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## **ICARUS BREATHES FIRE**

*By Erynn Aiello*

Icarus was always there. From the time I was a young boy, probably even a baby, until I was 21 years old, he was by my side; my own personal dragon. He used to be small, like I was, and hard with dark evergreen scales that tickled my skin. His eyes were the size of walnuts with black diamond-shaped pupils, mysterious as a toddler's nightmares.

When I was five years old, I tried to learn how to ride a bike. I hit a small rock and fell over, crushing my leg. My innocent blood spilled onto the pavement, and I cried and cried. Icarus responded by angrily setting my bike ablaze with his breath. I haven't had the courage to get on a bike since.

My parents never really said or did much about Icarus. They were concerned, yes; not many children had their own personal dragon, but I think they learned to accept him in the only way they could, treat him as an unruly sibling, chiding him, then eventually giving up hope and trying to pretend he didn't exist. Icarus did everything a child could do to try their patience. He accidentally set fire to my father's beloved Lazyboy recliner, he turned my most cherished

possession at the age of five, my teddy bear, Mr. Tickles, into a charred mess of cotton and melted plastics. “I’ve had enough!” My mother would cry. My father would comfort her, telling her that perhaps Icarus would move on soon.

They decided not to have any more children.

I was getting ready for my seventh grade dance, hands moist with anticipation, staring at my reflection with furrowed brow. My shirt wasn’t quite right. I would often ask Icarus for his opinion, knowing full well that he wouldn’t voice any – at least none which he could properly articulate in any kind of known language. But I asked him anyway, hopeful. His eyes would widen or squint, as I would ask thing such as, “What should I eat for breakfast?” “Do you think such-and-such a girl thinks I’m handsome?” or, more often than I would care to admit, “If Billy Winthrope spits on me and calls me a fartknocker again today what should I do?”

“Kill him with fire,” Icarus would always seem to say in a matter-of-fact manner. I knew that I would never go near Billy with fire because that is illegal in most places, and I would get in big trouble. Still, I knew that if I gave the word, Icarus would do it for me, and that’s all I needed.

“Does this shirt look okay?” I asked. It was cream colored button-down, more brown in hue, really. Now that I think about it, it was horribly out of style, so far ahead of its time that it went too far back in time. Hideous. Icarus’ pupils contracted and he squinted as he shifted his weight, leaning on the dresser beside me. He seemed displeased.

“You don’t like it, do you?” I sighed. “It makes me look fat, doesn’t it?”

The dance did not go well. Lucy, who was pretty, would not dance with me, and Billy spit on me, calling me a fartknocker, his middle fat roll bobbing up and down like a well-lubricated, Salvador Dali-invented hula hoop. Icarus lunged, hissing at him – a warning. Billy cried, everyone laughed, Billy left the dance humiliated, and Icarus was a star. Although he knew Billy must have had it coming, the principal asked Icarus to leave the dance. “Blowing fire at your classmates,” he said, “is not acceptable.” He had a point. Still, after his departure I was left feeling deflated, not knowing what to do with myself.

“Can’t fight your own battles?” Lucy asked, brushing my shoulder with her long red mane. I didn’t know what to say, so I shrugged. She giggled and pointed at me with the gaggle of geese she called her girlfriends. I left to go home and play Battleship with Icarus.

Icarus liked to play games with me: hide-and-go seek, checkers, hopscotch – anything, you name it, he played it. Battleship was the most fun, and a game we often played when we were feeling down and helpless. Whenever one of us would hit either of our ships, Icarus would make a Kaboom! sound with his mouth and pretend to set the little plastic boat pieces on fire. We would pretend the people we hated lived on the doomed battleships. That always cheered me up.

I took a blonde girl named Millie Jessup to the Senior Prom. She was beautiful – a vision standing under the mirror ball in pink chiffon. When harsh lights were flipped on to indicate the end of the evening, she transformed from beautiful vision to dastardly dehydrated pastry. Still, she had said yes, a word almost foreign to my vocabulary as it wasn’t said in my presence too often.

Icarus, who did not approve, sat slumped in the corner behind the punch table like a disgruntled wallflower, glaring, looking ready to pounce. To say that this made me uneasy is an understatement.

My lips brushed against Millie's plump lips. When, at this point in my life, I had only felt the touch of Icarus' coarse scales, I now felt the warmth of flesh filling me with a cozy, carbonated feeling of ecstasy.

It ended after that night.

It was the only night of my 17 years that I had felt anything close to love, but Icarus would have none of it, and, in turn, did not let me taste what many take for granted. By "not let" I suppose I mean to say that after that night, he ignored me and treated me not as a sibling or a friend, but as a lesser being – a stranger. I felt the empty sorrow of a tree stump, the thought of losing Icarus eating me up inside as insects eat what's left.

We continued our codependant games for a time, during what were supposed to be the best years of my life. After losing Millie I kind of shut down socially. I spent most of my time indoors with Icarus. Yes, I was blind to the negative impact Icarus was having on my life, the opportunities missed. But how do you let go of a brother, a best friend? It was easier to decline the requests of my peers to join them in social outings than it was to drag Icarus along. The thought alone brought forth too many embarrassing possibilities. It was far easier opting to stay in with my dragon. But I began to grow mad.

Despite this madness, or maybe in spite of it, at the age of 21 a woman, Jennifer Keely, fell in love with me. We did the things that normal couples do: went to the movies, to dinner,

made out in her car, as I tried not to let Icarus see us. I bought her flowers a few times, only to have Icarus burn them to a charred mess. “Stop that,” I’d say, “You’re being incredibly immature. Besides, I paid good money for those. You’d like Jennifer if you’d only give her a chance.”

Icarus spat a small flame, like that of a blow torch at me, his equivalent of a raspberry.

Icarus began to accompany us on dates whether we welcomed him or not. To art exhibits, Italian dinners, walks in the park, and leisurely afternoons on the couch. Sometimes Jennifer and I would try and make out, telling Icarus to leave the room. Other times we’d lounge around in our pajamas, reading the Sunday paper. If there was an article or photograph Icarus didn’t approve of, he was sure to make it known by torching the whole paper, often to our surprise and panic.

“I’ve had it,” Jennifer said one morning. “This can’t go on.”

Icarus was jumping up and down on our bed, playfully spitting amber sparks in the air.

“He means well,” I said.

“You have to understand,” she played with strands of her hair nervously, “That I’ve been very patient.”

“I know, I know,” I put my hand gently on her bony shoulder. “Just give it a little more time. You’ll get used to him.”

“I don’t want to get used to him. I want to get used to you. It’s too crowded in this relationship.”

Jennifer went into the bathroom and closed the door. This is a place she often resorted to when she needed some quiet. No one could touch her there.

“Jennifer,” I said. Icarus and I tried to coax her out of the bathroom.

“I’m not coming out,” she sobbed. “It’s him or me.”

I’d never been faced with this decision before. I could understand her frustration. I was frustrated myself and I had grown up with Icarus.

We sat there for hours. It was clear she wasn’t going to come out.

“Icarus,” I turned to him, hopeful he would understand.

Small red tears trickled down Icarus’ face and he turned to me. I could feel his panicky hot breath on my skin. *Please*, his eyes seemed to say. *Please don’t make me go*. But we both knew he had to. He left that evening, leaving a red trail staining the carpet to the front door. My heart was broken. I felt as though a part of me had been ripped from me, stolen suddenly. But this was the woman I loved.

“You can come out now,” I choked on my words a little. “He’s gone.”

Jennifer and I were more or less happy together for years. I think. I moved in with her after Icarus left and to try and replace that empty feeling I couldn’t get rid of, she bought me a little white cat. I named it Stupid. I painted the walls and bought new furniture and tried to make it feel like my home. Sometimes it did, but other times, I felt like a stranger perpetually visiting Jennifer’s bizarre and mysterious world. The sex was good, at least. But I grew fatter and fatter and her skin became paler and paler. And Stupid never really felt like my cat. Still, I loved her.

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I am 27 now, and I have just asked her to marry me. I got down on my knee after a night of martinis in the kitchen. I presented her with a small velvet black box with a modest-sized princess cut diamond ring inside. Her martini glass fell to the floor and shattered. I stared at her, not flinching as she nervously bit her lip and separated her long blonde strands of hair between her fingers.

“I’m sorry,” she says, finally. “I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

But I know why she can’t. She doesn’t love me anymore. I guess I just need to hear her say it. She does. Stupid looks at me with baleful eyes and hisses at me on my way out the door.

“Icarus!” I call out, drunk. I’m in the back room of a bar. There are only a few people in this room, but they are now leaving nervously. I am wet from rain and tears. I wandered into this bar because it seemed to have a friendly atmosphere and lots of liquor and it didn’t seem to be raining inside. I was right about the liquor, at least. I found myself lying on the crusty wooden floor, face down.

I miss Icarus.

I feel a warm breath against my spine and a claw gently scratching at my side. Icarus’ breath moves in and out, and gentle flames warm me, drying away the rain and tears. He holds me in his lap and licks my hair back off of my face with his hot tongue.

I tell him that I need a place to go. A new place to live and take off my cold, soaking clothes to dry. Icarus seems to agree and looks at me as though he would like to help.

“You can help me,” I say. “But I don’t think you should move in with me. It would be better if you were only over sometimes. You’ve gotten too large to live in my house. You’ve become almost literally, like, the elephant in the room.”

He looks at me, a growl ready, rattling in his throat, but I know he understands. He nods and stomps away. His eyes widen and he turns to look at me before he opens the door with his tiny paws. “I’ll see you soon,” I assure him. “Please don’t leave me again.”

A few weeks have gone by. I’ve passed Icarus on the street a few times. His head is held high and bright cirrus clouds wisp around his silhouette, framing him. I nod to him and his eyes widen in acknowledgment. *If you should need me to*, he seems to say, *I am ready to breathe. I am ready to kill it with fire.*