Take A Break

by andlat

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The Costume Box
2024

Chapter 1

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“Yes!” Joey pumped the air. “That's a ten kill streak! Victory royale, right?” He pumped the air again as he heard the sounds of dismay coming over the headset, but then a firm knock on his door startled him back to reality. “What?”

“Is that any way to talk to your mother?” Mom said, walking in. She frowned. “Have you been playing all day?” He took off the headset, hearing snorts of laughter.

“Uh”

“I know for a fact that that's sixth grader for yes.” Mom said, crossing her arms. “I want a one hour break from screens.”

“Mom!”

“Two hours. Leave this room at least once today.” Joey knew better than to comment that he had when he went to the bathroom. “And put on pants. Your sister has a friend over.”

Realizing he was hungry, Joey headed downstairs fully clothed. From the staircase, he could see into the family room where his sister Amanda and whichever friend of hers that was had pushed all the furniture against the walls as they danced to some classical music in their ballet dresses. A month ago, he could have sworn Amanda had never even heard of ballet, but now it seemed like all she and her friends talked about. Making a face, Joey headed away from that girly nonsense and into the kitchen.

“Let's see…” he murmured. “Fruit snacks for sure.” He opened the cupboard. “Where are they?” He looked over his shoulder and saw the empty box sitting on top of the kitchen trash. “Ugh, Amanda.”

Deciding to make do with something else, he stood up on his tiptoes to check the top shelf. Mom put all the snacks up there back when they had both been too short to reach even with the stepstool. Now, he could just barely reach on his toes.

He grabbed a chocolate pudding and lowered his heels back down. At least, that was what he meant to do. Instead, he remained on the balls of his feet. He tried to push his heels down, but somehow, his feet remained just as they were.

“Okay, weird.” He had heard vaguely about gamers getting muscle cramps, but this seemed weird. “It'll go away.” He told himself, twirling and then doing a few sidesteps to the silverware drawer for a spoon. “Oh, I should grab a juice too.” He hoped that moving around would help with the cramp or whatever, but he seemed to be even higher by the time he reached the fridge. Balls of his feet? More like his tiptoes!

He was so high up on his toes now, he had to bend over to grab a bottle of lemon lime Gatorade from the bottom shelf of the fridge, one leg straightening out behind him as he improbably balanced on just the toes of his right foot.

Gatorade in hand, he brought his leg back down and tried again to lower his heels, wobbling on the very edge of his toes. What was going on? He crossed the kitchen back over to

his waiting pudding, realizing only then that he was moving in exact time with the music he could hear from the family room. Why was he doing that? It wasn't like it was a bad song. It sounded familiar.

He ripped open the seal on the pudding cup and danced his way in time with the music over to the trash can. He frowned and tried to walk normally back over to his pudding. Was the music getting louder? He had learned in music class that this was called a… a what? A crescendo? Something like that, he thought.

Joey tried a third time to push his heels down to the floor, but they still refused to budge. He shifted his weight over to one leg and raised the other straight in front of him to inspect it. He frowned as something seemed off about it. He was wearing a strange shoe that looked nothing like the sock he had had on it. It was like a satiny white slipper. He frowned, trying to figure out why it seemed so strange. After all, it matched his tights and his tutu, right?

“Tutu.” He murmured, trying to figure out why that seemed so strange. He shook his head as if trying to clear cobwebs. “What's so weird about a tutu?” He realized a moment later. He was all in white and about to eat chocolate pudding. He was asking for stains.

Satisfied that he had figured out what was bothering him, he left the kitchen on pointe, making an elegant beeline for the family room, his hands placed just so on his hips right above his tutu. He paused just a moment at the mirror in the dining

room to inspect himself.

“I look just like a ballerina.” He murmured, half horrified and half confused why he would look any other way. Before he could reconcile that latest befuddlement, he made a grand entrance into the living room.

Joey expected Amanda and her friend to question his appearance, but they took it completely in stride. They curtsied and Joey found himself curtseying back as a new song began. The three of them started to dance, Joey in the middle and one of them on either side, moving in perfect synchronization, three beautiful ballerinas, though Joey was dressed much more grandly than the other two. He was older, he thought as if that made perfect sense. In the moment, with the music filling him from the tips of his toes to the top of his impeccable ballerina bun, it did.

Joey could not say how long they danced, but it seemed like both an eternity and an instant later, the trio held their curtsies as Joey's mom clapped.

“That was wonderful!” She gushed. “You three make a wonderful team? No, troupe, I think.”

“Mom!” Joey said, reality settling in and pushing his heels to the floor.

“Just beautiful all around.” Mom said, seemingly taking her son's dramatic change in wardrobe in stride just as the girls had.

“But-”

“Fine.” Mom sighed. “You can change, Joey, if you're really that embarrassed.” He breathed a sigh of relief. “You really were good though.” She stood in the doorway of the family room. “Don't you think so, girls?”

“Yep!” They giggled.

“Mom, let me through. Please.”

“Who knew you had it in you?” Mom gently brushed his cheek. “You even have glitter on your face, you know that?”

“You… you-” he stammered. “I didn't do this myself.” Mom simply smiled and nodded to Amanda behind the boy. The music started and Joey found himself back on pointe, arms held gracefully out to either side.

“You've still got about eighty-five minutes left of your break from screens.” Mom said, settling onto the couch with a girl in a ballet dress on either side of her. “So why don't you show us some more?” Joey began to dance around the room, his audience watching raptly. He should have pushed past Mom when he had the chance, but then he would have deprived them of a performance and no ballerina wanted that.