

One Night At The Refuge

Nalini Singh

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By Nalini Singh

Illium crept down the hallway, freezing in place when he heard movement. But no, his parents were still asleep.

He continued his creeping, trying really hard to keep his wings from making noises by dragging on the floor—only it was so tough! His wings were bigger than his body right now. His father told him he'd grow into them but at the moment, he could only fly a little far before becoming tired.

And they were heavy when he walked, but his mother said if he didn't learn to hold them up, they'd go all droopy and fall off. Illium wasn't sure she wasn't fibbing, but he knew for sure that all the strongest warrior angels held their wings off the ground—you had to be strong to be a warrior, so Illium would be strong.

Sometimes, the older kids teased him by saying he couldn't be a warrior because his wings were blue, but he figured he could always color his wings like some angels colored their hair. His hair already had colors.

Eee, he was at the door! Not the back door though, the one that dropped off into the gorge. His mom really would scalp his feathers if he went out that door. The wind currents in the gorge were really powerful—after Illium kept wanting to sneak out, his dad had taken him out into the gorge, let him fly there, made him see for himself.

It had been hard, so hard. The wind had almost crumpled his wings and thrown him to the stone walls of the gorge. But his dad had made sure he was okay. And Illium knew never ever to go out the back door—not until he was bigger.

But he could go out the front. Okay, maybe he wasn't meant to go out at night, but this was a special 'casion.

Reaching up to the doorknob, he stretched and stretched. Ugh. It was too far. His mom had made his dad move the handle after Illium kept getting out when he wasn't supposed to.

Looking around, he saw a chair. But it was too big and heavy and it'd make a lot of noise if he tried to drag it over. His mom woke at just little noises—she said she'd turned into a bat after he started walking—so he had to be very careful.

His wings whispered over the floor as he turned and looked to see if he could—Stupid! Sometimes, he was a stooooopid.

Moving further back into the kitchen, he clambered up onto the chair, then from there onto the table. That should be high enough. Jumping off, he got enough air under his wings to kind of sweep over and grab the door handle. He made a noise, but that was all right, because he was opening the door and dropping to the ground and running out.

“Illium!”

Laughing gleefully as his mother's voice drifted into the night air, he clenched his jaw and beat his wings real hard until he managed to get aloft. He couldn't wait to be big like Raphael, when he could just take off like it was nothing. Right now, it took forever. But he was fast enough to be up and on the roof of the house before his mom came out. He hid behind the chimney as she flew into the air and went looking for him.

His dad went out the back door, to check the gorge. That made Illium mad. He'd made a promise hadn't he?

Only when the coast was clear did he pick up the little bag he'd hidden by the chimney when he was playing before dark. Flying off the roof with the bag held to his chest, he winged his way over to Aodhan's house. He was still wobbly, but he wasn't as slow as he'd been before.

Reaching Aodhan's house, he couldn't see his friend at first, but then Aodhan waved at him from the other side of the roof and flew over to join him. He had a little bag, too.

Not talking because it would be too noisy if they shouted at each other—and they weren't good enough at flying to go real close without getting their wings tangled—they flew in silence. The grown-ups didn't all sleep at night so they stayed low, where there was less chance they'd be spotted.

Aodhan was usually too sparkly to hide even at night, but he'd covered himself with the charcoal they'd found in a fireplace, so he only sparkled a tiny bit.

Then they were there, at last.

Landing, they walked to the edge of the gorge, sat down with their legs hanging over the side and their tired wings draped behind them, and opened their bags to pull out their supplies.

“What did you get?” Illium asked his friend.

Sneezing, Aodhan rubbed his nose. “Charcoal makes me sneeze.” His fingers left smudge marks on his bag when he opened it. “I have cookies and I found a bottle of milk.” A big smile. “It didn’t spill!”

Illium grinned and took a sooty cookie. “I made sammiches.” He’d put cheese and tomatoes in them just like Aodhan liked. “And I got grapes.”

They laid out their booty on top of the bags, both bags between them. While Illium ate a cookie, Aodhan ate the sandwich, and they kicked out their feet.

“Look,” Aodhan whispered.

Illium’s eyes widened. “Here they come.”

He knew some grown-ups raced at night. That’s why they’d come to watch, but he’d never thought it would be this fast. They were like the lightning bolts in the sky during a storm, so fast he could barely keep track of them. “Who’s winning?”

“Raphael maybe?”

They watched, saw Uram take the lead, laugh wildly as Raphael overtook him. Two other angels were behind them, suddenly powered forward. Illium was trying to figure out who the angels were since it was dark and hard to see when he felt a grip on the back of his shirt. A hand gripped Aodhan’s shirt at the same time.

“What do you two have to say for yourself?” his mother asked as they looked over their shoulders at her. Illium’s heart thumped from the surprise and he knew Aodhan’s was probably doing the same thing.

Then his best friend held out a cookie and Illium said, “Wanna watch the race?”

“What race?” Frowning, his mother looked over their heads. “Is that Raphael?”

Good grief, what are those four doing?”

“Racing!” Illium patted the stone. “Please, Mom. Can we watch?”

His mother looked first at him, then at Aodhan, her pretty eyes bright. “Make a spot in between.”

Grinning, they moved the food to either side and shifted to make enough space for her. She sat down with one arm around him and the other around Aodhan. She tucked them both close, her beautiful wings strong and warm behind them... just as the racers passed right underneath. The wind from their passage blew Illium’s hair back from his face, had his heart beating in fast thumps all over again.

Raphael grinned at seeing them and waved. Then he was zooming around to overtake the two angels who’d gotten into the lead after catching a good draft. Uram flew on his heels, as if just waiting for a chance to slip past.

Illium watched until all four were out of sight but he couldn’t tell who won. “Did you see?” he asked Aodhan.

His friend shook his head, his eyes sparkling in his charcoal face. “They were going too fast.”

“They’re still racing,” Illium’s mom told them. “I think this is a long race.”

Disappointed at not getting to see the end, Illium picked up a sandwich and bit into it, then lifted it to his mom. She smiled and took a bite. When Aodhan offered her milk, she drank some and kicked her feet just like him and Aodhan. And it was okay that they didn’t see the end of the race. This was fun, too. Sitting here with his best friend and his mom.

Then his dad flew up along the gorge and stopped in front of them. “What, I’m not invited to the picnic?”

And it was even better.

It was the best picnic ever.

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