

THE VIOLINIST

a WITCH DOCTORS mystery
by Marin O'Connor



INTRODUCTION

This is intended as an introductory Mystery to help get people acclimated to the way Mysteries function within the game, as well as to allow the Guide practice in working with an Agenda and how Non-Player Characters are treated within the course of play. As such, this document is dramatically longer than a typical Mystery would be.

Feel free to adapt this Mystery and its underlying Agenda in whatever manner you please, but don't complicate it further unless you have a clear idea *why* you are doing so. If you are doing it out of fear that it may be too simple, the author recommends that you run it as-is prior to adding elements.

These things can take longer than you expect.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THIS MYSTERY

- ★ *The Violinist* touches on a characteristic of magick practice that is unfortunate: It is easier to cast spells on children, even teenagers, than on adults. As such, it is common for people with access to magick – via their own studies on the subject or by using a sigil – to target children or have a spell go awry and land on an unfortunate young person.
- ★ As with most Mysteries, *The Violinist* begins with the Inciting Event. In most Inciting Events, there is ordinarily some portion of it that is read aloud, though it ultimately finds its way to one or more Player characters and the game commences.
- ★ Similar to most Agendas, there are tracts of time and detail that fall between the elements listed in the Agenda for *The Violinist*. This doesn't mean nothing happened in those gaps. This simply provides the Guide room to play with the environment and details as they see fit, while keeping the overall Mystery on track.
- ★ *The Violinist* includes more information than normal for a Mystery, but the primary things to include in a standard Mystery are:
 - *Key Elements of this Mystery* to notate subject matter or topics that the Mystery deals with that may be alarming for some Players
 - *The Inciting Event* to set the tone of the Mystery and some of main characters the Players will be interacting with
 - *The Agenda(s)* as a reference point for the Guide as the Players move through the world and explore the Mystery
 - The *Key Non-Player Characters'* information and stats

This is specifically called out because it may trigger issues for participants and, therefore, is a good thing to explicitly mention at the start.

In roleplaying games, people often note how unlikely the Players' plans will survive first contact with NPCs or dice, but this is equally true for Guides' plans for their Players. This is why WITCH DOCTORS handles game prep the way it does: To set events in motion but reinforce the need to adapt as things happen. You want Players to feel a sense of accomplishment by the end, not prove how clever you are.

BEGINNING THE SESSION

- 1| **Socialize.** It's good to start casually. If this is an impromptu group, or there is anyone new to the group, begin with some quick introductions. Especially if someone is new to a regular group, don't be in a rush. Give folks a chance to talk and get to know one another.
- 2| **Set Expectations.** As you prepare to start, it's good to remind people of the *Expectations* at the front of the WITCH DOCTORS book. Two good ones to stress are "Participate" and "Support One Another". The latter is a good segue into introducing preferred Safety Tools – whether Lines and Veils, Script Change, etc., or some combination thereof.
- 3| **Turn Order.** Have everyone read off the total of their Reflex Save *without a roll* and record the numbers. If any number repeats, have those with the matching number roll to break the tie. Put the names of their characters in descending order based on their Reflex Scores and the outcome of any tie-breaking rolls on a piece of paper that's easy for you to refer back to.
- 4| **Character Introductions.** Go through the Turn Order and have each Player introduce their character. It's assumed for this Mystery that the characters know one another from before, but that won't always be the case. Key things to mention are Concept, Profession, and anything distinctive about the character's life or situation. Token descriptors – such as 'the fire in Fireball' – should be mentioned, but no Goals should be discussed.
- 5| **Determine the Setting.** *The Violinist* could take place anywhere, so have a quick discussion about when and where the characters live. There's nothing in the Mystery that forces one time or place versus another; so long as it's contemporary, it should run fine.
- 6| **Confirm everyone is ready.** If people need to go to the restroom, do it now. If they've a pressing text to reply to, do it now. Check off the boxes and make sure everyone is ready.
- 7| **Now, turn the page.**

For a one-shot, Private Goals may not be necessary. In fact, they might just take up time that would be best served letting the Players' characters interact and solve the Mystery.

For a game intended to set up a campaign? That's different. Private Goals should exist for each character and the Guide should know what they are in advance.

THE INCITING EVENT

Read aloud.

The auditorium is darkened. The stage, lacquered and fine, is empty but well-lit. Set for someone to step out onto. Judges sit in seats at the front, while pockets of family and friends dot the seating behind them. Separate. Politely competitive.

Ms. Rhetta Anderson sits beside Gary Froman. She's wearing an elegant dress, looking the part of supportive parent that she is. Gary is wearing a tweed suit, appearing in his role as the stodgy but well-meaning teacher that he is.

Gary glances at a program in his hand. They both have a copy.

He says, "Jerome's next. How was he this morning?"

"Fine. He seemed fine. He'll be okay," Ms. Anderson responds, as much to quiet her own nerves as his. She bites her bottom lip and waits.

A few moments later, Jerome Anderson steps onto the stage from behind the left curtain. His gait is professional for his thirteen years of age. He is well-dressed. He carries a violin case at his side.

The judges share a quick whisper, smiling. Their demeanor before – quiet, scribbling notes – has given way to genuine excitement. They know Jerome. They expect great things.

Jerome reaches the center of the stage and sits on a stool to open his violin case. He carefully lifts the instrument out, grabbing its bow. Though the violin is worn, well-loved, it shines in the stage's bright lights. The wear and tear no longer a source of frustration – but evidence of an instrument played to its peak.

He stands with it, steps away from the stool, and edges nearer the judges and audience.

Gary takes Rhetta's hand. Supportive. There. She's watching her son carefully, proud – unabashedly proud – but nervous.

Jerome extends the bow upwards and begins to play. Frantic. Rapid. A controlled font of sound and chaos. Prokofiev Violin Sonata, Op 115, 1st Movement. A flourished and confident start to his set.

And then, the instrument screeches in protest.

The judges' heads raise.

Rhetta gasps.

Gary squeezes her hand harder.

Jerome stops and gives a halfway smile at the judges. He says, "Sorry." His voice is small in the large room; his arms shake, uncertain. He restarts.

Another screech. This time sooner.

He restarts.

Another screech. Almost immediate.

His eyes jostle back and forth between his hand and the instrument. Sweat runs down the side of his face. Someone at the back of the room offers a muffled cough.

It is quiet. The fragile quiet after something breaks.

The judges, looking more confused than judgmental, whisper amongst themselves. Finally, one of them says, "Jerome. That's enough for today."

Jerome looks at the judge, wanting to protest, but knows not to. Breathing hard, he says, "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened."

He steps back to the stool and gingerly lowers his violin back into its case. Tears run down to his mouth.

He shuts the case, gives a quick bow to the audience, and walks off stage. Rhetta rushes down the side aisle to find him. Gary remains in his seat, stunned.

"That was four months ago," Rhetta tells you. "He can only get a few notes into any piece, then..." She swallows. "Over and over. Right when he should soar, he falls. Pieces he's played since he was 10. Before that, even. And it's creeping into everything. He got into a fight at school. His teachers tell me his grades are... I need help. I need to know what's happening to him."

Which of you is she speaking to, why did she come to you, and where is this conversation taking place?

Stop reading aloud.

GUIDING THE GAME

Beyond *The Inciting Event*, the *Agenda*, and *Key Non-Player Characters* information that follows, there is minimal strict guidance for how to act as Guide for a Mystery. This is for a few reasons:

- 1| **You are not the only author.** The Players' choices and ideas should both evolve and inform the story and its outcome. The Agenda is there to let you know what Morris has done or is going to do barring some outside resistance (hint-hint), it's not to railroad the Players' characters and send them down narrow, linear hallways. Give them time to explore their characters' lives. Each has a spot in the Turn Order for a reason. Morris will march along his own path, perhaps deviate to clear up liabilities along the way.
- 2| **The rolls will help define how things progress and move.** This ties into the note above about Players' actions, but dice are the third author of the Fiction – unbiasedly dictating outcomes. Dispensing success and failure without a care for the story or anyone's livelihood. It's your job to roll with them, rather than against them, and use them to create opportunities or escalation within the narrative.
- 3| **As you might guess, notes of 'Escalation' in the Agenda represent points in which Morris may start burning shit down.** How far he takes it is up to you. Whether Passive or Active Measures. The point is, these are pivot points in the story in which something he cares about is threatened in some fashion and he may choose to respond. By and large, he likes the trajectory his life is on now and he's unlikely to let it go without blood being spilled.
- 4| **Study the Agenda and try to fill in gaps and timing of events for yourself.** How long between X and Y? What are some of the other people involved with those listed in the *Key Non-Player Characters* section like? These people are notable because they aren't average. Beyond that, keep in mind that the information about people like Morris and Rhetta and Gary doesn't outline what they can and cannot do. Allow their behaviors and actions to flow organically from what you know about them. Most of your prep isn't in detailing out Scene after Scene; it's internalizing who these key people are and what they're like.
- 5| **Don't talk about Token all the time.** People often get lost due to how prominently it's discussed in the Rulebook, but Token isn't something that Witch Doctors talk about all the time. It's a toolbox that they pull out when they need it or a map for when they have to figure out how the hell to get from point A to point B. Let the Players ideate and be creative within it – and if they come up with a really cool idea, run with it. Pretend it was yours and make the game better by your theft. (Give them credit after.)

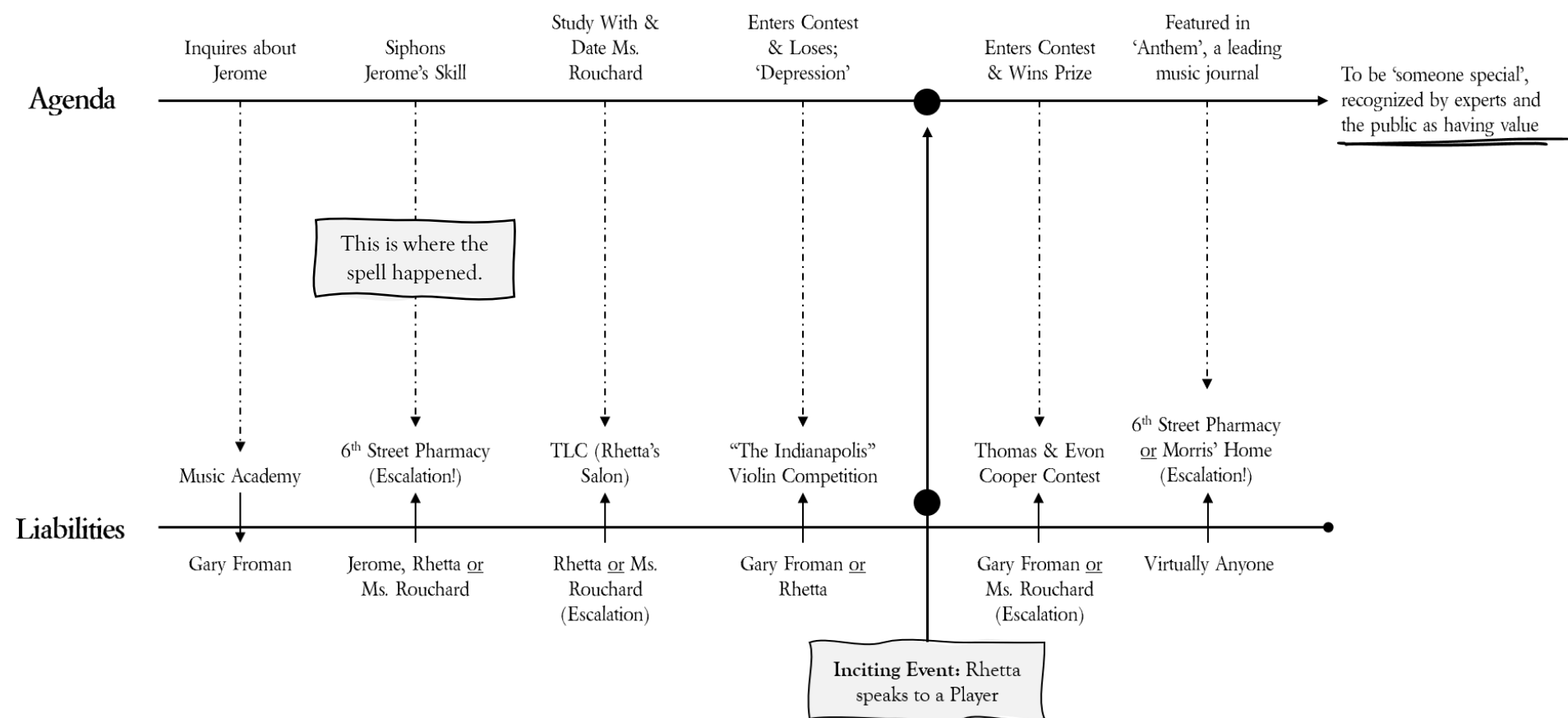
While you're studying the Agenda, ask yourself, "Why did Morris lose the competition in Indianapolis?" Also, note that he's probably not in the best state of mind right now after the loss. This may make him more vulnerable or more likely to escalate things. Up to you.

You can allow some time for the Players to ideate as to how the spell or spells work, but the crux of the problem doesn't change:

Find the Source. Make them reveal the **HOW** token to kill the spell(s).

THE VIOLINIST

The Agenda of Morris Haller



KEY NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

MORRIS HALLER

Good at hiding who he is. Tightly wound. Screaming quietly.

2 ATH 4 WIL 1 EMP 4 INT

Morris is a pharmacist at the 6th Street Pharmacy. Plain-looking and naturally quiet, Morris has suffered for decades – since childhood, as a result of emotional abuse – with the sense that anything he has of value is stripped away from him. That anything left over goes unpraised and unacknowledged. He is polite and does what he should on the outside, but is a writhing, broken mass set to explode inside.

Up until the events within the Agenda, he has lived a very routine and mundane life. Waking up each day, knowing what it would be. See a prescription. Fill it. Give someone advice that will invariably be ignored.

He lives in a small, well-kept home on Maple Street. Currently dating Danielle Rouchard.

Morris Haller is the chief antagonist of the Mystery and owner of the Agenda that drives it. Whether he is a Witch Doctor or has magick powers is not identified. That's left to you to decide. It's possible he used a sigil to cast the spell that drains Jerome's talent, but this agenda is left unsaid.

The intention is for you, the Guide, to interpret the information provided and represent Morris in a manner that fits your own ideas and inspirations, and bends as the Players start to formulate their own ideas. He could be one of those quiet-dangerous people similar to many serial killers, or he could be someone who wears his bitterness at life's ass-kickings on his sleeve. The point is to embody him as a real person, as someone who knows there are social expectations and laws and largely lives within them despite his emotional needs going unsatiated by doing so.

Magick merely gave him a means to express himself, whether he did it on his own or with help.

Rhetta is the reason the Players' characters are involved at all in what's happening and acts as a collaborator and ally. In the Agenda, she is listed as owning a salon/spa called 'Tender Loving Care' but that is easily changed depending on your preferences. She is someone who had to build a new life after the old one fell apart, with the death of her husband. She is originally from the town or neighborhood in which the game takes place and moved back only in the last few years upon becoming a widow.

Your key task with Rhetta is making her admirable and someone deserving of respect, but not someone who is perfect. She does not fear vulnerability. She's been under its thumb for too long to worry about appearing weak in moments in which she is.

Beyond that, which is largely optional and subject to your own tastes and judgement, her characterization is up to you.

RHETTA ANDERSON

Strong mother. Businesswoman. Goal-oriented & focused.

2 ATH 2 WIL 3 EMP 2 INT

Rhetta is a single mother to Jerome after her husband died overseas in combat. She owns a business in town that she bought upon the prior owner's retirement and made it through the awkward transition that always follows such changes. Attractive and good at listening, Rhetta is an engaging and passionate person who stands up for others. She plans to run for political office someday.

Upon discovering her son's gift, she devoted herself to opening opportunities for him and working hard to afford a private teacher (Gary Froman). She has become knowledgeable about music and particularly about the violin in a way that is admirable.

She lives with her son in a two-story home in a down-and-going neighborhood.

JEROME ANDERSON

Violin prodigy. 13 years old.

1 ATH 4 WIL 2 EMP 1 INT

Jerome is Rhetta's only child and is recognized as one of the most talented young violinists in the country. He has won numerous contests and been featured in *Anthem* magazine in their 'Top 20 Under 20' showcase. Until recently, he has been an even-minded and polite young man with clear aspirations and goals. His private teacher, Gary Froman, came out of retirement in order to guide Jerome's innate talent.

The spell cast upon him siphons his Skill in Violin anytime he attempts to play and transfers it to Morris. Since it was invoked, he has seen therapists and even been put on medication for depression. Without the confidence derived from his talent with the violin, Jerome has struggled to maintain relationships and become despondent and irritable. This period has also brought a bit of his hidden ego to the surface, as it has taken a hell of a hit.

Gary Froman is Jerome's private violin teacher and someone who may have an antagonistic relationship to the Players as they enter the story and start asking questions. The reasons for this, as well as his injury, are entirely up to you.

As with most high-level teachers, Gary is demanding of Jerome and has a strained relationship with the boy especially now – though they've never been close.

Gary is remarkably knowledgeable about music, contests, and anything happening in the scene and knows most people who play in the space within the area and further abroad.

In particular, he is on a first-name basis with Ms. Danielle Rouchard, another violin teacher in the neighborhood that Morris began dating shortly after signing up for violin lessons with her and amazing her with his 'natural' gift for the instrument.

Jerome is the primary victim in "The Violinist" and has been emotionally devastated by the spell's impact. You may characterize Jerome in whatever manner you prefer, but generally speaking, he has been raised fairly well. His unique talents have made him a bit arrogant, though this has largely been easily masked due to things going his way. Now that they aren't, the diagnosis and its outcomes are more noticeable.

Given his four months of depression, it would be possible for him to be considering taking destructive action: In the Fiction of "The Violinist", through Rhetta's own words, his grades are slipping, and he has been fighting with his classmates. How much this forecasts future, more severe difficulties is up to you.

GARY FROMAN

Master violinist. Prevailing Condition: Right hand, injured. Stubborn. .

1 ATH 5 WIL 2 EMP 3 INT

Gary Froman was once a talented violinist in his own right. Through his 20's and into his mid-30's, he traveled the world as part of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, until his right hand was mysteriously injured due to circumstances that he does not speak about. This ended his career as a performer, though he carried on as a teacher for several decades but few of his students ever reached his level of success.

Frustrated by the loss of the limelight, Gary retired from teaching 20 years before the events of the game and bought a simple home in a neighborhood known for its eclectic art scene and political activism. After hearing Jerome play during a music festival and noting that they lived not too far from one another, Gary came out of retirement and has acted as his teacher for the last 6 years.