

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 bell above the door tolled softly as a customer entered the shop. The apprentice started toward the door.

Without looking up from his workbench, the luthier shouted, "Apprentice! Get the door!" It makes the apprentice jump.

The customer looked around the shop imperiously, brushing at a few wood chips on the top of the counter.

"Welcome," the apprentice said softly. "How may we help you?"

"My daughter wants to learn the violin," the customer answered. "I've heard great things about the master here. I want to purchase an instrument from him. My daughter deserves only the best."

This was something the apprentice heard often. 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.

Unfortunately, this also meant the apprentice had to turn many people away. "Do you have a referral?" they asked.

The customer scoffed. "I have the money, don't worry."

The apprentice curled further into themselves, staring firmly at the surface of the counter. There was a sticky patch of varnish near the customer's soft hand. "I'm sorry," they said, softer, "but to get a violin made, you need a referral."

The customer rolled their eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. I'll pay extra, if that's what he wants. It's just a violin!"

There was a loud clatter from the luthier's workbench. The apprentice winced as the luthier got up from his chair and stomped over to the counter.

“Just a violin?” he asked darkly. The customer shrunk back. The luthier continued, “The instruments I make are not ‘just’ violins. They are music embodied, given form and placed only into the hands of the worthy.”

The luthier paused to look the customer up and down obviously. His lip curled. “I have made violins for virtuosos and princes and traveled to countries you have never *heard* of. I don't see how you could possibly think you are worthy of one.”

The customer sputtered, face red. They had likely never been spoken to in such a way. The apprentice envied the luthier's position, if not for the violins he made, then for the way he could talk down to even the richest nobles.

The customer left the shop in a huff, muttering about how there were other shops and it wouldn't do to get arrogant. The luthier paid no mind to the underhanded whispers. He had no shortage of clients begging for his time.

The luthier turned to the apprentice, still glaring. “I have one such client this week. I'll be leaving in the morning, likely before you rise, for three weeks.”

This was not unusual. 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. It was one of the few times the apprentice felt like a future in violin making was worth something.

The luthier lumbered back to his bench, not pausing in his commands. “Oversee the shop as usual. Take all the orders and keep them organized. Don't let any thieves in. And don't forget to tell any of the regulars where I've gone.”

The apprentice gathered the tools from the counter. “Yes, master.”

“Don't slack while I'm gone!” The luthier took the tools from the apprentice. “I'll do a thorough check when I return!”

The apprentice went back to the counter to scrub at the stray spot of varnish. “Yes, master.”

The luthier said nothing more, lost in the back and forth of his finger plane against the wood.

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 and curl up for dinner, a stranger entered. 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. They did not open the windows, did not put the sign outside the door, did not clear up the counter 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.

Softly, the apprentice said to themselves, “I have to finish quickly.”

The music, everpresent in the apprentice’s ears, swelled joyfully.

The apprentice paused, looking down at the wood. “You can understand me?”

The music danced, light and swirling. The apprentice laughed. “Magnificent!”

The music turned playfully impatient.

The apprentice picked up their tools again. “Yes, yes, sorry. Back to work. You want to sing aloud, I know. You will, I’ll make sure of it. Your songs are beautiful.”

The music became satisfied and smug.

For a little while, there was only the rasp of the knife against the wood. Softly, as if afraid of being overheard, the apprentice said, “He won’t approve of this, you know.”

The music quieted too.

“If you’re not finished or hidden when the luthier returns, he’ll want to take over. You’re very beautiful and he will not be able to resist.”

The music swelled, loud and pounding and angry.

“I know,” the apprentice soothed. “He would ruin you. I won't let him. You can trust me to finish perfectly. But,” the apprentice said quickly, before the music could get too excited, “that means I can't afford to rush. You mustn't be rough or jagged when you are finally finished.”

The music softened again, content. The apprentice felt peace at the gentle trust of the violin in their hands.

The apprentice 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.

As little as they slept, the apprentice could not finish before the luthier returned. The night before the luthier was due back, the apprentice lay down to sleep in their pallet, unfinished violin hidden beneath the blankets.

In the morning, the apprentice woke to the luthier already working at his bench. He didn't greet the apprentice as they got up, leaving the violin under the blankets. 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.

The apprentice pleaded with the impatient wood. “I can only work at night now,” the apprentice whispered, “while he's sleeping. We can't let him suspect anything.”

“What did you say?” the luthier snapped.

The apprentice jumped. “Nothing, master. Just getting to work.”

The luthier grunted unsatisfactorily and the apprentice swallowed hard, barely risking a glance at the blankets hiding the violin.

The music quiets to the barest hint of a melody in the back of the apprentice's mind.

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.

“I know you want to be finished,” the apprentice murmured to the violin, half asleep. “But if we're too loud, the luthier will wake and you will never be able to sing right. We must be careful.”

The music softened into something gentle and questioning.

The apprentice smiled to herself. “You don't need to worry. I'm used to him. I'll catch up on sleep once you're finished and I'll survive the scoldings until then. It is a small price to pay for you to be born. You're already coming into shape beautifully.”

The music trilled happily, like a purring cat. It made the apprentice laugh.

As the weeks went by, the apprentice 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.

One day, however, the apprentice made a grave mistake. The weeks of work finally caught up to them and they fell asleep with the violin in their hands, 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 save 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. “It's a violin, you little idiot. It doesn't feel anything.”

Every drag of the gouge into the wood of the violin wrenched 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. After a moment's hesitation, they 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 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, 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.