“Right now it’s only available at Amazing Angel Merchandise and Diamante’s on Shopping Street in District 44.” Raz clicks through to examine the wings’ availability.

“I’ve seen that place,” I say. “Isn’t it the big shop with bright lights?”

“That’s one way to describe it,” Raz says. An alarm beeps on his pager. “I need to get back home. It was nice meeting you, Gabriel. Hope you make it next year.”

“Thanks. Bye,” I say, watching Raz fly away.

The route back home via the Cupid Guild and the Healing Guild is rather gloomy. Despite being focused on love, the Cupid Guild has a tacky red and pink exterior. An equally garish pink guild flag trails over the main building’s dome. My eyes hurt just looking at it.

Back at the pavement leading to the mass transit station, I look down at my results that say, "Sorry, you did not make it," and sigh. As usual, there's no sign of the train and quite a few people are waiting. I shove the result into my pocket, searching "clip-on wings" on my pager.

"The next train will arrive at 4:00 PM," the announcer says.

I look up the clip-on wings Raz mentioned. A wingless angel like me demonstrates wearing the wings in the official product video. When she presses a button on the left, her wings glow, picking up her body's responses.

"This blue light means that your wings are ready to go," she says. A second later she's flying, clear blue skies surrounding her.

"Look at her fly," an angel she passes by comments. The screen changes to a logo of the company, Innovative Edge, and the wings.

"Only five thousand CD a pair," the angel with new clip-on wings exclaims enthusiastically.

"Twenty thousand!" I almost drop the pager in shock. That's more than grandma and I make in a year.

Light hits my face.

"The next train to District 100 is arriving."

I shove my pager into my pocket and wait for the train to come to a halt. It opens and a few people exit, one of them brushing past me in a great hurry. Something falls fluttering down the periphery of my vision.

"Wait..."

I pick up a feather.

A black feather.

"Excuse me..." I snap my head back and see no one out of the ordinary.

“Please stand clear of the doors.”

With the feather in my hand, I jump in before the train door closes. Straining my head to look down at the sea of strangers, I see no one with black wings.

Strange.

Where did that feather come from?