

After the screaming and shrill laughter had ended, the frantic sound of violin playing continued on. The casket did little to muffle the sound of it, nor did the passing of time do anything to slow it down. It had been hard enough to force him into the wooden box to begin with. Andrew was far from weak, he couldn't afford to be with the job he kept before the manor. Even running perpetually on a half-empty stomach, there was no time to be wasted on the horrible feeling of fatigue. But even with the years of experience in dragging literal dead weight around, it was much different, he found, to force a man taller than himself into a casket while he thrashed around. He ran his gloved hand along his jaw, the skin and muscle tender and surely developing a bruise from the force of Antonio's long, bony arms slamming against anything they could reach. He'd already gotten his nose to stop bleeding, it wasn't that bad, and he was glad he wore black clothes because the stains that would surely be on it weren't visible.

He had no reason to stay in the room with the casket, with Antonio, but he also had no reason to leave it, either. He'd never gotten to hear music much, outside of his mother's humming when she was still around. Sometimes, if he could get close enough to the church without being seen, he would listen to the hymns played by the organists, and the Latin singing of the choirs. But it never lasted long, and it was always muffled, both by the thick church walls and the noise of the world around him. There was nothing wrong with listening to him play, even if the music was different from any he'd ever heard before. He hoped there wasn't, at least, and that it was just Antonio playing frantically, and not the "demon" that he shared a body with. But even then, Andrew thought, is there anything wrong with hearing a devil play so long as he didn't let it tempt him?

He adjusted himself on the uncomfortable wooden chair and continued staring down at the glossy wooden casket. At first, when Antonio had first arrived at the manor and the Baron DeRoss insisted Andrew participate in a game himself, he'd tried to speak to the violinist. While he'd never consider himself outgoing, or even friendly, he'd wanted to make an effort to at least try to get to know the man he'd be involved with for the indefinite future. But despite his best attempts to seem sociable, the man spent much of his time locked in his room, surely drunk and laughing strangely. Eventually, he'd stopped

trying to speak with him much at all, the strained smile and haunting laughter finally unsettling him enough to curb his efforts. He thought it was a shame to see someone as skilled as Antonio participating in the games, even with that demon of his, and his strange, vain personality.

After a short period of working for the manor, Andrew understood what the games really entailed, although he couldn't figure out what purpose they truly served. And despite his discomfort with it, the Baron's smooth talking ways had convinced him that he was not only needed there, but that his work for the manor was a positive and righteous thing. He interred many of the participants of the games himself, carving each headstone and burying them all himself, and often found himself pitying them and their often brutal demises. He could do nothing to save them, mortally or to absolve the sins of their pasts, but he did his best to offer some sort of respectful burial. His own guilty conscience of what he had to do before coming here, overcoming him as well, perhaps.

It goes without saying, then, that when Mr. DeRoss had tasked him with joining one of his games; he had no desire to play. But there was little to do, the baron had offered him so much in the time he had worked for him. Besides, he would have been much worse off if he'd never come at all, so the game couldn't have been worse than what he'd endure outside the manor grounds. And so he'd accepted, and tried to seem gracious for the chance.

In truth, he'd been largely correct, anyway. He couldn't say he expected to be around so many eccentric performers, but it could have been much worse, he was sure of it. Nothing had gone all that badly to begin with, except Mr. Will's odd and unpleasant attitude, and now the strange fit Antonio seemed to have after drinking too much. He'd come to understand other games were much more gruesome, and while he'd never been given details that he didn't need to know, simply being face to face with someone's remains can tell you enough to make you not need to ask anything more.

Andrew turned again to the casket on the floor, realizing that in the time he'd spent thinking about how he'd ended up in the manor, the violinist hadn't yet stopped, but that the melody had slowed down greatly. He didn't know much at all about the instrument he played, but it seemed now that he'd stopped only

playing that one note, as well and beautifully as he had been before, and now played something with many more peaks and valleys to the tones. He'd felt a strange sense of relief at the change, and a stranger still desire to open the casket to gaze down at the man he'd been forced to inter alive within it.

He knelt on the floor beside it, running his hand along the smooth surface of the unadorned but well made lid, but stopped himself before he could curl his fingers around the lip and force it open. He pulled his hand back, afraid to open it, afraid to see how Antonio would react, and that he might stop if he had. He realized then that the sound of his knee striking the wooden floor near the head of the casket and the sound of his palm smoothing over the wood was surely audible from the inside as well. While the music didn't yet stop, Andrew felt the creeping heat of embarrassment wash over him, unknowing if it had even been noticed. Antonio had been very out of it, after all. Drumming his fingers on his thigh, he felt the childish desire to try to "play along" overcome him through the burn of his embarrassment. He didn't know the song Antonio was playing in there, or even if it was a famous one, really, but he let his middle and index finger tap gently upon the surface of the casket, the sound barely audible through the thick leather gloves and the lightness of his touch, and tried his best to follow along with the notes played by the violinist. The music stopped shortly after Andrew had found the basic rhythm of it, and his blood ran cold for a moment. Then, slowly, quietly, the music returned. It was simpler, like something you would teach a child who had never touched an instrument before, and he felt a small smile fight its way onto his face, as he resumed his efforts to tap along.