

a false performance

More than seventeen years had passed since the banishment of emotion, and not once had Valentin Bellerose succeeded in his attempt to perform it.

Though at the time of the ban he was but a careless young boy— as careless as a young boy from Paris should be— it was only then that he discovered that he could evoke emotion in others, and that he could do so through the art of make-believe. But even with such a theatrical prophecy and the world's salvation in his hands, Val was somewhat untalented; according to his audience, at least. Not even the sight of a man swathed in overelaborate garments could satisfy their tastes, which was difficult for someone whose looks were their only asset. Now, not even looks could save him from the mess he'd made. Now, Val had reached the end of his performance, where he would be punished for his defeat.

One step. Then two. Then three. He took each step towards the stage with bated breath, the lights flickering overhead. The place felt empty. Abandoned, and somewhat desolate. Val was a deer in headlights, so to speak, for an audience that was barely looking his way; if they even bothered to look at all. He could perform all he wanted, and they would still be frowning nonetheless. That, he knew more than ever.

One step. Then two. Then three.

Val envied his audience and their lack of reaction. With no reaction, they remained unstirred— unaffected by a lack of success. Val had no choice but to be affected. He had no choice but to fear failure and all that it came with. As Val stood onstage, he wondered if this was his true path to adulthood— feeling nothing. Feeling brave. Because being twenty-two didn't mean anything if you were afraid. Once you were under the spotlight of expectations, all you could do was bow, and wait for the audience to clap. But they didn't clap; not one bit.

One step. Then two. Then none, for all of it had become nothing, for he had reached the end of that very stage receiving nothing, doing nothing, *being* nothing. A pretty face wouldn't have changed that. He had slipped up somehow, somehow and somewhere, once or twice or even thrice. What gave him the right to wish it would be different? Or rather: what gave him the right to wish for anything at all? Val knew he was part of something greater— something he wished to obtain. But perhaps his role in it was just the understudy. Because performing— *making art*, as it was— was something that Valentin Bellerose couldn't do.

While the scene stayed the same as it was before— the theater silent as always— it would be unwise to say that nothing had changed. Just when he thought the show had finally ended, there came a blur of red, and Val screamed out a hideous scream.

“Tomatoes!” Val cried, ducking just a moment too late. A tomato stained the white-blondness of his hair with red, like raw fire. “Please, you can't do this! Stop. Stop!”

It only took a few seconds of shouting before he had caused an uproar, tomatoes staining both his hands and costume as he sobbed. A man so young yet so old as twenty-two was sobbing, and yet no one came forward to help. They only watched; it was the first and only time they ever spared a glance at him at all.

“Don't look at me! Don't! Stop it!” But there was no use. The spotlight revealed Val in all of his glory: white blouse, slacks and a long, translucent cape; all stained with bright red juice. Any more of this and

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he'd be considered a con, a fool, a laughingstock if he wasn't already. Val wondered if the boy from seventeen years ago was looking down at him in shame. "Please, just stop... stop!"

The future. The present. And then, the past.

One moment he was staring into the void of the crowd, and the next he was staring at his past self, who had taken his place.

"All I wanted was to become an actor!" the boy sobbed, hiccuping. "All I wanted was to perform for other people! For myself!"

Every spotlight turned to him as he fell on his knees, weeping.

"Yeah." Val sighed. "I wanted to believe that, too."

"Then why couldn't you?" The boy lifted his head, sniffing. "Why can't you?"

"Because no one needs us anymore." Val's words were perfectly collected, like he had said them once before. "No one cares about the things we do, or how we do them— yet we spend our whole lives trying, just for their approval." That was the true path to adulthood: trying.

"But I'm not doing this for their approval!" The younger Val yelled. "I'm doing this for me! My dreams! That's who I'm doing this for!"

The desperation in his voice had snapped something in Val, blurring the line between hopes and reality. It was like an invitation— permission, rather— to pursue the very dream he'd been chasing for all his life: freedom.

"My dreams," Val repeated. He let the words linger in his mouth. Not once did he ever get to think about his dreams or what he wanted; he only ever wanted to be perfect. Only ever wanted the impossible. At that moment Val went through a revelation bigger than anything he had ever seen before, never to be undone.

"So take my hand, Val!"

The younger Val extended his hand, like a place with no return, and Val took it without even looking back at the crowd behind them.

"Let's make this a performance they'll never forget!"