

Spring Again

A warm wind weaved through windows, dancing the shadows of the leaves and drawing up dust. Khava sneezed from across the room and dodged the dust onto the couch. I looked up, my gaze following her shadow from one side of the room to the other.

“Khava?”

She meowed and tilt her head.

“Would you like to hear a story?”

She fell soundlessly into my lap, exposing her underbelly to the spring sun. I pet her carefully, running my fingers through each and every strand of her fur, feeling her heat run through me and the subtle vibration of her purr. I committed every feeling to memory as best I could.

“Well, where should I start?” I leaned back.

“You see, Khava, when I was a child, my parents always tried to push different interests and hobbies onto me, trying to find out what I was a protégé for, as parents do. I never really got too into any of them though. Chess was too slow and mundane, football was too much running and Olympic math- Well, that one’s self-explanatory. But it was a day like this one, on my sixth birthday, when my mom gave me a used Erhu and a white kitten named Batu. As you’d expect, I left the Erhu in the corner of the room to play with Batu. He was not very vocal, nor was he very affectionate. Despite my best efforts, during the day, he would prefer to sit on the windowsills, still as snow, as the clouds shifted and the birds sang. During the night, when the silence finally revealed the brushing of the leaves, he would find the quietest room of the house and sleep until morning. I remembered the Erhu after a while though. I brushed off the dust and opened it. After

stringing the neck and tying the nut, I began tuning. Despite the songbirds, Batu jumped off the windowsill and, for the first time, walked up to me. I reached out my hand but he ducked beneath it. I opted to continue tuning instead. Tightening the bow and tuning the Erhu to the D hexian, I played a scale, and then another. I played one scale after the other until I felt Batu's paw upon my foot. He was right, I missed the skip."

"After that, despite having already started going to school, I refused to spend my hours at home doing anything other than playing the Erhu. My pulls were rough, the bamboo would hit the snakeskin and the sap would scratch against the strings. Each night, before I went to bed, the Erhu, Batu and I would be covered in sap dust. Yet, I would never fail to bring my Erhu to bed with me, for there was no other way Batu would elect to join us. I was getting better now and Batu had begun to sit beside me on the couch. I could play simple songs like Jasmine Flower without errors, though at times, I would play a note wrong on purpose just to feel his paw upon my hand. It wasn't often though. Batu didn't like mistakes, he liked it when I played correctly and when I played well. So, my singular purpose became to play as best I could."

"High school was harder, not because of the classes, but because, now, school wasn't off until six. Though every day when I got home, I would see Batu sitting beside my Erhu, waiting for me to play. I had gone through several books of sheet music at this point after they ran out of songs to teach me. Yet, I would keep playing what I already knew, over and over again. At times, I would try to freestyle and improvise a few pieces, completely based on the whims of Batu of course. If I played something he didn't like, he would place his paw on my hand and if I played something he liked, he would brush his whiskers against my leg. He never meowed. He was not much a talker, but he was a good listener, the best. There we were, day after day, with the summer sun on our backs and singing of the strings in our ears."

Khava shuffled between the couch and I as soon as I mentioned the summer. As willing as he was to lay in the sun mere minutes ago, the concept of summer would still scare him. The blackness of the couch was melding with the blackness of her fur. I reached out to her without thinking. She scratched me.

“Sorry,” I cleared my throat. “Where was I?”

“Right, as I said, I remembered learning *Ochood Zolgono Doo* that summer. It was the piece I played which I needed to sing along to. It was when I first heard Batu’s voice. He didn’t meow, but I could hear his purr through my song. He stopped when I did, so I kept singing.”

“After a while, I noticed I wasn’t improving like I used to anymore, so after I graduated high school, I applied to a music school. I spent less time at home but-“

I paused

“But I was getting better at playing the Erhu. I would go to all my classes and retreat to my dorms to practice. It was hard to practice, I never felt anything like it before. I was missing something, so I decided to try a change of scenery and go play in the park instead. It was cold and, once in a while, a leaf from the willows would fall beside me. I wasn’t playing well. But the passer-by’s thought I was. A crowd gathered, they acted like they were appreciating my music but they didn’t even notice my mistakes. Except one, there was one who did. I noticed a man bite his lip when I missed a skip. I stopped playing to talk to him. Later that month, I played at a competition he was hosting. I didn’t know why. I didn’t know why for many things. I dropped out of school to perform and compete full time instead. Tours would take me across the country and I would leave home for days at a time. I opened for a few musicians and even did a few performances as a guest to our provincial orchestra. My then-empty walls had become decorated in awards and certificates. I had to get better, it was all I could think about. Some people would

scout me or hire me, I didn't really care who, every opportunity for anything was an opportunity to improve as far as I was concerned. Before I knew it, I was going on tours to foreign countries. I didn't why, but I did. This one tour took me from my hometown to Russia, then to western Europe and even to the other side of the world. I arrived in Toronto near the end of the Winter. When I got to my hotel room, it was already the dead of night. The moon shown through the snow upon my windowsill, painting my floor in a sheet of fuzzy frost. I had to go home. I didn't know why."

"The plane landed and I headed straight for home. I put my Erhu in the corner of the living room and made dinner. I was already on my way to bed when I saw Batu sitting beside my Erhu case. I was tired from the plane and wet from the rain but I decided I'd play. I tuned it to play the first song I ever sang. Batu pawed the couch and stepped as though he was going to jump up, but he didn't.

I began playing.

Алсын газар эрдэм сурахаар хүрээд ирэхдээ би чинь...

To the far away, my ambitions take me...

Зай буурал аавыгаа орхиод гарсан даа...

Leaving behind my grey-haired kin...

I scratched the skin and Batu laid a paw on my foot, but I could already barely keep my eyes open. I ignored him and continued.

Алсын газар эрдэм сурахаар хүрээд ирэхдээ би чинь...

To the far away, my ambitions take me...

Хөмсгөн дороо нулимс мэлтрүүлэн уйлаад үлдсэн ээждээ...

Tears fell and wishes carried my way...

He laid a paw on my foot again, as gently as he did the last time, and the first time. Yet still, I kept playing.

Алсын газар эрдэм сурахаар хүрээд ирэхдээ би чинь...

To the far away, my ambitions take me...

Холбоо нуурын цэнхэр мэлмий цантаад үлдсэн нутагтаа

Haze remained upon the sapphire lake...

I missed a skip. Batu did nothing.

Хуртай зуны эхэн сардаа очоод золгоно доо...

From within the rain, I will come back to you...

Очоод золгоно доо...

I will come back to you...

I cut the last chorus short. Batu tilt his head when I stopped and followed the Erhu when I put it back in its case and into the corner of the room. I went to take a shower and when I came out, he was still there, sitting beside the Erhu. Again, I didn't remember why.

Some time that night, when I was asleep and the moonlight cut across the room, from one end to the next, Batu opened the case, crawled inside, laid his head against the strings and soundlessly passed away. I remembered why for several things.

In the coming morning, I walked over to him and placed my hand on his paw. He would paw me every time I made a mistake and I made *many* mistakes through the years. Yet, I had never felt or even seen his claws. I took his claw in my hand and scratched my arm with it just to see what it would be like. And then I cried”

“Well,” I sat up. “That was that.”

The white light from when I started the story had become a golden glow, illuminating the walls.

“Say, Khava, would you like to hear a song?”

She meowed and jumped off the couch. I stood up to watch her go. She walked past the now empty walls and the erhu in the corner, covered in a few strands of snowy hair and eighteen years’ worth of dust.

“Right, of course not, sorry,” I sat back down. “You’re not Batu.”