

The Price of Flight

“Go!” Sam screamed over the noises of a chase behind us.

“What do you think i’m doing!?” I yelled back.

Ok. You probably want to know how we got here. So I’ll start from the beginning.

I was walking home from school with my best friend Sam complaining about all our homework.

“Mrs. Johnson gives so many assignments Alex!” Sam groaned.

“I know right? And we can’t even fly home because of the weight of all the books.” I replied.

Oh right. I should probably explain that last comment. We have wings. Everyone does nowadays. Don’t ask me how they made our bones lighter or how they modified our lungs to take in extra oxygen from high altitudes, because all I know is that they did. Good? Good.

After walking for what seemed like forever, we arrived at my house. Once we got to my room we set to work.

About twenty minutes later, we heard a crash, followed by a car siren. Looking at each other, Sam and I dropped our pencils and bolted outside, where we saw my brother lying on the top of a busted up car across the street.

“James? What the heck is going on?!” I yell over the screech of the car alarm.

“Urg, my head...” He moans, wings splayed out behind him like a jacket.

Sam rummaged in her belt pouch for a healing pill and handed him one. He took it, and shakily got up.

“I gotta get outta here.” He said, getting up and positioning himself in a take-off stance.

“Oh no you don’t!” I barked, grabbing the edge of his wing. “You are gonna tell us what’s going on. Right now.”

“And if I don’t?” He asked.

“We’re gonna follow you until you do.” I said.

“Fine. But you’re not gonna like it.” He told us.

“What could possibly be so bad?” Sam inquired.

“The Cardinal’s back.” He said.

We froze. Everyone over the age of three knows that name.

“But-” Sam starts. “He was put away in the Cage...” she said as a look of shock crept onto her face.

“Apparently he got out.” James replied, more solemn than I had ever seen him.

“You would be right, little wren.” A voice called from somewhere to our right. “I guess you could say, I flew the coop?” The voice said, followed by laughter. A figure swooped over a rooftop, landing on the asphalt a few feet away.

“No...” Sam muttered, staggering back as if she’d been struck. The figure laughed again.

“The Cardinal.” I said, shocking even myself with the shakiness of my voice.

“In the feathered flesh.” He said, taking a bow.

We remained silent, shocked.

“Now, let’s get down to business.” He stated, snapping his fingers.

We heard a whirring as a horde of bright red birds rose over the buildings.

“Uhh, Guys?” James said. “I think that’s our cue to get outta here...”

“That seems like a good idea.” I replied.

The whirring sound grew. The birds dove toward us.

We took to the air. The birds realigned. The chase was on..

“Go!” Sam screamed over the noises of the chase behind us.

“What do you think i’m doing!?” I yelled back.

“Less yelling! More flying!” James shouted.

I don’t think I had ever flown that fast. It was like my wings were on fire. Come to think of it, if I hadn’t flown as fast as I did, they might have been.

The birds continued their pursuit for a while, before a strange whistle was heard in the distance. Then we watched the birds make a sharp 180 and set off in the direction of the whistle. Sam flew off after them.

“Hey! What are you doing!?” I yelled.

"They must be going back to the Cardinal right? Let's follow them To find him." Sam replied.

"Are you crazy!?" James exclaimed. "We aren't superheroes on some noble quest! We're talking about the *Cardinal*. Are you trying to get us hurt or worse!?"

"For once, I agree with my brother." I said.

"I'm not saying we fight him or something, just maybe find where he's hiding and see what we can do." Sam reasoned.

"This is the worst idea you've ever had." I grumbled.

Despite James protesting and my muttering, Sam couldn't be convinced to just go home, so we decided that it would be safest to go together.

As we were flying, A question arose in my mind.

"Hey James? You never did tell us why the Cardinal was after you." I said.

"I was messing around with a friend and he dared me to look in this creepy abandoned warehouse. Turns out it wasn't so abandoned after all." He responded.

"What did you see in there?" I asked.

"I didn't get a good look, as soon as we realized it was occupied, we were out of there, but I did see something."

"What?"

"People. But not like walking around. They were in cages. Jars. And the worst part is, some didn't just have wings. There were other things. I can't really describe it from the glance I took, but there was nothing good in there." He shuddered.

We flew in silence for the next good chunk of the flight. During that silence, I remembered when I first heard the name I would carry with me for the rest of my life.

I was about 4, and it was during our history time in class one day. The teacher had sat us all down and took out a book.

"Does anyone know what a cardinal is?" He asked. One girl raised her hand.

"It's a red bird." She said.

"Good!" The teacher responded. "Now, has anyone ever heard of *the* Cardinal?"

The class stayed silent.

"The Cardinal was a figure that wreaked havoc about 30 years ago. A genetic scientist who got a little too overzealous with his experiments. He had some successes, if you want to call it that, but most of his creations were monsters. He used people,

then threw them away like dead rats. He is now locked away in the Cage, the highest security prison in the world.” the teacher told us.

“Not anymore.” I muttered to myself.

“There it is.” James said.

The cloud of birds flew down through an open window on the side of a dilapidated warehouse. Sam flew down to the big double doors.

“What are you doing!?” I hissed. “You said we were just looking!”

“I said no such thing.” Sam said, sounding almost offended. “I said we would find him and see what we could do.”

“God this really is the worst idea ever.” I mumbled.

“Hey guys! The door’s not locked!” Sam announced. She pushed it open.

“Sam what are you... doing...” I trailed off seeing what was behind the doors.

“What-” James started. Sam remained silent, in shock.

It looked like something pulled right out of a sci-fi movie. Glowing green test tube things along the walls, pipes full of unknown substances criss-crossing the ceiling, the works. But that wasn’t what made us stop. What struck us was what was inside the tubes.

“Oh god.” James said.

People. They looked unconscious, and abnormal. There were fins, and gills, and misshapen, deformed wings. It didn’t stop there, but I don’t want to describe the rest of what we saw.

“Look who came to visit!” a voice said from down one of the rows of test tubes.

A red cloaked figure walked toward us down the aisle.

“What do you think of my experiments? Aren’t they just marvelous?”

“What... Did you do to them...” Sam stuttered.

“I improved them!” The Cardinal said. “How is what I did different from how you got your wings?”

“Because we didn’t mutate innocent people!” I exclaimed.

The Cardinal laughed. “Don’t be so naive. You think that the wings on your back have a clean past? I worked with the people who made those wings you know. But unlike the rest of my close-minded associates, I thought. ‘Why stop at the skies?’ What about the vastness of the oceans and seas? What about going underground? You

learn from your mistakes, do you not? Isn't that what you were all taught in preschool? And, why bother with the refuse if you've finished learning from it?"

"You bother with it if so-called refuse is *human beings*." I growled.

"Oh please." The Cardinal responded. "You think the people who made your wings didn't make a few sacrifices for the good of humanity? You think they didn't cross the line at one point?"

We remained silent, not knowing what to say, as the Cardinal continued.

"Come to think of it, where do you draw the line in the sand? What makes what i'm doing 'bad' or, 'evil', while what those people did is labeled as 'a breakthrough in genetic engineering' and, 'for the good of humanity'? Is it fact? Perspective, even? What do you think?"

He grinned. "Well, you'll have plenty of time to tell me!"

He snapped his fingers. The doors slammed behind us, and a cloud of red birds descended on us seemingly from out of nowhere.

"Sam! James!" I yelled, reaching for them. I felt a sharp sting on my arm, then everything faded to black.

I woke up.

"Look who's finally awake." The Cardinal said. I opened my eyes. I was in what looked like an oversized birdcage. On either side of me were two more cages, containing Sam to my right and James to my left.

The Cardinal shifted in his leather armchair and picked up a case of those big fat cigarettes from an ornate side table.

"Want one?" He said, offering the box.

"Bite me." I replied.

He smiled and lit the cigar.

"Alex?" Sam said groggily, coming back to consciousness. "What's going on?"

"Oh. You're awake as well." The Cardinal remarked.

"Zzz... GAH!" James jolted awake.

The Cardinal snickered.

"Good, the 'gang's' all here." He announced.

"Get to the point you strawberry dodo bird." Sam snapped.

“Oh, such hurtful words.” The Cardinal said, feigning insult. “But if you insist. Fritz!” he called.

A squat little man scuttled into the room. “Yes, Master?”

“Bring me number sixty-nine.” The cardinal commanded.

“Yes Master.” Fritz obeyed, scuttling back out a side door in the corner of the room. He returned a moment later dragging behind him a cart with a large fish tank on it.

“Thank you Fritz.” The Cardinal said. Fritz scurried away with a bow.

“What does that aquarium display have to do with anything?” I asked.

“Why don’t you take a look?” He replied.

We all looked inside the tank, and saw some sort of big fish swimming around.

“Oh my god.” Sam whimpered. I took another look, and realised it wasn’t a fish. It was a person.

“H-how...” I stuttered.

“It works the same way your wings work. A simple rearrangement of DNA.” The Cardinal explained, sounding like a proud father showing off his son’s ability to ride a bike.

“What... Did you do?” James stammered.

“Lord, you really don’t listen do you?” the Cardinal said, sounding almost disappointed. “I modified the genes of the embryo. Moved a few things around to give the specimen gills and fins.”

“Why?” I uttered.

“Because when I look at you, all I see is wasted potential. If you can modify a human being to have wings, why stop there? You have defied the very fabric of natural evolution! And all you do is put a few feathers on?” The Cardinal spread his carmine wings in a gesture of grandeur. “Those scientists were blind to the possibility! Think of all that you would achieve if you opened your mind and started to think! And that is why I want you to join me, Alex.”

“WHAT!?” I exclaimed, taken aback.

“You have an innovative and unrestricted wit. You aren’t like the other children around you. You’re special, Alex.”

“What about my friend? My brother?” I asked.

“They are disposable. You are the one I want to work with.” The Cardinal replied.

“Ok, first of all, no. Second of all, that ‘special’, comment? Didn’t come off how I think you wanted it to. Last thing? If you want me to be on board with your whole evil scheme, maybe don’t say you’re going to get rid of my friends.”

“Shame.” The Cardinal responded. “We could have done great things together. I guess we’ll just have to let it go then.”

“What?” Sam said.

“Fritz!” The Cardinal called, ignoring Sam. “Bring the serum!”

Fritz came scurrying in carrying a small syringe .

“Incapacitate them. Then bring them to my chambers.” The cardinal ordered, walking out the door.

“Yes master.” Fritz said, walking over to James’ cage.

“What is that thing?” James said, moving away from the bars.

“Simply a sedative sir.” Fritz said, opening the cage door and sticking the needle in James’ arm.

“Don’t you dare... I’ll get... You...” James started, before passing out.

“What did you do to my brother!?” I yelled, gripping the bars of my cage.

“I just put him to sleep for a moment Miss.” Fritz said, unlocking the door of my cage.

In a flash I grabbed his wrist and twisted his arm around, making him drop the serum.

“Ok, give me those keys.” I growled.

“M-Master will be mad, I d-don’t think I can do that miss.” Fritz stuttered.

I swiped the keys from his belt.

“This is what’s going to happen.” I said. “I’m going to unlock my friend, wait for my idiot brother to wake up, and then we’re gonna get outta here, and you’re gonna sit under that desk and do absolutely nothing. Got that?”

“Y-y-yes Miss.” Fritz stammered, scurrying under the desk in the corner.

After unlocking Sam’s cage, I unlocked James’ as well and me and Sam put him on a cart in the corner.

“We’ll get you out of here soon.” I told the person in the tank.

“First we have to get out of here though.” Sam pointed out.

“Agreed.” I said. “Now, grab sleeping beauty over there and let’s-”

“Where are you going, little sparrow?” A now familiar voice said.

“Oh no.” Sam uttered.

“I would return to your cages.” The cardinal said.

“How about no!” Sam cried, and with a swift beat of her wings, leaped across the room and punched the Cardinal in his jaw, splitting his lip.

Wiping the blood with the back of his hand, he simply said, “cute.” before bringing his wing around in a powerful swipe, knocking Sam off her feet. She hit her head on the floor and didn’t get up.

“SAM!” I yelled.

In an outrage, I spiraled up to the arched ceiling, and dove toward the Cardinal. I saw how he coiled his hand, and I aimed just to the other side of him.

Swooping down, I landed beside him and in one swift motion, grabbed his arm and spun around, locking his arm behind his head and twisting one of his wings.

“Move, and I’ll break your wrist.” I said.

“This is why you should join me Alex. You’re such a competent fighter. I guess those Jujitsu lessons paid off.”

“Don’t try to throw me off by inserting facts about my life. Once Sam wakes up she’s gonna-” I trailed off seeing that Sam was no longer lying where she was twenty seconds ago.

“Oh, what a shame. It seems your friend has flown off without you.” The Cardinal said smugly.

“One more word and the breaking starts.” I said, gripping his wrist a little tighter. He winced.

Suddenly, A siren was heard in the distance. As it got closer, I heard the screeching of cars coming to an abrupt stop.

“Police!” A voice called from down the rows of giant test tubes, accompanied by a pounding on the doors. Shortly after, the creaking of hinges was heard and I could make out the sounds of people coming down the aisle responding to the awful display of experiments.

“Good lord.” One muttered.

The Cardinal tried to twist free, but I twisted his wing so he couldn’t move without breaking something important.

“We’re in here!” I called.

The police barrelled into the study and one officer took out his handcuffs.

“The Cardinal, eh? Oh, I’m so getting a promotion for this.” The officer remarked. I let go of the Cardinal’s wrist and wing so the police could put the handcuffs on.

“Such a shame Alex. You had so much potential.” The Cardinal said.

“Tell it to the judge.” I called after the arresting officer.

“Spoken like a true cop.” Another policeman told me. “You can head home now. We’ll take it from here.”

“Just promise me you’ll free all these people?” I asked.

“You know it.” The officer said. “It’s the least we can do after your friend here told us the location of one of the most dangerous criminals in the world.”

“That would be me.” Sam said, swooping around the corner.

“Sam!” I said, running over to her. “How’d you get out of here?”

“I crawled under the desk while you kept the Cardinal busy, and found a little service tunnel. I assume that’s how Fritz told the Cardinal we got out of the cages.”

“Where is that slippery little thing anyways?” I pondered.

“Wherever it is, We’ll find it.” The officer said.

“What happened? Why are the police here?” James said, waking up at last.

Me and Sam looked at each other. “James, do we have a story to tell!”