

PROLOGUE

We angels come to the same places again, and again, but each time the players and we are different, and the positions new. Of course I've seen it all: Archangels making melodramatic landings on aeroplane wings. Souls falling in and out of love. Tiny mishaps to astronomical catastrophes. What seems small might turn out to be big, and vice versa: the real significance is often only revealed with time. Attributing things to fate, or making the most out of the hand you're dealt with – it's all a question of perspective.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let us turn to Tony, our human protagonist, who has just become part-angel, is about to embark on an unusual tour of the realms of angels, and is promising to shake things up for the first time in a long while. The game's afoot ...

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Tony stepped out of the toilet cubicle into the interior of a plane that was unlike anything he had ever seen in his life. Although he did not know it, he would be experiencing this reaction rather a lot in his coming adventures.

An elderly man in white robes, a little shorter than Tony but with a face that seemed vaguely familiar, was gingerly approaching him. There were embarrassed hisses of 'Go on, Albert' and 'You've got to tell him' behind the old man as he walked towards Tony.

'Hello, Tony, it's nice to meet you. Well, in fact you don't know me, but I know you rather well. Well, um, what can I say? There's been a terrible and highly improbable mistake and I'm sorry to say that nobody's quite sure of what to do. But I forget myself; it's most rude of me not to introduce myself. I am Albert, your guardian angel.'

During this strange introduction, Tony had had a chance to take in the scene before him, which was just as peculiar. He blinked, thinking for a moment that he was staring at a zebra crossing. Looking back down the plane, it was twice as long and twice as wide as it had been before, with twice as many seats. Everything was illuminated by a strong white light. There was something strange about many of the people. Those in the front row, and those in every alternate row right to the back of the plane, were all motionless as if they were in a photograph. They were frozen in the act of doing all of the regular things people do on a plane, like talking, staring out of the window or simply staring. Not far from the front a flight attendant was pouring out a hot drink to a passenger, but both of them were motionless, and the liquid was suspended in mid-air, defying gravity.

The frozen people were wearing the normal assortment of clothes you would expect on any flight, but in the rows between them there were other people who looked quite different. They all looked rather old and were dressed uniformly in the same white robes as Albert. There was a line of them in the second row, another in the fourth, and another in every other row behind, creating distinctive stripes. And they were moving. Some of them were murmuring to their neighbours, while others were blinking and gently moving their heads like normal passengers. All of them were staring at Tony in a way that made him feel he was about to be interviewed.

Seeing that Tony was in no physical or psychological state to do much more than continue to digest the scene in front of him, Albert continued, 'This will all be rather a shock for you, I should imagine. You will no doubt have many questions, but I need to check how damaged you were during the process of transmutation. How many fingers am I holding up?'

'Three,' said Tony.

'Thank goodness, your basic language skills and perception are functioning,' said Albert. Then he suddenly lunged forward and poked Tony sharply in the chest.

'Ow!' Tony flinched and backed away a step.

'Excellent, excellent, your reactions seem perfect,' Albert gleefully observed.

He was about to open his mouth again when Tony spoke up. 'Now look here, I don't know what's going on here, but this is all too strange for my liking. Is it some funny virtual reality thing?' His hands went up to his eyes as if to pull off a headset, but he was left patting his head as Albert looked on sympathetically.

'It must be a dream then,' Tony went on. 'I should wake up any second now.'

But he did not wake up. Albert hesitated for a second, then said, 'Tony, I need to ask you just one more question and then I promise I will start to answer yours. Just tell me what you remember.'

Tony stopped. He remembered the pain, the light, and spending what seemed like an eternity staggering down the aisle. Then it started to come back to him.

'I remember there was... an angel with big wings.'

'OK, we're on the right track!' exclaimed Albert. 'What else?'

'He was standing on the wing. As if he was singing, although as he was outside I couldn't hear anything. But it's starting to get a bit hazy.'

'Fine, fine, you don't need to worry, carry on.'

'Well, I was quite close to the doors in the centre of the plane, so I had a fine view. I remember there was quite a commotion inside as the door opened, and then... the angel stepped through. He was very handsome. He smiled at everyone and...'

'Yes, go on, go on.' Albert had begun to quiver slightly.

Tony hesitated. 'You know, I'm having trouble getting the rest.'

'Oh, well, when one is under a divine presence one's memory can be lost,' Albert interposed. He seemed quite relieved.

'I just don't know...' Tony went on.

'Excellent, excellent,' purred Albert, who was beginning to smile. He rubbed Tony's arm.

'No, I just don't know why he then turned out to be so nasty,' said Tony.

'Oh dear,' said Albert, and his mouth dropped.

CHAPTER 1

The drummer had set up her kit and was now seated facing the rest of the band and waiting. They were making typical mundane small talk before playing, speculating about the upcoming football match, reflecting on how they remembered gaining their 'wings,' or simply enjoying the view from 10,000 metres. Putting a big band on the top of an aircraft entailed certain challenges, including the limited width and the slopes, and the logistics of arranging one's own wings. Fortunately the potentially trickiest aspect of facing a 700-kilometre-per-hour wind was not in question, as the angels were sensibly impervious to air resistance.

When they saw a single white speck appear on the horizon, the band stopped talking, set their instruments, and prepared to start playing. The speck rapidly grew into a very bright and beautifully-manicured angel, who circled the aircraft a few times with impeccable finesse before gently descending onto the tip of the starboard wing. The Archangel Gabriel had arrived. Having adjusted his posture for the most majestic effect, he nodded up at the drummer, who played three quick beats on the cymbals, then one medium one.

Tony was in his seat reading. He overheard someone say, 'Mummy, there's an angel on the wing,' followed by several sharp exclamations and shrieks which sounded unlike those you would hear on a common-or-garden flight.

Tony gazed out from his window seat, just behind the wing. There was indeed an angel, singing rather melodramatically – although inaudible from the inside of the aircraft – and walking slowly from the wing tip towards the main body of the plane. He was certainly quite the stereotypical angel: all in white, with big and powerful wings, and terribly handsome. This was no hysterical mass illusion; the passengers' curious glances had turned to jaw-dropping stares. Very quickly, almost everyone on the plane saw that this apparition defying the normal laws of physics was, without any doubt, an angel. The plane was suddenly filled with expletives and exclamations of faith, while some reacted with open-mouthed incredulity.

The fervour began to shift towards genuine terror for many and, for some, greater religious elation, as it became clear that the angel was steadily approaching the starboard centre doors and looking very much as if he was going to open them. Without giving anyone much time for reflection upon the matter, the door handles slid open. Instead of a blast of explosive decompression, however, the air pressure did not change at all. Instead, a mellifluous baritone voice wafted into the aeroplane, singing something about New York being 'A, Number One'. Few people on an aircraft at 39,000 feet would expect to see an angel walk in through the door singing a Frank Sinatra hit. However, the series of events that followed were to prove even more improbable.

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The Archangel Gabriel entered the cabin with an immaculately smooth and adroit turn of his body, gracefully sliding past the backs of the seats, the tray tables with their clustered masses of plastic, food and hot drinks, not to mention the people crammed up together on the seats. There was no doubt that the Archangel had the dexterity to surpass the very best cabin crew in the world – or even, should he put his mind to it, to pass a dromedary through the eye of a needle.

There was no doubt either that even Frank Sinatra would have wept on hearing how beautifully he intoned *New York, New York*. However, it was highly improbable that an eyelash should detach itself from Gabriel's face just before his feet landed silently upon the floor of the aisle, his wings arranged behind him in all their gleaming splendour. It was even more unlikely that the eyelash, once detached, should happen to drift in the air circulation within the cabin and weave and spin, up and down and around, in just the direction it chose. And it defied all probability that Tony's mouth was open just as the eyelash reached it.

Of all the times to do it, it was precisely at that moment that Tony gave an involuntary hiccup. As he inhaled, mouth open, in floated the eyelash, down his windpipe, down until it reached the level of his heart, where it pierced the inner lining of his left lung, the substance of an angel within the body of a mere mortal.

It would have been impossible for the angels to foresee any of this.

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Gabriel finished his song. Having landed in the middle of the aisle he continued without missing a beat, and began purposefully moving down towards the back of the plane. At this point, the expressions on the faces of the passengers were all modulated into a similar stunned look as the performance continued. The wails and screams were now replaced by a gaping silence.

The end of the song was fast approaching, and when Gabriel reached the third row from the back, he turned towards the front. At the end of the phrase 'It's up to you,' he raised his right hand and laid it upon the shoulder of the passenger on the aisle seat, then looked down at him as he rendered the last two 'New Yorks' in a crescendo.

The passenger was a small, rather obese woman who had very thin, poorly-arranged hair. She had a rather dirty-looking and ill-fitting cream dress. She looked up and calmly addressed the imposing figure above her.

‘Always one for a flashy entrance, Gaby. You should be careful, with all these daring theatrics. One day you might upset that beautiful coiffure of yours.’

Gabriel roared with laughter. ‘My dear Fifi, you deliver such beautiful yet twisted words, but you are the last angel who is competent to make judgements on hairstyles.’

Fifi smiled, ‘I’m touched that even a lowly and renegade angel such as myself deserves an archangel and his band to arrest me when a single lower-grade angel would have been enough.’

‘Don’t give yourself airs, my little traitor.’ Gabriel looked coldly at Fifi. ‘The Archangel Gabriel will not be mocked.’

Fifi continued to look rather amused. ‘Well, the Archangel should take me out the side doors for everyone to see. Although rather than have the chance to show off, maybe he simply yearns for the roles to be reversed and to be taken captive himself from the back entrance.’

A vein twitched on the side of Gabriel’s forehead as he looked down at Fifi. From out of thin air, a roll of white duct tape suddenly appeared in his hand, and he quickly stretched a strip across her mouth to stop her in mid-sentence. He continued to wind it around her wrists and around the upper part of her torso.

Gabriel looked pleased at his handiwork. He glared at Fifi. ‘Now, where were we? The side door. Yes, a spectacular departure. Perhaps I should accidentally drop you off the wing and see how you cope stuck in the body of a human. As we know, you are so good at *accidents* yourself.’

Gabriel began to drag Fifi down towards the centre of the aircraft. The passengers had simply been following the verbal exchange from their seats, but as they approached a tearful woman sitting on the aisle suddenly stood up.

‘My lord angel, merciful saviour, I am your servant and humbly ask you to bless me,’ she said. The woman reached out to touch the angel, but rather than the beatific look she was obviously expecting, he glared at her. Then he shot out the hand that was not attached to Fifi, clasped her face and pushed her back into her seat.

‘My dear lady,’ he said, stooping to bend down and position his face above hers, ‘You can shut the fuck up and start praying that you die quickly when I walk out of the door and the stale air and contents of this flying fibreglass cucumber start to shake and disintegrate.’

A wave of shock and gasps replaced what had hitherto been silence from the passengers. Gabriel stood up straight with a little smirk. Tony saw a man in glasses stand up just in front of Gabriel. The man gasped, ‘Look, I... I... don’t know who or what you are but I’m not afraid of you and...’

Gabriel smirked at him. ‘Ah, my dear little hero, but you should be very afraid of me. And I think you too can go fuck yourself.’

The man suddenly jerked backwards, as if he was having a fit, falling so that he was seated on the aisle before Gabriel. It was difficult to make out his movements from Tony's seat, but it was impossible not to hear the man's shaking and screaming. The man's body started to bend involuntarily forward. Tony could hear him crying out, and then the shrieks of horror from the passengers around him and the sounds of bones cracking and squelching.

'So, little hero, does that feel good?' said Gabriel, looking down. 'You should be pleased. Not many people have the distinction of being able to put their heads up their own arses.'

The clamour that then began from some of the passengers was worse than before Gabriel's entrance into the cabin. But then all of a sudden it stopped. Gabriel put his finger to his lips and looked around calmly. Tony noticed that a man across the aisle who had been yelling no longer had a mouth. His lips had disappeared, leaving only his nose and his terrified eyes.

'So,' Gabriel began again, 'you can see that your more talkative compatriots have been silenced or have anally pleased themselves. Anyone else wishing to comment? Now, give me your full attention please.'

There was silence, punctuated by weeping and whimpering. Tony did not dare to look away from Gabriel. He felt a warm, familiar hand slide over and grasp his own.

'My dear, dear humans,' Gabriel continued, 'I have so much fun pitying your feeble mortal condition. Each time I drop by Earth I find you so amusing. Do you remember when you were children, looking at ants, probably smashing your heel down on them or perhaps lifting a stone and pouring boiling water onto their nests? It's just one way I can describe how I look at your pathetic and predictable lives – and what I could do to them. Or perhaps it's easier to think, as you reflect at the end of your life on all the important moments, of the meaning that you might place on the life of a single fly that suddenly smashed into your windscreen on one of the countless times you took a trip in a motorized vehicle.'

His audience was not about to move, and he was beginning to warm to his speech, which was beautifully intoned and underlined with gestures.

'And what fun it is to smash your pathetic stereotypes of ME. Of course, what you see in front of you is the finest specimen of angel in existence, and, yes! I've done all of those great things you've heard about. Normally I let people in first class with a bit more space prostrate themselves before me, but as you're all so cheap that you're on a flight with only economy class, you don't deserve it.'

Gabriel was looking around and some passengers were flinching slightly, but he did not break his flow. 'And then you poor non-believers, particularly those atheists among you. I've amused myself so much with humans like you in the past. But why? Why

am I not the 'nice' angel that you might imagine me to be? Well, you can't imagine eternity, but having virtually nothing to do for over one of your millennia gets just a little bit tedious. So, shall we say I'm just letting my hair down every now and then to help pass the centuries? But I think I've had my fill of fun with you and I'm wasting a lot of time when I could be in Angeland. Now, if the little hero will roll out of my way' – he kicked the contorted human ball in front of him – 'I seem to recall that you might appreciate some fresh air.' He waved his hand, and the three people in the seats by the wing door suddenly slid upwards and backwards like puppets, and ended up separated from their seats and flattened against the roof above the seats behind, so that Tony had to duck slightly to avoid the unfortunate woman who had been in the seat directly in front of him.

All this time, Fifi had been motionless, still grasped by Gabriel. He led the little woman towards the side door, through the now-vacant row of seats, and proclaimed 'Adieu, cretins!' Then he dived gracefully through the door while yanking Fifi with him, so that she left the plane horizontally. She raised her head, and in the brief second before she was pulled out of view, she winked at Tony. Immediately afterwards there was an explosion of noise, wind and pain, and everything went black.

CHAPTER 2

‘Then I recall staggering into the toilet cubicle... then out again, to here. I think there were only two gaps in my recall of how it unfolded. But that’s nothing compared to a gap that’s somehow... somehow much bigger. I can’t recall anything... anything... in my entire life before that child saying there was an angel on the wing.’

Albert and the other guardian angels had been listening carefully to Tony as he related everything he remembered. Towards the middle of his monologue, several had started approaching him more closely. Albert had urged him to continue even when they started lightly touching his back and chest, and Tony rather hesitantly finished his tale despite these peculiar intrusions. It was perhaps more unnerving to see the same angels who had poked and prodded him whisper and nod to each other, accentuated by the fact that they were very old.

There was a silence after Tony had finished, which Albert filled. ‘Well Tony, let me start by excusing Archangel Gabriel. He – ahem – is known for getting a little carried away sometimes.’

‘But what about those people? He killed a man in the aisle, closed up people’s mouths. It was like something straight out of a horror movie. Are we all... dead?’

‘No no!’ Albert weakly raised his voice. ‘Look all around you, everyone on the plane is here, just as if nothing happened. You are simply looking at things from the perspective of an angel now. Everything has been reset to the moment just before the Archangel arrived to perform his duty, and no one will remember a thing. Well, except you.’

Tony had been looking up and down the plane between the rows of angels, searching among the frozen faces for passengers he remembered from before the carnage. The man who had been screaming was there, with mouth intact – in fact everyone on the plane seemed to have normal mouths now. The man with glasses who had stood up to the Archangel was also there, although his face and ears were red and there were faintly perceptible brown smudges on his glasses.

‘So,’ Tony turned to face Albert, ‘how am I not dead then, if I’m talking with a bunch of angels in this goofy plane full of frozen people?’

‘We understand a lot more clearly what, erm, went wrong.’ Albert gently laid a hand on Tony’s shoulder. ‘After inspecting you it seems to be clear that something – we don’t have any idea what – of the Archangel got stuck inside you. It’s difficult to believe, even for us lowly G-class angels, but the fact that we are having this conversation shows that you have part-transmuted into the state of an angel. There are precedents for this, but it hasn’t happened for a very long time.’

Tony searched around the cabin. He saw the empty space where Fifi had been sitting, and glanced at his own empty seat. He started to look more closely at the angels, who were – like the group who had been poking him – almost uniformly old, well beyond retirement age but nevertheless looking quite sprightly. Then he started noticing some individual angels who were much younger, including one who couldn't have been more than six years old. The person in the seat in front of the boy angel was also a boy... and it was suddenly clear. He realised why Albert reminded him of someone.

'Albert, you're me! But you're older, so much older. And yet this little boy here looks almost identical to the angel behind him.'

The angels had been continuing to look at Tony all along, and were nodding and looking very wise – even, disturbingly, the boy angel.

'My dear Tony, you're quite right, and that's something I can easily explain. Each person's guardian angel is always right behind them to follow everything they do. I'm not sure why we look exactly like the person for whom we vouchsafe, but it certainly helps with rapid identification in cases such as rock concerts, in metro carriages, or after a particularly stressful Black Friday. The visible age of a guardian angel is quite simple. It represents how long the person will live for. But I can give you more explanations later. You and I need to get moving at once.'

Tony looked at the young boy and his slightly older guardian angel. There was something, someone in fact, very important that he wanted to remember. But this memory and everything before the moment he had become aware of Archangel Gabriel on the wing, though teasingly close, was lost. It was like having not a word, but an encyclopaedia or perhaps something larger, like the contents of the Internet, on the tip of your tongue and simply being unable to express it. *Someone... someone's fingers...*

'Sorry Tony, it's time to go.' Albert tugged Tony out of his reverie and pulled him up the aisle, past the flight attendant with the coffee, past the alternate rows of frozen passengers and rows of wise, nodding white-clad angels, and up to the front toilet cubicle in the plane. Tony's head was spinning again, and with a wince he recalled the pounding pain of the last time he had been at this door. He took a final look down the aisle, searching for the gap where his seat was, glancing to the side and seeing the top of a head with familiar brown hair...

'Tony, the next CRAP is due to take place imminently and I've heard that it will put this incident at the top of the agenda,' said Albert, pulling Tony's attention back to the angel and the cubicle door.

'CRAP?' said Tony, forgetting everything he had previously been thinking about.

'Sorry, it stands for the *Conseil Religieux des Archanges Ponctuel*. You'll see that we have quite a lot of acronyms, but you'll get used to them quickly, don't worry.'

'Isn't that a rather inappropriate acronym?'

'You might find it amusing as a human because it sounds like defecate to you, but as angels don't need to eat or drink or have associated bodily functions it doesn't carry the same connotation. But we are wasting time, let's get inside.' Albert opened the door of the toilet cubicle, slid in and drew Tony in beside him.

Most toilet cubicles look, smell and feel much the same, but the state of the one Tony found himself in was towards the less appealing end. There was toilet paper, some apparently used, strewn over the damp floor. The sink was nearly full, and a paper towel was swimming in the grey, soapy water. And it stank.

'Never judge a book by its cover,' said Albert gaily as they squeezed into the tiny space together. He pushed the door closed and slid the lock shut with a neat *clack*.

'Could you please explain to me,' said Tony, 'what we are doing in this place?'

'We are now ready to use the HARP,' replied Albert, suddenly looking a lot less flustered.

'What's a harp got to do with anything? I don't remember being able to play that, but I imagine you're an expert.'

'I'm forgetting myself,' replied Albert, 'not harp, HARP. It stands for Human Angel Rescue Portal.' He looked quite pleased with himself. 'For all angels, every aircraft toilet at a plane's cruising altitude is connected to HARP. It's a multi-dimensional emergency portal to Angeland, for stranded angels. It's also the only way for humans to get there.'

'So people have travelled using this before? How are we going anywhere?' said Tony, beginning to feel distinctly crushed.

'Well, no, in fact you'll be the first human, so the E4 who invented the system will be very excitedly following how things go. There's been plenty of testing using human, er, matter, but we've never had a real-life incident of this nature before. I can tell you I'm really rather honoured to be here with you to inaugurate the first full human passage.'

Albert was getting uncomfortably eager as far as Tony was concerned, but he bowled on, 'It's before your lifetime, I know, but you can't imagine the sensation that the invention of air travel for humans made in Angeland. Once planes had enough space to add toilets and enclose them, it was easy for our angel technicians to secretly tap into the base of the cubicle to configure them to HARP to channel the divine wind.'

Tony had been looking around the cubicle, and his attention was drawn to the toilet cover, which he lifted to see the grey bowl lightly flecked and streaked with water, with lines of brown just above the hole.

'I think I've seen enough strange things already to deduce that what you're saying is that we are going to leave through there when the toilet flushes?'

'Why of course,' replied Albert. 'Isn't that the obvious way out? Just imagine the distinction you'll have. It's not always you can say you're the first to do something.'

Tony didn't have much space to manoeuvre, but he had begun to squirm. He exclaimed, 'Actually, can we go back? I'm beginning to have second thoughts about this. It was quite comfortable on the plane...'

Albert, however, who had now become quite manic, put his hand across the door. 'No, no, no, we can't risk going back now, and you have an important date with the CRAP.'

Tony began to try to extract himself, but the angel, despite his age, was remarkably strong. 'Don't panic, that's the last thing to do,' Albert said in a slightly piqued voice, gazing around and then seeming to remember. 'That's it. You've already kindly lifted the lid. Hold your breath. And – something very important but I can't recall why – you might feel a bit queasy after we arrive, but if you're going to be sick, please do it on the floor or on your chest and not in the toilet bowl. Here we go!' He reached down and pushed the blue flush button.

Tony, pinned back and still in a state of disorientation following those previous events in his lifetime which he could actually remember, was not really in any state to protest further. There was a clunk and then a whooshing, sucking noise from the toilet. Tony looked down into the bowl, which was rushing up to meet him. He felt stretched and twisted, and for the third time that day his consciousness was suddenly whisked off.

When it was all over, Tony found himself in exactly the same position that he had been in just before Albert had pushed the flush button. He was promptly sick into the toilet bowl.

'Oh dear,' said Albert, who was calmer than before and still crushed opposite Tony. 'There will be repercussions, and I'll be blamed. But onwards and upwards.' He had released Tony at this point and looked at him, saying quietly, 'Tony, we're going to enter Angeland now.'

Tony had added queasiness to his state of continued disorientation, so he simply nodded weakly at Albert as he continued. For the first time, the old man looked his age, and there was sadness in his voice.

'It means that I will not always be with you as I have up to now in your life. We may walk side by side for some of the time, but in Angeland my link to you is broken. You will be entering a place where you will find everything is different and familiar at the same time. But remember that however difficult the situations are, you must have faith in your own ability.'

Tony noticed that it was now silent in the cubicle; the background hum of the air conditioning had stopped. Albert briefly wiped one eye, then swung back into what Tony now recognised as his typically upbeat manner.

Albert smiled. 'Are you ready?'

'It sounds as though I'll have even more questions than I do at the moment,' Tony said, smiling back weakly.

'Welcome to Angeland.'

The door slid open.

CHAPTER 3

Gabriel

I hate having a CRAP. But it's always worse if there's an item on the agenda under my responsibility where something's gone wrong. And downright embarrassing to be hauled away from my important duties for something I don't completely understand.

They say part of me got lodged in a human during my mission retrieving that weasel Fifi. But I'm good at what I do – the best. No other messenger comes close. Oh yes, there are some jealous angels who insinuate that I shouldn't be visiting Earth so often, but they don't have anything like my experience there. No other angel has gone through so much hurly burly, had such direct interactions with Mary and Mohammed, or is as handsome as me. With the pedigree and honours I've racked up, I've always taken great care to keep my wings, body and mind in tip-top condition.

It makes me think of A1. He would appreciate me now. It's been such a long time, but the other A2s had insisted on waiting, keeping on going without Him. Waiting. That was an understatement. I remember the CRAP quite clearly when A1 had last been seen, in the meeting with all of the A2s, the eight seats of the council room filled for the last time.

'I'm just going to nip out for a little while,' He had said all of a sudden during a pause in the discussions. It was a funny thing, and we were all surprised when He strode out of the council room with His great white beard, hair and robes trailing behind Him. A1 had been apt to come up sometimes with surprising things, which I didn't always agree with, but He had been fair. And I remember the last words He threw out as he left: 'just keep things going while I'm away.'

Anyhow, that's all a long time in the past now, and my thoughts focused on the present as the lift climbed the last few floors of the ARC building. As I'd expected, the conversation in the lift had been all about the football match that had just finished, with the Angeland angels finding it hard to control their elation. I felt sorry for Sandeepa, as her guardians had played really well, only being robbed at the end, but one has to admire the skill of Rita in smashing the records that had withstood for so long, even if she is a bit annoying. My Poste team may be playing Angeland if we get through to the last four, and our team preparations will need to be undertaken very carefully to counter the threat that she poses.

The lift arrived at the top floor, and I came into the Jardim do Céu, the location of the council room, and walked round the table to take my seat. I'd been there many times. It was a beautiful place to work: the austerity of the room, with eight comfortable white leather chairs around a round table, and the huge expanse of glass giving spectacular

views over the city. The wide Semaht River was glittering below, the major landmark, with the lights of many other tall towers beginning to twinkle as the sun began to set.

The conversation about the match among the other archangels fell away as I entered, and as I sat down the peace of the room was shattered by the hoot of none other than Natasha's laugh. This was one of those occasions when it did not feel so infectious, although when she started her loud and sudden squeals I admit that it was normally very difficult not to raise a grin or succumb to it.

'My dear Gaby,' Natasha began, having silenced the room, 'you surpass the best of us again. It was amusing to learn about your, er, conduct on the plane, but to learn that you shoved such a precious part of yourself into some innocent human has sparked the greatest excitement in Angeland, second only to His departure and the final of the Angel Cup. But the biggest treat for me was the sheer bafflement on your face as you tried to grasp what on earth had happened.'

Natasha had glanced at the empty chair to my right when referring to Him, and I decided to hold my tongue and let this barrage pass by, scrutinizing her scornfully with my usual elegance and discipline. She was pathetic really, with her strawberry blond hair and contrived accent; any human with any sense or taste would have laughed at her garish teenage Barbie doll image. Although I have to admit that she throws great parties.

At least we don't sit next to each other on the council table, as we have Michelle between us. Michelle has always been a fellow staunch soldier whose innocent image cunningly belies her experience, and whose charm and panache melt the hardest of human and angel hearts. Moreover, her innocent appearance hides the full fury and power of persuasion that only a toddler can unleash. She was in her cot and gurgling at me, but I was not quite in the mood to start playing with her yet.

In jumped Yuri at this point, always impatient for things to move on. His ginger hair and light moustache quivered. 'So let's get this straight,' he said, speaking quickly and deliberately, 'I don't know about you, but I've got business to do, and now we're all here I think it's time to work out what's happened and what our strategy is, fast.'

Then, true to form, Sandeepa comes in with her usual conciliatory tone. 'Yuri,' she said, stretching out her hand to touch his arm. She hadn't changed one bit since she first became an angel: her long single jet-black plait almost down to her waist, a simple white sari and a garland of white flowers, and those sandals that always flapped as she lankily paraded around.

'My dear Yuri,' she continued, looking sympathetically at me, 'I don't think we should be rushing off jumping to conclusions, or pointing a finger of blame too quickly. We know that the human Tony became semi-angelic after his encounter on the plane with Gaby, and there must be a simple way to put things right. We just need to put our heads together and work out a solution.'

Yuri lightly thumbed his trouser braces, rocking backwards and forwards. Any human would have mistaken him for a chubby adolescent, rather than the leader of the realm that keeps zillions of angels commercially in thrall, and he was impatient to get back to business. I smiled quietly to myself as he turned the situation round, making Sandeepa look quite deflated.

'Yes, dear Sandeepa, and rather than have the sense to keep Tony on the plane to give us time to find a quick solution, your G4 Albert panics and decides to bring him to Angeland. Where Tony then vomits on the HARP and is caught between worlds, creating a stasis for ten Earth minutes.'

I thought this line of questioning was going well, but of course it's the cue for Ray to jump in. I don't understand why he insists on wearing that tired-looking waistcoat and bow tie, which sit so at odds with all his experience. But having sent so many souls on their way, you have to respect his insights into the human as well as the angelic condition. But his place at the table, with Natasha on his right and Sandeepa on his left, does provide a little pragmatic balance.

'What's done is done, Yuri,' said Ray. 'And we give angels autonomy to make operational decisions in the field, isn't that right? So Tony is in Angeland, and we have ten Earth minutes to find a way to make him completely human again. It will certainly make for a bit of a change round here, and old Ray is ready to help out where he can.' He finished by looking round at all of us with a gentle smile, but I was thinking simply that the sprinkling of salt-and-pepper hair above his ears and below his broad bald patch could do with a trim.

I was about to suggest a rapid and practical solution for dealing with Tony, one which I knew would not meet with the approval of the majority of the angels but would at least have helped to move the discussion along, but then of course Mehi, our resident clever-clogs, jumps in and not only embarrasses me but demonstrates how badly the operational decisions of Sandeepa's G4 magnified something that could have been easily dealt with at the time.

Mehi had been scrutinizing me for a fair time. Irritating as he is sometimes, at least he dresses the part: a neat suit with his black hair slicked back.

He addressed the room and focused on me. 'The shock of the situation is clearly straining our powers of perception. 'Gaby, do you realise that you are missing an eyelash?' he announced.

In the ensuing pause I reached up. Incredibly, seemingly impossibly, an eyelash was gone from my perfect face. The nagging sense of loss that I had experienced after knowing that something had been transferred to the human Tony suddenly exploded. Although I kept my cool externally, internally I felt a burst of shame and catastrophe. I had deliberately said nothing at the start of the meeting but now, although I would be

the last to admit it, I was temporarily unable to communicate for the first time in my existence.

Of course Natasha was the first to break the silence, with one of her quips. 'Mehi, you are a clever one,' she said. Then she turned to me. 'But, dear Gaby, perhaps this means that before we know it you will be as bald as Ray.' She hooted with laughter.

I appreciated Mehi's imperturbable professionalism. Without a flicker he continued in his monotone, 'It has probably lodged in Tony's lung. We have lost the window of opportunity to conduct surgery while he was in the plane.'

Good, I thought, that's another jab at Sandeepa's poor management and really, given the very unfortunate and distressing accident, the obvious place to point the blame in the circumstances. Nevertheless, given my self-consciousness with the eyes of the others upon me, the best course of action seemed to be to pick up Michelle and start bouncing her up and down on my knee. I did so, and she started to babble and coo.

Meanwhile, however, Natasha was looking a little anxious. She asked Mehi, 'So what does this mean in practice for Tony?'

Mehi continued, 'As you are aware, we know the destiny of all things on Earth, while in Angeland and its divine realms, everything, particularly the Angel Cup championship, is uncertain. Tony, however, has become part-angel as well as entering Angeland. His destiny now, like those of angels, is currently impossible to predict.'

I and all the other angels, including Michelle, were looking intently at Mehi as he forged on.

'However, there are some parameters that are certain. If the eyelash is removed from Tony's person, after about an hour or two of angel time, he will then experience human time and become effectively frozen. In this catatonic state he can simply be propped up by the HARP and be flushed through after it opens, upon which he will regain his memory of his human life and forget everything he has experienced in Angeland.'

Yuri cut in. 'So the sooner we extract the eyelash, the less we all have to deal with.'

Mehi nodded. 'However, if the eyelash is still not removed when the emergency portal opens, the imbalance between Angeland and Earth will create a vacuum that will not just tear Tony apart cell by cell in what will feel like eons of excruciating pain for him, but also threaten the very fabric of Angeland.'

At this point Michelle suddenly let out a shriek and started bawling, and didn't stop despite my best efforts to rock her around and bounce her up and down. I looked at all the other angels and appealed to them with a clever idea.

'This is not my fault, I'll have you know. I was just doing my duty. Can't we just cut Tony in half and take out my poor eyelash?'

‘No, as angels that’s the last thing that we can do,’ said Sandeepa, looking rather severely at me, as I had expected. ‘Some of us might get away with certain things on Earth but there’ll be none of that here.’

I felt that was a bit of a low blow, but by this stage everyone but Mehi seemed a little nervous.

Yuri cut the silence and got to the point. ‘OK, OK, so how much time exactly do we have until the emergency portal opens? Is there another solution?’

Mehi gave a rare smile. ‘The portal will open approximately 24 minutes into the first half of the Angel Cup final.’

It was good to come back to a really serious topic. My several millennia of experience in the field of various near-apocalyptic events meant that I was able to maintain my calm and full powers of observation while Michelle was having a tantrum on my knee.

I had been observing Natasha’s fidgeting since Mehi’s earlier forecast of doom, and I smiled inwardly to myself to see her reaction to the timing of the portal opening. She had never won the Angel Cup, but this year she did have a strong team which looked as though she had a real chance, even without some of the backstage manoeuvring that was no doubt up her sleeve. I glanced again at His chair and mulled at how His team, the Angeland team, had also never won the Angel Cup since He had disappeared.

Natasha, however, was the next to speak. She clicked her fingers and looked at Ray. ‘Heaven,’ she said. ‘We simply send him to Heaven.’

We all turned to Ray, and Michelle paused in her tantrum with her mouth open expectantly.

‘Slamming the pearly gates irrevocably shut on Tony as he became a denizen of Heaven would create a protective barrier,’ nodded Mehi. ‘Angeland would be safe.’

‘Sure,’ said Ray, ‘I can give Tony a one-way ticket at the end of his scheduled time in Angeland, which is a bit radical before his time on Earth is due. But we could even exceptionally give him a two-way ticket, as a bit of relaxation and angel hospitality might do wonders to tease out the eyelash. Before we try the one-way ticket, we need to do everything else we can to free the eyelash.’

I would have seconded Natasha’s suggestion that we should send Tony straight to Heaven on a one-way ticket, but I decided to hold my tongue. The relief was palpable all round and despite my earlier annoyance I began to reflect that with this fail-safe option, some interesting benefits could well arise from the situation.

Yuri stood up as if to leave. ‘Excellent, so we can all continue to prepare for the Angel Cup then. Call on me if you need me to help, but you must excuse me now as I have things to do.’

'Please wait,' said Sandeepa, standing up and towering above Yuri, encouraging him to sit back down again. 'I have just heard that Albert and Tony have now left Angelgate Station and will be joining our meeting in a few minutes. We need to think about how we first go about freeing the eyelash.'