

The luthier's apprentice was a small, unassuming thing. They scurried about the shop, arms full of wood or tools or varnish or whatever the master violin maker might have asked for, curled over their cargo in order to take up the least space possible. They spoke softly and rarely turned their gaze away from the floor.

The luthier, in contrast, was a loud, booming man with large callused hands and eyes fixed in a permanent squint from staring so closely at his violins. The luthier was no simple craftsman; he was the most sought after luthier in the area. People traveled from neighboring kingdoms simply to have a chance to buy one of his violins. The luthier's apprentice considered themselves very lucky to work under him indeed.

Sometimes, when things were going especially well, the luthier would be called away to take up residence in a palace or manor and make a personal violin for someone very important. During these residencies, the apprentice was tasked with overseeing the shop; taking orders for the luthier to fulfill when he returned, ensuring the shop didn't get robbed, informing customers where the luthier had gone, and so on. It didn't happen often, and the apprentice hated it when it did, but it was just another facet of working under the luthier. A necessary evil, if you will.

One such of these occasions, the luthier left late in the middle of the night. He roused the apprentice from their pallet, already dressed in his traveling cloak. "Expect me back in three weeks," he commanded. "Keep the orders organized for when I return." And with that he swept out of the shop, door slamming shut behind him.

The apprentice, still tangled in their blankets trying to process the words, blinked at the shut door, listening to the silence in the shop. With effort, they got up to lock the door and blow out the candle the luthier had left burning. Then they returned to their pallet and their blankets and went back to sleep.

Morning came peacefully. The apprentice opened the windows, letting a breeze in that the luthier hated. They organized the front desk, settling themselves in a comfortable chair behind the counter to talk with the inevitable stream of customers. When they started trickling in, the apprentice handled each one carefully. They noted down the specifics of each customer; what things they were looking for in their violin, when they needed the work done by, and then sent them on their way. It was monotonous, but peaceful without the luthier shouting over their shoulder for tools sitting right next to him.

Just before the apprentice was due to close the shop back up and curl up for dinner, a stranger entered the shop. A hood was pulled over their head, obscuring their features, and they held something awkwardly underneath their cloak.

"Hello," the apprentice said. "What can I do for you?"

"I would like you to make me a violin."

The apprentice pulled up a new sheet of paper. “Very well. Please give me your details so the—”

The stranger put a hand on the paper, stopping the apprentice from writing. “You misunderstand. I would like *you* to make me a violin.”

The apprentice slowly lowered their pen. “I am just the apprentice.”

“I know.”

“I do not make the violins.”

The stranger smiled, teeth glinting under their hood. “I know.”

“Well. Then, please give me your details—”

The stranger drew several glorious pieces of wood from underneath their cloak and placed them on the counter. The apprentice’s breath was taken away. Reverently, they ran a hand along the grain.

“I would like you to make me a violin,” the stranger said.

The apprentice shook their head, one hand still on the wood. “I don’t understand.”

“Listen.”

“To?”

“The wood.”

The apprentice gave the stranger a skeptical look, but slowed their breath and focused on the wood, the feeling of the grain beneath their fingers, the rough rasp of the unsanded surface. Their eyes drifted closed and, somewhere between one breath and the next, syrupy notes filled the apprentice’s ears, as if the wood was already a violin being played. The apprentice snatched their hand back. The music stopped.

“You heard it,” the stranger said.

The apprentice stared at them, hand clutched against their chest. “Yes.”

“The luthier cannot do that.” The stranger motioned to the stray pieces of violins strewn around the workshop, front plates and necks and scrolls haphazardly balanced wherever there was space. “The luthier makes an instrument, yes, but he does not bring to life the musician inside the wood. He cannot hear it playing before it’s been born.”

The apprentice stared at the wood on the counter, unsure what to say.

“I would like you to make me a violin.”

The apprentice agreed.

The following days, the apprentice kept the shop closed up. They did not open the windows, did not put the sign outside the door, did not clear up the front desk to take down orders. They sat at the bench with the stranger’s wood, listening to the songs the violin wanted to play while they traced out the shape of the instrument.

They worked day and night, hardly pausing to eat or sleep. They often woke still at the bench, hands barely moved from the wood even in sleep. The bones of the violin, for it couldn’t really be called just wood anymore, filled the apprentice’s every waking thought and a good portion of their dreams as well. They felt an urgency to finish the crafting as soon as possible. The luthier would eventually return, but, more importantly, the violin wanted to sing aloud, not just in the apprentice’s mind.

The apprentice did not delude themselves that the luthier would approve of this project. As soon as he returned, if the violin was not finished or hidden away, he would take over himself and the apprentice knew deep within themselves that he would ruin it. That could not be allowed to happen. The stranger and, more importantly, the violin were relying on the apprentice to do this and do it right. They couldn’t be let down.

Doing it right also meant not rushing, though. As little as they slept, the apprentice could not finish before the luthier returned. They simply hid the pieces among their blankets and presented the luthier with the stack of orders upon his return. He did not pay them any mind, already caring only for the next order, the next payment. All the better, the apprentice thought, because that meant he did not notice the wood shavings in their clothes or the calluses on their hands or how often they got distracted by the singing violin, begging for them to continue their work.

With the luthier home, the apprentice could only work on the violin at night, while the luthier was upstairs snoring away. By the light of one candle, they carefully carved away, so slowly as to not make any noise to wake the luthier. They slept only an hour or less every night. Each day, they became more clumsy and more forgetful as the exhaustion caught up with them. The luthier was not shy in his scoldings at their mistakes, but for once the apprentice did not mind. It was all worth it for the way the violin was finally coming into shape.

One day, however, the apprentice made a grave mistake. The weeks of work finally caught up to them and they fell asleep still at work, candle burning down beside them.

They woke, abruptly, to the luthier lifting the precious violin, nearly complete, from their lap.

“What is this?” he boomed, fingers too tight around the neck.

The apprentice surged to their feet. "Give that back!"

The violin's notes were fast and tense, practically begging the apprentice to take it from the luthier.

"You are making a violin?" The luthier turned it over in his hands, holding it easily out of the apprentice's reach. "When have you had the time for this? Where did you get this wood? Are you stealing from me?"

"No," the apprentice said desperately, still reaching for the violin. "A customer gave it to me."

"A customer?!"

"They wanted me to make the violin. Please, just—"

The luthier set the violin on his worktop and reached for a gouge.

"Wait!" The apprentice shouted, pulling helplessly against the luthier's arm. "Don't, it's not—"

The luthier dug the gouge into the back of the violin and the violin screamed. The apprentice fell to the floor, clutching their ears. "Stop!" They cried. "Stop, you're hurting it!"

The luthier did not stop. Every drag of the gouge into the wood of the violin dragged a grating, shrill stream of notes from the instrument. The apprentice felt crazed by the sounds. Desperately, they cast about the room for something, anything, to make the luthier stop.

They grabbed the nearest tool, a peg hole reamer, and gripped it tightly in one hand. "Stop," they said again. "Please, don't make me do this."

The luthier ignored them.

The apprentice lifted the reamer and slammed it into the side of the luthier's neck. The luthier's eyes went wide and he made a strange gurgling noise. When the apprentice pulled the reamer back out, blood sprayed everywhere. All over the apprentice, the work table, the violin itself.

The luthier's body slumped forward. The apprentice dropped the reamer to save the damaged violin from being crushed.

They sank to the floor, the delicate wooden body cradled in their bloody hands.

The gouges the luthier took out of the back looked obscene. The blood spattered over the otherwise clean, pale wood seemed almost as if it were the violin's blood, pouring from the wound.

The apprentice trailed shaky fingers over the damage. The violin was still wailing, softly now that the danger had passed. "I'm sorry," the apprentice whispered. "I shouldn't have let him...I'm sorry."

There came a knocking on the shop door behind them.

The apprentice whirled, heart stopped in their chest. They glanced at the luthier's body and then the blood all over the table, all over them, and the very obvious assumptions that could be made from the scene. Before they could tell whoever was outside that they were closed, the door opened.

It was the cloaked stranger. The apprentice felt their heart in their throat.

The stranger came to a stop just beside the apprentice without a word.

"I'm sorry," the apprentice said thickly, lifting the damaged violin for the stranger to see. "I'd almost finished, but...The luthier, he..."

The stranger looked at the violin closely.

"I don't know if I can fix this. There isn't enough wood remaining to remake the back plate. I could replace it with something else, but I don't think the violin—"

"It seems ready to be finished to me," the stranger said.

The apprentice stopped short, speechless. After a moment, they managed, "What?"

The stranger straightened. "You did well. I wasn't expecting him to be holding it when you killed him. The blood will add extra depth. I brought the finish for you."

The apprentice struggled to their feet, clutching the violin delicately against their chest. "You...wanted me to kill the luthier?"

The stranger laughs. "Of course I did! Why else would I ask you to make a violin?"

"I'm..." The apprentice shook their head. "I could hear the violin. Can hear it."

"Mm. And how does it sound now? Sated?"

The apprentice stared down at the violin. The music coming from it had calmed down considerably. The notes were low and crooning, almost...content. The apprentice felt decidedly unnerved.

"As I said," the stranger continued, "I brought the proper finish for you. Don't bother cleaning the blood or smoothing the back." They held out an unlabeled jar to the apprentice.

Gingerly, the apprentice took it. They went to the counter and set down the violin before gathering brushes. The stranger moved the luthier's body to the ground and rustled about around it. The apprentice tuned them out, wholly uninterested in whatever the stranger wanted with the body.

They focused on the violin and the finish. Slowly, they applied the oily substance to the surface of the violin, laving even strokes over the smooth wood. The violin soaked up the finish eagerly, drinking it up like a plant that had gone without water for several days. The finish darkened the wood and drew out the contrast of the luthier's blood, brightening it against the richness of the wood. It only took a few minutes for it to set and dry.

The stranger appeared as soon as the apprentice finished. They held out a few long strings of twisted material, pink and white and stringy. Nauseated, the apprentice glanced back at the luthier's body. Sure enough, his stomach had been torn open and his organs pulled out.

Reluctantly, the apprentice took the strings from the stranger and strung the violin. They didn't ask how the strings were already dried enough to be fitted to the violin when the luthier's body hadn't even had a chance to cool or how the finish had only taken one coat to perfectly color the violin. They simply attached the strings and carefully tuned each one, violin tucked securely under their chin. The notes were just as rich and beautiful in reality as the apprentice had heard them in their mind, if not more so.

The stranger smiled when the apprentice held out the finished violin. "Beautiful."

The apprentice nodded, mind already turning to what to do with the luthier and the blood all over the shop. However, when they turned to look at the mess, it was gone, like the luthier had never been there and bled everywhere at all. The apprentice turned back to the stranger, questions on their tongue.

"Very well!" The stranger said, already at the door, violin still in hand. "I'll be back when I need another violin! Thank you for your hard work!" The door closed abruptly behind them.

The apprentice stared at their shop, spotless and clean, and then down at their hands and apron, stained with dark blood and varnish.