

# [Piano & Forte] Audition

## Original Doc

“Good ladies and gentleman of this fine establishment this evening, I must humbly thank you all for being such a wonderful audience for my magical illusions! I do hope I have lifted the veil of the mundane from over your eyes onto the true wonders that exist in the world!” The handsome man on stage - an illusionist by trade if his large crimson cloak perfect for obscuring his next trick, voluminous scarlet top hat with plenty of space for secrets in abundance, and larger than life personality was anything to go by - gave his audience his deepest and most sincere bow as one of his beautiful assistants stepped out of the hanging structure she had just been seemingly teleported into to join his bow, another running from her place at the side of the stage to join them. Both women were dressed in lilac leotards underneath a white dress shirt and a lilac coat with long tails with bells attached to the end, gold trim abundant throughout the design, with lilac high heels and what looked to the audience to be fishnet stockings rising up their long legs to meet the outfit above. The beautiful blonde woman with the clear pointed ears of an elf, not normally found this far into civilization, was joined on the magician’s other side by a red skinned woman with long dark hair and a pair of mismatched horns - one short, one long and flowing towards her back - as the two colorfully dressed women bowed next to him as the crowd before them erupted into cheers at the wonderful performance, the spotlight bright upon them as they breathed heavily from their work.

“That was a marvelous performance.” A well dressed woman adorned with quite a few sets of jewelry said to her partner at one of the tables near the front, the pair having gotten a good view of everything from their seats as the magician put on quite the masterful performance. “I can’t believe we were able to see the Great Illumaine in person like this. You’d almost believe he was using actual magic for his tricks, the way they’re done so perfectly. It makes his admission that everything is done without any actual spells being cast all the more impressive.”

“Quite so.” Her partner chimed in, clapping his well-adorned hands a few times in appreciation as well. “We have the Vicatrino family to thank for tonight’s performance. I heard it’s the Don’s daughter’s birthday tonight, so she asked him to get Illumaine for her birthday entertainment. I guess even a world famous magician like him can’t resist the call of the Vicatrino family.”

As Illumaine and his assistants stepped off the stage as the curtains drew across, the couple sat down as the woman spoke up. "So true. I knew accepting their invitation tonight was a good idea. I mean, I've been meaning to butter up with the Don, but getting a show with such a spectacular magician was a nice treat as well." The two laughed in a haughty manner, the woman covering her mouth with a gloved hand as she did. "And an elf and a girl with devil blood as assistants. That's quite the rare pair there. I guess Don Milifone put some good coin into the entertainment."

"I wouldn't be sure of that." The man spoke in a low whisper, covering her hand with his as he spoke quietly. "Elves don't normally leave their forest homes and venture so far into civilization. I personally think she was a present to Illumaine in exchange for coming here." The woman looked at him, glancing around before mouthing the word "Slave?" He nodded, steepling his hands in front of him as he leaned back into his seat with a serious expression. "The Don is rumored to often force people into serious debt, then force them to work in order to pay it off. I suppose this girl got lucky that she just has to perform in a magic show."

"No doubt. And what about the other woman, the devil child? Think she's one of those too?" She said "those" like one would speak of an exotic animal, rather than as a person.

The man considered it for a bit, a frown forming on his face as he thought. "Hard to tell. The elf tried to look happy, but she couldn't get that sad look out of her eyes. Poor thing's probably untrained in how to hide her feelings. But the horned girl... I don't know, something about her seemed different. And I could swear she kept gazing up at the Don's booth when she thought everyone was focused on the tricks."

"Oooh~" The woman suddenly looked interested. "Do you think she joined the show to try and get close to the Vicatrino Family? Help put on a good show with such a prestigious figure and maybe earn their favor that way? Maybe 'accidentally' finding herself in the Don's bed tonight? I hear his wife is on a trip to another continent this evening, so he's probably feeling pretty lonely~"

The man shrugged, clearly unconcerned as he held up his glass as a waiter walked close with a bottle of champagne, filling it with practiced precision. "Seems likely. Why else would anyone come here willingly if not to win the Don's favor?" He and his partner laughed another haughty laugh together, clinking their glasses together in celebration as other guests seemed to share in that sentiment all around them, all the guests eager socialites trying to earn the mafia boss' favor that night. Unaware, of course, of the coming force of change that was about to unfold that very night.

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"I must say, Mr. Illumaine, that illustrious performance of illusory imagery and marvelous manipulations of minstrel oratory and mazed masses to magnify your magecraft monumentally. It would scarce cross one's thinking that such a phenomenal artist of sleight of hand started his professional vocation as a mere peterman."

In Illumaine's dressing room backstage, two men sat across from each other, each in a different state as they spoke to each other. The magician was currently reclining across a comfy couch in his room, his cape and hat haphazardly hung nearby as the man looked almost unwell now that the public's gaze was away from him and he was talking to the person in front of him. That individual, in contrast, was much more cheerful, his tanned hand holding a pen on his notebook as looked at the magician intently. He wore a simple vest and shirt combo, and wore a simple bowler hat on his head and a simple pair of glasses on his face as he spoke a veritable cascade of linguistic chaos upon the beleaguered magician, who sighed in response.

"I still can't believe you squirreled that bit of history out of whatever dark hole you found it in. Guess I shouldn't underestimate the ability of a journalist looking for a scoop. Especially one willing to blackmail a magician in exchange for an interview, an exclusive backstage pass for after the show, and for having me take on that deviled woman nearly three days before the biggest show of my life."

The apparent journalist laughed, as if the illusionist said something humorous. "Forsooth, not to brag on about myself overmuch, but my abilities as an intelligencer are among the most first-rate for my chosen occupation. Though I'd scarce imagine that your opinion of the maid I presented to you is held to a much greater regard than my own talents?" He looked almost smug as he spoke, sitting up and smirking down at Illumaine.

The magician, for his part, sighed. "I'll admit, I had my doubts about her when she first showed up for practice after my last assistant suddenly came down with a severe illness right before the show. She was so shy and scared to talk to just about everyone, I thought there was no way she'd make it on the stage for the show. But when we started practicing the tricks, it was almost amazing how quickly she picked up how each trick was performed and could pull it off flawlessly. Hell, I could swear she could probably do my part as good as me if I let her." He gave a humorless laugh, looking more scared at the prospect than amused.

"A frightening prospect for a world class illusionist, I would presume." The confident smile the journalist gave him was enough to unnerve Illumaine. "Be that as it may, the tricks were accomplished and the illusions upheld. And likewise, you have upheld your end of the bargain, so I am of the opinion that there is not much-

"What are you really after?" Illumaine cut him off, sitting up now as the self-confident journalist fell blissfully silent. "You're not really here for me, are you? You're doing this whole bit as a formality, aren't you? There's something else you're here for, which is why you wanted to do your little interview here, rather than literally anywhere else. What's your angle?"

The tanned skinned journalist gave a thoughtful expression at that, as if not sure how to answer. Then, he shrugged, his aloof smirk returning. "Why else would one venture to such a place as evenfall approaches? I wish something of Milifone Vicatrino only he can grant me."

Illumaine, for his part, looked blown away at the bluntness with which the journalist laid out his intentions. The color in his face drained, taking on the color of one of the wings of the doves he released for the climatic finish of his show. His whole body seemed to shudder and nearly collapse in on itself with the weight of those words. "You're fucking crazy. You have to be."

"Be that as it may, it is what I intend to do. So, before I depart, might I request for your name once more. Not your pseudonym, of course. Your name of birth, if you so please."

The illusionist sighed, running a hand through his hair as he seemed to look more exhausted than he was right after getting offstage, this conversation more harrowing and filled with frights than his burning box escape trick. "The name's Paul Morgetson. That do it for ya'?"

The man's pen was writing extra fast, the magician couldn't even keep up with it, his eyes used to following elaborate sleights of hand unable to fathom the pen work. Though now that he was looking, was the pen suddenly more brown than black like before? And Illumaine... Paul could swear there was a slight flash of red as the man was writing. No, he shook his head, looking up at the lights above. Must've been the lights in this dressing room. They were much too dark and mood setting to be useful for seeing anything in this room.

The moment he was finished writing, the notebook slammed shut loudly, the pen stashed away in a coat pocket, and the notebook itself returned to his bag as he quickly rose to leave. "Well, Paul, this conversation was rather illuminating I must say. But I must beg your pardon, but I simply have another interview to conduct with the famed proprietor of this establishment, and you have an iron horse to catch with your illustrious servant whom you wish to release from captivity. I pray my work offers you a modicum of assistance in gaining such distance. And with that, I bid you adieu." And with a bow of similar magnanimity as the one the magician gave on stage earlier, the supposed journalist took his leave.

"What a fucking madman, that guy..." he cursed, looking at the closed door. He then walked over to his desk and opened a drawer, confirming he still had his train tickets for that day. The famed magician sighed, then reached into a breast pocket and pulled out the picture used in the "assistant" catalogue Vicatrino showed him of the elven girl, sighing sadly at it. Then he steeled himself, spun around quickly, and got to work packing his bags. If shit was about to go down, he'd better make himself scarce to avoid the wrath of Milifone. He knew better than to be around when he was put into a bad mood.

Outside the room, meanwhile, the journalist was walking over to the dressing room of the devil blooded assistant, knocking twice upon it, followed by a pause. He knocked twice more, paused another length, then four more knocks. A second later, the voice of the woman inside responded. "Did you get what you required from him?"

"But of course. To do otherwise would've been an insult to the labor of my trainers that poured their life's work into perfecting my skills. The Great Illumaine's true name is mine to behold." The man looked smug, twirling the pen... no, the wand in his hand as he spoke. He leaned against the door, ensuring he could hear her as clearly as possible as she spoke, given her soft tones she usually relied upon to convey her intent.

"That is good. Then we are prepared to tackle the real challenge for today?" She sounded somewhat relieved at first, then apprehensive, though not seemingly at the task at hand. "I just

want to get this done. I think I've talked to enough people to last me a month."

"Now now, my dearest sister." He reassured her, tapping the door slightly. "I understand that such people work must've been quite the ordeal without your more articulate brother to fend off any ill-intentioned suitors and the world weary magician wounding you with venomous criticism that were without much merit in the end. I most humbly apologize for having abandoned you so cruelly to such a task when it is my most elusive target you were giving me the simplest of assistance with."

"It is fine, brother. You were busy studying how many guards he'd have and how the security would be set up. I was just reading your work on that before we started. With all this, I'm not as worried about what I need to do."

"And for what reason were you afeared for then? If any task allows the two of us to consult and collaborate with one another, then it is one that is already complete, except for the doing of it. My work will be complete post haste." He glanced over to the side, noticing a trio of guards heading his way, one with a small batch of flowers in his hand. "Now I must bid you adieu until we reconvene shortly. Your most ill-favored of suitor approaches."

Piano groaned inside as her disguised brother began to step away, letting himself get revealed as if he was casually walking away from down the hall. Two of the guards instantly shot up, hands going for their guns as they called to him. "Oi! What're you doing back here?"

The supposed journalist gave a deep bow, pulling out his notebook. "I do apologize for my intrusion. I was merely conducting an interview with Illumaine in his dressing room. I have my pass here to prove my intentions." He pulled out the small card that had let him in, which caused the guards to relax, though the one with the flowers still glared at him.

"Well, you did your business, now fuck off. You can't be hanging around here looking for more scoops, reporter man."

“As you wish.” The writer did not argue, quickly moving past. Once he rounded the corner and was out of sight of anyone else, he dropped his disguise, revealing his more devilish appearance, a male mirror of the assistant the guards now approached. “Our first steps in this operation are progressing with great speed. I shall now hurry hence to my location, that I might meet my target at the designated locale.”

As he donned his next disguise as one of the guards and walked off, the three guards were cooling down from the confrontation and approaching the door to Piano’s room. The one with flowers was looking confident while the other two looked bored. “Why’d ya even bother with the flowers, anyway? It’s not like you gotta impress her or nothin’. It’s not like she can really refuse ya, can she?”

“I know that, moron! But it’s good to put her at ease, make her think she has a choice. Otherwise, she might run for it and that would be a pain. All I gotta do is give her the flowers and make her let go of the door and I can make my way in regardless of what she wants.” The smile on his face was cruel, while the other two nodded on.

“But why her?” The third asked, looking confused. “Isn’t the elven bitch one of our bosses girls? You give her an order and she’s gotta listen.”

But his companion shook his head. “Nah, that girl’s Illumaine’s now. I can’t touch her or the boss says that’ll be bad for business. But this girl’s all clear. Besides, I’ve always wanted to try those devil bloods. You know what you can use those horns for?” He raised his eyebrows suggestively, then all of them laughed.

“Well then you’ve lost the race to her! Some other bloke’s done broke the one before you could get it!” The cruel laughter grew louder at that, though Piano had long been listening to their conversation prior to that. She took a deep breath, steadying herself as she heard a knock on her door.

“Who is it?” She tried to make herself sound meek, which wasn’t that hard given her demeanor. The guards outside could hear the bells on her coattails ringing as she approached the door.

“Open up, buttercup! I’ve got some... important business... to discuss with you.” The trio of snickers outside indicated otherwise.

Piano opened the door, her garb a little more open than normal as she appeared to be part way through getting changed. The guards' eyes indicated they noticed the change, while the devil woman appeared to look shy at them all. “Oh, I apologize. I didn’t think there would be so many of you. Now, what was this about important business?”

The lead guard was already in action, pushing his clump of flowers, which was more a grouping of wildflowers found around the perimeter of the building than anything one would give a lady, into her hands and taking her hand’s place on the door. He quickly took a step forward, towering over her as she appeared to almost shrink in his presence as she clutched the greenery to her golden vest. She let out a nervous noise as his hand went to her cheek, causing her to take a step back, the bells ringing with the movement as he gave a low chuckle and stepped more into the room with her.

“Oh, just a few things I’ll need to discuss with you. I’ll just shut the door now, hmm?” Even as he said that, he was already beginning to close the door behind him, the other two guards giving her smirks as they took positions outside the door to make sure nobody disturbed them.

The two outside heard the bells on her coat ring a few times as the two inside seemed to move deeper inside, then silence overtook them. The two men stood fairly still, used to this kind of work, as they watched the magician and his other assistant walking together hand in hand at a hurried pace. The men said nothing, though they snickered to themselves once Illumaine was out of earshot. But as time went on more and more, the two started to get annoyed.

“What’s takin’ ‘im so long? He should be done by now, shouldn’t he?” He slammed his fist into the door, knocking loudly as he shouted. “Hey, bastard! You done in there or what? We got other shit to do, yeah?” The was a prolonged silence, which set both the guards on edge instantly. They drew their sidearms, one of them pulling out their key to the room. “Morgan, speak to me mate. You in there?”

They waited for a few moments, waiting to hear something inside. When only silence greeted them, the older guard started silently counting down with his hand, the other reaching forward with the keycard. As he clenched his fist, the keycard unlocked the door and his hand went to the doorknob and swung it open. The two rushed in, only to be greeted with a strange sight indeed.

Their companion, who was hale and hearty not too long ago, was now slightly pale and unconscious. His hands and feet were both bound with lengths of ropes, intricate knots tying him down and keeping him still. The older guard rushed forward, going at one of the knots with gritted teeth. "Fucking shit, what 'appened to ya? How'd you let that little girl get one up on ya?" As he struggled with the knots, seeming to make them worse, he swore up and down. "Damn it all, boy, aren't you gonna help me?"

He was once again met with the quiet room. As he froze in place, listening carefully, he suddenly heard the clattering of something metal onto the ground. Grabbing his gun and spinning around, he saw his companion still near the entrance. The younger man's gun was on the ground, one of his legs kicked out as he tried to brace himself on the other, the devil girl's arm around his neck as he struggled vainly for another second before passing out from oxygen deprivation.

"Wha-" He barely had time to react as she dropped his unconscious friend, pushing one of her shoes as the heel broke off. Catching the flipping heel on the arch of her foot, she swiftly lashed her leg out towards him, the purple stake striking at his firearm and sending it spiraling out of his hand. As he jolted and drew his knife, the second heel was already released and flung his way. He managed to swat the projectile out of the air, only to see that she had crossed the length of the room in the span of that motion, her fist colliding with his jaw and sending him reeling back in pain. She quickly grabbed a hold of his arm and with two twists, released his hold on the blade before shoving him back and delivering a straight kick to the upper chest that sent him flying into the large mirror in the room. As the glass shattered from the impact, his eyes rolled up in his head as he passed out, a rain of shards following him as he collapsed painfully onto the ground in front of the table.

Piano maintained her battle stance for a moment, her calm breathing barely rising above the ambient noise as she listened for further backup. Hearing none, she silently dashed to the door, her lilac form a blur as she moved swiftly to ensure no danger was outside. Once fully aware there was no greater danger set to arrive, she set to work. She grabbed the keycard from the younger guard, checking to make sure he was still alive in the process. She went over to her couch, removing the cushions to reveal the blade she smuggled into the mafia's stronghold when she had arrived. She also grabbed the removed heels from her shoes near the third man, checking him to make sure she didn't go too far with him. Seeing he still was breathing regularly, she silently stalked out of the room once more, placing a sign that indicated that "she" didn't want to be disturbed as she danced

among the shadows of the theater's backstage towards the restricted access areas.

Pausing at the door, the lilac shadow closed her eyes and focused her thoughts to the internal energies that flow within her, using it as a reference point as she expanded her mind's eye to look for other sensations similar to it on the other side of the door. She detected four men on the other side: two close to the door, and two down the hall, slightly elevated which indicated there were stairs on the other side or some form of ramp. Breathing a long breath that shifted the flow of ki, she pressed the keycard to the lock, unlocking it with a beep. She backed up slightly, then gallop stepped forward into a front kick to slam the door open.

The first guard was hit with the door as it swung wildly towards him, slamming into his chest as he let out a noise of surprise as Piano burst into the room towards the second while the other pair at the top of the stairs were still reacting to the sound of the door being kicked in. As the second guard drew up his gun, she quickly took control of his wrist and forearm and began pulling him along with her in motion, now making it difficult for the other two to aim at her with their guns as she almost seemed to dance with him as her partner. As the first shoved the door on him shut with a huff, he suddenly found his partner flipping towards him, having just been judo thrown towards the occupied guard as they now collapsed into a heap of tangled limbs and cursing.

The moment the other two guards raised their weapons to fire, a flash of steel reflected in the air as a pair of throwing daggers came hurtling their way. One guard was slow on the draw, his weapon being knocked from his hands as his fingers were slashed from the projectile, while the other ducked out of the way. By the time he recovered and went to draw a bead on her, she was already gone from that position. He looked slightly right just in time to see her running along the wall at him before she pushed off and with a spinning kick, sent him flying into his friend and knocking them both down the small set of stairs together in a huddle, crashing down at the bottom with a loud thud.

She only took but a moment to relax, however, as she could already sense another guard approaching, one with a stronger flow of ki within him. Sure enough, another guard rounded the corner, a man with an orcish appearance to him and a hand made of brass. As he saw the unconscious guards behind her, he grinned, throwing aside his gun and pulling out his blade with his hand that still had flesh, his brass right clenching into a fist as she pulled one of her throwing

daggers out to match his steel.

The two began circling the hall towards each other, crossing the distance between themselves within a handful of moments. Both their blades touched each other, but still neither swung as both began applying pressure on the other's knife, attempting to gain control before attacking with the more threatening fist each had prepared for the other. His natural strength was greater than hers, but she had a much more masterful control of her blade, which made him hesitate to press too hard to avoid her pulling a trick on him.

First he gained the ground with the center of his blade at the tip of hers, leveraging it back. Then she slid down to his hilt and started twisting, causing him to move his feet quickly to circle with her motion to avoid being disarmed. He made a feint, pressing in slightly before easing off, but she didn't change her actions too much in response as she saw the test for what it was. The two were locked blades for what felt like an eternity, his cruel black eyes glaring at her mismatched pair as the only thing that separated them was the steel between them.

But his patience wore out before hers. He quickly pressed his full weight onto her knife for real, clearing it to the side as his brass knuckles came hurtling towards her with the weight of his anger and frustration behind him. But she clearly had been expecting it, spinning into the pivot he did, causing his fist to scream past her head and embed itself into the concrete wall behind her with shattering force as she quickly bent his arm to make him drop the knife before he could pull himself away from her. He sent a wild backhand towards her, which she had to lean back to avoid, only for him to try and drop his whole arm down onto her to crush her.

She quickly pushed off the ground and planted her feet on his chest, before similarly pushing off of him to create some distance. He stumbled back, before stomping after her as she handsprung back onto her feet, kicking out as he got within range. He blocked the kick initially, only to receive a fist to his solar plexus that he couldn't see through his guard. His skin was tough, able to withstand the average person's punch, but even so, her blow still struck home hard and drove the air out of his lungs with sharp precision. He let out a groan of pain, clutching his chest as he kicked out at her to let him recover.

But Piano ducked under his kick, before her leg snaked out and struck his plant foot behind the knee, causing his leg to buckle and his balance to go out of whack. She then gripped his face and pushed further, lifting him off his feet and slamming his head against the wall with enough force to slightly crack the wall herself. His limbs slumped with unconsciousness, blood trickling from his head as she let him fall to the ground.

Piano took a breath of relief as he stopped moving, having had to exert herself quite a bit to override his natural toughness. She bent down to check on him, making sure she didn't hurt him too badly, though she was sure the only thing she heard crack was the wall from the force. Sure enough, her knowledge of first aid told her his skull hadn't fractured or anything from the blow and had held strong. She glanced around to make sure she wasn't spotted by anyone else, despite knowing there was no one else in the immediate area, before darting off to another section to continue her mission.

As she left, one of the guards began to stir, lifting his head up slightly in confusion. Remembering what happened, he reached down to his radio and turned it on, issuing a warning to the rest of the building.

"Intruder.... Alert.... Highly dangerous..... Be..... Careful-"

Piano slinked into the shadows of the next room as the alarm was raised, all the guards suddenly having their weapons drawn and were on the lookout for her. In the distance, she could hear the screams of guests as they were starting to be ushered out. She knew from the floor plans that the major exits were now going to be occupied with guests all streaming out, and her current rampage would take her along the back exits that would normally be used by VIPs. If she did her job right, then Milifone would have to take the exit of last resort: the roof, where Forte would be waiting for him.

But first, she thought as she focused her attention on the guards, she'd have to continue taking down threats. Moving along the shadows silently, not even her bells making a noise as she moved, she closed in on the first guard. The moment she felt the others weren't looking at him, she wrapped an arm around his neck, kicked his legs out from beneath him, and dragged him into the darkness using strength enhanced with ki as she pressed her forearm against his throat to strangle him. Once he stopped struggling beneath her, she let him go and climbed a nearby vent duct, taking her above to another guard who was looking down at things. With a swift chop to his neck, she knocked him out, grabbing his body and gun before either fell and created noise.

After ensuring his safety, she leapt down at another guard below, her knee slamming down on his shoulder as he was quickly knocked unconscious before she flung herself at another pair of guards who started to turn to see what was happening. They were both quickly dispatched with a series of blows from her fist and feet, alternating between the two as she quickly swapped between threats. By the time she finished with them, she was already drawing a throwing knife and chucking it at the nearest corner as a guard rounded it to see what the commotion was, dropping his Tommy gun as his hands were slashed, before a punch to the throat and a knee to the stomach drove all air and consciousness from him. She then dashed off to the next room, following each bit of life she could sense as she continued her mission.

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Within minutes, nearly thirty guards were rendered unconscious or unable to fight as she moved from room to room, as other guards found fallen comrades and began flooding their radios with panicked reports, unable to find the devil in darkness downing all of them. Milifone huffed angrily as he could hear the panic in his men from one of his personal guard's headsets. "What the hell did I pay you all for if you're going to fail like this at such an important moment?" he complained, to which the guards around him all looked nervous. "So, how's my escape route looking? Is it clear?"

"No sir. It would seem the intruder has taken out most of the guards around the back exits. It would seem our only option would be the secret roof exit."

"Good thing we had that installed long ago for just such an occasion. Take me out of here before I make your wives and children into my next products." He looked icily serious for a man half of their sizes, and the four quickly began to stride towards the secret entrance to the rooftop exit. As they opened the door to the exit, simultaneously getting another report of a fallen guard, the two in the front froze as they saw something they weren't expecting.

Placed on the small rooftop balcony was a table for two, that was already lit with candles and a bottle of wine set near the middle. Two glasses were set at each end of the table, one empty, and one half filled in front of a man strikingly similar to the assistant that had performed onstage earlier that night. The devil man adjusted his glasses on his face as he gave a cheery wave to the guards now pointing guns at him. "Greetings and salutation, fair folk. I do most regrettably understand for what reason that you draw such devices upon me, but I must most humbly request you lower them for the time being. I wish no great harm upon your charge. On the contrary, I but require a brief exchange of words with your employer, merely to satiate my curiosities before I return to you the ladder with which you plan to make your descent and evacuate to safety abroad."

He gestured towards where the ladder should have been, which was in fact missing entirely. As the guards ran over to look aghast at the problem, Milifone stepped forward confidently, the shorter man glaring up at Forte with an expression that promised death. His bejeweled hands clasped in front of his rather prominent belly, before he walked over to the chair proffered for him. One of the guards quickly ran forward to pull out the chair, pushing it in as Milifone made himself comfortable on the plush cushion. The mafia don snapped his finger and the guard swiftly grabbed the wine bottle and filled the glass with crimson liquid with practiced precision.

Milifone swirled the wine in the glass with a careless gesture, examining the swishing fluid before tasting a sip of it. Deeming it satisfactory for the conversation at hand, he finally addressed the diabolic writer. "So before I let you drag this thing out to something stupid like what sort of reason you have to get revenge on me or whatever you little people come up with to justify coming at me, I have to know: how did you get Illumaine to let you little devil girl onto the show for my daughter's birthday? I explicitly told him not to include anyone in the show that wasn't needed. I even provided him with the two slaves he wanted to make his show work. He shouldn't have been a security issue. So how could your girl have gotten in?"

Forte shrugged as two of the guards stood a distance behind him, posting a guard there as the other two lingered on Milifone's side to keep watch. "I merely proffered some help to assist Illumaine when circumstances struck dire for him. Unless you can conceive of some method of providence that allowed my mortal hands to direct a pestilence upon the second maiden that was

to provide entertainment for the night. There has been a minor plague spreading among some of the encampments you provide for the provisions with which you stock. I'd say then that the err in the security lies upon your shoulder, not upon mine or the illusionist."

Forte lifted his glass, going to take a drink before a loud shot rang out into the night sky as his glass shattered in his hand and spattered his clothes with wine. The writer looked unfazed as he set the broken glass down, picking up a cloth to wipe some of the mess up as Milifone's gun shook in his hand with anger, his warning shot making his intent clear as he let out a calming exhale. "I will not have you tell me how to do my job. I've been in this business longer than you've been alive. So I'd watch what you say with that tongue before I have my boys remove it."

"I must beg your pardon." Forte said, in a tone that almost implied just the opposite, his smirk not wavering in the slightest as he set the stained cloth aside. "But as a writer, I study a great many things, and it is with great trepidation that I find that you develop a more logical outlook on the methods those who are in the employ of the things you study. I was merely speaking what I would have my characters do in my novel, if I wanted to prove them a competent slaver. I meant no injustice upon your professional aptitude."

The three guards all looked apprehensive at the conversation going on as the shorter man merely cycled the next round in the chamber of his revolver. "Of course you don't. Otherwise, I'll finally get to see if devils bleed red on the inside like the rest of us do." Milifone took another sip of wine, his hand now steady pointing his weapon at Forte.

"Oh, I would not advise that. I'm afraid my blood possesses certain qualities that you might find distasteful for your flesh. But enough about me. I would much rather hear the tales of the man that managed to build his way into the Vicatrino family and marry his way into his name." Forte leaned forward on the table, his notebook on the table as he prepared to take notes.

Milifone just laughed at that, looking back at Forte with a cocked eyebrow. "That old tale? I'm sure you've heard all the rumors already. Why talk to me about that old thing?"

"Oft in tall tales and darkened speeches, the crux of the matter gets lost in the fog of misinformation and confusion. I find that it is thusly a more lucrative venture to seek out the subject in question, to get the perspective closest to the matter, as they would have the greatest investment in ensuring the tale gets told honest."

“There’s really not that much to tell if I’m honest.” Millifone admits, shrugging carelessly and leaning back as the pair of guards listened intently to the conversation between the two seated men. “You might say I’ve always had a talent for inspecting people and determining their exact worth in society. So I decided to make a career out of it. Turns out the mafia’s always looking out for people like me, so I made a killing pretty quickly.”

Forte laughed, jotting down a note as he winked down at the half man. “I’m sure it would also prove a significant asset when it comes to threat assessment, am I wrong? I would presume that is why you felt little danger in engaging me in conversation as we are, that you presume I could not overpower you directly.”

“So it would seem.” Millifone looked miffed at that, having not expected such a reaction. “Though there’s something about you that throws me off. After all, not just anybody can even get this close to me, much less talk to me. Just who are you?”

Forte just waved away the question. “I am merely a crafter of inken words with a keen interest in people of import as inspiration for the major cast of my magnum opus. Think of me naught. After all, this conversation is all about you.” He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out his cigar case, taking his time picking which cigar he wished to smoke. As he picked his chosen poison, he put away his case with a casual ease as Millifone watched confused. As he pulled out his lighter, the Don’s bodyguard reached for his weapon, but lowered it as Forte merely lit the cigar, a small stream of smoke emitted from the cigar.

As Forte leaned back, Millifone shook his head. “No, I don’t think we’re going to continue this conversation anymore. You see, I am a busy man and I don’t quite have time to amuse every writer that wants to take down my life’s story. Now give me my ladder back or I’m going to make sure you’re sleeping with the fishes.” He raised a hand and his solitary guard raised his weapon again... then they both realized the problem. “Wait, what the? Where did my men go?”

Before Forte could answer with words, the last guard suddenly felt a fist to the jaw. As he reeled in pain, Piano swept his leg and punch his chest, knocking him out with a solid blow to the sternum. The silent warrior stood up straight as Millifone fell off his chair, screaming as he did. “What the fuck? How the hell did you get up here so fast? I thought you were beating up all my guys downstairs?” As he panicked, he reached behind his back and pressed a button hidden beneath his clothes.

Piano quietly shrugged, as Forte spoke up. "My sister here is quite the talented warrior, hence her name. Her skill in the martial arts are almost unparalleled by anyone on this plane or any other plane in existence. It is of no shame for your blackguard that they stood naught a chance to her fist and fury. But enough talks of mundane quality. Mayhaps we can return to our prior conversation of a more important matter."

Millifone just shook his head, as Piano's head whipped over to the nearby wall. Forte quickly moved to the side as Millifone laughed. "You think a man like me would plan an event for my little girl and wouldn't provide the best security available?"

There was a series of thunderous crashing sounds coming from the passageway Millifone had come up from, drawing closer and closer with each one. That was, until finally the door was punched in, flinging the entryway into the table as they both smashed to pieces and flung over the side, much to the horror of the guests fleeing below. As the smoke around the former opening began to dissipate, there was a slight clicking sound, before a cacophonous boom as Piano rolled out of the way of the blast area. The piece of building where she was standing was nearly obliterated from the force of the shot, as the shooter was now revealed in the blasted away smoke.

A troll of monstrous size now stood, eight feet in height and a pillar of flesh and muscle. He wore a badly fitted suit, torn pants, with one hand completely free to utilize his sharp claws, while the other held an oversized double barreled shotgun, which he broke open to reload as he let out a massive snort. Millifone let out a whoop. "There you are, you lazy bastard! Now do what you were paid for and smoke these intruders!"

As the troll nodded, six daggers suddenly sprouted from his chest. Three were made of steel, and three of what appeared to be a red metal. As the troll looked down annoyed and swept five of the daggers off his chest, Piano closed the distance and kicked the tempered steel still embedded in its chest. It merely caused it to roar in anger, swiping at her as the blade dragged across its chest and she was forced to make her distance with several backflips, diving to the side at the last minute as another blast of its weapon rang out, demolishing the railing and a distant tree was stripped of all greenery.

As the troll glared at her and reloaded, she saw that the large wound was already healing, as had most of the other wounds. But not those of the red steel. Those still bled red, though the troll didn't notice as it began to charge towards her, stomping his foot just before he swung, trying to stun her with the shockwave. Her legs shook from the force, but with the strength of her ki, she was able to push through and dive just under his arm, running past him. As she did, she drew her blade, slashing his side and drawing more blood. But the toughness of his skin meant that her blade didn't pierce as deeply as she was expecting, making only a flesh wound in the process.

With a roar, the large beast of a man swung his shotgun behind him, clipping Piano's horn as she tried to duck under it. As she stumbled, she heard the click of the shotgun being fully loaded and leaned to one side. She then quickly ran the other way as she heard the roaring destruction of the adjacent wall as she shook her head and recovered. She closed the distance as he attempted to reload, slashing at him two or three times as he roared in anger. She leaped over another lumbering slash, landing on the arm as she cut an x across his chest.

Suddenly, he swung the shotgun first, making her backflip away from him. But it seemed she underestimated his reach, as suddenly the talons of the troll finally connected along her thigh, leaving a large gash. But as Millifone cheered, Forte smirked as blood spurted out of her leg at an incredible rate. As the black blood splashed across the troll's face, it suddenly screamed in horrible pain, covering its eyes as steam rose from beneath his fingers. The troll stumbled back, swinging his hands angrily as he tried to gain distance from her. But he forgot how far along the balcony he was, pressing against one of the destroyed sections of the railing. As it leaned back, losing its balance in the process and firing his shotgun into the air and destroying more of the balcony roof, Piano gathered all the ki into her legs as she crossed the distance in four steps, before leaping up and delivering one last kick that sent it tumbling back over the edge. A second later, there was a terrible crash, a series of screams, and the alarm of a car as the troll fell upon a limousine that was parked out front for Millifone. The half man ran over to the edge, looking down at his fallen bodyguard distraught as Forte and Piano approached behind him.

"Well, I can quite imagine that you're feeling the weight of all those coins spent plummeting into the depths of nothingness. A real shame as well. That monstrous brute was quite the fearsome beast of a sentry. I doubt you could find an equal nearly as impressive if you searched for the next century. But mayhaps you will be capable of locating such a wondrous find Mr...?" Forte clapped a

hand on his shoulder, blowing a bit of cigar smoke into the mafia don's face.

"Millifone. Millifone Vicatrino." was the weak response returned to the writer. Forte eagerly wrote it down, nodding his head excitedly as Piano took some of the scraps of the tablecloth to patch up her leg, which had stopped bleeding due to her ki's control of her blood.

"Thank you kindly for your time, Mr. Vicatrino. It was a valuable experience indeed." Forte stood up straight and snapped his fingers, dispelling the illusion hiding the stairs as he went towards it. But as he did, he also revealed a small white fox sitting in front of it, a large fluffy tail with an eye symbol flicking behind it and a scarlet letter in its mouth. "Ah. And pray tell, what is this canid doing so deep in the clutch of civilization?"

In answer, the fox leaped over to Piano and handed her the letter. The devilish martial artist looked confused as she opened up the letter. She looked down at the pretty script, Forte looking over her shoulder.

To Piano <insert last name here>,

I wish to invite you to a tournament of amazing proportions, taking place in the Crossroads, with fighters from across the planes of existence. And such an impressive challenge deserves an impressive reward: one wish, granted by me. I hope to see you fight, and I look forward to seeing what your heart's desire might be.

The God Eater, Madame Chief.

As Piano finished reading the note herself, she could hear her brother getting excited as he got to the end of the letter, letting out a huge puff of smoke. As he rubbed his hands together, she just flung a knife up to the balcony roof, snapping a rope and causing their stuff to come swinging down from the rafters and land in her arms.

“Well, dearest sister, I must apologize deeply for asking you to work on such tasks of great magnitude in such rapid succession, but a name like “the God Eater” is one that I simply cannot pass on. We shall be attending this Crossroad’s tournament post haste.”

“Of course brother. Perhaps there will be talents to steal among these fighters, along with your names.” She looked down at the letter again, then at the fox.

“I have little doubt in that, and great faith in your talents. Let us be off with not another ounce of starlight wasted shining down on us further.” He tossed his cigar to the side, the remains of it bouncing off Millifone’s head as he still sat distraught.

“What would we even wish for?” Piano asked confused, looking down at the last part. Forte shrugged, uncaringly.

“Such petty desires are beneath us. We have more important aspirations to reach for. Though I would imagine that since you are like to win such a martial event, I suppose we should place some of our thoughts into deciding what such a reward should be.”

“Very well. I accept your invitation.” Piano spoke to the fox, who’s tail suddenly grew in size and wrapped around the siblings, the large eye symbol looking out. Then, with a wink of the eye, the trio suddenly vanished, leaving Millifone alone on the roof with the sound of sirens and screams echoing beneath him, an unknowable future remaining ahead for him.

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As the devil pair suddenly blinked, shading their eyes as the sudden shift from near dusk to bright daylight was nearly blinding to them. As they recovered from the shift in lighting, they saw the bustle of people milling around the town. As they started getting their bearings, they saw a pair of guards begin to approach them. Forte instantly stepped forward, holding out the letter he took from Piano’s hands.

“Good day good sir, good madam. I do believe I was invited to this tour-” But even as he spoke, the guards shook their heads, pointing at Piano instead.

“No sir. We’re here for Mrs. Piano here. She’s the competitor.” The twins looked surprised they could tell, but one of the guards just gestured at his neck. Piano reached down, seeing a small tag around her neck now. “That’s your tag, lose it and you lose your place in the tournament. Mrs. X would normally give you the rundown, but she’s currently speaking with another contestant. Follow us, we have a powerpoint to show you.”

“Hold, good sir!” Forte called to the guard as he tried to lead Piano away. “ I have a few brief, but vastly important inquiries to make of you. Would you set aside but a few more moments of your likely crowded itinerary.” The guard sighed, clasping his hands together in prayer.

“Madame Chief, please give me patience.” The guard muttered to himself. His hands glowed. Forte raised an eyebrow, curious about the gesture.

“Firstly, I wish to ask for the locale within which I might rest, preferably one circumjacent to our immediate area.” The female guard pointed at a tall building in the distance, with what looked like two sleeping foxes on top of it. “Verily. As for the second inquiry, might I inquire as to where I might find where vast multitudes prefer to gather for recreation in this fine borough?”

“You’ll want Sake’s Bar. Most people like to drink there. Is that all, sir?” Forte gave a nod, and the guard looked happy, nodding to his fellow guard and then to Piano, before leading the way to a nearby building.

As Forte watched the three of them walk away, he couldn’t help but laugh to himself. There were so many interesting people walking around him. Oh what fun this “tournament” was going to be for him. But first, he had to find more information on this “God Eater” that seemed to be running this tournament.

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