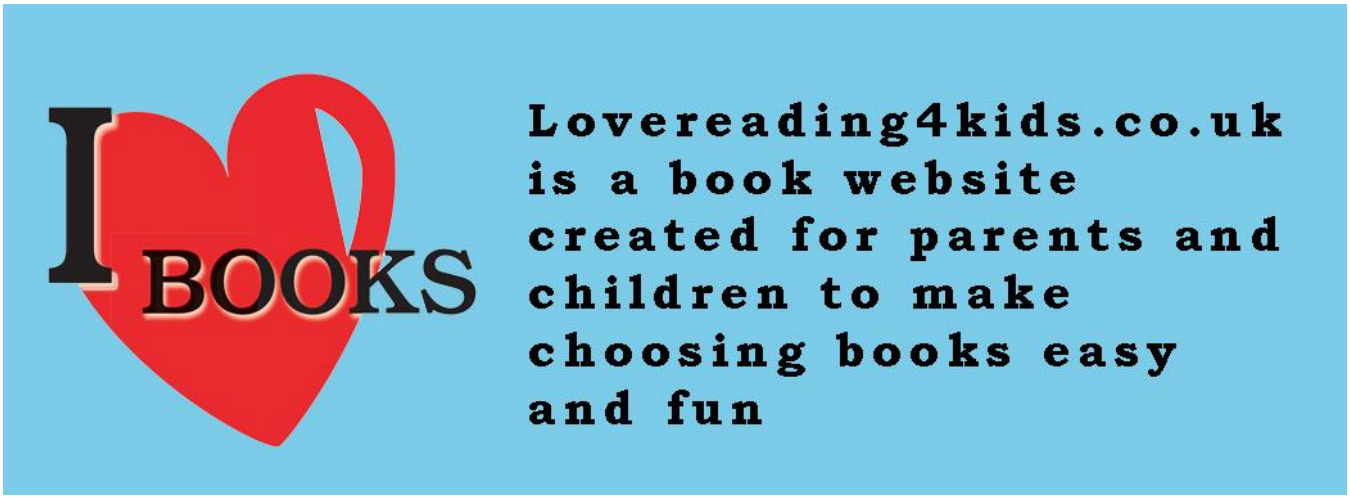


Opening extract from

Children of Icarus

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The gods were always jealous of the angels, or so we are taught.

They captured the angels, envious of their purity and perfection, but in their haste left one free. This was the youngest of the angels, Icarus. When the gods realized their folly, they bade Icarus come to their land to retrieve his people, and so they opened to him the doors to their realm: the sun.

The gods have always been cruel, always tricksters. The sun was no gateway but poor, young Icarus could not have known the gods' plan for him. He flew into the sky until his wings caught fire and he plummeted back to the earth.

Death would have become Icarus had he not been discovered in the field where he had fallen. He was found by the great Daedala, who took pity on the beautiful, innocent creature. She built for him a tomb far underground and crafted for him a sarcophagus, in which he might regenerate over the centuries and one day rise once more.

Daedala knew she would not live to see Icarus fly again, and so built for him two more gifts, to protect him from the ruthless, relentless gods. She constructed a giant city over the tomb of Icarus, with walls and towers so high they threatened the territory of the gods themselves. And then, around this city, she built a labyrinth that was thought to never end.

There is, somewhere, an end to the labyrinth. Every year those young and innocent like Icarus are sent to find this end. If they accomplish this task they are rewarded with entry into Alyssia, land of the angels, where they themselves will become angels and one day welcome Icarus home.

Or so we are taught.



I count every ping in the lift on the way up. Fifteen. Sixteen. I don't look at the number Clara pressed. I don't listen to her or the others now as they chatter about the parade. I just keep counting and praying to Icarus it's not twenty-three, not the balcony floor.

Twenty-three.

The lift doors open with a final ping. The others spill out into the hall. I linger, wondering if I could get away with waiting in the lift. Then Clara comes back for me. She grins and, despite her split lip, it's so pretty. I follow her after the others.

At the end of the hall the door is already propped open, spilling sunlight and a cool breeze inside. Tanner and two of the other boys from my class are already outside, peering off the balcony to the street below.

"Parade started yet?" Clara calls.

Tanner shakes his head. When he looks at Clara, his mouth twists. "What in Alyssia happened to you? Try and rob the bakery again?"

Clara doesn't waste her breath on him. She goes right to the balcony, shoving herself up on the stone ledge. A few of the other girls shriek at her and one of the guys tells her to get down, but Tanner and a few of the others laugh. I wish they wouldn't. It encourages her.

Clara walks along the ledge like it is a tightrope, throwing a grin over her shoulder as she pretends to wobble. I catch my breath, sure today will be the day she slips and falls. She doesn't. Not yet. She makes it out to the spire and sits, one leg on either side of the structure. Then she starts to shimmy out to the very end, so she's right behind the gargoyle.

"How's your boyfriend doing?" one of the guys calls.

"Great!" Clara wraps her arms around the gargoyle's waist. "He's my rock, y'know?"

A few more of the guys laugh. Some of the girls are into it now, but most still look worried or cross with her. Most of the girls don't like Clara. I can hear one of them whisper something about Clara being a show-off who just wants to impress the boys. I don't know if that's true. Rather, I think it's that Clara wants to impress everyone.

Although everyone is somewhat impressed at first, when Clara calls out that she sees the parade coming down the street, they lose interest in her exploits. The balcony's too far back, too far up, to properly enjoy the parade. They all head back to the lift.

"Losers!" Clara calls after them, sticking to her perch. She rests her chin on the gargoyle's shoulder, peering down at the street.

The breeze is slight, enough to rustle my skirt and hair, but not enough to erase the faint ping of the lift closing. Clara and I are alone now.

"Don't you want to see the parade?" I ask her.

"I can't hear you," Clara says, not turning around. "At least come to the balcony."

I do, albeit hesitantly. When I reach the stone ledge and peek down, my head swims. The crowds on the pavement are like one grey blob. We're too far up for details. We're too far up.

I must say this aloud, because Clara says, "Just look at the sky if you can't look at the ground."

Then again, maybe I don't say it aloud, because Clara knows this is what I need anyway. The sky is as grey as the crowds. It makes me wonder, does the sky worship Icarus as well, if it so often wears his colour?

"Deep breaths," Clara says. I don't know if she says it for herself or for me, because that's when she releases the gargoyle. Carefully, she rises to her feet.

I grip the ledge so tightly it hurts. I want to tell her to stop but I'm afraid I'll distract her and she'll fall. I'm afraid she'll fall anyway.

Clara raises her arms for balance as she stands over the city. Between the fluttering wisps of her blonde hair I see her grin. I wonder if she feels like she's flying when she's like that. I wonder if she feels like Icarus.

Finally, Clara starts backing up, off the spire. She tilts at one point and I have to swallow a squeal. She regains her balance and takes the last few steps to safety, then hops down to my level. I feel like I can breathe again.

"Let's go," Clara says. "We'll be just in time for the Dance of the Angels. I saw them coming down the street."

Clara and I hurry to the lift. I don't count the pings this time. They hardly register at all.

"Will you tell me what happened?" I ask Clara. She knows I mean her split lip and the bruise on her cheek.

"I tried to hide them. I borrowed Mum's make-up. Are they really obvious?"

I shake my head, even though they are.

"I went to the temple last night. After hours. Some guards caught me."

Clara knows as well as the rest of us we aren't allowed in the temple after night service. The city is very strict about curfews.

"I just needed some time there alone. I get that if we want to speak to Icarus at night we have to do so before bed, but I figured he'd be more likely to hear me in his own temple. Right?"

I nod because I know that's what Clara wants me to do.

"It's just… I needed to tell him again. I tell him all the time, but I wanted him to know how important this is to me. I'm already sixteen so tomorrow's my last chance. I have to be chosen tomorrow."

Clara has talked to me about this before. It makes me uncomfortable, but I listen anyway. She's my best friend.

"I'm going to be chosen," Clara says, and I know she's saying it more for her own benefit than mine. "I've prayed to Icarus more than anyone. He has to send me into the labyrinth."

Ping. We're almost at the first floor.

"I'll miss you," I murmur.

Usually Clara tells me to speak louder, even though she can understand me perfectly. It's her way of trying to get me to come out of my shell, I think. This time she gives me a warm smile.

Ping.

"Don't worry," she says, "I prayed that you would get chosen too."



My alarm goes off at seven. The service is at nine, but everyone in our building is expected to arrive at eight thirty. I need to shower and dress and do my hair.

I need to shower. I tell myself this over and over as I stare at my alarm clock. Its alarm is the same chime as the bells at the Temple of Icarus. Instead of turning it off, I lie there, thinking of how those bells have sounded to me on this morning for the past six years.

Children aged ten to sixteen are candidates for the labyrinth trial. Clara is sixteen. So am I. This is our last chance to become Icarii: to enter the labyrinth and become angels.

Clara's older brother became an Icarii when he was twelve and we were ten. Clara cried, but her mother was so proud and her brother was so excited and everyone was so pleased for him that eventually Clara stopped crying. It happened suddenly after her brother had been gone for a couple of months. One night I was helping Clara dry her tears with little grey handkerchiefs and the next I was praying with her for Icarus to send her into the labyrinth. Except that's never really what I prayed for.

Mother comes in for me seven minutes after seven. I close my eyes and pretend I've slept through my alarm.

Mother wakes me with a light shake of my shoulder. "Honey, you have to get up."

The bells go quiet. I open my eyes. Mother smiles at me. Pats my shoulder once more. "We don't want to be late. This is your big day."

My last big day. After today – this morning – I'll never be able to become an Icarii.

The shower is too hot or too cold. My skin is pink all over when I get out. As I dry my hair, I think about the parade. The Dance of the Angels is always so pretty. The dancers wear golden robes that catch the light as they twirl. The robes fan out behind them like wings. The Icarus dancer is dressed all in grey, muted yet striking against the gold. He dances differently than the other angels, movements languid and loose and haphazard. Sometimes it looks like the Icarus dancer is simply throwing himself around the street. Still, it manages to be just as beautiful as the Angels' dance, if not more so. Something about the movements of Icarus are desperate.

Sometimes I fantasize about joining the Dance of the Angels, but all the dancers are over sixteen. I'd have to wait until next year to try out and I probably wouldn't get a role. I love watching dancers, but I can't execute such perfect movements myself. I trip and I stumble and, more than anything, I freeze.

Clara would make a beautiful dancer.

"Are you going to put it up?" Father asks, startling me as he passes by my room. He gestures to my hair. I shake my head and he frowns. He says, "Alright." He leaves.

Father doesn't like it when I leave my hair down. I don't think Mother likes it either. I like it. Having it down makes it easier to hide my face. For the past six years I've hidden the expression I make when I'm not chosen. This is my last year. I won't let anyone find out how I really feel now.

Mother comes in to fuss with my dress. She brushes my hair back behind my ears. "You're so beautiful, dear. It's a pity you don't let others see that more often."

I wonder if Father put her up to this.

"What about that lovely clip you got for Fallen Day last year? It matches your eyes. I'll go get it, shall I?"

I shake my head, but Mother's already gone to the small music box where I keep my jewellery. She opens it and the little golden angel springs up as the Daedalum anthem starts to play. The little golden angel spins slowly. It's just about to meet its reflection in the music box mirror when Mother closes it again.

"It's not there. Where might you have put it?"

I shrug and Mother taps her chin, scanning my room as if her gaze will lure the hair-clip out.

"Mother?"

"Hm? What is it, dear?"

I twist the material of my skirt between my fingers. "If I'm chosen today, will you be happy?"

"More than anything. You know that. I guess we'll have to do without the clip."

Father announces we have to go. It's nearly quarter after eight and if we wait any longer there's going to be a line at the lift. There's a line anyway, when we get there.

Mother and Father socialize with the neighbours until we board. Once inside the lift, Mother gives my arm a squeeze and tucks my hair behind my ears again. She gives my arm one more squeeze, as if this action will seal my hair into place.

Ping.

The temple is on the seventh floor. It's the only thing on the seventh floor. I've been told it's the same for every building. The first six floors are for commerce. Nine up to fifteen include commerce and school rooms. Beyond that is housing. There is no eighth floor. The temple takes up two floors with its high ceiling.

I've never been in a building apart from my own, so I wouldn't know for sure what the others look like. There's no point in entering other buildings when we have all we need here.

We get off on the seventh floor and join the line of families streaming into the temple. I hear children whispering excitedly. I hear parents whispering excitedly. Will someone they know get the honour of entering the labyrinth? Do they know a future angel?

Mother, Father and I take our specified seats. I see Clara, two benches ahead, sitting next to her mother. Clara's hair is in two braids on either side of her head, tied by grey ribbons. From here I can't see the ribbons, but I know they're grey. I know exactly what they look like. Clara always braids her hair just like this for special occasions.

More people file into the temple. Mother and Father talk to our bench neighbours, who are also our real

neighbours. This is how seating is determined, for the sake of organization. I sit between Mother and Father and don't talk to anyone. Instead I stare up at the mural that covers the entire ceiling: Daedala's labyrinth. I look down, between my feet, where the mural continues over the whole floor. This is the most we ever see of the labyrinth. The mural is so beautiful it almost makes me want to see the labyrinth itself, which is depicted as being made of silver, with sections covered in shrubbery and moss and flowers. Some parts of the labyrinth are even made of gold, while others are wide spaces bearing fountains or gardens. I can't imagine something like this in real life. I can't imagine this existing just outside the city walls.

I press my feet together, obscuring my immediate view of the mural. I look to Clara and focus on her braids, on the way loose blonde hairs curl against her neck. Her head is bowed, I realize. Even now, she's praying.

I look away from Clara.

The priest of Icarus arrives, swathed in grey robes. Over his robes he wears a heavy silver chain, attached to which is the symbol of Icarus: a pair of wings emblazoned against a sun.

As happens every year on Fallen Day, the priest retells the story of Icarus and Daedala. After that we're led through prayers for Icarus and in thanks of Daedala. Then the priest reads the names of last year's Icarii and announces they have all reached Alyssia and become angels. We pray for them too. I notice a woman ahead of us crying, her prayer especially vigorous. One of those Icarii must have been her child.

The priest finally turns to the naming of this year's Icarii. He holds aloft a piece of parchment and I know it contains the list of chosen. It's the shortest I've ever seen the parchment.

The priest reads the first name and my hands knot in my skirt. I don't recognize the name. I don't recognize the second name either. I see Clara is as tense as me, but I know it's for another reason. I realize she's gripping her braids, that she's pulled them taut. This is her last chance to join her brother in Alyssia. If she's not chosen, she'll never see him again. If she is chosen, I'll never see her. I know it's selfish, but every name that isn't hers is a weight off my chest.

The next name isn't hers.

Mother's hand is on my shoulder. She's saying something to me. Father's brushing back my hair, turning my face to make me look at him. He says something too.

"That's my girl."

Clara has turned around. She's staring right at me. It's shock first and then it's hatred. She hates me, instantly.

And then they call her name too.

"You did it, darling," Mother says to me, and her nails feel like talons in my shoulder. "You're going to become an angel."