

I

We all turned sixteen today, and for any normal girl that would mean raspberry and lemon macarons and tiny pastel blimps and pink champagne and card games. Maybe even a teacup elephant.

But not for us. Today is our debut. There are only six of us this year.

My fingertips leave fog teardrops on the paper-thin glass walls. The carriage is beautiful and clear and fashioned into a ball. I am a delicate doll poised inside a snow globe. An adoring audience surrounds my carriage, eager to see what I look like, and what I can do.

A net made of my signature pink flowers stretches along the glass curves in order to tell everyone my name—Camellia—and to hide me until I'm revealed to the royal court.

I am the last in line.

My heart races with excited nervousness as we snake through the crowds in the Royal Square for the Beauté Carnaval. The festival happens once every three years. I peer through the tiny spaces

between the petals with a pair of eyescopes, and try to soak in my first glances of the world, wanting to fold up each bit and tuck it into the cerise layers of my dress.

It's a wonderland of palace buildings with golden turrets and glittering arches, fountains full of crimson and ivory fish, topiary mazes of clipped trees, shrubs, and bushes in every possible geometric shape. Imperial canals circle the square, holding jeweled boats bright as gemstones and shaped like smiling moons on midnight-blue water. They spill over with passengers eager to watch us. The royal hourglass that measures the length of day and night, churns with sand the color of white diamonds.

The sky and its clouds are made of melting cherries and flaming oranges and burnt grapefruit as the sun sinks into the sea. The dying sunlight flashes my own reflection on the glass. My powdered skin makes me look like an overly frosted piece of caramel cake.

I've never seen anything like it before. This is the first time I've visited the imperial island, the first time I've ever left home.

The Orléans archipelago is a string of islands stretching like a rose with a crooked stem out into the warm sea. Most of them are connected by golden bridges or can be reached by lavish river coaches. We came from the very top—the bloom—and we've made a long journey to the heart of the stem to display our talents.

A breeze pushes its way through tiny breathing holes in the glass carriage, carrying with it the scent of the sky. Salty rain, spiced clouds, and a hint of sweetness from the stars. It all feels like a dream that's held on and lingered past the dawn. I never want it to end. I never want to return home. One minute here is richer than a thousand moments there.

The end of the warm months brings change, Maman always said. And my life is bound to transform tonight.

The horses tug us forward, their hooves clip-clopping against the cobblestoned square. Vendors are selling sweets in our honor: small mountains of shaved ice topped with strawberries the color of our lips; intricate little teacakes shaped like our signature flowers; sweet puffs molded like our Belle-buns; colorful strings of sugar pinwheeled around sticks to mirror our traditional waist-sashes and dresses.

A hand thumps my carriage and I catch a sliver of a face. The square is overflowing with bodies. There are so many of them. Hundreds, thousands, maybe millions. Imperial guards push the crowd back to give our procession space to pass. All the people seem beautiful, with skin in various colors, from fresh cream to a drizzle of honey to a square of chocolate; their hair is in blond waves or brunette curls or raven coils; body shapes are petite, round, or somewhere in between. They've all paid to look this way.

The men wear jackets and top hats and cravats in a prism of colors. Some have hair growing on their faces in neat patterns. They stand beside women adorned with jewels and draped in luxurious, pastel-colored dresses made full with crinoline and tulle. Intricate hats cover the ladies' hair; some clutch dainty parasols and oilpaper umbrellas, or cool themselves with patterned fans. From the blimps above, I bet they resemble candies in a box.

I recognize the more popular looks from the stacks of gossip tattlers left in the mail chest a day too long, or from the weekly beauty-scopes Du Barry's daughter, Elisabeth, sometimes dropped between the velvet cushions of the parlor-room couch. The *Orléans*

Press said strawberry blonde hair and jade eyes are the new windy-season trend. All the newspaper headlines read:

AWAKEN LOVE . . . LOOK IRRESISTIBLE WITH
STRAWBERRY AND JADE

FILL YOUR TOILETTE BOX WITH BELLE-APPROVED
RHUBARB HAIR POWDER

A COMPLEXION OF LILIES AND BELLE-ROSE LIPS—
THIS SEASON'S COLORS OF BEAUTY

The newsies say that's what everyone will want in the coming months.

Coins jingle. Hands wave velvet pouches in the air. The *spintria* inside creates a tinkling melody. How much does each pouch hold? How many treatments can they afford to purchase? How much are they willing to pay?

I adjust the eyescope lens, zooming in on excited onlookers, noticing how some of their skin tones have faded, like paintings that have faced the sun too long; how their hair is graying at the roots, and age-lines are creasing several brows.

It's a reminder of why I'm here.

I am a Belle.

I control beauty.

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The carriages stop before the royal pavilion. Embroidered chrysanthemums coil around its peaks. Trumpets sound. Bells chime. I adjust the eyescope lens, and squint to see the king, queen, and their daughter. They remind me of the porcelain dolls my sisters and I used to play with as children. The chipped face of the little king in his purple robe, and the queen with a bent crown pinned into her dark hair, both sitting inside a miniature palace made of cypress wood scraps in the playroom.

They look the same here, though not as worn, of course. The queen glows like a faraway star, her ink-black skin catching the last rays of sunlight; the king's copper beard hits the waist-belt of his robe; their daughter has her golden hair pinned up like a beehive. I used to paint the arms and legs of the princess doll each time the *real* princess altered her skin color, keeping up to date with the scandal sheets Maman used to smuggle past Du Barry.

The blimp screens sparkle with her picture. Tonight she's snowy white like her father, but with peach-pink freckles expertly

dusted across her nose. I want to be the one who makes them all beautiful. I want to be the one the queen chooses. I want the power that comes with being Her Majesty's favorite. And if I can be better than Amber, I will be chosen. The rest of my sisters are good, but deep in my heart, I know it will come down to her and me.

Madam Du Barry speaks into a voice-trumpet. "Your Majesties, Your Highness, ministers, comtes and comtesses, barons and baronesses, ladies and gentlemen of the court, people of Orléans, welcome to our kingdom's most notable tradition, the Beauté Carnaval." Her voice is thick with authority. The noise rattles my carriage. Even though I can't see her, I know she's wearing a hat full of peacock feathers, and she's squeezed her curvy frame into one of her black dresses. Maman told me that Madam Du Barry likes to maintain a large and intimidating figure.

"I am Madam Ana Maria Lange Du Barry, Royal Gardien de la Belle-Rose." She says her official title proudly. The people of Orléans would most likely gasp if they knew we called her "Du Barry" at home.

Applause rumbles. High-pitched whistles echo. The noise vibrates inside my chest. My entire life I've wanted nothing more than to be here, before the kingdom.

"This tradition goes back to the very beginning of our islands, and to the onset of our civilization. For generations my ancestors have had the grand privilege to be guardians of our most treasured jewels." She turns to her left and motions to the previous generation of Belles. All eight of them sit in high-backed chairs, and hold Belle-rosebuds in their hands. Black lace veils mask their faces. The favorite—Ivy—wears a glistening crown on her head. This is the end of their time at court. They will return home once they train us.

When I was a little girl, they all played with us between their

lessons with Du Barry. But then one day, the servants packed the older girls' things.

I wanted to hole up inside those steamer trunks and carriage cases, hide within their silk dresses and soft furs and fluffy tulle, to stow away and catch glimpses of the world through a trunk's keyhole. I remember reading about the older Belles in the papers after they left. I have their official Belle-cards tacked to my bedroom wall.

I want to be Ivy. I have always wanted to be her.

You have to be the favorite—just like me, Maman told me before she died. The people of Orléans hate themselves. You must change that. The memory of her words warms me from the inside out as the sting of missing her swells inside my chest. *The favorite shows the world what is beautiful. She reminds them of what is essential.* I wish she had lived long enough to be here, watching from the stage.

I picture myself living at the palace as the personal Belle of the royal family, being the left hand of the Beauty Minister and helping her draft beauty laws, experiencing the wonders of the Imperial City of Trianon and all its quartiers, swimming in La Mer du Roi, sailing in royal ships, visiting every island, and roaming every town to taste all the world has to offer.

My sisters will be placed at one of five imperial teahouses, or will stay at home to tend to Orléans's newborn citizens.

I will be a vessel for the Goddess of Beauty.

I hold the dream inside my chest like a breath I never want to let out.

"And now, it is my pleasure to present the newest generation of Belles," Du Barry announces.

A shiver of anticipation makes my heart threaten to burst. My hands shake, and I drop the eyescopes.

The crowd cheers. The driver pulls the netted covering of flowers from my carriage.

I'm revealed to the crowd. I grab the fans from my lap. Their latches fall open, exposing the fans' primrose-pink pattern. I cover my face, then flap and twirl them together so they flutter like a butterfly's wings. I toss them above my head and catch them effortlessly. The hours of lessons pay off in this moment. Whistles and shouts rise up from the throng.

I look to the left at my sisters' carriages. We're all lined up like a row of eggs in a carton, moving in time with one another. We exchange smiles. The same blood runs through us: the blood of the stars, the blood of the Goddess of Beauty.

Crimson lanterns float into the air. Against a darkening sky, the thin paper burns big and bright with our names: Edelweiss, Ambrosia, Padma, Valeria, Hana, and Camellia. Fish jump from nearby fountains, changing from ruby to teal mid-flight, teasing onlookers. Their leaps hold the promise of our powers. The square explodes with cheers. Little girls wave Belle-dolls in the air.

Many men and women are sporting monocles to have a closer look at us. I smile and wave, wanting to impress them, wanting to be good enough to be remembered.

Du Barry presents Valerie first. Her carriage rolls forward.

I close my eyes.

Don't watch them, Maman had said. Don't ever covet their use of the arcana. Envy can grow like a weed inside you. Be the best without trying to be better than the others.

We weren't allowed to discuss our instructions in the weeks leading up to the carnival, but Amber and I had swapped our dossiers. Her subject needed to be given skin the color of toasted walnuts, hair full of large barrel curls, and a pretty, plump face;

mine had to have skin the shade of alabaster stone from the Fire Isles, hair so dark it blended into the night, and a mouth so perfect and so red it would be indistinguishable from a rose. We practiced our looks on house servants, perfecting them in solitary chambers under the scrutiny of Du Barry. *Practice begets perfection*, she'd yelled for hours.

I shift around in the carriage as the demonstrations continue, with Hana following Valerie. My legs fall asleep from having them crossed for so long, and my eyes flutter, fighting my desire to keep them closed. Pained moans cut through the noisy square like silver knives as the little girls endure their transformations. I wince as the cries peak and fall, and the onlookers cheer at their crescendos.

Some of my sisters receive louder reactions than others. Some get *oohs* and *ahhs*. The roar deafens me at times.

I love my sisters, especially Amber. She's always been the one I loved the most. We all deserve to be the favorite. We've worked so hard to learn the art of beauty. But I want it so much there's no room inside me for anything else.

My eyes feel like they've been closed for an eternity before my carriage trudges forward again. Imperial attendants approach, and their gold uniform buttons catch the lantern light. They arrange themselves at four corners around me, unlatch the hitches, grip the levers jutting from the sides of my glass ball, and lift me off the wheeled bottom like I'm only a soap bubble. Thin and weightless.

I lock my legs in place and focus on my balance. The men march me to the center platform. I try not to be nervous. Du Barry recreated this entire set inside our home, complete with the gold cylinder where my platform will eventually come to rest. I've been preparing for this day since my thirteenth birthday; all of the lessons, the lectures, the practice. I know exactly what I'm supposed

to do. It's been rehearsed, yet I can't stop my fingers from trembling and my body from quivering like there's a tiny landquake inside my glass ball.

I whisper to myself: "I will have the best showcase. I will receive the loudest applause. I'll be named the favorite, just like Maman. I will get to live at court. I will get to see the world. I won't make any mistakes. I'll make people beautiful." I say it over and over again like a prayer until the rhythm of the words erases my fear.

The men turn a lever. Gears clink and clang and wheeze. The platform under me rises just above the crowd. Plush royal boxes sit on stilts high above. People lean out of them with eyescopes and spyglasses pressed to their faces, and ear-trumpets jutting out like elephants' trunks. Faces look up in wonder and anticipation like I'm a star caught in a vase, ready to explode.

The platform stops. I turn a tiny lever on the carriage floor. The glass ceiling above me cracks open like an egg. The night's warm air skates over my skin like soft fingers, and it tastes even sweeter up here. If I could bottle the tiny winds, they'd turn to sugar dust.

The stars twinkle. I feel close enough to grab one and stow it away in my beauty caisse.

The square grows so quiet, and the sounds of the ocean swell. The people of Orléans gaze up at me, the last Belle to demonstrate her talents. Du Barry didn't prepare me for what it's like to be stared at. There are so many pairs of eyes, all different shapes and colors. My heart leaps.

Du Barry winks at me, then taps her full lips—a reminder to smile. The crowd believes I was born knowing how to make them beautiful. They don't know how hard I've worked to perfect the

traditions and master the arcana. They don't know how hard I've struggled to learn all the rules.

"Now, it is my pleasure to present our final Belle, Camellia Beauregard!"

She fills the syllables of my name with pride, triumph, and magic. I try to hold on to that, and use it to combat my worries.

Light shines everywhere: the lanterns and blimp screens and sky candles and a bright rising moon. I can almost taste it, soft and bubbly and sweet, like pink champagne on the tip of my tongue.

I face a semicircle of smaller platforms. Three to the left and two to the right. Seven-year-old girls stand on them like jewels on velvet cushions. They're as different from one another as pearls and rubies and emeralds, showing how uniquely we can use our arcana to beautify.

I know my sisters' work: Padma's subject has limbs the rich color of honey bread; Edel shaved her girl's head close to the scalp; the eyes of Valerie's subject twinkle like amethyst stars; Hana's girl has the body of a dancer, long legs and arms and a slender neck; Amber's subject has a cheery round face just like her own.

The other Belles have created tiny masterpieces.

It's my turn to transform a girl.

The king and queen nod at Du Barry. She waves her hand in the air, signaling for me to get ready.

I glance up to the heavens for strength and courage. Belles are the descendants of the Goddess of Beauty, blessed with the arcana to enhance the world and rescue the people of Orléans. Blimps crisscross above me and block the stars with their plump forms and silhouette banners.

The last platform lifts directly across from mine. It completes

the set of six and creates a perfect half-moon curve. The girl wears a long shirt, which is an excuse for a dress; its frayed hem kisses the tops of her feet. Her hair and skin are as gray as a stormy sky, and wizened like a raisin. Red eyes stare back at me like embers burning in the dark.

I should be used to the way they look in their natural state. But the light exaggerates her features. She reminds me of a monster from the storybooks our nurses used to read to us.

She is a Gris. All the people in Orléans are born this way—skin pallid, gray, and shriveled, eyes cherry red, hair like straw—as if all the color was leached out of them, leaving behind the shade of freshly picked bones and ash. But if they earn enough *spintria*, we can lift away the darkness, find the beauty underneath the gray, and maintain their transformation. We can save them from a life of unbearable sameness.

They ask us to reset their milk-white bones. They ask us to use our gilded tools to recast every curve of their faces. They ask us to smooth and shape and carve each slope of their bodies like warm, freshly dipped candles. They ask us to erase signs of living. They ask us to give them talents. Even if the pain crescendos in waves so high it pulls screams of anguish from their throats, or if the cost threatens to plummet them into ruin, the men and women of Orléans always want more. And I'm happy to provide. I'm happy to be needed.

The girl fidgets with the camellia flower in her hands. The pink petals shiver in her grip. I smile at her. She doesn't return it. She shuffles to the platform edge and looks down, as if she's going to jump. The other girls wave her back and the crowd shouts. I hold my breath. If she were to fall, she'd plummet at least forty paces to the ground. She scoots back to the center.

I exhale, and sweat dots my forehead. I hope she earns a few leas for the stress of participating in this exhibition. Enough for her to purchase a square of bread and a wedge of cheese for the month. I hope to make her beautiful enough to receive smiles from people instead of fearful whispers and frenzied glares. I don't remember being that small, that vulnerable, that terrified.

I flip open the beauty caisse beside me. Du Barry gave each of us a different chest, engraved with our initials and the flowers that we're named after. I run my fingers across the golden carvings before lifting the lid to reveal a medley of instruments tucked inside endless drawers and compartments. These items mask my gifts. Du Barry's morning instructions repeat in my head: *Display only the second arcana, and what has been instructed. Keep them wanting more. Show them what you truly are—divine artists.*

Three scarlet post-balloons, carrying three trays, float up to the little girl's stand. One sprinkles little white flakes—bei powder—all over her, and she ducks as it coats her like snow. The other dangles a porcelain teacup full of Belle-rose tea, an anesthetic drink steeped from the roses that grow on our island. It sloshes and dances near her mouth. She refuses to have a sip. She swats at the cup like it's a nagging fly.

The crowd cries out as she nears the platform edge again. The last post-balloon chases her with a brush smudged with a paste the color of a cream cookie. To her left and right, the other girls shout at her, telling her not to be scared. The crowd roars. Onlookers try to convince her to drink the tea and wipe the brush across her cheek.

My stomach knots. Her constant squirming could spoil my exhibition. A surge of panic hits me. Every time I imagined this night, I never thought my subject would resist.

"Please stop moving," I call out.

Du Barry's gasp echoes through her voice-trumpet.

The crowd goes silent. The girl freezes. I take a deep breath.

"Don't you want to be beautiful?"

Her gaze burns into mine.

"I don't care," she yells, and her voice gets carried off by the wind.

The crowd erupts with horror.

"Oh, but of course you do. Everyone does," I say, steadying my voice. Maybe she's starting to go mad from being gray for so long.

"Perhaps they shouldn't." Her fists ball up. Her words send a shiver through me.

I paint on a smile. "What if I promise it'll all turn out well?"

She blinks.

"Better than you expect? Something that will make all of this"—I wave at our surroundings—"worth it."

She nibbles her bottom lip. A post-balloon putters back up to her with tea. She still refuses it.

"Don't be afraid." Her gaze finds mine. "Drink the tea."

The post-balloon returns.

"Go on. I promise you will love what I do. You'll feel better."

She reaches toward the post-balloon, then pulls back like it will burn her. She looks at me. I smile and motion for her to tug it forward. She grabs its golden tail ribbons, then lifts the teacup from its tray and sips.

I examine her, noting the details of her small, undernourished frame. Fear flashes in her red irises. Her body shakes even more.

"Now, take the brush," I gently goad her.

She wipes it along her cheek, and it leaves behind a milky streak as a color guide for me.

A blimp shines a sky candle over the carriages, and I catch

my reflection in the glass again. A smile creeps into the corner of my mouth as I see myself. I abandon Du Barry's instructions: the snowy skin, the black hair, the rosebud lips. An idea leaves behind the warmth of excitement.

The risk might cost me, infuriate Du Barry further, but if it allows me to stand out from my sisters, the gamble will be worth it.

It will be unforgettable. It has to be.

I close my eyes and picture the girl inside my mind like a small statue. When we were little, we practiced our second arcana by manipulating paint on a canvas, shaping clay on a pottery wheel, and molding fresh-dipped candlesticks, until we were able to transform them into treasures. After our thirteenth birthday, we moved on from using our teacup dogs and the stray teacup cats that lurk on the grounds to enlisting our servants as subjects of our beauty work. I'd give my room servant, Madeleine, bright sea-glass-green eyes when the red seeped in. At fourteen, we changed the babies in our nursery chambers, giving color to tiny fat legs and little wisps of hair, and just before our sixteenth birthday, the queen gave out voucher tokens to the poor to help us train and perfect our skills.

I am ready for this.

I summon the arcana. My blood pressure rises. My skin warms. I heat up like a newborn fire in a hearth. The veins in my arms and hands rise beneath my skin like tiny green serpents.

I manipulate the camellia flower in the little girl's hands. I change it, just as I will the little girl, shaping the flower's fibers and veins and petals.

The crowd gasps. The stem lengthens until the tip hits the platform, like a kite's tail. She throws the bloom and inches away. The flower quadruples in size, and the petals lengthen to catch her.

They wrap around her small, squirming body, until she's swaddled inside a pink chrysalis like a writhing worm.

The crowd explodes with claps, whistles, and stamping. The noise turns into a rolling boil as they wait for me to reveal her.

I will be the best.

It will be perfect.

I love being a Belle.

I hear the whoosh of the little girl's blood racing through her body, and the thrum of her pulse floods my ears. I say the mantra of the Belles:

Beauty is in the blood.