

In The Spotlight

As soon as I step on to the rope, I know it is too much. The lights, the sounds, everything. Combining to make my biggest fear. I stand frozen, unsure what to do and most of all, what will happen if I let my feet wander any further. The seconds feel like minutes stretching on, all the while my hands shaking, sweat beading on my forehead. The noises in the crowd have gone from excited cheering to bleak silence. The sound of waiting. Waiting for something to happen that is destined to fail. I'm vaguely aware that down far beneath me, another group is doing some act, something to entertain the crowd while I am standing unmoving at the edge of the tightrope. Slowly as if in a trance I make my way back down the ladder that took me up only moments before. I have let down the whole team and for that I will not be able to forgive myself. Still in a trance-like state I make my way down the stairs, along the corridor and all the way out. As I step outside, I begin gulping in huge breaths as if I have been deprived of air. Which is exactly what it felt like being up there.

My name is Isla and I'm eighteen years old. Ever since I was seven I've had one dream and that was to join the circus and become a tightroper. After years and years this dream has finally become reality, only for me to go and blow it all up. I know I can do it, I really do, it's just that I have this one barrier to reaching my goal. And that is the fact that I have stage fright. Severe stage fright.

Sometime in the night I must have fallen asleep because when I wake up I'm in a bed and from what I can tell, it's nearly morning. The last thing I remember from the night before is leaning with my back against the wall outside the theatre, sobbing into my knees. I quickly scan the room and realise I'm in my dormitory in the training centre. Someone must have brought me here after the disaster last night. Memories start flooding back to me. Memories of that irreversible moment when I stood stock still about to make my way across the tightrope. And then the memory of turning around and giving up. I don't know what will become of my circus career now but at this moment I don't really want to think about that. I just want to go home and forget about this and that it ever happened. But I know that this is not an option. I will have to face the consequences of my actions. My head snaps around when I hear footsteps quickly proceeding in my direction.

"Hey." It's my friend Madelyn, my fellow trainee. "Glad you're awake."

Madelyn is 13 years old and always seems to be able to cheer me up. Hopefully it works today. She sits down on the bed next to me and puts her arm around my shoulder.

"Look, it happens to all of us. We all have a degree of stage fright, it's just whether or not we let it get the better of us. I'm sure Renei will understand and let you get on with training."

"Thanks Madie, but I'm not so sure. I don't know if I can forgive myself. I've done it over and over in practice but when I get up on the stage, I don't know why, it's like something takes control of me and I can't move," I blurt it out so quickly as if I just want to get it off my chest. "It's OK," she says.

We sit there in silence for a few minutes and then Madie stands up to go.

"Do you want me to talk to Renei about it? Or would you like to come out and talk to her yourself?"

"Thanks again but maybe could I just have a little longer alone?" She nods her head and walks calmly out of the room. What a sweet girl.

I sit for a while longer, mulling things over in my head. I can't believe I was foolish enough to think that I would ever be able to make my dream come true. All it ever was was a wild daydream. That's it. Some time later I decide I better get up. It's almost eleven and I know I can't stay here forever.

I slowly wander out of my room, head bowed, unsure where to go next. I figure I should go talk to Renei and the others. Renei is the head of our performance group and choreographs just about everything.

I think she knew I was coming because when I enter the gym she's there, standing with her hands on her hips, facing the door. Not a good sign, I think. I can only hope she's not in one of her bad moods today. I smile sheepishly in her direction.

"Isla! Where have you been?" she demands.

I keep walking until I'm standing directly in front of her, determined not to show how I am actually feeling.

"We need to have a discussion. We need to talk about last night," she says. "Come this way. She leads me into a small storage room filled with all sorts of odds and ends.

"We cannot afford to have a repeat of last night. You either have to face the fear, let the stage fright come but not overwhelm you, or reduce to one of the lower levels that don't perform in front of large audiences. Only you can decide to conquer the fear and push on."

Renei's words really get to me and I find myself apologising again and again. But I cannot forget what happened and I cannot stay here.

Over the next few weeks I go to university, hang out with friends, do all that kind of stuff. But in my heart I am longing to be back in the gym, at the training centre with all the friends I have there. Though how can I possibly go back when I know I can never progress? How can I walk back in and pretend nothing happened? How can I make it up to everyone? But then again, how can I live without it, without the circus? I feel claustrophobic. One night, I go to bed but am unable to sleep. I toss and turn, too many thoughts spinning through my mind like an endless sandstorm. I close my eyes and can almost feel the sand pouring into them. I force myself to calm my thoughts and after an hour more of thrashing around I finally drift off.

The next morning I wake to the sound of my phone buzzing. Seems like someone really wants to get in touch with me. I am surprised when I look up at the clock and realise it's almost ten in the morning. I don't usually sleep in. Then I notice who's calling. It's Derek from circus but I can't imagine why he needs to contact me this badly. I decide to see if he leaves a message. The phone continues ringing until I can't stand it anymore. I pick it up slowly and answer in a bored voice.

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Isla, listen, we need you back. We need you in the circus again, there's an opportunity coming up but we need a tightroper and no one else is fit for the job. Please consider this. There's a long pause in which I do consider it. I know I would have to work on my stage fright but isn't this exactly what I needed, a chance to prove myself? A sudden fire burns inside me and I know I cannot refuse.

"I'm on my way," I reply, and I hear Derek heave a sigh of relief.

I know I need to get there and the sooner, the better so I immediately spring out of bed and pull my clothes on. I enter through the double doors not knowing what to expect, unsure of how everyone will greet me. This place is bound to be busy already since it opens before dawn. I make a beeline for the small meeting room, which is sealed with perfect maroon curtains. I can hear voices inside but I can't make out who they belong to. I knock on the wall next to the entrance seeing as there is no door and hope it is understood to be a request to come in. A man I don't recognise pulls open the curtains and seems to consider why I am here.

"What's the matter, miss?" he asks.

"Uh...", I gesture with my head into the room. He steps aside and reveals me to the rest of the people inside. I see a sea of familiar faces all peering intently at me. One of them nods at me and I take the cue to enter. I sit down on an empty chair and wait for the talking to begin once again.

Koji, an older man, breaks the silence. "I'm so glad you have made this decision, Isla and joined us here today. We were just discussing a major opportunity that, if we win, will make us much better known, not to mention the money we'll receive." He pauses for impact and then continues. "We have been offered a place in the International Solar Circus competition." I let a small gasp escape my lips, I was not expecting this. The Solar Circus competition is held annually and to compete in it is a great honour.

"As I was saying before, only the best in our group will be chosen to participate. It will mean travelling by plane to reach Paris, where the competition will be held. We will discuss this further but I am going to send out the word and schedule a time in a few days for everyone in our organisation to meet and then we will decide who will come. That's all I have for now."

The next days fly past and before I know it, I am gathered with everyone else about to decide who's to come. Koji is in charge of this whole thing and he has the job of picking those up for the challenge. At the end a group of about fifteen remain inside as everyone else files out. Koji pulls me aside and begins talking.

"I think Derek already told you but we want a tightroper and you're the only one up for it. We have ten weeks to prepare for this and then we will be off. I'm going to get you to work with a very highly trained friend of mine and with her help I'm sure you'll be able to get up on the stage again."

The next morning, I meet this friend of Koji's, her name is Tara and is very soft but professional. Over the next few weeks, she gets me used to performing in front of increasingly larger audiences until she feels I am ready to go. We begin practicing together, the group of us who will be going to the competition and soon enough we have a solid routine put together. Koji is delighted with what we have come up with and as the time draws nearer, he begins explaining properly how it will work. We will fly to Paris and have a day to practice in the actual space. The next night the competition will be on.

Sooner than I could have been prepared for, we are boarding the plane and heading off into the great unknown. The day draws on, all the while I am staring out the window, feeling fear bubbling up inside of me like a fizzy drink. I'm sitting alone and I begin to wish I had someone to talk to right now. When the plane touches down, I take in my surroundings. We are in a humongous airport and everything about it reeks of wealth. My family is not poor but neither are we rich so I have a feeling that what I am about to see in this city will blow my mind.

After arriving at the huge dome - shaped building, we hurriedly bring all our luggage inside. The interior of the building is enough to blow my mind already. We are escorted to a living room, each competing group gets one, and are told to get sorted.

Each group of performers get an allotted time the next day to practice in the space and figure out the set up. Our act consists of mainly ground acrobatics and at the finale the lights will go off and shine on me making my way across the tightrope. Once practice is over my group and I get ready for our moment on the stage.

I try to calm my shaking knees as my team and I wait in the tiny room, looking out for the signal to enter onto the stage. The moment has finally arrived and my whole family has come to watch. I close my eyes and pray that all will go well, that this time when the lights shine on me I won't falter. Before I know it, we are being ushered onto stage and introduced. I wait unseen at the ladder that will take me up. When I see the cue and know the lights are about to go off I take a deep breath and begin to climb. At least the lights aren't on yet so I can take a moment to calm my nerves before the whole crowd has their eyes fixated on me.

In a sudden flash, the entire stage is illuminated in a bright, cool light. I force myself to go ahead and make this moment count. I step boldly onto the tightrope and in a flurry of movement I am off. Tiptoeing across the thin wire. Dancing, twirling, putting all my efforts into this one act. And the crowd is loving it. Although I cannot see their faces, I can hear the fierce cheering and hooting that can only mean one thing. I have done it.

The lights go off again and I know it's time to climb down the other side and exit the stage. Our group is embracing, celebrating the success and I don't hesitate to join in. Tomorrow the winners will be announced but right now I don't care if we win or not. All I can think about is that I did it, after all my setbacks, I did it.

Maybe it was just a daydream. But that never meant it couldn't come true.