

To Dance as a Doll

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Part of the Fashion Series

It was almost the witching hour, and Claudia still danced in the studio. Tired had come and gone hours ago, and now she was driven by spite and determination. She spent her time turning on her toes, leaping across the gray marley floor, and letting the elegance of the classical music direct her every motion. It was challenging, tiring, exhilarating, and beautiful. It was ballet.

She went into a grand jete, stretching her legs as far as she could, raising her arms, feeling like a weightless balloon. For a moment she forgot the world and lived in the air. Then she came down and her ankle wobbled. Grace fled from her, and Claudia fell to the floor like a puppet with cut strings. While the music continued to play, the ballet dancer cradled her injured ankle and massaged the pain away. It hadn't been the same since the wreck. Every turn, every jump, and every landing was so much harder than it used to be. There were times when Claudia was afraid to push herself, sometimes afraid to dance at all. And she couldn't help it, but she began to cry because the thing she loved most was being taken from her.

“Go home, Claudia.”

The dancer spun on the floor, turning to Madam Agery, a middle aged woman more fierce, and frightening, than a Russian ballet teacher. She stood in the doorway with her arms crossed and severe dark eyes on her student.

Claudia gulped. “Madam Agery, I didn’t know you were here,” she said, wiping tears away and standing up, careful not to put weight on her ankle.

“Why would I be? It’s only *my* studio. What are you doing here at this ungodly hour?”

“Rehearsing,” Claudia replied sheepishly.

“For how long?”

“I took breaks, made sure to keep hydrated, and. . .”

“For how long?”

“Ten hours. Professionals can dance that long, and. . .”

Madam Agery arched her eyebrows, and Claudia’s answer fell away. “You are *not* a professional,” the teacher said, stinging her student with her sharp tone, “and you’re still recovering from injury.”

The dancer looked down, feeling the weight of her stupidity. She knew she was pushing herself too hard, getting tired and putting herself at risk. Gingerly, she put weight on her throbbing foot and the pain raced from the sprained ligaments. Giselle was a little over a week away. She still had time to recover, and Claudia didn’t think it was that bad to keep her from the dance.

“I understand, Madam Agery.”

The woman nodded and considered, “I think Laci will take your place.”

Claudia balked, “That’s not fair! I’ve been here longer than she has!”

“And she has two good ankles.”

The dancer’s face darkened, as if she had just been challenged, and she put her full weight on her bad foot. Pain radiated, but she ignored it. Ballerinas were supposed to be able to dance through the pain. She had heard stories of dancers performing with broken or bloody feet. Claudia went into a prep for a fouette.

“Don’t,” Madam Agery said. It was the kind of one word command that could freeze any dancer, and Claudia backed down. They stared at each other while the music, which didn’t know about the standoff,

nonetheless played a dramatic crescendo. “Do you really want to dance that bad? You could risk further injury, maybe even putting your career in jeopardy.”

“I don’t need a career, I just need to dance.”

Madam Agery looked her over from head to toe, finally nodding. “Then follow me.”

Claudia limped, but did as she was told, following the woman from the studio to the props room that was all clutter and chaos. The ballet mistress went to the back corner of the room after telling the dancer to stay back, and returned a minute later with a large gold key, the kind that dolls would have. It had a glow, a warmth, and the dancer stared.

“Claudia, I received this from a warlock many years ago. He promised it would bring me great success. I’ve been waiting for a dancer like you to use it on.”

“Like me?” the student asked warily. She didn’t understand anything about warlocks, except they were supposed to be bad and magical. But there was something about the key, some promise, some need it would fulfil, and she stayed in the room.

“Someone who would do anything to keep dancing.”

“But what does it do?”

“This key will turn you into a mechanical doll programmed solely to dance. And it’s much, much easier to turn you into a toy than it will be to undo the spell. So I’d have to leave you as a doll for a while to make it worth my time.” Madam Agery waited, as if what she said was supposed to scare Claudia. If it was coming from anyone else but her teacher, the student would have thought it was a joke. But Madam Agery didn’t joke.

The dancer breathed in and considered, shifting her weight between her feet, feeling the still wounded ankle. Knowing it would come back again and again to try and ruin her art. And what if she discovered that she couldn’t succeed as a dancer? Claudia couldn’t risk it. Without a word, she turned so her back faced her teacher.

“Understand, Claudia, that once I do this, you will *belong* to me. I’ll keep you here with all the props

because that's all you'll be, only taking you out to rehearse and perform. And you won't have much use for rehearsal."



"But I'll dance?" Despite all the drawbacks, Claudia still believed it was better to dance as a doll than not dance at all.

"Oh yes, I'll make sure you dance." Madam Agery didn't give Claudia any more time to consider. But as far as the student was concerned, her part in this was over. What she wanted no longer mattered.

The key went into her back, cold and firm, and the dancer gasped. It radiated strange energies that spread through

Claudia in clockwork time.

Her bones and muscles were replaced tick by tick with an intricate array of gears and springs. Her skin became nothing more than a beautiful shell to hide her mechanical insides. She leaned forward with every tick, her arms pulling together with every tock, her face fell vacant with every click. The key wrenched her body away from her control and trapped her mind inside it. Claudia was eternally aware even while she remained unwound.

It wasn't until the transformation was over and her fate sealed that Claudia realized, truly realized, what she had become. A pretty prop. Silent, and ready to dance. Made only to dance. She needed Madam Agery to twist that key, to bring all the gears inside Claudia to life. She needed to see how she would dance, perfect and obedient to her Owner. To dance without struggle, or injury, or imperfection.

But it was late, and her Owner was tired and she covered her doll in a protective white sheet. She said nothing, but left the room, abandoning Claudia in the storage closet. There would be no more dancing tonight.