

At Least She Flew

Icarus King stood barefoot on the grassy hundred-foot cliff that bordered her home. Giant waves smashed against the rocky bottom, creating the deafening roar she could never seem to get out of her head. She wiggled her toes deeper into the grass and dirt that surprisingly held this close to the edge. Icarus lifted her arms to stretch as her wings proceeded to open to their full span. Her feathers swayed softly as the harsh winds threatened to pull her into the air. She licked her lips, the temptation to jump and fly above the sea was sickening. However, she well knew that her wings were not strong enough to carry her on the local wind currents.

As thoughts of flying grew in her mind, she folded her wings behind her back and instinctively rubbed the large scar on her shoulder, the consequence of her first premature attempt at flying. Even with warnings, children were often in the habit of trying that which was dangerous. It was a regret she would always carry with her. On days like these, that scar still felt like an open wound.

"Icarus! Please come down from there!" Severus, her father, broke her from her thoughts. His voice was deep and smooth. That voice had sent her to sleep countless times as a child singing lullabies and reading stories. She never would have dreamed this same voice would become part of her daily nightmare. As she turned, she saw him a few yards below her on the hill. His hand was held out to her, and she sighed sadly as she took it.

"Did you need me for something, father?" He didn't really answer her question. Instead, he stared at the cliff and then took her hand, guiding her back down the hill to their quaint cottage on this secluded island they called home. Her mother, Itabam, stood outside with a forced smile on her face.

"Good morning. You're up rather early, aren't you?" The winged woman asked, "Did you get all of the chores done?"

Icarus grimaced. "All the ones I *can* do." Her voice was soft, but her parents heard her clearly. The mood shifted for a brief moment before returning to the soft daily bliss of ignorance for the day that was ahead of them.

The rising sun began to beat down the cool crisp air that usually surrounds the island. With the right breeze, there was the ever-so-sweet scent of the salty ocean that always made Icarus smile. How could she not smile, when it was her dream to fly across the seemingly endless body of water, to explore and feel the rush of adventure as she discovered what lay on the other side?

“If it’s alright with you, I’d like to go out to the clearing today,” Icarus said as she stared off into the distance.

“Okay. Just be home by supper. We’re having Red Grouper. Mahlia caught it yesterday,” Severus declared. His daughter paid him no mind. She had already begun to walk towards the forest. “I hate it when she does that,” he said to his wife. Itabam wrapped her arm around his back.

“It’s alright, dear. She’ll be forced to face reality soon enough.”

Eventually, Icarus found her favorite spot in the small forest and began to climb. Limb by limb, she climbed a large tree whose branches were low enough and just strong enough to hold up her petite frame. As high as she thought to be safe, she carefully turned towards the clearing a few meters down. She spread her wings all the way out and fanned them a few times to make sure that she was feeling well enough to do this. After a moment, she stepped off the branch.

Born with wings, she is now seventeen, and she still cannot fly. All because she got curious and stepped off the edge much too soon. She sustained a permanent injury in her wing that made it impossible to fly long distances, and the most she could do was glide humbly from a tree to the ground.

A sharp pain through the nerves in her back made her cry out as she glided towards the ground, but she did not falter. She kept straight on her flight path as she balanced her body weight in the air. Wind rushed past her face and hair and for about four seconds, she was flying. Too soon, the pain in her shoulder turned to a sensation burning pins and needles in her wings. Breath abandoned her lungs, and she tucked her wings behind her, bracing herself for impact. As she hit the ground, she bit her tongue. The copper taste of blood filled her mouth. Icarus sat up, grass and leaves mixed in her hair. Ignoring the

swelling pain in her mouth, she hopped back up.

“Whoop!! I did it! I flew!” On dirty, sap-covered feet, she practically danced her way back up the tree and spent the day jumping, gliding, and then falling.

The end of day was announced by the cooling air and orange skies. The girl was now covered in cuts and bruises, but she had never been happier. Today, she had flown. Not just glided, but she really flew. Probably the second or third time, she decided to not just let her wings take her down, but to use them to rise. So after she jumped, she beat her wings as hard as she could, and even as she could feel her muscles straining, they awkwardly flew her body just past the top of the tree.

She was now higher than she had ever flown.

By the time she returned to her family’s cottage, it was much past dark. Adrenaline was still pumping through her and she had never felt so alive.

Lanterns were hung by the entryway, and the door to her cottage was still open. It certainly was a nice night, but she never had known her parents to leave the door open. As she entered, she could hear her mother and father speaking.

“She’s probably out there on the ground with a smashed skull because you told her she could go.”

“I thought she needed some space.”

“If anyone needs space, it’s us, Severus. She’s out there being careless and--”

Both Itabam and Severus turned to see their teary-eyed daughter standing in the doorway to their bedroom.

“Just so you know, I’m practically an adult. I can be responsible for my own choices.” For a long moment, her parents were silent. As she began to turn away, it was her father that spoke.

“But you aren’t,” he growled. “But you aren’t an adult. We are still your parents, and until we leave for the sky city after you turn 18, we are responsible for you and your actions. Yet, here you are being stupid by going out there and hurting yourself. You’re hurting us.” Icarus began to head towards the front door, but her parents appeared in front of her, arms crossed, staring down as if she was a child. It

made her feel so small.

Any attempt to get past them was futile, as they stood together like a wall. It was her mother's turn to talk.

"What is wrong with you? Do you just want the attention? Why do you keep hurting yourself, when you're never going to fly?!" The words were harsh and Icarus could feel herself begin to shake. Her gaze dropped, and she could no longer meet their heavy gaze. The anger in her mother's voice destroyed her. "You are being careless, and selfish! Why are you doing this to us? Making us worry, when you were just out being stupid?!" Here she was, still endlessly standing in the shadows, never to be anything more than she was.

"It may be hard to hear Icarus, but your mother is right. You are putting yourself in unnecessary danger when you know that there is no hope for your wings. It is difficult to get past, but you have to. It's already been ten years. You should be able to keep going forward. Do your chores, finish your classes, and then start your own family. You can help run the village down here. You can do anything you want."

"But I can't fly..." she whispered.

"Speak up, child." Itabam's voice was hard and cold.

"But I can't, can I?" Icarus' voice was loud and clear this time. Mixed with anger and sorrow, her heart slammed against her chest. "I can't do anything I want. I have to do what you want me to do, don't I? I have to say what you want and become what you want me to become. Because it was never about me. It never has been. It's never been about whether or not I can fly. Whether or not I'm capable of it. I just had to want it enough. Once I finally did? Once I looked over that cliff--" she pointed towards the door. "Now that I feel free, you once again tighten your chains on me, and leave me struggling to breathe." Every part of her was shaking, and she was crying now. "You refuse to see how much pain you leave me with! I've got it pretty good, because you care, but you don't care about anything but my health. That I'm alive. It doesn't matter to you how I feel, but I'm going to tell you anyway, while you're listening for the first time since I have been alive. My anxiety grows whenever you're around. My heart races, and I get a

little scared that you're going to yell at me for being careless. For being reckless. I get nervous, so I bite my nails, and chew my lips, and have to go out to the woods just to calm myself down. But it's okay. Because it's not you!"

Before she could think, she had turned and ripped the door open. Itabam and Severus watched, expecting her to head towards the woods. Instead, she ran right for that cliff with the sound of waves crashing against the rocks below and the salt in the air. That is the same grassy, old, crumbling cliff that had sealed this girl's fate when she was just eight years old. Her heart raced, as she heard her parents suddenly realize what she was doing, and they began to call after her. They too began to run.

Too bad she was faster.

When she reached the edge of the cliff, hesitation pulled at her. The darkness was broken by the white glimmer of the moon reflecting on the water, making it bright enough to see. The clouds were parting enough that the shadow of the sky city was cast upon their island. She could hear her parents calling getting closer, as they ran. For that final moment, there wasn't a doubt in her mind that she could really fly. For that moment, she at least felt strong enough to carry herself above the sea. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled. Finally, she was free.

There is a legend about a girl with broken wings and broken chains hanging from her wrists. Some say that she jumped from a cliff. Some say that she fell into the sea and disappeared. Others say that she soared through the clouds and never once looked back. Only one thing can be determined for sure. On top of that cliff, on a small island, is a stone that simply says "At Least She Flew."