

金色のコルダ

*La corda d'oro crescendo*

**by Heidi Braga**

# La Corda d'Oro 2

## Crescendo



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# Chapter 1

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## "Into the Blue Ether..."

It could not be a more dismal overcast day, despite the unusually warm weather blowing in this blustery Vienna tree-lined street. The forecasted snows had not yet fallen, but the change in season as Autumn transformed into Winter's dull scenery was enough to depress many stouter a heart than of this particular stroller.

The slender figure of a striking young man pauses in his slow paced trek across the deadened grasses. His gaze travels upward, but not necessarily focusing on the House Doebling apartment high-rise that loomed through the grayness he was heading towards. No, it was the bleak horizon itself that caught his attention - or more precisely - his inattention.

It was far too often now that exchange student Tsukimori Len found himself in a dazed slump. The famed city of Vienna, for all its musical and artistic merits of inspiration and genius could never fulfill the place in a young heart that longed for his true love, miles and miles away, beyond the gray sky that separated them.

This was such a day for Tsukimori Len. Perhaps his musical skills and knowledge had expanded since he left Japan for the wide experience of the artistic capital of the world, but so did his loneliness. And that, amidst his violinist's genius, was reflected in his playing. Despite glowing reports and high placed respect and recommendations by many of his Austrian music school teachers at the Vienna Conservatory for Music he attended, not a one of their praises of his talented performances was as meaningful to him as a single girl's gentle approving applause at his music. In his eyes, no one could ever touch the irreplaceable emotion of her smile.

"There you are, Tsukimori-kun! I wondered where you got off to," Ousaki Shinobu's friendly face was filled with concern for his roommate. The twenty-something older man had come to feel this way more and more, over the past few months. For despite the ice blue lad's impeccable grades and skillful playing, Ousaki could see a building sense of empty triumphs and useless downhearted successes. It wasn't the highbrow musical teachers' praises that Tsukimori Len longed for. It wasn't the fame and fortune offering public he really played for. It was all still for the one girl who gave light to Tsukimori's dull world.

As he comes to stand alongside his errant friend, Ousaki adjusts his glasses with a worried brow, following Tsukimori's lost silent gaze upwards at the empty sky.



It was breaking Ousaki's heart to see strong-minded Tsukimori like this, day after day, month after passing month. There was such longing and loneliness in that face, as confused eyes seemed to be straining to glimpse something he knew existed there, but was always just beyond his reach. Tender Ousaki knew just what that something was and also just what to do about it. After all, Tsukimori's parents had asked him to

accompany their awkward son and keep a helpful eye on him-to be the friend Tsukimori was completely socially inept at making.

*Tsukimori-kun.....I know how much you miss her...he thought to himself.*

So right there and then, Shinobu Ousaki decided to be that friend. The truest kind, who did what was right for his friend's heart, ignoring whatever opposition or obstacles stood in his way.

He knew the *what*. Now all Ousaki had to do was figure out the *how*.

## Chapter 2

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### "The Other Side of the Coin"

*R-ring! R-ring! R-ring! R-ring...*

*Click.*

The sun starts to set over the hilly Eastern Japanese prefecture of Kanagawa, at Ferris University's private music rooms that she often haunted. Hino Kahoko dejectedly puts her cell phone back into the amply filled music bag. She stuffs the crumpled overused practice sheets she'd been doggedly working on in, as if they were nothing more than used empty wrapping paper after the presents had been extracted from them. That's exactly how her heart felt about this time of day lately, as if all the glitter and shine it once had, had been ripped from it. Well, maybe that was a bit overdramatic, but Kahoko did feel the drama of love, separation and longing all too acutely.

It had been two years since he left for Vienna, and she has lived each day just to hear the sound of his voice for those few precious moments on the phone once or twice a week. Every other moment was spent improving her skills at the only thing that made her feel close to him, as if his spirit was somehow inside her whenever she played the violin.

So play and play and play she must, as Hino spent each night and day hard at practice, her musical skills indeed improving as she seemed to channel her Len's genius, their bond so strong. But that still didn't make it easy for a girl in love to have not a glimmer of hope of being with her sweetheart again for at least another two years -- or maybe more!

*Surely he'll be a success, and then he'll have to stay abroad for*

*who knows when! How long until we're together again? I must work harder, so I can be good enough to join him someday! Someday...*

She unconsciously clutches the two gold and silver rings entwined at her neck, as she replays the tender scene when a certain blue-haired violinist had bestowed it upon her. With tears in her eyes, then, the same as now, Hino still could feel Tsukimori's thin, musical fingers slip the necklace around her neck, assuring her that it wasn't a promise he required of her--- just a hope that someday she would put it on where it belonged and that would show him when she was ready for it to be forever. Lost in this daydream about Tsukimori, she leaves the practice room where she spent most of her current life.

She starts her trudging walk home, absentmindedly taking the long way by route of Seiso. Each passed gate was a point of reminiscence of a past with Tsukimori. Each step was a walk down memory lane.

*Oh, Seiso... I wish those days never ended. We were so happy there... I wish... I wish...*

"Oh!!" Lost in her own thoughts, halfway down the hill, Hino didn't know if it was her inattentive faults or that of the elbow jostling her. Either way, the result is flying papers on the wind, bouncing purse and schoolbags rolling down the hill in a general mess.

"Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Hino-chan! In a hurry! Gotta get to work! Can't stop! Already late! Sorry! Sorry!" In a flurry of apologies, picking up handfuls of papers, bags and poor discarded purses and ribbons like a Speedy Gonzales whirlwind, Hino catches just the flash of that famous Hihara Kazuki smile in her flustered direction. He had knocked her down and then righted her again in a matter of seconds. And by the blink of an eye's end, Hihara was gone, dashing down the hill at breakneck speed, dust kicking up in his speedy wake.

"Hee hee...hee," Hino tries to giggle at the strange event,

though finding it not truly funny. No one seemed to ever have much time for her anymore, even her old friend. She hadn't seen the busy Seiso OB for...

*...Has it been as long as last Christmas? Now that I'm at University, I rarely see anyone. I mean, Mori-san is my school mate and she **tries**... she and Kaji-kun who's now a student at Ferris' male branch, Meiji University, both do... but...*

And then, there was that park, there was that cherry tree, standing still and cold before her. Hino could hear the leaf whistle he made still echoing in her head from two years ago.



*"That is.....a little one will be fine. Right now, as I blew that leaf, I remembered how delighted Mother was as Father told me how.*

*I miss those times..."*

And the tears won't stop flowing. She now begins sobbing as she collapses against the tree, exhausted both mentally and physically, practicing day and night, and pining for him every second in between.

"Hino! Are you all right!?" Her worst nightmare come true, the gruff voice signaling to her that the last person she wanted to find her in a puddle of self-pitying tears over the man who he once deemed a stuck up bitter rival was hovering near.

*No, no, no...not him...*

Tsuchiura Ryotarou had not expected to find his ex-classmate sobbing on an autumn saddened tree. Was she physically hurt? Was she so distressed over being abandoned by her so-called devoted lover? To the point of the strong-willed redhead being driven to tears?

# Chapter 3

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## "Guarded Hearts"

"Tsuchiura-kun! I'm fine, really... I'm just fine. It's just... it's just... I miss him so much! I miss Tsukimori-kun so much..." Hino bursts into full-fledged unmitigated tears now. For some reason, she always felt at ease with Tsuchiura. He was more like a big brother to her than any of the others. He was the sturdy friend, the reliable one who was always there to help her, to bail her out when the chips were down. The shoulder she could easily cry on.

And so she does. Ryotaro's strong pair of arms wrap around the girl's trembling weak ones as Hino turns to lean on him instead of the culprit tree. It was a pretty picture of compassion and friendship.



".....Ryo....."

Unless you're the jealous type of girlfriend that Mizue Sakimoto never claimed to be. But she did claim to being his girlfriend, once upon a time. Once upon the happiest time in her life, but that was soon followed by the saddest, when they parted ways.

That was the past, and she should just leave it there, deciding to be Ryo's best friend now. She had determined to be content to just be 'one of the guys,' his right-hand man, encouraging him in both his music studies and sports career. She thought him a brilliant pianist, a genius soccer player as well as the boy she was still in love with.

*'First love dies hard, if ever at all'* she had heard someone once say.

But that was her secret. No one must know. Sakimoto never once confided it to anyone. For no friend could ever be trusted with her most guarded secret: She's been madly in love with the boy next door for as long as she could remember. There was no one else, no matter how hard she tried. There could never be. So she had thrust herself into her own career passion, whilst Ryo now was persevering in pursuing his.

But perhaps, the music wasn't all he was pursuing. After all, Sakimoto was eyewitness to this tender embrace just as she was coming to meet Tsuchiura on their way home for a quick bite of dinner at the Hihara family restaurant. She had an urge to turn and run, heart breaking at the sight. She had had suspicions as well, but she also knew she had no claim to Ryo's love, and yet...

"Hello, hello. What's going on over there? Am I going to have to report a scandalous romance among rival music school students? What WILL Tsukimori, say?" Amou Nami's arms soon were wrapped around Sakimoto's surprised shoulders from behind. In a wink, Amou's trusty camera whips out. She was about to take an incriminating snapshot of the embracing pair when....



# Chapter 4

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## "Melting the Ice"

"Keiichi!! Look out!" A voice cries out from the distance, breaking up Amou's newsflash scoop scene.

Unobserved as they approached by all spectators at the park entrance, a quiet trio is led by the boy angel Shimizu Keiichi who's grabbed by his two pretty feminine Seiso students on either side of him. Fuyuumi Shoko and Megumi Shouji tug him away just in time, saving the blonde beauty from crashing into a lamppost. Shimizu was so absorbed with his latest composition that he was blissfully unaware of trivial things like obstacles or traffic on the road. But the two timid girls were used to it by now. Shimizu was becoming more and more absent-minded as he was maturing as a composer. So they felt it was their duty, as fellow Seiso students--as friends, to fearlessly touch the angel in ways neither delicate girl would ever handle a normal boy.

"Good thing I've got your back, Keiichi! You'd sure be lost without me!" Etou Kiriya was the kind to take credit for everything. But over the last two year, the sour youth who had a sharp tongue had been slowly growing a heart -- albeit a small one. Etou often found himself inexplicably following this little group of friends around after his benefactor/uncle/director of the academy had advised that he become familiar with his fellow ensemble members for "better orchestral cohesion."

"Whatever, old man," Etou had murmured under his breath then, but gradually, he had become a little more considerate under shy Fuyuumi Shoko's patient guide, a bit more inspired to love music for music's sake under Shimizu Keiichi's dedicated influence, and a tad more gentle when it came to speaking to delicate female hearts such as Shouji Megumi's. All three had quietly left their mark on the neglected boy's soul--especially

Shouji. Etou found himself unconsciously relying on the sweet voiced girl, for she was always at the ready to be his accompanist any hour of the day, he merely had to beckon and she'd come running.

Shouji's piano prowess had expanded since the days of the Seiso concours. Hino Kahoko's inspiring determination, coupled with Tsukimori Len's truthful words had changed the jealous heart into a repentant one. Those days -- those acts of betrayal and deceit -- still haunted Shouji's mind from time to time. She had done it for jealousy and love of a boy who never would have even spoken to her, if not for the sake of Hino Kahoko. For months, a blue ice wall had stood between Shouji and any thought of forgiveness or friendship. And although Hino Kahoko's golden friendship had pierced through the cold eyes of defeat, Shouji's lost love, remained in a tiny corner of her heart that she couldn't completely dissolve alone; that would have to take something new and warm and exciting to do the job.

Something like a violin romance of her own.

Shouji could never stop the red-hot blush that crept up the back of her neck, threatening to overtake her cheeks, whenever Kiriya Etou was near. Somehow this up and coming wine-red colt had raced to the gate of her heart alongside the elite ice blue stallion in ways Shouji didn't think possible. Was this the love her eager heart had longed for? All she knew was that she would do anything to please Etou. Her piano skills had been improving by leaps and bounds whenever she played for the hot tempered teen.

*Was this feeling real love?*

## Chapter 5

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"At Your Service..."

"Rats!" The crack ace reporter on the scene grumbles at the lost photo-shoot opportunity. Tsuchiura and Hino quickly separate the comforting embrace after hearing Etou's warning cry to Shimizu and the ensuing chaos of the gathering crowd saving the oblivious boy.

"LUNCH SPECIALS! BUFFET STILL OPEN FOR HALF HOUR!! HURRY AND COME TO DINE IN THE COZY ATMOSPHERE OF THE HIHARA FAMILY RESTAURANT!!!"

It was a funny thing to hear coming from the mouth of the slight little lithe figure of a girl, her plummy purple curls bouncing on the winds, as she yelled the call as loud as her lungs could withstand--which was surprisingly loud indeed, for such a tiny thing. Even more surprising was the lineage of this noisy town crier, as she spouts the lunch buffet sales pitch for the small family restaurant she was standing in front of.

Yunoki Miyabi, her hair askew, flour dusting her flushed cheeks and hands and any part of clothing the cute little apron she was donning did not cover, was a good saleswoman when it came down to it. The sheltered little rich girl never would have imagined doing anything so bold or exciting as this. She'd never have thought just a year or two ago, that she'd be where she was--that she and her brother's betrothed, Takeshina Ayano, expert of the ancient Japanese tea ceremony, would be running their very own tea shoppe café called "Casual Kaiseki." She never thought just a year or two ago that she would be attending Seiso Academy either, thanks to her older brothers running

interference with their aging grandmother. Never did Miyabi think she'd feel so useful to anyone, getting her callous-less hands dirty--playing hostess, waitress, side-order cook, and dishwasher when necessary for the Hihara restaurant-- just conveniently located next door to her tea shoppe. (Yunoki knew how to pull some strings.)

So every day, Miyabi would leave the tea ceremony part to Ayano, and walk across from "Casual Kaiseki" to transform from rich prim hostess of her own dainty tea and dessert shop, into a busy middle-class working tables woman.

And there was nothing more that could make an eager lively girl, such as Miyabi, happier. The independence and that sense of worth that had heretofore been nonexistent in her sheltered life, ruled under the tight thumb of her grandmother, never would have known. But thanks to Azuma's lead, all her brothers had rallied against Grandmother in favor of Miyabi's idea to let her be allowed to live in a new world of possibilities, eat of the forbidden fruit denied them that Yunoki Miyabi was now enjoying at the age of Sweet 16.

She blossomed into quite a beauty. In the rosyess of her cheeks, there was a healthy glow that the once pale girl had, especially when she was working alongside her big brother's best friend, the bright sparkling Hihara Kazuki, who still took her breath away. She adored him, but he didn't ever seem to know.

"Come on in, gang! Mom's made her famous homemade apple pie! A piece for everyone after the meal!" The man in question himself, sticks his head out the front entrance door. Hihara's warm smile and warmer hands over Miyabi shoulders, like she was his little sister, could usually brighten up any gray day. But a trained eye could see the wear and tear on his body. Between working here at the restaurant, part-time at the music store on weekends, and doing odd jobs at the local mechanic's shop/gas station by night to make ends meet, all made Hihara Kazuki quite an exhausted workaholic. But Showa Academia Musicae's attendance was a costly affair that his working class parents

couldn't fully afford to send him to. But if anyone had the energy to succeed, it was Hihara Kazuki. He would not give up his dream of pursuing music. If he had to burn his candle at both ends to do it, he would burn them both brightly!

*And little Miyabi-chan sure was a big help!*

He was grateful for her selfless pitching in at the restaurant when he was late or had to stay at the academy for practice or special alumni meaning. Hihara would rush from one class, one job, one task to the next with as much vigor as he could muster. But some days he was sure glad Miyabi-chan was there to help his mom at the restaurant when he was too tuckered out from a long day running around at school and part-time work. She had become like a daughter to the Hiharas. The sunshiny girl was eager to please, even learning to cook (a skill rich girls didn't seem to even modestly own.) and wait tables and do general jobs Kazuki would have to do had she not been there.

"Good job, Miyabi-chan!" Hihara unknowingly sets the plummy girl's heart a-racing as he whispers the encouragement in her curls. He was still so blind to her total adoration as he ushers the friends gathered in. Miyabi sadly notices how he stops to greet Hino Kahoko especially warmly.

"...Hihara-senpai...."

Hino's tears were long gone by now, for Hihara was able to enjoy her smiles with jolly laughter in return. Miyabi sighs, her spirits sinking as they often did at the thought that she was no competition for the older girl. She would never be anything more to Kazuki, than his best friend's little sister.

>*Sigh*<

*...I wish I could play an instrument as well. Then maybe Hihara-san would notice me, too. But I'll never be as good as Hino-san. He thinks I'm too young....Because I am...*

"I saw that. Miyabi-chan? Are you okay?" Amou's kindest inquiring eyes ask, as she drags a reluctant Sakimoto Mizue in

the rear with her into the doorway, despite the girl's protest as last into the Hihara restaurant.

"Amou-san, I'll be fine. Thank you. Just flour dust in my eyes." Miyabi blinks back tears, pretending it was flour she was wiping from her face and not the bitter tears.

# Chapter 6

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## "A Kind Ear"

"Will you be having our Special today, too, Miss Amou?" Miyabi quickly covers up her distress. She whips out her little notepad for orders like a seasoned professional, along with a plastered smile.

"Hmm?" Amou gazes from one familiar face to the next as Tsuchiura helps Hihara pull some long tables together when they see the expanded gang. It continued to grow, as Kaji Aoi and his accompanist Mori Manami soon come in, in search of their missing companion. Hino Kahoko had forgotten their appointment for practice she had with the two and they were anxious.

"Hino-san! You missed practice! We were so worried! Your cell's been on busy for an hour! Are you all right?! I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you!" Ever the politician, eternally effervescent Kaji Aoi comes bursting in with his usual slobbering. He hugs Hino's uncomfortable stiff body with finesse.

"Oh! Kaji-kun! Mori-san! I'm so sorry! Our practice meet afterschool today totally slipped my mind! My friends, forgive me?" Softly pushing Kaji back, Hino reaches and squeezes Mori's hand in both of hers.

"Of course." Mori Manami looks down and smiles in her knowing way, giving a retreating Kaji a raised brow look and smirk. "We enjoyed our time together. Just the two of us was rather cozy, wasn't it Kaji-kun? Or something like that."

Mori was not at all shy to speak to boys like most of the other

girls were. She had grown up with far too many brothers, both big and little, to ever be intimidated by one, even a looker like Kaji Aoi. Mori felt perfectly at ease playing as his accompanist afterschool in Ferris College's music rooms. She was glad Meiji was so close by and affiliated that she wasn't alone in caring for Hino-san. She and Kaji saw each other often, he always going out of his way to meet them for lunch. The three former Seiso students were a close knit group and would walk home together, or Kaji would take them home in his new sporty car for rides after school.

*Maybe I could fall for a guy like him*, Mori would often muse to herself as she and Hino would attend a soccer or volleyball game that the handsome golden haired lad was star player of. At first, Mori considered Kaji-kun more as one of Hino's friends. But with Hino in this continual funk lately, Mori was a much more sympathetic ear, a good listener to whatever the confused young man wished to talk about. Kaji had even opened up to Mori about his indecisive career choice.

"Do I become a doctor, like my grandfather?" or "Do I go into politics, like my father?"

He was dabbling in both college courses at Meiji, but knew that soon he would have to make up his mind. He imagined it would be his idol, Hino Kahoko, who would advise it, give him insight on his life's answers. But even though he saw Hino nearly every school day, it was Mori he saw more of. She and Kaji together had promised the others to watch out for the heart-sunk girl. This concern for her brought them together. They were her only connection--these two old friends here in this new music college.

The two golden heads were often to be found then together over lunches and practice sheets, plotting how next to lift their wayward friend's spirits. They themselves did not realize how closely they were being knit together, too, by their mutual concern for Hino.

"Oh, um, yes...we did. I enjoy your company a lot, Mori-san!

Every moment of it!" Kaji appreciated Mori's friendly honesty, though neither realized how evil the words sounded to the unknowing public. Kaji's eyes reaching into those of the smiling and nodding girl he was gentlemanly seating at their friend's table.

"Chill, you two. This is a family restaurant, you know."  
Tsuchiura, smirking as he makes the swipe.

Mori, chuckles with the rest of the gang as Kaji's face turns red as a beet when he realizes what Tsuchiura was getting at.

"Tsuchiura!!!" He bursts out in shock. Everyone giggles at how dense the politician's son could be sometimes as laughter fills the restaurant.

# Chapter 7

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## "Just Say the Word"

A calm night was starting to fall on the busy town of Kanagawa, but Takeshina Ayano was uneasy.

>Ding, dong<

Opening the door of the Hihara restaurant a sliver to peek in, she was opting rather to stay outside in the chilling air than go into the restaurant. Ayano was never comfortable in crowds. Her strict upbringing, her severe parents and schooling, even now at the current all girls Kokugakuin University, had left the lonely quiet girl more of an oddity than ever. It was in her way of dressing, her old-fashioned styled speech pattern, the very timid subservience that kept the 17-year-old beauty's eyes continually respectfully down. Her soft voice was rarely, if ever, heard, making her seem like a porcelain doll or a geisha girl out of a historical storybook rather than a modern young woman of the 21st century. She played the part of the modest maiden, patiently awaiting her betrothed master's return so well indeed, that no one barely noticed her presence. Ayano's only hobby, her only purpose in life was to serve Azuma-sama, and whatever he wished her to do. She would be whoever he wished her to be, even while he was not here, even while he was abroad studying at Princeton University in America so far away. And rarely did Azuma-sama ever tell Ayano what he wished of her at all.

*I will wait for you forever. Azuma-sama. I will prepare to make myself pure enough to befit to serve you as a good wife when you return...when the cherry blossoms bloom again...I will be waiting to be your humble bride...*

She had no other thought, but for that day, Azuma-sama's every desire, every order was her command, to the point of obsession.

So all that need be done was for his little sister Miyabi to tell Ayano of her scheme, her idea for the 'Casual Kaiseki Tea Shoppe' and that Azuma-sama had suggested that she, ever loyal Ayano, could help Miyabi run it with her expert knowledge of the traditional tea ceremony and vast collection of authentic decor and tea service skills.

Just say the word, Yunoki Azuma, and Ayano would wordlessly oblige. If Yunoki knew he wielded such power over beautiful young creature's heart and soul, why did he not rush back to marry her? Many another ordinary male would jump at the chance to have rule over such a rare beauty of an absolutely subservient offer of a wife. But Yunoki Azuma was far beyond ordinary.

Ayano continues to pause in the doorway, unsure what to do when she sees the boisterous crowd a-chattering away. Should she turn and go back to Kaiseki and patiently wait for Miyabi to return to close up? She had a key herself to do just that on every other normal night, while Miyabi was at the restaurant. But this night with special -- it was Thursday night. It was the night Ayano lived the rest of the week for. It was the night that Azuma-sama would send an e-mail to his little sister. And maybe -- just maybe -- every now and then (*oh please be tonight!*) Yunoki would write a word or two in Ayano's direction. She only needed a sentence, a phrase mentioning her in his thoughts, and she would be the happiest girl alive. She would hang on the chance of his every word such as: "Tell Ayano to help you." or a "Say hello to Ayano for me."

Just these simple obligatory phrases would send her world soaring. Ayano prayed that each message would be the one that said he was on his way home, that he was on his way back to Japan--back to come and marry her. Even if he didn't think of her much along his journey. Even if he made many girlfriends abroad. Even if he didn't love her, she would marry him. Yunoki Azuma was Ayano's obsession, her adored Royal Prince

since the time of their youth. She had nothing else in life to live for but her preparation to marry him.

And tonight was Thursday night, but Ayano must wait for Miyabi to receive the e-mail, or perhaps, *oh glorious perhaps!* a video message or actual phone call!

*Yes, I believe it would be preferable to wait at tea shoppe,* Ayano was about to make a silent escape when a friendly voice raises over the dinner din.

"Ayano-chan! Come have dinner with us! There's still a lot of Mom's warm and tasty apple pie! Don't just stand lurking there in the doorway!" Hihara Kazuki was sweet and kind and well-intentioned, but the phrase 'Bull in a China Shop' certainly came to mind when it came to him and speaking to girls.

The frightened deer in the headlights look that an embarrassed Ayano gave the group was enough for Miyabi to want to slap the green haired young man for his disregard for Ayano's sensitive nature. So she does just that, giving Kazuki's chest a punishing pound. Hihara's bellowing certainly didn't do any good to the shy creature. Miyabi jumps up to greet her delicate partner when she realizes that she too, had neglected poor Ayano, and her one joy in life!

"Ayano!" Miyabi didn't even have time to get to the door before Ayano does a 180° and sprints back out into the night, like a young gazelle in full Japanese kimono dress.

"I'll be back, Mother Hihara! But 'Goodnight' everyone, if I miss you!" Calling out to the older woman in the kitchen, Miyabi dashes out to comfort her frightened friend, leaving the gang quite silent for all of 10 seconds.

"I have to be going, too. I have a lot of practice waiting for me at home. Good night." Hino quietly makes her exit, putting her share of payment on the front counter desk for Mrs. Hihara to collect.

"Not you, too, Hino-chan! You're no fun anymore!" Foot in

mouth strikes again, but the night was still young. The sad look coming over her face as she finishes paying and leaves with a faraway look was enough to prove that.

"Wait! I'll walk you home Hino-san!" Kaji jumps up and rushes to his idol's side. "See you tomorrow, Mori-san!" And he's gone as well.

Once they're out of earshot -- *BOP!!!* Tsuchiura whacks Hihara the back of his head hard.

"Ouch! Tsuchiura! What did I do?!" Oblivious yet, again, Hihara rubs the back of his aching head.

"If you don't know...." Amou rolls her eyes at him, she also leaving the table and exiting the restaurant with a huffy *hmph!* at the entire callous male race.

"You said it." After another unceremonious pause, Mizue stands and joins her in the female walkout. An already ticked off Mori, because Kaji just abandoned her, links arm in arm with Shouji and follows Amou's lead. She pops Fuyuumi on the shoulder with a twisted '*You too*' look mid stride.

With Mizue holding the door open for her, Fuyuumi is torn between fear of angering the boys and fear of not fitting in with the girls. Her eyes slide back and forth between the two opposing groups at the door and those who were still seated. Terrified and almost in tears, Fuyuumi's decision is made for her. Thankfully, she is relieved beyond gratitude for her pale knight in shining armor. Happily finishing off her piece of apple pie, too, Shimizu slowly gets up from the table. He places more than enough monetary bills to cover both his and Fuyuumi's and even some of the other girls meals on the tablecloth in front of his empty plate.

"Please thank Mother Hihara for me, Hihara-senpai. The meal was delicious, especially the apple pie. I think it was the best pie I ever ate, I think." And with that and a calm smile, the unperturbed angel is up and escorting Fuyuumi from her seat. They go out the door that Mizue was still holding open, behind

the other girls. They give him a grateful, welcoming smile as Mori slams the door with a final *hmph!* flourish.

"Way to go, Kazuki-san. You've got some way with the ladies." Etou says with a smirk, shaking his head. He never did claim to understand the mysteries of the female psyche, but he certainly knew when a fellow fellow had stepped in it--and not just once but three times in a row.

The abandoned guys seemed to lose their appetites in the pallid atmosphere, also soon thereafter deserting the unhappy spot.

## Chapter 8

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### "The Best Laid Plans"

"Ayano-san?" Miyabi enters the darkened cafe, seeing nothing, but hearing enough. Ayano was quietly weeping in the far corner of the scenic shoppe, beneath the sakura blossom painting that she loved to stare at. Azuma-sama had sent it to her from America when the shoppe first opened.

"Ayano-san? Hihara-san didn't mean to frighten you." Miyabi says, comfortingly putting an arm around her friend.

"It--it was not that. If you please, I do hope he can pardon my inadequacies." Ayano says in her overly polite manner, as she subconsciously fingered the painting adorning the wall as she spoke. But Miyabi saw the simple act and suddenly remembered, in her ditzzy way, what could always cheer her quiet companion up--a thursday night message from America!

"Oops! Look! I almost forgot! Our thursday night email from Big Brother. Here it is." Miyabi produces her trusty iPad and Yunoki's weekly message came in for Ayano's hungry eyes to drink in. "And since I almost forgot it, you can read it first tonight!" Miyabi generously places the device in Ayano's un-technological hand. In the eerie darkness, the bright words on the screen are read and reread until her blurry eyes were back in tears, full force.

"Ayano! What is it?" Worried now, Miyabi quickly asks with a concerned frown, peering over Ayano's shoulder at what could bring the girl to tears again.

*'Hello. Dull prospects. Can't decide where to go after graduation. There's nothing adventurous enough here in*

*America to entice me. But nothing there at home exciting enough to bring me back, either. Do you think there's a shuttle launch to Mars I could book a flight on? Even that sounds dull and boring to me about now. Tell Grandmother and our older brothers that business school is as expected--even here. Dull. My grades are exemplary, I'm at the top of my class and expected to graduate with honors. Dull. Tell them I'm making them proud. Dull. Maybe I can try out tiger hunting in Africa. Perhaps I'll send you a trophy or two. Ask Hihara if he'd like to join me, Miyabi. I'll write you from somewhere dull when I get there soon. Oh, something has come up. In Austria. So I won't be coming home for the holidays after all. Goodbye.'*

"There is nothing as exciting as all that, here...." Ayano whispers forlornly.

"I guess tiger hunting sounds like fun." Miyabi tries to lighten the mood with a giggle at her brother's strange message. She knew how this news of not coming home must hurt poor Ayano even worse than her. The girl was in a daze once she'd read the part about Yunoki not coming home for the holidays at all.

"There is nothing as exciting as that here." Ayano repeats herself sadly.

"Tiger hunting? I think the male species on the whole, would make better game!" Amou says, with hands on hips. She had had just about enough of the creatures as she leads her troupe of angered females (plus Shimizu) into the small cafe, as Miyabi comforts Ayano, bringing her to a back room for a sit-down.

"Present company excepted." Mori gives the blonde boy a passing pat on the head. The girls treated him more like a beloved pet than one of those loathesome of the race called 'men.'

"Poor Ayano-chan." Fuyuumi sympathetically feels for the girl. They all had heard that Yunoki was not returning.

"Poor Hino-san!" Shouji too felt Hino's pain acutely, although somehow, her own ocean of feelings for Tsukimori Len was

slowly ebbing like the tide, now that Kiriya was in her life. She still could understand the redhead's sadness, though. She had suffered it herself for years, and the ice-blue stallion didn't even know that she existed. At least Hino had more of her boyfriend's feelings to cling to than Ayano did.

*Yunoki Azuma's a cold fish.*

She pitied the girls now, seeing the same look in both their eyes after Hihara-senpai's unintentional remarks.

*And Miyabi-chan didn't look none too happy for wear, either! Hmph! Men!* thought Shouji.

"Yes, they pine away for their loves, they do, until sadness tears their souls in two.' I read that in a poem once." She apologizes for that bit of melodramatic nonsense. Mizue remembered how Ryo had laughed at her for her flights of 'fancy words' when she tried to quote a romantic poem to him one Valentine's Day.

"I know you've all been doing your best to keep those girls spirits up. Mori, both you and Miyabi-chan have been true friends to them." Amou shakes her head. "But life isn't a poem! It's heartbreaking to see their 'souls' being torn apart as you say, Mizue." Amou garners the girls' nods. "But I suppose it happens to boys, too." Amou begrudgingly admits. "Shinobu--I mean, Ousaki-senpai--" Amou corrects her over-familiar address for the older man, "--he's just as beside himself with worry for the sad state that Tsukimori-kun is constantly in, pining away for Hino-san, if you can believe that of that cold guy. Ousaki-senpai thinks we've got to get them together again soon, 'before one or the other dies of a broken heart.' I guess I can see now what he means." Amou could hear Ayano's sobs from where they were whispering in the front of the store.

She could just imagine what Hino Kahoko was going through---and all on her own, keeping her tears bottled up inside. She never complained or begged the boy to return, stubborn as she was. *"Just like Tsukimori-kun..."*

"They're just both too bull-headed and stubborn to admit to each other how lonely they are! Ousaki-senpai tells me that Tsukimori-kun never tells how he misses her so on the phone to her. And in the emails that he receives from Hino-chan never tell him to come home to her, either! They both want the same thing but seem to speak another language when they talk to each other!" Amou throws her hands up in frustration. The girls all exchange nods with each other in agreement.

"Hino-senpai and Tsukimori-senpai...just have to...play their...violins to one another...again.....After all, music....is the true language....of love...." From out of nowhere, hidden in the darkness, a silent Shimizu Keiichi speaks. A brilliant stream of moonlight breaks through the clouds to shine upon him at this moment, through the darkened window.

Fuyuumi was beside him, awed by his pure beauty and genius. They all turn, almost seeing a halo glowing over his head as the simple answer comes from his melodic lips. His gaze fixes upon Fuyuumi as he says the word 'love.' Fuyuumi was frozen still, not even able to blush under his angelic gaze.

"You mean--we have to get Hino to go to Vienna? But how?" Mori asks incredulously. Europe seemed so far away, yet she was till filled with the glint of hope seen in the young blonde boy's unfailing eyes.

"Lili."

One word. One answer. His eyes spread groggily over his female audience. Fuyuumi's heart twitters at his honest, simply spoken solution.

Some of the others were confused by it, but one skeptical Amou Nami over the years, had become a true believer that somehow fairies existed at Seiso Academy.

"Absolutely! Shimizu, you're brilliant! Fuyuumi!" Rushing across the room, Amou firmly grabs hold of both the idea and the girl's shoulders as if lights suddenly zinged electricity into her head--bright dazzling ones of joy and hope.

"Tomorrow! You get that fairy of yours to bend Director Kira's ear. He's the only ticket to get us to Vienna! So Hino-chan and Tsukimori-kun can play their language of love again! Oooh!!! What a romantic story this is going to be!!!!"

Bells and whistles and knobs and wheels start churning and spinning in Amou's excited brain.

## Chapter 9

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### "Sprinkle the Fairy Dust"

It seemed a normal Friday afternoon at the Seiso school grounds--quiet and peaceful since classes were out, and most students were eager to rush home for the weekend. Only a few, stouthearted serious musicians would come to practice in the rooms here and there.

He didn't mind that sort. They were the self-absorbed types who wouldn't want to bother him, either. It was the sort of day Kira Akihiko liked---no, the word should be 'preferred.' He was always ill at ease on the rest of normal busy weekdays when any said student might accidentally be bumped into, or give him a snide look or silly giggle as he walked the halls or grounds outside.

Children were strange creatures---he never did take to them, and teenagers were even worse as they aged.

*Unlike a fine wine such as this...*

Kira swirls the vintage port in his glass around with a lazy air. Friday was the one day of the week he could relax. Every other day was filled with school problems. On weekends, he generally ended up with disdain at a social event he'd attend merely for appearances' sake, and for as short a time as propitious, and then slip away.

But Fridays were calm--forgotten days. And Kira liked to forget himself once in awhile and let the music sweep him away...

He loved his darkened office and comfortable couch to lie upon, for hours on end, just listening to the music he was so apart of.

The only problem with the classical pieces was that they would remind him of Miya, his late sister. But that wasn't a problem anymore, was it? With the help of a certain girl and her friends, the stoic director had come to peace with his past--and more importantly, with himself.

His drifting mind wandered to thoughts of the child Miya had left behind, and Kira was as glad now as he was uncertain then that he had brought Kiriya back from America. The awkward boy was showing a lot of promise to be a great violinist someday.



*Just like his mother...Have you heard him lately, Miya? You would be proud....*

Kira lets himself recall Kiriya's practice outside his window at home just yesterday. He played so well, as if inspired, now and then. It was the music of the 'Je Te Veux' that Miya loved to play most. Kira had told Etou once about his mother's fondness for it, and the boy had latched on--playing it almost just as she did. Kira was sure he could hear Miya's tone color in the wine hair colored lad's music.

*I suppose he's not too bad a kid after all.*

Kira clears his thoughts with a sigh and lets the beautiful piece transport him...

"Hm hmm hm hmm hmmm, hmm hmmm hmm hmmm  
hmmmmmmm"

Someone was still humming the piece even after the CD ended. His eyes closed, Kira was certain that his peaceful afternoon was over now. Maybe it was just another fairy laced dream? But more likely, a 'Lili-filled' nightmare....

"Hm hmm hm hmm hmmm, hmm hmmm hmm hmmm  
hmmmmmmm.... We **love** Satie, don't we Kira Akihiko?!" Lili's high pitched voice finished his humming.

Kira turns over on the couch, trying to ignore the annoying creature entirely.

"Especially 'Je Te Veux'" Lili flutters over until he was right over Kira's ear. Kira, in turn, grabs a pillow and places it over his head. "That's no way to entertain an old friend, Kira Akihiko, you know! My feelings may get hurt, you know!" Lili whines, zapping the pillow with his wand until it was nothing but feathers, raining down over Kira's head.

The poor man shoots up, spitting feathers from his mouth with a choking cough. "We are not 'old friends,' Argento!" Kira spouts in anger at last.

Lili was pleased and triumphant at getting his goat. "Now my feelings ARE HURT! And just when I was going to do you a favor, Kira Akihiko, you know!" Lili's voice was getting just as angry as his victim's.



"Don't. Don't do me any favors. Just get out. Leave me alone, Argento." Kira goes to the window and opens it, pointing an ordering finger out.

Lili smirks, giggling evilly. The window magically comes slamming down shut, and Kira just agilely pulls his hand back in, just in time. He turns with a growl on his face, to find Lili had disappeared.

"Good." Kira was relieved for one hopeful moment. But the racket just outside his office door stops that thought immediately. "Argento! Stop this!"

Furniture was flying to and fro around the sitting room's front entrance. Kira ducked in the nick of time, not to get decked by the stream of books circulating around the room. Busts of Beethoven and other composers, papers and sheet music, all joined in the whirlwind. Kira did all he could to not get whacked by a flying missile or pen shooting through the air.

But more than a pillow or two got through, and knocked him from behind.

"My name is 'Lili!' LILI LILI LILI LILI! I won't stop until you say it!" Lili giggles with threatening glee, floating above the melee below, as he seemed to enjoy watching Kira deftly dodge objects, like at a circus.

"No! I won't. It's foolish---to---address a---figment---of my---imagination!" Between dodges, Kira's doubtful soul, since he was a small child of magical fairies and legends, was going to be his downfall someday. Especially when it came to Lili the Fata.

*Pull!*

The Oriental rug was pulled right out from under him and goes flying in the air. Kira almost went with it as he trips forward, forward, forward towards the closed door. He prepares for impact, unable to stop, when it suddenly opens.

Kira tripped right out the door and into the sunlight, knocking the surprised woman, who had opened the door upon hearing suspicious noises inside, only to have them both knocked flat down the steps into the thankfully soft, grassy knoll below.

A dazed Kira blinks back the blinding sunlight and dizziness to find Mari Tsuzuki pinned beneath him. She was just shaking off the same dizzy, off-balance feelings when she comes to with a blush at their close proximity.

"Mari...are you all---are you hurt?" Kira finds his wind first. He lifts the speechless woman, air knocked right out of her, to her feet. But noticing how wobbly they were yet, he cavalierly decides to pick her up and carry her inside to the couch, laying her upon it.

"No more nonsense, Argento. I'm serious now. She could've been hurt." Kira turns and talks to the empty air in anger. Mari's thumping heart and confused mind grew even more so as the dashing dark Director of the school kneels down at the side of the sofa with a kindly expression of care she'd never seen on his usually emotionless features before.

"Are you hurt?" His voice changes decidedly in temperature as he speaks to her. She smiles, despite the surprised fall, at his caring attitude.

"No, I don't think---" Mari stops dead in her tracks. For there, floating in the air, right behind the Director's head was an apparition.

A small bluish being, in a skirt, with yellow curly hair, wings, a wand, and a devilish expression on its face was there.

"Ohhh! I must've taken that fall harder than I thought." Mari tries to rationalize what her dazed eyes must be seeing. She shakes her head, then rubs her aching temples, closing her eyes tightly.

But Kira already had a suspicion of what was going on. He quickly swivels his head to see if---

*Poof!*

But Lili poofs away and Kira looks back to Mari, who opens her eyes, just in time to see Lili poofing back.

*Poof!*

This time, he waves his wand, doing a mid-air somersault, and then sticks his silent tongue out in a razz at her over Kira's head.

"Ahhh!!" The usually calm and reserved Mari shrieks. She grabs Kira's arm for support.

"You see it, don't you?" Kira resigns himself to an explanation now, knowing he could not fight the damn Fata. It had made itself obvious for a purpose, it seemed. "Of course you can. Your heart must truly love music." Kira mumbles under his breath in realization.

"Wh-what is it...?" Mari whispers as Lili mischievously continues to pop in and out of sight.

"A Fata." Kira states, rolling his eyes. "More correctly--THE

Fata. The one that my great-grandfather rescued from dying." Kira omits here to say how he wondered of his ancestor's wisdom in doing that. "The one who granted him his dream to bless the school he was opening with music." Kira repeats, dronelike, his father and grandfather's and great-grandfather's passed down fairytale, from when he was a disbelieving kid, in his most monotone voice.

"....Music that would be spread around the world...." Mari finishes the legendary story in awe as she glances from Kira's face to the hovering, smiling figure of a fairy above him.

"Just like that, you know, Tsuzuki Mari!! You understand, you know! You will help Kira Akihiko from now on! I sense your souls are in tune with each other, you know! Together, you will both help spread music around the world, you know!!!" Lili was getting excited. "Here! This is the bond you two will share for all time! My eternal gift to you, Kira Akihiko, Tsuzuki Mari!" Lili flutters over their hands, drawing one atop the other, and with an enchanted golden violin string, he wraps it around until it dissolves right into their skin, by magic.



"What are you doing, Argento?!" Kira protests, reverting back to not using Lili's name, as he awkwardly tries to pull his hand away. But it was too late.

"You're too late, Kira Akihiko! Ha ha ha ha!" Lili dances around the room.

But as for Mari, she was in seventh heaven at the thought of being blessed by an actual musical Fata.

*At last! My music will be special, too!*

"Lili!" The fairy stops in mid-flight to come before her. "I used to believe you existed when I was a student at Seiso. I often imagined you were there, watching me play whatever instrument I picked up. Were you really there? Were you really watching, helping me?"

"Of course I was! That is--until your heart closed to me at the Concours and became cold! I could see you still, but you could no longer see me, and I couldn't help you anymore!"

Mari recalls those dark times after the Concours--the jealousy she felt for the winner--one Ousaki Shinobu---and the cool perfection she then, after losing, demanded of herself in music. As a result, it was no longer the warm sparkle that it once brought to her world.

"I can see you now, Lili. I can truly see you again at last." Cold, prim Tsuzuki Mari was almost in tears. She, unlike Kira, embraced the idea of someone to watch over her and bless her music. She softly stroked Lili's golden head and hugged the Fata to her chest--so grateful for this unexpected day.

"I'm happy, too, Tsuzuki Mari, you know! Maybe YOU could convince Kira Akihiko that I should grant him a great favor today!" Wiping away his own tears of joy, Lili chuckles in glee, sticking his tongue out at Kira over Mari's shoulder. The man, still unconvinced, turned his head away from the stupid creature

that Mari was embracing.

But Lili could see the soft spot inside Kira when he carried the girl into the room. It was something that Lili had never glimpsed in this stubborn great-grandson before.

*She could teach you a thing or two about belief, Kira Akihiko, you know...*

And now that he blessed the pair with his golden cord bond, Lili was sure there was no way even reluctant, stiff, meanie Kira Akihiko could deny the other half of his bond anything.

The way Mari was looking at him, with new wonder and curiosity, Lili knew, that Mari Tsuzuki was going to be butter in his magical little hands...

Kira sits down and leans back on the other side of the imported European double-sided sofa, from where Mari was cooing over Lili on the other side at his back.

With a triumphant smile, Lili zaps the CD player remote and "Je Te Veux" plays again. He was sure that between himself and Tsuzuki Mari, Kira Akihiko would be putty in their hands.

# Chapter 10

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## "Guilder for Your Thoughts"

*V*ienna, Austria Opera House

"Vat are you thinking right now, Dearest? Penny for your thoughts?" Spoken in broken English, the language that they both somewhat knew, the Dutch woman glances across her dressing room from where she was behind the screen at the lavender-haired man lounging on the settee, just blankly staring at the bare wall.

He had already changed from his costume and was quietly awaiting her. You wouldn't think a normal woman would question such a noble sentiment in her man. He patiently and wordlessly waited, while she changed her attire. After the last curtain call came down on the opera house that night, Caterina van Etten was not only famous for her soaring soprano voice in the opera world, but also for her lavish gowns and fashion, and the time it took to undress and redress that made her constantly late for everything.

*Everything--the story of my life.*

Everything, including finding happiness with the love of her life. She was almost too late for that as well. It took Caterina ten years of lonely dressing rooms and empty flirtations from various gold-diggers and fellow actors, for her to realize who the true co-star of her heart was---and what a mistake she made when she walked out on him that day.

*But I didn't lose him....even after I left him, like a fool---when he needed me most. Like a selfish, spoiled girl, when I was offered a part in ze opera, I didn't think of him, and I was off*

*again to Europe before even discussing it. To make my mark on ze world---become rich and famous, a celebrity toasted by all, beloved by all. And by all, I vas loved---but I had lost ze one whose love meant ze most.*

It took years for the Dutch beauty to realize the true desire of her heart.

*Never again vill I lose you....My Hiro...*

"How about the guilder instead, zen? A little birdie's told me zat you happen to like sparkly things made in Holland..." Caterina flirts, only partly dressed as she saunters about the dressing room and elegantly alights onto Kanazawa Hiroto's lap. Her velvety voice beckoned to him, almost as velvety as her red, red lips hovered expectantly near his, as she holds the polished coin between her fingers---offering both the coin and herself to him. She wanted to please him and her vow when he returned to her was that she never wanted to make him unhappy again.

"...That I do..." Kanazawa says with a smirky smile and lingering kiss on Caterina's lips.

Since last we saw him, Kanazawa Hiroto had transformed from the obsolete, aged 'hobo' into a handsome, debonair leading man, full of romance and warmth---all for the 'Dutch witch' who broke his heart, and along with it, his soul, when she left him.

The young Kanazawa had turned into a drunken, smoking wreck all those years ago, and as a result, he lost his beautiful tenor voice as well, in punishment for his neglect of health and destructive habits.

It was only when his Seiso school best friend had found him in that sad, broken down state, and was loyal and kind enough to lift Kanazawa Hiroto up by the bootstraps and sober him up. Kira Akihiko had given 'Kanayan' a teaching job at his Academy when no one else seemed to care if he was dead or alive.

Kira's 'tough love' friendship, along with the knowledge that

even when the chips were down, his true love lost and his singing voice decayed, his title as 'lead tenor' in the opera troupe revoked, his pride erased---Kanazawa still had a friend. Kira Akihiko had proven to be more than that. The dark man who had experienced his own share of troubles and grief enough to fill a lifetime. Yet he still found it in his heart to save that of his boyhood companion.

He gave Kanayan not only a job when no one else would. Not only a living and a place to stay, when no one else wanted, but Kira also gave Kanazawa something new to live for---his students.

Kanayan was at first reluctant to be a music teacher--a role model to young skulls full of mush. He knew he was not a brilliant orator nor scholar. He was also certainly sure he couldn't be anyone's inspiration in anything--never mind learning to teach love of music, opening new worlds of discovery, or to be a reliable friend to students. He couldn't enjoy their questions or their company, as much as they would seek his.

Kanazawa Hiroto never imagined all this in his wildest dreams---and as a drunk, some of them were wild--that these kids would come to love him and he was just as surprised to find himself loving them back! For all their faults and triumphs, they were his 'kids' now and boy, did he miss them! Even if it didn't always look like it, as just now--with a beautiful blonde hanging on his arm, lavishing him with kisses.

# Chapter 11

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## "Beside My Heart"

**S**himizu Keiichi and Fuyuumi Shoko had indeed gone right to work to inform Lili of their plan to reunite Hino Kahoko and her star-crossed lover, Tsukimori Len, the very next day.

It was a cool, crisp Friday afternoon by the time they finally located the slumbering Fata and had shared with him the plan. Before the words were barely out of their mouths, Lili had poofed away with a delirious giggle and sinister smile on his little face to do the good deed to Kira Akihiko--his favorite victim.

Their mission set into action, Shimizu turns to the girl standing next to him in the cool Seiso forest area. They had walked around in search of Lili for awhile and her cheeks were glowing a soft pink from the cold, the excitement and also, his intense gaze upon her.

When they stopped, she began shivering, maybe from all three reasons again. Fuyuumi only sported a light, but lovely tan and brown poncho over her school uniform's shoulders.

"You look cold...Shoko-san....Here you go...." It wasn't done as gentlemanly, nor as valorously, as it was angelically, but Fuyuumi felt like a princess nonetheless as her blue-eyed prince removed his own school blazer and places it over the aqua-haired girl's trembling shoulders. Fuyuumi could still feel his warmth in the cream colored jacket, as his dreamy vanilla scent enveloped her and the pink color on her cheeks were by now a brilliant red.

"Th-thank you, Sh-sh-Shimizu-kun..." Fuyuumi was trying not

to stumble over her words, as she usually did. She was often successful when it was only Shimizu and herself in the room. She somehow felt at ease with the blonde beauty, except when he dared to touch her like this. Fuyuumi's breath caught in throat as Shimizu buttoned up the top buttons on the blazer as if she was a doll, *'so it won't fall off.'*

Fuyuumi thought she would die as he finishes and looks up into her beet red face with a content smile.

*The smile of an angel....*

Fuyuumi hears herself saying inwardly and she felt so blessed, so special that he was paying such tender attention to her.

"Before you go home....Shoko-san....will you come...to the practice room....with me now? I'd like to show....you something...." Shimizu says in his slow, plodding way, with his angelic blue eyes on hers expectantly.

"Y-yes...." Fuyuumi nods with a smile at the cello-proficient Shimizu, who no doubt wanted to play for her his latest piece. She loved listening to Shimizu play anything---his playing was able to comfort and warm her soul, right to its very depths. She loved when he played his own compositions even more---she sure that his talent was pure genius and that Shimizu Keiichi would be a famous composer someday, his name reknowned.

He was so gifted, so sweet, so pure, so angelic in every way, that Fuyuumi often cried herself to sleep at the good fortune she'd been blessed with, to have such a beautiful, gifted boy genius fall in love with her.

At least she thought he was in love with her. She hoped against hope that he was, for she was head over heels in love with him. But being the quiet, reserved types they both were, neither spoke any passionate words aloud, even though he had been escorting her home and taking her to concerts and movies and walks in the forest, just like today, for two years now.

They liked each other immensely—certainly—and felt a kind of

calming peace when they were together generally. But Fuyuumi was the type of insecure girl whose lack of confidence of everything could never be 100% certain that she even deserved this perfect, blue-eyed angel's love. In fact, she was sure she wasn't even in his league. Shimizu Keiichi's pure beauty of heart, soul and mind were far beyond earthly--he was Heaven sent.

All these thoughts and dreams of him had quite brought a blush to Fuyuumi Shoko's cheeks as the emboldened creature takes her arm, crosses the lawns, and leads her down the path and into the Seiso Academy building they knew so well. He slowly, yet purposefully leads her into a special first-floor practice room---the one that Director Kira had sanctioned for only Third Year Student Shimizu Keiichi to use. The musical boy genius' composing skills had impressed the Music School director so much that Kira put the teachers under instruction that if Shimizu missed classes or fell asleep or failed to do homework assignments, he should get a pass. For the young man was constantly busy composing music in his slow, concise way. Every second of his waking hours and even into his slumbering dreams--where time meant nothing, the musical ingenue never failed and exam or did less than excel on any pop quiz, for his musical knowledge was vast.

Kira recognized that Shimizu spent a great deal of his life in the library, doing his own research, that required no teaching. Everyone knew that Shimizu was destined for musical greatness someday.

Especially Fuyuumi.

But she was just as certain that she wasn't worthy of standing at a famous composer's side.

>*sigh*<

Shimizu turns from adjusting his cello strings tension to look at the quiet girl he had seated at the piano bench to wait a few minutes ago. "You must be...getting warm with...that extra

jacket on, Shoko-san. Forgive me....for not noticing...earlier..." Taking her sigh for being overheated, he drops what he's doing and goes over to her. He unbuttons the cream blazer's buttons and removes it from her shoulders. "Oh....your poncho, too..." He says, in those lovely patient tones. His deft hands on the cello were clumsy at undressing girl's clothing, as he attempts to untie the knotted bow, keeping the tan poncho on at her neck.

"Ohhh." By now, Fuyuumi Shoko was totally flustered. So many blushes had crawled over her entire body that she felt she was going to pop as Shimizu's small hands untie her cloak.

"There....is that better...now...?" Shimizu was always oblivious to her mood fluctuations. She was just trying to catch her stolen breath when she hears the gentle calming strains of a cello reverberate in her ears.

Not just 'a cello' but **his** cello. Fuyuumi could always tell Shimizu Keiichi's tone color from anyone else's. It was so soft, so flowing---so flawless and yet still warm as she lets the new melody envelope her soul. She closes her eyes and absorbs his sentiments.

It started out softly, like a gentle breeze, then as if climbing, slowly on wings of anticipation upward, that breeze seemed to be asking her a question.

Fuyuumi was always amazed at how expressive Shimizu's beautiful compositions were. Each piece portrayed a heartfelt emotion, drawing a wondrous scene in her head, that reached all the way to her heart.

From his bow to his strings, question after question, gently nudging note after note, for an answer that he seemed to be awaiting, as if ghostly invisible hands were begging, reaching out beseechingly, for a reply.

Fuyuumi opens her eyes when the music stops and she feels a physical hand atop hers. Startled by what she sees, she stifles a small gasp. Shimizu Keiichi was no longer seated across from the piano bench she was sitting on. He was kneeling at her feet,

clasping her hand in his, leaning his head to it, as his soft curls cascade over her fingers.



His eyes were closed as he reverently smiles, looking more angelic than she'd ever seen him before.

"Sh-sh-Shimizu-kun...?" Fuyuumi whispers in stupefied awe. She felt quite inadequate to express her emotions and didn't know what to do as his head now rested on her still trembling hand.

"Shoko...this is your song....you are my muse....You are my heart's muse..." The words come from his lips, though his eyes never open nor resting head move.

"Shimizu...kun....." She barely squeaks out as her heart races at a million miles an hour, unable to move.

"I wrote this for you, Shoko. Please....play it with me...." His angelic eyes open to display an angelic smile, full of love for the shy girl as he produces a sheet of music from inside his vest pocket. He unfolds it carefully before her. "Beside my heart..."

he whispers as he hands her the page.

Fuyuumi's eyes were too filled with tears to be able to clearly read the notes for a moment or two. The score of a musical composition unfolds before her eyes, fittingly titled 'Heaven Sent Breeze' in Shimizu's scrawled handwriting.

When she sees the first bars for the '*Vc*', soon followed and coupled with more passages labelled '*Cl*' and no other instruments designated in his notations, her disbelieving eyes dart back and forth, realizing what this was.

Not only was this beautiful piece written in her honor, but Fuyuumi was beside herself with the thought that she---little unimportant and unnoticed Shoko Fuyuumi---was inspirational to anyone able to compose such a celestial melody. She sees that it was written as a duet for two instruments to play with one another. '*Vc*'--the cello, not surprisingly as this was Shimizu Keiichi's forte, but also '*Cl*'--the clarinet, her own special friend.

It all hitched Fuyuumi Shoko's delicate sensibilities all at once. She looked deeply into Shimizu's pure sky blue eyes, glistening for her. This was what he had been working on so diligently all this time. This, the greatest compliment and most precious gift a musical heart like Fuyuumi's could receive. She was so honored and touched that she uncharacteristically drops her reserve, takes Shimizu's hand, which was still laced with hers, and hugs it adoringly to her cheek, kissing it with a soft, almost inaudible,

"....thank you for loving me...." coming from amazed, grateful lips that felt so blessed by her angel's 'Heaven Sent Breeze.'

# Chapter 12

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## "A Plaintive Melody"

*K*nock knock knock

"Come in." A handsome, poised young man with icy blue hair, calls out curtly, well knowing who would be entering the room.

"Ousaki-senpai," Tsukimori Len glances up from the thick German language book on famous composers to meet his roommate's be-spectacled eyes with his own.

"How are you?" Ousaki asks with concern as he steps in Tsukimori's room.

"Fine, thank you." Tsukimori answers, returning to read the dull text.

"How are you getting along?" Ousaki stumbles for conversation.

"Fine, thank you." is the simple reply as he once more goes back to intently reading.

Ousaki frowns. Tsukimori never was one for intense, long conversations, but this was bordering on rude.

"Tsukimori-kun, if you need someone to talk to, or tell your troubles to, I want you to know, I'm here." Ousaki attempts to hold out an olive branch for the forlorn youth, but Len was not biting.

"Really, I'm all right, Ousaki-senpai," Tsukimori takes off his glasses and puts down his book to look up, annoyance on his face.

"Oh, good," Ousaki folds under the blue boy's piercing, on the verge of anger, gaze.

Len, feeling like he won some peace, puts his glasses back on and goes back to tackling the foreign words with a furrowed brow.

"Because--"

Tsukimori glances above his eyeglasses threateningly, but brave tenderhearted Ousaki Shinobu plunges on just the same.

--I thought you might enjoy attending an opera. It's just opening at the Vienna State Opera House. I can get tickets for next weekend."

"No, I'd rather stay here. I have work to do." Coldly, sourly, he was not in the mood for pleasant chatting like Ousaki seemed to be.

"It's 'Rigoletto.'" Ousaki continues, undaunted, though omitting some important facts about next week's particular showing.

"That's nice." Tsukimori Len says offhandedly, uninterested.

"The Vienna Philharmonic is playing." Ousaki offers optimistically.

"No -- thank you." Len rather forcefully insists.

"Good. I'll go buy some tickets." Ousaki smiles, pretending not to hear his friend's protests.

Len's jaw drops, and he rolls his eyes with a sigh as Ousaki throws on his the beret and coat and hurries out their apartment's door before Len had a chance to say anything about it.

"Not that it matters what I say...why do you even bother asking me then?" Tsukimori grumbles under his breath to the cloudy windowpane as he watches his senpai make his way through the cold late Autumn streets outside their apartment building.

He thought Ousaki was acting rather strangely lately. "Must be the fault of Autumn..." Tsukimori Len knew all too well himself how depressing the latter seasons of the year could be.

How dead, how grey and garish. How chilling, without a single snowflake to grace the sky with any sparkle, as the sun starts to sink below the skyline, taking any small ray of light with it.

He shivers inwardly, pulling his turtlenecked sweater's sleeves over his exposed wrists, feeling the cold exquisitely today.

"Maybe playing will warm me." He says aloud to the thin air, going to his room and producing his violin case. Deft hands caress the instrument's precious oak body for a brief moment, before lifting his violin's chin rest to him, drawing his bow over the bridge's strings with expert ease.

Unconsciously, his fingers move, as if by some unseen force, not consciously realizing he was playing for her, that the emptiness inside his heart was for her, as the music of the first song they ever shared, fills the room with a longing his lips could never express.

This was the only way Tsukimori Len could ever fully show his emotions---through his song. Finally alone, he could let out all the lonely frustration and pain at separating from his love, that the violins notes could expertly play.

They indeed sounded like a crying, forlorn creature, captured as the notes spread over the room. Damning the bitter Austrian cold, Len throws open the window to let out his heart's sound into the winds that may just blow all the way around the world to land on Hino Kahoko's ears and tell her of his sadness, his longing and his love for her.

Perhaps it will convey his prayer to go back to her, to have her run again into his empty arms as strains of his yearning love for her echo through the Vienna streets. More than one brave pedestrian out in the cold sunset is moved by the touching 'Ave Maria.' Children stop to guess where the sound came from, as the adults pause in wonder of its beautiful sound, as many a

forgotten elderly eye drops a tear or two in complete understanding of the sentiments the musician is trying to express.

Night falls from the mountains over the still city as it listens to the music of a crying soul. Sadly, Ousaki pauses in his gait and looks up, fully well knowing the source of the heartrending playing.

*How much more of this can he take before breaking?* Ousaki wonders.

Just then, his cell phone's classical ringtone signals an incoming message that interrupts his grim train of thought.

*'Hidey ho! All's going according to plan! Kira's 'suggested' throwing a graduation concert in Vienna for the graduating class. I'll keep you updated on our ETA. I can't wait to see you again...Shinobu.....working my end here. Lots to prepare! See you soon!  
Your Nami'*

***BEEP***

"Good girl!" Ousaki proudly smiles in the cold darkness, skipping a step or two as a warmth comes over him when he envisions the vivacious golden haired girl's ingenuity and get up and go in situations such as this. He knew she could pull all the strings together with her vigorous spunk and indomitable spirit.

*I like that in her...* Ousaki smiles, despite the forlorn, yearning music serenading him in the background. He had happy visions of his 'Nami' setting the plan into motion because he knew, if there was anyone he could count on, it was Amou Nami.

# Chapter 13

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## "Fairy Tales Do Come True"

If ever there was a candidate for the human form of foot and mouth disease, it was Hihara Kazuki. He was so terribly truthful, so honestly oblivious, so simply Sagittarius, that he often paid the price for it.

He wanted to be sensitive to others' feelings, but it was like a bull tiptoeing through a China shop with ballet shoes, playing a horn. Hihara was Hihara—bright, outwardly friendly, spontaneously fun. Everybody and anybody liked Hihara—except for himself today. For all his spirit and joy, Hihara was also the type to come down hard on himself when it came to hurting others.

He never meant a single bad thing—ever! His heart was made of sunshine and his smile a rainbow. But today, there was a decidedly upside-down storm cloud over him in its place. It seemed nothing could be sadder than when Hihara Kazuki was sad. He had trudged to work that day, after a sleepless, guilt filled night, only to do one wrong thing after another. Accident after accident happened at the mechanic's shop he worked part-time on Fridays, until they had to send him home early.

So, in such a state we find him, wearing his heart on his sleeve, as he puts on his best face and decides to have a go at being 'OB' for a few hours before donning his waiter's apron at the restaurant, with trepidation.

But there were no music students in sight when he arrived. He had forgotten how empty Fridays were for OBs.

"I know! I'll go get my trumpet! Maybe that'll cheer me up!"

Playing 'Old Silver' always does!" Hihara thinks, as he goes to his locker in the teacher's lounge and picks up his old silver friend. He heads up to the roof and begins to play.

But the tune was a sad one, and all the notes came out wrong. Hihara seemed to find 'Elegy' coming from his mouth whenever he was in this state, and the music proved to depress him even more.

In his mind, he saw flashes of last night's scene---from tearful Ayano-chan to Hino-chan's sad retreat, to the angry 'hmping' of Amou-chan, Mori-chan and Mizue-chan....and then there was Miyabi-chan.

Her particular face stood out in his memory. Were those tears behind her bright eyes when she left? Hihara could kick himself if he said something wrong to her, too, especially.

"I am just so stupid..." He says to the cold winds, leaning against the railing on the roof, letting his sad trumpet fall at his side.

"No, you're not, Hihara-san! Don't ever say that!" A high, squeaky voice protests as a head full of bouncy, purple curls comes from inside the stairwell, where she was silently watching the tall boy play his sad tune.

"Miyabi-chan?! What are you doing up here? It's too cold for you!" Putting his own problems aside, Hihara's instinct was to wrap the little girl up in his arms and warm her cold, red cheeks.

But Miyabi wasn't backing down. She had had just about enough guff from her brothers and her grandmother---she just couldn't take it anymore from anyone else.

"It is NOT too cold for me if it's not too cold for you!" Miyabi rebelliously didn't want to be looked down as a child by anyone--especially by him.

*If he can take it, so can I!*

She was so stubborn when it came to being ordered around, and after last night's explosion at both the restaurant and her home after her brother Azuma's shocking email, she'd had enough words---her hands turning into shaking fists.

"But!" Hihara was going to put his foot down---Miyabi standing without a coat, without a hat, and she was beginning to tremble, despite her protestations.

"I have three older brothers already!" She explodes. "I don't want you to be one, too! I want you to be something more! Why can't you see it? I don't want you to think of me as a little sister anymore! I want you to think of me as a woman!"

There. She said it.

The truth finally came out of Miyabi Yunoki's little upturned mouth. The sixteen-year-old girl on the verge of maturity and longing to be her own woman so badly, she could almost taste it.

So in a very adult-like fashion, she puts on a pouty face, turns on her uniformed heel and turns away, storming down the stairs from the roof at dangerous speeds.

Panting, she runs, knowing he was on her tail, and not wanting him to see her in this state. Miyabi lithely ducks into a practice room and slumps on a piano bench, trying to slow her rapid breathing.

"Miyabi-chan! Miyabi-chan, wait! Miyabi-chan! I'm sorry!" Hihara was acting less like an adult nineteen-year-old graduate and OB, and more like a lovesick student. But he didn't care what he looked like. Miyabi mattered to him---she was always there for him. It was Miyabi who always shared stories about Seiso, and communications with Yunoki with him. It was Miyabi who was always there to giggle at his jokes and chat with him, as she filled in selflessly for him at the restaurant, doing whatever task was necessary, no matter how beneath her rich girl status, no matter how dirty her beautiful small hands had to get.

"Miyabi...chan...." Hihara realized his mistake in calling this young woman, who took on so many responsibilities and tasks, like a little girl. She did it all for him. She wasn't doing it only out of love and duty for her big brother's friend--she was doing it because she cared for him, personally.

*Me....Hihara Kazuki.....Someone wants me to love them?*

Hihara was not used to this new thought. He was the victim of unrequited love of his own when he was about Miyabi-chan's age. But when it came to love, age was no barrier. Hihara was looking at Miyabi with a new light, as he intuitively goes right to the correct practice room she was hiding in, somehow sensing she was inside.

"Miyabi-chan, may I come in?" Hihara knocks, wanting to treat her like an adult and not hurt her feelings anymore and---

"NO!" It was breaking Hihara's big heart to hear her sobs and upset over him and his big mouth.

"Miyabi-chan!" Hihara couldn't take it. He rushed into the room and fell to his knees. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt your feelings! I didn't realize you felt that way....about me.....I've been a fool, about a lot of things." He himself was almost in tears, his voice breaking as he leans his head into her shoulder.

"No, you're not. You're not, Hihara-san. You're the most kind, most genuine and funniest boy I've ever know. I couldn't have opened my own shop and learn how to run anything without your help and kindness. I just couldn't stop myself....from falling in love with you. When I first laid eyes on you, all those years ago.....I'm sorry....." Miyabi blurts out her tearful secrets, ashamed of herself and her loss of total control. But really, she couldn't help it--emotions were something that came to her easily, unlike her brothers.

In that moment, Hihara hears Miyabi's laughter in his ears, when she was up to her arms in soap bubbles, smiles and sunshine. He realizes he wouldn't be able to withstand his busy life without her to lighten the load and help him, with her

cheerful smiles every step he took. She was there for him-- through thick and thin. As he looks into her teary eyes, Hihara Kazuki could see a light that burned as brightly as his, straight into his weary heart--making it happy and hopeful again. She relit the fire and purpose and force of her belief in him. She was a girl who needed his love--who wanted his love, and the faith he lost in himself once upon a time was rekindled to try again....

"'Kazuki,' Miyabi. Call me 'Kazuki.'" He smiles as he lifts his head up, encouraged by her sparkling eyes.

"...Kazuki..." Miyabi wondered if she should pinch herself or just believe that fairy tales do come true, like she did when she was little, as the two begin to shyly embrace.

*Ding dong, ding dong!*

*Poof!*

*Ding dong, ding dong!*

Just at this tender moment, the ringing cacophony of bells start donging and dinging throughout the school grounds, as only once before. Hihara was glad a startled Miyabi was clinging to him in his arms. She wasn't present at Seiso when last this miracle occurred.

Hihara himself wondered what was happening when....

*Poof!*

"Eeek!!!" Miyabi squeaks a shriek, scurrying behind the green-haired lad when before her eyes appear a certain reckless fairy.

"Hurray! Hurray! Kira Akihiko has agreed! Hurray! Hihara Kazuki! Gather everyone together, you know! We're on our way to the music capital of the world, you know---for Seiso Academy's Graduation Ceremony! Whooopeeee!!! Back to the Old World, to spread music around the globe and bring Hino Kahoko and Tsukimori Len back together with this golden cord of love!!! Heeeeee heeee!!!!"

"Lili! Tone it down!" Hihara scolds the exuberant apparition as he makes so much noise, clatter, and blinding lights, that he thought poor Miyabi would be beside herself.

But instead, she was giggling at the spritely fairy.

"She can see me? Music must live in her heart, too, you know!! Joyous day, Hihara Kazuki! Go tell the others, you know! Quick!" Lili couldn't contain his joy, nor his laughter.

# Chapter 14

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## "That's What Friends Are For"

**B**y the end of the day, it was all decided. Hihara and Miyabi had gathered all the friends together at the Seiso Music Room where Kira, with Lili's "help" explained about the "Graduation Concert" that he and Mari had planned for Vienna. He'd already called some connections in. He had arranged for the Vienna Concert Hall, to be prepared for the graduating students selected to play in, two weeks from now. There was no time for a decision, so he had just assigned the ones best suited. That was his privilege as school Director. Of course, the best Seiso had to offer, was ample--past and present--and Kira must hand pick only a choice elite few to fit his music selection. With Mari's astute advice and Lili's (albeit unwanted) aid, the musicians for the ensemble were assembled in no time.

**Vn1:** KIRIYA ETOU

**Vn2:** HINO KAHOKO

**Vc:** SHIMIZU KEIICHI

**Va:** KAJI AOI

**Pf:** TSUCHIURA RYOTARO

Kaji, Hino and Tsuchiura were no longer Seiso students, but Kira (and Lili) felt this special "Graduation Concert" could bend a few rules for some of their elite graduates. Especially Hino Kahoko, who the entire trip was set in honor of.

But she would not know about it until the very last minute, Ousaki and Amou had decided. It was to be their little group's

well kept secret. And no one argues with a go-getter like Amou Nami when she was in full commando mode. From one moment to the next Amou would flit from here and there and everywhere, her "Girl Power" team ready and willing to help for Hino's sake. They made last-minute arrangements for dresses and rented tuxedos and luggage and airplane tickets, like clockwork.

"Big trouble girls! I totally forgot passports!" Panic stricken Amou looks from each of her team's faces with a sudden scream, late at a secret Hihara restaurant meeting on a Thursday night before Friday morning's big event or "Operation Launch" as Amou and Hihara have fittingly named the scheduled flight.

"What are we going to do? No passports. No Vienna." Mizue says forlornly, all the girls shake their heads in worried disappointment. Their hearts sunk until Mori's gaze suddenly brightens as she crosses the room to where the group of hard-working-at-music-practice members (minus Hino) just came through the door.

"Kaji-kun! Just the man I wanted to see!" Mori exclaims, way-laying the teen before he even had a chance to remove his scarf and jacket.

"M-M-Mori-san? What can I do for you?" Kaji gulps, looking frightened, feeling singled out as she tugs him to the table. He was not accustomed to being accosted in doorways by beautiful women as the rest of 'Girl Power' seemed prepared to pounce on him if he didn't do their unknown bidding.

"Visas. 15 of them. Pronto." Mori says succinctly, with a prodding smile.

"Visas?" Kaji repeats, so scared stiff by the seven pairs of demanding eyes that he felt like ducking behind the other guys in hiding.

"You know, magic papers that let you go on mechanical birds that fly over the ocean." Mizue walks up behind Mori, sarcastically using her hands to describe for him the airplane,

and then the approximate shape and size of the questioned piece of paper that she was speaking to a five-year-old.

>*Gulp*<

Kaji's mind (what there was of it), drew a complete blank about now. His eyes roll around in his head, especially when Etou comes up from behind, puts his hand into Kaji's music bag and produces the golden boy's cell phone, sticking it to Kaji's ear.

"Tell your dad. You only need lucky number 13 of them – Akihiko-san and I already have our own, Aoi-san." Etou's smirk brings Kaji's swirling head back down to earth, and he dials promptly.

After a few minutes of explanations (politicians like to get those, but not give them), Kaji was soon able to assuredly assure the group of their 'Magic Papers ' arrival by the time the "Magical Birdie " was ready to take off tomorrow, if they'd all enter their vital info into his Blackberry now.

"Kaji! You rock!" Amou exclaims, relieved for a moment or two.

"Crisis averted, Councilor Kaji. You'll make a valuable member of the Diet yet. Well done." Quietly she pulls him aside and Mori squeezes the relieved lad's sweaty palm as he hands her his Blackberry for info entry.

"That's what friends are for, Mori-san. Hee hee." Kaji felt more like fainting than flaunting his powerful family prowess after the mental ordeal, but Mori seemed pleased with him. And that made all the difference to Kaji Aoi as he puffed up inside, awaiting another one of her encouraging smiles.

"Operation Launch" was back on schedule.

# Chapter 15

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## "Fly Away with Me"

**F**riday morning dawned bright and sunshiny for the first time in several weeks, but to Hino Kahoko it was just another day.

Or so she thought.

Showered, changed, linked rings securely in place around her neck, breakfasted—just like the routine of every other day, she was just about to go for her long cold trudging walk to the bullet train's tram that would take her to Ferris University, when –

>*Ding dong*<

"I've got it, Mom!" Hino calls back to her parent, just about to turn the doorknob to leave herself when the doorbell rang.

"Hino-san! It's such a bright sunshiny day, I thought I'd take you two girls up for a ride!" Bubbling over with smiles and an irrefutable offer, Kaji Aoi turns up on Hino's doorstep, bright and chipper as ever, and looking rather debonair.

Hino peers out the door to see Mori already loaded in Kaji's sporty silver Jaguar waving at her warmly.

"Umm, I..." Hino wasn't exactly blind to budding romance, despite her own troubled soul. She decides to be magnanimous and give Mori and Kaji some time alone together, she often feeling a third wheel on their cart of love.

"... I've already got a weekly ticket for the bullet. Thanks anyway, Kaji-kun. It was very nice of you to think of me, but I have to be on my way. You two enjoy your ride. It is a lovely

day for it." Hino's kind generous heart would get her into such scrapes!

*Ahh! Now what!?* Kaji panics when Hino gives him a farewell wave and pushes past him on her way out and down the street for her walk to the train station.

"W-Wait! Hino-san.!" He cried out in fear of his blowing his end of the plan already.

"What is it, Kaji -kun? I'm going to miss my train," she says with a frustrated sigh.

"Uh,umm...uh..." The political intern still had a lot to learn about selling pitches, despite the promise he'd shown last night.

"That's just it, Hino-san! Please let us drive you at least part of the way, then you'll surely catch it." Mori saves Kaji's bacon once again.

"Alright, if you really don't mind," Hino smiles appreciatively, capitulating at last, as Mori gets out the passenger side door and ushers her in. Mori then gets back in, sandwiching the weirded-out redhead between herself and a smiling Kaji as he resumes his place at the driver seat.

"All aboard! We'll get you there on time, Hino-san! I promise!" Now he was speaking as a true politician, Kaji calls excitedly as he revs up the engine and pulls out of the parking lot at breakneck speed, gunning it. Mori and Hino both hold onto their bags and hats, as Kaji puts his foot on the gas.

Hino Kahoko would 'be there on time.' Kaji was not telling an untruth. He just failed to mention where **"there"** was.

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Meanwhile, in the early wee hours of the morning at the Yunoki Residence, side mission "B" had been set well underway as well.

"Are you sleeping, Ayano?" Miyabi finds herself whispering to the thin, trembling form of the young girl bunking out beside her.

"Not I." Ayano whispers back. She never before having a sleepover with a friend and found it rather nice to wake up and have a friendly face to talk to.

"No, no, no. Remember, Ayano?" Miyabi corrects the elder girl kindly.

"Yes. I mean, nope, not me!" It was a strange phrase coming from her usually timid, polite mouth, but Ayano's been worked on hard.

"That's better!" Miyabi reaches under the covers and squeezes her dark-haired friend's hand, only to find it cold and clammy, shaking uncontrollably.

"Are you nervous?" Miyabi asks with a worried brow.

"Nope, not me." Ayano repeats her slang vernacular from before, but this time a bit more unconvincingly.

"It's all right, I'd understand if you are. I would be." Miyabi says sympathetically, hugging Ayano's trembling form.

"You would?" Ayano asks, she never opening up to a bosom friend before like this. Her sisterly relationship with Miyabi had grown in the past two years, and exponentially in the past two weeks.

"Don't you worry! Big Brother will love the new you, I'm sure," Miyabi whispers optimistically.

"He will?" Ayano was not as certain as Miyabi and the other girls on the strange plan.

"He will!" Miyabi giggles, and Ayano can't help but return the smile with some soft hopeful giggles of her own.

"Shh! We'll wake grandmother up!" But Miyabi herself couldn't halt the giggles in the anxiety of the upcoming day's excitement. Shared giggles seemed to be the only cure for their anxiety, as the pair continues their giddy chuckles until tears ran down both sets of rosy cheeks and Grandmother Yunoki's warning stick comes banging on the girl's door. Ayano returns to considering the plan in silence.

If this didn't work, maybe nothing else would. That last message had left Ayano with little hope. Something drastic has to be done, Ayano just knew that if this didn't work, and she lost Azuma-sama, and the promise of a future with him –

She would just die.

So in the attempt to gain his love, his interest, she would, in turn, die trying.

~~~~~

"Are you almost ready, Mizue!? I wanted to get there before... well, in case they need my moral support!" Standing below her window bellowing, Tsuchiura Ryotaro smacks his fist into his palm, displaying his "moral support," though Mizue had no idea when that kind of heroic male nonsense would be necessary today.

"Golly! They're just music students getting on a plane. Sometimes you're such a big lug, Ryo. Sheesh." Mizue dashes from her dorm room and down the front steps of the Kawasaki City College of Nursing that she was attending.

"I –nothing." A cold silence falls between the friends. Mizue had known who he wanted to rush to see if **SHE** needed him. Ryo was such a lunkhead if he had any thought that that lovesick girl would turn from her true love to lean on his shoulder instead.

"Big lunkhead." She murders under her breath.

"What?" Tsuchiura thought he had heard –

"Nothing." Mizue's sharp tongue and eyes mimicking him told Tsuchiura that something was up.

*He didn't even ask why I'm here at a nursing school. Does he even care about me and my life? Or only hers?*

Mizue was trying not to be bitter. She had decided to ignore his ignorance, at least for this week's trip to the continent. In fact, she had almost opted to back out many times, but her concern for Hino was true, and her loyalty to their "Girl Power" group's righteous cause intense. There was Ayano-chan to consider as well, though honest Mizue didn't deem either of their careless young men worth the gunpowder to blow them to -- not worthy of either of their deep devoted hearts in love anyway.

*But who am I to speak of love? It's not like I've got a good track record on the subject myself.* Mizue knew that Tsuchiura Ryotaro now only thought of her as a friend. But still, every now and then she thought... *maybe... just maybe..*

"Let's go, Ryo." Mizue pointedly picks up her own modest suitcase and loads it into the taxi that Tsuchiura had kept waiting for her.

Sighing himself at not understanding girls sometimes, he gets in behind her and tells the driver: "Tokyo International Airport, please."

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Shouji Megumi loved the freeing feeling of wind blowing wildly through her hair. She never had known how exhilarating, how exciting it was to be on the back of a motorcycle, feeling the thrill of racing at death-defying speeds and doing crazy stunts like wheelies! Shouji's breath was long past taken away. And she was loving every second of it!

Her delicate pianist's fingers were tightly clinging to the chest of a young man—another feat in itself—Shouji Megumi wouldn't have seen herself doing in a million years before this. She buried her face in the thick scent of the trendy youth's

wine-colored hair and clings to his furry jacket collar for warmth on this cool brisk November morning ride. Her arms were wrapped tightly around him, and she even dares to lean into his back as they zip down the highway together.

*Etou Kiriya feels so warm*, she thinks proudly. Shouji couldn't help it when her mind wandered to such forbidden subjects. But when seated on the back of a fire red motorcycle going at well over the speed limit, there wasn't much else to occupy a young girl's mind. It felt allowed here on the open road that the violinist and his accompanist often traveled.

Ever since he first touched her hand with his warm—almost hot one—Shouji knew. She had become more and more obsessed with Kiriya. He fascinated her in every way, from the plainspoken not overly polite way he addressed everyone, to the open cool way he spoke almost disrespectfully to adults, to the fact he been living in America! Shouji thought everything about him was exciting. Especially when he called her name.

"Megumi-san."

*He's saying my name again!* She was thrilled each time anew.

"Yes, Etou-san?" She wasn't bold as he was—yet—as she continues to hug his back and cling to his warm, warm chest.

"We're here," he announces, taking his foot off the accelerator. The crooked smile tossed over his shoulder made even his coolness warm.

"So you can let go now." Succinctly spoken, Shouji immediately removes her enjoying arms from his body with a start, as Etou steps off his bike and pulls down his only protective headgear—his goggles—from his eyes.

"Come on." After unstrapping her suitcase from the cycle and retrieving his own small satchel tied to the back seat, Etou extends her his one free hand to help her from the motor bike. Shouji revels once again, how deliciously warm his fingers in his palm were as they touch his accompanist's adoring ones.

*Way warmer than Tsukimori Len's probably ever were.*

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There were 13 sets of brandy-new passports in her happy hands (courtesy of 'Councilor Kaji Junior' - *thank you very much-- it really is who you know in this world!* Amou thinks jadedly), but she was far too giddy to grumble today about the state of the nation's politics. She'd leave that for another day.

"I do hope we have no late stragglers. Before this—ahem—excursion begins," Kira attempts to make pleasant conversation (believe me, this was pleasant for him) but only if Mari cared—or dared—to respond.

"I'm certain the students will raise themselves to your standard, Director Kira," she smiles shyly, feminine and fluttering her eyelashes at him.

"—*Ahem*—yes," here was still embarrassed to admit a relationship with anyone. *But I suppose if it had to be anyone...*

His lips almost curl into a smile. But in the corner of his well-trained eye, Kira Akihiko spots that annoying girl (*she's almost as bad as that Fata!*) trying to covertly take a picture still of Tsuzuki-san and himself for her school paper's gossip column, no doubt!

"Amou-san?" Kira says, with a threatening look at her.

"Yes, Director?" Amou innocently answers, her hidden camera not being subdued—just yet.

"I'm on very good terms with the director of the Kanagawa University you attend."

A not-so-veiled threat.

Amou Nami feels the oppression of her journalist's freedom being trampled upon, her pride injured in the knowledge that she must back down, though. There was too much riding on

keeping the Seiso director happy and pliable to the requests and needs on this trip.

So, with a pasted smile, Amou turns a 180°, pulling out her camera. She openly takes a shot of a boy who was blissfully unaware of the world spinning around the interior of the limousine he and his sweet little girlfriend were cuddling together within. Amou clicks a still of the scene. The bright flashing light awakens Shimizu Keiichi, from his slumbering peaceful position atop Fuyuumi Shoko's uncomplaining lap.

"Oh." Shimizu's hair was a curly mess as he sits up from being fainted over onto Shoko's lap at the beginning of this limousine journey. Shimizu was not known to be an early riser, but it wasn't from laziness—rather from his long hours at night spent practicing, honing his skills, and it left Shimizu's human body tired, where the angelic spirit was never exhausted. But nonetheless, he always seemed to be in a blissful mood as he was smiling sleepily out at them all. Mari returns the smile from the seat directly across from him, and even stern Kira Akihiko can't deny the ethereal features with a satisfied grin.

"I was having a nice dream." he begins to speak in that slow, plodding way. "We were driving to the station in a car. Yes, it was this car," Shimizu glances around as it just now noticing he was in a moving vehicle, "and Kira-senpai and Tsuzuki-san and Amou-san and Shoko-san were all here with me."

"Yes, Shimizu-kun, we're all here with you." Mari smiles patronizingly, knowing the boy well.

"And so was Lili." He finishes his sentence, causing Kira to frown at the name. He then involuntarily glances around the limo for the despicable creature.

*No. The boy must just be half asleep and fantasizing,* Kira thinks, certain that that blasted fairy was still safely inside the school grounds, where Kira left it. Lili was even waving goodbye wildly at him, wishing “*A safe and fruitful journey*

*blessed with much music!*" But Kira ignored the foolishness then, and had a really bad feeling about it now.

***POOF!!***

"Now your journey will be blessed! Because I am going with you, Kira Akihiko! Hee hee hee! Ha ha ha hee hee!"

"Lili!!" On the other hand, Fuyuumi and Shimizu both were glad to see the fairy and here he was, along with them on their trip.

"Where!? Where?!" Amou twists her lip at being the only one in the car not able to see the magical sprite. At least not yet.

"Can't you see him? I told you Lili came, too. Just like in my dream." Shimizu says pleasantly, even as Kira hangs his shaking head into his hands.

*I give up on any semblance of order or sanity now that that **thing** is to be along for the ride. The entire ride. Why me? Kira feels Mari's hand pat his gently, sympathetically. At least you're going to be here, Mari. Kira's eyes give her a grateful smile back.*

"Now we can all spread music and love all over Vienna--and then the world! Hee hee hee hee hee hee!" Lili's laughter fills the limousine all the way to the airport.

## Chapter 16

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### "...Of Mice and Men"

"Kaji-kun, I think you missed the turn." He notes turns from the pleasant giddy conversation that Mori seemed intent on continuing. So many subjects had passed between the two girls, that Hino's head was spinning from trying to keep up with Mori Manami's racing tongue.

And it seemed Mori's tongue was in competition with Kaji Aoi's driving. Hino had been a passenger in Kaji's silver shiny Jaguar sports car many times already, since the trio had started school at Ferris/Meiji colleges. Never had he driven like a madman or on a death wish before. More than once today, Hino was startled to a shriek after the high speeding vehicle hit a bump or two all too quickly for any resemblance to a 'comfortable ride'.

"Did I?" Kaji says innocently, though his eyes could not meet the girl squeezed in next to him for fear of losing his cool, which was a very easy thing indeed for sieve-headed Kaji sometimes.

"Yes!" Hino nods emphatically.

"I don't think so." Mori contradicts in a serious tone, shaking her head believably.

"Oh." Hino gives in. After all, Kaji had been driving in these parts for two years now, and if Mori agreed—

"Wait! We're definitely on the wrong road!" Hino panics when she sees the strange sight of a milking cow swishing its tail behind a fence and field that she'd never seen before.

"I don't think so." Kaji says in his most convincing voice, though it was less than Academy award-winning.

"Nope." Mori backs him up with a closed eyes smile right in Hino's face.

"Yes, we are, you two! I saw a cow!" Hino was getting flustered, feeling out flanked on either side as Kaji says something and Mori swears to it.

"You saw....a cow....Hino-san? Ha ha ha. That's funny." Kaji's acting was improving.

"Very funny, Hino-san! You're becoming quite the comedienne!" Mori joins Kaji in the silly chuckling. Hino felt like tearing her hair out about now as the unfamiliar scenery on the long expanse of strange road is added to by billboards for some nearby amusement park's smiling clowns and giraffe cutouts looming down over her.

"Kaji-kun! We never pass that sign with the clowns and animals on the way to Ferris before!" Hino cries out.

"Shortcut." It's his simple clipped reply.

"But—" Hino wonders as he makes a quick turn.

"Shortcut to the shortcut." He looks away, pretending to be fixed on the road. Hino turns to Mori, who just shrugs and smiles at her.

Hino swivels around in her seat to look at that billboard for a mile marker or location sign. Her frustrated eyes instead gaze wonderingly at the mass of suitcases and baggage, accompanied by a warm winter coat or two piled in the backseat.

*So that's why I couldn't sit in the back like usual.* Hino muses, not quite putting two and two together yet.

"Are you planning to go on a trip, Kaji-kun?" Hino asks, cocking her head.

"Trip? Trip?! Trip!?! " Kaji looks to Mori to bail him out, his head empty as the wind blowing through it.

"Oh," Mori's mind races. "You found us out, Hino-san." Mori says with a little sigh. Kaji grits his teeth, shaking his head at her over Hino's in worry of the beans being spilt.

"Kaji-kun, and I..." Mori pauses dramatically as she grasps at straws for thought, as Kaji's stupid mouthing of 'Don't Tell!' over Hino's back and forth head, was not helping one bit.

"Kaji-kun and I..." Mori struggles until a thought pops into her head.

"We're running away together! Just for the weekend." Mori crosses her fingers behind her lying back, hoping that Hino bought the quickly spun tale as Mori gives Kaji, over Hino's head, a raised brow hopeful grin.

"Ohh~hh." Hino says with a low whistle, looking from one reddening face to the other.

"Please don't tell on us! We're on our way to the airport now." Kaji bites his lip for effect with the added corny fib.

"I won't. I think that's just so—so—" the two were hanging on every word ready for a disbelieving rebuke.

"Romantic." Hino finishes with the delirious smile and a girlish dreamy sigh, slumping in her seat at the thought. She was too lost in the fairytale tale to wonder much about where that would leave her, if the lovey-dovey couple abandoned both her and their car for an airplane ride to parts unknown.

"Don't worry, Mori-san, Kaji-kun. I won't breathe a word to anyone!" Hino promises the guilty face couple on each side of her.

"Oh! And I'll take very good care of your Jaguar, too, Kaji-kun. Thanks for thinking so highly of me." Hino puffs up with pride at the trust of the expensive vehicle.

She misinterpreted the reason now that the pair had insisted on picking her up. She thought Kaji intended for her to drive the car back from the airport and keep it while they were gone.

"Umm...Gee...thanks? Heh heh heh heh." Kaji is just able to squeak out. Mori's quick excuse for their reason to travel to the airport, was quite a lot for his little brain to entertain. Kaji blushes from the base of his red neck all the way to the bottom of his red toes.

## Chapter 17

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"Three, Two, One--Take Off!"

"What took you so long, Aoi-san? You just made it,"

Etou Kiriya puts into words (in his oh-so-kind way) what every one of the other Seiso alumni and friends are thinking, as Kaji and Mori race into the terminal gate of the airport. They were huffing and puffing, loaded down with luggage and bags, with viola and violin cases as they had run.

"Where's Hino?" Tsuchiura and Kira both ask simultaneously, giving each other and then Kaji a furrowed angry look.

"Just (*huff*) parking (*puff*) the car in (*huff*) the garage (*puff*)." Kaji points back, dropping the three heavy suitcases to the ground. He falls over, hands to his knees as he struggles for breath.

*What did you put in yours and Hino's when you girls packed for her, Mori-san?*

The three sets of luggage he had to chivalrous volunteer to carry, seemed to get heavier with every successive step. Kaji gave Mori the two light violin cases to carry because the traffic leading up to the airport had slowed them down so badly that the devious pair had to improvise on their feet.

Literally.

Mori wished now, she hadn't opted to wear her dress pumps just yet.

"You made her park your car?" Mari asks incredulously, exchanging a narrowed glance with the Director.

"Hey! She insisted, so we wouldn't be late. She'll be here soon! Aoi-kun's given it his all!" Mori defends her partner in crime, as she rubs his huffing back in support caringly.

"We can see you think so." Amou smiles that swipe under her breath, sharing a look with the others. Miyabi, Shouji, and even Fuyuumi giggle with the giddiness of the day.

"Maybe I should go find her. There's only a few minutes left." Tsuchiura offers, as he checks the clock ticking away overhead.

"No need to. She's here." Kira states, as his sharp eyes catch sight of the redhead, as she uses the escalator and rises to their terminal floor.

"Everyone!? What are you doing—?" Hino Kahoko's confused face at seeing the gathered group and grows startled when she sees Director Kira and Tsuzuki-san there, too.

"Are you here to stop Kaji-kun and Mori-san from running off together? Please, I'm begging you, just leave them be!" The kind friend who was Hino Kahoko would stand up through thick and thin for her friends' happiness.

Just like they were doing for hers.

"Kaji-kun and Mori-san are running off together?" Hihara scratches his head, entirely perplexed, as more than a few giggles twitter around.

"No, Hino-san, we're not here to stop *them*." Kira has no idea what has transpired between here and there and Kaji and Mori.

*I suppose they're both adults now. Not in my school anymore anyway, so it's out of my hands.*

"We're here," Kira clears his throat, "to invite you to be a part of Seiso Academy's Special Graduation Ceremony Concert." Kira answers in his most pompous voice.

"Oh! But I'm not really prepared—" Hino begins to already back out. She did not feel up to playing much nowadays,

publicly, because it was too painful a reminder to her of his absence--especially faced with standing on a stage alone with her inspiration, her musical heart, so very far away. Hino just knew she couldn't stand on a stage again without Tsukimori Len.

"Please let me finish." Kira states seriously. He waits for her to nod.

"—To be held next weekend at the Vienna State Opera House, in Vienna, Austria, of course."

"...Vienna...?" Hino's voice was just above a whisper of a whisper. It was as if Kira had just handed her the world—and she didn't know what to do with it, so exquisitely happy was she to hear the words, that she couldn't believe them.

"I must be dreaming." She murmurs beneath the flowing tears of joy, streaming down her cheeks.

"You'll be, if we don't get on that plane—right now." Blinking back her own tears, Amou was indomitable. Her spirit about now, was ready to fly alongside the plane!

"Let's take to the sky, gang! Vienna awaits!!" She cries out the call, her eager troop on her happy heels as she links Hino's stunned arm in one of hers, and just as tearful Fuyuumi's arm in the other. The trio marches down to the terminal arm in arm with the rest of the group close behind. Miyabi throws her arm around a frightened stiff Ayano, Shouji and Etou on either side of an already sleepy Sheepy, propping him up as they walk along, as Mizue aides Mori with the violin cases.

Tsuchiura and Hihara come to Kaji's rescue in taking the last-minute suitcases through the airplane's quick-check security. But as Hihara lifts the especially heavy suitcase of Hino's, that Kaji had superhumanly brought in, the 19-year-old stops to pause in thought, the wheels of his brain turning.

"Are you and Mori-chan really running off together?" The light green haired OB turns to the red-faced political intern with curiosity. But he was in all seriousness.

"Hihara-senpai!!!" is all the frazzled young man can reply. Kaji grabs his share of the cases and hurries towards the checking station liftgate, his ears a decided shade of crimson.

"What'd I sa -- Ouchy!?! Not again, Tsuchiura!!!"

*WHOMP!!!*

Hihara's poor head gets another whack to add to the still sore spots from last week.

"Come on, Hihara-senpai. You just better watch your mouth in Vienna. I hear they put people in jail for slander real easy." Tsuchiura teases his older senpai.

"Really?"

>*Gulp*<

Hihara believes, in his innocence, every word of his reliable friend as he dashes off to catch up with Kaji. Overhearing the exchange, Kira and Mari smile.

"Kids these days." That one phrase said it all.

## Chapter 18

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### "The Arrival"

All eyes were upon the stunning young man as he walks elegantly into the airport terminal. His deportment was as striking as his graceful gait was polished. Every female eye landed upon him with interested admiration, causing every male eye to glare at the newcomer with jealous disdain.

There was something decidedly beautiful and yet enigmatic left in the atmosphere whenever he went past. The long indigo purplish strands of his hair flowed behind him like a champion racehorse's mane. For indeed, this cultured, well bred youth cut a refined yet chic air through the airport as he makes his way through, turning heads in his stylish wake.

Yunoki Azuma pauses his polished step to gaze out the terminal window. He smiles when he sees the incoming craft through the cloudless blue sky, his heretofore blasé attitude adjusting ever so slightly.

*Right on time, Kahoko.*

The cultivated smile curled into a wicked whimper as the smirking eyes envision his old victim—ahem—his old classmate and all the fun they used to have together. At least he had some mercenary fun then, perhaps at Hino Kahoko's expense.

*But at least that was fun. Not like the dull life plotted out for me now.*

Yunoki's posh smile never falters for a second, even as his tortured mind -- at times cracked -- bitterly regretted his highbred, yet hollow 19 years of life.

*What a waste of time.* His sourly circulating thoughts of dull despair at his situation were not to be suspected for a moment by the swooning check girls and ogling stewardesses he had been oh-so-cordially conversing with while awaiting the plane's landing.

When the automated announcement comes over the loudspeaker of the flight's arrival at Gate 11, poised and polished Yunoki Azuma carelessly tosses his hair back over shoulder. He strides in his elegant way as he places his most genteel smile on his face to greet the visitors with the expected dull niceties.

*How dull this is going to be.* Yunoki's mind resigns itself to play the part well.

When Ousaki-senpai's phone call came in, asking the rich young man to join him in Austria for his vacation, due to a 'mission of the heart' or some such nonsense, concerning Hino Kahoko, Yunoki had agreed. At that very moment he was in a "slump."

Not the musical or scholastic or artistic kind, but more applying to the soulful branch. He had hoped for adventure in America, for something wild and exciting to happen to him there, not just more of the boring plodding day-to-day he was destined to be chained to forever.

So when Ousaki called, Yunoki considered it. At least it was something different.

*Why not? I have nothing else to do. It's so dull here, I might as well go and play with Kahoko.*

The evil side of Yunoki didn't mean with his flute either.

So when Yunoki Azuma turns his conciliatory gaze upon the incoming group, coming towards him from the distance, his

dulled, glazed over eyes strain in disbelief of what they were seeing.

And it wasn't, for once, the bright red headed Hino Kahoko to whom all his attention was once lavished upon, as his warped mind believed it would be again.

No, far from it, Yunoki gave Hino but an incidental glance.

No, it was the gorgeous creature some paces to the left of her, who stood out from the crowd, in his book.

*In any man's book.*

Smarmy, swanky, sinister Yunoki Azuma's dark side, for the first time in his entire life, was totally blown away by someone else.

For there, in all her stiletto-heeled, flaming hot red mini dress, laced black thigh-highs, and diamond dripping anklet glory, was the young 'lady' that Yunoki almost didn't recognize, confidently striding alongside the other Seiso familiar faces.

She glistened at him like a rare precious gemstone, Yunoki quite feeling his breath taken away as the overly made-up vixen saunters up to him when he stops still in his tracks upon realization of just who she is.

The rest of the group part ways and drop back to give this reunited pair some breathing room. And boy, did Yunoki need it. He didn't even notice that any of the others were present.

"Ayano-chan" Yunoki swallows hard, as he eyes up and down and in awestruck surprise, trace and retrace her lines, before unseen and undreamt of. The quiet, dutiful girl had only worn full traditional kimono dress since as long as he could remember. This certainly was a change, Yunoki's disbelieving eyes were almost bugging out in his ears were just about to join it.

"Do you miss me now, Azuma?"

That's it. End of sentence. No obligatory over the top respectful '-sama' at the end of the high-class man's name. No lowered eyes either, as Ayano—as per training—meets her fiancé's gaze with coy heavy-lidded eyelashes and dark shadowed eyes. The saucy words and catty smile on her face were well worth the weeklong practice sessions it took to drill these essential habits into her unobserved soul. At first reluctant to even consider changing her pure, reserved, subservient image, Ayano took some convincing by the other seven girls to get her to agree to this total makeover. It was only when, after all were privy (by Miyabi) to the Rat aka Yunoki's latest e-mail, that they all had come up with this plan (in between the Hino x Tsukimori one).

Amou and Mori and Mizue and Miyabi and Shouji, and even Fuyuumi in her quiet way, had gone to work on Ayano.

*Yunoki longed for excitement? They would give it to him on a golden platter!*

And boy did it pay off! Amou and Mori nudge one another as they note how classy, cultivated Yunoki Azuma was doing all the drooling as he takes his betrothed in with new, astonished eyes.

"Yes," Yunoki recovers finally, taking in a deep breath as he lifts Ayano's long painted fingernailed hand and bestows a kiss upon its engagement ring finger as a symbol to the once shy, dull, unassuming, boring girl transformed into a delightfully exciting and changeable woman, who could be a shrinking flower one second and wild blossom the next.

"I do believe I can now." Yunoki see, for the first time in Ayano's once glassy doll eyes, a light that he found to deliciously thrilling.

*A doll that I can change and adapt to suit me? How unexpected. How exciting! What other mysteries you hold for me, Takeshina Ayano? I wonder...*

And just as surprisingly, Yunoki places a soft gentlemanly kiss on Ayano's moist red lips, looking quite pleased when they part.

*Way to go, Ayano-chan!*

The girls exchange fist bumps of triumph behind their own guy's heads. Miyabi smiles most of all, she loving her brother so that she wanted him to be happy with Ayano at last.

"Yunoki?" His voice breaking, Hihara had, as instructed by the other girls, patiently waited his turn to greet his best friend, whom he too hadn't seen for going on two years. But seeing Yunoki kissing Ayano! *In public too!* Hihara was shocked at Yunoki's ever-changing behavior, but he had told himself to get used to it.

*As long as you don't want to change best friends, too.* Hihara thinks with a worried brow, but his anxieties were appeased when Yunoki's intrigued eyes on Ayano turn to Hihara with that same friendly bond that they two had always shared.

"Hihara, I've been hearing good things about you from Miyabi." Yunoki smiles. Hihara not quite sure what that knowing look passed between the siblings meant as Miyabi takes this chance to dash up and snuggle her brother's spare arm, the one that Ayano wasn't a prisoner of.

"Oh, yeah? Hee, heh, hee." Hihara chuckles nervously. He had watched movies and had heard enough stories from other guys his age about 'terrible older brothers' when it came to younger little sisters and older age boyfriends.

*Poor fellow. You'll be one of my insane family soon enough.* Yunoki chuckles generously to himself at how well Hihara and Miyabi fit together. He watches the two go to help claim luggage from the rack, Yunoki already pitying his best friend. The trouble that was sure to follow if he wanted into his loony family, if Yunoki knew his grandmother well enough.

And by now, Yunoki Azuma knew his grandmother very well indeed.

*Poor Hihara.* But Miyabi's big smile from ear to ear was visible from where Yunoki was standing, as Hihara pretends to let her

help him carry some luggage (like his 'very heavy' trumpet case or a 'great big' violin one or two). Miyabi even has a giggle fit on him, when she accidentally pops the trumpet case open, extra reeds and papers and spit cleaners spill all over the Viennese airport terminal floor. And when Hihara giggles right along with her, he never angered at all for her dropping his precious friend, as they scurry after flying papers and musical notes, Yunoki smiles as well.

*Lucky Hihara.* For Yunoki truly was fond of his little sister deep down in his chaos tortured soul.

"Shall I collect your luggage, Ayano?" he directs the polite question at the dark beauty on his arm, and she nods back at him shyly.

"There's my girl." He whispers in her ear huskily, Ayano's eyes pop out as Yunoki lets his hand slide across her bareback rather luxuriously, before his wandering fingers depart. He leaves to retrieve her luggage from the conveyor it was spinning down from, beside where Hihara and Miyabi were. Alongside them was a comically sleepy-on-his-feet Shimizu Keiichi, attempting to catch his and Fuyuumi's luggage handles and so many times missing as they circulate and are bumped by other quicker passengers. Shimizu only manages to take hold of the wrong one every time it seemed. He had to apologize to many an astonished traveler before he actually lays hands on the correct ones. But they were too heavy at that for him to pick up, though he tried. But that's what big strong friends like Tsuchiura Ryotaro were for. Tsuchiura did his part and more for the group, picking up and loading onto the pushcart most of the girls' (and Shimizu's) luggage, not to mention more than a few instrument cases.

"Wow! You're so good at this, Tsuchiura-kun! Maybe you should take this up for a living!" Airhead Kaji Aoi thought airport travel was a very exciting thing, indeed. Tsuchiura gives the golden haired lad an odd look.

"I think I have something higher than this in mind." Tsuchiura smirks inwardly as a faraway look comes to his eye. Bringing himself back to reality, Tsuchiura smacks his hands together.

"There! That's all of them!" Only slightly jetlagged, Tsuchiura rubs back this neck after he, Kaji and Hihara finish loading all the luggage into the two carts they had commandeered. Tsuchiura glances around at the gathered group to see Hino still clinging tightly to her own violin case, as if it were both beloved friend and precious treasure--and if she let go of it, she might just awaken and the dream would end.

For Hino, that's how this surprise trip felt. The magical, wondrous dream she had experienced every night since he left. This was just like every night all over again. She would find herself whisked away through the skies to the mystical land of Vienna, where her handsome Prince Charming awaited her, beckoning to her with the beautiful strains of his violin playing, calling out to her of his loneliness, of his sadness, of his love....

So Hino hugs the precious envoy of her happiness to her throbbing chest. His music was just waiting around the bend for her, and her beloved violin could sing again.

*Just a little more, then you can live again...love again...* Hino whispers to her violin as if it were a living creature who, only with the power of their love, could its golden cord truly ever gleam again.

Watching her daydream, Tsuchiura smiles, not uttering a word as he pushes one cart towards the exit, where Yunoki had already arranged for stretch limousines to take them to the posh hotel he had already selected and paid for. Looking to the sky above, Hino is beside herself with anticipation as they all load into the limos, excitedly, one by one, two by two.

And Hino Kahoko would soon step a solid foot onto the fabled city of the Vienna of her dreams...

## Chapter 19

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### “Vienna, Fabled City of My Dreams”

A light sprinkle of snow begins to fall on the city of Vienna as if in a snow globe dream. So, that is how the wondrous world outside the window of the Grand Hotel Wien (where Yunoki had arranged for an entourage of limos to bring the incoming group to) seem to Hino Kahoko. It was as if she was replaying a scene from her dreams. From the grand ornate lobby on a gold leaf hallways and posh elevators and classically carved details in the rooms, Hino had never been in such the lap of luxury before. From the brocade curtains to the embroidered French chairs, from the gold gilt furniture and exquisitely canopy beds, her hotel room was nothing short of fit for a queen. And you should just see the bathroom!

But wandering around the ritzy hotel room aimlessly, Hino would rather forgo all its beauty. She landed in the window gazing outside at the light dusting of snow fall, wishing for something beyond the elegant windowpanes. The Grand Hotel Wein may indeed have been on inspiring, but it seemed not to have that effect on either girls in this room. For Amou Nami was too busy texting and e-mailing, building schedules and making acquaintances she would need here in this city. Amou had seen it all before, from her journalism crash course that had taken her halfway around the world to stay at many a fine hotel and attempt to hobnob and interview a diplomat or member of royalty or two. Amou had purposely assigned herself to be Hino's roommate, even though Yunoki Azuma (*Mr. Money bags!*) had booked each of them a separate room. But Amou wanted to be close to the redheaded girl, maybe serve as a confidant, because any woman having a relationship, especially

with a guy like Tsukimori Len, needed someone to talk to you—someone to share secrets with, someone to—

*Huh?*

"Are you there, Hino-san?" Amou pauses kicking her legs in the air on the ornate bed to glance up. The stunned redhead hadn't been much for conversation since they arrived, the glossy, dreamy look in her eyes told perceptive Amou that. So Amou Nami had left a quiet dumbstruck Hino Kahoko to collect her thoughts and dreams while she herself was busy planning the next week they were to spend here, abroad, on her various mobile devices. That was when she was sure she heard a door close somewhere in the spacious room, despite the hotel's swanky thick carpeting. Amou glances around the room furiously, spying that nothing was missing from their still unpacked suitcases.

Nothing missing but the beloved violin case, and Hino's winter coat.

"Ooh! She doesn't let the grass grow! Girl on the move!" Amou's eyes light up, with the fascinating story.

"Shinobu!" Amou cries out her accomplice's name, her cell phone already on redial before it even left its place in the bed.

Each snowflake that tickled her nose with its cold fingers told Hino Kahoko she was really alive. Truly alive and not just in the dream she's dreamed so many times. Nearly every night for two years, they would go just like this. She would be walking down an unfamiliar street, taking its new sounds, new scents, new atmosphere like she was walking on thin air. Or was she floating? Hino wasn't even sure if her feet were touching the ground anymore. Only the crunching of autumn leaves beneath her feet and the whisper of the cool wind in her hair was proof of the fact, as gold and silver rings dangling at her throat tinkle in her ears.

Facts? Reality? Did either mundane creature even exist in the city of Vienna? Or could dreams and fantasies be part of this

world? Part of her world? Hino was only now beginning to believe, as she floats down the fabled city of the Vienna's avenues in the direction her heart knew she should go.

Because he would be there, just as he was in every night's fantasy, standing as tall and straight as ever, all traces of sadness on his beautiful face immediately erasing the moment she arrives. When across the snowy distance, their ears would hear each other's heartfelt music, and know it belonged to the Other..

And there he was, the scene of her fantasies perfectly played, as if her dreams were reflected by the mirror angels above call 'the Sky' watching over them both, as surely as it was already written down in the book of life He scripted long ago for two destined souls like Hino Kahoko and Tsukimori Len to meet once again...

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Just a few minutes ago, Tsukimori had felt possessed to play 'Vienna, City of My Dreams' on his lonely violin as he let his music echo through the empty park. Something had called him to this particular section of the park across the Avenue this particular afternoon at this particular time. It wasn't his usual hour for lonely stroll, but something caused him to bring the report that he'd generally stew over in his solitary room indoors, to instead sit on the bench and stew over it outdoors. Dressed warmly in a navy blue turtleneck and trenchcoat, Tsukimori couldn't keep the wind from scattering his mind to the other side of the world. Today, he couldn't focus on filling out the rest of his personal thesis on Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy.' After scribbling a phrase or two on the page, Tsukimori gives up on it. He turns the mostly blank page into a paper airplane and wistfully tosses it into the air to see if at least the wind could make some sense of his jumbled thoughts of mind and heart today. That's when the paper airplane flies down to the feet of a young girl.

Soul meets soul. Eyes meet eyes. Tsukimori wasn't sure at first, if he was seeing a mirage, a dazzling Heaven-sent mirage that

was playing tricks on his hungry eyes in between the falling sparkle of snowflakes.

"Kahoko....?" He gasps. Joyfully pleased, excitedly ecstatic, blissfully happy, there weren't enough words in entire language in the entire world to express what Tsukimori Len was feeling at this moment. Not that he'd use any of them anyway, being the quiet stoic type he was, even as the ethereal goddess of his dreams was standing not 20 yards away.

She starts to tremble. Hino Kahoko had lived this moment, played the scene in her head so many times, but still, she was at a loss for movement, so in fear it would all shatter into broken glass shards and disappear before she could catch hold of any of them. Hino collects her wits and bends down to pick up the paper airplane at her feet. She stiffly unfolds it with fumbling fingers, blindly reading the two sentences written upon its stark white parchment:

*'My thesis on 'Ode to Joy'*

*What joy is there in music without love?*

*Without my Kahoko...*

And that was it. The fine familiar penmanship was unmistakably that of the darkly dressed man who stood in the park before her.

That question. Her name lightly scrawled beneath.

Hino's eyes glisten with tears, pure emotion carrying their immobile legs to each other. She crosses the cool crisp Vienna Park expanse in a matter of flowing seconds that seemed an eternity away until she was racing with fairy's wings upon her feet straight into his waiting arms.



Tsukimori Len gazes down upon the teary eyed girl in his arms with a smile, seeing the well-kept necklace he had placed there, still about her graceful neck.

*She's still waiting for me....*

He closes his eyes with the grateful feeling of knowing that his love had appeared as an angel would, just when he was calling for her, when he needed her most. They were two parts of one soul, calling out to one another and reuniting to answer Love's call....

*Never, never will I let you go again.* Len pledges silently as gentle wisps of air swirl around the pair eternally bonded by their heart's musical golden cord of love...

And Tsukimori Len discovers in this moment what his 'Ode to Joy' truly means....

## Chapter 20

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### “Breaking News Story”

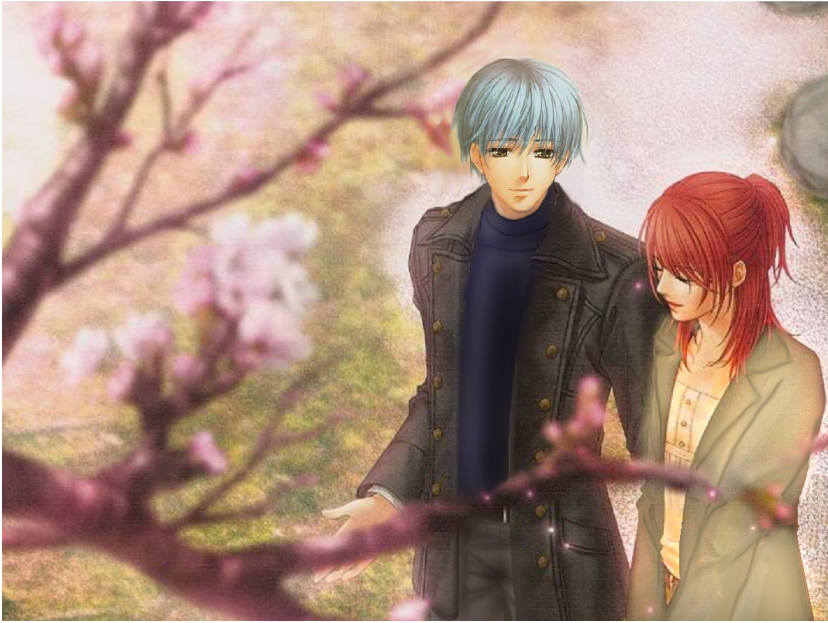
"Ousaki-senpai! Have you seen her yet? I couldn't keep up with her!" Amou Nami comes barreling down the same Avenue that Hino Kahoko had ethereally floated on invisible wings through. Hino had somehow moved faster than the agile reporter on high-speed heels could achieve.

"Yes, I have, Amou-san. It's so nice to see you." Ousaki Shinobu tips his beret to the inquiring mind with his ever present pleasant smile. But right now it was even more pleasant than usual. He looked quite pleased with himself as he points across the street from the House Doebing that he and Amou were standing in front of.

"I think everything is going to be just fine from now on." He comments, adjusting his glasses at the scene, pretending to wipe snowflakes from their embarrassed cloudiness.

"Yes, I'd have to agree." Amou smiles a devilish smile, sad she had missed the poignant moment, but glad that it finally happened. Both she and Ousaki blush at the romantic scene of Hino and Tsukimori just breaking a rather passionate kiss.

Tsukimori places the smiling red-cheeked girl's arm in the crook of his as they walk through the autumn's late apple blossoms, blowing on a soft breeze, eyes entranced in one another's.



A glow of pure happiness seems to befall the entire city as the cloudy gray day of just a few minutes before is replaced by a bounty of sunshine, whose rays glorify each iridescent snowflake that falls upon the park. Ousaki and Amou exchange a triumphant look as church bells ring out throughout Vienna.

"So," Ousaki smiles at her sweetly. "Would you care for a stroll down the avenue, Miss? It appears that all your hard work is paying off, and you deserve some down time of your own." Ousaki takes Amou's hand in his with a victorious squeeze, as if to survey their handiwork. Tsukimori and Hino were lost in each other's eyes as they walk arm in arm through the Vienna park beyond the Ringstrasse.

"**Our** hard work, Shinobu." Amou smiles, squeezing his warm palm right back.

"Oh," Amou suddenly recalls, "it was ingenious of you to call in from America our resident wealthy powerhouse. Yunoki Azuma has done us proud. You should see the hotel rooms he's booked for us." Amou was one to give credit where credit was due.

"I knew I could leave those details to his able refined hands. It's right up his league." Ousaki was sure he could count on their old friend despite the physical distance between them.

"And what of 'Mission B'? Have we done Yunoki proud?" Ousaki raises his glasses, quickly with a sheepish grin.

"And how! You should see Ayano-chan! My girls certainly know how to transform a tame, shy demure kitten into a ferocious sexy tigress in record training time, if I do say so myself." Amou's excited eyes were a glow like a mischievous lovely little devil.

"A-hem, yes. Oh, dear." Mild Ousaki was chuckling despite himself, though a bit ashamed of this particular end of the plan. He was not so certain, if they, for all their good intentions, really did well by poor Ayano from the raucous sound of it all.

"I suppose I have been a bit less than completely open and honest with Tsukimori's questions myself." Wanting to get his own sins lifted from his chest, Ousaki confesses to his partner in crime. They laugh together beneath the umbrella of swaying autumn trees that lined the avenues of the Ringstrasse Ousaki was maneuvering them down.

"All for the cause?" Amou tries to comfort him with a smile. She sensed that tender hearted Ousaki Shinobu wasn't born to be a schemer, a plotter -- like she was.

*It's all part and parcel of being a great investigative news woman!*

"All for the cause." Ousaki adds his smile to Amou's bright eyes.

"Well, fellow schemer, care to cleanse your soul for a while?" Ousaki points Amou's gaze to the place where he goes whenever in need of his own soul-searching in Vienna. Amou just notices now that her clever scheming fellow had just happened to take her in the direction of the beautiful Vienna Roman Catholic Cathedral.

"Lord knows I could use His help." Amou smiles to him with a nod as the pair walk into the ornately decorative Lord's House, that was always open to all who need His Guidance, His Grace, His Love.

*That's why He gave me you, Shinobu.* Amou Nami thinks, counting herself a lucky girl to have the influence of such a good, kind man as Ousaki Shinobu in her life. She smiles as he lets go of her hand to aid in elderly man through the door and get him situated in his pew. And then he escorts another even older woman to the front altar with rosary beads in her prayerful, grateful hands.

*Always thinking of others.* Amou proudly smiles, when Ousaki returns down the aisle to where she had secured seats in the pew for them both. When he squeezes in beside her, she takes his warm hand in her cold one and they smile to one another in understanding as the service begins. A strange warm glow comes to Amou's cheeks as Ousaki's mellow voice sings along with the congregation the church's opening hymn.

*Breaking news! Amou Nami! You're in love!*

The reporter girl smiles to herself, she having the suspicion before, but now, face-to-face, she was sure of it. As Ousaki's smooth velvety voice flows along with the melody beside her, Amou's feelings ring throughout the vast cathedral hall as well.

Unnoticed by either of the two budding lovebirds, another couple, with hues of azure and crimson, find their way into this place of solace. Holding hands, in silent gratitude, they both give thanks to He who had, in His infinite wisdom, brought them back to each other.

# Chapter 20

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## “Jet Lag”

It was daytime when they left Japan, and it was daytime when they arrived in Vienna, but once the excitement of the foreign city and its elaborate luxurious hotel wore off, jet lag set in.

Shimizu actually had to be carted in along with the rest of the baggage. The time delay hit the already continually tired boy hard, and Shimizu was already fast asleep again from the limo ride before Hihara and Tsuchiura even finished putting him down on the great big bed in his Grand Hotel Wien room. After they dumped him, the two exhausted souls left to settle their own luggage and affairs.

"The sixth floor, please." Kaji Aoi didn't seem a bit tired as he smoothly directs the elevator lift attendant to the visiting group's intended floor. Most of the girls were eager to get to their rooms and they enter the gold gilt elevator going up with him. Awed by the hotel's front lobby ambience, they would all have been ranging from nervous to frightened, if not for Kaji Aoi's experience in hotel travel prowess.

Kaji was constantly chattering all the way up the elevator as if he was an old pro at staying in hotels. That would be because he was, ever since he was a small boy, as the son of a national politician, he'd seen his share of hotel rooms and public arenas filled with strangers. Come to think of it, Kaji rather enjoyed new society, new scenery, and new acquaintances.

"...That meant making new friends like the nice porters, to hear new stories from the helpful maids, or hear new ideas from the friendly attendants." Kaji gives the foreign teenaged boy with

the elevator cap, his broadest, most winning of smiles, receiving one in return, despite the language barrier.

"So I've never minded Dad's political trips when he let me come with them. The older folks are always real nice to me. I'd get extra desserts or candy or toys sent up to the room from people I never even heard of before! It was a kid's dream!" A delirious smile on his face, Kaji had been explaining to Fuyuumi, Mizue, Mori and Shoji his blessed childhood as he casually leaned against the elevator door. The attendant boy didn't want to spoil his new friend's fun with silly things like hotel rules, so he said nothing. Kaji's effervescent attitude about life had that effect on people around him. The tired girls couldn't help but smile at his entertainment.

The elevator climbs up the flights quickly, Kaji standing on his own two just seconds before the elevator bell rang and the door slid open, giving the attendant a generous tip (in Euros!), Kaji turns to his female audience with a suave smile.

"Show-off." Mori smiles flirtatiously, fanning Kaji's chin with a brush of her room's card passkey.

"Good night." Fuyuumi waves to Mizue and Shouji as all three give a grateful nod to their escort. The latter two use their passkey and quietly enter their room.

"Which room did you say was Shimizu-kun's and mine, Fuyuumi-san?" Kaji Aoi's boisterous voice could be heard clear across the sixth floor hallway. It was soon followed by a tiny squeak out of a girl who felt quite overwhelmed by this entire ordeal if it had not been for her friends, even if some were boys.

"R-Room 608." Fuyuumi answers softly almost in a whisper, scooting back to him, too frightened out of her mind to call across the fancy foreign hotel hallway like he did.

"Oh, right across the hall from you guys!" A great big smile turns Kaji's whole face into pure sunshine as he walks Fuyuumi back to her door where Mori was waiting. Mori clears her throat, giving the deliriously happy boy, pausing in their doorway, a coy look when Fuyuumi innocently interrupts.

"Maybe I should,... um..." Fuyuumi looks down at the precious cargo in her hands, calling Kaji and Mori's flirtatious advances to a screeching halt.

"Oh, yeah, Mori—I mean—Fuyuumi-san!" Kaji transforms from romancer to bumbling fool in the flash of a eye. He stutteringly bids a chuckling Mori 'Goodnight' and escorts Fuyuumi and her cargo to his joint room across the hall. He fumbles with his passkey under Mori's alluring gaze, despite his boasts of hotel savvy, until the teen was a shade of beet red, hot under the collar, so to speak.

"Please come in, Fuyuumi-san!" Kaji does a full bow (if only to hide his shamed face) after letting himself and the girl into the room.

And there lies Shimizu Keiichi, just as Hihara and Tsuchiura had left him, plopped on the large queen size bed with a pleasant smile on his face, as if he were enjoying a lovely dream.

Feeling quite uncomfortable by herself in the two boys' room, Fuyuumi carefully holds the large cello case that she had been dutifully carrying. She had wanted to deliver the beloved instrument to its owner by a familiar hand, rather than a stranger's, and leave just as quickly.

She goes over to the bed and pauses to just stare at the angelic beauty of the sleepy boy's soft toned features. Sure, Fuyuumi had seen Shimizu's slumbering face many, many times before – that the state Shimizu Keiichi was in more than he was awake

--and yet still, it was just as breathtaking now as it was the first time.

"D-Do you think he's -- he's cold, uncovered like that?" Fuyuumi boldly asks, she worried despite the fact that the blonde angel was still donning his brown fur collared winter coat that the boys had just plopped him wearing on the bed hours earlier. She surveys Shimizu's still slumbering face and the headphones he had continually worn and listened to the entire airplane trip and limo drive to the hotel. The iPod was on repeat and she could faintly make out the music he had recorded of they two playing his newest composition. He had insisted on having it, saying over and over how he wanted 'to hear Shoko's tone color in my head, even when you're not there'.

Fuyuumi smiles at the sweet recollection, still waiting for a response from the awake occupant of this shared hotel room. But Kaji's attention was long gone. He was already busily fixing the satellite TV for his favorites settings. He turns to her from the adjoining front room's copper tan velvet couch he was seated at with a blank face, feeling her stare on the back of his neck.

"Guess you should cover him." Kaji shrugs nonchalantly, turning back to his TV channel's prompt.

"All right." Fuyuumi, even bolder yet, puts down the cello case still clutched in her hands and goes to work. She gingerly tugs first one side of the thick comforter, and then the other corner, proving only to knock off a pillow or two when she finds it not pulling loose from under even Shimizu's light body weight. Pausing, she then decides to try to pull the bottom down solidly. But try as she might, with all her small strength, Fuyuumi only succeeds in nudging Shimizu down the bed a few inches. Shimizu doesn't even stir a muscle.

>*Sigh*.<

Fuyuumi was at a loss what to try now. She looks around frantically, catching Kaji's eye.

"Is something wrong, Fuyuumi-san?" He wonders, finally getting his favorite channels inputted and remote ready. (Important guy stuff)

"I—Shimizu-kun—I can't—" Fuyuumi was almost in tears at her inability about now, as she glances from the bed to her small hands to the immovable boy halting her mission, then back to Kaji with a plaintive expression on her face.

"Oh!! How thoughtless of me!" Kaji cries out loudly enough to wake up the dead -- but not a live Shimizu Keiichi after jet lag. Kaji simply goes to the bedside and scoops the sleeping boy up by his armpits, like he was a rag doll.

"There, Fuyuumi-san." Kaji says, straining. "Pull the sheets down now... please."

"Oh!" Fuyuumi scurries around one side then the other, doing her best to pull the covers down enough for Kaji to unceremoniously plop the sleeping beauty back down to the mattress.

"Boy, he's heavy when he's passed out like that." Kaji comments, leaving Fuyuumi to cover Shimizu back up as he returns to his own 'guy stuff', watching who knows what on the TV.

"T-Thank you, Kaji-senpai." Fuyuumi whispers politely, though getting no reply, save for a smiling hand wave, as Kaji was already absorbed in some sci-fi flick flashing across the TV.

Fuyuumi gets to work now, rolling her sleeves up, and she gently tucks the lightly snoring boy in. But even that was proving difficult. Shimizu, in his state of slumber, had turned on his side after Fuyuumi had just untied his shoes, making it very

hard to slide them off. Then, after she struggles to manage that, his one arm knocks the pillow she had just replaced on the bed back to the ground. Pillow returned again, Fuyuumi flutters first the sheet over Shimizu, but whilst going to add the blanket provided, one of Shimizu's feet come kicking out, socked toes exposed again. Back down, she goes to re-cover first one foot and then the other that soon joins its irksome partner's lead.

Both feet finally tucked in completely, Fuyuumi returns the top of the bed. She gently tucks the sheets about the boy's shoulders. But in her ministrations, Fuyuumi can't help but pause to gaze down at his face, his beautiful, peaceful features still having that smile written all over, as if in his dream, all was right with the world.

That's when one of his arms falls out of the sheet Fuyuumi had so diligently placed there. She stands there for a moment, deciding on whether it would be better to just leave it at that.

Shimizu was *mostly* covered. But the sweet young woman couldn't leave the cold Austrian climate to freeze her favorite musician's precious fingers. The ones that made glorious music dance on the strings of his cello.

Fuyuumi Shoko reaches her own musical fingers to take hold of his limp forearm, re-tucking it into the sheet. Feeling successful, she goes over to the other side, copying the same procedure. Her eyes gaze down upon his lovely features and she can't help herself from touching a real live angel.

"Sweet dreams, Keiichi." She whispers, tenderly stroking his forehead's errant curls aside.

"Shoko-san?" Shimizu's eyes slowly flutter open.

"Oh! Shimizu-kun! I am s-so-sorry I woke you up. I was just trying to—" the flustered girl searches for words to cover her embarrassment as his warm fingers lace into her trembling ones.

"It's all right, Shoko. I was just with you in my dreams. We were playing our song. So perfectly...Listen with me..." Lifting one arm of his headphone for her to share, Shimizu's fingers laced with hers gently tug her closer. Fuyuumi complies with his sweet wishes, lying beside him and leaning her head to his, while Shimizu sleepily places the other speaker of the headphone over her ear to hear the music as well. Only at ease when she's with him, Fuyuumi rests her peaceful head upon his warm chest and Shimizu's contented eyes flutter open as his other hand loosely reaches towards Heaven it seemed, with his heart's muse at his ethereal side.



She rests her eyes against his soft pillow chest, not wishing to disturb her beautiful angel's happy dreams but knowing she too could live inside them, where beautiful music played unfettered and unending. Fuyuumi imagines herself part of them now, adrift in his melodious soft golden glow.

Exhausted herself from the long trip, she too drifts to sleep at his peaceful side, their hands still entwined.

Too absorbed in his own affairs, Kaji didn't even notice her presence until later that night. when Mori comes to retrieve her shy missing roommate from the boys' room, and finds her sound asleep beside her boyfriend, their ears and hearts still connected by love's music.