

Accompanied

Robin marches across the windblown night, sleek black violin case clutched close. The music hall looms large against a star-scattered sky. It is late, far past ordinary operating hours, but this is Robin's routine. She waits for sunlight to slip away, waits for even the night owls to retreat to their dorms, waits for campus to fall quiet with only the crickets' chirr to accompany the staccato beat of her boots against the pavement. She nudges the brick out of the way where it holds the side entrance open, slips into the building, and pauses just for a moment outside the concert hall.

Far across the grand room, past tiers of scrunched-together seats and the sweeping cedar stage, there is a window. Semicircular, clear glass segmented neatly into clean panes, and a field beyond. A waxing moon hangs low in the sky, casts its mournful face on the empty stage. Robin clutches her case tighter.

She turns to duck into the stairwell, to descend into the lower levels—the practice rooms tucked away beneath everything else. The stairs are narrow, and Robin imagines it must be a bit of a nightmare to drag a whole bass down them, though she never really had the chance to find out before everything splintered apart. She pokes her head into the first hall and listens for a moment. Counts the beats in her mind. It's quiet; nobody home. For good measure, she goes for a room at the end of the hall.

The sound of metal clasps snapping open is jarring against the quiet. Robin unstraps and lifts her violin out of the case's velvet lining, turns it gently to fit the shoulder rest on. With a flick of her fingers, the bow is free—she tightens the end screw, applies a healthy

coating of rosin, and rises, tucking the instrument under her arm. A sheaf of sheet music pokes out from a small compartment of her case; she shakes it out and smooths it onto the music stand waiting forlornly in the corner of the room.

Telemann's *Fantasia No. 1 for Solo Violin in B-flat Major*. The sheet, stark white, is littered with sharp, dark pen strokes. Bowings, lifts, brief margin notes stating simple commands—*breathe, hold, watch yourself here*. She knows it will be poor. She lifts the violin.

The first few measures are soft—inhalates, exhales, whispers against the strings. Robin's shoulder, all the same, complains. That steady ache, that thrum of dull old pain. She pays it little mind, notes spilling into notes, forging on with careful strokes. A stutter on the wider movements, sure, but tolerable. The music marches on.

The music hall's practice rooms are cramped. Stuffy. The light is always sterile, the acoustic paneling a tedious shade of eggshell. But it serves its purpose. It contains the music, the musicians. And for Robin's purposes, it is secluded. Quiet. Undisturbed.

The first few notes that float in from the other room are hesitant. Tentative chords, the sound of a harmony's soft clunk into place. A pianist, seated at the baby grand a few doors down. It barely registers in Robin's mind until a few measures later: they are playing along with her. This piece has no accompaniment, and they are playing along.

Improvising—dubiously, she'll be the first to admit, but valiantly. And then it strikes her, somehow after the first revelation, that someone is listening to her play.

With a scramble, Robin halts her piece, packs her things, and rushes out of the room. Her boots thump down the hall and she winces at the sound. The piano has stopped, notes ringing soft in the suddenly too-warm, too-stale air. Robin disappears into the stairwell.

Professor Nancy's lecture fades in and out of Robin's attention. At the back of the class, she follows along with the steps laid out on the board—simple instructions on MIDI arrangement. It's not that Nancy is a bad lecturer, but his voice carries a strange cadence of boredom, his movements sluggish and vague as he gestures to the workstation on screen. Robin can't help zoning out as he moves into a tangent on BPM and time signatures—the content is basic, concepts she's heard a thousand times before this class.

She doesn't know anyone here. Audio design majors, murmuring amongst themselves, already familiar with each other from two years of classes, clubs, events, and whatever else communications students get up to together. She has to remind herself that she's one of them, now. A block away from the music hall, forced under stale LEDs like a Stradivarius in a glass museum case. Gathering dust. Going out of tune. Wood slowly warping into something unintelligible, soundless, broken.

"Your assignment for this week," Professor Nancy says, jerking Robin out of her thoughts, "is to create a short piece of music. Nothing complicated, nothing too crazy. You can use loops, if it helps you get started."

Robin takes a breath. She will not be using loops. Someone else raises their hand, asks about loop libraries, and the professor hunches over his laptop to navigate to a website packed with free thirty-second recordings of tinny drum solos and warbling electric guitar licks. Something curdles in Robin's chest when he hits play on a snippet of orchestral music. Her fingers twitch.

When the clock hits 8:50 PM, she snaps her laptop shut and stuffs it in her bag. The cool evening air cannot bite her fast enough.

In the emptying quad, Robin sets up shop on an old iron bench. The music hall lingers nearby, quiet and towering, tall windows soaking up starlight to spill over the common area within. The crickets have struck up their song again, and Robin taps the corner of her laptop, knowing she should follow suit.

The blank project seems to gape up at her. She imagines the box full of records back at her apartment, pictures herself sprawling on the bed and closing her eyes, letting the music gather her up and cradle her close. She could just go home. Push the work back. Get out of her own head for a little while.

The music hall's side entrance creaks open. Robin whips around to stare—or squint, really—at the darkened doorway. A young woman holds the door with her foot, reaching down to fetch the little red brick and slip it back into place. Neatly, with care. She's wearing a jean jacket over a soft olive hoodie—a little warm for late spring, dirty blond hair tucked into the hood. There's a black binder under her arm. When she turns from the door, she catches Robin's eye for a brief second before going on her way, disappearing down a set of wide stone stairs off the quad.

Robin shakes her head and returns to the empty project. She opens the bin of virtual instruments and skips past the strings. She knows they'll sound abysmal.

The music hall consumes everything. Shadowed, brimming with echoes. Robin's boots send low notes skittering off the vaulted ceiling as she makes for the stairwell, dipping in and out of long swathes of cold moonlight. In a way, she's always here. The empty stage, the semicircular window, the rows of fold-out seats, the spiral staircase, the tucked-away practice rooms—it all dwells at the back of her mind, a black hole her thoughts fall into. If she could, she would walk herself right in along with them. What would she lose? Time would slow, warp around her, and she would keep walking, keep falling in, while her afterimage faded crimson and disappeared on the event horizon. She would hear the universe sing her to sleep.

She takes the stairs two at a time, sequesters herself in the practice room at the end of the hall, snaps open her case, slips on the shoulder rest, and rosins her bow. A twinge of familiar pain nags at her shoulder. It will only build. It will only rise. It will only crash, eventually. But not tonight. Not here. She lifts the bow, takes her first breath—

A piano cuts in. The opening measures of *Ave Maria*, light and floating, low left-hand notes steady beneath soft, bright upper chords. Plum blossoms on a breeze, morning clouds lifting high over a thin horizon line. It's too easy of an invitation—Robin finds herself moving almost subconsciously, shifting into position and pulling the first trembling note from its string. The pianist barely stumbles, letting the melody slip from their hands and into hers. It's easy on her shoulder. Long, breathing notes that open and close, swell and fade. The final chord comes quicker than she likes, bow soft as it scrapes over the strings.

When the door down the hall opens, Robin freezes. She holds her breath as footsteps tap along the tile. For a long moment, there is silence outside her room. Then the stranger carries on. Robin exhales and gathers her things.

As she closes the door quietly behind her, Robin sees the note. Bright blue, stuck to the wood right at eye-level.

Same time next week?

“You haven’t *started it* yet?”

Robin grimaces when her roommate reels back, a stapled packet crumpled in his hand. “I don’t know, I just—it all sounds so fake.”

Beckett gives her an incredulous look before tossing the papers onto the table. “Yes, Robin, they’re fake instruments. I’m pretty sure they all sound like that.” He drops into the chair next to hers and reaches for his pencil case.

“I know that,” Robin mutters. She slides the packet over and uncaps her pen. “What I mean is, they sound like shit. I don’t know how anybody makes decent music with that stuff.”

“Well, they don’t. They buy better ones for hundreds of dollars.” Beckett unzips the case. “Anyway, shouldn’t this be, like, a walk in the park for you, Miss Concertmaster?”

“Shut up. That’s not even true anymore.”

He holds up his hands. “Sorry, sorry. I’m just saying...”

Robin strikes through a misspelled word and scrawls the correction in the margins.

“It’s not the same. There’s no sheet music, it’s all... little green blocks on a scale. You drag ‘em around and hit play and the program spits out notes.”

“So, it’s easier?”

“It’s different. Also, you misspelled *coercion* again, I hope you know that.”

Beckett scoffs, dumping the contents of his pen case on the table. “It should have an ‘s’ in it. The fact that people invented the word wrong is not my fault.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Robin circles a quote and marks it with a question mark, scribbling *citation?* in the margins.

“I’m hilarious.” Beckett reaches for Robin’s paper and sets to work. “The other classes get any less mind-numbing? Y’know, with...” He waves his hand.

“I’m fine.”

Beckett gives her a look.

“Really,” Robin says. “It’s not that bad. I know I complain, but it’s... it’s not that far off from what I was doing before.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s still music.”

Beckett shakes his head, underlining the title of her paper and drawing a silly face next to it. “It’s your own personal hell, and I know that, because I have to hear about it every other day.”

Robin just shrugs and flips to the next page. She doesn't like to talk about it. How much her life has changed over the past year. How everything she wanted to do has uprooted itself and shredded apart. It's fine. She's fine. And the world moves on.

"Maybe you could join a community orchestra, or something," Beckett says.

Robin huffs a laugh. "Maybe I could die of embarrassment."

"*Maybe* you could really enjoy yourself."

"Nobody wants to hear it, trust me." Robin sets her pen aside and uncaps a highlighter. "And anyway, you need to stop worrying about me and start worrying about this thesis statement."

Beckett leans back in his chair, twirling his pen. He just watches her for a bit, pulling a face. "You know he was wrong, right? You're not—"

Robin shoots him a sharp look. "Don't. I don't want to do that."

"Do what? I—"

"I don't want to talk about him, I don't want to think about it, I just—" Robin lets the highlighter clatter onto the table, holds up her hands. "Can we change the subject?"

"... Yeah." Beckett sits back up. "Yeah, okay."

A year ago, lightning lit a storm-dark campus. Robin was on her way back from a little performance in a church, separate from her schoolwork. A local gig, a small orchestra directed by her high school tutor. Cole had driven her there, and now they were walking down to the campus apartments from the parking garage. Trudging through a sharp, driving

rain across the quad. Robin was still wearing her concert dress, hugging the black fabric as it soaked through, feet aching something fierce in her cheap heels. Neither party was in a good mood.

“You were sharp on the last chord,” Cole said. It was the third thing he’d said since they left the church, the first being ‘*That was a rough one,*’ and the second, after they’d walked outside into the oncoming storm: ‘*Did you bring an umbrella?*’ She had not.

“Do we have to do this?”

Cole shrugged, pulled his parka tighter around himself. “You want to make concertmaster again next year, don’t you?”

“I’m not slacking. It was just a favor for a former mentor.”

“A performance is a performance.”

A scrap of sharp rain stung Robin’s eye. She reached up to rub it. This was something her boyfriend said often—every performance was important, a testament to a musician’s skill, a culmination of careful work and endless study. He wasn’t entirely wrong. But she was fallible. And hell, she was tired.

“Is it really that important?” she said. She didn’t have to look to know the way his face would twist.

“Yes, it is. And while we’re on the subject—principal second? Really? What happened there?”

Robin resisted the wave of hot annoyance that rose within her. Yes, she was principal *second* violin in her former tutor’s orchestra. Yes, it had stung a little when she first got the news. Yes, she wished she had the spine to ask why.

“It doesn’t mean anything, Cole. It’s educational. He wanted someone experienced leading both sections. There weren’t any auditions.”

“But he picked the other guy for concertmaster.”

“Arbitrarily!” Robin kicked herself for raising her voice. It wouldn’t help.

Cole picked up his pace, leaned into her space. His shorn dark hair was slick with rain, stuck to his forehead. “I’m just saying, the way you played tonight sounded like it.”

“Oh, would you—” Robin cut herself off, turned to face him. She knew it wasn’t her best work, she knew it was a rough night, she *knew* every single mistake she’d made. And she knew Cole was right. He wasn’t an idiot; he was the principal cellist in their university orchestra. But she was angry, and he was being an ass. “Just fuck off, for once? It’s one stupid gig, it doesn’t matter.”

The rain pricked her skin, the wind battered her. The storm was howling off-key, snatching her tempo and rendering her lost, stumbling off-time and spitting sharp notes. Cole said something about responsibility and dedication, something about taking what she deserved. The badly-lit quad flickered in the downpour, light and sound, cold and sharp. Something held fast was slipping.

“We’re supposed to be the best,” Cole said. He was too close. His words rang hollow and true, somehow both at once, rattling in the cage of her ribs. “And you can’t even pull it together for one lousy—”

Robin turned on her heel to walk away. Rain had made the pavement slick, and the two of them drew too close to the steps. The night was starved for violence.

Cole grabbed for her arm. “Where are you going?”

Wrenching away from him, Robin didn't get the chance to respond before her heel slipped, caught the first step. The plastic snapped.

On her way to Rue's apartment, Robin picks up takeout. She's got a list of everyone's orders hastily tapped out on her phone, transcribed in the midst of a raucous call where all of her friends seemed incapable of not speaking over each other. Their usual haunt never takes too long, and she's almost certain Beckett will have commandeered Rue's living room and laid out the board games before she gets there.

This is what she needs, she decides, slipping a heavy bag of hot food off the pickup shelf and throwing a polite thanks over her shoulder as she shoves her way back into the soft night. The apartment is only a block or two down the street, and the evening is cool and calm. Callery pears have bloomed along the street, shedding small white petals on the sidewalk. A fine spring snow.

When the door opens, Rue squeals and drags Robin inside. The living room table, predictably, is strewn with Love Letter cards and little crimson favor tokens. Beckett's gloating over his win, Walker gathering up discarded pieces. And someone Robin doesn't know—dirty blond, legs tucked underneath her, jean jacket draped over the armchair's back—elbows Beckett, complaining lightly. Robin tries to place where she's seen her before. Rue's guest, somebody new to her.

"Food's here!" Rue says, clapping their hands.

The boys cheer, swiftly packing away the card game as Robin sets the bag down on the low coffee table. Beckett pats her back when she drops down next to him on the couch. “Thanks for picking it up. Hope the walk wasn’t too bad.”

“It was fine. Nice night out, actually,” Robin says. She sneaks a glance at the new blood. “Do I get an introduction?”

Rue hands Walker a box of lo mein and startles. “Oh, I forgot you guys haven’t met! This is Olive.” They gesture to the blond stranger, who smiles sheepishly and waves.

“Nice to meet you. Heard good things from Rue.”

Robin raises a brow at Rue, who grins and pushes a plastic container of fried rice into her hands. “She’s telling the truth, all good things, I swear.”

“Right, right.” Robin shakes her head and cracks open the box, the fragrant warmth of fresh-cooked food a balm to her soul. “Well, nice to meet you, too, Olive. Are you a psych major, like Rue?”

“Oh, no. Music,” Olive says.

Beckett is unable to hide his wince. Robin takes a bite of her food, ignoring the unbidden prickle of heat at the back of her neck. Embarrassment. Envy. Shame.

She gathers herself. “That’s cool. I, uh, used to do that.”

Rue and Walker are not immune to the unfortunate shift in atmosphere. Walker eats quietly, not engaging, while Rue’s eyes dart between Robin and Olive, their leg bouncing. Olive glances at Rue, brows knit in light confusion.

“Well, I’ve got all of you beat,” Beckett says, propping his shoes up on the table. “Big-shot computer science major, here.”

The tension dissipates as the room devolves into groans, half about Beckett's feet on the table, half about his faux-grandiose attitude. Amidst Rue threatening to throw a fortune cookie at Beckett's head, Olive making a comment on his untied laces, and Walker shaking his head in silent disappointment, Robin shoots him a grateful look. Beckett nudges her with his shoulder.

The rest of the evening passes in relative calm. Light topics, easy conversation. Olive doesn't broach the subject of majors or music again, and looks almost apologetic for causing any spot of tension in the first place, though she couldn't have known.

When they pack up for the night, Robin touches Olive's shoulder to catch her attention. Rue's mediating a match of wastebasket toss between Beckett and Walker—their version of group cleanup—and Olive has already tugged her jacket back on.

"Hey," Robin says quietly. "Sorry about earlier. You didn't do anything wrong. It's just a rough subject, but you didn't know that."

Olive offers a soft smile and a shrug. "No harm, no foul. I just hope I didn't make a terrible impression."

"No, no." Robin plucks her bag off the bureau by the door. "You're fine. Um, it really was nice to meet you."

A hint of relief passes over Olive's expression, and she beams. It's almost like she puts her whole body into the grin, like she stands taller. "Good. I'm glad."

The practice room door looms before Robin. The note from last week is burned into her brain, that bright blue square of sticky paper she'd taken from the door, folded neatly in her pocket, and left on her dorm room desk never far from her thoughts. She's here at night, same as before. Does she want them to be there? Just a few doors down, seated at the baby grand, waiting for her to take up the bow?

She opens the door and sets her case on the fold-out chair, flips open the snaps and frees her bow before she notices the sheaf of paper on the music stand. A closer look, and she recognizes it instantly—Fritz Kreisler's *Praeludium and Allegro*, painstakingly marked in soft graphite. She's played this before, had it regularly in her repertoire, dedicated herself to it and loved it fully. But as she is now? She knows it would be a bad idea to try.

But she remembers the notes, the accents, the way she could linger and lean into the fermata and the piano would wait for her, eyes ever pinned to her stance, her breath, waiting for the cue. She remembers the taste of a good duet, the way her heart would race. She wants it back. God, she wants it back.

She warms up with an easy scale. G major. As she draws the bow over the strings, quiet notes filter in from down the hall. A piano follows along, riffing on the scale. Playful, light, free. When Robin winds back down to the root, she lifts her bow and sets it. She stares down the page.

A sharp intake of breath. The pianist catches up to her on their second chord and she rushes only slightly, eager to sink her teeth into the melody, and from the moment she begins her shoulder wails in protest—a pulse, an ache, a sharp talon slipping into sinew. The accents are taxing, her weight on the bow desperate and wanting. She pushes through the

first crescendo, the high G trembling in her hands, the music gentling as they march toward a time signature change.

On to Andante. She resets her bow, prays the pain to ease—give her more time, let her breathe, allow her this small moment. Quieter, she chides herself, softer. The piano works steadily underneath her melody. Back to common time, *a tempo, piano*. The ache flares bright anew as she hurtles toward the ritardando, as she slows and holds and pulls each note like teeth from the violin's body.

The crescendo comes. She does not make it to the fermata.

Her bow clatters to the ground and she barely manages to catch her violin, sinking to the ground with a pained gasp. The next piano chord rings in her ears, lingers in the hall, empties in her mind. She sets her instrument down and curls in on herself, fighting the sting of tears at her eyelids. She knew she would be here. From the moment she picked up her bow again, from the second she slipped into the music hall, from the day she lost it all. She knew.

The door opens with a quiet creak. Silence, hesitation, realization. A gentle hand lands on the shoulder she's not cradling.

"Robin, right?"

Robin bites back a sob. Of course. Of course it would turn out like this. She scrubs her face and accepts Olive's hand. She doesn't explain. Olive doesn't ask—only lifts her violin and bow from the floor and tucks them away in her case, takes the sheet music from the stand and folds it into her pocket, out of sight. She leads Robin out of the music hall and offers to drive her to Urgent Care.

Robin accepts, Olive squeezes her hand, and the shame seared into her body subsides. The night is quiet, the drive gentle. Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto in D major* ekes out of the car radio and Robin breathes through it.