

SFORZANDO

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Yufei leaves her small apartment exactly an hour after the sun wakes her. Her walk is fast enough— her steps are brisk despite her heeled boots, violin case in one hand and other hand untucking her short, wide sleeves from her backpack straps. She signs herself in at the bottom of the glass-and-metal building, then clicks her way over to the elevator and ascends to the top floor.

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An empty room awaits her, blissfully quiet and ready for her to charm it with music. Controlled sweeps of her bow tell the story of the piece: a swift strike, a long, drawing pull— she keeps the original tempo in mind, but here is where *rubato* allows her to fly.

Once she's had her fill of the precise finger movements, she heads down a few sets of stairs for hot water and a small lunch at the cafe. Her steps do not falter as she moves to another building— this time, she has a test. It's grueling, especially the handwritten code questions, but she's glad she put in the time this past week. When she leaves the building, the sun has sunk below the suffocating city skyline but not yet dipped below the natural horizon. She's tired, but doggedly determined to finish everything she wanted to do today.

Jenny wakes, startled by the sharp pinging of her alarm. She fumbles for her phone, falling out of her bed while frantically pressing the 'stop' button. She groans as she puts her glasses on. That was her third alarm and she's going to be late for class if she doesn't *hurry the hell up*. She scrambles to get ready, and she's flying out of the dorm in a record 15 minutes, stumbling onto the shuttle just before the doors close. She's still reviewing slides on her phone when the shuttle drops her off at school and she sweeps inside, her ratty sneakers creaking on the wooden floor of the dramatic writing department. Class ends with her closing the New York Times website and scuttling off to the nearest piano. She needs to practice one last time.

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Jenny settles down into a trance-like state, fingers dancing over the keys. She sways with the music, keeping in mind the tempo of the piece while sticking closely to the written dynamics. She is a vessel for the story of the music, but it is not her story to embellish.

When she's satisfied with her practice, she gingerly closes the lid on the lovely grand piano, brushing her hand over it in a gentle farewell. Jenny's stomach rumbles. *Shit*. She forgot to eat lunch. Time for some boba and a snack.



Yufei doesn't know what to make of her accompanist. She checks the time; it's a quarter-to-six and the show starts at nine. She's already changed into her concert wear— heels and a long, golden dress with a slit down the side— and done her hair and makeup. They should have begun practicing at six-thirty. She sighs, aggravated, while rosinning her bow.

"I'm so sorry!" The doors of the auditorium burst open, and Yufei stops playing. "I got caught up with the line at the boba place. The app said ten minutes, but it took thirty, *ugh*—"

Yufei's frazzled accompanist, a girl still in her casual clothes with her glasses askew, plops down at the beautiful piano, placing a drink down by its side. Yufei aches to make a cutting remark, but in honor of their soon-to-be working relationship, she keeps her mouth shut.

The girl shuffles her tablet out of her bag and places it gingerly on the piano, before turning to Yufei.

"I'm Jenny, by the way," Jenny beams at her.

"Yufei. Let's begin."





"No-nonsense, huh? I like that. What speed do you usually take this at?" Something must show on Yufei's face, because Jenny nods, "Play a few bars and I'll match."

"I tend towards a lot of *rubato*."

"That's fine. I've been practicing with the recording you sent, but if you've made any huge changes in your characterization of the song since then, I can adjust how I play in our first run-through." Jenny says.

Despite the tardiness, Jenny seems to know what she's talking about. Hopefully her playing will be good. Yufei plays her favorite part of the melody at tempo while Jenny taps out the beat, then nods.

"Ready?" Jenny asks.

"Ready."

She's totally changed up the character of the song! Jenny despairs. The first page went alright, and the start of the second was fine, but once Yufei started racing forwards and pulling back erratically near the end of the second page, Jenny had to stop her.

"Yufei, sorry, can you stop for a moment?"

Yufei lowers her bow, a smoldering glare drawn on her face. "What?"

"The, uh. Can you play it all the way through without me, and then I'll write down your tempo changes?"

"We don't have time for that," Yufei says, her tone as sharp as her eyeliner. She takes one heavy step forward, head tilted. "We need to meld together. Just follow how I play."

"That's not—" Jenny scrubs her hand through her hair. "The recording I got was from like two months ago. I need to hear how you play it now."

"Is that really necessary?"

"Yes."

Yufei finally agrees and begins playing through the song. In contrast to her sharp and elegant character, she's wild and free as she plays, swaying slightly with her emphatic bow movements. Yufei's eyes flutter shut, concentrated, and Jenny snaps herself out of her stupor. She needs to take notes! When Yufei finishes her playthrough, she sighs, and all that wild, untamed magic seems to fold back into herself as she lowers her bow.

"Drink some water, and I'll be ready in a moment," Jenny says, finishing up her notes.

Yufei does, then raises her bow and eyebrows in tandem. "Ready?"

Jenny plays the first few bars carefully, then flicks her eyes between her hands and Yufei through the first page. It's the start of a fairytale story, full of hope and love for the first page and a half, until tragedy strikes midway through page two. This time, Jenny follows Yufei's sudden tempo and volume increase, the violinist's intonation growing stronger and more vivid as they progress onto

the third page and onwards. A string of syncopated notes sends the tempo veering wildly and Yufei delicately slows the song down for the final few pages. And like that, they finish their first runthrough.

Yufei's shoulders ease slightly. "Better."

"Not *good*?" Jenny can't help herself.

"No. Again." Yufei raises her bow again and Jenny starts the first few bars, a smile etched onto her face.

The performance goes perfectly. The two are in sync, and following Yufei's lead comes as naturally to Jenny as breathing by the end of it, sometimes before Yufei pointed out a mistake. She was a perfect accompanist. But Yufei has other things she needs to do. She doesn't have time to play the violin much after college.

Now and again Jenny thinks about the proud, headstrong woman with her violin, but there's not much to mourn. Yufei never requests her as an accompanist again. Some things are meant to only intersect once.

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