

Crimson liquid dripped from her open, calloused fingers, smearing the neck of the violin and staining the once silver strings, before falling off the edge onto the white, marble floor. Her legs, already worn and frail, shook as they inched closer and closer to the brink of collapse. The stage platform rotated, showing off every angle of her playing. Despite the toll on her body, the playing was flawless. Her bow moved as if she was weaving a path to a new dimension, devoid of all feeling and sound.

There was no sheet in front of her; her fingers moved mechanically, without thought, dancing up and down in D major, before drawing out a shrill F-sharp. Never had a note sounded so frightening, so baleful. She could not see in front of her, white light slowly filling her vision.

“Louder!” a female voice pierced the air. “I. Want. More!”

The tempo increased with her heartbeat, acting like a metronome to the sonata. Blood dripped faster now, as a small waterfall continued to drop below, as if it was an accompaniment to the transcendental melody that continued to consume the room.

Finally, the tune came to an end as its resolution came after a hurried ascent of notes, ending with a dramatically bowed high E-natural to conclude. For a few seconds, that portal to that dimension had opened as she ceased to play, and silence engulfed the room. And just as the voice had done for the past few hours, an impatient yell of “Again!” prompted the repeat of the composition.

She was like a machine, but even machines tend to malfunction. Her fingers, slick with blood, oscillated ferociously against the fingerboard. What was once a song with the grandeur of ethereal origin became a convoluted phrase of accidentals, no longer sounding like the empyreal theme the composer had intended.

The little girl shrieked again, getting up from where she was sitting in her room. “You’re just like the others!”

She continued to play; she was not allowed to stop unless asked, and she was not asked. Footsteps ran faster than any tempo she had heard before. Wrenched from her platform, her shoes finally free of the substance that restrained her to the floor, the music ceased, as the little girl picked up the violinist and squeezed her hard.

“You’re broken!” the girl started crying her angry tears, signalling her tantrum had just begun. “Why do you always break?”

She noticed the girl’s palm was warm. For a moment, she felt at peace. It was quiet—there was no more music to be played. It seemed as though all her wishes were to be granted. A world where there were no more key changes or arpeggios.

And then the girl snapped the player in half, throwing her away in her trash can.

“Mommy!” she called out. “My music box broke again!”

After a few moments, the girl’s mother ran up the stairs and opened the door to her daughter’s room, and engulfed her daughter in a deep hug. “Sweetie, have you been yelling at the box again?”

A guilty look was plastered on the young girl’s face. “I’m sorry Mommy,” she said between snuffles. “I know you made it extra special for me. But it keeps *malfunctioning*.”

“Malfunctioning?” she repeated the word, pronounced correctly, to her child. “It’s okay. Sometimes we need to replace parts to make them perfect. I made your favourite pasta, and it’s waiting for you downstairs. While you eat dinner, Mommy will fix your music box in time for beddy time. Okay?”

Drying her daughter's soaked cheeks, she kissed the top of her forehead before letting her run downstairs to the dining room. The mother picked up the music box and took it to her room, frustrated that despite her best efforts, it still wasn't working. This was her daughter's gift for her sixth birthday, and she had felt like a failure for producing an imperfect design.

Her room's walls were adorned with honours and awards for her advancements and discoveries. Centred perfectly above her desk was a framed certificate, with cursive font denoting an impressive PhD in theoretical physics.

Placing the box down at her work desk, the mother bent down at her chair to the safe underneath, where the key part to her mechanism was. Unlocking the steel compartment with her combination (her daughter's birthdate), she was instantly met with screams of terror and sorrow. Rolling her eyes, she picked out another player from her assortment, and brought her onto the desk. This one was an oboe player.

"Please don't do this," the smaller human screamed. "I'll do anything, please!"

Wordlessly, the mother cleaned the platform back to its pristine, original look. She grabbed a tube of adhesive glue, and placed two small drops in the middle. The oboist screamed, and struggled against the larger woman's grip, but to her avail, her feet were permanently planted to the marble.

In the end, the last, futile attempts of resistance were all for naught, as the mother gently took the oboe, also shrunken down to size with the player, and shoved the mouthpiece between the player's lips, silencing her. Muffled cries of protest began, but she tuned them out, instead grabbing the tube and placing a final drop of adhesive on the lips. Now, no sound came.

"My daughter is going to go to sleep in around an hour," she informed the oboeist while cleaning up her desk. "I expect that you will have a soothing tune prepared."

Before the oboeist could even try to protest, the mother grabbed the top of the lid and smiled.

“Break a leg.” she said, before slamming down the top of the box, leaving the muted player cramped and engulfed in darkness.