

Chapter 4: Isabelle and Challenge

In June 1940, Isabelle Rossignol finds herself trapped in a finishing school overseen by the austere Madame Dufour, a woman who embodies the rigid societal expectations of the time. The school, housed in a medieval villa, is designed to shape young women into refined, obedient figures suited for marriage and high society. But for Isabelle, whose fiery spirit refuses to be tamed, the school feels less like an institution of learning and more like a prison that seeks to suppress her individuality.

During a formal dinner, Isabelle's growing frustration with the suffocating customs reaches its peak when she is expected to peel an orange with utensils, a seemingly small but deeply symbolic act of control. The pointless etiquette feels like yet another attempt to confine her, another rule designed to make women docile and compliant. When she fails to meet these arbitrary expectations, she is swiftly expelled, an outcome that hardly surprises her but deepens the lifelong pattern of rejection she has faced from both institutions and her own family.

Expelled once again, Isabelle is sent back to Paris, where her father, Christophe Rossignol, manages a small bookstore, his passion for literature overshadowed by his growing detachment. Their relationship is strained, built more on absence than presence, as Isabelle has spent much of her life being shuffled between boarding schools and disapproving guardians. Though she desperately wants to prove herself, her father's demeanor is distant, as if he sees her as more of a burden than a daughter.

As war looms over France, Isabelle senses the urgency of the situation and is eager to contribute in any way possible. She proposes ways she might help, but her father quickly dismisses her, insisting that she stay out of harm's way. His reaction is not just a reflection of his own fears but also of the deeply ingrained gender norms of the time,

which dictate that women should remain on the sidelines while men engage in war.

The fragile normalcy of Paris is shattered when the first wave of German planes appears in the sky, their dark silhouettes heralding the arrival of destruction. Panic spreads through the streets as civilians scramble for safety, realizing that the war is no longer something happening elsewhere—it is now at their doorstep. Isabelle and her father, along with their neighbors, take shelter in a cellar, the walls trembling with the force of bombs exploding above them.

In the cramped darkness of the shelter, Isabelle's restless energy refuses to be contained. The war is no longer just an abstract concept but a brutal force of destruction that is changing everything she has ever known. For the first time, she begins to see her rebellious nature not as a flaw but as something that could be used to fight back against the forces that seek to control and oppress.

As the bombs continue to fall, the realization dawns on her that she can no longer afford to be a passive observer. The world around her is unraveling, and she is determined not to sit idly by while everything crumbles. She sees the fear in her father's eyes, but instead of adopting his instinct for self-preservation, she feels something else entirely—resolve.

The stark contrast between the world she was forced into at the finishing school and the one she now finds herself in could not be greater. At Madame Dufour's villa, she was told that obedience and refinement were the ultimate virtues, but here in war-torn Paris, those qualities mean nothing. It is resilience, courage, and the willingness to act that will determine survival, and Isabelle is beginning to understand that these are the traits she must embrace.

The chapter ends with a heavy sense of dread and anticipation, as Isabelle and her father remain trapped in the cellar, waiting for the bombing to cease. The destruction she has witnessed cements her belief that she must carve her own path, one that defies both societal norms and the chaos of war. Though the future is uncertain, one thing is clear—Isabelle is not meant to be a bystander, and the fire inside her is only

just beginning to burn.



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