

Behind **HIS SCAR**



A COMING OF
AGE STORY

A Short Story by
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Behind His Scar

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I've been inside the red-white big tent for almost three hours since five o'clock in the morning. I wish I could be outside to feel the winter sun warm my body.

Sitting on the long bench, I'm gazing at small, misty cloud of my breath floating in the air. Lifting my head, I take another deep breath and open my mouth slowly to create a long puff cloud into the very cold air and then disperse it with my chilled fingers.

Twenty yards behind the cloud of my breath, a young man is swinging in the air gracefully like a pendulum. His breath cloud is following him like a thin white ribbon flying in the air.

Peering through spaces between my fingers, I tilt my head and close one eye to see his smooth motion. Under flickering fluorescent bulbs hanging on the tent's ceiling, I imagine him turning into a flying dragon, blowing fire from his nostrils, ready to kill anyone who is standing in his way.

My name is Skye Steel. I'm sixteen years old. That young man is Ty, my brother. We're flying trapeze junior in Cirque Boreas, a small circus that we joined seven years ago.

"One more!"

A thunderous voice followed by loud claps pull me back to reality. I turn my eyes to the voice's owner, who is standing on the opposite platform holding a second trapeze bar. His name is Joe Nowak, the flying trapeze master. He is also our trainer and our owner—sort of.

I shift my eyes back to my brother again. With his hands holding onto the bar, my brother stands tall on the platform, bends his knees, and jumps. As he departs, he kicks his legs backward to create a large sweep and then kicks his legs forward as he's sweeping back. Slowly, his motion becomes smooth and constant.

From the opposite direction, Joe is swinging upside down with his legs on the bar in locking position. His eyes are on my brother while synchronizing his motion with my brother's. Then, as Joe shouts, "Ready," Ty releases his hands from his bar, somersaults in the air, and stretches his hands to grab Joe's.

But his hands fail to connect.

My breath catches in my throat as Ty's body is falling from a height of twenty-five feet before he's caught by a safety net at ten feet off the ground. The net gives way beneath him and bounces slightly while cradling his body.

“Stupid!”

I hear Joe’s screaming as I launch forward to help Ty by holding the edge of the net. Ty shakes his head as I look at him in worry. His nose and cheeks are red from the cold.

“Your takeoff is sloppy and your momentum is wrong. How many times should I tell you that wrong momentum and sloppy takeoff don’t work together? If you want to die, it’s up to you!” Joe barks, stomping toward us. “I think you’ve spent too much time with the animals, and they make you weak! From now on, I’ll punish you if I see you near them again!”

Approaching Ty, Joe swings his hand to smack my brother’s head. Ty must have predicted it, or he wouldn’t move his body to avoid Joe’s hand that is passing over his head. Joe glares at him. The scar across his face ripples and makes his expression even scarier. Without dropping his eyes, Joe motions to me.

“Skye, your turn.”

Ty’s eyes widen. He stops me by holding my arm. “You promised to let her rest today,” Ty says to Joe.

A smug smile creeps across Joe’s face. “Well, I forgot to tell you that she can rest only if you perform well today.”

“You jerk!”

“That’s okay, Ty. I can do it,” I say, touching his fingers that are curled into a fist.

My brother looks down at me with sorrow in his blue eyes. Ty is only fifteen years old, a year younger than me, but his five-feet-eight frame makes him look older than his age.

Forcing a smile, I take off my jacket and give it to him.

“It’s not his fault that he loves animals.” I tie my blonde hair into a ponytail, glaring at Joe. “And don’t smack my brother’s head again. He’s not your punching bag.”

Joe spits as I make my way to the ladder, limping. Three weeks ago, I’d sprained my right ankle. It could have been healed by now if Joe had given me enough time to rest. I don’t know which one is worse: working with the unhealed ankle or letting him cut half of my already low weekly wage.

I dip my hands into the powder chalk bowl and shake them off a little bit before climbing the ladder carefully to reach the platform. On the opposite side, Joe is climbing the ladder, too.

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I wince, feeling sharp pain as I place my right foot on the rung. I close my eyes briefly to switch my attention to the thrill feeling of flying in the air while hanging onto the bar.

Standing on the platform, I pull a trapeze bar toward me and look down to see Ty gazing up at me. I force a smile, although I'm sure he couldn't see it from twenty-five feet above him.

Clenching my fingers around the bar, I take a deep breath and leap, hurling myself through the air by kicking my legs backward. At the right moment, I kick my legs forward to create a nice swinging motion.

Joe, hanging upside down on the other bar, is synchronizing his movement with mine. As he shouts, "Ready," I release my grip, somersault in the air, stretch my hands to catch Joe's hands, and . . . we latch tightly!

Looking skyward, I see a satisfied smile on Joe's face before it becomes sour again. He's swinging me back to my own bar. As it comes closer, I feel his grip loosen.

"Ahh!"

My heart sinks and the air howls in my ears as my body plummets downward. I'm shocked because Joe released my hands unexpectedly. In one bounce, the net catches me and the impact knocks my breath out, makes me wheeze.

"What are you doing?" Ty screams, running forward to hold the edge of the net. He pulls me as I roll off and grab his hand. "Are you okay?" Ty's worried eyes are all over me.

I bite my lips when the pain from my ankle rushes through my body in a sharp burst.

"Yeah," I say, adjusting my standing position to ease pressure from my right foot. But I don't have to worry about that because, as I turn, walking toward the bench, a big hand smacks my cheek hard enough to make me stagger. Covering my cheek with my hand, I stare at Joe.

"Stupid girl!" he shouts. "Why did you release your hands before reaching your bar?"

"You are the one who let go *her* hands!" Ty screams back, pushing Joe away from me. He's standing tall with his fists in front of his chest, as if ready to fight with Joe.

I pull Ty's arm. My brother is stronger than other boys his age, but not for Joe.

Joe scoffs and spits on the ground.

"Are you guys done? I need this place for practicing," says a stern voice at the corner.

I see Mr. Bakker, the ringmaster and owner of Cirque Boreas, standing near the tent door. He motions for us to leave.

Joe nods and glances at us. “Five o’clock tomorrow morning!” Then he turns toward the door.

Ty exhales sharply and supports me as we walk outside the tent.

“Be patient,” I whisper to Ty as we move slowly toward our trailer. “Because of him, we are alive.”

Ty doesn’t say anything because he knows that we are indebted to Joe. If he hadn’t found us unconscious and half-buried in the snow seven years ago, we would have died. Knowing we were orphans, he took us under his wings as his apprentices, to learn his flying trapeze skills.

Near our old trailer, a round, short lady with a hairnet wrapped around her gray hair is running toward us. Her name is Tiny. She is a cook, sort of a nurse in the circus, and also the owner of the trailer. She has let us stay with her since we first arrived.

Her trailer is small, but has enough space for a bunk bed and a small dinette with a stove and a sink. The top part of the roof can be raised to make a room for Ty to sleep. We’re lucky to have a tight bathroom with a toilet and a shower in a single room.

“Argh, that beast!” she shouts in her thick Moldovan accent, gazing at my swollen ankle. “He forced you to practice again! Doesn’t he know that your ligament is already weaker, and if you keep forcing yourself, you can’t walk normally?”

She mutters something in her dialect as she pushes the trailer door open. When we are inside, she brings the first aid box and takes a cold pack from it. Ty takes the pack from her and puts it on my ankle. In the meantime, Tiny is stepping out to get some medicine for me.

In ten minutes, she returns with a bowl of herbal concoction for inflammation that is unbelievably bitter, and I almost spit it out. She chuckles to hear my protest. Then she and Ty leave me alone, lying on my bed with my wounded ankle propped up on a pillow.

Whatever concoction she gave me, it makes me drowsy. Somehow, through a haze of drowsiness, I hear a deep voice mutter, “I’m sorry for today,” and feel a warm, rough hand on my forehead. I open my heavy eyes, but it’s hard to see the face in the dimly lit trailer. Then I hear the door open and close softly, and I’m pulled back to slumber.

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When I wake up, it is already past noon. Ty brings a bowl of stew for my lunch. While eating, I listen to Ty explain that he has just returned from treating some sick animals, against Joe's warning. But Ty seems not to care. He loves taking care of animals. If we were living a different life and had enough money, I would force Ty to go to a veterinary school.

After he leaves, Tiny comes to check on my ankle.

"I'm surprised Joe doesn't bother you today with his meticulous tasks," Tiny comments.
"Usually, no matter how sick you are, he has a way to force you out."

"Maybe he's sick of me," I say lightly.

Tiny chuckles. "Well, he must be busy, because he didn't show up for lunch, either."

"Really?" I frown. "The big boss must be upset with his absence during lunch time."

Mr. Bakker values togetherness and always expects his performers to show up to meal times.

"Nah, he won't because Joe's show alone brings more audience than any of us here," Tiny says. "Listen, Skye, I know Joe is rough on you and Ty, but he has a good heart. No hard feelings, okay? I've mentioned to you that Joe used to be a gentle kind man. His personality changed after his wife died in labor together with their twin babies. He doesn't even want to talk to people except to the big boss. That's why we're surprised to see him bringing you and Ty here that night."

Without saying a word, I pull the blanket over my shoulders and gaze at the ceiling as Tiny continues talking. For Ty and me, Joe is a tyrant. He forces us to get up at five in the morning, rain or shine, for practicing. If I were old enough, I would run away from him.

Snow falls lightly as Ty and I walk to the big tent at five o'clock the next morning. Oddly, we don't see Joe inside the tent. Usually, he's on time. After waiting for a half-hour, we make our way to his trailer. But Joe isn't there, either.

A full day passes, and we still don't see Joe.

Ty and I are happy for not seeing him for a day, but we feel curious too. We check with Mr. Bakker, but he only says, "He's in town on personal business."

I force Ty to coax more information from Matilda, Mr. Bakker's daughter. Since she has a crush on my brother, I think she may leak some information. But Matilda is useless, too. She only says Joe had a doctor appointment, which is strange because Joe is as fit as a fiddle.

While waiting for Joe, we continue our practice each morning, and then use the rest of the day to earn some extra money by doing chores or running errands for the other performers.

During the off season, most of the performers go to the nearby towns for drinking, partying, or shopping. They are tired of living in the country, where our circus usually stays for the season. With our help, they are happy to get a break from shoveling horse manure, repairing furniture, and mending clothes.

A week passes, and Joe hasn't returned yet.

One morning after practice, Mr. Bakker calls Ty and me to come to his brightly painted trailer. Inside, we greet Mrs. Bakker. She looks at us ruefully but the streaks of mascara under her eyes makes her look funny. I nudge Ty's stomach hard as his body is slightly shaking from holding his laughter.

Next to her is a middle-aged man wearing a gray tie and blue suit. His hair is thinning, and a pair of thick glasses perches on his nose. He gives us a slight nod.

"Please sit, Skye, Ty." Mr. Bakker motions to a red sofa.

Ty and I sit side by side, facing the man and Mrs. Bakker with a rectangular table between us. Mr. Bakker positions himself at the head of the table and gestures to the man.

"My name is Gus Spencer. I'm Mr. Nowak's lawyer," the man says, gazing at us. "I'm afraid I have a very bad news for you, kids. Mr. Nowak died. Despite all the lung medications he took for years, his lungs collapsed and he passed away three days ago. I'm sorry."

Ty and I exchange glances as an inexplicable feeling rises inside my chest. I chew my lips, thinking about our future.

"But we are not his family. Why are you telling us?" Ty blurts out a question that is in my mind, too.

"Ty!" I hush, glaring at him.

Mr. Spencer smiles and takes out a brown envelope from his bag.

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“Before I read Mr. Nowak’s will, both of you better read his letter first,” he says, giving the envelope to us.

I open the envelope and unfold the letter. Ty leans his head to mine as we read it together.

In the letter, Joe apologizes for his harsh training because he wanted us to be the best flying trapeze performers in the world so no one would look down on us. But he realized that we are too smart to live in the circus. Last year, after finding out that he wouldn’t have a long life because of his illness, he reached out to his single sister, who lives in a big town somewhere in the state of Virginia, and asked if she wouldn’t mind having two teens in her house with all expenses covered. Joe also writes that his savings is enough for us to get a good education, something that his babies couldn’t do. At the bottom of his letter, he wishes Ty to be the best veterinarian in the world.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I finish reading the letter. Ty’s face and eyes are red from crying. We feel guilty for hating Joe. It never crossed our minds that he would care so much about our future!

“Mr. Nowak’s sister will be happy to have you stay in her house. She’ll be here in three days to pick you up, so be ready for her,” Mr. Spencer says, looking at us behind his glasses.

Mr. Bakker looks at us and says, “I’m sad to see you go, kids, but I understand Joe’s intention and I’m happy for you.”

“Me, too.” Mrs. Bakker nods her head, dabbing her misty eyes with a handkerchief.

Ty squeezes my hand hard enough to get my attention.

“So, I can go to school like . . . those kids we saw the last time we were in town?” he asks cautiously.

Pressing my lips together, I nod.

Ty’s face lights up, and his blue eyes sparkle. “Can I go to the veterinary school?” he asks again.

Chuckling, I nod again and ruffle his ash blonde hair with my hand.

“Skye!” Pouting, Ty swats my hand away.

The news about Joe's passing and about us leaving the circus spreads like wildfire. As we step out from Mr. Bakker's trailer, all the performers are already outside waiting for us. They cheer for us and cry for Joe and then cheer again.

In the crowd, I search for Tiny and find her standing away under a tree with her arms crossed. Her face is placid, unreactive. She must be upset because we'll be leaving her all alone. After all these years, I can't imagine living without her, either. But Joe gave us this opportunity, and we must fulfill his wish by working and studying hard.

Letting out a sigh, I promise myself to use the money I've saved to buy an airline ticket to Virginia for Tiny. With the thought securely carved in my mind, I'm pushing the crowd aside so I can share the good news with her and ask for her blessing before I step into my new life.

Kana Wu is the author of feel-good YA and New Adult Story.

Her other novels:

[No Romance Allowed](#)

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