

The Lion and the Dove

I kick the sawdust, shuffling my feet. All I can see is warm darkness. My nerves calm with the crack of the whip, the start of the show. A golden glow swells from the centre of the ring and the Master roars. “Welcome, one and all, to the Circus of The Wild!” The audience rise from their seats, and thunderous applause fills the tent. “We welcome you to relax and enjoy the wonders of our show, as you experience the circus like never before.” The lights snap off, and a single spotlight focuses on the Master. “The secret, sweetheart, is to entice the audience, make them lean forwards in their seats to hear every word.” The Master is known for his wisdom in the industry as *the greatest showman in all of the world*. His catchphrase is not unlike his personality; practical, but with considerable dramatic flair. But the Master is also known for his cruel brutality when it comes to training his performers. I run my fingers over the rough scars left by the whip he now cracks, once, twice, thrice. The show has begun.

I soar through the sky, twisting and tumbling, reaching, catching. Two powerful swings and I’m off again, falling and flying, turning, grabbing, swinging. The crowd gasps as I let go of the ropes, leap through the air, light as the dove I’m named after. Strong hands catch my wrists as Leo lifts me up and grins at me. I smile back. We make a good pair, Leo and I. The lion and the dove, flying trapeze with a difference. He has the golden curls, while mine are wavy and white. I am small and lithe, he is taller, stronger. The crowds love us. They roar and shout even as the light filling the tent disappears and the space it leaves is filled with the dark embrace of Leo’s steady arms. I lean into him and he murmurs in my ear, huffing a breath that makes my toes curl. “Good flying up there tonight, Dove.”

Together we walk out into the inky night, the cool wind blowing my hair back. Leo drifts toward his caravan and I tug him back, leaning up to whisper in his ear.

“Practise tonight?” He nods.

“I wouldn’t miss it.” I watch him stride into the night as I climb the steps of my own caravan, turning only when he disappears into the shadows.

Mum’s smile lights up the cramped space when she sees me. “How was the show?”

“Great mum, I flew really well.”

“That’s brilliant darling, you must take after your mother.” Mum’s wink has me grinning wide.

That’s my mum all over. She’s the nicest person you’ll ever meet, which is surprising considering her past. Although she’s bubbly and full of energy, she can’t work in the show anymore. All she’s ever told me is that she messed up her act. Once. Then the Master crippled her, so she could never fly again. She says again and again that she forgives him, but the burning hatred for the Master bubbles inside me and some days I can barely conceal it.

I wolf down my dinner and rush out, not even changing out of my show dress. “Don’t be too late back, chick.”

“I won’t mum.”

“That’s my baby.” I glance over my shoulder, giving her the biggest frown I can manage around the laughter. Then I skip down the stairs, light as a feather, slamming the door behind me. The night folds its dark cloak around me and I start towards the river.

Just passed the crooked tree, I feel a tap on my shoulder. I whirl around. “Leo?”

“What is it, pumpkin?” He croons.

“I’m going to kill you!”

“Not if you can’t find me.” He teases.

I start to walk back toward the giant Eucalyptus, perfect for practise. It doesn’t have any branches for at least five meters, although Leo and I nailed hand and foot holds into the trunk long ago. Where the branches start, the tree slants to the left. The crooked tree.

“Where are you going pumpkin?” Leo asks. I keep walking, and when my outstretched hand brushes the rough bark, I begin to climb. By now it’s completely dark, but I know this tree like the back of my hand. I climb to the highest branch that will hold the two of us, knowing Leo is not far behind. I perch on the wide branch, savouring the rush of the wind and the layered sounds of the night. I can hear the soft hoot of an owl, the rustle of animals in the brush far below. I can hear the wind whistling, and the rush of the river. I can hear Leo grumbling as he climbs up, failing any attempt at stealth. I hear him sigh as he sits beside me, swinging his legs as if there isn’t a twenty metre drop beneath him. “So Dove, why exactly did you make me climb all this way?”

“Practise.”

“You know I don’t like heights, pumpkin.”

“And yet you choose to perform on flying trapeze for a living.”

“You know I didn’t choose to, Dove.” Leo’s voice seems heavy with sadness.

“Oh come on,” I attempt a joke to try and lighten the mood. “I know you just do it for the attention.”

But Leo doesn’t laugh. “Seriously Leo, lighten up. You’re making me worry.”

“Come down Dove, it’s too late for this.” A second later I feel the light brush of Leo’s lips against the high bone of my cheek. I lean into him, but he isn’t there. “Hurry up pumpkin!” I hear a shout from the ground. I often wonder at how Leo can take so long to climb up, but somehow be back on the ground in between one breath and the next.

“You’re really making me do this?”

“You should make use of your talents Dove.” I grumble under my breath.

“Watch out below.”

“I’m watching, pumpkin.” Sick of his smartass remarks, I stand up on the wide branch. Slowly, my back aching from the show earlier, I spread my wings. Yes, that’s right, wings. I was born with snow white wings sprouting from between my shoulder blades, just like my mother, and her mother, and on and on. I know I’ll be sore tomorrow, but seeing the look on Leo’s face every time I fly is worth it. The tips of my wings brush against the leaves, and the sensitivity tingles through me. With a deep breath, I step off the branch. For a few gut-wrenching seconds I freefall, then my wings catch the wind and my descent slows.

I land, knees locking up, and Leo steps out of the shadows and scoops me up. “Leo! Put me down!”

“Never! Someone as beautiful as you deserves to be carried everywhere they go.” He cackles, and tightens his arms around me. I can only see darkness, but the quiet rush of the river gets louder and I realise where he’s taking me. When we reach the pool, Leo wades in, still carrying me. He finally lets go and I dive under the water and swim away. He chases me, and I splash around, trying to find him. Strong arms envelop me in a bone-crushing hug. “Gotcha!” I giggle. “I’m never letting you go.” I laugh again.

“Leo.”

“No Dove, I’m serious. You and me, we’re a team. It’s us against the world, pumpkin.” I look up into his serious gaze. Without thinking, I lean up and kiss him. Just a gentle brush of lips, an understanding that if he doesn’t want this, it’s okay. To my surprise, he moves his hand up to cup the back of my neck and kisses me again. A beautiful, perfect, never ending kiss. A kiss as wonderful as all the stars in the sky.

The whip cracks. The show begins. The acts spin through, one after another. The clowns, the lions, the dancing horses, the magic. I wait behind the curtain, nerves tingling. A light touch on my shoulder and I relax. Leo. He whispers in my ear. “We’re next, pumpkin.” I know. The Master calls us.

“Tonight, for one night only, the lion and the dove, flying trapeze with a difference.”

We push through the curtain and into the applause. I climb onto the lowered trapeze and it starts to rise, higher and higher, Leo next to me. When we stop rising, the audience hushes. I stand up, gripping the wooden bar with my toes. I spread my wings and the audience marvel at their splendour. That’s what we are really. A circus of marvels. Lions kept on leashes. Doves in gilded cages. Meant to be seen and admired, but never really free. I look over at Leo. He winks and grins.

“Hurry up.” He mouths.

I step off the bar, and I’m falling, flying, soaring. The master is wrong. Here, with Leo, I am free.