ДИАНА РЕЙН

ТОТ, КТО НЕ ИЩЕТ СЧАС-ТЬЯ



16+

Рассказ из вселенной "Ангел-неудачник"

The One Who Doesn't Seek Happiness

Standalone

Diana Reyn

(Диана Рейн)

Тот, кто не ищет счастья

An English translation of a Russian-language original.

The One Who Doesn't Seek Happiness

Original Russian text © 2021 Диана Рейн (Diana Reyn).

English translation © 2026 Diana Reyn.

Translated from the Russian. No official English edition of this work exists.

This edition was prepared with the assistance of machine translation, then reviewed and edited.

Contents

“Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark...” 1

“...love can forgive what is base and turn vices into valor...” 10

“O, hear the voices of angels...” 19

“Everything done in this world is done with hope.” 30

“Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark...”

Only a desperate loser like Mickey could have brought himself to commit such a terrible folly.

As a guardian angel, he had never been one to set an example: he despised his ward, never once tried to hold him back from reckless ventures, and never sought the friendship of his fellow angels. And this time, he wasn’t the least bit worried about Jack Ronter’s hide—the very person he was meant to be watching over. He was out to save his own skin.

His wings—those beautiful, snow-white wings—had faded to a shameful gray after his passage through the Forest.

Mik had no idea what else to do. He had striven to become a proper guardian to Jack, but to no avail. He had swallowed his pride and begged forgiveness of a classmate—the very human Ronter had wronged—yet nothing changed. He had even tried to win over his aunt, though it would have been easier to build a rocket and fly to the Moon.

What else was left to try? What more could he have done to turn his feathers white again?

And so Mik made up his mind: he would have to return to the Forest.

The Forest was no ordinary place. To human eyes, it appeared as nothing more than a bleak grove of black trees and scorched earth, a place where one could all too easily lose one’s way. Nothing more. To angels, however, the Forest was something of a devilish jest. The instant you set foot inside, the bond with your human was severed, and the trees, the bushes, the ground—everything became as real and tangible to a spirit as to any mortal. Mik had to cross this place twice,

and it was nothing short of a miracle that he made it through. But the crossing had turned his wings gray, and that is a brand of shame. Not yet a demon, but no longer an angel.

His classmate Fisifa threw up her hands in dismay, the woman swore and recoiled from him, and the teenagers' angels pointed and laughed.

Then, around Christmastime, a terrible idea took hold of Mik.

He breathed nothing of it to Fisifa. He waited until Jack fell asleep, and then set out for the Forest. If this was the place where he had changed, then surely it was here he ought to search for answers as well. There was simply no other way.

It took Mik a long while to gather his strength, yet even so, the moment his foot met the black earth, a cry of pain tore from him. His bond with Jack had snapped, as though someone had given that invisible thread a sharp tug. Now the angel no longer knew what his ward was thinking or feeling, nor could he come to his aid should trouble befall him.

Though it had to be admitted that even before now, Mik had never gone out of his way to protect his weakling of a ward.

Slowly the angel made his way through the Forest, stepping over fallen trunks and roots jutting from the earth. He stooped beneath low branches and detoured around trees. It was all so unfamiliar to a being who had never felt anything material in his entire existence that Mik often forgot himself, stumbled, and snagged his long tunic on branches. The glow of his halo was too dim to make out the path properly, and his clumsy wings scraped and brushed against every tree and shrub along the way.

Perhaps if he walked this path once more, the Heavens would see that he was no coward and give him back his white feathers?

The Angel wandered on, hopelessly lost — turning in circles, stumbling ever more often, and no longer able to see a thing. He tried to turn back, but the Forest seemed to have come alive and was shuffling its paths. Feather by feather, Mik was leaving his wings behind, and his tunic hung about him in shreds. Even the golden radiance of his halo no longer burned as it should; it was dimming with every passing minute.

What a fool he had been to come here again!

Mik stopped beside a tree and tipped his head back toward the sky. How simple it would be to soar up above the Forest and return home. Too simple — and yet he had fallen for it, that very first time, and tried anyway. The branches caught his body and wings at once, nearly piercing them through; the pain tore his essence out of the real world for an instant, and he fell. The Forest was no joking matter, and it would not be tricked.

Mik remembered how unerringly the guardian angels of the blind found their way. One of them had once led him out of a thick cloud when he lost his bearings. So perhaps he might try the same? He closed his eyes, and a chuckle escaped his chest unbidden. If only someone could see him now. Behold the idiot who had abandoned his human and ventured into the damned Forest of his own free will! Lost, he was — lost here for good.

Holding his hands out uncertainly before him, Mik walked slowly on.

Time was creeping toward the devil’s hour, and the Forest knew nothing of Christmas. The teenager’s angel trudged blindly forward, his thin arms stretched out ahead of him.

It was the dead of night when Mik emerged from the Forest. It happened without warning, and at first he thought he had stumbled into yet another trap. But the trees were behind him now, and ahead, as

though nothing had happened, a human city stretched out. One might have thought the Forest had simply grown weary of enduring his presence and rid itself of him, spewing him out of its womb.

Mik drew a sharp breath (one of the useless habits he had picked up from the human) and twisted his head around to check whether this mad stroll had spared his wings.

But there were no wings on his back. None at all.

The angel froze, staring blankly. It couldn't be. It simply couldn't be! He reached behind himself and ran his palm over his shoulder blades. Not a trace, not the faintest hint that he had ever borne wings.

Mik straightened up, closed his eyes, drew in a slow breath, and let it out just as slowly. He did it once more, as calmly as he could manage, yet something still gurgled in his throat, and his hands would not stop trembling. None of this could be happening; his mind had simply come unhinged after the Forest. Or it was one of the Forest's illusions. He had to get as far away from it as he possibly could.

Without a backward glance, he took several long strides forward—and then his left foot skidded on the ice and shot out from under him. Instinctively, Mik tried to spread his wings and crashed down onto his back with a groan of pain. His bare shoulder blades slammed hard against the asphalt, and no feathers, black or white, rose to shield them.

Mik blinked back tears and exhaled, and a small translucent cloud drifted from his face. None of this was right. He was meant to have wings. He should never have been stumbling and falling beyond the borders of the Forest. And his breath had no business being so... so real. After all, he didn't need to breathe at all.

Without getting up, Mik reached out his hand — slowly, ever so slowly — until his palm came to rest against his chest.

A heart was beating in his chest. The truest heart there ever was.

Mik ran on through the nighttime city, slipping and falling every now and then. Everything around him was too solid, too painfully real. The winter air was icy, chilling him to the bone — bones he now possessed, too! The asphalt was too hard, impossibly hard. He had scraped his palms raw, and he could see the blood on them now. The realest blood there was!

Not only were his wings gone — his halo had vanished, and even his tunic. Instead, he found himself dressed in familiar clothes and quickly remembered that they were Jack's shirt and trousers. No wonder he was so cold. Ordinary people wore a coat over such things in winter, after all.

Mik had no idea where to run. He found himself, quite unexpectedly, in the city center, and unease and fear crept over him, for there was no one about. Guardian angels could be found anywhere, at any hour of the day, for spirits knew nothing of fatigue. When their people slept, they preferred to wander, gather together, and explore the world around them — up above, among the clouds, and in the lower, human world alike.

Mik was certain the guardians were here even now. Roaming, chatting, perching on rooftops or oak branches like giant snow-white birds. But he could no longer see them.

So who was he supposed to turn to for help?

Not that Mik kept a whole retinue of advisors and patrons to call his own even in ordinary times, but it was far easier to come up with ideas and make sense of things when you were in your own shape, in your own world—not when everything had been flipped a hundred and eighty degrees on its head.

His first thought was to head for Jack's house, but he dismissed it at once. If the human saw him—saw himself—it wouldn't solve a thing; it would only make matters worse. He needed someone else, someone

with a brain. Someone who could understand what had happened and help him.

Mik sank onto the nearest bench and raked his fingers through his hair. How could something like this even happen? Sometimes people lost their angels—ones who had sunk so low as to become demons—and sometimes, very, very rarely, guardians themselves could get lost. Wander so far astray that even their inner compass, forever tuned to their charge, could no longer lead them home.

But an angel turning human? Mik had never heard of such a thing, not even in the wildest of tales.

He couldn’t sit still and think for long—he was far too cold. He’d never suspected a human could freeze so thoroughly! His whole body shook, his fingers refused to bend, and his shoulders, neck, and jaw ached with the strain. Mik stumbled onward, clumsy and directionless, just to coax a little warmth back into himself through motion. And if he didn’t survive this night, would his human die too, or simply be left without an angel? Then again, he was already without one—and it was anyone’s guess which of them would be the first to destroy himself. No, he had to find Jack, if only to keep watch over him from a distance.

By dawn, Mik had finally reached the home of Ronter and his aunt. He was numb with cold and utterly spent by then; for part of the way he had simply dragged his feet along, no longer knowing where he was.

The door of the house was shut, but out of habit Mik tried to walk straight through it, and his whole body struck the wood with a loud thud. On the verge of despairing tears, he drummed his fist against the door, hoping that at least one of the neighbors was already awake and would let him in.

Not that there was any use in hoping.

Mik stood on the doorstep a full half hour before footsteps sounded inside and the door swung open. It brushed against him, shoving his shoulder, and he barely managed to stay upright, reminded yet again how difficult it is to keep one’s balance without wings.

On the threshold swayed the drunken neighbor from the floor above. Today he seemed almost presentable: his eyes were steady, and there was scarcely a trace of the constant smell of liquor. The man trained his swollen gaze on Mik, eyed him up and down, and at last shook his head. Mik kept silent, glancing nervously past him, still waiting to catch a glimpse of his guardian.

“Been out wandering all night?” the neighbor asked hoarsely, and Mik flinched at the realization that the man could actually see him. “Look at the state of you — you’ve gone all gray.”

He meant the color of Mik’s face, of course, but the boy spun around on the spot, trying to glimpse the wings at his back, which had grown so unmistakably gray that even humans noticed it.

The neighbor merely waved him off and stepped aside, letting him into the building, and Mik slipped quickly inside.

The stairwell was no warmer than the street, but it held a familiar, stale smell of damp, and at least there was no wind. Mik felt a touch calmer. In the half-dark he climbed to the second floor, stomping loudly on every step, and came to a stop before the familiar door.

It rose before him as vividly as if it were happening that very moment: his human curled up in bed, swaddled tight in a blanket. Winter nights grew so cold that Jack would wake, pull on his father’s sweater, and still lie awake for hours; and when sleep finally claimed him, it brought nothing but nightmares. Mik had watched it all a thousand times and had long since grown used to thinking of his ward as a weakling — too soft for this world.

Well, today he had learned firsthand just how savagely the frost could bite.

Mik reached out and found the round, carved handle with his fingers. He could knock, and a few minutes later be inside the apartment — hardly the warmest or most welcoming place on earth, but even that was a luxury forbidden to him now. He absolutely could not set foot inside. If the aunt saw him, or Jack himself, it would be a catastrophe, for neither of them could explain what was happening. And of course, that precious fool of his would be no help whatsoever — assuming he believed any of it.

He had to get out of here.

Mik lingered a while longer, despairing at the thought of trudging back through the cold on his own two feet, then turned to the door in resignation. One last person in the world remained who could save him. If she was willing.

Erin Gamfrill and her angel, Fisifa.

As luck would have it, Mik remembered where Gamfrill lived. He would simply go to her and take it from there. Perhaps Fisifa would even guess what had happened, and…

No, he hadn’t the faintest idea what could be done.

The Gamfril house looked no different from the other faded old dwellings of the Grey City, and so Mik, merely to be safe, walked the entire length of the street, trying to recall exactly which house in the row he and Jack had once visited.

Erin was clever, and probably kind after all, but she and Jack knew each other too little as yet for Mik to be certain she would help him. There had been a time when they had even hated one another; now the angel hoped, more fervently than ever, that all of that truly lay behind them.

He settled onto a bench across from his classmate’s house and began to wait. His wretched human body ached with pain and cold, and Mik had time to reflect that from now on he would keep a closer watch on Jack, lest the boy break himself.

If he was ever to become his angel again.

“...love can forgive what is base and turn vices into valor...”

“Jack? Jack, what are you doing here? Jack!”

It took Mik a moment to realize that he was the one being called. A strange haze had come over him — as though he had gone blind and deaf for a time, and the last few minutes… or had it been hours? — had been wiped clean from his memory. He flinched, eyes flying open, and for a long moment stared blankly ahead, unable to make sense of anything.

Why was he here? What had happened to him? And why was he so cold?

“Did they kick you out of the house?”

He turned toward the voice and frowned at the sight of a girl with long chestnut hair standing beside him. Erin Gamfril. Was she truly speaking to him, of all people? And where was her angel, Fisifa?

“You’re freezing half to death!”

And then she laid her palm on his shoulder.

Mik sprang up in shock and terror and toppled clean off the bench.

No human had ever touched him before! No human had ever so much as suspected his existence!

And then it all came flooding back. The forest. The loss of his wings. The very fact that he had become human. And how he had made his way to the Gamfrils’ house, because there was nowhere else to go.

He scrambled to his feet and swept his gaze around Erin, hoping to catch some glimpse of her angel nearby — then quickly reminded himself that even if Fisifa were standing there at this very moment, he would never know it. And that was the real trouble.

“Jack, don’t go quiet on me, say something, at least!” Erin was thoroughly frightened now, and all at once she touched him again, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze. — What on earth is the matter with you?

Her touch felt so strange, so wrong, that Mik flinched away from her as though from a demon. Afraid of losing his balance again now that his wings were gone, he clutched the back of the bench, straightened up, and cleared his throat. He meant to speak with her, to ask for her help—and all of it had to look perfectly ordinary from the outside. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound…

“I wanted to see you,” he said at last. — I need to ask your forgiveness.

Erin’s green eyes went still, but her brows drew together, slowly, slowly, toward the bridge of her nose, until her face was half plaintive, half frowning. It was easy for Mik to picture Fisifa standing beside him at that very moment with just such an expression, trying to work out what he wanted of them.

“Forgive you for what?”

Mik licked his lips and noticed how cold and dry they were. His fingers ached, and his ears ached, and he was dwelling on these small sensations far more than they deserved.

“For everything. Fis…”

He bit his tongue sharply—so hard, as it turned out, that he tasted blood. Salty, warm blood, of all things. Mik swallowed slowly, not daring to raise his eyes to the girl, and carefully corrected himself:

“A letter… I had even meant to write you a letter of apology, but I decided it would be better to come in person. In any case, I wanted to ask your forgiveness for everything I’ve done, for how we… for how I hurt you, even when I had no idea I was doing it. It all began back in the Forest, you remember…”

A faint shudder ran through him as Erin's hand closed over his shoulder once more. Her eyes shone brightly, and in them he glimpsed something like fear—or, rather, a certain sternness, maternal in its severity. Her lips curved as she struggled to speak, and her fingers tightened around his shoulder. Mik suddenly remembered how Fisifa had once struck him with her wings. Had Erin possessed that ability, he thought, she would have used it too.

"Fool! What have you done to yourself?" Fisifa hissed through her human's body.

Mik himself knew what it was like to take direct control of one's ward. The angel seemed to step inside the human's body and speak through his lips, shielding him from a danger he could not see, or voicing words he would never have found on his own. Mik had managed it once with Jack, saving him from the suicide to which a demoness had driven him. He, who had so nearly been torn apart from his human, would have been the last to believe he could ever accomplish such a thing. And it had been the most incredible, the most magical act of his existence.

Fisifa was a clever one. She grasped at once what had happened, and she, too, had to steel herself for that step—taking command of her ward's body. Even so, the angel could not say whatever she pleased, for the human remained present. The girl simply believed she was acting a little recklessly, on instinct alone; under normal circumstances it would never occur to her—and it should never occur to her—that someone else was speaking for her.

"How… how did you get here?" she went on, her voice trembling. — How are you feeling? You look dreadful—you need help! What can I do for you?

The words made Mik's heart suddenly lurch into a quicker beat, and that frightened him more than anything. It was as though someone deep

inside his chest had grabbed the ropes and begun hauling frantically, waking a whole chorus of bells that rang out in discordant peals, shuddering through his entire body. Good heavens, was the body dying?...

“I don’t know,” Mik answered honestly, meeting her eyes. “You do remember the Forest, don’t you? The way we crossed it? I still blame myself for what happened back then…”

Fisifa took it all in at once. She seized his shoulder and gave it an angry shake, and Mik realized just how badly she wanted to smack him over the head with her feathers.

“You went back there? Why—oh why, Jack?”

Mik let out a short breath, reached across with his right hand to rub his free shoulder, then slid the arm further behind his back and pressed a hand to his shoulder blade. For a moment Fisifa squeezed her eyes shut, sensing what he meant, and whispered:

“I told you we would see everything through together. And why are you asking for my forgiveness? The blame is not yours—none of it. Not anymore, do you understand? You should never have gone there.”

She lapsed into thought, gazing past him, and Mik feared that Fisifa had left her ward’s body. He hurried into speech again, desperate to hold her there:

“You’re right! I only thought… it would make me feel better, that I would finally understand… that is, shed the guilt. Oh, I meant…”

“Wait.” Fisifa herself was weighing every word, careful that her person shouldn’t think her foolish. “Maybe it would do you good after all. Maybe you need to go back there? I mean—“ panic flashed in her eyes, the hand fell away from his shoulder, and Mik could see Erin growing tangled in her own words “—that way you’d find the... the thing you want to find... what...” She screwed her eyes shut and gave her head a slight shake, and when she opened them again, Mik saw that

Erin was alone once more. “Sorry, that came out stupid. I didn’t mean you should go back to the Forest, I just...” She caught herself and let him go, stepping back. “What are we standing around here for? You need to get warm—just look at yourself! Come to my place, and you can explain later what’s happened to you. Or wait—you’ve already told me about that, haven’t you?..””””

Mik very nearly wept when he found himself inside the warm flat. It seemed to him that one moment more and this heavy, unbearably real body would freeze solid for good—and then not even Fisifa with her person could save him.

By now his fingers had begun to ache as feeling crept back into them, and Mik hissed through his teeth at the sting, yet he thanked the Heavens all the same to be out of the cold. Erin showed him where the bathroom was, and there the former angel spent a while puzzling out the faucets before he managed to run hot water into the sink. He held his hands in it until the skin turned bright pink, and the face in the mirror—his, Jack’s—no longer looked so pale, its unhealthy bluish tinge fading away.

When Mik first saw himself in the mirror, the whole world fell away for a few seconds; he simply stared at his reflection, unable to believe his eyes. Was this Jack’s face, or his own after all? Where exactly did the boundary between a person and his angel lie — the one that made them identical? And just how different was Mik from Jack, really? The question had never crossed his mind before.

Erin’s mother wasn’t home — which was probably why she had dared to bring Mik here. She called him, and he found Gemfril in the tiny kitchen that doubled as a dining room for two. And at once, Mik caught the scent.

It was pleasant, almost familiar, and quite literally intoxicating. Every sense in a human body was astonishingly sharp, and the angel still hadn't grown accustomed to it.

"Coffee?" Erin asked, lifting a miniature saucepan off the stove. "Hot — it'll warm you right through. The last thing you need is to catch a cold, right?"

Mik listened to her in astonishment. In just five minutes, this strange girl had shown him more care than he had shown Jack in an entire week.

"Yes, please."

He could almost see Fisifa pacing her kitchen in an agony of nerves, wringing her hands, her eyes fixed on him. For the sake of a clever turn of phrase, Mik might even have claimed he could feel her gaze upon him — but that wasn't true. He had become a deaf and blind human. Only now, without a guardian angel.

Red Advent candles lined the kitchen windowsill, and soft fir boughs stood in a vase of water. Mik remembered how Jack's parents used to decorate the house for Christmas as well, and how they had even made him an advent calendar with little presents when he was a boy. But his parents were gone now, and his aunt had no love for the holidays.

Erin set a mug of fragrant brew in front of him, and Mik stretched his fingers greedily toward it…

He almost dropped the delicate cup and nearly toppled off his chair. His fingertips seared with pain, as though a demon had sunk its teeth into him.

"What's wrong?" The girl's eyes went wide with fright. "Sorry — I didn't think to warn you the coffee was hot. I assumed you'd work that out yourself…"

Unable to suppress her sheepish smile, she glanced away. Mik sat across from her, clutching the seat of his chair, staring at the steaming coffee. Never once in his life had he been burned. Never had he drunk or eaten anything. And so he feared that if he kept up this pretense of being human, he was bound to blunder yet again. Left as it was, things would only get worse — one careless slip, and he might kill this body without meaning to.

Oh, Heaven, grant him strength…

“So you were in the Forest?” Erin asked abruptly, circling back to it.

She met his eyes squarely, then rubbed her own shoulder, trying to hint at the wings. So Fisifa had come back to help him. Mik smiled at her in gratitude, strange as it must have looked to an outsider.

“Yes. I thought it would help me. That is—“ he caught himself, remembering that Erin herself could hear him now “—that it would help me set my thoughts in order. I kept wondering why I had taken you there back then, because after that everything changed so much…””””

He couldn’t bear it and lowered his eyes, afraid that Fisifa’s human would suspect something was off again and might well end up throwing him out of the house. He slowly reached out his hand toward the mug and touched it with just the very tips of his nails. Was it safe to drink this now?

“Jack, I don’t think the cause is in me,” Fisifa began softly, watching his attempts. “Perhaps it’s all… in you yourself?”

Mik raised his head. In him? But how? After all, his wings had darkened after Jack got…

“It’s all about your bond,” Fisifa continued carefully, teetering on the very edge between telling him openly what she thought and staying

in character as Erin, “the bond with yourself. Between heart and mind. Do you understand me?”

Mik shook his head uncertainly and lowered his gaze to the cup again. His head felt completely empty. And on top of that, something in his stomach hurt and churned all on its own. He would remain in this body forever, because…

The bond! Fisifa meant his bond with Jack! Of course!

“It’s all in me,” he whispered, considering that possibility for the first time.

If Erin and Fisifa had truly forgiven him, then there was nothing left but his human — the one Mik had long since written off, and stopped looking after, helping, or even being around.

So that was it! How had he not figured it out himself?

“I never even thought of that,” he admitted, bewildered, carefully touching the mug with his whole palm.

Erin nodded distantly, running her finger along the tabletop. She had set her cup of coffee aside and never touched it.

Looking more closely, Mik realized that the girl was tracing an invisible oval on the table. A halo.

“Tomorrow is Christmas,” she said, apropos of nothing.

Mik looked at her. Elated as he was by the answer — by the solution to his whole problem — he couldn’t at first grasp what she was talking about. Or who, exactly — Gamphrill herself, or her angel?

“Uh-huh.”

“Thanks, that much I still remember,” he nearly added, catching himself just in time. Of course, that was just like Jack — to be rude, to pick a quarrel with the only person who could help him. But Mik hoped angels were better than people. He had always believed that.

“And you know,” Erin went on, as though she hadn’t heard him, “that people... there’s this belief that they change when Christmas comes.”

Mik swallowed, trying to make certain he had heard her right.

People change. And that means that...

“You have one day,” Gamphrill confirmed, her green eyes fixed on him. “By tomorrow it will already be Christmas.”

“O, hear the voices of angels...”

The coffee was bitter, spicy, and delicious all at once. The notion of “delicious” surfaced in Mik’s mind unbidden, as though he had always known exactly what it felt like. He sipped in small mouthfuls, no longer scalding his tongue, and the drink spread a pleasant warmth through him from within.

What a whimsical way to savor pleasure — first to freeze miserably, then to thaw little by little.

But Mik had no wish to repeat the experience. Within a single day he had to mend his bond with Jack and become an angel again. And from that moment on, he would never set foot in the Forest — or anywhere else like it — as long as he lived!

For now, all he had were these quiet, cozy minutes in Gemfril’s apartment, and Mik was racking his brains for a way to accomplish the impossible: making peace with his human, who was never meant to know he existed. He couldn’t see her, but he suspected that Fisifa was racking hers too, wrestling with how to help him though she owed him nothing.

“And how will you spend Christmas?” Mik asked Erin. He hoped that talk of the holiday might distract her from the strange predicament she had stumbled into.

“Nothing special,” she said with a dismissive wave. “I have no family in this city, so it’ll be just Mom and me. We’ll go to church, I’ll play the piano there, and then, maybe…”

Mik never heard the rest. His angelic nature had seized upon the one symbol in which salvation was meant to lie — the one in which salvation had always lain, for everyone.

Church. In the past, a Catholic priest had even given him counsel on how to drive out a demoness. And now it might be the only place

where he could speak with Jack face to face. After all, where else could people touch the otherworldly, if not in a temple?

“Erin,” he interrupted her, “will you go to church today?”

Tomorrow it would be too late, and he himself could never invite her there…

“In the evening—of course, that’s the whole point.” She even smiled as she looked at him, and Mik grew flustered and glanced away. “Why do you ask? Jack, you’re so odd today—you don’t even know what to expect from yourself!”

He swallowed nervously, suddenly choked, and for another couple of minutes wheezed and coughed, genuinely convinced he was about to kick the bucket.

No, he definitely wouldn’t last until evening.

“I’d like to come with you,” he finally wheezed, rubbing his chest, “if you don’t mind.”

“Mind? What are you saying—that would be wonderful!”

“Then could you invite me?”

Only after saying it aloud did he realize how strange it sounded. And Gemfril, too, was staring at him in bewilderment.

“I mean—could you send me an invitation? On the phone?”

“But you’re already here, right now…”

“No—I mean, yes. But could you invite me anyway? So… so my aunt finds out about it; otherwise she won’t let me go anywhere. Erin, please!”

And though the girl looked bewildered, she agreed — surely not without a nudge from Fisifa. Mik clarified precisely which church the service would be held at, asked once more about the time, and, upon learning that it would begin at five in the evening, lapsed into thought. That was still a whole day away — a long, perilous day spent in human

skin. He could hardly hole up at Erin's house, yet he had nowhere else to go.

Mik drank one more cup of coffee and decided it was time to do the decent thing and leave Gemfril in peace — especially since her mother was due home soon. She and Jack had not yet met in person, and the last thing Mik wanted in this world was to spoil his human's standing through what would surely be the most awkward introduction imaginable. Oh no — let Ronter handle that himself.

"But how do you expect to go out looking like that?" Erin asked as he was already heading for the front door.

Mik glanced ruefully at the thin shirt he found himself in. But what could he possibly ask of Erin? She had neither a father nor a brother.

"I'll be quick — I'll run home," he lied, meeting her eyes.

He knew he couldn't fool Fisifa, and wondered whether she might do something to help him. She wasn't obliged to, of course…

"Wait," Gemfril said, stopping him, and darted off into another room.

Mik's gaze lingered on the spot where she had just been standing, and he said quietly:

"Thank you, Fisifa. For everything."

Mik left Gemfril's apartment wrapped in a babushka scarf. Erin said it was all she could offer him, but Mik was grateful even for that. And to hell with how he looked to others: he was used to being invisible, used to paying people no mind.

He meant to make his way to the church Erin had told him about and wait there until the holiday service began. Of all the plans he had turned over in his head, this was the least perilous and the least complicated.

The crucial thing was that his numbskull agree to come along. Oh, how strange and absurd it would be if he weren't in the mood and

refused! What a fool Erin would feel then! If only Mik could stay close to his human and keep watch over him!..

So he walked on, entrusting himself to forces beyond his control, until a hard, icy snowball struck him square in the back.

“Hey, Ronter!”

Mik turned, bracing himself for fresh trouble.

There stood his classmate Dave Duke. Short, squat as a tree stump, with fists like iron and a family fortune that hovered over him like a second guardian. Dave had never taken to the newcomer Jack, having made a habit of testing the strength of his ribs. But ever since Ronter and Mik had unexpectedly “stolen” Erin from Duke at the start of the month, every encounter with this fellow threatened to be Jack’s last.

“Where are you off to, dressed like that?” Dave barked, baring his snow-white teeth. — Did they finally throw you out of the house?

Mik said nothing, his eyes instinctively sweeping the space around the human. The angel Kel had to be lurking somewhere nearby. He grew so restless when there was no one to shout at or strike.

At first Mik meant to say something to Dave, but then he realized that would only make matters worse — for himself now, and for Jack later — so he turned in silence and walked on.

The second snowball caught him on the back of the head, and Mik clenched his teeth against the sting of it, the fury rising. Let the bastard tumble off a cloud and shatter every feather in his wings!..

“Ronter, I’m not backing down!”

Mik whirled around—and took a snowball square in the face. There would be no walking away from this. Wiping the slush from his cheeks and eyes, he racked his brain for a way to get back at Dave—something that wouldn’t end in a brawl.

Fine. He’d charge straight at him and let the chips fall where they may!

“It’s Christmas tomorrow, Duk!” he called, brushing the snow from his hands. — The angels have already come down to earth. And yours is one of them!

“What are you mumbling about, you idiot?”

“Everyone has a guardian!” Now Mik straightened to his full height and looked Dave dead in the eye, unblinking. — Even you. Isn’t that right, Kel?

He hurled the question into the silence, and Duk glanced about uneasily. Mik could only guess what his guardian was thinking at that moment, but the angel was plainly rattled—perhaps even a little afraid—and his unease bled into the human. At the very least, it threw Dave off balance, if only for the moment.

“And mine is the only angel who’s nowhere to be found!” Mik flung his arms wide and grinned from ear to ear. — Which means no one can stop me.

He advanced unhurriedly on Dave, arms still spread, as if about to pull him into an embrace. The scarf Erin had given him worked loose, and its triangular ends flapped behind his back like small wings.

Dave watched him tensely, no longer cursing or throwing snowballs. Mik pictured Kel circling around them at that very moment, shouting himself hoarse trying to reach Mik, trying to work out who stood before him: a man, or an angel in the flesh — and Mik himself could feel that excitement, that restlessness of his. He felt it, yet couldn’t grasp why his classmate’s words unsettled him so.

“Angels watch over their charges, always.” Mik had nearly reached Dave, who involuntarily retreated a step. — Think about that. How much grief you’re causing your guardian. Any moment now his halo will go dark and his wings will turn black.

Dave drew a sharp breath, filling his chest, and snapped resentfully:

“You’re a lunatic, Ronter! Stark raving mad!” he tapped his temple in the classic gesture, then waved a hand. — I don’t even feel like scrapping with you — you might just bite! Go to hell, you…

He even flinched when Mik raised his hand, lifting his index finger in warning.

“Ah-ah. Consorting with the forces of darkness” aren’t you ashamed of yourself? — Then Mik sharply raised his voice and called: — Kel, why aren’t you keeping an eye on him at all?

Dave swore under his breath, eyeing his classmate warily.

“Why do you think his name is Kel?” He glanced back over his shoulder uncertainly, but could barely make anyone out there. — Why are you even going on about this? It’s strange, even for you.

“It seems strange to you because it’s true.” Mik smiled again. — Kel, if you can hear me, have your human take a step to the right, and I’ll leave the two of you alone.

Dave froze, glancing around warily, but nothing happened, and he relaxed a little.

“You’ve completely—“””

He never finished, for he abruptly lurched to the right, as though someone had shoved him hard in the ribs. Duk’s jaw dropped, and he wheeled around, trying to work out who had touched him, while Mik concealed a smirk. For once—just this once—he had managed to put this pair firmly in their place.

“Merry Christmas, you idiots,” he hissed, and hurried off before Dave came to his senses and decided to pay him back in his favorite manner.

An hour later, Mik finally tracked down the church Erin had mentioned. He had been living in this city with Jack for six months now, yet he knew it far better from above. Winding through the streets,

squinting at house numbers and reading signs—thankless work for a winged guardian.

In truth, had Mik not found the right building by then, he would have ducked into the first house he came across, for he was bitterly cold once more. Gemfril's shawl no longer kept him warm—unless it was the memory of the girl herself that did. On top of that, his stomach had begun to ache, everything churning inside, and Mik guessed it was because his new body was hungry. How on earth was he going to hold out until evening?..

Fortunately, this was a Protestant church — in Catholic ones, Mik felt uneasy amid the profusion of icons, statues, and, above all, crosses. Here he felt far more at ease. He slipped inside and hid in a corner beneath the staircase to the second floor. He didn't want to attract attention right away and be forced to invent a reasonably plausible tale about who he was and what he was doing there. At the moment, even if he had wanted to, he couldn't have said a thing. His teeth were performing a tap dance entirely of their own accord, and Mik clenched his jaw until it ached, just to muffle the noise somewhat.

He curled up in the corner right on the floor, grateful it was wooden and not too cold. He would warm up a little now, then devise some story and show himself to people.

But no sooner had Mik laid down his frail human body than he plunged straight into a deep sleep.

"I never wanted an angel like you!"

Jack's face was contorted with hurt and fury; he was breathing fast and noisily, like a locomotive, and his fists trembled faintly. Mik cowered before him, trying to vanish, to turn invisible again. But the more he hunched and shrank into his shoulders, the more conspicuous and larger he seemed, until he all but loomed over his human and the others who had gathered around them.

“How can you look after me when you’re the one who’s forever landing yourself in trouble?” Jack went on shouting in anguish, and every word struck Mik’s ears like thunder.

He tried to mumble something in his own defense, but his teeth kept chattering from the cold, and not a single word would come. Everything in his chest went cold with the agony of his human hating him so much.

“I’d far rather live without any guardian at all than with you!”

Jack strode up to him in an instant, seized him sharply by the shoulders, and began shaking him with all his strength. Mik jerked and thrashed, struggling to break free, but Ronter bent low and barked straight into his ear:

“Jack! Wake up!”

For the second time that day, the angel surfaced from an unfamiliar oblivion, and for the first few moments he could not grasp where he was or what was happening to him. His eyes darted about in search of Jack, unable to fathom how the man had vanished so quickly, unable even to recall when they had met at all. Where a human heart would be beating, everything ached and clenched, as though he had taken a fist squarely to the chest.

But then a familiar face resolved above him, and he came to his senses with astonishing speed.

Standing over him was Auntie Mary.

Mary Fabston was the elder sister of Jack’s mother, yet she had never treated him as kin. And after his parents died, once she became his legal guardian, she had come to positively loathe the boy. To underline just how little he mattered to her, she even insisted on being addressed not as “auntie,” but as…

“Miss Mary!” Mik caught himself just in time, substituting the correct name for “Lilian,” the name this lady’s guardian went by. “What are you doing here?”

He asked with that innocent expression on his face, as though he were the one who had discovered the woman beneath the stairs of some church.

Mary slowly planted her hands on her hips, and Mik realized his mistake.

“And what about you, young man?” Mary pursed her wrinkled lips and knitted her thin brows over her slanted eyes. “You were supposed to stay home, so what are you doing here—and in that state, besides? Look at me, will you? Are you drunk?”

Mik tried to rise, but his legs, cramped from the awkward position, kept buckling beneath him and sliding apart, so Mary scarcely needed an answer to her last question. Her lip curled with distaste as she gathered up the hem of her long skirt and looked down at him.

“I only decided to come here...” Mik began, not daring to meet her gaze—when she seized his shoulder with her clawed hand and yanked him round, forcing him to lift his head. “I didn’t know you were here as well...”

“I left you at home barely two hours ago. What on earth happened to you in that time?” Overcoming her revulsion, she bent down toward him and drew a quick, sharp breath. “You don’t reek of alcohol, so what the devil is the matter with you this time?!”

Mik tried to recall the excuse he had meant to concoct, but his mind was painfully, perilously clear. No—there was no point in tangling Jack up in a web of lies; sooner or later he would be made to answer for everything. Perhaps as early as tonight. It would be a catastrophe—one that could shatter the fragile balance between humans and keepers!..

“Ronter, why so quiet?” Mary barked, her patience snapping.

Mik wrenched himself free of her predatory grip and babbled in a pitiful voice:

“Miss Mary, I decided to go to church before Christmas too—I had no idea you were headed there as well! You never tell anyone where you’re going. And on the way, some boys stole my coat—I’m freezing, and I’m dreadfully hungry too!..”

“Silence!” Mary clapped her hands over her ears, and Mik was quietly pleased that his gambit had produced the desired effect; she could hardly have made out half of what he said. “And if you’re hungry, you should have eaten your lunch before running over here in nothing but your shirt!”

Mik hung his head in guilt as he endured her reproaches, all the while trying to work out whether Lilian had been here—and whether she had any inkling of what had become of him. She would hardly have managed to convey her distress to Mary, as she had with Dave and Kel, but she was clever enough to speak with him through her and discover what had happened. And it would be far better if she knew nothing at all.

“Go to the kitchen; perhaps you’ll find something there, the aunt commanded at last, tugging at the kerchief and hauling it from his shoulders.” And what on earth is that hideous shawl you’ve got on?

Mik did manage to retrieve his kerchief, bid his aunt farewell, and hurry out of her sight. He had no idea where the kitchen was, nor how he might go there and ask for food, but he understood that unless he ate something very soon, he would collapse from hunger. And then Jack would surely be left without a guardian.

The church had been decked out for Christmas: candles flickered, vases held bouquets of slender fir sprigs, and paper garlands and little flags of every color swayed softly overhead. Wicker baskets were filled with small boxes and parcels wrapped in bright paper.

A crowd bustled about—mostly adults, all occupied with preparations for the holiday. Yet Mik moved through them as though he were an angel once more, and no one spared him a glance.

In the great hall he caught sight of a decorated Christmas tree and drew nearer to admire it. The fir seemed to glow from within; tiny flames glimmered in the glass bulbs of an electric garland strung among its branches, their light catching on ornaments of glass and foil. The tree breathed out a rich fragrance, and Mik, who had never encountered anything like it, crept closer still.

He caught sight of himself in a large, dark blue bauble: a pallid face ringed by dark circles, an absurd purple scarf wound about his shoulders, hair bristling in every direction like needles. No wonder his appearance bewildered everyone.

Before leaving, Mik let his gaze linger on the little angel perched on the Christmas tree.

He would win back his halo and wings, even if it meant showing his face to his human.

“Everything done in this world is done with hope.”

From the corner of his eye, Mik watched the people filing into the main hall, afraid of missing the one he was waiting for.

A kind woman in the kitchen had treated him to apples and ginger cookies, and now he felt a good deal better. The spicy sweetness of the treats still lingered on his tongue, and his fingers were sticky with juice. A little later, Mik had come across a cape—most likely a prop for one of the Christmas skits—and taken it for himself. Wrapped in it now, he tried to hide his face without letting a single person pass unnoticed.

He sat in the very last row, off to one side, and a few people greeted him, mistaking him for a hunched old man. Mik answered no one, yet his living heart was touched by this unexpected attention. When you are forever invisible and unheard, such small kindnesses cannot go uncherished.

Mik held his breath and drew the hood lower over his eyes. In the doorway appeared a lanky, scrawny young man whose pale skin, dark-circled eyes, and sullen face lent him a perpetually sickly look. He wore a festive shirt with a crookedly knotted tie, wrinkled trousers, and a jacket a size too tight. Stepping into the hall, he let his blue, glasslike eyes sweep the room, then exhaled sharply through clenched teeth.

Jack Ronter knew full well that he was out of place here.

Mik tracked his every movement with a keen eye, like a mother long parted from her son who now studied him anew, noting every detail, every change. Jack could hardly have turned into a different person in the twenty-four hours Mik had been apart from him, yet he found he could not tear his gaze away, praying with all his might that

his human would not stumble, that he would find his way to Mik's side — and above all, that he would not glimpse Mik's face. Should he come face to face with his double, scarcely anything could save the feckless angel.

Erin slipped soundlessly from behind Jack and came to stand at his side. She, too, wore a festive dress: modest, yet trimmed with delicate lace embroidery along the hem and finished with a knitted collar. Her thick hair had been swept back and bound with a long ribbon. Rising slightly on tiptoe, she touched Jack's arm and whispered something in his ear. Jack gave an absent nod and followed her toward the rows of wooden stalls.

Mik bowed his head, striving to become invisible once more, to melt away so that no one's gaze might light upon him. The couple settled into the opposite row, seating themselves a stiff three feet apart. Out of habit, Mik's eyes cast about for Fisifa before he remembered that she would lie beyond both his sight and his hearing. Even so, the mere thought that his friend was near warmed his soul and lent him courage. If she had twice contrived to speak to him through her human's lips, then surely he, too, could find a way to reach Jack.

Pulling up his hood, Mik slid onto the neighboring bench in one swift motion, settling directly behind Erin and Jack. He went still; the teenagers never noticed his presence. Then, carefully, slowly, he reached out and let his fingertips graze Jack's shoulder.

Even that light contact sent a shiver coursing through him. For the first time, he could truly feel his human, and it was so unfamiliar, so wrong, that Mik no longer knew what to believe—or what not to. Ronter glanced back at him over his shoulder, and Mik ducked his head lower, not daring to meet his gaze. He was afraid to speak, though speak he must, and so he sat in silence behind his human.

"What do you want?" Jack grunted.

Erin glanced back briefly, without letting her gaze linger on Mik. Then, all at once, she stirred, straightened up, and whispered to her companion:

“I’ll be right back…”

She slipped away soundlessly, and Mik could not tell whether it was her own wish or whether Fisifa had called her off. Either way, he now had his chance to speak with Jack unobserved.

“Merry Christmas,” he muttered, forcing his voice low, rough—anything at all, so long as Jack didn’t recognize that familiar tone. “It’s a wonderful holiday today.”

“Yeah,” Ronter mumbled, turning away from him again.

Mik knew him as no one else did, and he could see that his human wanted no part of conversation right now, would listen to no one, and didn’t want to be here at all. Which meant he had very little time.

“I hope you can feel it. Love.”

Without sparing him a glance, Jack gave an irritated shrug of his shoulders, and Mik feared he was about to turn and walk away.

“Yeah, right… If you mean the girl, she’s just a classmate.”

“No. I mean you.”

Jack glanced at him again, but this time his gaze lingered, studying him. Mik hunched over nearly in two, dreading that Jack might make out the familiar lines of his face — or that his glance, his very posture, would strike him as suspicious.

“You believe you don’t deserve love,” Mik pressed on before Jack could slip away, — but the truth is that everyone deserves it. You included. And if it seems to you right now that no one around you loves you — which isn’t true — then you can always love yourself. You’ve simply never thought of it that way.

Ronter grunted and sat up, his eyes sweeping the area for Erin.

“What makes you say that?” he grumbled, sinking back into his seat. — Maybe my self-esteem is simply sky-high.

“You’d never have guessed it to look at you.”

Mik tried to keep his tone gentle so as not to offend him, yet he understood that only sincerity would make Ronter listen. He had to make him grasp that Jack deserved love — if only he would pause to consider it; Mik hoped nothing more would be required of him. All he needed was to do everything right and win back his wings — he wasn’t asking for anything more!

“Just listen to what I’m saying, Jack. It’s very important…”

Mik broke off abruptly. Not because he had called his ward by name. Only now, at long last, had the true meaning of what Fisifa had been trying to drum into him sunk in.

It all came down to his bond.

From the moment he had set foot in that cursed forest, Mik had thought of nothing but his wings — of restoring them to their snow-white brilliance. Then, layered on top of that, had come the matter of reclaiming his halo and tunic. Yet in all that time, through this endless day, he had scarcely given a single thought to winning his human back.

Even now, while doing the impossible — conversing directly with his ward — Mik wanted only one thing: for Jack, just this once, to listen to him and do as he was told. To do at least one thing properly, so that Mik could return to his usual form.

But he had never considered what Jack himself might want. He had never stopped to wonder how his human would wish to return to him — to the one who was meant to cherish him above all else in this world.

As always, Mik understood nothing. Perhaps Heaven had punished him justly?

“Then again, you know what,” he began slowly, weighing every word, “forget everything I just said. You know best — both who you are and what you ought to do. When the whole world says no, you still do what you believe is right; you don’t bend to this stupid city with its stupid conventions. The main thing is that it truly is the right decision…”

He fell silent when he realized that Jack had been studying him for a good minute already, never once taking his eyes off him. The hall kept filling with visitors; people were settling into the seats beside Jack, but Ronter no longer paid them any attention. In that moment, Mik understood that his human was truly listening to him. Perhaps for the first time in his life.

“All I wanted to say was that you must never forget who you are,” he finished quietly. “And hold on to that until the very end.”

He froze, breath held, as Jack’s hand closed on the back of his bench. After a moment’s hesitation, he reached out slowly and rested his fingers lightly on Mik’s shoulder. A faint shiver ran through the guardian’s whole body. His human could hear him, his human could see him, his human could feel him!

“I don’t know who you are,” Jack said, barely above a whisper, “but thank you for those kind words. Since my parents... no one has ever said anything like that to me. Merry Christmas.”

Mik had scarcely caught his breath when Jack turned away, and a second later Erin was back at his side. The angel could still feel the warmth of that touch on his shoulder, and, no longer hiding beneath his hood, he watched Ronter’s back, swept by an unprecedented tide of love for him. They truly had no one left: their parents were dead, and they had no close friends to speak of. Mik had grown used to always having Jack behind him—someone worth protecting—while Ronter knew nothing of that purpose and felt achingly alone. Mik had known

this, yet he had never stopped to consider how heavy the loneliness might weigh on him. He hoped that now, even though Jack still knew nothing of his existence, Jack felt more whole, stronger, and safer for it.

“You did it.”

Mik slowly tore his gaze from Ronter and glanced aside. Beside him sat Erin Gamfril’s double—save for her wings and the golden ring hovering above her head.

“I can hardly believe it,” Fisifa whispered, smiling. “And you only just made it—there’s so little time left before midnight.”

Mik reached gingerly toward his shoulder and felt, almost with astonishment, the soft feathers unfurling behind his back. He lifted his arm and brushed the warm halo with his fingertips. It had worked… It had truly worked! He was an angel again!

“I can scarcely believe it myself,” he confessed, stroking his wings with tender affection and marveling at their pristine, snow-white sheen. “I thought I’d be trapped in that wretched form forever. Oh, Fis, if it weren’t for you, I honestly don’t know…”

“His friend gave him a gentle nudge with her elbow, still smiling.”

“It had nothing to do with me, truly. It was all down to Christmas, the church, and your human. You worked out on your own what needed doing. The two of you are far cleverer and stronger than you give yourselves credit for.”

“Mik had no chance to reply, for Jack had turned toward them.”

“The Guardians stiffened as the teenager’s gaze swept across the empty pew. Mik watched Ronter press his lips together in a habitual gesture, his eyes dimming ever so slightly, as they did each time he met with failure. But Mik knew he had managed to impart the most important thing — and Jack would not forget it.”

“For all that, the angel Mik bore no regrets about his journey through the accursed Forest. He had felt and learned things that would have remained forever beyond the reach of a disembodied spirit. He was grateful to every soul he had encountered that day — even Dave Duke. And now, perched behind his human as always, watching over him and hearing his thoughts as clearly as if they were his own, he knew he would gladly make that journey again if ever the need arose.”

“And it had nothing at all to do with the color of his wings.”