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Lisa wakes up slowly, the alarm beeping annoyingly in her ear. She scrunches her face up, snuggling further down under the covers. “Go ‘way.” She mumbles, fumbling for the alarm on her watch. Which doesn’t stop. “Shut up, shut up!” she mutters, reluctantly opening her eyes. “Oh, God, [I wish you’d shut up](#), you stupid thing!” The alarm goes quiet and Lisa closes her eyes again. And receives an extra three seconds rest.

“Come on, sleepy-head, wakey-wakey.”

She opens her eyes again. “Go away, Peter.”

“Can’t do that. We’ve got too much to do to get ready.”

“Get ready? What are you, ohhhh, is that today?”

““Fraid so. Our audition.”

“I still can’t believe this ‘old friend’ of yours won’t just give us the job. He does know what you can do, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, he knows, but that doesn’t mean much. We can’t go too magical without revealing the magic, and...”

“I know, Peter. You don’t have to keep reminding me. Spill the secret and the big, scary magicians come get you. See? I understand.”

“You just don’t like it.”

“Not especially. And it doesn’t explain...”

“And because we can’t go too magical, we have to be able to put on a decent show. Which is where we both sort of lack experience. I wish Carrie hadn’t gone back to Edinburgh.”

“Oh?” Lisa’s eyebrow arches. “Thinking of replacing me in the act already?” she asks, her eyes sparkling.

“Of course not. She could have helped us get this looking good, that’s all. I know we’ve practiced it...”

“To death. For a fortnight. Every night.”

“And we’re still stiff. You know it and I know it. I’m hoping Stuart will still give us the job and we can improve before our first proper show.”

Lisa reluctantly emerges from under the covers, “I know, I know. If we aren’t good enough, he can’t really afford to put us on rather than someone who’s good. Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Quite.”

“I still can’t believe you know the owner of a magic club. How can he resist doing all the performances himself?”

“Because he can’t do the performances.”

“Huh?”

“Stuart can’t really do magic. He can do a few small things: a little telekinesis, enough mentalism to keep the place calm. He could do close up, but he’s much better as a manager.”

“He can do magic? You didn’t mention this before.”

“It didn’t come up. He can’t do much, anyway. You can probably do more magic than he can.”

“Really?”

“Really. He seems ok with it.” He shrugs. “He seems happy running the place, anyway. Not like when we were younger.”

“Oh?”

“When we were younger, kids, really, Stuart often got the short end of things. His dad ran the club, but he wasn’t really a magician like Mark’s or mine, so he was sort of a second-class citizen in the gang. He always had to play Murdoch.”

“Murdoch?”

“The A-Team. Mark was Face, he always thought he was the best looking of us, I was Hannibal, Stuart was Murdoch and Malc was BA. We were always on incredibly dangerous missions, tracking down our dads like they were the bad guys, trying to get into the club without getting caught like we were sneaking into their base, the whole works.”

“So how does being Murdoch make him...”

“Because he didn’t want to be Murdoch, but Mark and I wouldn’t let go of the parts he wanted.”

“So, now I know about Stuart. What happened to the others, Mark and Malc?”

“Let’s see, Malc’s a social worker, happily married and I have no clue about Mark. Our dads were practically brothers, but we didn’t really get on and sort of drifted as we got older.”

“Where was Tony in all this?”

“Tony didn’t get to play when we went to the club. We told him it was in case he saw a secret. We said we’d get punished if he did. I’m pretty sure we would as well. We only did A-Team when we were around the club. It was a lot easier to make believe there. So when he was around we played Star Wars more.”

“And you were always Luke?”

“Hell no, everyone knows Vader was cooler, **little Jedi**.” His voice changes to Vader.

Lisa looks briefly for her light sabre and decides not to bother; it’s far too early and she’s far too tired to win. This time. “Hold on, I thought Tony didn’t know about your magic.”

“He doesn’t. When we played with him I was careful. He was mostly my friend more than the others’, anyway. So they didn’t play with him much.”

“I see. So why do we have to get up at stupid o’clock when we’re not seeing Stuart till lunchtime?”

“Well...”

“If you mention the word ‘practice’, Peter, I’ll scream.”

“Ok, I won’t use that word. We need to rehearse.”

Lisa sticks her tongue out at him. “Very funny.”

“Got to practice the patter for the show, Lise.” Peter grins at her and lifts her head off the pillow, “Now, let’s get you back together.”

“Just don’t put my legs on backwards this time, Peter. I’m not in the mood.”

“Yes, dear.”

“I mean it, Peter. I’m not in the mood at the moment.”

“No problem.” He kisses the head in his hands and starts looking for where they scattered the rest of Lisa last night.

Much nearer lunchtime, “This is it?” she looks at the brick building. It’s fairly nondescript, at least from the back, a plain wall of red brick with a metal fire escape leading up to a white door on the first floor, and a large loading bay below it.

“That’s it. You wouldn’t believe how many hostages we had to rescue from evil landowners in that place.”

“Peter, it doesn’t look much like a magic club.”

“Well, this is just the back.” He opens the car door. “Come on.”

“Fine. I suppose it doesn’t matter if it’s a dump. We’re just doing this so the Conclave’ll leave us alone, after all.”

“Something like that. Just don’t call it a dump when Stuart’s here.”

“Please, I do have some tact, you know.”

Peter remains tactfully silent as he leads her to through the alleyway between buildings and onto the street. She looks up at the building, the fascia covered in strips of chrome and black, ‘THE HOUSE OF MISTER E’ in red neon letters, currently off, arching above the double doors. Carved in a stone effect arch around the door are the words: ‘Enter freely and of your own will’.

Lisa looks from the club to Peter, “You are kidding, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“Who named this place? That has got to be one of the corniest names I’ve heard.”

“Don’t look at me. It’s been called that since my dad was performing here at least. If it makes you feel better, most people refer to it as ‘Mister E’s’.”

“I suppose. At least it looks more like a club like this. You certainly can’t miss it.”

“Shall we?”

They walk towards the club and the recessed black doors with a red border swings inwards before them. “Cute. Magic?”

“Simple infrared beam, I’m afraid.” A voice comes from inside the club. “Come in.”

They walk in and the doors close behind them. Lisa looks around. The club looks large, maybe a little larger than the walls but not a lot, if at all. Opposite the door is a raised stage, complete with black and red curtains. On either side of the door are large black circular tables with chrome legs, each seating between four and eight people. The seating areas extend right to the left wall and to within five feet of the bar dominating the right wall. The carpet is jet-black covered in white diamond shapes, a path of black lacquered wood leading from the door to the stage and then splitting towards the bar and the fire exit in the left wall. Above a set of circular lights are set into the ceiling, illuminating the room with soft light.

The man who let them in is standing to one side of the door. His golden blonde hair hangs in loose curls around his healthily tanned face. He smiles, extending his hand to Lisa, his pale blue shirt hanging open at the neck. “I’m Stuart. And you must be Lisa.”

“I suppose I must be.” She takes the hand.

“And this reprobate I already know. How are you, man? I haven’t seen you since the wedding.”

“Yeah, sorry about that, Stu. I’ve been a bit busy.”

Stuart flashes a white smile at Lisa, “I’ll just bet you have.”

“Careful, Stu; if Lisa doesn’t kill you for that, Sarah certainly will.”

“Only if she finds out.”

“Finds out what? Your eyes haven’t been straying again, have they, Stuart?”

Lisa turns to find a flame-haired woman walking down the aisle. She’s dressed in a loose black top and skirt, both doing nothing to hide the prominent bulge around her waist.

“Only my eyes, Saz, my heart is yours.”

“My, my, looks like Peter’s bringing out the poet in you.” She kisses Peter on the cheek, “You always were a bad influence on him.”

“As opposed to your wonderfully positive influence I’m sure.” Peter hugs her gently, “And you’re, well, I guess congratulations are in order for you both. Why the hell didn’t you tell me, Stu?”

“Well, um, I thought it was about time I got to surprise you.”

“I haven’t pulled a stunt on you in, well, at least...”

“Since the wedding.” Sarah helpfully suggests, “Where you made me disappear just after the ceremony and told everyone I’d done a runner.”

“I brought you back before it got too far.” Peter says a bit sheepishly.

“Only when Stuart was talking about scouring the streets for me.”

“Everyone else found it funny.”

“They weren’t involved.” She turns to Lisa and smiles, “And you must be the poor woman he’s abusing

now.”

“I’m the ‘poor woman’ he’s seeing at the moment, yeah.”

“How can you stand him? I doubt he’s got any better about mutilating other people’s bodies.”

“Mutilating? Not what I’d call it. I guess not everyone can handle unusual things. Shame some people’s minds are so closed. I’d hate to bring someone up like that.”

“You little…”

“Lisa…”

“Truth hurts, does it? I don’t understand how someone like Stuart got snared by you.”

“Lisa…”

“And you never will. Anyone sick enough to enjoy what this freak does…”

“Freak? Sick? This from a woman who deals with magicians every day and is happy to take their money? What a hypocritical bigot.”

“Lisa…”

Sarah smiles, her eyes cold, “I don’t think there’s much point you auditioning today, is there?” she snarls icily, “You certainly won’t fit in here.”

“I guess you’re right. Let’s go, Peter. We’ll start something ourselves and show them what they’ve missed.” She turns to go.

“Lisa!”

“What?!” she whirls round, to find Sarah smiling warmly, one arm around Stuart, the other around Peter.

“I like her, Peter. She needs a good spanking to teach her some respect, but I like her. Is she always like that?”

“Only if I do something she doesn’t like.”

“Good. You need someone to take you in hand.”

Lisa looks at them, back and forth, “What the hell are you…”

“You didn’t think I was going to let my husband’s best friend make a decision like this without a bit of testing, did you? He’s a nice boy, but he’s way too romantic for his own good.”

“You were testing me?”

“Fraid so. I had to make sure you knew what you were getting into. Or at least that you’d cope once you did find out.”

“What? What do you mean ‘what I’m getting into’?”

“You’ll see.” She smiles again, warmly. “And you’ll love it. Just remember magicians are like lawyers,”

“Hey!”

“they can make an agreement mean what they want to.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Yeah. This sneaky little bastard promised he wouldn’t disrupt our wedding.” She turns a stern glare on Peter, “So he waited until the ceremony was finished before vanishing me.”

“It would have gone better if I could have finished it. Honest.”

“Finished it?! You made me vanish into your top hat and told everyone I’d run off! What else did you have planned?”

“Well, uhm, you and Stuart were going to be the bride and groom on the wedding cake.”

“We were going to be what?? You were going to turn us into ornaments at our own wedding?”

“Well, yeah. For a little while. No more than five minutes.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“The man of the hour here,” he nods at Stuart, “didn’t cooperate. He was supposed to split everyone up so I could grab him, but he didn’t.”

Sarah wraps her arms around Stuart, giving him a kiss, “I knew there was a reason I married you. Even though your taste in friends is a little dodgy.” She winks at Lisa. “Well, I think that concludes the interview portion of today.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, come off it. You don’t think there’s much about this reprobate Stuart doesn’t already know do you? I just wanted to get an idea what you’re like, and I like you.”

“Didn’t seem like it just now.”

“Years of am dram, dahling, followed by working here. Good to see I haven’t lost it.”

“Marvellous. Now I can’t even trust the non-magicians around here.”

Sarah laughs, “I’m afraid not. Mind you, most people don’t trust the assistants around here either. So at least we’re even.”

Lisa’s lower lip trembles, “You don’t trust me?”

Sarah cocks her head to one side. “Not bad. But the eyes give you away. Now, shall we get on with the practical?”

“Practical? Oh, right.” She grabs Peter’s arm, “Let’s go, magic boy. Where do we change?”

“Right here.” Peter snaps his fingers and Lisa feels her clothes reshape around her, a ludicrously tight swimsuit, split down to her navel, replacing her jeans and t-shirt. She feels the makeup appear on her face. Strappy high heels in a silver match to the swimsuit coil around her feet. Peter also changes, a black tuxedo covering him with black bow tie and cummerbund, a silver diamond in the centre of each.

“Mandrake the magician and his lovely assistant reporting for duty.”

Sarah looks them over critically. “Bit old-fashioned, especially you, Peter. People these days prefer their magicians to be a bit more casual. Unfortunately, they still prefer their assistants in as little as possible.

Sorry.”

“What a shock.” Lisa mutters as Peter’s tuxedo becomes black jeans and a formal-wear-effect t-shirt. He keeps the top hat, though.

“At least he didn’t give you a spangly feather headdress.” Sarah offers, “And compared to some of the costumes we’ve got, that one’s quite modest.”

Lisa looks at Peter. “Don’t even think it.”

Peter raises his hands in surrender, “I wasn’t going to, honest.”

“So, what have you got for us? We’ve heard about your appearance at Shecky’s quite a lot. You guys made a definite impression.”

“You’ll have to wait and see, Stu. Can’t reveal anything to the audience before time, remember?” Peter starts walking up to the stage, ignoring the steps in favour of walking up the air.

“Nice start.”

Peter pulls an assortment of pipes from his pockets and fits them together into a tubular chrome stand. Lisa strides across the stage with a fixed smile, her heart pumping. *Nothing to worry about. We’ve done this so often I can do it in my sleep now. I hope.* But despite that, having someone watching her makes it harder. She stops just by the frame, twirling into Peter’s outstretched arm and almost misses him. *Oh, God. I wish I wasn’t so damn nervous about this. I’m going to screw up, I know it.*

At that point, Peter produces his light sabre, the white blade igniting. She takes reassurance from the humming sound, her heart slowing down as she begins to find the steps falling into place. *Easy. What was I so worried about?* Peter lowers the sabre into the stand, the blade shining three feet into the air from the top of the stand, the tip at about eyelevel with Peter. He turns to Lisa, fixing her in the eyes. He holds his hand up by her head. Lisa stiffens. She closes her eyes and lolls her head. She’s been practicing this even when not with Peter, looking like she’s rigid and asleep. Sometimes it feels like she couldn’t move even if she wanted to.

She feels Peter wrap his arm around her shoulders and lean her back. She tips as rigid as a board. She knows Peter is lowering her head to waist level but it’s hard to tell when your eyes are closed exactly where you are. She feels Peter’s arm leave her shoulders, leaving her at a 45-degree angle. She feels his arm against the underside of her legs. She wants to shiver, or giggle, but doesn’t as he slides his arm down the back of her legs, bringing her level. Again, Peter’s touch leaves her. *I wonder what Stuart and Sarah think of this.* She feels a gentle push on her back, knowing she’s rising into the air, and then the warmth of the light sabre on the base of her spine as Peter lowers her down onto it. She feels a touch on her leg, a gentle push and can feel herself spinning around, turning slowly. *Mmmmm. That always feels nice. It’s just so quiet! I wish I knew what they were thinking.*

“So far so good. Peter’s still a bit hesitant. He needs to express a bit more, maybe some larger gestures. And a bit of noise; it’s weird to have this silence, like a black and white film. Needs a little work, certainly, but certainly workable.”

Lisa’s eyes almost snap open. She does take a sharp intake of breath as she hears Sarah’s voice in her head.

“Didn’t think Peter had it in him. He’s no Blackstone, but he’s not bad. Lisa’s keeping very still, but she looks comfortable. And good. How the hell did Peter manage to pull someone like her? Lucky bastard.”

Again, Lisa almost breaks her trance-like state, as Stuart’s thoughts intrude.

“PETER!” she puts a lot of effort into the thought, trying to make it escape her skull. She completes her fourth rotation and she feels the levitation end. She plunges down the blade, the sharp stab, fading to a pleasant tingling sweeps through her. She stays rigid for a few seconds, her thoughts still jumbled up with Sarah’s and Stu’s; and then she collapses, her body hanging limply on the glowing blade.

“Hmm. Stayed rigid too long. That’ll need to be worked on.”

Oh, I wish whatever’s doing this to me would stop! I’m going to go mad, if it doesn’t... the noise stops, leaving her alone in her head once more. It did? What the hell? What’s going on? Peter, if I find out this is your fault, I’ll... She feels Peter continue her slow spin and then the gentle feathery feeling on her back as she floats up the blade, still turning slowly, her body hanging loosely on the blade.

She rises off the top of the blade and feels herself drift to the side. As the blade pulls out of her back she shivers. She keeps her face as slack as she can, eyes still closed as she lowers towards Peter, but something doesn’t feel right. It’s like she’s got a pit in the middle of her stomach, sucking all the heat out of her. She feels Peter’s arms under her. He runs his arms under her legs and when he pulls away, she keeps them rigid. He pushes her head and arms back into place and starts to tip her up. She doesn’t resist as the feathery floating pushes on her and soon stands rigidly upright. She hears Peter’s handclap and opens her eyes, smiling.

“So, when are we going to do the trick?” she asks.

“That’s a good close. Ready to hear the bad news?”

“What? We weren’t that bad, were we?”

“Well, you were both a bit stiff. But you are just starting so that should get better.” Stuart starts, “Lisa, you held the position a bit too long. You really need to drop as soon as the blade penetrates for maximum impact. Also, I know this place isn’t exactly warm but you need to get the shiver under control. And as for you,” he turns to Peter, “say something will you? You haven’t got the presence or the looks to pull off a silent act. We need an introduction to the trick. Mechanically, it’s fine, but you need to work on the performance part. Without a hook, you won’t pull in the crowds.”

“That’s all the bad news?”

“Not quite. Lisa, you and Sarah need to go and discuss the contract, while I have words about what is and isn’t appropriate behaviour with my best man!”

“Me? Why me?”

“It’s traditional.” Sarah explains as she pushes herself up, “Magician’s can’t get to grips with the books, so their assistants handle all the business things. Come on, we’ll let them discuss things.” She turns over her shoulder, “Just don’t drink the good stuff, ok, Stu?”

“Give me a second.” She turns to Peter, “Clothes, please, magic boy.”

Peter snaps his fingers as he steps off the stage and floats down to the floor. Lisa jumps down after him, rubbing her arms, as she follows Sarah into the small office.

Sarah sits down slowly in a large leather-backed swivel chair and pulls out a set of documents in close type from a neatly arranged desk, binders filling the shelves. “It’s just the usual boilerplate. This outlines the pay and working hours.” She hands over the top sheet, “As you’re only going to be an occasional performer, the hours are pretty much as and when; pay’s pretty standard, too.” Lisa skims over the document.

“£100 a night?”

"I know, but people aren't drawn to traditional magic shows these days. For some reason David Blaine's more popular than the big box stuff."

"Yeah, I see."

"I doubt it. You haven't heard Stuart ranting about him and that prat, the Masked Magician."

"That bad?"

"Let's just say DB's very lucky Stu can't do the big stuff, or they'd still be looking for him in that stupid glass box of his."

"That bad. Peter said he kept making the smell of fresh-baked bread appear in the box, but he's not sure he even noticed. I thought he was just being petty."

"Well, maybe a little bit, but in our little community, people who bring down our livelihood aren't really popular."

"Got it. Now, I know we're as and when, but how often can we really expect to be doing these shows?"

"Oh, probably once a month, maybe twice. Not much more than that. Probably Friday or weekends. We tend to keep to strolling during the week."

"Ok. Just checking."

"No problem. This is the non-disclosure agreement."

"The what?"

"You can't tell people the secrets of how the tricks are done."

"Well, duh. I'm already under secrecy thanks to the Conclave."

"It's mostly to throw off suspicions, but some people don't know the rules. And some people aren't as good at following them."

"I guess."

"Good. Don't worry, it's just a simple bit of legalese, with a side curse attached."

"Oh, right, what?"

"Gotcha." She grins, "The document is a bit of a magical sanction, as well as legal. By signing it, you basically accept that you can't tell people the secret, even if you wanted to. There's a lot of exceptions to that. You can tell people in the business, and people who are coming into the business, and anyone with magical talent. But basically, you try telling someone and your mouth stops working while you're trying. You can't write it down, either."

"Sounds pretty severe."

"Are you kidding? I've seen some twisted bastards draw up contracts that turn you into statues if you don't obey them."

"Statues?"

"Yeah, and not in a good way."

“There’s a good way to be a statue?”

Sarah smiles. “Oh, definitely. If it’s done right.”

“I’ll pass, thanks.”

Sarah raises an eyebrow and pulls out another sheet of paper. “This needs your SORM registration number, just for our records. Also your NI and tax office, contact details, the usual. We’ve got a good accountant who does the books, so leave the money side of things to us.”

“Gladly.”

“This,” another sheet of papers, “is contact numbers: Stuart’s, mine, lawyer, accountant, all the usual people, it’s good to know in an emergency.”

Lisa looks down the list, “Magical emergency? ‘Just scream really, really loud’?”

“Yeah. If you need to call them, you’re already in it really deep. So don’t do it unless you really mean it. They don’t like having their time wasted.”

“As in, will turn you into something really nasty if you waste their time?”

“Bingo. I can see Peter’s teaching you the basics of dealing with magicians well.”

“He’s trying.”

“And that should be all the documents we need. Now, what’s Peter been doing to you?”

“Well,” Lisa feels her cheeks heating up, “it’s sort of private.”

“That good, huh? Must be serious between you two.”

“What?”

“Well, when Stuart showed me magic, Peter was the one who did most of the showing, but he didn’t do anything, you know, X-rated. Still, that was a wild evening. I thought I’d been hallucinating when I woke up.”

“How many pieces?”

Sarah’s smile broadens, “Only 8. He was starting gently.” She sighs, “I miss that kind of insanity sometimes.”

“Miss it? What do you mean?”

“Oh, this bundle of joy.” She pats her stomach gently, “Once you get, how does it go, ‘with childe’ there’s no magic allowed. You can’t do, you can’t be done to. It’s not recommended when you’re feeding, either.”

“Can’t?”

“Too risky. Baby’s developing. Last thing he needs is for his accommodation to start changing willy-nilly. And who knows what effect magic would have on someone who hasn’t got a firm shape to start with. Still, once I get him on solids…” she smiles. “So, ‘fess. What have you been up to? You don’t have to give the gory details. Just some of the better ones.”

“Better?”

“You know what I mean: weirder. Peter’s twisted imagination was always one of his better features once I found out what he could do.”

“Weird? Ok, let’s see. I’ve been a fish-tank,”

“Really? With fish as well?”

“With fish. And with my sister as one of the fish to boot.”

“You’re kidding? You’re not kidding?”

Lisa shakes her head.

“That’s the weirdest?”

“Uhm, well, he sicced an egg on me at Easter. The damn thing gobbled me up and Peter broke me out, as a little chocolate assistant.”

“He ate you?”

“No, not quite. But the bastard let me think he was going to. Right up till the last minute.”

“Ah, well, maybe next time.”

“Next time?”

“Oh, almost forgot.” She hands Lisa another sheet. “This is the preferential rates if you book us, as performers.”

“Right.” Lisa barely glances at it. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“Of course. We always give our staff discounts.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Maybe.”

“Come on, how could anyone actually like the idea of being eaten? It’s disgusting!”

“What was it you said? ‘I guess not everyone can handle unusual things. Shame some people’s minds are so closed.’ That was what you said, wasn’t it?”

Lisa shifts, “Yeah, but…”

Sarah smiles, “When you’re ready, try it. You wouldn’t believe how good it feels.”

“Good? Really?”

“Well, when you thought Peter was going to eat you, what did you feel?”

“Scared. And angry.”

“Is that all? You’re sure the thought of being so vulnerable, so much in his power, didn’t give you just a little bit of a thrill?”

“Yes, I mean, no, I mean, yes, I’m sure.”

Sarah smiles even more broadly, “Good. Well, shall we go and see what the boys have been up to? Hopefully there’s still some alcohol left and the tables aren’t at shoulder height.”

“What?”

“Some magicians can get a little too loosened up.”

“Oh. Peter?”

“I’m kidding. Neither of them’s that irresponsible. Although sometimes I’m not so sure.”

“Too right.”

They walk out of the small office, to find Stuart and Peter sitting at the bar with one half-empty bottle of beer each, “...told her yet?”

“Not yet. Some things are too secret right now, y’know?”

“I know.” Stu nods his beer bottle towards the office door, “She sign on the dotted, sweetheart?”

“Not yet. We were just getting to know each other; a little girl talk. Just bring them back soon, so we can get everything sorted, ok?”

“No problem. We’ll have a look through and I’ll bring them round next couple of days.”

“That’ll be fine.”

“I’ll see you later, man.” Peter hugs Stuart, “And you take care, Saz.” He slides off the stool, kissing her on the cheek.

“You too, Mother. See you soon, Lisa.”

“See you, Lisa.” Stuart kisses her.

“See you.” Lisa waves as Peter holds the back door open, bowing to her with an exaggerated flourish.



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