

— AUTHOR'S NOTE —

Though I could probably wax poetic for pages on end about the purpose of “art” and what elements of the human condition I wanted to explore in *I Feed Her to the Beast and the Beast Is Me*, this book’s primary goal is to entertain. As a result, I want to make sure readers know what they’re signing up for by forewarning of some potentially disturbing content and topics that can be triggering, stressful, or just unenjoyable to read. Different strokes for different folks, you know?

Foremost, this book contains copious depictions of blood and features ritualistic self-harm (with the purpose of summoning a nonhuman entity). There are also descriptions of bones and corpses, body horror and an instance of body shaming relating to ballet, non-graphic torture, and murder. Finally, there are references to classism and racism as well as parental neglect and abandonment that, while not graphically depicted, still permeate the work.

Now, let’s have some fun.

What do you crave?

I lurched back, tumbling flat on my ass as a voice spoke from within my marrow. Muscles in my arms and legs trembled at the vibrations. The knife skittered across the floor as it repeated its question.

“P-power,” I stammered, blinking rapidly. “So they can’t deny me.”

My skin prickled. Still, I inched closer.

And what would you give for power?

“Everything.” I prayed by clenching my bleeding fist against the shiver that rolled through me. Willing more blood to flow, willing all this to be true and more. And I meant it, I had to.

I wouldn’t go home with nothing.

“Take it,” I dared. “Have all of me, I’m offering.”

I crawled until the knees of my jeans were wet, until the tang of blood filled my nostrils. Until my hands were submerged in red and it had no choice but to take me.

Something hot and sharp gripped my ankle. Then the rock floor vanished beneath me, and I was pulled under, down into the void.





PART ONE

DEVOTION

CHAPTER 1

We were desperate to be the girl who dies, always. Eager to show how dolefully we danced, how prettily we perished, in every ballet, at every audition. In every room was a chance to have our graceful suffering acknowledged.

Today was no exception.

The clock ticked toward auditions for *Giselle*, and the hallway air was thick with desperation, with hunger. Pale ballerinas swarmed the studio windows, elbowing each other to get a better look at the demonstrating soloists, the judges, the board of directors, and our instructors. People who held our futures in their frowns got acquainted with the teachers who had watched us both soar and plummet for eight years straight, six of which I spent at the top of my class. They always told us that dancing meant sharing a part of yourself with your audience—well, now we were ready to give them everything. Once we crossed that threshold, none of us would come out whole.

Take it, the palm prints on the glass pleaded. *Have all of me, I'm offering.*

Fighting the urge to gawk at my executioners, I squeezed out of the crowd. With our final year at the Ballet Academy of Paris drawing to a close, every audition was more important than the last. Today, it was for *Giselle*, our last production before graduating, and next, for the company, *the* Paris Ballet, swirling in luxurious satin and tulle on one of the greatest stages in the world. What we gave today mattered because it was all they'd remember of us tomorrow. The girl who

claimed the heroine became who they craved in three months' time as an apprentice.

So my shoes had to be perfect, because now wasn't the time to over-compensate for a dead pair, and that mattered more than analyzing any judge. Madame Demaret, who taught for both the academy and the company, had said during our very first pointe class, "The shoe is an extension of your foot." And the best shoes required a delicate balance—rigid enough to prop you up but beaten into silence and the shape you needed. Firm but still broken. And always beautiful.

Just like the perfect ballerina.

"Of course they brought Joséphine Moreau to show us how it's done," Vanessa remarked loudly from the window, twisting the twinkling diamond necklace at her throat. "As if we don't get enough of her with *Cinderella* posters all over the city."

Keeping my head down, I focused on the pair of new pointe shoes in my lap. The soft pink satin was still unblemished, the scored soles and darned box not yet darkened from scuffs or worn away, fabric still neat on the sides and back where I'd stitched elastic and silk ribbon. I'd started customizing them the night before, working my nerves out in the crack and pop of the vamp and shank, rapping on the floor and shutting the tip in doors to reach that sweet spot. I didn't have diamonds or famous parents or a milky complexion to sway the world, but I had this. And by the end of the instruction period, when it was time for the judges to watch me, they'd be perfect.

And I'd be perfect too.

Girls like me didn't have any other choice if we wanted to belong.

"Last week, I heard someone in the locker room say that Joséphine kills lesser ballerinas and drinks their talent." Olivia, with her straight, dark hair in a neat bun, grinned from her place by the window.

"That's ridiculous," I muttered, turning the shoes over and giving

them a shake. Stories of broken glass, thumbtacks, and pins hidden inside before auditions were too abundant for it not to be habit.

And every month, there was another rumor about the new étoile Joséphine Moreau and her rapid rise to fame, stories dark, wild, or twisted. She was an urban legend made flesh, where everyone knew someone who saw something untoward. Seducing board members, handling large wads of cash, drinking blood. The only thing we knew for certain was that every door was open to her, and she had more opportunities than she could carry. She'd even turned down Moscow last month.

But it didn't matter what any of us thought of someone like her. Almost everyone who made it into the company also had a legacy name or an inheritance big enough to make you blush, while Joséphine had neither to pave her way. It was rare for a nobody to climb high society's ladder, and for Joséphine to reach so high so fast... that was terrifying for them. Enough to inspire endless gossip. People always manufactured excuses to deny us our successes.

"Obviously she's a witch," my best friend Coralie Baumé grumbled as she shoved her way through the thicket without a glance inside. "There's no other way. Even my mom loves her."

Her nose wrinkled with disgust before she turned her attention back to the sticky toffee bun in her hand. She was the only one with an appetite, easygoing in her poreless, ivory skin as she flopped down in a graceless heap beside me. Times like these never got to her the way they did the rest of us. Wisps of golden ringlets sprang free from her sloppy French twist.

I declined her wordless offer for a bite and smoothed back my already gelled hair, resisting the urge to point out that Rose-Marie Baumé wasn't capable of loving anyone but herself. In some ways, though Coralie descended from ballet royalty, she had it worse than I did being on my own.

Vanessa threw a scowl over her shoulder. “Coralie, you just hate her *because* your mom likes her. Your mom is wasted on you.”

The last part came out a dreamy sigh that made Coralie freeze mid-chew. No one saw the hesitation in her jaw, the blankness in her eyes, but me. It was there and gone in a flash.

“Anyway,” Olivia drawled, “I heard she’s a witch too. When she was in the academy, one of her classmates caught her stealing hair from a brush for a spell or something. She even tried to recruit Nina Brossard into her coven—”

“Was that before or after she was spotted bathing naked in the Seine under a full moon?” I quipped as I slid caps over my toes.

The hall fell silent, frosty. And when I raised my head, Vanessa, Olivia, and the others were glaring at me, making it abundantly clear that I wasn’t meant to be heard. Because I wasn’t like them, not in any way that mattered: rich, white, born with the moral high ground. Breaking the stark silence, Coralie threw her head back and laughed, exposing chewed, gross globs of toffee for all the world to see.

The metal door to the studio lurched open with a loud shudder just as I shoved on my shoes, and my heart skipped a beat. My classmates streamed out of the hall, chatter turning to whispers while I remained on the floor. The pointe shoes’ drawstrings and ribbons fell loose at my trembling fingertips.

“If Vanessa climbs any higher up my mom’s butt, she’ll get stuck.” Coralie sneered through a mouthful before licking the cinnamon and toffee from her fingers. “Ready to get this over with, Laure?”

I didn’t move. Too loose, not loose enough, ribbon bunching instead of lying flat, I stayed put, tying and retying my shoes, ignoring her and that open door, waiting for my pulse to steady so I could walk into that room and claim my future.

Small, warm hands closed over mine. Big, green eyes like a doll’s

inched into view. Eyeliner clumped in her long lashes. “Hey! Don’t be nervous—”

“Easier said than done, Cor,” I snapped through gritted teeth. “You realize President Auger and Hugo Grandpré are in there, right?”

Coralie cocked her head to the side and smiled. So innocent and amused, like she knew some secret to the universe the rest of us didn’t, and it made me want to shove her. “I know. And who’s ranked number one in every subject?”

My eyes fluttered shut. A flush crawled up to my ears.

“Well?”

“I am,” I mumbled, unwilling to look at her and her smug grin. It wasn’t that I forgot my rank, or that I had any other choice but to out-perform when my scholarship was on the line. The problem was the same as ever: *What if rank wasn’t enough?* And certainly my calves could stand to be stronger. “But—”

She wasn’t done. “And *just* this morning, who did Madame Demaret call ‘a joy to watch’ and ‘a vision to behold?’”

A knot untangled in my chest. Always did when Coralie was here, hands in mine, radiant in the afternoon rays like some angel with words of affirmation to soften my edges. It was just the two of us in the hall, sitting on the floor, just like the day we met twelve years ago. We’d waited for our parents outside an empty studio, alone, late into the evening, and though her mother’s driver was the first to show, she refused to get up until my dad arrived from the construction site. And look how far we came. Together.

I sighed and pushed to my feet. Though my hands were no longer shaking, my heart still raced in my chest, but we couldn’t put it off forever. “Let’s go knock ’em dead?”

“And then bury them.”

Coralie looped her arm through mine, and we faced the massive

studio, inseparable. By the wall of mirrors, our classmates huddled with their things and took seats on the floor; and behind a row of tables, the board of directors perched stiffly in wire chairs, wearing bespoke suits, day dresses, and mostly pinched mouths. It wasn't until I was settled with my legs outstretched in front of me that I finally saw them all, the demonstrating soloists and the people who would judge me.

"Sabine looks good considering she was cheated out of *Cinderella*," one of the boys observed, sending my stomach into free fall.

There, stretching with an ankle propped on the barre, was Sabine Simon, a recently promoted première with the Paris Ballet, graduate of the academy, and my ex-girlfriend. There was no mistaking her pixie face and butter-blond hair, her small frame and sugary pink leotard with ruffled sleeves. For them, President Auger and Director Grandpré, Sabine was the blueprint for the ideal ballerina, and so they always picked her for demonstrations, but for me, she was an inescapable reminder of how love and ambition couldn't seem to coexist. Time with her was time better spent perfecting my technique, and no love could withstand how ugly she was beneath the lacquer of ballet silks and perfect pirouettes. There wasn't any love that could withstand the ballet but love of the ballet itself. Not family, not yourself, and certainly not a doll-like girlfriend.

And in avoiding that eyesore, my gaze found Sabine's junior who had surpassed her, Joséphine Moreau. The newest étoile. In fact, the youngest ever to be promoted so, having managed to ensnare the judges and seize the honor of opening the upcoming season in *Cinderella*. Just before her rise, there was even an article interviewing current and former dancers from the company, some of whom moved to other cities because the board refused to promote any new étoiles for years. Former dancers blamed their departures on favoritism and bias, stalled careers,

forced retirements, damning exclusion policies the ballet would never admit to. Anyone who had walked the gilded halls of the academy knew It was more than coincidence how the roster managed to stay gold-plated. And that's what made Joséphine so noteworthy—she was the only new étoile in almost a decade, so special she couldn't be denied, so commanding she just *took* it.

She looked just like her flyers that had gone up the day before: hardly older than us, milky white skin, long neck of a swan, pink rosebud lips, the slenderest hips, legs for days, shiny chestnut hair. She was so coveted, they'd pulled her out of the academy early to begin her apprenticeship, and now she was filling seats, Grandpré reserving roles for her while she guest featured in Saint Petersburg, London, and Milan.

And with every kind of murmur attached to her name.

Joséphine stood in conversation with a tall and slender man, face fine with East Asian features and long, full hair bleached ash white. He wore an expensive-looking white suit fitted nicely to his frame, and when she said something to make him laugh, it became undeniable how handsome he was. Model-esque and hard to look away from. The two together, in intimate closeness, drew the eye: two beautiful people fully absorbed in only each other, the gravity of the room tilted toward their glow.

"Okay, he's not my type, but that is the most attractive man I have ever seen," Olivia mumbled.

I rolled my eyes and swept the room.

The man in white easily ignored Rose-Marie Baumé, seated at the table and watching. Glaring, really. Coralie's mother, with the same flax-colored hair but smooth and a heart-shaped face, decked in jewels and dripping wealth, hands clasped before her and round lips pursed in displeasure. A look I knew well, of a bad smell, that designated otherness, that conveyed you didn't belong but it was uncouth to say so aloud.

Vanessa gasped. "That's the new board member! Remember I said I

ran into Joséphine at a bistro, and she was seeing a guy who looks like a model? Totally nouveau riche.”

“My mom said his name is Ciro Aurissy,” offered Coralie to our cohort with marked indifference, pretending to study her nails chewed down to stubs. “Won’t say what he does though. He just showed up one day, totally legit.”

“How could Joséphine have everything and *not* be a witch?” Vanessa lamented to a sour chorus of agreements.

What I found more interesting was that Joséphine never denied the tales of drinking blood and spells with hair, only adding to the aura of mystery around her. Fears of curses and dark magic psyched out her competition, making her nothing short of genius.

Ballet was warfare, after all.

Rose-Marie stared at both of them now: the guy far too young to be on the ballet’s board and the girl who skipped too many rungs of the ladder on her ascent.

There was an order to the ballet, a structure for who was featured and when. Étoiles then premiers, sujets then coryphées, and finally quadrilles, with apprentices in the gutter. When a role opened up, the ballet worked its way down the pyramid *except* where Joséphine was concerned. She’d sped through her apprentice and quadrille statuses in a matter of weeks instead of years, bypassing coryphée altogether as the youngest sujet ever. She made première and étoile look like a cakewalk with her competition cowering in her dust and Adonis incarnate at her side. Now together, they *really* got under Rose-Marie’s skin.

Suddenly I liked them a lot.

Because who were they, Ciro and Joséphine, but nobodies capable of upsetting the order of the ballet? How did they, so easily and completely?

Joséphine waved to a dark figure sitting behind the table. He was

the only other brown-skinned person in the studio aside from me, with dark hair piled on his head in some haphazard fashion, his black suit neat and working hard to obscure how young he also was for his place there. He scrawled into a notebook in his lap, brows knit in a contemplative scowl, and when he noticed her, he nodded in acknowledgment. Light fell on his broad face, exposing the beautiful sculpt of a strong, wide nose and melancholic down-turn of his eyes. Striking, even, if you're into that sort of thing.

Which I wasn't.

Strangely, all the room's daylight appeared dimmer in that corner where he sat, like a photo gone fuzzy around the edges. Broken TV static and shade obscuring an image I had to squint to see.

I nudged Coralie. "Did your mother mention a second new board member?"

"Nope, why?"

"Does he seem *off* to you—?"

Turning back, I saw Ciro's nameless friend had returned to his notebook, face hidden again, pen moving fast. The eye-straining dimness adorning his frame was gone, leaving just a normal boy dressed in finery, nothing for Coralie to see. Just my imagination then, dust or something in my eye.

President Fiona Auger clapped her hands and strolled to the middle of the floor. Everyone sat quiet and still, arrested by the timbre of her soft voice. "Welcome to the evaluations for level eight's final production, *Giselle*. Let's get started, shall we?"



Watching Joséphine dance was like watching a sculptor carve, knowing they were onto something before the masterpiece even revealed itself

to you. She struck invisible lines none of us saw, tapping into currents in the music none of us felt. Her *sissonnes* were textbook, attitudes beyond reproach, and *pas de bourrée* as light as a feather.

To kick off the audition, Joséphine, Sabine, and some muscled male soloist I didn't know danced variations from the finale of *Giselle*. The man, a hero in mourning; Sabine, the vicious queen forcing him to dance until his death; and Joséphine as Giselle's ghost, adamant in saving him from beyond the grave with her love. His jumps, Sabine's turns, and Joséphine's grace set the standard, showing the board what proper soloists looked like before we students deigned to try.

Even Coralie in all her pretend apathy couldn't resist staring, her mouth agape, transfixed by the spell Joséphine cast. The whole room was enraptured by her sorrow. We hung on every half-turn, hoping she'd save her duke. And when the music ended and she curtsied, not even flushed or breathing hard, not a hair out of place or a falling bead of sweat, we applauded loud enough to shake the walls.

My toes twitched in my shoes to get up and have my turn. Not just dancing, I wanted to fly and glide and spin like that. I needed to channel her, subsume her essence in mine. *Become* Joséphine, the board of directors soft as putty in my hand, ready to offer me everything.

Moving like that, Joséphine was untouchable. *That* was the kind of power I didn't know I wanted. To be undeniable.

"Very well done," President Auger said, clearing her throat and rising from her seat among the judges. Her silver hair was pulled back into its usual high bun so tight it lifted her brows, her navy pantsuit pristine, and as she returned to the center floor, she scanned our class with her falcon's gaze. Searching for mice.

Nearly everyone was afraid of her and the man at her side, Hugo Grandpré, the company's creative director. They shaped and shattered careers, though the sight of Auger's severe expression warmed me just

as much as made me want to run. She'd presided over auditions for the academy all those years ago, grey eyes shining when she realized that I came alone, by bus no less. Eight years old but wholly devoted, shoving my way through a lobby full of dance moms with my chin high. Auger gave a single, almost imperceptible nod that said we shared the same drive, wore the same fierceness. That said she saw *me*.

When she told me I belonged at the academy, I marched back through the shark-infested waters of desperate parents bitter over their children's misfortunes, grinning victorious. Indestructible.

I wouldn't let her down now.

"While they have their break, students, please take your lines for individual evaluations."

Coralie was the first to leap to her feet, impatient while the rest of us tensed our shoulders. My paltry breakfast went sour in my belly as I shuffled up toward a place at the barre.

Before auditions, they liked to line us up to be evaluated, and we complied wordlessly, standing in first position, heels turned out and together, in our academy-issued uniforms of black leotards, soft pink tights, and matching buns.

All cuts of meat in a display case while they prepared a dinner party. The board of directors waited hungrily at their tables.

As they examined us, President Auger whispered to Grandpré, a muscular man with a shaved head and too-tight clothing, known for both his temper and creative genius. Our future choreographer if we were lucky. He scowled, disappointed with what he was served. He always seemed in a foul mood, whether I passed him in the halls or he was taking bows onstage. During the warm days of spring when all the studio and theatre doors were propped open to combat the stifling air, his screams of rage filled the opera house.

"From the top of the roster with Vanessa Abbadie," Auger mumbled,

prompting Grandpré to look at his clipboard and then at the first girl in the row.

In evaluations, we braced ourselves as they cataloged our parts for muscle-to-fat ratio, pitting the curve of my arms against Olivia's ruthless precision, loud enough for everyone to hear. Six months ago, it was Vanessa's emoting we had to strive for, worthy of every night on the main stage, but lately, the rubric was Joséphine Moreau. They wanted necks longer, teeth whiter, arms slenderer, hips narrower, and thighs shapelier. And we had only months to fix what he labeled as flaws before company auditions came along.

"Joséphine is the girl they should all kill to be," Grandpré grumbled loudly, his eyes shifting to the newly minted étoile on the floor, dabbing at her neck with a towel. "Raise their standards to be more like her." Only the air-conditioning whirring overhead gave him a reply.

And so we all studied Joséphine, lithe and pale and pretending not to hear. Not even two years ago, she was one of us, getting told to be like Sabine or some other older model that she studied and later moved on to replace. Maybe two years from now, one of us would be cannibalizing her. We hated her as much as we loved her, because she had our dream caught between her perfect, pearly white teeth, dangled in front of our faces.

The director lingered in front of Vanessa, and Auger offered like a merchant eager to sell her wares, "She has Joséphine's proportions."

And Grandpré stared at Vanessa for a long while, taking in every detail from her full, brown hair and dimpled chin to her long, muscled calves. The silenced dragged on, not even the professionals on the floor daring to make a sound. In the mirror, the only trace of life in Vanessa's face was in the upward twitch of her lips. The board sat up in their seats, squinting to estimate the width of her hips.

“Yes, but she’s too tall,” Grandpré muttered, waving a dismissive hand. Auger scratched notes on her roster. “Taller than the rest, so putting her in the corps may be difficult. She’ll stand out.”

Auger nodded. “What about *pas de deux*? Imagine her dancing Princess Florine with Alain—”

He shook his head. “Joséphine can do everything. We want versatile dancers who will shine in any role.”

And like that, Vanessa’s turn was over, her lips trembling toward a frown, and they moved on to the next.

“She reminds you of her mother, no?” Auger asked before Coralie.

Rose-Marie Baumé was one of the ballet’s greatest étoiles, who went on to become a model, cosmetics mogul, and chair on the ballet’s board, and my best friend was her spitting image down to the permanently flushed cheeks and perfect posture. The kind of disgusting beauty everyone craved, though everything about Coralie from her hair to her manners was wild, almost out of spite.

No one cared to notice the annoyance in Coralie’s set jaw as she stared straight ahead, daring them to say more. Auger couldn’t have chosen a worse attribute.

Grandpré hardly glimpsed her. “Yeah, we all know Rose-Marie’s daughter. Too many freckles, but she’ll be fine if you keep her out of the sun.” He said this directly to Rose-Marie, whose painted smile hardened. She narrowed her eyes at her daughter when he stepped aside.

Then came a nobody at the middle of the pack, a pretty face but too weak a turnout, and though Olivia Robineau’s turnout was near perfect, her waist wasn’t small enough. Leading the boys was Rémy Lajoie, too muscular, and Geoffrey Quý, bafflingly not muscular enough, but his broad shoulders were certainly appreciable. The girl before me cried when Grandpré said her hair was too short. But bodies mattered to them as much as our skill and devotion, and many talented dancers

were chased away over the years because of things they couldn't change. Or shouldn't have been asked to.

We didn't have the power to say otherwise. Still, I stiffened when my turn came.

"Laurence Mesny," Auger announced, using a small, cold finger to lift my chin, raise my eyes to Grandpré's. I was a puppet, waiting for strings to be pulled. Over her shoulder, the board watched on with muted interest. Ciro Aurissy's brow furrowed as he contemplated me. His friend didn't bother glancing up from his notebook at all.

"Final marks are in, and she finished at the top of her class in all areas. Astute, dedicated, with innate artistry."

I resisted the urge to smile in case I appeared confident. They didn't like too much confidence in a soloist.

Grandpré scanned me from head to toe, closing in on the remnants of kinky hair burned and gelled into submission, my complexion darker than the rest, shoulders wider, pulse racing in my throat. Over the years, I'd received every type of criticism veiled as critique, sometimes kind and occasionally cruel. Some found me charming, others boring. Depending on the day, I was too thin or not thin enough, simultaneously vibrant and dead behind the eyes, hair too big and expressions too cocky. I swallowed it all with a blank face.

I held my breath, both eager and reluctant to know what he saw. What if they wanted something I couldn't give? *Someone* else?

Finally Grandpré shrugged. "I guess."

Freed from the spell, I blinked rapidly and released the tension in my shoulders, though I didn't remember flinching.

"Her shoulders are a little too wide," he said before moving on, having had his fill and leaving me hollowed. After two steps, he glanced back and added, "And she could stand to be softer too. Not so uptight."

I tasted blood from biting my tongue.

Uptight.

No one looked at me now, Sabine turned back to her snack, Joséphine working her calves with a muscle carver, the board devouring the next poor girl down the bar. Even the dark-haired boy kept scribbling in his notebook, probably taking notes on our humiliation.

I mulled over that word in my head again and again while the rest of the critiques went by in a blur. Unseeing, unfeeling, my only sensations the tang of blood and ringing in my ears. Not sore from morning class, nor hungry from the breakfast I hardly stomach through the nerves. My knuckles popped in fists balled at my sides, because of everything I'd heard, this was a new one to fixate on.

Now I was too *uptight*.

And then, it was time to dance.

CHAPTER 2

In the center of the studio, Coralie danced a variation from *Giselle*, and she was doing it badly.

“Looks like she finally learned how to balance,” Olivia muttered snidely behind me.

I tucked my cheeks between my teeth, willing myself not to turn around and say something vicious. Each of us prepared a solo for this audition so the judges could assign featured roles, and like many others’, Coralie’s strategy was to make her desire plain. She didn’t want Myrtha the queen or Bathilde the noblewoman; she wanted to be the star, which was always a risk if the judges thought her more suitable in some other position.

She clasped her hands at her chest and turned out, the ends of her long gauzy skirt swirling. I recognized the variation from the first act, when the shy and lovesick peasant girl twirls to entertain a party of aristocrats, full of turns en pointe that sink into gracious, sweeping bows.

And it was spit in all our faces how beautifully, effortlessly she still fit, despite her flaws.

She beamed brighter than the setting sun’s rays as she moved through the steps. Doe-eyed and demure, round cheeks caked in blush she didn’t even need.

My eye twitched at the sight.

“Do you think her mom gives her private coaching?” Vanessa whispered.

“I would, if my daughter got held back a year.”

I inhaled sharply through my nose, but still didn’t turn. Before us, Coralie stepped into the temps levés en pointe. On the toes of one foot, she hopped again and again, small and steady, while the other foot did petit battements to the rhythm. It was a feat both gentle and athletic, to be perfectly in time and make it look easy—the supporting leg bent slightly, body perfectly upright. All the while, the facial expression remained serene, skirts fanned with both hands. It was hell on the knees, yet Coralie’s full, pink lips were quirked in a soft smile as she gazed out past the board. As if she could hop for days and weighed nothing at all.

Beneath the gold plating, however, her work was only passable. Her movements were listless, sloppy. Her hops half a beat off-rhythm and stilted. If I danced like that, they’d laugh me out of the academy.

It took all my strength to stop cringing, as I admonished myself for how easily I too dissected her mistakes. And I was worse than the evaluations, not even saying it to her face. Me, her best friend, no better than the rest.

“Imagine the embarrassment,” Rémy said, voice dropping low. “Anyone else would’ve quit or run off to another ballet already. She only got to repeat the year because her mom’s on the board—”

I whipped around and gave my most scathing glare. Three of our classmates, Olivia, Vanessa, and Rémy, who only smiled in Coralie’s face to sidle up to her mother, fell silent immediately.

“Is someone paying you to be this bitter,” I hissed, “or are you doing it for free?”

Coralie was my best friend—my *only* friend—and I loved her. I wouldn’t let them talk about her like that, as though they didn’t see me sitting right here. Even if they weren’t wrong, exactly.

Vanessa pursed her lips but didn’t respond. I stared her down a

moment longer before turning my attention back to Coralie's wobbly attempt at piqué manège.

In a tornado of blush pink, she spun through a series of small turns, wisps of golden curls coming free. From here, we all saw there wasn't enough speed. Even Joséphine stopped flirting long enough to wince because Coralie didn't have enough momentum to carry her across the arc.

Sure enough, on the next step she lost her footing, stumbling roughly out of the turn. A chorus of sharp inhales echoed through the room. Rose-Marie's frown deepened. But Coralie righted herself, finding her place in the music once more, only now she was trying to make up lost time, pushing faster. And that was a mistake. I chewed my lip to stop myself from shouting directions at her. She needed to turn *with* her rib cage, not restrict its movement. She looked inexperienced, and that was the last thing they wanted their Giselle to be.

Not that it mattered. The judges' warm, indulgent smiles barely slipped—*maybe* there was a dash of pity on Ciro's face, but that was all. The boy in the corner even glanced up from his notebook.

When Coralie's music finished, she sank into a deep bow, dipping her head with convincing modesty. Her shoulders rose and fell, her neck and chest flushed as the room broke into a small round of applause. It wasn't the thunderous roar of a full house by any means, not the sky-shattering applause that Joséphine's Giselle had received. Still, it was louder than the other solos had gotten.

Coralie was a demigod competing against mortals. She *belonged*, born of the ballet with stardust in her blood. And it took everything in me to fight back the bitter taste in my mouth at the thought.

She smiled and scurried to her seat.

"Mademoiselle Baumé," President Auger said from her seat among the panel, wire glasses low on her nose. "Very charming, as

always, but please take extra consideration to anticipate the pace of the music.”

Coralie, fanning herself as she crossed the floor, paid her no attention. Everything was a game to her when her mother was in charge.

“Still delightful.” Auger motioned to the next dancer. “Olivia? Ready for my Candide fairy?”

Coralie flopped onto the floor beside me with a happy sigh, smelling of fresh sweat and muscle cream. “Well? Did I do her justice?”

I dragged my gaze away from Olivia, who pranced to center in a tutu with her arms waving like willow branches. She looked confident. Candide from *Sleeping Beauty* was a good choice. “Huh?”

“You were watching me like a hawk.” Coralie wriggled her brows, but within her grin, her lip quivered. Her eyes watered.

So I flicked her nose and offered her a smile. “You were disgustingly angelic. It was some of your best work.”

And I technically wasn’t lying.

My turn came after Olivia, so I leaned forward in a quick stretch, eyes drifting closed for a second with pleasure as my hip popped, relieving pressure. When I opened, I found the boy in the black suit glancing at me from his corner. There and then gone, eyes turned back to his notebook, pen moving.

What is he writing?

“Last up, Laurence,” Auger called out. “Ready for Kitri?”

No.

But my feet were already carrying me to position. A heavy silence blanketed the studio, eyes boring into my skin as I crossed the floor. The air felt thin. My heart drummed in my ears.

Still, my body struck the starting pose, even as the shrieking chorus of questions began to loop in my head: *What if I fall?*

What if they’ve already seen what I can do, the polish chipped and peeling,

and they finally find all the ugly things underneath? Too desperate, too sharp, too uptight?

What if I'm not enough?

The questions didn't stop, but the opening strings of music stirred through the studio announcing Kitri's fiery variation from *Don Quixote*. I'd listened to the music so many times, it played in my dreams. Ready or not, my body sprang into action, and before I decided to move, I was already galloping across the stage.

One leg folded under me, the other extended, I leapt high and fast.

The solo was meant to be upbeat, dazzling. A bold young woman in the market square, declaring her love with the sweeping arms of a toreador and the kicks and jumps of an angry bull.

I rose on the tips of my toes in a quick developpé, then kicked my leg straight up. The movement was crisp, precise, but my cheeks were already aching from the strain of my smile. Kitri was meant to be impetuous, vivacious, but all the muscles in my face felt rigid. I twirled into the double pirouette, blessed heat rushing my joints. In motion, the studio faded until it was nothing but a blur of white, and I was transported to a higher plane. I couldn't make out anything or anyone except the flurry of violins encouraging me to move faster, jump higher, kick sharper, *be more than*.

I flitted back to my starting spot, toes numbed in my shoes. Skin sticky with sweat. But I only had time for a single, hurried breath before taking off at a gallop again. More spins, more flirty little flutters. My pulse took flight along with the ends of my skirt.

But the grands jetés were still to come. They were the type of move that every ballet used in its promotional shots: a ballerina contorted in midair, split a perfect 180 with her head back, arms up, ephemeral, intense.

A great Kitri had to be fearless. It demanded everything she had, everything she *was*.

My legs moved me through the développé and grand battement by memory. Then came my time to soar.

Into fourth position, and up I sprang.

The thought rang out in my mind, loud and clear, cutting over the music: *What if I'm not enough?* But it was too late.

I split my body as far as it allowed, against gravity and sinew and time, stretching the moment—the pose—for as long as possible. The tip of my pointe shoe nudged the crown of my head. My eyes drifted shut.

Then the floor reclaimed me again, too soon. There was no time to fumble in the music. My body couldn't pause, couldn't rest, already moving into the next step, arms sweeping wide. Because the ballet didn't wait for you to catch your breath.

I leapt into another grand jeté, crisper, less languid, and snapped back to the ground on bouncing heels. Too early, but acceptable. Lingered en pointe, I gave the crowd sweet, little battements while the knuckles of my toes stung. Sweat ran down my arms.

Gazing over at the tables, I made out the stony faces of the judges, the squint of Rose-Marie Baumé, the purse of President Auger's lips. Was she disappointed? Even against pirouettes, I caught the stares of Ciro, his friend, Joséphine, and Sabine. Olivia was practically salivating in her seat, waiting for me to fall.

So I channeled Kitri, chin held high, and blew them a kiss. Proof that I could be cheeky and sweet. Fearless. The very opposite of uptight.

The music didn't stop, and in three heartbeats, I sailed into my third jeté. And this one was perfect. My body became extreme and exalted. Even as makeup ran in my eyes.

I landed weightless before flying into the ending. Twenty pirouettes down the length of the studio, back-to-back, push spin push spin while the room disappeared. I became a bird of prey in motion. There was no

Coralie, no Auger, no judges or classmates—only me and the lights, the wood and the mirrors. I belonged to the music, and we only had each other. My breath was shallow, lungs burning as I swept myself away.

Unbound from my body, from myself. From time and mortality, even.

Until I stretched into the final arabesque, contorted in a pose, and the stillness claimed me. Face flushed, eyes unseeing, chest wheezing, skin buzzing.

Applause scattered slowly around the room, but compared to Joséphine, it only felt hollow. My pulse throbbed in my neck as I dropped my trembling leg and straightened. Limp and wrung out, I slunk back to my seat with my eyes locked ahead, too afraid to glance back. I knew what I'd find on the other side of the tables: the panel's distaste. Who else could follow Princess Coralie and Joséphine? They'd already seen what they were after.

My eyes stung. Someone's whisper prickled at the back of my neck, not that I heard anything.

"Well done, Mademoiselle Mesny." The president's voice floated my way, faint over the blood pounding in my ears, the same comment she'd given everyone who just did "okay."

But I wasn't allowed to be "okay." Without Giselle, I'd fade into the background in the corps. The board would forget about me, and when company auditions came around, I'd be dispensable. Insignificant. Cast out of the house and back onto the street with nothing. And certainly separated at last from Coralie, from the only person who cared about me.

Coralie rubbed my shoulders, but I hardly felt it. Geoffrey Quý danced Hilarion's death next, and we all knew he'd capture the part.

When it was over, President Auger gestured to the door. "Once again, well done, students. Assignments will go out later this evening, thank you."

Everyone stood. Bags were stuffed and slung over shoulders, and

the studio filled with the clamor of dancers chattering, murmuring their bests and worsts of the day. On the other side of the room, Ciro Aurissy and Rose-Marie Baumé butted heads. They engaged in a battle of hissed whispers too low to make out, Ciro scowling, still seated and arms crossed while Rose-Marie leaned over the table, sneering and red-faced. The other board members' gazes flicked between them nervously.

Clearly, he didn't appreciate Coralie's number.

Meanwhile my classmates filtered out through the clanging metal door, back into the hall.

"Laurence, a moment?"

President Auger stood by the table, head bowed and close with Grandpré. The creative director nodded to her and moved aside as Rose-Marie Baumé stormed out, expensive coat thrown over her shoulder. No one seemed surprised.

I licked my lips, cycling through what Grandpré might have told her. Was I still too uptight? Or maybe my scholarship didn't renew, and there was a huge bill waiting for me in the office. Both options were equally terrifying.

My heart skipped a beat as I neared, as the older woman placed a hand on my shoulder and leaned in.

Is my father dead?

"We're still figuring out the cast list, but I wanted to tell you before you left."

Bile rose in the back of my throat. I was going to be sick, and my life was over.

"Grandpré has assigned you the role of Giselle. You've done a marvelous job this year. Your devotion has paid off, congratulations," President Auger whispered, with Grandpré's grunt of approval behind her. Her lips curled in the closest I had ever seen to a smile.

But I only stared, ears ringing, completely numb. Breath caught with incredulity, my feet carrying me away and into the hall. Coralie waved a hand in front of my eyes, took my shoulders, and shook me.

“What?”

“What. Did. She. Say?” She was nearly growling, our faces so close our noses touched. Her eyes were wide and wild, anticipating.

Finally my face cracked into a smile. A shaky breath.

“I’m gonna be Giselle.”

Coralie screamed, so loud a board member stuck her head into the hall to shush her. But she didn’t care. She crushed me to her chest and spun us around, tilting us off-axis until we both crashed hard on the floor.

I was spared to dance another day. *As Giselle.*

“Olivia suggested going to Pont Notre-Dame to chill. And now you *have* to come celebrate!” She turned her head to our classmates, all huddled together conspiratorially up the hall.

They eyed me. I eyed them.

Gnawing at my lip again, I willed one of them, any of them, to smile. To offer me a bead of warmth or congratulations. Anything.

It didn’t work. They remained silent.

I pushed up into a seated position and fixed my bun, averting my gaze. But sweet, oblivious Coralie didn’t wait for an answer. “Laure’s coming!”

As we climbed to our feet, Coralie took my hand, fingers threaded through mine, and squeezed. Our classmates continued to look me up and down, unconvinced.

“I *said* she’s coming. Now, what’s the plan?”

And just like that, there were no objections. There would be no hugs welcoming me into the fold, but Coralie’s charisma was impossible to deny. She wanted me around, so it was simply made fact like everything else she wanted in her life. It scared me a little, that unearned

influence, and in these moments, she truly resembled her star-powered mother.

Not that I'd ever say it aloud. She'd never talk to me again.

After a hesitant pause, Olivia explained that her cousin was fetching booze, and the group resumed their discussion where they'd left off.

For now, I'd take it. I smiled at the idea of being ordinary for one night. In this, at least, I wasn't so different from my classmates—they were playing a game of pretend too. Drinking wine by the water like we were normal kids about to graduate from a normal school and celebrating our last exam the normal way. We'd stare at the stars, and for a little while the crushing pressure of our looming careers might lessen. For a moment, they'd pretend to not care about *Giselle* casting or the company's audition, ignore that not all of us would make the cut. And I'd pretend that I wasn't Laurence Mesny—a girl who could never allow herself to falter, for there were monsters nipping at her heels, starving for their chance.

For one night, maybe I could just be Laure, a normal girl who belonged and had the leading role to prove it.

When Coralie noticed me smiling, I stopped.

The Seine's dark waters sparkled under lights from the lampposts as we marched down the old, yellow stone steps off the bridge, welcomed by the warm damp air of early summer. They passed around a bottle of expensive rum from La Réunion that I didn't drink, and Geoffrey Quý, with his wide smile and an offer from La Scala already waiting, howled at the moon, his volume rising as the alcohol went down. When the rum ran dry, someone cracked open a bitter merlot. I passed on that too.

"It's too cloudy," Olivia groaned, her eyes already bloodshot and nose pink. "You can't see anything!"

"Just keep drinking until you can," Rémy Lajoie, tied for first of the boys with Geoffrey, quipped.

Not that funny, but I laughed because it felt like somebody should, though it sounded strange and false, even to me. Olivia narrowed her eyes at me and brushed past, her gaze so cold I rubbed my arms without thinking. Then we all followed, clambering down to sit at the landing. We were a cohort of ballet dancers who finally stopped spinning long enough to enjoy the night.

Coralie nudged me with her elbow, offering yet another bottle until I finally relented. It burned all the way down. I'd glued myself to her side, cowering like some stray because I couldn't bear being completely on my own. Not with them. Her cheeks and neck were flushed red, and she squinted at me suspiciously.

"What?" I asked, twisting my gold ring on my finger. It was the only real gold I had, not that it was actually mine. It had been my mother's once, though now I didn't know who it technically belonged to. Still, I wore it always, fidgeting with it as a harsh reminder that I had to keep climbing, never pausing to catch my breath.

My best friend grinned wide, leaning in. "If you want them to like you, you really have to stop trying so hard."

"I'm not trying anything," I sniped back.

She held the bottle between us. "Admit it—you're only drinking because that's the only way you can stomach these people, and we both know Rémy's never funny."

I scowled, but my face already stung from the alcohol and the cold and smiling so much in evaluations that I struggled to rearrange my features any other way. Still, she leaned her head on my shoulder, and I ground my teeth at how right she was. The second our cast list went out, I'd really have to watch my back. "What else can I do, then? Go home?"

"You can't make them like you. Just be yourself. It works for me."

"Yeah, well, *you're* rich and pretty, and your mother's face is all over

TV,” I snapped, and though the words felt jagged, she simply laughed. Sometimes I wondered if there was anything about my sharp edges that could push her away. *She* didn’t mind me being uptight.

“They’re all vultures in people-suits,” I continued acidly, wanting to test her. See how far I could go. “In cotton candy tutus, ready to devour me if I give them the chance.”

She laughed again, a high little trill that warmed my chest. Or perhaps that was the rum. “You’re a vulture, too, Laure.” A smile curled on her cherry-red lips, like it was a good thing that I was. Like she was envious of my claws.

“Guys, we’re graduating in three months,” said Vanessa, gazing out at the lapping water with a stunned expression. “From the fucking Ballet Academy of Paris!”

Olivia threw her head back and shrieked.

“This is our last time to unwind,” Rémy added. He ran a hand across his face, and I supposed in the low light, he could be handsome enough to play the hero Duke Albrecht. “It’s all serious after this. We run *Giselle* and then it’s straight to the company.”

Vanessa fished around in her bag for a lighter, cigarette propped in her mouth. “God, don’t remind me. If I screw this up, it’s back to the middle of nowhere for me.”

Olivia snorted. “My dad has been planning my Parliament career since before I was born. If I fail, he has a ten-year dossier ready to go. What about you guys?”

“I’d go to school, study physics,” Rémy supplied. We all glanced at him, incredulous, but he just shrugged. “I have beauty *and* brains.”

For a moment, the group fell silent, watching the plumes of Vanessa’s smoke drift over the water. It was more peaceful than any moment at the academy, bellies warm and shields down, not having to watch for teeth lunging at each other’s throats.

So then, lulled into a false sense of security, I offered up my truth. “Without ballet, I’d be dead.”

Because I meant it. I didn’t see a world for me without my art in it, where I didn’t live this beauty and torment every single day.

But they all stiffened around me, and I squeezed my eyes shut. *Too* honest. So stupid to let myself forget that, for all this pretending, I wasn’t actually one of them. We might all be vultures, but they weren’t the same kind of hungry that I was. Or if they were, they had the luxury of never letting it show. Tomorrow they’d be back to picking at the still-warm bodies of each other’s careers. *My* career, now that they smelled my desperation.

The silence stretched on.

And then, a little too delayed but having my back like always, Coralie cackled, and the rest of them followed.

