

1729

Stradavari works the file; brushes away a maple shaving. He runs a stained, liver-spotted finger deliberately across the bridge; senses the slight protrusion of the strings; plucks gently to gauge the tension from the pegs. Satisfied, he straightens himself; blinks.

Noon. Bracing his shaky left hand and pocketing his lens, the luthier wraps his creation in suede and steps into the Cremonan sun.

1730

It is purchased by an aspiring young soloist. Though he is aware that its demands outstrip his ability, he rehearses diligently and finds great happiness leading small orchestras.

1884

When his great-grandchildren's estate is dispersed, the instrument's auction price is found to exceed its sentimental value. It is purchased by the concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic, a quiet man possessed of uncanny technique and emotive power. A couple's stolen first kiss amongst his audience becomes a mutually cherished memory.

In private life he is a sadist and inebriate. Varnish disappears from the instrument's neck. Its belly accrues cigarette burns.

The concertmaster's wife vanishes. Before she is found, he distributes his assets.

1943

It surfaces in Zurich and is sold at auction. Its purchasers loan it to promising soloists. In circumnavigating the globe, it loosens knotted hearts.

1968

Seeds of unearthly melody flow from the astral plane to the Cleveland hotel. The weeping starlet shoulders the instrument; she is merely a conduit. If recorded, the tune would upend musical practice, its insidious grace defying every rule of theory. It is last heard that night, after she shoots the mismarked sachet of heroin to ease the crash from the blotter. Convulsions. The song chews its way through her skull.

1994

Passing between collector and curator, it occupies climate-controlled glass cells, breathing only clean air. The weathered ribs, heavy with centuries of oil and stigmata, hang frozen in time.

2029

The spidery pagoda creeps across the waterfall. An enormous glass platform, buttressed by a filigree of supports, buoys soaring bamboo eaves. The isolated open-air venue is a labor of love – a final push from aging patrons funding a dying art. The transparent flooring conveys weightlessness; immortality – the audience sits on cushions appearing to float hundreds of feet above the churning water.

The soloist steps from behind a curtain and ascends a flight of stairs to a narrow balcony. The concertgoers quiet one another as a digital filter silences the roaring falls.

Shunsen Miyuki and the Strad, they whisper. Music's final legends.

She is thirty; it, three hundred: both untouched by any contemporary. In just a few weeks she has found deep respect for its quiet stoicism and grace. Shaking her inky hair, she raises the instrument and gazes over the falls, inhaling and readying the opening downbow of an arduous concerto.

The spotlight adjusts, reflecting off the glass. Dazzles her. She twists from the sudden exposure, fingers splaying across her eyes.

It tumbles over the railing, tracked unerringly by a thousand stupefied faces.

1732. Conquering a scherzo, the first owner wins the heart of a nobleman's daughter.

They reach for their phones; its free fall will be captured ten thousand times. The scroll hits an outcropping and splinters away.

1905. Revelers flood the Manhattan streets after Mahler's No. 3.

Faces pressed against the glass. An elderly man jumps, unnoticed.

1927. Its body saturates with notes of cognac in the Zurich safe-deposit.

For an instant, the wind whipping through the F-holes blows A440.

1996. Cold filtered air fills the armored car leaving Sotheby's.

And Miyuki's stricken face – the pagoda, the cliffside, the crowd – fade to nothing as it punches through the surface of the rapids and is gone.