

STRINGS

By Kelley Eskridge

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SHE TOOK THE stage, head shaking. Her jaw and the tiny muscles in her neck rippled in sharp adrenaline tremors. She moved her head slowly back and forth while she walked the twenty yards from stage right to the spotlight; it was always the same, this swooping scan, taking in the waiting orchestra, the racks of lights overhead, the audience rumbling and rustling. She moved her head not so much to hide the shaking as to vent it: to hold it until center stage and the white-light circle where she could raise the violin, draw it snug against the pad on her neck; and at the moment of connection she looked at the Conductor and smiled, and by the time he gathered the orchestra into the waiting breath of the upraised baton, she had become the music once again.

After the final bows, she stood behind the narrow curtain at the side of the stage and watched the audience eddy up the aisles to the lobby and the street and home. She could tell by their gentle noise that the current of the music carried them for these moments as it had carried her for most of her life.

Nausea and exhaustion thrust into her like the roll of sticks on the kettledrum. And something else, although she did not want to acknowledge it: the thinnest whine of a string phantom music high and wild in a distant, deep place within her head.

“Excuse me, Strad?”

She jerked, and turned. The orchestra’s First Clarinet stood behind her, a little too close.

“I’m sorry.” He reached out and almost touched her. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No. No, it’s O.K.” She felt the tension in her smile. “Was there something you wanted?” Her right hand rubbed the muscles of her left in an old and practiced motion.

“Oh. Yes. The party has started; we were all wondering... You are coming to the party, aren’t you?”

She smiled again, squared her shoulders. She did not know if she could face it: the percussive of too many people, too much food, the interminable awkward toasts they would make to the Stradivarius and the Conservatory. She had seen a Monitor in the house tonight, and she knew he would be at the party, too, with a voice-activated computer in his hands; they would be soft, not musician’s hands. She wondered briefly how big her file was by now. She wanted desperately to go back to the hotel and sleep.

“Of course,” she said. “Please go back and tell them I’ll be there just as soon as I’ve changed.” Then she found her dressing room and began, unsteadily, to strip the evening from herself.

She was tense and tired the next morning as she packed her music and violin and clothes. Her next guest solo was with an orchestra in a city she had not visited for several years. A Conservatory limo picked her up at the airport along with the current Guarnerius, who handed his cello into the backseat as if it were an aging grande dame rather than hardwood and almost half his weight. He was assigned to the same orchestra, but for only two weeks. She was glad she would have a week alone with the musicians after he left. She did not like him.

He chattered at her all the way to the hotel mistaking her silence for attention. She tried to listen, to allow him to bore her or anger her, to distract her. But she could not hook her attention onto him: it slid away like the rain down the windshield of the car, dropped into the steady beat of the tires on the wet road, thud-DUH thud-DUH, the rhythm so familiar and comforting that she relaxed into it unguardedly and was caught and jerked into the welter of other sound that was also the car and the road and the journey: thwump thwump of the wipers, the alto ringing of the engine, the coloratura squeak of the seat springs as Guamerius leaned forward to make an earnest point, the counterpoint of the wheels of the cars around them, thudduh thudduh THUMP thump-thump THUD-duh — and no matter how hard she tried, she could not make it something she recognized; she had no music for it. No Bach, no Paganini, no Mozart or Lalo or Vivaldi would fit around the texture of the throbbing in her bones — and she was suddenly sure that if her heart were not pounding so loud, she would hear that distant wailing music in her head; it would wind around her like a woman dancing. sinuous, sweating lightly swaying wrapping her up —

She jerked. The edge of Guarnerius’s briefcase pressed against her arm. She remembered G did not like to touch other people or be touched by them. She wondered if he chose to play the cello so he would never have to sit next to another passenger on an airplane. She wondered if he had ever heard phantom music.

“...waiting, Strad.” The cold rim of the briefcase pushed at her arm. She blinked, looked up at him.

“We’re here, for God’s sake. The whole orchestra is probably on pins and needles, poor idiots, waiting in there for the Strad and Guarnerius to arrive, and here you sit gaping off into the middle distance. Or were you planning to ask them to rehearse in the car?”

She could feel herself flush. “No,” she said shortly, definitely, as if it would answer everything, and stepped out.

She never made friends easily. There were a thousand reasons: she was too shy; she was the Strad, and other people were shy of her; she was busy. Sometimes she thought she was too lonely to make friends, as if the solitude and separateness were so much a part of her that she did not know how to replace them with anything else. So it was simply another sign of how upside down things were that she found a heart-friend in the first two days of rehearsals with the new orchestra. They might have been friends the first day, if he had been there.

“I’m very sorry, Stradivarius,” the Stage Manager said. She was a thickset woman with a clipboard and a pinch-eyed look. She was also, Strad thought, worried and not hiding it as well as she wished.

“I’m very sorry,” the SM began again. “I’m afraid we can’t rehearse the Viotti this afternoon as planned.”

Strad rubbed her left hand with her right. She wished for one improbable moment that the SM would give her an excuse to fly into a rage so that she could howl out all her fear and tension safely disguised as artist’s pique. But she could not: all other considerations aside, it reminded her too much of something G might do.

She sighed. “What seems to be the problem? My schedule requests were quite clear.”

“Yes, Stradivarius. But our Piano isn’t here.”

“Then get someone over to the nearest bar or videohouse or wherever she or he...he?...wherever he is and bring him along.”

“It’s not like that. He...” “The SM swallowed. “He’s at a Conservatory disciplinary hearing. We’re not sure if he’s coming back or not...but we don’t want to replace him until we’re sure, because it’s not fair.” She stopped, gripped the clipboard tighter against her breasts. “I beg your pardon,” she said formally. “I did not intend to question the decisions of the Conservatory. The entire orchestra apologizes for the inconvenience caused by one of our members.”

“Oh, put a sock in it,” Strad said, surprising them both. “What’s he done.?”

“He’s been accused of improvising.”

He was back the next day. Strad knew it the moment she walked into the hall for the morning rehearsal. The room seemed brighter, as if there were more light and air in it than the day before.

She saw him in the midst of a crowd of players, like a young sapling in the sun. From habit, she noticed his hands first. They were thin and strong-looking, with long, square-tipped fingers; expressive hands. Good, she thought, and looked next

at his face.

He's so young. His eyes and mouth moved with the same emotion as his hands, but none of the control. Someone touched his shoulder, and as he turned, laughing, he saw Strad watching him. His eyes widened, the laugh turned into a beautiful smile; then, quite suddenly, he looked away. It jolted her, as if a string had broken in mid-note.

She felt movement behind her. Guarnerius appeared at her left shoulder, with the Conductor in tow.

"Is that him?"

"Yes, Guarnerius."

"What did the disciplinary committee decide to do about him?"

"He's on probation. He's been warned." The Conductor shrugged. "I couldn't prove anything, you see; it was just a matter of a few notes. They really couldn't do anything except cite him for faulty technique." The Conductor sounded unconcerned; Strad thought committee hearings were probably all in a day's work for her. No wonder the orchestra was tense. No wonder their Piano was playing forbidden notes. She could imagine herself in his place, young and impatient, aching to prove she was better than the music she was given to play, knowing that one note added here or there would support the piece and give it more resonance, wanting to hear how it might sound...And then she did hear.

It started slow and soft, the music in her head. It swirled through her skull like a thread of heavy cream in hot coffee. It seeped down her spine. I mustn't move, Strad thought, if I can just not move, it won't know I'm here, and it will go back wherever it came from. The almost-audible music bubbled in her bones. Go find somebody else to play with! she thought wildly. Then she looked again at the Piano, and knew it had.

"How soon can you find someone else?" Guarnerius's voice grated against the music. For a confused moment, she wondered if he were talking about her, and a huge, voiceless no swelled inside her.

"I have no grounds to replace him," the Conductor said.

G shrugged. "Contract privilege. If Strad and I find him unacceptable, you're obligated to provide a substitute."

"There isn't going to be anyone as good..."

"There isn't going to be any substitute," Strad interrupted.

“What are you talking about?” Guarnerius looked sharply into her eyes, but she knew the Conductor was looking at her shaking hands.

“He was warned, G, not expelled.”

“He was improvising.”

“The Conservatory apparently doesn’t have reason to think so. Besides, what’s the point of upsetting everyone again? We’ve already missed a day’s rehearsal, and your Strauss is difficult enough without having the orchestra tense and angry and playing badly.”

Guarnerius frowned. Strad turned back to the Conductor, who was managing to look attentive and unobtrusive all at once. Strad could feel her hands still trembling slightly. She folded them carefully in front of her, knowing the Conductor saw.

“Perhaps you’ll be kind enough to gather the players?”

“Perhaps you’d like a moment to yourself before rehearsal?” The other woman’s voice was carefully neutral. Strad wanted to break something over her lowered head.

“No, I would not,” she said, very precisely. “What I would like is a few moments with my music and a full orchestra, if that can be arranged sometime before opening night.”

The Conductor flushed. “My apologies, Stradivarius.”

“Well, let’s get on with it,” G said crossly.

She did not get to speak with the Piano until the next day. She sat on the loading dock at the back of the hall during the midday break, enjoying the sun and the solitude. She was far enough from the street that no mechanical noises reached her: she heard only the creak of the metal loading door in the breeze, the muffled, brassy warble of trumpet scales, the hissing wind in the tall grass of the empty lot behind the building. The sun was warm and red on her closed eyelids. A cricket began to fiddle close by.

“I thought you might like some tea.”

The cricket stopped in mid-phrase. She felt suddenly angry at the endless stream of infuriating and intrusive courtesies that were offered to the Strad. Nevertheless she smiled in the general direction of the voice. “You’re very kind,” she said. She kept her eyes closed and hoped whoever it was would put down the tea

and go away.

“Well, no, I’m not. I just didn’t know how else to get to talk to you.”

“I’m available to any musician. It’s part of being the Strad; everyone knows that. Please don’t feel shy.”

“I’m not shy. I just thought you might not want to be seen talking to me, considering everything.”

Strad opened her eyes and sat up straight. “Oh. It’s you. I didn’t realize...” “He stepped back. “No, please don’t go,” she said quickly, and put one hand out. “Please. I’d like to talk to you.” He came back slowly, tall, dark, close-cropped hair, those beautiful hands. He held two mugs that steamed almost imperceptibly.

“Sit down.”

He handed her a cup and sat next to her on the edge of the loading dock, curling into a half-lotus, tea cradled in his lap. She took a sip and tasted hot cinnamon, orange, bright spices.

“Can I talk to you?” he said.

“Of course. I just told you...”

“No,” he said quietly. “Can I talk to you?”

The rich yellow taste of the tea seeped through her. She felt transparent and warm, caught between the sun and the tea and the young man who wore his music like skin.

“Yes. You can talk to me.”

He let out a long breath. Everything was still for a moment. The cricket began to play again.

“It was awful at the disciplinary committee,” he said, as abruptly and comfortably as if they had known each other for years. “They would have dismissed me if they could. There was an old man with long gray hair who made me take the phrase note by note to prove that I knew how to play it. He wanted me to repeat what I had done during the rehearsal that made the Conductor charge me.”

“Boethius.” Strad nodded. The Piano looked at her. “He’s the Master Librarian,” she explained. His eyes widened and then closed for a moment.

“I suppose he does all the notation of the scores as well.”

“Mmm,” Strad agreed. “He doesn’t like having his toes stepped on.”

“Well, at least now I know why he...he really scared me. I’ll never be able to play that piece again without freezing up at that movement.” He grinned at her. “Don’t say it: I know I’m lucky to even be able to think about playing the piece again at all.” His smile faded. He took a gulp of tea, swallowed, studied the inside of the cup. Strad stayed still, watching him.

He looked up after a while, up and beyond her into the empty field.

“I never improvised half as much in the music as I did in that room.” He was silent for a moment, remembering. His fingers twitched.

“You know I did it, don’t you.” It was not a question.

She nodded.

“Thought so. Some of my friends in there —” he looked at the hall — “don’t believe I could have done it. They wouldn’t understand. They just...they play what they’re told, and they seem happy, but that’s not music. It’s not,” he said again, defiantly. His cheeks were red, and his voice shook. “So how can they be happy?” He swallowed, took a deep breath. “Maybe they aren’t. Maybe they’re just making do the best they can. I can almost understand that now, you know, after the hearing...I wish that cricket would just shut up.” He picked up a piece of gravel from the edge of the dock and threw it out into the field.” The cricket fiddling stopped. “What’s it like, being an Instrument?”

“It’s good.” She saw, in a blur, all her Competitions, all her challengers. “It’s hard. It can be amazing. The Conservatory orchestra is wonderful.” She set down her cup. “You’re thinking of the Competition? Of challenging the Steinway?”

He bit his lip. “I’ve thought about it. Maybe we all do...” He sighed. “I know if I ever want to be the Steinway I’ll have to...I’ll stop improvising. But Strad, I don’t know how to stop the music in my head.”

She felt herself go very still. She had made no sound, but he looked up and out of himself and saw her. “Oh,” he said gently, hopefully, sadly. “You, too?”

She found the muscles that moved her mouth. “I don’t know what...you’re talking about, she meant to say, and have it finished. But she could not. She had a sudden, clear image of how he must have looked in the disciplinary hearing: a new suit, an old shirt, his breath sour with anxiety, and his mouth suddenly not very good with words. He would have appreciated the piano they had him use, she knew; it was undoubtedly the finest instrument he had ever played. She thought of him carefully

wiping the fear-sweat from his hands before he touched it, of him playing it and denying the music he heard lurking within its strings. It broke her heart.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, and behind her the cricket began to play again.

THAT NIGHT she dreamed of her first competition. She stood with the other challengers backstage while a crowd of people with no faces settled into the arena seats. She played in her dream as she had in the real moment, with the passion that the music demanded and the precision that the Judges required of a Strad, as if the piece were a new, wondrous discovery, and at the same time as if she had played it a hundred thousand times before. She forgot the audience was there, until they began to clap and then to shout, and she could not see them clearly because she was weeping.

Then the audience disappeared, and the building vanished into a landscape of sand under a sand-colored sky. Directly ahead of her, a door stood slightly ajar in its frame. She heard her violin crying. She stumbled forward into dark. The violin screamed on and on as she searched for it. She found it eventually, high on a shelf over the door. It went silent when she touched it. She pulled it down and hugged it to her, and fell on her knees out onto the sand.

She looked at the violin anxiously, turning it over, running her fingers across the bridge and the strings. She could not see any damage.

Suddenly a voice spoke from the darkness inside the open door. “It only looks the same,” the voice hissed, and the door slammed shut inches from her face at the same time that the violin stood itself on end and burst into song. And then she awoke, clutching a pillow to her side and sweating in the cool air of her hotel suite.

She lay still for a few moments, then got up and went into the bathroom, filled the tub full of water so hot that she had to lower herself into it an inch at a time.

She closed her eyes as the water cooled around her neck and knees; she remembered the music that had burst from her violin at the end of her dream. She recognized it: the distant, maddening music that she had heard earlier; the haunting melody that stirred her hands to shape it; the illegal music that she could never play.

When she tried to stand up, her hand slipped on the porcelain rim, and her elbow cracked against it. The pain drove the music from her head, and she was grateful.

“Let’s have a picnic,” the Piano said a few days later, at the end of an afternoon’s rehearsal, the rich, rolling energy of good music still in the air. There was a moment of quiet, as if everyone were trying to work out what picnics had to do with concert performances. Then the SM set down the pile of scores she was

carrying with a solid paperish trunk.

“That’s a great idea,” she said. Behind her, Guarnerius rolled his eyes and went back to packing up his cello.

The SM produced a clipboard and a pen. “Who wants to bring what? She was surrounded by a crowd of jabbering voices and waving hands. It took a few minutes for the group to thin out enough to let Strad get close.

The SM looked up at her, obviously surprised. “Was there something you wanted, Strad?”

“I’d like to bring something, but you’ll have to tell me what we need.”

“Oh no, we’ll take care of it, Strad. There’s no need to trouble yourself.”

“I’d like to.” But the SM had already turned away. Damn it, Strad thought. She gathered up her violin and left the hall, walking alone through the double doors into the sun and smell of the street.

The limo waited alongside the curb. The driver got out and moved around the car to take her things. She gave him her violin and music, but shook her head when he opened the rear door for her.

“I’ll walk. Guarnerius is still packing up; I don’t know how long he’ll be. Wait for me outside the hotel, and I’ll pick up my things. Don’t give them to anyone but me.”

“Yes, Stradivarius,” the driver answered. He looked down at the ground while she talked, so she could not tell if he minded being told what to do. Damn, she thought again.

She walked fast the first few blocks. Then she realized that no one recognized her, that no one was paying her any more than casual attention, and gradually she felt safe enough to slow down. She was sweating lightly, and she stopped under a canvas awning in front of a shop to catch her breath. She pressed herself against the cool concrete of the building, out of the way of people moving along the sidewalk, and watched the world go by.

A man stood at a bus stop, absorbed in Wuthering Heights, humming Brahms. A couple passed her with a transistor radio, Vivaldi trickling fuzzily from the speaker. A pack of little boys on bicycles pedaled down the street, bellowing the 1812 Overture booming out the cannon with gleeful satisfaction. My audience, Strad realized with wonder. She thought of all the musicians, all the hours and the work for a few minutes of song that lived and died from one note to the next. But they hear. They hear.

She stepped out from the shadow and wandered up the sidewalk. It was as though the whole world had opened up since she had talked to the Piano, since she had told someone how it was with her. She saw things she had not seen in a long time: dirt, children's toys, hot food ready to eat out of paper containers, narrow alleyways and the open back doors of restaurants where people in grubby aprons stood fanning themselves and laughing. And everywhere music, the works of the masters, clear and rich and beautiful, the only music; the sounds and feelings that had shaped and contained her life since she was young; as young as the child who stumbled on the pavement in front of her. Strad stopped and offered her hand, but the little girl picked herself up with a snort and ran on down the street.

Strad smiled. As she craned her neck to watch the child run, she saw a smear of bright color beside her. She turned and found herself in front of a window full of lines and whorls and grinning fantastical faces that resolved into dozens of kites, all shapes and sizes and shades of colors. "Oh," she breathed, catching her hands up to her ribs.

"Everybody does that," someone said, and chuckled. She saw a woman standing in the open door of the shop. Bits of dried glue and gold glitter and colored paper were stuck to her arms and clothes.

"They're beautiful," Strad said.

"Come in and have a closer look."

She left the shop with a kite bundled under her arm, light but awkward. She walked slowly; the hotel was only a few minutes away, and she wished she had farther to go so that she could enjoy herself longer.

She passed a woman who smiled and then wrinkled her eyebrows and gave Strad an odd look. It was only then that she realized that, like so many others, she was humming as she walked. But the music that buzzed in her mouth was the alien music that she had thought was safely locked in her head. She knew the other woman had heard it; then she began to wonder who else might have heard, and she spun in a circle on the sidewalk, trying to look in all directions at once for someone with a hand-held recorder or a wallet with a Monitor's badge. She was sweating again. Suddenly the hotel seemed much too far away. She wished for some sunglasses or a hat or the cool of the Conservatory limousine. The music lapped against the back of her tongue all the way back to her room.

The kite was an enormous success. Most of the players wanted a turn, although G and the Conductor made a point of turning up their noses when offered. The kite had a large group that leaped and shouted under it as it bobbed along in the clear sky over the park.

The Piano had brought his wife. “You’re someone famous, aren’t you?” she said to Strad when they were introduced. The Piano poked her sharply in the ribs. “Stop it, hon,” she said calmly, and went on shaking Strad’s hand. “Not everybody knows music, as I keep trying to point out to the whiz kid here. Everyone says you’re very good. Did you really tell the SM to put a sock in it?” She was a tall, loose-boned woman with deep-set brown eyes. Strad liked her.

They sat on the grass and talked while the Piano joined the group running with the kite. His wife smiled as she watched him. “He was so excited about meeting you. He needs friends who understand his work. I guess you do, too.”

“Yes,” Strad agreed. “What do you do?” she asked, suddenly very curious.

“I teach literature to fifth graders. They all wanted to come with me today. I told them it was my turn for a field trip.”

Words and music, Strad thought. What a household they must have together.

“What are you thinking?”

“I was just envying you,” Strad said.

Later, after the others had worn themselves out, the three of them took the kite to the edge of the park green for one last flight.

“I know what it reminds me of,” the Piano’s wife said. “With those deep colors and the tail swirling. It looks like something the Gypsies would have had, something that I read to my kids about. They loved to sing and dance. I’ll bet it was just like that, all dips and swirls and jumping around. They played violins, too — did you know that?” she added, with a grin for Strad. “I wonder what it sounded like.”

I think I know, Strad thought.

“Careful, hon,” the Piano said warningly. He jerked his chin toward the other side of the park. A man stood on a slight hill overlooking the common, staring down at the players. He carried a hand-held recorder.

“They don’t leave you alone at all, do they?” his wife muttered. “At least I only have to worry about them on the job. Although I hear it’s worse if you’re a history teacher...” She sighed and began to reel in the kite.

They walked back to the group together, but they found separate places to sit. Strad put the kite away.

WELL, I for one will be extremely glad when this particular tour is over,” Guarnerius announced, and put his drink down on Strad’s table. Strad wished he

would just go away. It was the last night of his engagement with the orchestra, and she was heartily sick of him.

“Where do you go from here?”

“Back to the Conservatory. Time to get ready for the Competition. Well, you know that of course.” He patted at the wrinkles in his jacket. Alcohol fumes drifted lazily from his mouth. “You should be rehearsing yourself. What’s your schedule like?”

“Well, there’s next week here, and I’ve got one more city.”

“I don’t envy you another week with this miserable orchestra.”

“Mmm,” she said noncommittally. G’s engagement had not gone well, and two clanging wrong notes in his solo that night had not improved his temper.

“Really, Strad. That Conductor is as wooden as her baton, the entire brass section needs a good kick in the rear, and that Piano...well, small wonder they had trouble with him, considering the state of the rest of the group.” He nodded, took another swallow of his drink, and set the glass down so that it clacked against the wooden table as if helping to make his point.

“I thought the Piano played very well.”

“Well, of course he did, Strad, don’t be an idiot. He’s already screwed up once, and now he’s being monitored. Of course he’s going to play well.”

Monitored. She picked up her glass and leaned back in her chair, let her gaze wander around the room. And there he was, the same Monitor that she had seen at her last orchestra. Had he been the one at the park? Was it normal for the same Monitor to turn up again and again? She had never noticed before. She realized now how much she, like the Piano, had always taken the Monitors for granted. She felt a cramp like someone’s fist in her stomach. The sickness brought with it the faint, sweet music inside her skull. The Monitor’s head came up like a hunting dog’s, as if somehow he had heard it, too. She watched him scan the room, making whispered notes into his recorder, and she saw as if through his eyes: how scared they all look, how stiff and anxious; see a hand moving too sharply there, a voice raised slightly too high, the smell of hunger for something illegal...Strad dropped her gaze back down into her glass.

There was something cold and wet against her arm.

“...your problem lately, Strad?” Guarnerius nudged her again with his glass.

“What?”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” he said with a smile that was not altogether nice. “You’re very preoccupied lately, aren’t you, dear?”

She could only stare at him in shock.

“Oh yes, I’ve noticed. It hasn’t shown up in your music yet, but it will. Bound to. One of these fine days, you’ll be up onstage, and your hands will slip on the strings, and then we’ll see what it’s like when the Strad loses that precious control, that fucking precision that everyone’s always going on about, oh yes...” “The words trailed off. Strad realized for the first time how drunk he was. She remembered that he had made bad mistakes that night, and the Monitor had been there.

Guarnerius stared into his glass as if he wanted to climb in and hide among the ice cubes. Strad stood up and grabbed her violin, music case, coat, bag into a loose, awkward bundle.

“I’m sorry, Strad,” she heard him mumble, but she was already moving. She smiled and excused her way across the crowded room without seeing or hearing anything properly until she came to a wall and could go no farther. There was an empty chair by the wall. She dropped her things on the floor next to it and sat down.

The chair made her invisible somehow; at least, no one approached her. The party happened in front of her, like a video. She rubbed her hands, left with right, right with left, watching the groups mingle and break apart and spiral into new forms: the currents matched the music that swelled in gentle waves in her head. And it was too much; she could not fight it any longer. Somewhere inside her a door edged open, and the music trickled through.

She did not know how long she sat before she realized that someone was standing in front of her. She looked up. It was the Piano. She could not speak. He took her arm and pulled her to her feet, tugged her out a side door of the restaurant onto an open patio. He sat her hard into a wrought-iron chair at one of the tables. The metal bit cold and sticky through her light dress. She opened her mouth and took in great heaving bites of air, one after the other, until she felt the door inside her push tightly closed, the music safely behind it.

The Piano sat next to her. She held his hand so hard that the ends of his fingers turned bright red.

“Oh, thank you,” she whispered. “How did you know to bring me out here?”

He reached over and brushed a finger against her cheek. It came away wet. “You were crying,” he said. “You were sitting in that chair, staring at nothing and crying like the loneliest person on earth, and you weren’t making a sound. So I

brought you outside.”

She put her hands up to her face. Her skin felt puffy and hot.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said.

And then: “I’m scared.”

The next morning she met some of the players in the hotel to have breakfast and say good-bye. The Piano was there. She kept him in the lobby after the others had left.

“I hate to say good-bye,” he said.

“I have something for you,” she said. She gave him the kite.

“I’ll fly it for you.”

She looked at him closely. “You be careful,” she said.

“Don’t worry.”

“I mean it.”

“So do I. I’ll keep the kite, and every time it flies I’ll be thinking of you and the music we both have in us. The trick is to keep it alive somehow. There has to be a way, Strad. There has to be a way to have it and play it and be what we are.”

He stood looking at her, and she thought he would say more. But in the end, he only nodded and kissed her gently on the cheek.

She went to her next city, to the rehearsals and dinners and performances and parties, and then back to the Conservatory, to the soundproofed suite of rooms and the tiny private garden that were hers for as long as she was the Stradivarius. She rested, ate, played with the other musicians, all the Instruments gathered together to face their yearly challengers. She rehearsed her Competition piece. One day, Guarnerius asked her, stiltedly, how her last engagement had gone.

“It went fine,” she told him. “No problems.”

He muttered, “Oh, how nice,” and stepped around her, moved stiffly down the hallway toward one of the Conservatory practice rooms. She wondered how he would have reacted if she had told him that she had played as well as ever, and that it had all been empty: hollow, meaningless sound.

It was a relief to put her violin away when she got back to her rooms. There were letters on the desk. There were instructions and announcements from the Conservatory. There was a note from the Conductor of an orchestra she had guested with once before. There was a package from the Piano.

The note was unsigned: he would know that her mail might be monitored. She did not realize it was from him until she opened the package and saw the kite. She put it slowly on the desk and set the note beside it on the polished wood. She read it again without touching it. A little of the silence inside her gave way to the remembered sound of his voice.

I am sending you this as an admirer of your work and your talent. The beauty of this kite reminds me of the music that you carry within you, that you as the Strad keep in trust for us all. Do be careful of the kite; it is not as delicate as it looks. I have been told recently, by those who love me best and who watch me closely, that I can no longer risk flying it myself, as it is too strenuous and dangerous to my health. I will miss it. I would not suggest that you fly it, but it is beautiful to look at.

She folded the note into a small rectangle and tucked it inside her shirt, against her skin. She thought about the Piano running in the park, whooping and pointing at the kite. Then she went out of her rooms into the garden and pushed a chair into the sun, sat and closed her eyes against the light and let the silence fill her up.

She stayed in her rooms for the next four weeks, rehearsing for the Competition. Her practice was painstaking. She wrung the piece dry. Every note, every phrase, every rest was considered and balanced. Every nuance of tone and meaning was polished until the notes seemed to shine as they shot from the strings.

She felt hollow and open, as wide and empty as a summer sky. She slept without dreaming. She spoke only when necessary. She touched everything gently, as if she had never known texture before.

The night of the Competition, she waited calmly in the wings. The challengers stared at her, or tried not to. She smelled their sweat. One of them, a young woman with pale lion-gold hair, was very good. Strad smiled encouragingly at her when she came offstage, and the young woman smiled back with all the joy of accomplishment, and then blushed desperately.

The Assistant Stage Manager came to her. "Five minutes, please, Stradivarius," he said, and gave her a little bow and smile that meant good luck. She rose and walked to the place that she would enter from. Through the gap in the curtains, she could see the Judges frowning over their evaluations of the challengers, the audience shifting in their seats.

She waited. The violin and bow hung loosely from her relaxed right hand. She

thought of all the entrances, all the stages, all her years of Stradivarius. Her arm began to tingle, like the pinprick feeling of warm blood rushing under cold skin. All her years of Stradivarius. All the music that she had played, always with the correct amount of passion and control. All the music that she had been in those moments suddenly swelled in her; she heard every note, felt every beat, tasted every breath that had ever taken her through a complicated phrase. She felt dizzy. A pulse pounded in her stomach. Her hand, and the violin, began to tremble.

The ASM cued her entrance.

She took the stage, head shaking. The audience shifted and rumbled. She found her place in the hot light, and when she breathed, the audience breathed with her. The Judges nodded. She lifted the violin. It felt warm against her neck. One of the Judges asked, “Are you ready?”, and she smiled. “Yes,” she said, and white heat shot through her; “yes,” she said again, and felt a hum inside her like a cricketsong in her bones; and yes, she thought, and the door that had been shut so tight within her burst open, and the music battered through, spinning inside every part of her like a dervish, like a whirlwind, like a storm on the ocean that took the tidewater out and spit it back in giant surges. The music in her exulted and laughed and wept and reached out, farther, farther, until she wondered why everyone in the room did not stop, look, point, dance, run. It poured out sweet and strong through her heart and head and hands into the wood and gut of the violin that was her second voice, and her song was yes and yes and yes in a shout and a whisper and a pure, high cry. She played. She saw Monitors stumbling down the aisles and out from backstage, slowly at first and then fast, faster, toward her with outstretched hands and outraged eyes. She saw men and women in the audience rise to their feet, mouths and eyes and ears open, and they hear, she thought as the Monitors brought her down, they hear as her violin hit the floor and snapped in two with a wail, they hear as her arms were pinned behind her, they hear, and she smiled. Her hands were empty. She was full of music.

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Kelley Eskridge’s short fiction has appeared in *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine*, *Little Deaths*, and *Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine*. Last year, she won a writing grant from the Astraea Foundation in New York

About “Strings,” she write, “I wrote ‘Strings’ after seeing a television interview with a violin soloist named Nadia Sonneberg, who plays as if her whole self were the instrument. She doesn’t give a damn if she stands crooked or makes funny faces or cries while she’s doing it. It was wonderful to see a performer care more about her music than about someone else’s idea of how she ought to look when she plays it.

“Strings” marks Kelley’s first appearance in F&SF.

“Two days later at midnight, while I was out walking my dog, the story dropped out of the clear and cold sky on me all of a piece