

Secondhand Music

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On the day of the fitting, hope flits in Ava's chest, a frightened sparrow she might stifle or set free. The day unravels languidly from dawn until midmorning, then hurtles toward noon so quickly that Ava must run to catch the subway or risk being late. The doors swish closed behind her, and the creak and clatter of the car on rails drowns out the rest of her thoughts as she's whisked away from Washington Heights, first south, then east.

When she enters the brownstone that houses the prosthetist's office, the bird in Ava's chest returns, larger, pummeling her ribs and lungs. She was this close once before, until the insurance claimed cheaper options on the market and denied her the X390. That those prostheses would require Ava to change her bow hand, to relearn the violin from scratch, was insufficient cause for appeal.

Ava signs the paperwork placed in front of her with barely a glance, accepting whatever risks they suggest with a flick of her pen. Her eyes instead are riveted to the arm on the prosthetist's mahogany desk: sleek and organic without pretending to humanity. Soft curves of muscle spill down its length, matte chrome accentuated with gold, tapering into a slight wrist that bears the company's name. A hint of fingernails carved into the metal crowns the tips of its delicate phalanges.

"I have to remind you that the change won't be easy," the prosthetist says, gesturing Ava to a raised bench. Her right arm pebbles as she removes her cardigan; she detaches her left. It is cool to the touch, the silicon warming beneath her fingers as she holds it in her lap. "The fitting is just the start. The X390 includes a chip that learns and adapts to how you move, which significantly shortens the adjustment period. It also means that it's not designed to pass between individuals. The previous owner had been using it for long enough that it'll have to unlearn her idiosyncrasies as well as pick up yours."

He waits for Ava to nod her understanding, then prepares a needle, large, unwieldy: the microchip, he explains. A bite into the skin of her stump forces a gasp from her lips.

Then: coolness blossoming beneath her new fingers. She can feel the polish, a groove of a scar in the mahogany. She thinks of raising a finger and, across the room, her new arm stirs on the desk, its index finger gently extending.

"How does it feel?" the prosthetist asks.

"Like magic," she breathes. Her life spreads ahead of her like a new horizon.

The prosthetist attaches the arm, tests the fit of the adjusted socket. At his behest, Ava clenches and unclenches her new fist, raises and lowers the arm. While the prosthetist is making

notes, she rests her new fingers on her jeans, her real hand, her sweater. Textures bloom between her fingers. A breath shudders from her lips.

"I have someone for you to meet," he says when he is satisfied. Ava had forgotten that Mrs. Grace DuVerne, the widow of the prosthesis' former owner, had requested the meeting as a condition of the donation. The prosthetist leads Ava out of the office, through the waiting room, to a pale woman clad in black. She rises from her seat, tucking a strand of silver hair behind her ear.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Ava," Mrs. DuVerne says, extending a ring-clad hand. "I'm delighted to have found someone to carry on Natsuki's legacy."

"Thank you for . . . Thank you," Ava says. The gratitude she is expected to perform sticks in her throat like a fishbone, but Mrs. DuVerne does not seem to notice: she gestures Ava outside, pausing in a pool of sunlight on the front steps.

"It's too stuffy in there," she says, drawing her jacket about her; the early April air is brisk, deceptive. "I would love to take you to tea, but today's been beastly."

Ava's search for a response is interrupted by the squeal of brakes down the block, a prolonged honk. A taxi hurtles by. She pulls her coat on.

"May I?" Mrs. DuVerne asks. She gestures toward the prosthetic; the plume of her breath curls into a question. At Ava's nod, she places her fingers on Ava's upturned palm as if tracing a story. Her fingers are cold and soft.

"It's a marvelous construct, isn't it?" Mrs. DuVerne murmurs, her fingers traveling up Ava's hand to brush the cuff of her sweater. "I would love to hear you play, you know," she adds, as if the idea had just come to her.

"Play?"

"I always loved to watch Natsuki play," Mrs. DuVerne says, letting go of Ava's hand. "And I'd like to see your progress."

Ava fishes a MetroCard out of her pocket, buying time for a response. Natsuki Saito's virtuosity had been undiminished by the loss of her arm, her swift return to the stage enabled by the X390. She'd defied predictions of obscurity once the prosthesis' novelty wore off, selling out every concert. But the idea of playing for even an audience of one twists inside Ava like an eel.

"I'd be honored," Ava says. "In a few months. I'm not certain I'll be good enough to do your wife justice any time soon."

"Nonsense," Mrs. DuVerne says. "Just once a month. Perhaps the first Saturday of each?"

Ava doesn't know how to decline; instead, she proposes a date.

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She reaches for her violin the moment she arrives home. When she draws the bow across the strings, the apartment fills with the sound of just one note, an A, rich and round, sinking into her skin, through her muscles, a salve against the tension and loss that she thought might live within her forever. She can almost hear an orchestra tuning around her, feet shuffling, chairs creaking as dozens of bodies prepare to make music as one. The note fades from the air, blanketing her in familiar silence. It is no longer one of absence; it is potential. An empty vessel waiting to be filled.

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That night, she dreams of the accident. The details change each time: the black ice that caused her sister to spin out becomes a blown tire, a frightened deer, another driver, drunk or asleep. Sometimes, it is Ava herself behind the wheel. Sometimes, her sister is alive enough to scream; most times, she is dead and Ava is the one screaming.

She wakes with a whimper. The prosthetic is across the room and powered down, but she feels the ghost of her left arm burning, the one they cut from her as a mangled twist of bones and muscle. She grapples for the painkillers on her bedside table with her right hand, her real hand, the hand that can feel the cool plastic, the ridges of the lid, the soft chap of her lips and the moistness of her tongue as she slips the blue pill into her mouth.

Eventually, she sleeps.

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“Don’t push yourself too hard,” her physical therapist says during her first appointment, looking pointedly at the bags under her eyes. She nods, knowing that there is no such thing. Where she used to practice for four hours a day, she now plays for six, or eight, or sometimes even ten. There is no one to pull her away from the scales and exercises, from the mind-numbing repetition of seeking perfection. Her parents died when she was a teenager; her sister is gone; her musician friends have faded away, frightened by how easy it is to lose their livelihood.

The only company she has is Natsuki: the ghost of a dead woman winding its way through her new fingers as if stirring in recognition at the piece. This *étude* a touch faster than Ava intends, that one a touch slower, the music transformed into a series of uncouth squeaks and dissonant notes. When the arm remembers something, Ava plays that piece for the rest of the day, until she has given the arm a new memory, until she has made it her own.

Aches wind their way unceasingly through her muscles from standing, holding the instrument, moving the bow; they are a comfort, an acknowledgment of her effort as she falls asleep, a nuisance to ignore as she wakes. The pain doesn’t matter: she has the music.

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On the first Saturday of May, at precisely 2:30 P.M., Mrs. DuVerne sweeps into the apartment and requests a glass of water that she does not touch for the rest of the afternoon.

The repertoire is several simple pieces and, though not inspired, it is competent and in control and more than Ava thought she could ever hope to achieve a few months before. She smiles as she lowers the instrument.

“Has it been serving you well?” Mrs. DuVerne asks, nodding toward the prosthesis.

“It’s life changing,” Ava says, her throat constricting around the words, leaving the rest unsaid. The music has made Ava feel *whole* again, even with Natsuki haunting the notes.

“I’m very glad,” Mrs. DuVerne says. “It’s just—well. If there are any issues, I hope you’ll let me know.”

“Issues?” Ava says.

“I know there’s an adjustment period, but . . . you sounded neither like Natsuki nor yourself.”

There is a flash of heat deep in Ava’s chest, and she fights back a scowl. There have been dependent days, yes, when the arm has felt particularly stubborn, but *this* was a good one.

“There’s a lot to learn. And relearn,” she says slowly. “For both me and the prosthesis.”

“Of course. I just want to make sure that you’re doing each other justice.” Mrs. DuVerne is silent for a moment, watching Ava, then dons a brilliant smile. “Come, I’ve made a reservation for a late lunch. You must be starving.”

Ava allows herself be swept downstairs and into a waiting car. A uniformed driver takes them down the West Side Highway, and Ava spends the trip gripping the door, her eyes searching the road ahead.

A man with close-cropped, tightly curled hair and an optimistically yellow suit jacket approaches their table not long after the hostess has seated them in the back of the small SoHo café.

“Anthony, darling,” Mrs. DuVerne says, presenting her cheeks to be kissed. She introduces him as Anthony Gerard, a reporter for the *Times’* Style section. “This is Ava, the wonderful violinist who’s agreed to take Natsuki’s arm.”

Ava watches him take in her outfit as they shake hands, his gaze resting briefly on her left arm.

“I hope to see you play soon, Miss Young,” he says. “Perhaps I could even do a profile on you whenever you’re ready? Mrs. DuVerne has an eye for talent.” He pulls a card from his pocket so smoothly that Ava has it in her hand before she realizes she’s taken it. By then, he’s excused himself and disappeared into the crowd.

The rest of the meal passes in amiable chatter, and the car brings Ava back to her apartment building as the sun approaches the horizon. She peers into the car as Mrs. DuVerne calls after her.

“I don’t want to be a bother,” Mrs. DuVerne says, leaning across the backseat armrest. “But I did love seeing Natsuki’s arm when she played.”

“I’ll . . . remember that for next time,” Ava says, forcing a smile even as a shudder runs up her

spine. She watches the car drive away, clenching and flexing her hand.

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June arrives too quickly, and Mrs. DuVerne with it, a thin envelope pressed to her chest. She glances over Ava and smiles approval at the short-sleeved dress, flooding Ava first with relief, then with revulsion.

"This was Natsuki's favorite," Mrs. DuVerne says, distracting Ava from thoughts of fetching a cardigan. "I'd like to hear you play it."

"Today?" Ava says, reaching for the envelope. It contains Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor. Pencil markings cover the sheet music. Natsuki's.

"Well, yes. You must challenge yourself, Ava."

Ava barely registers the comment as she looks over the notes. It's a beautiful piece, one Ava last played at a Juilliard student recital, but her stomach twists at the thought of playing it. She can almost feel the arm preparing.

"Ava?" Mrs. DuVerne prompts.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to play it well," Ava says.

"But you'll try it? Excellent!" Mrs. DuVerne says.

Ava's mouth opens, then closes. That hadn't been what she'd meant at all, but Mrs. DuVerne looks at her with such earnestness that objecting feels impossible.

Her fingers fumble as she arranges the sheets on the stand. The Chaconne will be beyond her, she thinks, but she might manage the Allemande and the Courante with some semblance of grace if she plays slowly. The first notes march too deliberately from her violin, borne of sight reading and a tension she tries to shake from her bow arm, yet with each passing bar, her memory unfurls and the music begins to take shape.

The arm does not awaken until the start of the first repeated section. It seems, at first, that it is a continuation of her own memory, and she lets herself relax until, quite suddenly, one note slips away from her, and then another, moving not with her thoughts, but from some drive within the clusters of metal and wires. It becomes a guessing game for Ava as she tries to move the bow to match it: faster where she wants slowness, vibrato where she wants simplicity.

The arm continues onward, and Ava's mind becomes something immobile; she knows this feeling, except this time it is not a car slipping and taking its own inexorable path toward a pair of shining headlights but a part of her own body, and it will not listen even though it should by now, even though she has taught it to submit. One mistake, then a second, a third. A bead of sweat rolls down her arm and drops from her elbow, raising goosebumps along its cold path. The arm continues to move the music away from her, spinning its own memories until suddenly she remembers herself and tears the bow away.

The last note hangs in the air between the two women, sour and harsh, punctuated by the sound of her treacherous fingers still moving against the strings.

"Ava—" Mrs. DuVerne begins.

"I'm sorry." Ava takes the instrument into her right hand and stares at the prosthetic, bending and flexing the fingers as if testing their compliance. A tendril of hopelessness coils its way through her stomach, up her windpipe, reaching for her lungs, twisting around them until her breath comes shallow and ragged and tears threaten at the corners of her eyes.

An ambulance sounds somewhere on the West Side Highway.

"You don't have to fight her," Mrs. DuVerne says. The expectation has gone from her voice: she speaks softly, as if to a wounded bird, and the sound is so unexpected that Ava must turn to the window lest Mrs. DuVerne see her cry. "You've been given a gift, Ava. The talent of a more seasoned violinist for you to use, to make your own . . . just think of what you could accomplish. Just try working with my Natsuki, not against her. Can you do that for me? For a month?"

It sounds so easy. So simple. And perhaps Mrs. DuVerne is right: it is a gift. A leg up after falling so far behind.

"I'll try," Ava says.

When they leave for lunch, Mrs. DuVerne pauses at the doorway.

"Don't forget your cardigan," she says, and Ava smiles as she walks to the bedroom certain, for

that moment, that Mrs. DuVerne might understand.

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Ava watches hours of films of Natsuki, gorging herself on the woman's technique and words. In interviews, Natsuki has an air of quiet precision, rarely meandering into anecdotes. Only her eyes betray a lack of focus, drifting to a spot behind the camera from time to time, as if Mrs. DuVerne were standing just behind the lens, where Ava sits now, watching.

When Natsuki plays, she transforms into a woman of unbridled joy and pain who teases music not just from the notes, but the moments between them, the pauses that reverberate through the bones of her audience. Ava traces her fingers down the lines of the prosthesis, wondering how much of that energy is captured inside of it, and lets herself fall into the prosthesis' wishes.

Ava studies Natsuki's recordings, listening for the crescendos and diminuendos, the accelerandos and rallentandos and rests that bring the notes alive. Her right arm learns to follow the left. It is a waltz, she tells herself, and she is learning the steps, and one does not have to lead to be dancing.

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Summer slips away in a blur of music. Mrs. DuVerne is thrilled at Ava's progress after the July recital and orders champagne at lunch. Ava's blood turns effervescent with the alcohol and praise. A friend of Mrs. DuVerne appears at their table shortly thereafter, another in a parade of business-people, philanthropists, reporters, and artists who find them en route to the restaurant, during the meal, as they say their goodbyes.

Each time, Mrs. DuVerne introduces Ava, and Ava, in turn, awaits a call that evening or later in the week. There is always a call, suggesting or requesting an interview, or photoshoot, or solo performance. Ava declines each one, even those from Anthony, whose persistence has become grating.

"When I'm ready, you'll be the first to know," she tells him truthfully: she feels indebted to his patience, even knowing that it is he who created this feeling of something owed in the first place.

During their August lunch, Mrs. DuVerne introduces yet another woman who holds *rather famous soirées* to Ava.

"I do hope you'll play for us one day," the woman says, tone conspiratorial. "Grace has said the most marvelous things."

"That's very kind," Ava says. "I'll return to performing as soon as I'm able—"

"You know these musicians," Mrs. DuVerne interjects. "Such perfectionists for their art. She's made the most amazing progress . . ."

Ava lets the conversation wash over her, smiling through the sourness that has settled in her stomach. She *has* made progress, enough to perform in front of others—except it would be Natsuki playing, and not her. Playing for Mrs. DuVerne this way is one thing, but for others . . .

The feeling eats at Ava until she comes to a decision that evening: she will hold a concert in three months, on the anniversary of her accident, re-debuting with a style that builds deliberately on Natsuki's. Mrs. DuVerne will have her limelight, and Ava will have her music, and that, she thinks, will be enough.

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September arrives on the back of a heatwave that leaves even Washington Heights listless. Ava, drenched in sweat despite wearing the lightest dress she owns, plays three new pieces in her own style and finishes with Natsuki's version of Partita No. 2.

"Marvelous, Ava," Mrs. DuVerne says. "A beautiful homage, and in perfect time. I'm holding a gala in Natsuki's honor next week and I was hoping you'd play a few pieces for us."

Ava pauses in collecting her music. She had prepared a proposal for the debut to present over lunch.

"Mrs. DuVerne, I'd be honored to attend, but . . ." Ava takes a breath, then lets the words tumble out of her in a rush. "Playing now, it would be a mere imitation of Natsuki, and that does a disservice to her. The other pieces I played . . . I've been working on a style that builds on Natsuki's. I want my first concert on the anniversary of my accident."

Mrs. DuVerne looks at Ava for long enough that she begins to worry.

“What I mean is . . .” Ava begins.

Mrs. DuVerne shakes her head with a small smile. “I know what you mean. You’re so much like her. She usually humored me—ever the perfectionist, ever particular—but when she dug in her heels . . . Let’s forget I mentioned playing. You’ll attend?”

“Of course,” Ava says.

“Good,” Mrs. DuVerne smiles. “We can discuss the details over lunch.”

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The gala is a black-tie affair, and Ava rents an evening gown for the occasion: a cascade of black sequins that leaves her arms bare. She had preferred a long-sleeved dress but knows this one will make Mrs. DuVerne happy; it seems a small concession for the debut she wants. There had been no more mentions of a concert. Mrs. DuVerne would merely introduce Ava during the toast. No music, no speeches, no grand gestures.

“You look divine,” Mrs. DuVerne says, kissing Ava’s cheeks when she arrives at the sprawling modern colonial. “You remember Anthony?” She sweeps away, leaving Ava no choice but to take Anthony’s proffered arm.

She does so reluctantly, remembering the multitudinous calls, but Anthony is surprisingly good company. He leads her deftly through the crowd, pointing out notable guests and speaking mostly about his work, small anecdotes from profiles he’s done. He asks undemanding questions about her past: when she first started playing, which composers she loves best. After the first hour, her stomach settles enough for a glass of champagne.

“This food always seems to be more flash than taste,” Anthony murmurs to her, picking up a small tartlet loaded with caviar and crème fraîche from a passing server. “I wish they had pigs-in-a-blanket.”

Ava grins. “Maybe for the main course.”

A glass clinks in the main hall, and they make their way to the atrium, where Mrs. DuVerne stands on the landing halfway up the stairs next to a large photograph of Natsuki. Ava lets her eyes wander over the crowd as Mrs. DuVerne speaks. Some hundred people are crammed into the atrium or peeking in through doors.

“The last year without her has felt empty,” Mrs. DuVerne says eventually. “But I’m especially fortunate to have met one young musician to keep Natsuki’s legacy alive.”

Ava smiles and steps forward, ready to join Mrs. DuVerne on stage. Her stomach cramps with sudden nerves, crushing the caviar and champagne. She hasn’t been in front of a crowd since before the accident and, even though she won’t be playing, it is overwhelming to have so many eyes on her at once. One step, then another, stiff and uncertain like a child learning to move. When Ava reaches the landing, Mrs. DuVerne places a delicate hand on the small of her back. Ava stiffens at the touch, forces herself to relax into it.

“Ava Young was a rising star of classical music, set for her solo Carnegie Hall debut,” Mrs. DuVerne says. Ava flinches at the past tense. “Until a car accident took her arm, and her future, from her. Her insurance denied her access to an X390, a state-of-the-art prosthesis that could help her get her life back.” Mrs. DuVerne continues, her description of their meeting and monthly recitals reaching Ava as if through water.

“And so,” Mrs. DuVerne finishes, raising her champagne flute. Ava echoes the gesture unthinkingly. “I ask you all to raise a toast not just to my Natsuki, but to her legacy.”

The crowd roars a garbled toast. Ava clinks glasses with Mrs. DuVerne and waits to be dismissed, but the widow turns back to the crowd.

“We’re in for a particular treat tonight, as Ava has agreed to honor us, and my Natsuki’s memory, with Bach’s Partita in D Minor.”

Behind Mrs. DuVerne, a man in a tuxedo appears on the landing. He holds an open violin case in white-gloved hands. Ava stands, watching him, as the audience applauds.

“You agreed I wouldn’t have to play,” Ava whispers, taking a step closer to Mrs. DuVerne. “That I’d debut another time.”

“No,” Mrs. DuVerne murmurs. “I acknowledged that you have Natsuki’s stubbornness. She also needed a push sometimes.”

“But—”

“These people will be your devoted audience for years, Ava. Don’t you want that?”

“Yes, but—”

“Don’t let me down,” Mrs. DuVerne says, patting Ava lightly on the shoulder, and descends the stairs.

Ava glances at the crowd below her. They have stopped milling about and stand, the entire room composed of a single breath, their eyes fixed like headlights upon her, their expectation stretching taut with each passing second. She imagines, for a moment, rushing through their bodies, their grabbing hands, running down the driveway and into the night.

“Madam?” the man with the violin case says. Deeper in the house, a sneeze erupts.

Ava cannot run.

She picks up the violin and begins to tune it, wondering if she is imagining the softness with which the prosthesis touches the violin. Natsuki’s violin.

This must be what continuing her legacy means: becoming Natsuki for an anonymous crowd that isn’t ready to let her go. Is it so bad, to lose a bit of herself again so she can have the life she’d always dreamed of?

And so, Ava plays. She lets herself drown in the dead woman’s interpretation of the Partita, in front of this sea of strangers. The fingers move without any urging, traveling over the strings with easy familiarity. She follows where they lead, the same rhythm as always, the interpretation ever unchanging. The prosthetic is perfect; she is perfect with it.

Her concerts had always been about connection: not just with the music, but with the audience. She could feel them understanding something new when she played, some phrase that only she could explain. A statement turned into a question. A shout turned into a whisper.

But as Ava plays, she can sense only the mechanical arm. She is the translator, a body through which Natsuki can live once more. Her mind focuses only on the instructions that the prosthetic gives her, not the effect they are creating. When she finishes, the audience’s applause echoes through an empty place inside of her where the music once lived.

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Ava descends the stairs to a mob, its multitudinous hands reaching for her hand, her prosthetic, her arm. She squints into a flashing camera, looks past the people speaking at her, over her.

Mrs. DuVerne stands apart from her guests. When they lock eyes, the widow gives an approving nod, then disappears into the crowd.

Anthony finds Ava and guides her to a quieter corner, pushing a glass of champagne into her hands.

“You didn’t know you’d be playing,” he says, not waiting for her to confirm. “She does that. Pushes people toward her vision. Natsuki’s always been a genius, no question. She would’ve found the spotlight herself, in time. But Mrs. DuVerne had all the connections and knew how to use them. She loves finding diamonds in the rough.”

Ava takes a sip of the champagne. The bubbles are sour in her mouth. “Was it worth it? For Natsuki?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I can’t speak for her. They seemed happy when I saw them. In love. But . . . for what it’s worth, it was for me.”

“You’re one of her projects, too?”

“I prefer to think of us as investments.” Anthony smiles. “I always wanted a political beat. I met Mrs. DuVerne when I was bartending one of these events during school, asked a question that piqued her interest. She helped me get my first job. Only ever asks for small favors.”

A certainty pools in Ava’s stomach, cold and heavy.

“That’s why you’ve kept calling me,” she says. “Because she asked.”

She feels him glance at her, look away.

“You’re writing about tonight, aren’t you?” she presses.

“It’s running tomorrow morning.”

“I wanted—” Ava sighs through the tremor in her voice. “I wanted a debut my way. Later this year.”

“And Mrs. DuVerne wanted it her way.” He shrugs, turns to look at her. There’s a sharp earnestness in his eyes that borders on intrusive. “I have no doubt you’ll play great music, Ava. You. Not her. That’s what matters eventually, isn’t it?”

He waits for her to respond, smiles lopsidedly when she doesn’t.

“You’ll have excuse me,” he says. “I have an article to finish. But call me if you ever want to chat.”

Ava watches him leave and makes her way to the front of the house. Mrs. DuVerne’s driver is already waiting for her. They sink into the muted hum of traffic.

Ahead of her, the lights of Manhattan’s skyscrapers stretch ever higher: buildings that people thought could not stand, could never exist without support or scaffolding or magic. They rise above her as the car makes its way through the city, cocooning her in their shadows.

As the car travels up the West Side Highway, Ava’s fingers feel the edge of the prosthetic where it connects to the residual limb. She supposes Anthony’s article will be enough to let her start playing concerts. Enough for the audience to expect Natsuki on the stage, with Ava as her conduit. Perhaps she can find her own style eventually, but it will always be Natsuki’s story first. Ava’s life will be built on a ghost.

She removes the prosthesis deftly. The sleek metal glints yellow in the streetlights as she lays it carefully across the plush leather seat. The driver catches the motion in the rearview mirror.

“Can you make sure Mrs. DuVerne gets this, please?” Ava asks. He nods, his eyes returning to the road. Ava swallows the explanation she’d been preparing, feels it solidify in her chest.

She is deposited by her apartment ten minutes later. The street is empty; a breeze laced with a hint of autumn carries the faint beats of samba and laughter from the nearby park. When the car pulls away from the curb, she can still feel the leather under her fingers, slick and cold; the arm slides slightly as they turn south on Haven Avenue, then disappears from Ava’s senses. Ava unlocks the door and climbs the stairs to her apartment. The landing is dark, but she slips her key easily into the lock and enters her home.