

Encore

By: Charlotte Chen

With the final chime of the music, Mina's plastered-on grin fell. It was well past dark and the blindingly white lights of the dance studio felt all the more severe paired with the sound of her panting and the faint hum of the AC. Drops of sweat pattered across the vinyl floor as she whipped her head to observe her teacher's expression. In the far corner of the room, meddling with the stereo, stood the thin frame of the woman known as Ms. Heather. Her mouth, per usual, was tightened to a thin line.

"I did it again," Mina called out, defeatedly, her voice bouncing with a hollow echo. "I just need to remember to keep my core tight this time at the final fouette sequence, let's try again." They could both hear the fatigue creeping into her voice from her trembling muscles.

"Looking good enough, but perhaps we should call it quits for tonight?" This was their twenty-fourth run and Mina was indeed counting. Twenty-fourth run, twenty-fourth attempt riddled with imperfections. Who knew the Lilac Fairy could be so devilish? She felt her optimism of qualification for the Youth America Grand Prix finals slimming with each try. Annoyance bubbled up in Mina's chest, although it was unclear if it was directed at her teacher, herself, or the broader universe.

"No. Like I said, let's do it one more time," she replied, snappish despite still breathing heavily. Ms. Heather nodded- she had known her pupil long enough to know she never accepted defeat. With a subtle smile she added, "Twenty-fifth time's a charm, right?"

Again she received confirmation from her teacher.

Mina assumed her starting pose, imagining herself on a dark stage. She envisioned a packed crowd, thousands of pairs of eyes anticipating the first sweeps of her arm. From a balcony her parents watched- no- smiled over her. The corners of her lips tugged up at the thought, and the music commenced. Immediately her body sprang into action, following the choreography blueprint imprinted in her mind. Her ballet tiptoed the line between delicacy and power as she entered an entranced state. With each crescendo and every crash her ligaments glided through the air. Her mind followed the shake of the tambourine, savoring the way each livening rattle filled the studio. It was moments like these that reminded her the reason she not only loved but craved the sensation of performing.

That was, until it returned. Extension, hold, relax, again, she repeated the mantra instilled in her by her former ballet master, a retired Russian man with the temperament of a child. She could hear his thick, mean accent saying the words and the subsequent comments that permeated her younger years. Extension- higher! Hold- longer! Relax- not like that! You look like a fat cow. Try again. It had been years since he had left, but he always did have a habit of demanding authority. Extension. Hold. Relax. Again. Extension- she felt her foot slip out from underneath her as she crashed to the floor, the thud masked by light bells. Vanquished, her body refused to stand up.

"Come on," Ms. Heather sighed. "Your parents are waiting- I can see their headlights shining through the window. How 'bout we call it a day and pick it up tomorrow?" Mina checked. Her mom waited in the driver's seat, her gaze transfixed on her rehearsal. For an instant, their eyes met.

“They don’t care, I promise.” Mina denied, turning to inspect herself in the mirror. She was aware of the sacrifices her parents bore for her sake, but it was only in exchange for her to uphold her end of their expectations.

“Still, I’m sure they would like to get home before the night slips away entirely.”

“With all due respect, I believe I’m the one performing next week. All alone in New York, my future is riding upon getting scouted. They can wait.” It came off cockier than she would have liked, but she believed each word wholeheartedly, so she let them hang in the air. For a few moments, silence stood like a dark shadow over the two women.

Then, doused in a renewed vulnerability, Ms. Heather inquired gently, “Do you really believe that? Do you truly believe this is your conquest and yours alone?”

Stunned, Mina hesitated. “At the end of the day, I’m the only one on the stage, am I not? I’m the one who takes the fall if I fail, the one who’s put in the years and years of training to get to where I am.”

“If you’re truly alone, then what on Earth am I doing here?” Ms. Heather quipped.

Mina relinquished her stance, too fatigued to push back.

“Mina, you’re a talented young girl. I’ll tell you why I’m here- I’m here to identify areas of improvement so you can achieve the things you want to. Believe me, with your passion you can do whatever you set your mind to.”

Mina nodded, she had heard similar spiels countless times in the past.

“But you need to understand that a dancer is never alone. It takes a world to work together in harmony to provide you with the mental strength and technique required to access the spirit of dance. I see the ways your parents are hard on you. I see the ways former people have wronged you, and I see the resilience inside of you that is stronger than all of that combined. It takes a team to make a dancer, we are all just collages of our experience.”

The teacher extended her arm to the girl shaking on the ground and held it there. At last, she gave in and grabbed it, standing up unsteadily. With a deep breath, she relaxed some. It was time to go home.