

The Perils of Guardianship

Natalie Nagel
Editor's Choice Award Winner

"I expect you'll make a full recovery. You're very lucky," the doctor said, flipping through test results. "Quite frankly, Mr. Garmer, the smoke inhalation you suffered should have been fatal. It's a miracle."

The patient, a pallid man hooked up to several beeping machines, nodded weakly. His voice was raspy when he spoke. "A miracle...yes, I have no doubt. Thank you, Doctor." Once the doctor left him alone, the man called out to the empty hospital room: "I know you're here, Remiel."

Indeed, Remiel was there, standing unseen by the window and watching in silence. He shed his invisibility like a cloak, allowing his charge to see him.

"You are a foolish man, Jacob Garmer," were the first words from Remiel's mouth.

The patient, Jacob, waved a bandaged hand dismissively. "I'm not a fool."

"Careless, then."

"It was a calculated risk."

"It was madness," Remiel countered sharply. "Had I not purged the smoke from your lungs, I would be having this conversation with a corpse. But at least then you would not argue with me."

Jacob barked a laugh, which turned into a violent cough. "Was that a joke I heard?" The man asked once he'd recovered.

"It was a fact," Remiel stated dryly. "You should be dead right now."

"But I'm not," Jacob protested. "Thanks for that."

Remiel bristled, not appeased by the man's thanks. Why must his charge insist on such recklessness? It was just Remiel's

luck to be charged with protecting the most self-sacrificing firefighter on earth.

“I’ll be fine, Remiel,” Jacob repeated, sensing his companion’s irritation. “Don’t get your feathers in a twist.”

“My feathers are perfectly in order,” Remiel insisted. It wasn’t a lie. Though his wings were raised in annoyance, the feathers lay neatly in place. “And that is not the issue. Your reckless behavior is the issue. Need I remind you, just because you have a guardian angel does not mean you can throw your life around simply because I can save you.”

Jacob scowled. “I’m a fireman, Rem. Danger comes with the job.”

“You took off your mask!”

“She needed it more!” Jacob snapped loudly, before doubling over in a fit of coughing. Remiel crossed the room and pressed a hand to the man’s back, concerned he may have missed some of the toxicity that had invaded Jacob’s lungs. However, it was all gone. Assuaged, Remiel stepped back.

“How is she?” Jacob asked. Remiel’s head tilted to the side. It was a human gesture, something that had rubbed off on Remiel after serving as a guardian angel for so long. Jacob was one of many charges he’d had in his long life.

“Amelia Bradshock will make a full recovery,” Remiel said.

“Amelia?”

“That is her name,” Remiel said. “The little girl you carried out of the fire, the one you gave your mask to.”

“Amelia,” Jacob repeated the name softly, like it was something sacred. He was silent for a long time. To a human, it would have become awkward, but Remiel was unfazed. “I’m glad she’s okay.”

“I should think so,” Remiel said coolly. “You nearly died to save her.”

“I’d do it again,” Jacob said, unapologetic.

“I know,” Remiel sighed, even though for him, breathing was unnecessary. “Jacob, what you do is noble, truly. But why must it always be you? When someone has to face death, why do you think it has to be you?”

“The men and women I serve with, they have families waiting for them at home,” Jacob said. “Come to think of it, they

need a guardian angel more than me, too.”

“Who says they do not have one?” Remiel replied cryptically.

Jacob blinked, and then shook his head. “Anyway, they have people who need them. That’s why it should be me. I just have myself. My family waits for me elsewhere.”

“You mustn’t rush to join them,” Remiel said sternly, but not unkindly. “You shoulder guilt you needn’t bear.”

“My guilt is where it should be,” Jacob replied firmly. “The people I didn’t save, my family included, are on me.”

They always ended up here. “It was not your fault.”

A derisive scoff was all the response Jacob gave.

“It was not! Your wife and son, their deaths are not your fault.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” The man muttered. He sounded very tired all of the sudden.

“You cannot be there all the time. You had no cause to suspect one weekend away would be the weekend a fire broke out in your absence,” Remiel said sternly. When Jacob didn’t respond, Remiel shook his head. “You cannot save everyone. This is survivor’s guilt, Jacob.”

“Well,” Jacob said with a forced laugh. “Sorry I’m so much trouble.”

Remiel sighed inwardly. Unlike poisoned lungs, the angel could not heal emotional scarring with a simple touch. That would require time, and patience. Fortunately, as an immortal being, Remiel had both in spades.

“Yes, you are much too high maintenance,” Remiel said. Humor always did appeal to his charge. “I want to be reassigned.”

“No, you don’t,” Jacob replied, and this time his accompanying laugh was real. “You’d miss me.”

“I would be significantly less stressed.”

“You’d be bored.”

Remiel gave a rare laugh. “Yes, perhaps I would be. Furthermore, you would not last a day without me.”

Jacob chuckled. “You’re not wrong.”

The man yawned and blinked tiredly. Remiel, taking this as his cue to go, shook out his wings and moved towards the window. “I shall let you rest.”

Jacob hummed, settling further under his blanket. “See you soon, Rem.”

“Yes,” Remiel replied dryly as he walked right through the glass and took to the air. “Yes, I fear you will.”

Doubtless there would be more days like today, days with close calls and days Remiel would have to intervene. There would be more days where Jacob’s demons would rear their ugly heads. Those were simply the perils of guardianship, he supposed.

Remiel paused in his flight, cool night air ruffling his feathers as he swooped downwards to a different hospital window. Inside, a young girl lay partially on the bed and partially on her mother’s lap, while her father embraced them both. Even from outside the room, Remiel could feel the warmth of their joy and the soaring feeling of their relief. Thanks to Jacob, this girl still lived. Thanks to Remiel, Jacob still lived. That was enough for now.