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Stardust

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Stardust

Author Bio

Georgia is a first-year at Gettysburg College, who is struggling to make decisions other than what book to read next. She is an avid writer, tree-hugger, and dog enthusiast. Georgia's taking life day by day, with a paperback in one hand and a jar of peanut butter in the other.

Stardust

GEORGIA K. KIRKENDALL

Three, two, one... a production member cues for my entrance, but I don't bother even glancing his way. I feel the rhythm in my chest, a crescendo that pulses and burns with varying intensity. I charge the stage.

Most everything beyond that is blacked out—there are bright, orangey spots dotting my vision and my breath rushes in my ears, before fading to allow a fierce stream of applause come through. I hold my position with an agonizing grace—my toe itches, and a bead of sweat slips into corner of my eye. The luminous red curtain draws shut and I allow myself to fall apart.

The vultures are on me before I can begin to compose myself. In a twisted manner, they put me back together according to their own ideologies. “Oh hon, oh hon, just well done, really really well done.” The repetitiveness and over-emphasizing of the glam squad—they have the audacity to call themselves by such a name—washes over me. They whisk my frail and exhausted form to my stage room and go about stripping me of my confinements.

“Did you hear how Claude went berserk when she wasn't promoted to soloist, just completely berserk?”

My pointe shoes release from my feet with a sickening squelch, and I try to ignore the blood.

“Oh yes oh dear yes—although I just can't imagine how she thinks she can ever get anywhere with the state of her fouetté—I mean I cannot understand it!”

My tights crumple into a wad on the floor.

“Not to mention, even, the physical state Claude's in. She must be almost 50 kilos by now.”

Gasps and chitters swell my brain.

“Nooo, really? Are you sure sure?”

“So sure sure. I saw her eating a cheese cracker the other day.”

“Gramps better not hear about this. Forget about being promoted from corps de ballet—that poor girl will be gone in a heartbeat.”

Gramps is the “fond” nickname we at Paris Opera Ballet use to

refer to the director of dance. He is a mean, stern, and paunchy man, and I have only glimpsed him in person two times, both of which he seemed to be frowning into nothingness, as if it all wasn't enough. No, never enough. Gramps was always demanding more, and us dancers immediately and most willingly gave all he asked for. Why? For the remote possibility of becoming Danseuse étoile. To be Danseuse étoile was to be above it all: 180 personalized dances a year, at the pristine Palais Garnier. No more frilly costumes—to climb that high in the hierarchy of ballet was to be respected, and to be remembered.

I wish I could say that I have a whiff of self-respect, unlike all the other bun heads, not to give in to the whims of Gramps, but I must admit—when Gramps calls, I answer like a trained dog. He has a fierce leash on me, and I pretend that it's not there. Because with my submissive attitude, Gramps has granted me the title of Sujet, a soloist. While I may be one rung below the revered Danseuse étoile, my position is still one of rarity and great envy. Yet, as Gramps can tell, I have my sights set even higher.

“Sylvie, darling, darling, you aren't seriously going to eat that atrocious thing, are you?”

One of the glam squad, I can never tell them apart, narrows his eyes at the éclair in my hand, which I had unconsciously picked up during my reverie of becoming the star of Paris Opera.

I quickly drop the pastry on the floor and sweep it across the room with my foot.

“That's what I thought.” The squad beams at me in unity, their thick makeup creasing in the wrinkles of their faces. They scare me with their ugly pristineness. Suddenly their faces turn stony, and I turn to the door to see what magnificent force could have silenced these chatterboxes.

Gramps hovers in the doorway, his fists shoved into his Louboutin trousers. His mouth is downturned in the corners, and his icy eyes make the squad quiver. His gaze slides over to me, and I feel the blood drain from my face.

“Mademoiselle Guillem, I would like a word with you.” Gramps looks at the glam squad, whose mouths hang open. “Alone.” Immediately, they scamper like frightened field mice, abandoning makeup bags in their haste to escape.

I sit frozen on my tiny stool and paste what I am hoping is a smile on my face. Only when Gramps enters the stage room do I realize he is not alone—his entourage of secretaries and security flank him, and I suddenly feel claustrophobic. I begin to stand, but Gramps gestures for me to stay where I am. I gaze up at him and his troop, who stare back with an oppres-

sive silence.

“I watched your performance this evening, Mme Guillem.”

I don't know how to respond, and I sink into myself. I feel as if I am a tiny child, judged by these powerful and shrewd adults. My body becomes awkward and disproportionate.

“It was... your usual.”

I resist the overwhelming urge to fidget.

“You have an elegance and, say, demeanor, that is valued in our community. Although, of course, far from perfect. Your form is wanting, Mme Guillem.”

I nod my head vigorously. “Yes, of course, I apologize, monsieur.”

Gramps considers me. In his contemplation I can feel that he is not looking at me, Sylvie Guillem, but at what I could afford him. His image as director is of utmost importance. To consider each dancer individually would be a waste of time. Instead, he sees revenues. He sees reputations. I try not to take it personally.

“Mademoiselle Guillem, I would like...” he seems to struggle over his words, as if it pains him to tell me. He grunts. “I would like to offer you the position of Danseuse étoile.”

“Oh—”

“Wait.” Gramps raises his hand, and I obey. “The Paris Opera Ballet is prestigious, and with good reason. You know this. I need a Danseuse étoile, yet I do not have a dancer deserving of this role. You are the closest Sujet to it, and when you make the necessary adjustments, I will grant you this role. Are you willing to do this?”

I give a slight inclination of my head, tentative. If I move suddenly, I fear that all this will blow away, like a dream ruined by awful reality.

Gramps gives another grunt, this time of satisfaction. “That make-up crew of yours is abysmal. Your face was positively red while dancing. I need it to be white, like death. First thing, we'll let go of them and hire a new team.” He snaps his fingers, and one of his attendants leaves to fulfill his orders.

“More importantly, I need you to lose weight. Look like you belong here. What are you at now?”

“43 kilos, monsieur,” I say, rounding down.

Gramps frowns. “You can only be 38, at most.” He moves towards the door. “I will visit you again after your performance in a month. If you are not improved,” he turns at the door and chains me with his eyes, “I would suggest searching for employment elsewhere. Good day, mademoiselle.” And he is gone, his crew of advisors hurrying after him.

Heat blazes my cheeks as a torrent of conflicting emotions washes over me. To be both gratified and ashamed within a singular moment leaves me dizzy and at a loss. In the distance, I can make out the shrieks of the glam squad as they receive their unfortunate news. For a beat I feel sorry for them, and hate towards Gramps, but then the back of my mind dings.

I'm going to be a Danseuse étoile. I'm going to be a Danseuse étoile.

Best to shed unnecessary weight. Both in the figurative and literal sense. My regimen becomes strict immediately. The amount of *elevés*, *relevés*, and *rond de jambes* leaves me exhausted, and still I push. I barely eat, and the kilos are shed like my tears. I become dizzy often. Once I fainted during practice for my solo, but thankfully no one was there to see it. I buy cream after cream in vain effort to tame my raging foot sores and rashes attributed to the extreme cover-up used by my new makeup team. By the following month, I embody the hopelessness of the lead, and I know I am ready for Giselle—a play of passion and ultimate sacrifice.

There is no other dancer more suited for the title role.

Three, two, one... my body whips through the air, and I submit to the natural force of the ballet, of the Palais Garnier, of the fervent audience. Again, brightness dots my vision, only this time I cannot control it, and I succumb.

People are smiling, everywhere, all about me. They think I am so elegant, so pretty. My illusion strangles me, and instead of pirouetting, I want to scream.

“Look!” I wish to screech at the onlookers, “Just look at me! Can't you see I am fading away?” I am turning to dust, and no one cares. Fading to dull nothingness, to be swept aside, to be blown away with only a faint exhale. But no one listens, they just watch with silly little smiles.

From a distance, I see a ballerina dancing perfectly, on the perfect stage, with a perfect form.

That is not me. I am over here, in this dark, dark corner, a faint pile of dust. Blow me away so I don't have to watch that poor ballerina anymore. She and I, we are nothing but tainted air.

And then it is over. The curtain is drawn, a deep red of forbearing, and this time I don't hear the applause that must be resounding throughout the Palais. Nor do I hear the shouts of “Etoile!”

All I hear is my heartbeat, thrumming in my gut and behind my eyes. It whispers to me in a desperate plead. I nod to myself in assent.

I will flee the death of that beautiful, blazing star.