Don't Promise Me Silence

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ROMANS

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INTRO

In a concert hall, it was easiest to hear the things that weren't supposed to be there.

That morning, it was a dry crack coming from the right side of the stage, returning after every clap with such a brief delay that most people would have mistaken it for part of the sound itself. I heard it clearly. I stood in the middle of the empty auditorium, a folder tucked beneath my arm and a pencil between my fingers, trying to convince myself it was nothing more than an echo left behind by the crew who had removed the old chairs the previous day. In truth, I knew that this single crack could ruin the entire concept I had spent three weeks developing.

On the plan spread across the seats in the front row, I had marked the orchestra's new arrangement: the piano closer to the centre, the strings in a gentle semicircle, and the wind instruments slightly farther back so they wouldn't overpower the soloist's phrasing. I had no intention of rebuilding the stage from scratch or turning the hall into some sterile, modern space. Its character lived in the wood, its proportions, and that particular way the sound returned to you before it had a chance to fade. The renovation was supposed to save it, not erase it.

I was forty years old and had enough experience to know that the word "vision" was often just an elegant name for someone's stubbornness. Even so, I wasn't about to surrender my project simply because someone wearing a hard hat decided it was inconvenient. I had been invited to develop the musical concept for the hall's reopening. Not to

turn up at the end, admire the finished walls, and fit a programme around them that wouldn't put anyone at risk.

I tucked the pencil behind my ear and stepped onto the stage. Standing where the cello was supposed to go, I clapped once, then again. The sound came back unevenly. I moved a chair half a metre to the side, repeated the test, and heard the difference. That was precisely why I needed access to the hall before the next stage of construction began. On paper, you could move anything without consequences. In reality, one poorly positioned element could rob the music of its breathing space.

"If you're going to move the equipment, please inform the crew first."

The voice came from the entrance to the auditorium. I turned too quickly, and the pencil slipped from my fingers, landing on the wooden boards. A man stood in the aisle between the rows, without a hard hat, wearing a dark coat and carrying a roll of drawings beneath his arm. He didn't look like someone who had come to admire the progress of the renovation. His expression was calm, and his gaze had the attentiveness of a man accustomed to checking whether things matched what had been promised on paper.

"I'm not moving the equipment. I'm checking the arrangement," I replied.

"The chair is equipment."

"And the stage isn't a museum."

The corner of his mouth twitched, although he didn't quite call it a smile. He walked a few steps closer and stopped beside the front row. He didn't step onto the stage without being invited. I noticed that small detail, although I wasn't particularly keen to admit it meant anything.

"Kazimierz Las," he introduced himself. "I'm responsible for the acoustics on this project."

"Ludwika Gaj. I'm responsible for making sure there's a reason to come here after the renovation."

"That's an ambitious remit."

"Yours sounds fairly broad as well."

This time he smiled properly, briefly, without trying to disarm me. There was something about him that made it difficult to put him into an easy category. He didn't rush to answer, but neither did he pretend he hadn't heard the provocation. Instead of looking at me, he examined the plan resting on one of the seats.

"You want to position the strings closer to the side wall?"

"By a few dozen centimetres. That way, the soloist won't have to compete with the piano for space."

"And the sound reflected off that surface will return to her with a delay."

"Which is exactly why I want to test it."

"I didn't say you weren't allowed to test it. I said you couldn't assume what the result would be."

I didn't like the fact that he was right about that one narrow point. I liked his tone even less: no superiority, no theatrical lecturing. He wasn't giving me a convenient reason to dismiss him.

"Do you have measurements?" I asked.

For a moment, he studied the stage as though he were assessing not only its dimensions but also what could still be saved. Then he unrolled one of the drawings. I saw a cross-section of the hall, markings for the panels, and several

notes made in red pencil. One of the figures had been circled, but the sheet slipped beneath his hand before I could read the description.

"I have preliminary data," he said. "I still need one more measurement under conditions close to those we'll have once everything is finished."

"When?"

"When the hall is ready for testing."

"That might be too late to change the arrangement."

"And your proposal might become very expensive if it turns out that it requires adjustments to the wall."

There was no threat in his voice. Just a boundary he wasn't willing to cross simply to make my work easier. I felt irritated, but beneath that irritation something considerably less practical began to emerge: curiosity. He wasn't trying to win the conversation. He wanted me to see the problem before I decided to call it an obstacle.

"I'm not asking you to approve something blindly," I said. "I'm asking for the chance to test a solution before anyone rejects it."

"In that case, we need to establish exactly what we're testing."

"We?"

"If I'm responsible for the acoustics and you're responsible for the music, someone has to make sure we aren't working towards two different versions of the same hall."

The statement sounded more reasonable than I wanted it to. I looked at the plan, then back at him. I noticed a faint trace of dust on the cuff of his shirt and a tiredness he

wasn't trying to conceal with either haste or professional confidence. I didn't know whether he was someone I could work with, but for the first time that morning, I considered that it might be worth trying.

"I have a quartet rehearsal on Friday," I said. "If we haven't settled the arrangement by then, I'll lose the booking and the musicians."

"I have a crew closing off access to the side section of the stage on Monday. If I promise you something the building can't support, we'll lose more than a rehearsal slot."

I didn't answer immediately. Pale light streamed through the tall windows, revealing the dust suspended above the rows of seats. The hall looked like a place caught between what it had been and what someone wanted it to become. I had my own plan, people waiting for a decision, and too little time to allow someone else's caution to turn into paralysis. He had measurements he wasn't yet willing to show me in full, and a responsibility he had no intention of shifting onto my shoulders.

I gathered the papers from the seat. One of them, the one with the semicircle of strings drawn on it, had stuck to the wooden surface because of the dampness. Kazimierz reached out, then stopped halfway, waiting for me to decide whether I wanted his help. I handed him the corner of the plan. He held it carefully, without touching my fingers.

"Tomorrow at eight?" he asked. "We'll test a few different arrangements. No promises that any of them will stay."

"At eight, I have a meeting with the conductor."

"Nine?"

"I can be here at nine."

"Good."

He rolled up the drawings and walked towards the side exit. He didn't look back, and I didn't call after him to ask about the circled figure. Not yet.

I remained on the stage, holding a plan that was no longer entirely mine, and with the uncomfortable suspicion that the most difficult part of the renovation wouldn't be persuading the building to sound different.

The hardest part might turn out to be discovering how much truth we could tell each other before each of us began defending our own version of silence.

Chapter 1 - Conditions of Sound

The following day, I arrived at the concert hall a few minutes before nine. My meeting with the conductor had run later than I had expected, but I had still managed to review my notes and make two adjustments to the plan. I didn't want to begin the conversation by explaining my schedule. I had enough arguments to support my position without needing additional excuses.

Kazimierz was waiting on the stage. This time he was wearing a dark sweater and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Beside him stood two measuring stands, a small loudspeaker, and a case containing equipment whose purpose I wasn't about to guess. His roll of drawings lay on one of the seats, held in place by a metal set square.

"Is punctuality not your strongest suit?" he asked when I walked in.

I glanced at my watch.

"It's two minutes to nine."

"Exactly why I said it wasn't."

"And exactly why I haven't started defending myself yet."

He smiled faintly and gestured towards the stage.

"I've prepared three measurement configurations. I'd like us to start with the arrangement you proposed, but without moving anything permanently."

"I wasn't planning on bolting the chairs to the floor."

"Good. Then we already have our first agreement."

I placed my folder at the edge of the stage and took out the plan. The previous evening, I had refined the

arrangement, taking into account the observations Kazimierz had made. I hadn't changed the central concept. I had simply moved the piano a few centimetres and kept the strings in the position I considered most advantageous for the ensemble.

Kazimierz leaned over the drawing. He didn't comment immediately, instead comparing it with his own cross-section of the hall. There was something about the way he worked that both irritated and intrigued me. He didn't treat a sheet of paper as conclusive evidence. He examined it as though every line still had to justify its existence.

"Why the piano here?" he asked.

"Because the soloist will have better contact with the conductor. In the current arrangement, she has to turn her head to see his hands. That becomes a problem during longer phrases."

"And what if we move it in the other direction?"

"We'd lose space for the cello."

"We could change its angle."

"We could also move the cello to the balcony, but I doubt the musician would be delighted."

Kazimierz straightened and looked at me with amusement.

"Do you always negotiate like this?"

"Only when someone suggests solutions that look good on a drawing."

"Then we have a similar problem."

I didn't answer. Instead, I walked over to the piano, which was temporarily positioned beside the side wall. The

instrument hadn't yet been prepared for playing, but a few notes were enough to hear how the space responded to its presence. I pressed several keys gently, first in the middle register and then lower down. The sound spread widely, but the final chord produced an unpleasant blurring effect. It wasn't a problem that could be solved simply by changing the instrument's position.

"Can you hear it?" I asked.

"Yes."

"That's exactly what I want to reduce."

"Not through instrument placement alone."

"I know. That's why we're here."

For a moment, we looked at each other across the open lid of the piano. There was nothing in that exchange I could have called hostility. It was more like the caution of two people accustomed to making decisions according to different criteria. I started with what someone sitting in the last row was supposed to hear. Kazimierz started with what the building could deliver without compromising its own stability.

"Please stand halfway down the auditorium," he said. "I'll play a test signal. I'd like you to describe the differences between the three configurations."

"A test signal isn't music."

"No. But it will help us distinguish problems with the room from problems caused by a particular performance."

I stepped down from the stage and took a seat in the seventh row. Kazimierz activated the equipment. A short pulse came from the loudspeaker, followed by a series of tones at different frequencies. It didn't resemble anything I

would ever want to listen to as a piece of music, but it made it possible to detect differences in sound reflection. With the first configuration, the sound was even, although a little too dry. The second produced a more pronounced reflection from the right side. The third offered greater spaciousness, but at the expense of precision.

"The second one is out," I said.

"Why?"

"Because the sounds will overlap in this configuration. During faster passages, the strings will lose their clarity."

"And the third?"

"Better for a choir, worse for a chamber ensemble."

"And the first?"

"The safest option. But I wasn't invited to this project so that we could choose the safest solution."

Kazimierz switched off the device.

"That statement could cause us some trouble."

"Then it's a good thing I said it now rather than at the meeting with the investor."

For the next half hour, we tested several more positions. Kazimierz moved the microphone, adjusted the signal level and recorded the results. I walked between the rows, sat in different places, compared the reflections and marked the areas on the plan where the differences were most noticeable. We didn't always agree in our assessments. Sometimes I felt he trusted the numbers too much. At other times, I had to admit that my initial impression hadn't told me the whole story.

At one point, he asked me to sit in the very last row.

"This is where it will be worst," he said.

"Why?"

"The geometry of the rear wall. Some of the sound energy returns in a way we won't be able to correct simply by rearranging the stage."

"And if we change the materials?"

"Then we need to check what can be done without interfering with structural elements that mustn't be altered."

"So not everything has been decided after all."

"I didn't say it had."

I stood up and approached the wall. Several metres above the floor, I could see a fragment of the original decoration, partly hidden behind the scaffolding. The wooden panels varied in shade. Some looked as though they had been replaced, while others still bore the marks of years of use.

"I'd like this to stay," I said.

"In its current condition?"

"If possible."

"That's not a technical answer."

"Not everything that matters in a concert hall can be described in technical terms."

He came to stand beside me, although he kept a respectful distance. He looked at the wall, then at the fragment of decoration.

"I'm not going to remove something simply because it's old," he said. "But if that element affects safety or causes uncontrolled sound reflections, I can't pretend I haven't noticed it."

"And if there's a way to preserve it?"

"Then I'll be the first to suggest it."

I turned my head towards him. His answer was calm, free of professional posturing. I was surprised that he hadn't tried to convince me by quoting regulations. Instead, he had established a boundary while leaving room for us to look for a solution.

"All right," I said. "Then I won't assume your goal is to turn this hall into a box lined with sound-absorbing material."

"And I won't assume that every suggestion you make is an attempt to force the building to conform to your vision."

"That sounds like progress."

"Not bad for our second day of working together."

We returned to the stage. Kazimierz unrolled a larger drawing and pointed to an area marked in red pencil. It was on the right side of the auditorium, roughly level with the eighth row. A number and a short note appeared beside it, but I couldn't make them out from where I was standing.

"What's this?" I asked.

For a moment, he kept his finger on the marking.

"An area that requires additional testing."

"Because of the reflections?"

"Among other things."

"Do we have the results?"

"Partial ones. I don't want to draw conclusions before the measurements are complete."

It didn't sound like a refusal. More like a boundary he had deliberately chosen to establish. I wasn't going to press him, although I memorised the location on the drawing. If we were going to work together, I needed to know where we

stood. At the same time, I didn't want to demand an answer he himself didn't yet consider definitive.

"All right," I said. "But if that area affects the ensemble's arrangement, I need to know before the plan is approved."

"Of course."

He made a note in the margin. I noticed that whenever he changed a configuration, he recorded not only the measurements but also the reason behind the change. That was more important than it might have seemed. In my work with musicians, I often encountered people who could say that something wasn't working but couldn't explain why. At least Kazimierz made an effort to separate observation from interpretation.

During the next measurement, I asked him to reverse the order of our tests. I wanted to check the piano's position first and arrange the strings afterwards. Kazimierz initially objected because he believed the results would be more difficult to compare. I suggested that we record the conditions of each test separately. He didn't need much convincing.

"You like to have control over the way the work progresses," he observed as we moved one of the stands.

"I like to know why we're doing something."

"Those aren't always the same thing."

"And do you like keeping them separate?"

"Professionally, I have to."

"And privately?"

He looked at me with unmistakable interest.

"Privately, I try to remember that not every conversation is a measurement."

I didn't answer immediately. It was the first moment that day when our conversation had moved beyond the hall. Not enough to call it personal, but enough for me to notice the change in tone. I turned towards the piano and asked him to run the next test.

By midday, we had gathered several useful results. None of them solved the entire problem, but they allowed us to eliminate two configurations and identify one worth developing further. Kazimierz summarised the measurements, while I marked the adjustments on the plan. We agreed not to approve the final arrangement until we had tested it with the actual ensemble. That meant an additional rehearsal, but it was a price I was willing to pay.

"Friday?" I asked.

"If we can get the stage ready."

"I need confirmation by the end of the day."

"You'll have it."

I closed my folder. Kazimierz packed the equipment into his case, then looked at the drawing once more. For a moment, he seemed distracted, as though something in the results didn't fit his earlier assumptions. When he noticed me watching him, he folded the sheet and slipped it back into the roll.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"I need to compare today's results with the earlier measurements."

"Can I see the data?"

"When I have the complete set."

I accepted his answer, although it didn't entirely satisfy me.

"Just remember that we can't make decisions based on data neither of us has seen."

"I remember."

We left the stage almost simultaneously. At the door, Kazimierz stopped to let me go first. It wasn't a gesture that called for comment, but I noticed it. Just as I noticed that he didn't try to end our conversation with a professional handshake or a promise that everything would be fine.

"See you Friday, Ms Gaj."

"See you Friday, Mr Las."

Once I reached the corridor, I took out my phone and checked the message from the conductor. He had confirmed the ensemble's line-up and the rehearsal time. I replied that the hall should be ready, but I didn't promise him anything more.

Behind the doors, I heard Kazimierz opening his case again. Then came a brief electronic tone, followed by silence. For a moment, I felt like going back and asking what exactly he was comparing with the earlier results. I didn't. We had an agreed plan, and I didn't want to begin our collaboration by crossing someone else's boundaries.

Even so, as I walked down the stairs, I found myself thinking about more than acoustics. Kazimierz Las wasn't a man who gave way easily, but he also didn't try to prove his worth by dominating others. He could listen and then respond with something more substantial than polite agreement. There was something appealing about that, although I wasn't ready to give it a name.

For now, I had work to do. And a man I needed to learn to work with without losing either my own voice or my patience.

Chapter 2 - Rules of Closeness

The message from Kazimierz arrived the following day at 10:17 a.m.

"Friday's rehearsal is possible. The stage will be available from 2 p.m. However, we need to establish the order of activities and the scope of changes we can test without interfering with the structure."

I read it twice. Not because it was particularly complicated, but because I had expected a brief confirmation rather than another list of conditions. I replied that I could meet him in the afternoon to discuss the details. I added that I wanted to talk not only about the positioning of the instruments but also about who would make the final decisions concerning the stage.

His response came a few minutes later.

"I suggest coffee somewhere outside the hall. It'll be easier to talk without the noise of the renovation."

I held my phone for a moment. The invitation was professional, but its form left a little room for interpretation. I wasn't going to read more into it than was there. I agreed to meet at five that afternoon in a café not far from Plac Litewski.

I still had several hours of work ahead of me. I reviewed the scores, called the conductor and adjusted the rehearsal schedule. Then I drove home to leave the folder containing materials I wouldn't need for the meeting. Before leaving, I stood in front of the mirror for a moment, wondering whether I should change my shirt. In the end, I didn't. I wasn't going on a date. I was going to agree on the terms of cooperation

with a man who had a habit of asking questions I didn't always want to answer.

The café was small, with tall windows and tables spaced far enough apart that people could talk without having to raise their voices. I chose a seat by the wall, from where I could see the entrance. I ordered tea and took out my notebook. Kazimierz arrived a few minutes after five. He was wearing a navy blazer over a light-coloured shirt. He no longer looked like a man who spent half his day on a construction site, although his hands still bore faint traces of manual work.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," he said.

"You're the one who suggested meeting."

"Then I hope you don't regret accepting the invitation."

"I haven't made up my mind yet."

He sat down opposite me.

"I see. I'll have to make good use of the first five minutes."

He ordered a black coffee, without sugar. When the waiter had left, he took several sheets of paper from his bag and placed them on the table. This time, they weren't drawings of the entire hall, but a comparison of possible arrangements, together with notes about their technical limitations.

"I've prepared a proposal," he began. "I'd like us to agree on the rules before we start changing anything based on individual tests."

"I'm listening."

"First, neither party approves changes that affect the other's work independently. Second, we test every

configuration under conditions as close to the actual ones as possible. Third, if a structural problem comes up, we don't try to solve it by shifting responsibility onto someone else."

"That last one sounds like it comes from experience."

"Unfortunately."

I didn't ask any further questions. Instead, I read through the document. It was specific, but something was missing.

"There's nothing here about responsibility for the final stage layout."

"Because I didn't want to include something we haven't agreed on yet."

"Then let's agree on it. You're responsible for safety, acoustics and the building's technical capabilities. I'm responsible for the performers' arrangement, the clarity of the musical parts and the musicians' working conditions. Neither of us can make changes within the other's area without consultation."

"Agreed."

"And one more thing. I don't want my proposals treated as decorative additions to a technical design that's already been completed."

Kazimierz rested his forearms on the table.

"You weren't invited here to decorate the stage."

"I've met people who thought otherwise."

"I'm not responsible for them."

He said it without unnecessary emphasis. He didn't try to convince me that he would be better than the people who had come before him. That was precisely what made me put

down my pen for the first time since the conversation had begun.

"All right," I said. "Then I need access to the measurement results you're basing your decisions on."

"Of course. I'll share the data for the different configurations."

"All of it?"

For a fraction of a second, his gaze shifted towards the papers.

"Everything relevant to our work."

I didn't like that expression. Relevance was a category that could easily be used to exclude inconvenient information.

"I'd prefer to decide for myself what's relevant to my part of the project."

"That's reasonable. I'll prepare the data in a format that allows you to follow the results, rather than simply look at the conclusions."

I accepted that answer. It wasn't perfect, but it contained a promise I would be able to verify later.

We moved on to the schedule. Kazimierz explained that certain sections of the hall would be closed off before the next stage of construction, which meant Friday's rehearsal had to provide us with enough information to select two configurations for further testing. I didn't want to make decisions under pressure from a deadline, but I understood that the renovation couldn't wait for me to be completely satisfied.

"I need at least two rehearsals with the ensemble," I said. "One with the basic arrangement, the other after