

Except *The Music* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's mystery novel, *War at Home* (written as Kris Nelscott), was recently nominated for the Oregon Book Award--one of the Northwest's most prestigious literary awards. This is the second year in a row that Kris has been nominated for it. Her newest Nelscott novel, *Days of Rage*, came out in February, and her latest SF book, *Paloma: A Retrieval Artist Novel*, will appear in October. As I write this blurb, Kris is probably in Barcelona collecting the prestigious UPC award for her novella "Diving into the Wreck" (Asimov's, December 2005). In her latest tale, she explores the mystique of creativity and shows one man that perhaps nothing can save him...

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"Where *do* musicians go to die?" She rested on one elbow, her honey brown hair spilling down her arm and onto the pillow. The rest of her body was hidden by the linen duvet, which warded off the room's chill.

Max paused, his left black tuxedo shoe--shined to perfection before the concert--in his right hand. The question unnerved him. She had overheard his remark earlier, made at the festival to one of the other performers: *Places like this are where classical musicians go to die.*

His cheeks warmed. He was glad he had his back to her. He slipped the shoe over his sock-clad foot, then picked up the other shoe. "It was a joke."

His voice was soft, gentle, as if he wasn't the kind of man who had any malice within him. He knew that wasn't true, and he had a hunch she did as well. But he couldn't be certain of that; he knew so very little about her.

"I know you meant it that way," she said, scrunching up the pillows and pulling the duvet over her large--and not fake--breasts. "Still, it got me to wondering."

He buttoned his shirt halfway, stuffed the bow tie in the pocket of his pants, and looked for his jacket. The room seemed smaller than it had two hours ago. Then it had seemed charming--slanted ceilings, large windows with a spectacular view of the ocean, a bed in the very center--made, which surprised him--and two antique upholstered chairs next to a curved reading lamp. A small table sat near the even smaller half kitchen. The walls were lined with bookshelves, filled floor-to-ceiling with well-read paperbacks. Until he saw those, he would have guessed that she was a weekender, like so many others in this godforsaken coastal town.

"Wondering?" he asked. "About death?"

She shrugged a pretty shoulder, then turned on a lamp on the end table beside the bed. He hadn't noticed the lamp or the end table before. Of course, he had been preoccupied.

"Death is a hobby of mine," she said so calmly that it made him nervous.

He finally turned toward her. She was forty, give or take, but still beautiful in a mature way that he rarely saw outside of the major cities.

She didn't look like the typical classical music groupie. Granted, most of them were middle-aged women with too much time on their hands, but their beauty--if they once had any at all--had faded. They now had a soft prettiness or a competent intelligent look about their tired faces. Dressing up made them look like librarians, and he always sensed desperation in them.

She had stood out, even on the first night of the festival, wearing a lavender silk blouse that made her

honey hair seem blond. She was statuesque, overdressed for the Oregon Coast, and yet, he had a sense then--which he still had--that she had dressed down for every one of the concerts she attended. Her hair was long, where most of the middle-aged women wore theirs too short--and she wore no make-up: she needed none.

"You seem startled," she said, and that was when he realized how ridiculous he looked. He still had his shoe in his hand, one sock-clad foot resting on his knee, his shirt unbuttoned and his pants unzipped.

A man who was trying to escape. A man who was done with this one-night stand, as pleasurable as it had been.

A man who should have known better, but had--even at the ripe old age of forty-five--let his penis get the best of him.

"I just never heard anyone claim they specialized in death before," he said.

"I don't specialize," she said. "I dabble."

She fumbled in the end table's only drawer, finally pulling out a cigarette with an air of triumph. Max winced. The place didn't smell of tobacco, but apparently that didn't mean anything. She hadn't tasted of tobacco either. Maybe the cigarette was of a different kind.

She lit it, and he realized he was both right and wrong: the cigarette was a different type--he just hadn't expected to smell cloves instead of marijuana.

"I wouldn't have bought the season tickets if it weren't for the Mozart on the bill." She took a long drag from the cigarette, then let the blue smoke filter slowly out of her lungs. "I so love that requiem. I think it's the best of all of them."

Max didn't; he preferred Fauré's. "Mozart never finished it. There's some argument about how much of it is his work."

"Precisely." She jabbed the cigarette toward him with the movement of a long-standing smoker. "A requiem partially composed by a dead man. Don't you find that amazingly appropriate?"

"I think it's more appropriate that I find my coat before I leave." He slid the other shoe over his foot. "Did you see where I dropped it?"

She gave him a wicked smile. "I wasn't looking at your clothes."

He gave her a wicked smile in return. No sense letting her know that she was freaking him out.

He stood, looked around the small space for the tuxedo jacket that had cost him more than she probably paid for everything in this place. He remembered this feeling; he'd had it in his twenties before he married, this sinking sensation that if he had simply taken five minutes to talk with the woman before slipping into bed with her, he would never have touched her.

Then he saw the jacket, lying in a heap on top of a fake Persian rug.

"You don't have to run out," she said.

"Actually, I do," he said, picking up the jacket in one neat movement. "I'm staying with a local family, and it would be rude to wake them just because I stayed out too late."

That shoulder shrug again, accompanied by a practiced pout. "So don't go home at all."

"I'm the celebrity," he said, with only a trace of irony. "They'll be watching for me."

As if he were a child again, and they were his parents. He hated this part of music festivals, and he didn't care how much the organizers explained it to him, he still didn't understand the lure. He felt as though the patrons, who had spent thousands of dollars supporting music in the hinterlands, had also bought a piece of him, even though none of them acted that way. They all seemed honored that a man of his skills would deign to visit their home.

He would rather have deigned to drop five hundred dollars per night for a suite at a local resort, but that money would have come out of his own pocket. And with CD sales declining precipitously and classical music going through a concurrent but unrelated slide, he had to watch his pockets closely. He still had a lot of money by most people's standards, but he also had a sense that that money might have to last him for the rest of his life.

"Poor, poor pitiful you," she said with a smile. It had been that smile, wide and warm and inviting, that had brought him here in the first place.

"Yep," he said, "poor, poor pitiful me."

And with that he slipped out the front door and into the cool fog-filled night. As he walked the three blocks back to the performing arts center--built twenty years ago with funds raised at the festival--he realized that he hadn't even learned her name.

He was out of practice. There had once been a time when he would have learned enough about her to cover himself for the rest of the festival. Now he was going to have to avoid her.

He sighed, feeling the accuracy of his earlier statement.

This really was where classical musicians went to die.

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The North County Music Festival drew several thousand people annually to the Oregon Coast. Max had come every year since the very first, mostly because of Otto Kennisen, the genius behind it all. Otto had taken Max under his wing when Max had been fourteen, and Max owed him for that.

The festival had grown from a tight little community of internationally known musicians who wanted a coastal vacation into one of the more respected classical music festivals in the Northwest. Although that didn't mean much any more.

When he had started in professional music as an acclaimed prodigy about thirty years ago, the international music scene had more festivals than sense. Classical music sales were at an all-time high, and some musicians had become superstars.

Now, the music wasn't being taught in the schools or played much on the radio, and what was being played was Top Forty Classical--"acceptable" excerpts from Bach or Mozart or Beethoven, rarely the entire works, and never works by "difficult" composers like Schoenberg or Stravinsky.

Europe still loved its classical music, but it also loved its classical musicians, preferring anyone with a European pedigree to an upstart American.

Max was able to make his living touring and playing music--his CD sales were down, but not as far down as some of those former superstars--but the changes bothered him. Once, he would have toured the major concert halls in Portland and Seattle. Now, he made the rounds of the music festivals, and augmented his visits with performances with the remaining reputable orchestras.

Max stopped outside the performing arts center. He had a key--the only one granted to the performers beside the one given to Otto. Max walked around to the back door, and let himself inside.

He had lied to the groupie: he didn't have a real curfew. The guest cottage where he was staying this time had a detached entrance, and a private drive. He could come and go as he pleased. The couple who owned the place probably did keep track of him, but he didn't care. On this trip, at least, he didn't have to answer to anyone.

The performing arts center was dark. It smelled of greasepaint and dry air mingled with a hint of wood and old sweat. He loved that mixture--the smell of an empty theater, no matter what city he was in, no matter the size of the theater.

He wound his way through the curtain pulls and the old flats that lined the backstage area. The piano sat on the stage, covered in a cloth.

He crossed the stage, pushed the bench back, and sat, hands resting on the keyboard cover. After a moment, he took off the cloth, and uncovered the keyboard. He rested his fingers on the keys, but didn't depress them, simply sitting there for a moment, in the dark and silent auditorium, and closed his eyes.

He belonged here. Not on a stage, but with a piano. It was the only place he felt alive. The groupies, the concerts, the strangely worshipful perks of fame, none of them made him feel complete as these moments alone did.

He sighed once. It had been a mistake to go off with the woman, but then, he'd been making a lot of mistakes like that lately. The divorce--his second--had left him vulnerable and even more lonely than usual. He hadn't spent a lot of time with his wife--that had been one of the issues--but he had called her every night, shared the day's events, and he had felt intimacy in that. His wife hadn't.

His fingers came down hard on the keys, and he found himself playing Grieg's "Piano Concerto in A Minor," with the great crashing chord in the beginning that ran down the scale like a wave breaking against the shore. He'd always thought the piece appropriate to the coast, but the festival had never played it.

And he wasn't playing it now because of the sea. He was playing it because the piece helped him vent--the loud passages weren't angry, but they were dramatic, and he was feeling dramatic.

A woman who called death her hobby.

A woman who had pursued him with the single-mindedness of one possessed.

He played and played and played until he'd exorcised her. Until he felt clean again. Until he felt calm.

Then he put the cloth back on the piano, and sat in the silence for a long time, wishing for something he didn't completely understand.

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She was at the next concert, of course. There were two weeks worth of concerts left until the requiem--and he had a hunch he would see her at all of them.

He wasn't playing in the first set--a Mozart trio, a Bach cantata, and an obscure chamber piece by a composer few of the musicians liked. Still, Max had come early, and he was wearing his tux.

During the Mozart, he peered out of the wings, and saw her in her customary seat, four rows back, where the light of the stage played up the shadows on her face.

Otto Kennisen came up beside Max. Otto clutched his violin, his thick fingers strong despite his age. He was over eighty now, although he looked like a man in his fifties. He loved the music, but he lacked the stamina he'd had as a younger man. Now he only performed one piece per concert instead of all of them, and even that one piece took something out of him.

Otto's career made Max's look as if it hadn't even gotten started. Otto had been one of the superstar musicians of the 1950s and 60s, and had been in a state of semi-retirement since 1990. He loved the Oregon Coast, and now he brought the musicians he wanted to meet here, rather than going to see them.

As applause rose at the end of the Mozart, Max turned to Otto and nodded toward the woman in the fourth row. "Do you know her?"

"Which her?" Otto squinted.

"The woman with the long, honey-colored hair," Max said.

"The one you escorted out of here last night?" Otto's blue eyes twinkled. "You didn't bother to learn her name?"

Max made himself grin. "It was an oversight."

"Now you want me to correct it," Otto said.

"I want someone to before I embarrass myself."

"Again." Otto's smile was puckish.

"As if you've never done anything like that," Max said.

"At your age, dear boy, I was married with five children." Otto stared into the audience.

And with mistresses all over the globe, Max wanted to add, but didn't. Otto's attraction to women had been legendary. When he'd semi-retired, musicians the world over wondered how Otto would survive with only one country's women to chose from.

"I at least learned their names," Otto said into Max's silence.

"Well, I'm trying to learn hers," Max said, a little more defensively than he had planned.

"I believe Maria knows," Otto whispered as the next group of performers filed across the stage for the Bach cantata.

Max slipped away from him and went in search of Maria, the board chairman, and Otto's answer to everything.

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But no one knew the woman's name. Max had gone from local volunteer to local volunteer, all of whom claimed they had no idea whom he was talking about. One of the volunteers used most of intermission to check the computer records of the ticket sales, hoping to find the woman by seat number, but there was no name, only a record that someone had paid cash for that seat for the entire festival.

He didn't think of her while he was on stage. That night, he was playing a series of piano concertos, first a Schubert, then an obscure piece by Prince Louis Ferdinand, and ending with a rather frothy Chopin work, familiar and popular with the festival audience.

Max had gotten so lost in the music that as he stood for the final bow, he realized Otto was looking at him in surprise. Usually, Max held part of himself in reserve at these smaller concerts. The venue was too intimate for him, the audience too close.

In larger halls, like the Carnegie, he could lose himself, pretend he was playing alone in his room just as he used to do as a child, and when he gazed toward the audience (if he accidentally did) he would see only darkness. Here, he saw faces, and the faces reminded him that he was not by himself.

But here, he had gone to that place, that place that had made him an international sensation, and he could tell just from the quality of the applause that Otto wasn't the only person he'd surprised. He had taken the audience, held them in that place where only music could go--that place between simple emotion and rapture, the place that was beyond words.

It surprised him that the moment of ecstasy came this night, and surprised him even more that it had happened through him. The audience sensed it, and found that rhythmic pattern in their applause where their hands seemed to speak with one voice. They were on their feet, clapping in unison, a spine-tingling sign of affection that he had missed more than he realized.

He bowed, then rose, following the other musicians off stage, in a daze. The applause continued, stronger, and Otto shook his head as if he couldn't believe it. The festival audiences were appreciative, sometimes embarrassingly so, but never like this.

Otto sighed, then swept his bow in a come-on sign. He led the musicians back to the stage, where the applause got even louder.

Max followed, stood beside the piano, his hand on its frame, and bowed again. As he did, he felt his back muscles knot with tension. Otto would yell at him when the applause ended. They would go backstage, and Otto would remind him, as only Otto could, that Max should give more of himself in *all* of his performances.

Max had been so young when he'd met Otto that any criticism from that man felt like the criticism from a parent. Max rose out of the bow, saw the audience still standing, saw the faces, saw...

...her. She was clapping like the others, only it seemed as if she believed that he had played that music just for her. Her gaze met his, and he looked away. He wondered how he had ever found her attractive.

He followed the musicians out a second time, and kept going. Even if there was going to be a third bow, or an encore, he would not be part of it.

She had shattered the illusion for him, made him remember what he hated about performance, and it saddened him.

The whole festival saddened him.

He was beginning to think he had lost his heart.

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Max avoided her that night, but he knew that he might have to speak to her over the next few weeks. In particular, he worried about the next two concerts. One was an informal "encounter" in which Otto spread his expertise to the audience as if they were students who had never heard of classical music before. Most festivals had a version of this, the free afternoon session that existed to drum up ticket sales for the next night's performance.

The North County Music Festival had been sold out for weeks. The encounters really weren't

necessary--to anyone except Otto. He claimed he lived for them, and indeed, he seemed to have more energy than usual when he bounded onto the stage, rubbing his hands together as he enthusiastically explained the motifs of the following night's Bartók.

Max's job at the encounters was to accompany the soloist, Penelope, who had to sing little snippets of a cantata, and to illustrate Otto's sometimes esoteric points, using the music before him to illuminate the melody or the melodic inversion or the composer's little in-jokes.

Max hated these sessions more than anything: He didn't like wooing the audience. They made him feel self-conscious. On these afternoons, he felt like a pianist for hire, not an artist. Anyone could do this part of the job, so long as they'd had enough keyboard training to sight-read the classics.

He was sitting on the piano bench, staring at the Bartók score, trying to pay enough attention to Otto's lecture to catch his cue, when he realized that Otto had stopped speaking.

For a moment, Max froze, wondering if he had missed his entrance. But he had done that in the past, and Otto had laughed at him, or tapped him on the shoulder, or made some joke about musicians living in their own worlds.

But Otto said nothing. Max turned toward the audience, saw Otto clutching one hand to his throat. Penelope took a step toward him, but Otto held up one imperious finger, warning her away. Maria, the board chair, ran toward the back, grabbed a bottle of water, opening it as she brought it to the stage.

Otto took it like a man dying of thirst, guzzled the contents, set the bottle down and shuddered. Max didn't move. Otto was old, but he was a bear of a man, a pillar of the musical community, one of the foundations of the earth. Nothing could happen to Otto.

Nothing would dare.

Then Otto coughed, turned toward the musicians and grinned, and said to the crowd, "Now you understand the drama of silence. How composers use it for effect...."

And he continued with his lecture as if nothing had gone wrong.

If Max hadn't known Otto so well, Max would have thought that it had all been a ploy, but it hadn't.

When he approached Otto after the encounter, lamentably the fourth person to do so in the space of five minutes, Otto held up that imperious finger again.

"I am fine. I made the mistake of sampling some of the fine cheese that the vineyard had brought to serve with its wine, and a bit of Gouda caught in my throat. It is nothing, really."

Max made no reply. Like the good musicians, he knew the value of silence.

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He didn't see her at the encounter, but she was at the concert. She caught his arm during intermission, when he had tried to sneak through the lobby to get himself a glass of the excellent wine being served by the local vineyard.

"Are you going to allow dancing during the minuet?" she asked.

He had to lean toward her to understand her. Her question hadn't been one he expected; he had thought she was going to challenge him about the way he had been avoiding her.

"Dancing?" he repeated rather stupidly. "Why would we allow dancing?"

"Because a minuet is a dance. The composer intended it as a dance, not as something that a group of people listen to while seated in plush chairs, pressed against the backs like wallflowers."

Max frowned at her. She had her luxurious hair up that night, which only accented her surprising beauty and, for the first time, she wore a touch of make-up, just enough to inform him that she knew how to use it to accent her assets as most women did not.

Her face seemed familiar to him, and not because he had spent an evening cupping it between his hands. She looked like someone he had known before, or someone famous, someone highly photographed.

"Don't you think it would be fun?" She swept the skirt of her ankle length dress, revealing delicate shoes. "We could move some chairs to the side here in the lobby, leave the auditorium doors open, and let anyone who wanted to dance."

"It's against fire code," he said, wondering if that was even true. He had no idea what passed for fire code in this godforsaken town.

"But it's a crime to embalm the music like this," she said. "You treat it as if it were a museum piece instead of a living thing, a joyous thing. You take away its purpose and make it about the musicians instead of about--"

He didn't wait for the end of her analysis. He excused himself and pushed through the crowd, listening to the pretentious voices discuss pretentious topics with an astounding amount of misinformation. When he reached the concessions, he glanced over his shoulder to make sure she hadn't followed him.

He didn't see her.

He leaned against the service counter with a sense of relief. People pushed against him, trying to get food or drink during the short intermission. The staff behind the counter moved in the makeshift kitchen as if they had been digitized and programmed double-time.

"A glass of white," he said when it was his turn. The server smiled at him as she hadn't done with the others. She seemed delighted that he had deigned to speak to her.

She gave him a glass, her hand shaking, the amber liquid threatening to spill over the lip.

He took the stem, paid her despite her protests, then made his way through the crowd.

Most of the audience didn't notice him, and for that, he was relieved. A few smiled at him and moved out of his way. One elderly man raised a finger--imperious just like Otto's--obviously about to ask a question, but Max simply nodded and moved on.

It took him nearly five minutes to get backstage. He let out a sigh of relief at the plainness, the comparative silence, the lack of bodies pressing against him.

His shoulders relaxed. She wasn't back here. She couldn't be.

He wasn't sure what it was about her that frightened him. They had had a pleasant enough evening, albeit a bit strange. She wasn't really his type, but he was beginning to believe he had no type--at least not one he wanted to put up with permanently.

He sipped the white, which was even better than he had hoped, and then set it down. He needed all his

faculties for the second half of the program. The Bach pieces weren't difficult--at least for Bach--but they weren't pieces he normally played; he couldn't fake his way through them.

Not that he would ever fake in front of Otto, anyway. The very idea made Max shudder.

He turned, saw Otto leaning against a heavy wood table that had clearly been used as a props table for a recent play, and frowned. Otto's face was an unusual shade of red.

The room was hot--no air-conditioning, which usually wasn't a problem on the coast--but could be when there were so many bodies in one place. Still, Otto didn't look good.

"You don't have to go out, you know," Max said softly. "Hu knows the violin part. She's been doing it for years."

Otto raised his head as if realizing Max was there for the first time. "No worries. The heat and I do not get along, but I've had Maria open the doors. The breeze should cool things down."

His voice was strong, but beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

"The audience will understand," Max began.

"The audience never understands." Otto reached into his breast pocket and removed the decorative handkerchief. He used it to blot his forehead. "To them, we are kissed by the gods, untouched by human concerns."

Max suppressed a smile. The old-fashioned way of looking at performing. He had forgotten that Otto had trained in the days when performers were gods instead of tabloid fodder.

In the concert hall, a bell pinged, signaling that the audience should return to their seats. Otto wiped his face a final time, took a deep breath and winced as if it hurt, then straightened his shoulders.

"Otto..." Max said, elongating the word, making his warning clear.

Otto waved his hand. "I am fine."

He stood up, but his knees buckled. Max hurried over to catch him. Otto was heavier than Max expected, and Max struggled beneath his weight.

"Help!" he yelled. "Someone!"

He eased Otto to the ground, loosened his bow tie, then his jacket, and finally his shirt. People scurried around him, three already on cell phones, dialing 911.

Otto's face was a lurid shade of red.

"Anyone done CPR recently?" Max asked. He had never used his training, which was two decades old.

"Move aside," someone said from behind him. He turned as Hu crouched beside him. "I have EMT training."

He didn't ask why a world-class violinist would have EMT training. He just stepped aside, as she had commanded, watched helplessly as she worked Otto's chest, checked his mouth for blockages, and murmured words of encouragement.

Outside, a siren wailed.

There would be no proving to the audience today that their musicians were gods. The tower of strength, the most famous of them all, Otto, had fallen.

And Max felt as though one of the main supports of his world had fallen too.

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The concert went on, of course, with Hu's bruised hands caressing the violin. Her hair, normally braided and curled in a bun behind her head, had come undone while she'd worked on Otto, so she had taken it down. The blue-black strands waved, hanging free, catching on the chin rest and the neck support.

Twice Max had seen Hu shake her hair back during a rest and once he thought he'd seen tears in her eyes.

No one danced to the minuet. No one would now, even if it were permitted, not with Otto hauled away on a stretcher, insisting weakly that his festival continue.

Sometimes music was an antidote, a relief after a crisis, but not this time. Sonatas, perhaps, or symphonies, would have felt appropriate, but minuets were happy bits of fluff, toe-tapping music as Max's groupie had mentioned, and while the audience was attentive, they clearly did not want to tap their toes.

No one did.

By default, Max had become the one in charge--the second most famous, the most experienced, the only one with real power besides Maria. And briefly, Max had toyed with substituting a different piece of music.

But they had little left that they had rehearsed as a group. Only the minuet, a few obscure twentieth century pieces that Otto had sprinkled into the Top Forty Classical like pills stuck in dessert, and the requiem. The requiem was extremely inappropriate, even if the choir was ready--which it was not. Most of the soloists hadn't arrived yet. They would reach the coast tomorrow.

So Max had gone on stage, informed the audience that Otto wanted the festival to continue, and then introduced Hu. She normally played only in the afternoons at the encounters or as second chair to Otto, if a second chair were needed. Mostly Otto avoided any pieces with violin parts if he was not going to play.

And Hu, despite the way she had used her hands on Otto's chest, despite the problems with her hair, had acquitted herself beautifully. Her performance was the only inspired playing among the chamber musicians.

Everyone else seemed to be marking time until the concert ended. Including Max.

And finally it was done. There was applause, even a shout or two of bravo (most likely for Hu) and some sighs of relief from the musicians themselves. They bowed as they always did, smiled at the applause as they always did, and then trailed off the stage into the darkness beyond.

Max's wine glass still sat on the table. Otto's bow tie and handkerchief littered the floor. This was not a real theater--not the kind that Max preferred, with stage managers and a hundred employees, people who would have made the reminders of the night's trials disappear.

Instead, he bent, picked up the bow tie, pocketed it, and grabbed the handkerchief, still wet from Otto's brow.

Hu stopped beside Max, still clutching her violin. It always surprised him how small she was.

"What do you think his chances are?" Max asked.

She shrugged, but wouldn't meet his gaze. That was answer enough.

"We should go to the hospital," she said.

He wasn't sure he could take the hospital--Otto looking frail, vulnerable. Mortal. But he would miss Max if Max wasn't there.

"I'll take care of everything here, then join you," Max said.

Hu nodded and hurried off. Max stood there for a moment longer, clutching Otto's handkerchief. Every festival he had ever played had a crisis. A musician down with food poisoning; a damaged instrument; the time that a regional festival lost its venue a day into the concert series.

But those seemed small compared to this. This felt catastrophic--the world shifting, becoming a place Max no longer recognized.

Someone touched his arm. He looked down. Maria, the board chair, stood beside him, her face wet with tears.

His breath caught. "News?"

She shook her head. "I'm just not sure what to do. The other board members have been asked if tomorrow night's concert will happen. And then there's next week."

Max's mouth went dry. If they were talking like this, then Otto wouldn't be back this evening. Max had somehow hoped...

He shook his head. Someone had to make decisions, and no one could make decisions about the music except Otto. That was why Maria had come to Max. Max was the only other musician she really knew at this year's festival.

"This is Otto's baby," Max said. "He'd be furious if we abandoned it now."

She bit her lower lip, another tear running down the side of her face. "But the violin solo--it's the Paganini tomorrow."

"Hu can handle it," Max said, hoping that was true. And if it wasn't, then they'd substitute. The audience would understand. The audience *had* to understand.

They weren't gods after all.

"But we need a second chair--"

"I have a friend at the Portland Symphony," Max said. "We'll see who we can find."

Maria clutched his hand, squeezed it, and let go. "Thank you," she whispered, and ran off.

He stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket and sighed. Someone had to take over the music side. It was better than hovering around Otto's bed, worrying.

Although Max was worrying already.

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Three hours later, he returned to the performing arts center, parked, and looked at the darkened building. He had lied to himself, told himself he had come to see whether everything was in order, but he knew it was. He had worked with the stage manager the way Otto usually did, even taking Otto's violin to Otto's beach "cottage"--a small mansion on a cliff face overlooking the Pacific. The housekeeper had offered to take the instrument, but Max, knowing how precious it was, placed it in Otto's music room himself.

Then he had gone to the hospital, only to discover they had life-flighted Otto to Portland. They didn't want to trust a world-famous violinist to the inadequacies of small town doctors. Hu, who had waited for Max, had added her own interpretation as she drove him home.

"They don't want him to die here," she said quietly. "They're afraid they'll get blamed."

"Should they be?" Max asked.

"He's eighty," Hu said, "and he's very ill. You tell me."

He didn't have to. Eighty, and Otto had had an incident at the encounter, then refused to let anyone help him. Perhaps Otto believed the immortality myth as well.

Max dropped off Hu, then committed his internal lie, heading to the performing arts center to make certain everything was all right. He knew when he saw Otto in Portland tomorrow, the old man would want to know that his festival was still going fine.

But really, Max thought as he unlocked the door, stepped inside, and smelled the greasepaint, he had wanted to come to the closest place to home that he had on the coast. It certainly wasn't that free-standing guest cottage up a windy road. It was here, among the empty seats and quiet stage, where the piano waited, looking lonely under the dim backstage lights.

He went to her and ran his fingers along the keys, but didn't play. He was unable to play, worried he would find only silence inside his own head.

He sat there for a long time, afraid to think, afraid to move. Afraid to acknowledge that even he had believed in Otto's immortality, in the redemptive power of a man who, with just a violin, could steal the voice of God.

* * * *

The drive to the hospital took forever. Max had come alone, even though he knew he should have offered some of the other musicians transportation. This was a scheduled day off--in that, they had been fortunate. If it had been an encounter afternoon, Max had no idea what they would have done.

Otto's prognosis was not good. Apparently, he had already refused treatment that would have saved his life--treatment he had needed nearly a year before.

Max had been wrong: Otto had not believed the immortality myth. He had known this was coming, and had chosen to perform during his last year instead of spending the time in doctor's offices, laboratories, and hospitals, getting poked and prodded and gradually reduced of dignity.

Max learned all of this from Otto's second wife, Dani, who seemed relieved to finally tell someone. Until now, Otto had demanded her silence.

But when she finished telling Max the news, she let Max into Otto's room, and then left them alone.

Otto had tubes up his nose and protruding from his arms. Only his eyes seemed familiar, bright and sad at

the same time.

Max sat beside the bed. "You never said anything."

Otto rolled those eyes, just as he would have if Max had played a particularly emotionless set.

"My dear boy," Otto said. "If I had said anything, you would have treated me like glass. I am not glass. I am merely old."

"And ill," Max said.

"And dying," Otto corrected. "I had hoped to make it through the festival. Now you must finish it for me."

Max folded his hands together. He was supposed to leave before the end of the festival; he had no role in the final night, the night of the requiem. The piano was not required.

"The festival," Otto said, "is yours now. Forever, if you want it. I would like it to go on. And you shall get the house too. Dani does not mind. It is less hers than mine. She prefers the house in Milan, and will, of course, get the apartments in New York and London. This place will die without someone who loves it."

Max almost protested. He did not love it here. He had come every year for Otto.

"You'll get better," Max said.

"No," Otto said. "There is a time when people do not get better. No matter who they are."

Max wanted to take Otto's hand, but it looked frail, not like the hand that had so commanded the bridge on his violin, making it sing.

Otto coughed. The sound was moist, almost as if Otto were drowning. He finally managed to catch his breath. It had to be sheer force of will that kept the moistness from his voice. "There is no cure, you know. Except the music."

Max wasn't sure what Otto was referring to. "Otto, I--"

"It is not necessary to say anything more." Otto gave him a weak smile. "Save my festival. There is still a week left."

* * * *

One week and a lot of music. Max had never known exactly how much Otto had done. Maria coordinated everything--hiring the violinist to take second chair, picking up the additional musicians from the airport, dropping off those who had finished their stint.

Max did not listen to the rehearsals--he didn't step into that part of the job, partly because he lacked the expertise to guide others. When Max had returned from Portland, Maria had pulled him aside and asked him, shyly, if he thought it was still appropriate to do the requiem.

It made Max uncomfortable as well, but he knew Otto: Otto had planned all of the music himself. Max would not second-guess him.

And then, on Thursday, just as that night's performance ended, word came that Otto had died.

Max made the announcement to the still-gathered crowd. He could not remember what he said or how they reacted, only that he hadn't been able to keep his voice level. Otto would have said that Max had shown an unusual amount of emotion on stage.

Afterward, Max comforted the stagehands and the band, reassured musicians that they would both perform and get paid, and helped the stage manager clean the house. When it was all over, Max locked up, alone, his hands shaking. They were the only part of his body over which he had no control.

He stood outside in the sea fog, locking up the last door. His car was the only one still in the parking lot.

"You weren't lying."

He didn't have to turn to recognize the voice. It was her--the unknown woman, the fling, the one who had so attracted and annoyed him at the start of the festival. Weeks ago.

It seemed like years.

"I'm very tired," he said.

"And not in need of comfort?" Her voice held amusement, not an offer.

He felt a surge of anger at her presumption. What could she give him, after all? The pillars of the earth had fallen, and he no longer stood on solid ground.

She put a hand on his back and he moved away, violently.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

Her eyes still sparkled in the hazy parking lot lights. "Dancing for minuets. Or corpses. For requiems."

He felt chilled. The air was damp, and she was almost invisible, lost in swirling mists of fog.

"What did you do?" he whispered.

"Nothing," she said. "It was inevitable. And you know that."

Then she stepped backwards. The fog swallowed her as if she had never been.

He reached for her--and found nothing.

He stood in the chill for another ten minutes, waiting for her to come back, although he wasn't sure why. He didn't even have a name to call or an understanding of who she was, or why she had deliberately provoked him.

The damp air wet his cheeks and the shaking in his hands didn't stop. He leaned against the door, but didn't open it. Nor did he go to his car.

He just stood in the fog, alone, listening to the ocean boom, and wishing for silence.

* * * *

He almost didn't go to the festival on the final night. His performance had ended the night before. He had planned to do a solo, a favorite Chopin, but at the last minute had pulled Brian, the principal cellist, into service accompanying him in Fauré's *Adagio* for cello and piano.

That performance had been difficult enough: Max could almost imagine Otto sitting in the wings, listening for the moment when the piano became more than an instrument, the music more than notes. Max wasn't sure how well he played; the audience seemed to love it--as much as an audience could love a mournful piece of music--but he hadn't been playing for them.

He had been playing for the ghost in the wings, the one who would never again tell him how well he had done or that he had failed.

Max remembered to stand and bow at the end, and he had worked hard not to look in the first few rows for her. He was afraid if he saw her again, he would take her thin throat between his two powerful hands, and press until she could not say another word.

Ever.

Then he had gone back to the guest cottage, looked at his plane ticket, and felt the pull of somewhere else--anywhere. He had already canceled next week's performance in Texas; he had to stay for the first of Otto's memorial services, this one to be held here. There would be others--one in New York that Max wouldn't miss either, and another in Vienna, which he might have to, given his own touring schedule.

The next six months would be hard, and he would need to rest, need to think about this shuddery feeling that he now seemed to have all the time.

He went so far as to look up Hu's number, to ask her to say a few words before the requiem, to end the festival with a plea for next year's funding and to keep Otto's memory alive. But his hand froze over the phone.

For his sake, and for Otto's, he had to stay.

* * * *

Max wore a tux, even though he did not have to since he was not performing. Still, he walked onto the stage with all the dignity of a performer, startled to see risers where the piano normally was, and chairs all the way to the lip.

He had to stand in front of the empty chairs, where the conductor would be in just a few moments. And Max used a microphone, which he normally abhorred doing, hating the amplification of sound, the way it turned the beauty of the human voice into something almost mechanical.

He spoke of Otto as he had first seen him--a vibrant man in his fifties, who had taken a frightened boy under his wing. Max had been a prodigy, but he had been sheltered--and suddenly he was famous, touring, lauded for his immense talent at his very young age.

Age will creep up on you, Otto had told him that first day. *Become the best musician for any age*.

Max had forgotten that. He had forgotten so many things--the way that Otto had shown him that music was more than a collection of notes; it was also a history of all that had come before.

Music does not exist without the audience. It is written for the audience. The performer is merely a collaborator with the composer. And centuries from now, the greatest composers will be remembered; only the music historians will remember the greatest performers.

Max did not say that in his tribute, nor did he say much about his own experiences with Otto, preferring to speak only of Otto's dedication, and his consistent support of young, up-and-coming musicians, many of whom would soon be on the stage.

"Otto planned the requiem," Max said. "He had known this would be his last festival. He had hoped to stand in the back and listen. We must imagine him there, whispering a bit too loudly to Dani, and being the first to shout, 'Bravo!'"

And then, before Max lost his voice entirely, he shut off the mike and left the stage. Only when he got to

the wings did he realize he had said nothing about next year's festival or about fundraising. The festival would have to fight that battle without him.

As the performers walked onto the stage, he took the side stairs, just as Otto used to do, and walked toward the back. In spite of his best intentions, Max looked for the woman. She was not in her seat. Some elderly man Max had never seen before leaned forward as if he had been waiting for the requiem all of his life.

Strange that she wouldn't show when she had said that she had come only for that piece. Of course, *she* had been strange. Perhaps she had finally decided her behavior was inappropriate. Perhaps she had embarrassed herself that night in the fog.

Perhaps she was gone for good.

He felt an odd pang at that thought, almost as if he had relished tangling with her again--this time, letting her know his fury at her insensitivity. But this evening was not about her.

It was about Otto, and Mozart's *Requiem*, a piece of music--as she had said--written by the dead for the dead.

Max shuddered a little as he reached the back of the auditorium. He moved to the spot near the doors, where the room's most perfect acoustics lived.

And there he listened as the orchestra swelled, and the chorus started the introduction, one of the few sections Mozart had written in its entirety, taking the Latin words from the Catholic Mass for the Dead, begging for eternal rest and perpetual light against the darkness that would eventually befall everyone.

The words faded, but the music did not. It rose, the soprano's voice soaring like a prayer, the bass, tenor, and contralto joining, adding balance and strength.

In the past, Max had felt his soul rise for only a few performers--Otto had been one of them--but on this night, with this piece, the orchestra, chorus, and soloists seemed to be speaking as one, their power raising goosebumps on his flesh, and transforming the auditorium into a place sublime.

He had not expected it. He had expected to listen, as he had always done, trying to parse the sections that Mozart had written and those SÃ¼ssmayr had finished--the acolyte never quite living up to the original.

But those considerations were beyond him. Instead, Max let the music sweep through him and soothe him, and give voice to all the complicated emotions within.

There is no cure, Otto whispered a little too loudly. *Except the music.*

Max started and looked. He felt Otto's presence as if the man were beside him. But no one was.

Except the woman.

He knew better than to ask her what she wanted. That question had led to the response that had angered him the last time.

He was going to tell her to leave; instead, he blurted, "Who are you?"

And she smiled the smile that had attracted him in the first place, wide and warm and inviting.

"It's about time you asked," she said.

To his surprise, she curtsied. No one else seemed to notice.

She rose slowly, her movements as practiced as if she had done this a thousand times before.

"I am your muse," she said. She touched his cheek lightly. She still smelled ever so faintly of cloves.
"Perhaps now, you will pay attention."

And then she vanished. Literally disappeared. Max could not see her, or touch her. But he could feel her.

He could still feel her fingers on his cheek, just as he had felt Otto beside him earlier.

A shiver ran through him, and he looked at the stage. No one had noticed his conversation with the woman.

Only Otto had noticed her before. Otto, who had always had a finger on music's soul.

Otto had once told Max there was magic in music, and a touch of the angels. Only Max had mostly forgotten it--or perhaps he had never learned it, not really, not understanding how music did more than provide an evening's entertainment.

It existed for dancing--and for mourning.

It was the most basic of human expressions, and it was his gift.

Which he had mostly been ignoring, using it to achieve wealth through technical perfection, almost never letting it speak from his heart.

No wonder she had looked familiar. She had shown up at other concerts--not often--or perhaps he had just not noticed her. But she had been there on those nights when he had forgotten where he was and what he was doing, how much he was being paid, and who was listening.

She had been doing her best to stand beside him all this time, and he had treated her like a one-night stand. Over and over.

No wonder Otto had chided him.

No wonder Max had failed to respect himself.

He leaned against the cold wall, and listened to voices rising in remembrance of a great man, using the talent of other great men long dead, feeling the power that lingered, the intangible bits of memory that wove themselves into a benediction. He did not feel forgiven.

He felt renewed.

And when it was all over, he didn't leave as he had planned. Instead, he walked down the aisle, determined to find Maria, the board chair, and begin the plans for next year--to continue Otto's dreams, yes, but also to help Max start his own, whatever they might be.