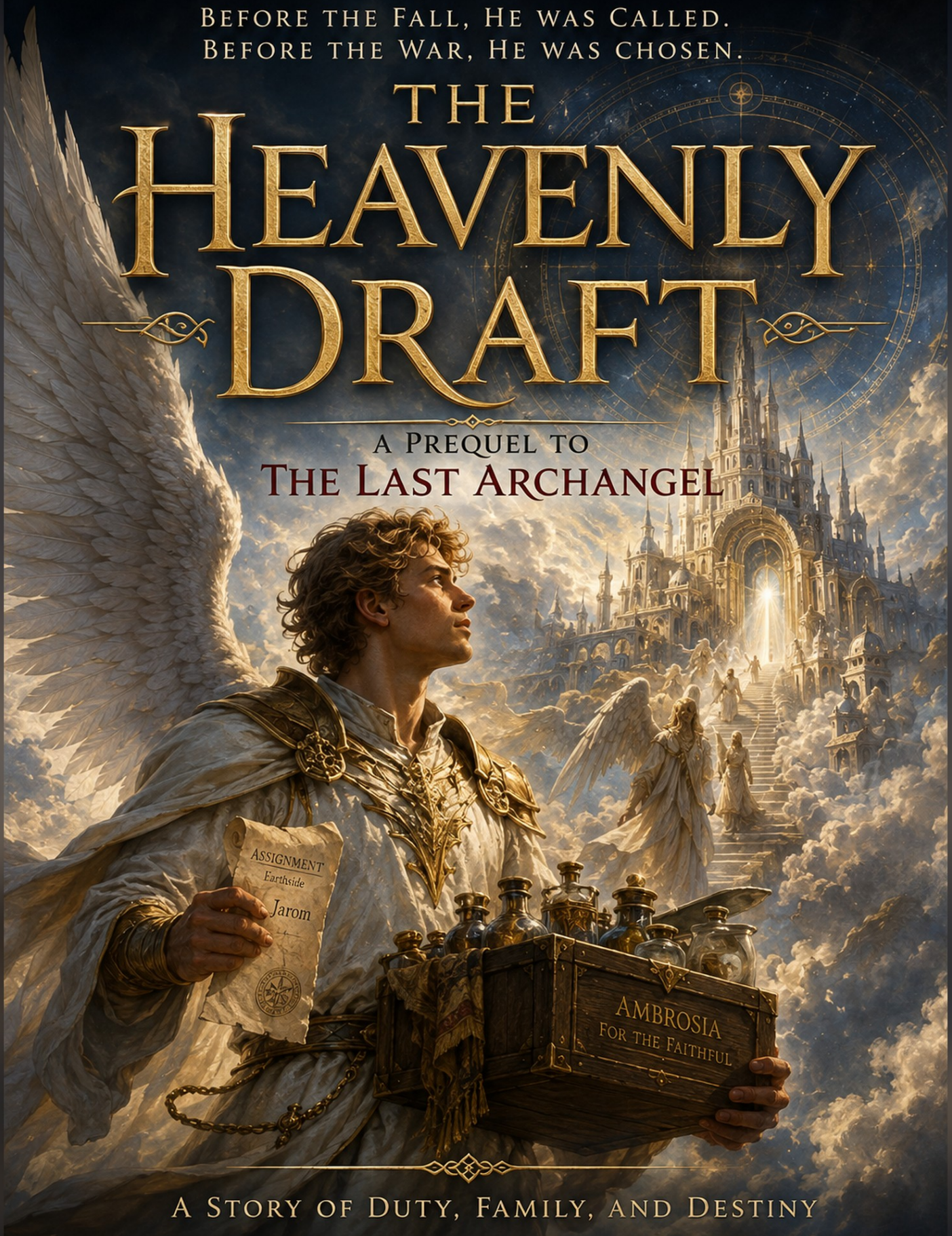


BEFORE THE FALL, HE WAS CALLED.
BEFORE THE WAR, HE WAS CHOSEN.

THE HEAVENLY DRAFT

A PREQUEL TO
THE LAST ARCHANGEL



A STORY OF DUTY, FAMILY, AND DESTINY

THE HEAVENLY DRAFT
A Prequel to The Last Archangel

The first sign that something unusual was happening in the Elysian Fields was that the Order of Ambrosia ran out of parchment.

Jarom noticed because he had been sent to fetch some.

His father had given him the errand just after sunrise, although sunrise was a rather flexible expression in a place where the light had never truly gone away. The fields already shimmered gold beyond the open doors of the bakery, and a warm breeze carried the scent of flowering trees, fresh water, and enough ambrosia to make a mortal forget every sensible thing he had ever learned about portion control.

Jarom returned from the storehouse with an empty arm and a puzzled expression. His father stood over a broad marble table, arranging rows of flaky white cakes on cooling trays. He did not look up when Jarom landed beside him.

“Well?”

“There isn’t any.”

His father paused. “Any what?”

“Parchment.”

That earned a look. His father was an older cherub, though age in the Heavenly Realms was more a matter of bearing than wrinkles. His curls had begun to silver around the temples, and his wings were broader than Jarom’s, but his hands still moved with the speed and certainty of someone who had spent centuries making things that other angels devoured too quickly to appreciate.

“No parchment?”

“Not a sheet.”

His father turned slowly toward the storehouse, as though he might catch it lying. “We have had parchment since before your great-grandfather joined the Order.”

“I told them that.”

“And?”

“They said the requisitions took all of it.”

His father frowned. “What requisitions?”

Jarom shrugged. “They wouldn’t say. They did say they’ve had more requests in the last two days than in the previous two years.”

For a moment, the only sound came from the river beyond the bakery and the quiet ticking of a celestial oven that never needed fuel and still somehow managed to run five degrees hot whenever anyone important was visiting.

His father wiped his hands on his apron. “Bring me the wax tablets.”

Jarom did.

They had just begun scratching delivery tallies into the wax when a golden cargo chariot swept low over the fields, scattering a flock of white birds and forcing two junior bakers to throw themselves flat. The chariot banked hard, circled once, then came down beside the loading platform with a shower of sparks that would have earned Jarom a lecture if he had landed that way.

The driver leapt down before the wheels had stopped glowing.

“Priority order for the Citadel,” he announced.

Jarom’s father folded his arms. “We have three priority orders for the Citadel already.”

“This one is more priority.”

“That is not how priority works.”

“It is today.”

The driver thrust a metal tablet into his hands. The surface shimmered with lines of light. Jarom leaned in to read them, but his father’s eyebrows climbed so quickly that Jarom stopped trying.

“How many?”

“Everything you can spare.”

“We can spare nothing.”

“Then everything you cannot spare.”

His father lowered the tablet. “What is going on?”

The driver glanced over one shoulder, as though worried the golden fields themselves might overhear him. “They’re calling people in.”

“Who?”

“Everyone.”

Jarom’s stomach tightened.

The driver continued. “Messengers. Guardians. Scribes. Healers. Chariot crews. Even apprentices.”

His father’s expression changed only slightly, but Jarom saw it.

“Cherubs?” he asked.

The driver nodded. “Cherubs too.”

A tray slipped from somebody’s hands behind them and struck the floor with a sharp metallic clatter.

Jarom turned. Three younger bakers stood frozen near the ovens, their faces pale.

The driver took back his tablet. "I don't know what it means. I only know the Citadel is stocking field stations, opening old armories, and assigning personnel faster than the clerks can write the orders."

"Then we had better keep baking," Jarom's father said.

The driver blinked. "That's all?"

"What would you have me do? Panic into the dough?"

"No."

"Then load what you can carry. If Heaven is preparing for something, I would rather no one face it hungry."

The driver gave a grateful nod and hurried toward the chariot.

Jarom's father turned back to the table.

"Father?"

"Hand me the filling."

Jarom obeyed, but he did not move away. "Do you think they'll call us?"

His father pushed a line of amber filling into the center of a strip of dough and folded it with careful fingers. "They already called us. That is what the order means."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes."

Jarom waited.

His father sighed. "I do not know."

That answer bothered him more than any prophecy could have.

Jarom had lived nearly all his existence within sight of the Elysian Fields. He had flown on the great celestial vessels that carried food and supplies across the Heavenly Realms,

sometimes riding beside his father at the front while the golden chariots cut through the clouds. He had learned the Original Tongue, as all young cherubim did. He could shoot a small bow, keep his balance in high winds, recite the basic laws of celestial conduct, and tell the difference between restorative ambrosia and the sort intended only for dessert.

He had never considered any of those things especially heroic.

He baked.

He delivered.

He occasionally endured the Ambrosia Auditing Office, which was as close to mortal torment as Jarom had ever come.

Earth was a place in stories.

Wars belonged to older beings with swords.

Demons belonged to cautionary lectures.

Jarom belonged here.

At least, he had thought he did.

By midday, every worktable was covered in flour, every oven was running, and every available chariot had been pressed into service. The ordinary laughter of the Order had thinned to brief, nervous exchanges. Nobody said the word draft, but the word moved through the bakery anyway, passing from face to face.

Jarom was sealing a crate when a shaft of white light descended through the ceiling.

Everyone stopped.

The light narrowed into a column no wider than Jarom's shoulders. Inside it, a roll of parchment floated downward until it hovered directly in front of him.

His father closed his eyes.

Jarom stared at the parchment.

“It might be a delivery receipt,” he said.

Nobody answered.

“Or an audit.”

One of the junior bakers whispered, “You’re hoping for an audit?”

“I’m trying to rank bad possibilities.”

The scroll unrolled itself.

JAROM, SON OF THE ORDER OF AMBROSIA, REPORT TO THE AMBROSIA
AUDITING OFFICE AT ONCE FOR SERVICE ASSESSMENT.

Jarom read it twice.

Then a third time.

His father put one hand on his shoulder.

Jarom swallowed. “I got my wish.”

#



There were very few buildings in the Heavenly Realms that Jarom disliked.

The Ambrosia Auditing Office was one of them.

It rose from the edge of the Elysian Fields like a perfectly frosted cake designed by someone who had never tasted frosting. Its walls were pale gold, its towers were tipped with sugar-white stone, and the front doors were carved with scenes of cherubs joyfully weighing flour, measuring nectar, and presenting completed forms in triplicate.

Jarom had always suspected the sculptor had been lying.

The waiting hall was packed.

Cherubs from half a dozen orders filled the benches: musicians, messengers, gardeners, candle-lighters, archivists, and at least one young fellow wearing a hat shaped like a cloud. A sign on the far wall read SERVICE ASSESSMENT - PLEASE HAVE YOUR EXISTENTIAL RECORD READY.

Jarom checked his satchel.

He had brought his record.

His father had checked three times.

An elderly clerk sat behind a desk large enough to land a chariot on. She peered at each new arrival through a pair of tiny spectacles.

“Name?”

“Jarom.”

“Order?”

“Ambrosia.”

“Specialty?”

He hesitated. “Filled manna?”

The clerk looked over her spectacles.

“Food preparation,” Jarom amended.

She marked something.

“Combat experience?”

“No.”

“Adversarial encounters?”

“No.”

“Exposure to demonic entities?”

Jarom shook his head.

“Giants?”

“No.”

“Rogue angels?”

“No.”

“Mortals?”

“I once waved at one through a viewing pool.”

The clerk’s quill stopped.

Jarom cleared his throat. “I don’t think he saw me.”

She marked another box.

“Original Tongue proficiency?”

“Advanced introductory.”

“That is not a recognized level.”

“It was on my last examination.”

“That examination was administered seventy-three years ago.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“With pastries.”

“They are medicinal.”

The clerk regarded him for a long moment before pointing toward a side door.

“Assessment Chamber Three.”

Jarom rose.

“Should I leave my satchel?”

“If you are sent Earthside, you will need something to carry your regrets in.”

Jarom could not tell whether she was joking.

He decided not to ask.

Assessment Chamber Three resembled a schoolroom whose teacher had developed a personal grudge against furniture. Several obstacles floated at different heights. A row of targets moved along the far wall. A glowing script covered one entire section of floor, while three examiners sat at a raised table.

The first was a broad-winged guardian with a scar across his cheek.

The second was a thin archivist whose crown glowed a neat, irritatingly symmetrical circle around her brow.

The third was eating one of Jarom’s family’s ambrosia cakes.

Jarom stared at him.

The examiner stopped chewing.

“Problem?”

“That one came from our morning batch.”

The examiner glanced at the cake. “Excellent work.”

“Thank you.”

“Try not to let it influence your score.”

Jarom’s wings drooped.

The guardian pointed at the moving targets. “Bow.”

Jarom removed the small golden bow from his satchel.

“Three shots.”

He nocked an arrow.

The first struck the outer ring.

The second struck closer.

The third missed the target completely, bounced from a column, ricocheted from the ceiling, and sliced the feather from the archivist’s quill.

The severed feather drifted between them.

Jarom lowered the bow. “I can explain.”

The archivist stared at the ruined quill.

“Can you?”

“No.”

She wrote something with the featherless shaft.

The next test involved flight. Jarom did better there. Years of riding supply vessels had taught him how wind curled around hulls and towers, and he slipped through the moving obstacles without touching one.

The guardian grunted.

“Competent.”

Jarom brightened.

“Not impressive.”

He dimmed again.

The archivist gestured toward the glowing script. “Translate.”

Jarom studied it.

The characters were old, but familiar. They belonged to the Original Tongue, the pure language he had studied in lessons that had seemed entirely useless until this moment.

“‘The hand that carries mercy may weigh more than the hand that carries the sword,’”

Jarom read.

The archivist nodded.

“And the lower line?”

Jarom leaned closer.

“‘Do not store honey cakes in direct celestial light.’”

The cake-eating examiner stopped chewing.

“That seems oddly specific.”

“It is what it says.”

He discreetly pushed his cake into the shade.

The guardian rose. “Final test. Emergency response.”

Jarom’s stomach tightened.

A small figure appeared in the center of the chamber.

It was an illusion of an injured messenger lying beneath a broken chariot wheel. One wing bent at an ugly angle.

Jarom flew down.

He knew enough to check whether the messenger could move. He knew enough not to yank the wing straight. He knew how to release the chariot brake and lever the wheel up with a length of metal.

Then he hesitated.

The guardian watched him.

Jarom reached into his satchel and removed a small piece of ambrosia-filled manna.

The archivist frowned. "What are you doing?"

"Treating him."

"This is not a bakery exercise."

"No, but ambrosia has restorative properties."

"Only in limited applications."

"Yes. This is one."

He broke the cake open, pressed a small amount of the filling to the illusion's injured wing, and bound the limb with the cloth wrapper.

The illusion dissolved.

Jarom stood alone in the chamber holding half a pastry.

The guardian returned to his seat.

"You used food."

"I used medicine."

The third examiner smiled around another bite.

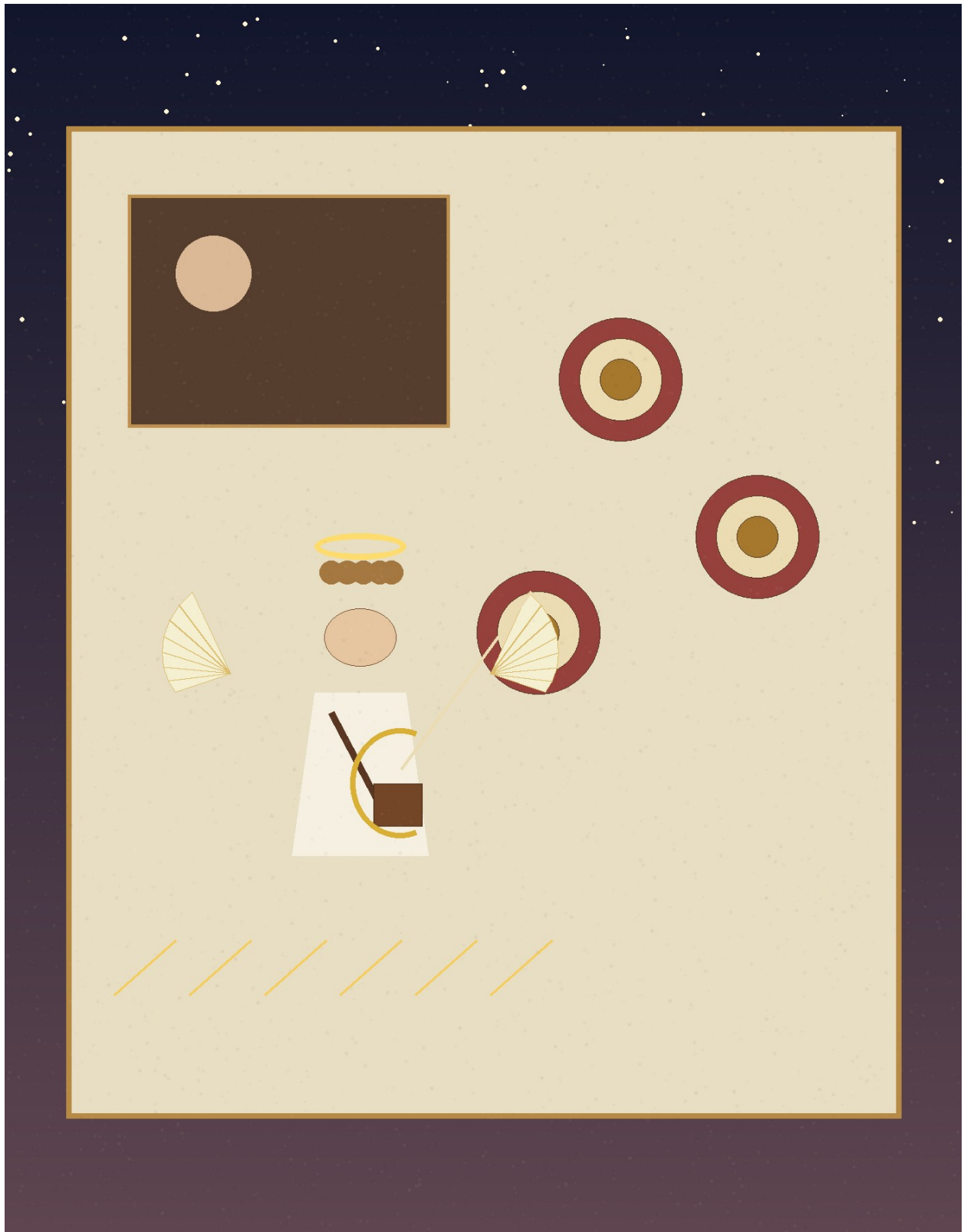
"I told you these were excellent."

The archivist rubbed her forehead. "You may go."

Jarom could not read their expressions as he left.

That worried him.

#



He returned to the bakery expecting either congratulations or sympathy.

Instead, he found the west loading platform on fire.

Technically, it was not fire. Celestial cargo light did not burn in the ordinary sense, but when three golden transport crystals cracked at once, the resulting flare looked close enough.

A cargo chariot hung crooked over the edge of the platform. One wheel spun uselessly in the air. Several ropes had snapped, and a tower of supply crates leaned toward a cluster of terrified junior cherubs below.

Jarom's father shouted orders from the other side.

"Clear the platform! Get those children back!"

Jarom dropped his satchel and flew.

One of the crates shifted.

A young cherub stood directly beneath it, frozen.

Jarom did not think.

He pulled his bow.

The distance was longer than any shot he had taken in the assessment chamber, and the rope he needed to hit was narrower than his thumb. He heard the examiner's voice in his memory.

Competent. Not impressive.

"Good enough," Jarom muttered.

He fired.

The arrow struck the rope.

Nothing happened.

Jarom stared.

“Oh, come on.”

The rope snapped a heartbeat later.

The supporting net swung loose, pulling the falling crate sideways. It missed the young cherub, struck the edge of the platform, and exploded into hundreds of wrapped ambrosia cakes.

The child screamed anyway.

Jarom reached him, scooped him into his arms, and darted back as another crate came down where they had been standing.

His father reached them.

“Are you hurt?”

The child shook his head, sobbing.

Jarom set him down.

Behind them, the damaged chariot groaned. A second line of cargo began to slip.

“Jarom!”

His father pointed.

A transport worker had been pinned between two crates. His wing lay trapped beneath one corner.

Jarom flew toward him.

Together, Jarom and his father tried to lift the crate, but it barely moved.

“Brace it,” his father said. “I’ll get a lever.”

Jarom wedged his shoulder beneath the edge. Pain shot through his back.

The worker gasped.

“Don’t move.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

Jarom's father returned with two other bakers. They levered the crate upward enough for Jarom to drag the worker free.

The man's wing was badly bruised and bleeding along the edge.

Jarom opened his satchel.

Empty.

He had dropped it.

He looked around.

Ambrosia cakes covered the platform.

For the first time in the history of the Order, nobody complained about food on the floor.

Jarom grabbed the nearest unbroken cake, tore it apart, and worked the filling across the injured portion of the wing.

The worker shuddered.

"What are you doing?"

"Trust me."

"I'm not sure I do."

"That makes two of us."

The golden filling warmed under Jarom's fingers. The bleeding slowed.

His father watched in silence.

"You used the cooling batch."

Jarom looked down.

"I did?"

"Yes."

"Was that wrong?"

His father smiled faintly. “No. Better, actually.”

The worker flexed the edge of his wing.

Pain still tightened his face, but he could move it.

Around them, the crisis settled. Workers secured the chariot. Bakers collected scattered supplies. The young cherub Jarom had pulled from danger stood beside a supervisor, staring at Jarom as though he had personally defeated a dragon.

Jarom suddenly felt very tired.

His father picked up Jarom’s fallen bow.

“Competent,” he said.

Jarom blinked.

“What?”

His father handed it to him. “Not impressive?”

Jarom stared.

“How did you know?”

“You talk in your sleep.”

“I do not.”

“You do when you are worried.”

Jarom accepted the bow.

His father glanced across the ruined platform. “I disagree with the examiner.”

Jarom looked at the snapped rope, the injured worker, and the broken crates.

“I missed the rope on the first shot.”

“You hit it.”

“Eventually.”

“That is often how success works.”

Before Jarom could answer, a brilliant shaft of red-white light descended onto the platform.

Every angel present stopped.

The light widened.

A High Seraph stepped from it.

Jarom had seen High Seraphim before, but never this close. The newcomer stood more than seven feet tall, with wavy brown hair, piercing blue eyes, and the sort of posture that made everyone nearby suddenly aware of how badly they were standing.

He looked first at the damaged chariot.

Then at Jarom.

Then at the cake filling still smeared over Jarom’s hands.

“Jarom of the Order of Ambrosia?”

Jarom swallowed.

“Yes, sir.”

“You have completed your assessment.”

Jarom’s father stepped beside him.

The High Seraph produced a small scroll tied with a scarlet ribbon.

Jarom’s stomach sank.

The Seraph studied him. “You seem displeased.”

“No, sir.”

“You are lying.”

“Yes, sir.”

One corner of the Seraph's mouth twitched.

"Your scores were unusual."

Jarom did not know what that meant, but it sounded bad.

"Your combat results were mediocre. Your flight was adequate. Your linguistic scores were considerably above average. Your emergency judgment was..." He paused.

"Unconventional."

"I used what I knew."

"So I am told."

The Seraph's gaze shifted toward the worker, whose injured wing now moved almost normally.

"That is why you are being reassigned."

Jarom's father inhaled quietly.

"Where?" Jarom asked.

"Earthside."

The word seemed louder than it should have been.

Jarom stared at him.

"Earth?"

"Yes."

"With mortals?"

"That is where most of them are."

Jarom's father coughed into one hand.

The Seraph continued. "You will serve as apprentice and assistant to an Angel of the Second Order. Your appointment is effective immediately."

Jarom's mind raced.

An apprentice.

Earthside.

Second Order.

He felt as though someone had picked up the entire Elysian Fields and tilted them beneath his feet.

"Who?"

The High Seraph unrolled the parchment.

"Xandir."

Silence fell across the loading platform.

A junior baker dropped another tray.

Jarom looked at his father.

His father looked at the High Seraph.

Then back at Jarom.

"Is there," his father asked carefully, "another Xandir?"

"No."

"I thought not."

Jarom's throat went dry.

He knew the name.

Everyone knew the name.

The Destroying Angel.

The Watcher.

The one who had been in trouble for longer than some civilizations had existed.

Rumors around the Order disagreed about nearly everything else. Some claimed Xandir had once flattened a city by sneezing. Others said he could look at a mortal and know the exact day that mortal would die. One particularly persistent story insisted that he had challenged Death himself to a duel and complained afterward that Death's technique lacked elegance.

Jarom had assumed most of it was nonsense.

He suddenly wished he had paid closer attention.

"Sir," he said, "I bake."

The High Seraph raised an eyebrow.

"So I have been informed."

"I'm not a warrior."

"That is also obvious."

"I have never been Earthside."

"Yes."

"I have never fought a demon."

"Good. One hopes it does not become a daily habit."

Jarom searched for another argument.

The High Seraph rolled the parchment.

"You have spent your existence carrying supplies to those who perform difficult work. Now you will learn what happens after the supplies arrive."

That silenced him.

The High Seraph handed him the scroll.

"Report to the eastern transport court within the hour."

He stepped backward into the light.

Jarom found his voice just before the beam closed.

“Why me?”

The Seraph paused.

For the first time, his stern face softened.

“Because those who believe service must look impressive are often the least prepared to perform it.”

Then he vanished.

Jarom stared at the empty air.

His father rested a hand on his shoulder.

“An hour,” Jarom said.

“Yes.”

“That isn’t very long.”

“No.”

“I haven’t packed.”

“You own three robes.”

“Four.”

“One still has ambrosia on it.”

“That was one time.”

His father turned him toward the bakery.

“Then we had better hurry.”

#



Jarom packed everything he believed he might need for Earth.

This took seven minutes.

He unpacked it.

That took five.

He packed again.

His father watched from the doorway of Jarom's small room, saying nothing while Jarom debated whether Earth required two spare cloaks or three.

"Do mortals have weather everywhere?"

"Yes."

"All at once?"

"Not usually."

Jarom held up a heavy cloak. "Then I should take this."

"You are an angel."

"I can still get cold."

"You have never been cold."

"That is because I have always lived here."

His father nodded as though Jarom had made a good point, which somehow made Jarom more nervous.

Jarom pushed the cloak into his satchel.

His father entered and removed it.

"You won't have room."

"For what?"

His father held out a small cloth bundle.

Jarom recognized it immediately.

“Ambrosia-filled manna?”

“Our family batch.”

“I’m going on an assignment, not a picnic.”

“Then you will be glad to have something medicinal.”

Jarom took the bundle.

It was warm.

His father had made it fresh.

Jarom looked down at it. “You really think I’ll need this?”

“I hope not.”

“That is not comforting.”

“It is not meant to be.”

His father sat beside him.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Outside the open window, the Elysian Fields rolled away beneath eternal sunlight.

Golden chariots crossed the sky in slow arcs. Bakers called to one another from the loading platforms. The river made its soft, steady music along the white shore.

Jarom tried to memorize all of it at once.

His father followed his gaze.

“You will come back.”

Jarom nodded.

“Of course.”

His father studied him.

“You do not believe that.”

Jarom looked at the bundle in his hands.

“I don’t know what to believe.”

“Then believe what you know.”

Jarom frowned.

His father pointed toward the bakery below.

“You know how to work. You know how to listen. You know how to carry something fragile without dropping it. You know how to read old words other people ignore. You know how to help when someone is hurt.”

“I also missed a target from twenty paces.”

“You cut the rope from twice that.”

“After I missed it first.”

His father smiled.

“Jarom, do you think everyone who does something important feels ready before they do it?”

Jarom considered.

“I hoped so.”

“No. Most are simply too busy to admit otherwise.”

His father stood.

“Come. If you miss your transport on your first day of service, they may send you to the Ambrosia Auditing Office permanently.”

Jarom sprang to his feet.

“I’m ready.”

“I thought that might help.”

They descended together.

At the loading platform, the Order had gathered to see him off.

Jarom hated that.

He had hoped to leave quietly, perhaps with one dignified wave and only a few witnesses. Instead, every baker in sight crowded around him. Someone had hung a banner over the door.

EARTH OR BUST, JAROM!

The letters were crooked.

Jarom stared.

“Who made that?”

One of the junior bakers raised a hand.

“You spelled my name correctly.”

The young cherub beamed.

“Thank you.”

Jarom could not bring himself to criticize anything else.

His father adjusted the satchel strap across Jarom’s chest and slipped the ambrosia bundle inside.

“Keep it dry.”

Jarom nodded.

“And do not eat all of it yourself.”

“I know.”

“And if you meet mortals, remember that they are not as fragile as they appear.”

Jarom nodded again.

His father's expression changed.

"But they are more fragile than they think."

Jarom swallowed.

A golden transport chariot descended beyond the platform.

The driver waved.

"Jarom! Citadel transfer!"

Jarom looked at his father.

The words he had prepared disappeared.

His father pulled him into an embrace.

Jarom's small wings pressed awkwardly between them.

"Come home when you can," his father whispered.

"I will."

"And Jarom?"

"Yes?"

"If this Xandir fellow gives you trouble, remind him that the Order of Ambrosia supplies half the pastries in the Heavenly Realms."

Jarom pulled back.

"Is that a threat?"

His father smiled.

"It is logistics."



The Heavenly Citadel was more beautiful than Jarom remembered.

He had visited only twice before, both times on deliveries, and both times he had spent most of the trip worried about paperwork. Now he saw the towers differently.

Light streamed between them like rivers.

Music seemed woven into the air itself.

Angels of every order crossed the broad avenues, but the usual calm had vanished. Messengers hurried between halls. Guardians moved in formations. Old storage chambers stood open, revealing weapons and armor Jarom had only seen in illustrations.

The rumors were true.

Heaven was preparing.

For what, nobody told him.

His transport set down at the eastern court.

A clerk checked his name.

“Jarom. Earthside apprentice.”

“Yes.”

“Destination: New York.”

Jarom blinked. “Is that a person?”

The clerk looked at him.

“A city.”

“Oh.”

“You will be transferred by direct beam.”

Jarom looked toward the glowing platform.

“How direct?”

“Very.”

The clerk stamped his parchment.

“Try not to scream.”

Jarom’s wings stiffened.

“Do people scream?”

“Some.”

“How many?”

“Enough that we stopped pretending they do not.”

Jarom stepped onto the platform.

He gripped his satchel.

The clerk raised one hand.

A ring of light formed beneath Jarom’s feet.

He thought of the Elysian Fields.

The river.

The shining towers.

His father’s hands shaping dough.

The golden chariots.

The smell of ambrosia.

He thought of Xandir.

That last one was a mistake.

The platform vanished.

Jarom shot downward.

He had flown faster before, but never without moving his wings. Light swallowed him in every direction. His stomach seemed to lag several miles behind the rest of him.

He did not scream.

He made a sound that was much more dignified.

At least, that was how he planned to remember it.

Then the light opened.

Cold air struck his face.

Noise exploded around him.

Buildings rose in every direction, dark and hard and crowded together. Tiny vehicles crawled along streets far below. Lights flashed in windows. Great towers stabbed upward into a sky that looked strangely dull compared with home.

Jarom forgot to breathe.

Earth.

Actual Earth.

He hovered beside the High Seraph, who seemed entirely unimpressed.

They stood above a skyscraper.

On the highest spire sat a solitary figure wrapped in a dark cloak. Long platinum hair stirred in the wind. Iridescent wings folded close behind him, almost invisible until the city lights touched them.

Two swords hung at his waist.

Jarom's mouth went dry.

The High Seraph descended.

Jarom followed.

The cloaked angel rose to his full height, which was considerably more height than Jarom had hoped for.

Jarom clutched the satchel.

Inside it, the ambrosia cakes suddenly felt very small.

The angel looked him over.

Jarom straightened his shoulders.

He had no idea what came next.

But for the first time since the scroll had arrived, he realized that not knowing did not mean he could not do it.

The angel's mouth opened.

Jarom braced himself.

And his quiet life in the Order of Ambrosia ended.

CONTINUE THE STORY THE LAST ARCHANGEL

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