

The Flying Alsteds

My family can fly. We're Alsteds. Common knowledge is that somewhere way back somebody got lucky with an alien. No one remembers what the alien looked like or where the family first started or even if it's really true. But that's what we think, and everyone else too. Although once a senator's son told me the first flying Alsteds probably got their powers from a vampire. So I guess that's another theory.

In hundreds of years no one has discovered the secret of our flight. Not the inquisitors with their hot coals, not the scientists with their syringes. Our blood looks normal, our height, bone density, DNA, everything indistinguishable from any person pulled off the street. We tend to bruise like peaches and have red hair, but nothing is ever amiss, even in the oldest samples sequenced.

No one knows why we can fly, so no one can tell me why I can't.

Most Alsteds start hovering by five or so. But not all. So no one was concerned when I just cried to get my toys back instead of floating up and grabbing them myself. But now I'm sixteen, years into puberty and well past the time everyone else first pierced the troposphere. I've been through every test known to modern man, every blood test, DNA sequence, and scan you can think of. So far the only anomaly is my red blood cells are a tiny bit bigger than average. And that's fine. Lots of Alsteds have had illnesses and genetic quirks. It would be weird if we didn't, it's not like we're super people. Well, kinda, with the flying. But we can't fly as fast as a plane or lift a building or anything. We're as breakable as anyone else.

And I feel extra breakable today with the needle in my arm. I don't know what tests my doctor is doing or if the office is just freezing some of my blood as backup to study in the future. I watch the blood shoot in. It's violent, fast. The vial gets all steamy from the heat. Sometimes I don't watch. I feel the pressure more when I do, feel the hand behind the needle, pushing in and in, one vial after another.

They don't even give me juice after, like they would if this was a blood drive. Not that I feel dizzy or anything. My driver is waiting for me by the curb. His name is Henry, and I like him because he doesn't take his job too seriously. The other driver holds the car door open and calls me "Mistress Isabel" and is as cold and proper as a frozen dueling glove. Henry reads a magazine in the front seat while he's waiting and calls me Fizzy Izzy when no one else is around. Besides Luz, he's my favorite person.

"Big hubbub today," he says when I slam the door. I never mean to slam it, but everyone says I do so it must be true. "Big to-do."

Henry ruffles his mustache when he talks and he does it now as he puts the car in gear, twitching his lip so it scuffles side to side like an excitable mop. "You got your party dress all picked out?"

"I'm sure Mother has set out something." I say, suddenly despondent. Henry doesn't give a crap about my dress. This line of questioning has Mother all over it. If he's starting this roundabout way, I'm really not going to like whatever Mother wants him to say.

"That Mother of your'n. What a character," I can hear the gears turning. The other driver would have no trouble with this game, but Henry is a straight shooter, he doesn't talk in circles. Usually.

"Yeah," I say, not helping.

He stares straight ahead and crawls to a stop, giving the red light far more attention than it deserves. The radio isn't on.

"The thing is Izzy...bell. Isabel. Your mother was wondering if you might want to go somewhere tonight."

"Go where?"

"Anywhere? Maybe a girlfriend's house or," I can hear his throat go tight. "Or maybe you'd like to book a fancy hotel, order room service, and pretend you're in one of those movies you like."

“But the party...” Of course. They don’t want me at the party. That’s what this is. I’m an embarrassment. The flightless wonder who tarnishes our reputation, our specialness, just by existing. Tonight is a big deal, no need to display the worst laundry.

My throat gets tight too. Without a word, I slide over and roll the window up between us. I sit with my back to it, and breathe very quietly. It’s useless I know, Henry can still tell I’m crying. But I’d rather pretend to have some privacy.

When I roll down the divider, Henry is red around the eyes too. He hasn’t driven me home, but is idling in front of a big gilded building in the downtown area. The Alsted Estate is over an hour away.

“This is where she made the reservation?”

“Yes ma’am.”

I glare at Henry for the formality. And he winces as soon as it slips out.

“Bag in the trunk?” I snarl.

“Yes.”

He doesn’t try to apologize or walk me to my room or open my door or anything stupid. He knows me too well for that.

I kick open the door and leave it swinging so he’ll have to get out and close it. I stomp to the back and yank my bag out of the trunk. I drag it forward so forcefully, it tips over and I end up scraping the zippered front on the stairs as I storm my way to the entrance. The bell boys and attendants wisely choose to ignore me.

I’m so angry I’m vibrating. It feels like I may actually achieve flight for the first time in my life merely by shaking upwards right out of my skin. But the top of the stairs offers a new perspective. Why should I be alone in this rage? I am much calmer as I gently shepherd my bag down the stairs, and am practically serene as I glide up to a rideshare and scoot inside.

I give the address and the driver meets my eyes in the mirror. “That’s the Floating Island,” he tells me.

“I know.”

“Like, it has security. You can’t, like, *actually* go there,” he says.

“Just drive,” I sigh and look out the window. There is a perfect mix of imperiousness that works on almost everyone. Not haughty enough to create resistance but too dismissive to be argued with.

It works on my unwitting cabbie and he pulls out of line and starts towards home. I have him drop me off at a rest stop pretty far from the front gate. I make my way to a side entrance, a little used guard door embedded into the hundred feet high wrought iron fence that surrounds the property from one end of the butte to the other. The grounds are miles of forest that suddenly break into a breathtaking estate garden. That garden enrobes the house in beauty, extending forever in front before it crumbles into a sheer cliff face jutting over the ocean. Little me always thought it looked like where Batman lived, or maybe one of his villains.

My plan tonight requires Batman levels of sneakery. The cabbie wasn’t wrong about security. I don’t know if Mother would go as far as to tell the pairs of guards patrolling the property to prevent my entry, but I’ll have to avoid them just in case. As well as the caterers and the press and the family and servants. It won’t be easy with the estate buzzing like a beehive. I walk and walk through our woods, wishing I could fly instead of getting blisters all over my feet and grass seeds all over my tights. Since I’m alone I even try a few hops, like the wind might catch me if I can only stick the timing.

When I finally get to the garage dusk has fallen and the grounds have gone lavender in the fading sun. Strings of lights outline the winding driveway connecting one lamp post to the next like loops of dewey spider silk. I slip into the garage just another shadow and gulp water from the work sink in sucking draws. My stomach rumbles, but I daren’t leave until the party really gets underway and that won’t be until after dark. I bide my time in the driver seat of one of Papa’s Beamers.

Finally it's time to make my grande entrée. Night has cloaked the house in mystery and the front entry glows like a beacon. Footmen open doors and politely direct curious party goers away from forbidden areas like the kitchen and guest suites. Almost the entire first floor is a grand foyer. The front doors open into an entrance hall that quickly gives way to a huge mirrored ballroom that comfortably hosts hundreds. Everything is gold and gleaming and glorious from the moldings to the curliques sconces shedding aurous cones of light every few feet. The room would not be out of place in the Palace of Versailles.

There are several guest amenable areas directly adjacent: a library, a topiary, non-family housing and several small salons and offices that guests use to network or make deals or screw. The kitchen is down here, and the servants' quarters, and also my second bedroom.

But as impressive as the ballroom is, it's nothing compared to the Floating Island. The ballroom's walls climb stories upwards. Fifty feet or so from the top of our heads the pale gold wallpaper and mirrors and gilding abruptly end. There is dark, cherrywood paneling for several feet and then it's too dim to see what the walls are made of. Out of this gloom seems to float a mirror of the room below. It too is glowing and golden and is the first thing to catch one's eye upon entering the ballroom. A hundred feet above, it begins where the far wall ends, a recess into a vast, crystalline cave that no one can easily reach except by the power of flight.

Of everyone down here, only I know what lies beyond that glittering platform. I've been inside the real library and the vault with all our family's most precious historical treasures. There's the sprawling suite where Mother and Papa sleep, the family rooms, the real guest wing. I have a room up there too although I don't use it much.

Once I got too big to carry, Mother suggested I would be more comfortable downstairs. I asked for an elevator, which was a fight we had for a while. She said her "no" was because of security, she couldn't sleep at night knowing just anyone could access the family rooms. Maybe that's true. But maybe she just didn't want a permanent reminder that she'd given birth to the first flightless Alsted.

So I used a ladder for a while. Climbing the swaying rope as it groaned in my ears. Often Henry would hold the bottom for me, to keep it steady as I ascended.

But it turned out she was right.

It was easier to live in the lower levels than climbing down every day for school or the doctor's or a party. And it wasn't so bad. I got to pick whatever suite I wanted so now I have a bedroom equipped with a full Turkish bath. It has wide, wide windows and a granite vanity. And I still have a room on the Island. I can always go up. If I want to.

Most party crashers think it best to keep to the edges. This is a mistake as it invites scrutiny and marks one as an individual instead of part of the crowd. I strike straight for the center of the glistening ball gowns and trim, black tuxedos and aim to get lost among them. I'm still a little sweaty from my long trek and wearing a faded black dress with pilled stockings and dirty shoes, but most people are so involved with their own conversations they won't even notice me as long as I keep moving.

I spot several familiar faces, a few dignitaries, a Swedish princess. In the corner by the ice sculpture angel is the (probably) next archduke of Austria. He's a freaking Hapsburg and family friend who spent summers with us when he was little. All I remember about him is how much he farted.

A trill sounds softly from the hidden speakers and the crowd quickens, people simultaneously hushing and starting to rustle like birds. The lights dim and everyone looks up to witness the beneficent faces stepping onto the platform. On cue, the whispers are replaced by soft claps.

As one the Flying Alsteds step off the platform and float gently downward, glowing like deities in their white, white clothes. Mother sees me straight away. Only someone who knows her well could tell that she is furious.

Mother and Papa are the point of the arrow, with my brother Enricio and sister Magda to either side. The cousins flank them, one family on each end. They may all be wearing white but

each family group is unified with minute differences in color and fabric, design choices no doubt architected by my mother's subtle hand. She's holding Luz like a holy relic, pale and remote as Jennifer Joseph when she posed for the Columbia Pictures logo.

As soon as I'm spotted, Luz struggles to reach me. She forgets that I can't fly up to catch her, so she squirms to drop down once she's a story or so above me. Luckily Mother holds firm, and squashes her fidgeting with a well placed elbow.

The family fans out, drifting above the craned necks of a hundred or so of the most important people in the world. All the Alsted women are wearing pantsuits except for Luz who is half disappeared in a froth of tulle that makes her look like she's sitting on a cloud. It's precious.

Mother smiles down, white teeth gleaming under piles of red hair. "Thank you everyone for the gracious pleasure of your attendance. We," she waves Luz's chubby baby hand at the crowd, "are so pleased you could be here to celebrate the engagement of our daughter, Magda, to none other than our *dear* friend," her melodious voice falters for a moment, a tiny crack I don't think anyone else can hear, "Frederick Matthias Leopold Von Haspberg."

No one reacts for a moment. But finally someone in the back finds their social graces and starts up a polite round of applause. I can feel suppressed gossip straining to erupt from the crowd like an explosion of magma. No one wants to be spotted talking behind an Alsted's back, but I know the salons are going to be extremely busy with clandestine rounds of shit talk.

Not that I can blame them. I'm shocked too. There are Alsteds on three continents and not a one has been married to an outsider in I don't know how long.

Mother takes Magda's hand, her smile as bright as it is pained. They drift down and meet the lucky groom to be, who's cut through the crowd to greet them. I try to see Magda's face but no luck.

Luz pops out from the forest of legs and runs into my shins full tilt.

"Up Zizzy!" she demands, jumping at me with her arms raised. "Up!"

I swing her up in a wide arc, little feet kicking behind her. She squeals in glee, the sound disappearing in the general mayhem surrounding the (maybe) happy couple. She's heavier every time I do this. Soon I won't be able to pick her up at all.

"Did you have fun flying down, pretty princess?" I snuggle her a little as I walk us to the refreshments. Her garnet hair has been twisted into sweet little braids, studded with white ribbons and real freshwater pearls. Her baby doll lashes and fat cheeks could have been daubed by Botticelli, but maybe even he couldn't have dreamed up a more perfect cherub.

"Starberries!"

Luz tries to jump out of my arms and onto a nearby platter of strawberry confections. But I'm used to these bids for freedom and know better than to relax my guard. She stays put on my hip where she belongs.

"Okay, okay. Hold your horses." I dish up some sweets one handed, running down the tables to grab the choicest morsels for Luz and I.

A quick glance shows Mother and the others still swarmed by well wishers. So I book it with Luz toward the topiary before anyone sees us.

"What do you want, Luzy? Unicorn? Or hippopotamus?"

"Pottomus!" she shrieks. Maybe it's a four year old thing or maybe it's a Luz thing, but everything she says is so enthusiastic that only a shrill little girl scream has enough power to get it out. If I go deaf later in life, I'll know why.

The "pottomus" lives by the reflecting pool in the open air topiary right next to the ballroom, close enough that we can still hear the susurrations of the milling crowd inside.

"He wants a treat," Luz tells me.

So I hold her up and let her mash a tart into the bushes, right in the hippo's mouth. Luz is delighted and cackles in her weird, little girl way.

"Mama said you wouldn't be here," she says when we sit down on one of the benches.



“I almost wasn’t but I’m glad I made it. I get to see you.” I squeeze her a little, and Luz rests her head on my shoulder.

“Did the doctor make you fly yet?”

“Nope, not yet. He said he was gonna have to install a jet engine.”

“Nuh uh,” she says but still looks at me dubiously like maybe I really would get a 757 turbo installed and start whizzing through the sky.

Eventually partiers start drifting past us, splitting the quiet with their sussurant laughter. Most people don’t visit the topiary to admire the sculptures so I know it’s time to leave.

Luz follows me everywhere. We dance. I get her to eat a shrimp rangoon so she gets at least a little protein. I take her down to the kitchen because she wants a scoop of ice cream and we aren’t serving that, and then she gets bored and wants to watch a movie in my room.

She falls asleep to Paw Patrol and it takes me a few minutes to realize I am watching a cartoon police dog for no good reason. I switch to something calming and turn the sound low, pulling out my laptop to see what’s on Amazon. Luz is curled up under my arm, her little pearls glinting in the blue light from my computer screen. I must fall asleep myself because the next thing I know the door is opening.

It’s Papa.

“Go back to sleep,” he says. He picks Luz up and seems surprised when I get out of bed and follow him. Papa drifts beside me down the hall. He almost never walks anymore. He doesn’t talk much either.

The ballroom looks different empty. The tables have been cleared and spears of light taunt me from their lofty origins above. Papa starts drifting up as soon as we break into the ballroom. I’m about to text him to drop down my ladder when two cousins float down from above. One looks familiar and one I’m sure I’ve never met before. They each take an arm and hoist me between them as they rise. The stranger helpfully offers a shoe so I can brace myself instead of dangling between them like a sack of rice. My stomach swoops but not in a good way.

Everyone turns to glance at us when we enter the big open air kitchen. Mother looks more resigned than angry to see me there. That's something at least. I slip to the back and try to camouflage myself among the cousins. Maybe if she doesn't see me, she'll forget I'm even here. It aches a little to be in the warm family kitchen instead of the cold chrome one that only gets used for parties. I've missed it here.

Magda comes in, surprising me. Her face looks blank, papered over. She sits stiffly but gives Mother a nod.

Mother draws herself up, and instantly commands all of our attention. "Thank you all for coming. I've called this meeting to discuss Magda's engagement and the future of the Alsteds."

One of the cousins pipes up from his souciant drape over the sturdy wooden farm table. "Shouldn't the fiance be here? He *will* be family after all."

"This is for the real family," Mother says. "The Alsted family." She meets each pair of eyes at the table, even mine. "We have to decide what is going to change, now that...everyday folk will be joining us."

"Why *did* you decide to give your daughter to a walking person?" interrupts cousin Margret, an older woman with carmine hair fading to gunmetal at the temples.

Mother looks as serious as I've ever seen her. "We've been working closely with a geneticist in recent years..."

I duck my head.

"...and it has become obvious that we need to be slightly less selective when arranging spouses."

"Peh," Margret says. "We live on separate continents. And have for ages. I can hardly conceive how we'd have a problem joining families from so far away."

"The fact remains that our tapestry continues to be spun from the same thread," Mother says. "There is no one suitable for my Magda or Enricio. Nor your daughters, Margret. Nor your

son, Stephen,” she says gesturing to the other side of the table. “Nor even our own little Light, when she comes of age.”

I can't help but notice my own breeding potential is not mentioned.

Mother continues, “It is now of vital importance that we carefully select families worthy to be inducted into the Alsted line and arrange suitable matches.”

Margret pounds the table in outrage. “You're playing a dangerous game, Maria! Your foolhardiness could be disabling future generations forever! I for one would rather die than be responsible for a flightless child.”

The remark creates an ugly chasm of silence. No one looks at me, yet I know I am the center of attention.

Cousin Margret flushes. But she doesn't take it back.

The meeting ends and the family mills, a great river breaking away into small eddies of three and four people. I escape to the side and move to reacquaint myself with my old room. Only it's not there anymore.

The door is there, and my same walk-in closet, and the arching bay windows that frame the old iron gate perfectly when it's daylight and you can actually see. But my collection of old action figures is missing and so are my water colors and my poster of Amy Lee. Someone has switched out my black velvet comforter and spackled the holes from my do it yourself shelving. The walls are white now, not Pollacked with my many attempts at muralization, except for the wall behind the new headboard which is gray. The closet door is open, and I see a white robe, solitary as a ghost, hanging up in there but none of my costumes or dresses or t-shirts.

I am a pencil mark scrubbed out, my only legacy a few smudgey crumbles of eraser. I do what I always do when things get unbearable. I run. Downstairs I have the topiary or the garage to hide in. Up here, I have the observation deck.

Avoiding everyone takes minimal effort, judging by the buzz in the kitchen they're still mostly congregated there with clanking cups of espresso. I slip out to the side, to the endless moon washed deck that juts over the bluff our house is built on. I perch on the railing like an ocean bird, hundreds of feet above the clawing sea and watch the waves bash their brains out on the rocks below. The moon glints like shards of ice on the water, catching the edge of each wave's leaping peak. After I don't know how many lulling moments I feel a presence behind me. Even though she's floating silently, I somehow know it's her.

She drifts forward until I can smell the Delina perfume she's worn since before I can remember.

"I'm glad you're here," Mother says.

My stomach clenches and I hide my face behind my raised knee. She's almost admitting she was wrong. Whatever comes next is going to be horrible.

"You're family. My daughter, no matter what."

"Glad you finally remembered." I can't help but be snotty.

"I never forgot." Her voice remains melodious as if I'm being perfectly pleasant. "Even when you've failed to behave like an Alsted."

I whip around despite my precarious seat on the railing. "It's not my fault I can't fly!" The words almost choke me on the way out.

"I'm aware of that, Isabel. I meant that Alsted's care about family more than themselves. Look at Magda. Is she giving up because things are hard? No. She's prioritizing her family and doing what needs to be done."

I'm arrested by the moonlight glinting in her eyes. This feels like an olive branch. Like Mother giving me a way to be good, to be recognized, at last, as a real Alsted. This feels like absolution.

"Don't I go to the doctor? Didn't I try every day?"

Her features don't move, yet I can sense that I've pleased her. I turn away, unwilling to see if triumph will cross her face. I'm afraid of acquiescing to whatever this is and coming out empty handed and ashamed. My pride is cold comfort, but it's all I have.

"You did try when you were younger and I was glad every time you did."

Mother moves infinitesimally closer. "Do you remember when you broke your arm? You were always jumping off the furniture trying to fly, and Enricio told you you'd catch more wind if you tried from one of the trees? Your Father was so angry at you both, but I was proud of you. Our family owes everything to our exceptional abilities. But those same abilities have engendered suspicion and envy in equal measure to our acclaim. There are those who have tried to abduct Alsteds in the past but public outcry forced the government to retrieve them. Likewise they have been unable to make us hand over medical records or submit ourselves for testing. But if we stop being special, Isabel. If people stop respecting us or seeing us as extraordinary, we may lose everything and become nothing more than a receptacle for jealousy and scientific curiosity. We could be interred, seized. Our ability is our only protection."

*And you ruin that.* I can almost hear her say. *You are the weak chink in our armor.*

"An Alsted would do anything for the family," she says, "anything to fly."

Mother puts her hand between my shoulder blades. She exerts no force but the butterfly pressure of her palm makes my body sing with realization. I am on the wrong side of a railing hundreds of feet above a rocky slope of ocean, with one foot already dangling down. There are no handholds. One shove and there would be no turning back. Fly or die. That's what her palm is saying.

I freeze and Mother's hand retreats.

“You’re an Alsted,” she says. “Don’t let us down.”

She leaves me on the railing with the night wind and the dark water below. I don’t move for a long time.

The sun is brightening the indigo sky before I’m ready to go inside. A fierce debate has kept me lashed to the railing like tortured Odysseus. A true Alsted would jump, prove herself worthy one way or another. If I flew, they’d be so happy. If not...

They’d still be happy. They’d be free at last of my clodding footsteps and the shameful wear on my rubber soles, the huff and puff as I heave over the ground, the horrible creak of the straining rope ladder as I crawl to their great heights. They could finally stop being scared all the time, that their power was fading, that my failure was catching, like a fatal disease.

I slip inside and pad to the hidden storage box to unroll my ladder. The plastic connectors clink like bones.

“Going down Zizzy?” Luz suddenly pipes behind me.

I take little Luz by the hand, the daughter they birthed to replace me. I feel in her the same groundedness that’s in me, and know she will never fly. It’s cruel to leave her to be the confirmation of their failure, to bear the brunt of their suffering: all their blasted hopes and shattered dreams. She will be the screaming ‘why?’ that goes unanswered. The next in line for blood draws and doctor’s visits and a bedroom alone on the ground. I fold her into my arms and squeeze until she gripes about it.

“I love you more than anything, Luz.”

I’ll find her when the time comes, or maybe she’ll find me. Or maybe the Alsteds will have accepted the truth by then and created a new life with what little wind they have left. But none of that is mine to worry over.

If I have to walk, it must be on a path of my own. All that’s left is for me to forge it.