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III AJ TUK Karolina Gonova A Brush With Destiny

Paris, the city where whispers of history and secrets linger in the air like ghosts, city of love, romance, and so much more... Paris, my home. I breath in the chilly winter air and tighten the maroon scarf wrapped around my neck to fight off the cold that starts to slowly creep its way in.

“Étienne!” a gentle female voice calls out.

I immediately turn to the direction of the voice. A blush makes its way to my cheeks, and I feel my heart flutter in my chest.

“Juliette...” I welcome her in my arms as she throws herself at me and embraces me tightly.

“Ready for our date, my Da Vinci?” Juliette teases.

This brings a chuckle out of me. “Of course, where would you like to go first?” I ask with a gentle smile. Juliette winks and takes my hand, intertwining our fingers. I get lost in her brown eyes, like pools of liquid honey when hit by the sunlight.

Suddenly, a light squeeze of my hand snaps me out of my trance. I look at Juliette curiously and see her pointing at a poster at the entrance of Louvre. A grand art competition? I look back at Juliette with wide eyes.

“I know, Étienne! This is the perfect opportunity for you to show off your art skills in front of judges from across the world!” Juliette exclaims, thrilled. “J-Juliette, I... wow, this is,” my voice trails off, “the perfect...the perfect opportunity to immerse myself in the world of art!”

I pull Juliette into a tight hug and without thinking twice, kiss her. At this moment, our lips brush softly, igniting a fire that consumes the world around us. As we both pull away, we can't help the big grins that find their way to our faces. Juliette stands up on her tip toes and places a final, goodbye kiss on my cheek. I watch her with a lovestruck expression as she turns to walk away. Finally, I get knocked back into my senses by the crispy wind that slaps me right across the face. I smile to myself one last time and with a skip in my step, walk back home.

After setting foot inside my apartment, I quickly shed off the layers of winter clothing and flop down on the couch. With a grunt I roll over on my back and stare at the empty ceiling,

collecting my thoughts. The grand art competition takes place in a month, meaning I should have just enough time to prepare. The question is, what should I paint? At times like these when I feel unsure, only one place can make it all clear. I put on my boots, grab my coat and walk out the front door.

The sun has set, casting shadows across the land. My fingers start turning red from the bone-chilling cold. Great, turns out in my determined state I forgot to put my gloves on. I stick my hands into the coat's pockets in an attempt to warm them up. After another few minutes of walking down the dimly lit streets of Paris, I finally reach my destination. Cimetière du Père-Lachaise...the home for wandering souls, nestled within the serene embrace of tombstones. The home of my dear grandma... After wandering through the endless rows of tombstones, I finally reach the one that makes my heart swell and tears form in my eyes.

'A beautiful soul, Amee Auclair,' reads the carving in the middle. I try to fight back the tears as memories start flashing through my head.

"Grandma! Look here! I made a drawing of us!" the child, all happy ran down the narrow hall of the old house, proudly holding up the drawing he made himself. A woman in her 60s, sitting outside the small house with a notebook and a pencil in her lap turned to the child with a warm smile.

"Really? Show me, honey, I'd love to see!" she placed the notebook and pencil down, lifting the giggling child onto her lap and taking the drawing in her hands. Her expression turned into one of surprise. "Étienne...wow, this is so beautiful." It was baffling how an eight-year-old child could draw something so detailed...The child squealed in an excitement at the praise. Making his grandma happy had always been the most rewarding feeling! After carefully placing the drawing down, the older woman looked at the boy still sitting in her lap. "Étienne, how about I show you some shading techniques? They will give even more life to your already lovely drawings," she said with a smile. "Sh- shading techniques?" the child repeated confusedly. The woman just chuckled and began to explain the importance of shading in art.

"Happy 14th birthday, Étienne!" the elderly woman exclaimed and handed the smiling boy a small box carefully wrapped in gift paper with a red bow on top. "Thank you, Granny!" the boy grinned and slowly unwrapped the present. He held his breath. What he pulled out from the box was a set of Windsor brushes along with a watercolor pallet! Suddenly, he could feel the bitter feeling of guilt creeping up. Those must have cost a fortune... The boy looked up at

his grandma with an unsure look in his eyes. As he moved to speak, he was interrupted by the elder woman.

“I know, honey, it cost a lot, but I want to allow you to keep growing in what you love. The fact that you have taken such an interest in art brings me immense joy,” she said with a bright smile full of love for her little grandson.

“P-please, I-I don’t want to be alone! Don’t go!” the boy said desperately as he bawled at his grandmother’s bed.

“Étienne...” a soft but tired voice started, “promise me, you will never give up on your dream and make it far in the art world,” the dying woman said in a timid voice.

“I-I can’t do it without you here! I’ll be so lost in this big world all alone!” the boy continued weeping.

“Étienne, you will never be alone. I will be always watching you. Become the artist I could’ve never been...” with the last ounce of energy she squeezed his hand in a reassuring manner. The boy sniffled and watched as she took her last breath.

Tears were flowing freely down my cheeks by now. I wiped them with the back of my hand, but couldn’t shake the nostalgic feeling off.

“Granny, an opportunity has just opened,” I begin while staring at the grave with a sad smile, “and now the question is - what should I paint?” I sigh and drift off to think. Suddenly a gentle breeze brushes my face and I chuckle.

“Wow, funny how a little breeze can make a moment feel so peaceful. “Peaceful...” the word starts repeating itself over and over in my head, “peaceful!” I look up at the night sky filled with shimmering stars. “Granny, I think I’ve got it! I will draw a landscape that will evoke the peacefulness that you brought into my world!” I say proudly and determinedly.

After saying a quick goodbye, I start making my way back with a newfound motivation. The air has become even chillier. Finally, after what feels like hours, I find myself inside the comfort of my little, but warm apartment. Once I am done with my evening routine and safely snuggled under the covers, I start making a mental plan for tomorrow. I will buy necessary art supplies right after work. My planning does not get far as darkness slowly envelopes me.

Beep, beep, beep. Slowly I blink away the sleep and with a groan stretch towards the buzzing alarm clock on my bedside table. After laying there for a few more minutes, I forcefully drag

myself out from under the warm covers. I quickly slide through my morning routine and set off to work. The morning breeze greets me as I step outside. Feeling productive even for it being still so early, I decide to drop by the art shop now. I have always loved art shops. Right upon entering, I'm hit by the comforting smell of canvases and paint that never fail to bring me back to my childhood memories. I skillfully navigate the aisles of the small art shop, picking out items I will need for my masterpiece.

Once done with paying for everything, I walk down the still relatively empty streets that will be buzzing with tourists on every corner by noon. A sunny morning has always been the most comforting time of the day for me. Finally, I can see the restaurant slowly entering my horizon. I enter the Le P'tit Troquet Restaurant through the back door and carefully place my bag in the corner of the employee room. I take off my coat and wrap the green apron around my waist.

Moving through the kitchen and into the dining area, I flip the closed sign to open.

Once the workday ends, I find myself in my humble little art studio. Skillfully sketching the outlines of the landscape on the newly bought canvas. The pencil just being an extension of my arm at this point. Stroke after stroke starts making its way onto the once empty canvas, merging into lines that define the land, trees, and clouds in my painting. The sun has long been replaced by a veil of darkness, putting the city to sleep. Only after I start noticing the slight pain in my lower back from sitting slouched for so long, do I come back to my senses. I decide to pack up for the night and surrender to slumber's gentle embrace.

The following month is a repetitive cycle of waking up, going to work, getting back home, and painting relentlessly until late at night. We can throw in the occasional dates with Juliette that made the gloomy winter days more bearable. Beep, beep, beep. The alarm clock starts going off. I jump to my feet right away. No time to waste, today's a big day! I throw on my new tailored suit. Gazing upon the painting from the doorway, I'm swept away by the peacefulness it exudes. The lush green hills seem to roll endlessly, leading my eyes toward the river that glimmers under the warm, amber light of the setting sun. With a satisfied look I cover it with a veil for protection and pick it up.

The journey to Louvre is exhausting and nerve-racking. The constant fear of dropping the painting made me flinch at every sudden motion around me. I make my way to Cour Napoléon just in time as the host, dressed in a fancy black suit, announces: "We ask all competitors to move to the Denon Wing, prepare their works and wait for the judges!"

The moment I step inside, my mouth hangs open. Inside the room, grand arches and detailed frescoes adorn the walls. It's truly a majestic sight. I settle myself in between two other artists and put up my painting. That exact second, four sharply dressed people, exuding confidence and style in their impeccably tailored attires enter the hall. The room quiets down.

Slowly they start making their way through each participant's painting. Eventually, they stop right in front of me. "Mister...Rousseau, is it?" one of the judges asks with a serious look. I gulp and nod, "Y-yes, that is correct." I step aside and let the judges inspect the painting. My hands become unbelievably sweaty as I watch them scribble down some notes.

"Thank you, Mister Rousseau. I think I speak for all of us when I say your work is truly remarkable," the same judge, an intimidating elderly man, says with a polite smile.

"Yes, thank you," I say with a nervous smile and watch the judges move to another participant.

After inspecting each artwork, they excuse us and tell us to sit down and wait for the results. As I sit in quiet anticipation, my heart flutters with a mixture of excitement and nervousness, each passing moment feeling like an eternity as I await the results of the grand art competition that I poured my soul into. Yet, amidst the uncertainty, there is a flicker of hope that fuels my patience and anticipation of what lies ahead. The four judges make another grand entrance, heads held up high. The judge in the middle steps up and enthusiastically begins.

"Thank you to all the talented participants," his voice resonates through the grand hall. "Your contributions have made this competition truly remarkable. Now, it is my honor to announce the winner of this illustrious event. With exceptional skill, the recipient of this year's award is none other than Étienne Rousseau. Congratulations!"

As the announcement fills the room, my heart races with anticipation, each word carrying the weight of my hopes and dreams. I can't help but remember the countless hours spent with my dear grandmother, sharing my aspirations and dreams. In this moment of triumph, I feel her presence beside me, her spirit whispering words of pride and love. As I step forward to accept the honor, I can't help but wonder what lies ahead on this journey she helped me set out on. With each step, I carry her memory in my heart, knowing that she will always be with me, guiding me towards new horizons and greater heights.