

The Family Man

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From set *Streets of New Capenna*

“Do we *have* to stop here tonight, Dad? This place it’s plain old gauche, ain’t it?”

Anhelo winced. She wasn’t wrong. Park Heights was a carefully crafted work of art, a thing anyone would die to behold. All its parts sang together like a choir of well, angels. And for a man like Anhelo—a conductor, a connoisseur, a true bon vivant—picking the right environment for his work was like picking the right key for a symphony.

But he couldn’t imagine what anyone could compose here. If you asked him, the place was a dump, plain and simple. Stank like rotten food, grime on all the walls. No limestone here, no sir; no marble, no gold. Trash lined the streets, waiting for pick up. The people here were just as shifty—not a drop of fashion anywhere to be seen. The angels must not be watching this place.

Of course, Errant hated it. She was right to. Having her here was like bringing a sunbeam down into a cave. But there was no helping it. The boss wanted intel, and Errant needed some last-minute supplies for the big day tomorrow.

Anhelo wasn’t sure how many more chances he was going to get to be the one to come through for her. He had to take them when he got them. But the boss, well

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he said. He kissed her forehead. “Just five minutes, I promise.”

“What are you even buying here?” she asked him, pouting. She had her mother’s warm brown skin, but the thick wavy hair was all him. She gestured out the window, her expensive manicure cheapened by the flicker of badly maintained lights. “No way this place has any artists.”

“Art’s everywhere, if you know where to look,” Anhelo answered. Wishful thinking on his part, but it wasn’t a total lie. He got out of the car. A glare conveyed to the driver what’ll happen to him if Errant comes to any harm while he’s away. Word on the streets was this place did business quick, but if they didn’t “If I’m not back in fifteen, then I’ll see you in the morning.”

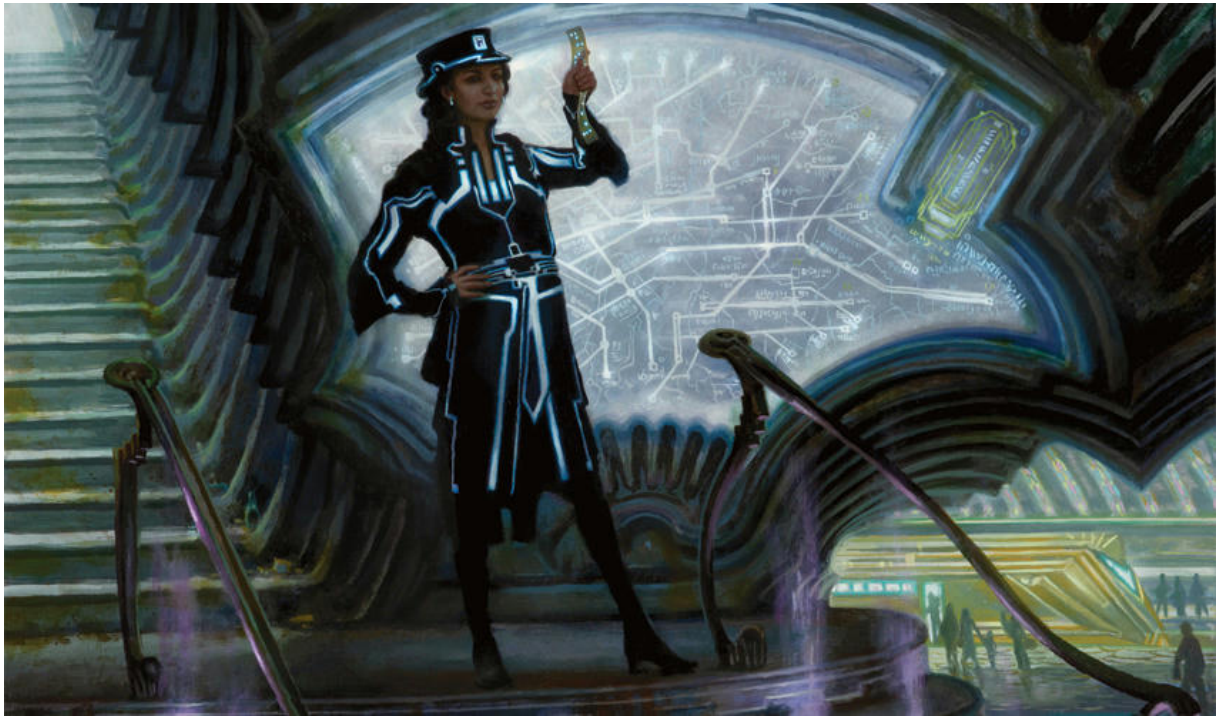
Errant crossed her arms. She looked so much like her mother when she did that, rest the woman’s soul. “You said five minutes. Now it’s fifteen. Is this going to be like when you missed my party because of that Severo guy?”

No knife he’d ever wielded could match the hurt of that disappointment. He deserved that one. Errant didn’t know why he was here, nor would she.

“You got me there,” he admitted. “Five it is.”

Five minutes to make his case. Five minutes to get his information. Five minutes back to the car. He couldn’t disappoint her, not again. The thought of that alone was impetus enough to get to the point.

“Toluz. You heard the news?”



Art by: Donato Giancola

Her grin was wide and white in the dark of her office, pale as a razor held against the night's own throat. Her voice was richer than everything in this neighborhood put together. "I hear all the news, Anheló. Is that any way to greet your family?"

Anheló flicked the tip of his own brown nose. "I don't have a lot of time, and we aren't family yet."

Fingernails drummed unseen on the desk. Despite that, he'd seen Toluz enough to know the look on her face. Always had the look of a mother who'd just caught you sneaking out at night. Those thick black brows of hers were the most expressive thing in this part of town. "Business, then? I'd expect nothing else from a Maestro. You have no sense of propriety."

"Business," Anheló nodded. He'd let the rest pass without comment, just for today. "There's a woman in white traipsing around the boss's territory. Know anything about 'er?"

"Plenty," came the answer. Of course. Toluz had a reputation for playing with her food, and Anheló was under no illusions. Outside of this place, he was an unstoppable assassin, an artist of the knife without compare. But here?

There was a reason Toluz kept her office so dark. And Errant marrying Toluz's daughter wasn't going to matter much if he upset her. They didn't call her Light's-Out Luz for nothing. Won a slick gadget from the higher-ups once, fair and square she alleged. A shadow generator. If Light's-Out Luz wanted you gone, you'd never see her coming.

But Anheló didn't have time to waste, and he didn't like the idea of someone who worked in the dark. Better to have your work out in the open. Part of why he hated this neighborhood, really. Lot of inventive folk here—but no sense of drama.

"What's a guy gotta do to get that information?"

"If you were family," she began, "it'd be free."

Here she was, dragging things out. Anheló grit his teeth. "Just tell me."

"Don't look so grim, Anheló," she said. "All I'm asking for is a favor. Helps you as much as it helps me."

“Find that hard to believe with your reputation,” he said. The extra power Toluz offered her clients meant she charged far more than even the Brokers for her services. Hadn’t seemed to slow her down much, having her leg messed up in the Shadow Generator job. Only difference was she did a bit less of her own field work—and when she did, she brought a cane.

“You don’t know me very well,” came the answer. Heels clicked along the ground. “Fiero Vespini. You know the name?”

Anhelo chuckled. “Yeah, I know the guy. One of ours. Got no taste in fashion but keeps heading to the buffet, anyway. What’s the job?”

“The buffoonery’s a cover. My daughter’s been having trouble with him for years. Last night he made a move. You saw her.”

He had. Parnesse showed up to the rehearsal dinner with a gash across her cheek the size of a stick of gum. Errant couldn’t stop fussing over her all night. Anhelo hadn’t missed the scent of blood on her, either, or the way she winced when Errant embraced her. Broken ribs. Parnesse refused to talk about it, of course—knuckleheaded pride—but Anhelo had a hunch it was bad. Thought maybe it was the woman in white he’d heard so much about, causing trouble left and right.

But Fiero? *Fiero*? It just didn’t make any sense. Guy’d never done a real job, so far as Anhelo heard. He *really* was just an art dealer, and a bad one, at that.

Still, he knew Toluz was no liar. Especially when it came to Parnesse.

“If you want information for your Family, you have to do a little work for ours. Bump him off, and we’ll talk,” she said.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. Offing someone within the family was going to be tough to explain, but he could make it work. Wasn’t like he liked Fiero all that much, either. No one did. Man wore enough cologne to smother you to death from a mile away.

“When do you need it done?”

“Tomorrow.”

“But that’s—”

“The wedding, I know,” she said. A tap against the cool stone floor—her cane, most likely. “He has twenty goons under his heel looking to cause trouble otherwise. Tired of being the joke, I’d wager, and looking to make a name for himself. What better way to prove his merciless nature than ruining such a high-profile affair?”

He clenched his right hand into a fist. That little

The timing was going to be tight. He needed to be at the Grand Capenna Hall by half-past three to make the wedding. Errant wanted him to walk her down the aisle. To make Fiero into the monument to cowards and traitors Anhelo wanted him to be, it’d take hours. “Why can’t you do it?”

“Because you’re going to,” Toluz says. “Let’s not make bones about that.”

She could have done it herself. That Fiero would try to put out a hit on Parnesse when her mother once beat a rhox’s skull in barehanded spoke to his audacity, his hubris. That he’d try to follow that up with an attack on an inter-family wedding

He hated to admit that she’s right. The guy had to go.

“It’s been three and a half minutes, Anhelo. If you leave now, you have time to make it back to the car.”

“Real considerate of you,” he said. He turned toward the door. “I’ll get it done.”

"I know you will," she said. "Congratulations on the wedding."

He let out a strained laugh. "Yeah. You, too, Toluz. You, too."

You can compose the best symphony in the plane only to hand it to a bunch of kids playing out-of-tune violins. Good art—whether it be music, painting, or murder—was all about the sum of its parts. Composer, performer, instrument. Painter, canvas, paint.

Anhelo had one terrible part to work with. Fiero was nobody's friend, and what he called fashion was just going to get in the way of Anhelo's artistic expression. Too gaudy, by far. If he was going to make this work, he needed to ensure the body was found somewhere clean and simple for contrast's sake. That was a big ask for a man who ran a museum.

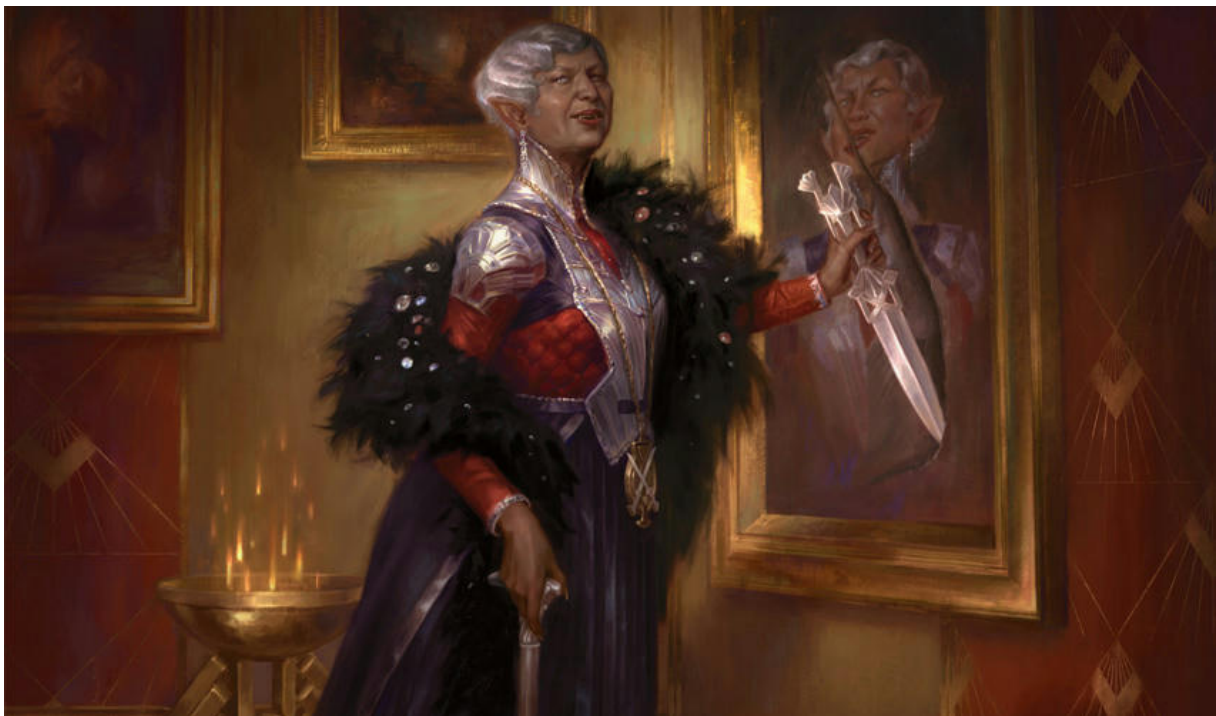
It was a bigger ask with less than twelve hours to get the job done.

But Anhelo hated to disappoint—the boss, Errant, his adoring public. He'd get it done.

Step one was to send the invitation. That he could do the night he got the orders, and it'd give him time to work with.

To Mister Fiero Vespín, in recognition of your contribution to New Capenna's ever-changing fashions, we'd like to invite you to a private tour of the museum . . .

The next step was to find a collaborator. Great art like this required two artists, after all. First thing in the morning, he swung by Evelyn's place, kissed the ring, talked up her latest acquisitions—but she caught him out in five minutes.



Art by: Marta Nael

"You aren't here to look at portraits, are you?"

Evelyn's cunning was as sharp as the knives Anhelo kept up his sleeves. She'd had centuries to hone it. "Got me sniffed out," he said. "Need something for tomorrow."

“For the wedding?” Evelyn said. Her brows rose. “I’d heard Parnesse got into a tussle, but I didn’t think it was with you.”

“It wasn’t,” Anheló said.

“Then you’re doing family business on the day of your daughter’s wedding?”

The corner of Anheló’s lip twitched. He hated how that sounded, but “Yeah. I am. I need something I can rig in the museum.”

A moment of silence passed between them, Evelyn sizing him up. “My, what a *predicament*. Of course, I’ll help “

A sinking feeling in his stomach. “For a price?”

“Clever boy,” she said, flashing her fangs. “We’ll work out the details some other time, but for now, let’s just call it a favor for a favor.”

Evelyn’s “favors” were about the worst thing you could have hanging around your neck in the Maestros. The boss being upset with you was the only thing that could inspire more desperation from one of the family. The last time he’d owed her a favor, she’d asked him to kill a Nightmare. Said she wanted to be the only one in town. He’d done it—but the scars from that one still coated his ribs. Unsightly flesh he’d have to live with for eternity. Toluz could make that sort of thing a point of pride, but not him.

He could turn her down. He could figure out some way to do this on his own, one that involved less flash. If he gave up on making this a work of art, then he could just pull Fiero into an alcove and kill him there, easy as could be. Show up at the wedding early enough to help set up the silverware.

But what sort of message would that leave? What kind of impression?

No. An artist never compromises. He had time for both. He *was* both. He could no more slit Fiero’s throat in an alley than he could abandon his daughter. It was going to work out, it had to.

“All right,” he said. “Name your price.”

“Anheló, Anheló, Anheló!” Fiero wrapped an arm around him like they were old friends. Halo smoke curled around them, earning glares from security. Never mind the signs posted all over—Fiero wanted to make an impression. “My old friend! What an honor. I had no idea you’d be giving the tour. Isn’t it your daughter’s wedding day?”

Anheló’s smile was strained. “Sure is.”

“Taking time out of your day to help a jamoke like me,” he said. With two more claps on the shoulder, he let Anheló go, anointed now with the reek of cheap cologne. “I tell ya, nobody in the family like you, buddy. Nobody looking out for the little guy anymore.”

At least they agreed that he was a jamoke. “That’s your job, ain’t it?” Anheló said. He started walking, hoping Fiero would take the hint. “Looking after all our new fellas, showing them the ropes, keeping an eye out for new art. Where’d we be without you?”

Hook, line, and sinker, he reeled Fiero in. Man was walking straight into his own tomb. Despite how banal a person he was, the solemnity of the occasion lent things a certain poetry Anheló couldn’t resist.

“Well, you know, I do what I can. Say, how is Errant, anyway? Nervous about the big day?”

Anheló walked them past a portrait of an angel embracing a demon, the latter’s throat slit. *Redeemer and Redeemed*. Knucklehead doesn’t even bother looking. Some art dealer he was. Private tour, and he

was busy preening about a wedding he wanted to ruin. If Anhelio killed him right here, it wouldn't be out of line.

"Don't know. I haven't seen her," he admitted. The twinge of guilt in his voice wasn't part of the act. "But she was as happy as could be before I left in the morning. Parnesse is her whole world."

Fiero took a drag from his Halo stick. He blew the smoke directly toward the oil painting. Anhelio's teeth hurt. "And she's your whole world. I'm surprised you aren't over there right now," he said.

"Oh, believe me, I'd like to be there. But you know how it is. Boss's orders I look after this place," Anhelio said, the venom boiling below the surface of his charming smile. "Right this way, Fiero. Got a whole new exhibit I wanted to show you. Figured I could use your expert eye."

"Whaddya got for ol' Fiero?" he asked. He walked straight through the door Anhelio held open for him. The air in this room was noticeably drier and cooler than it'd been in the main antechamber. "My specialty's in, you know, the contemporary stuff. Modernism they're calling it. You dipping your toes into the bloodbath there?"

"Could say that," Anhelio said. Why did he want to make so much small talk? At least they were on the way. He gestured to the walls around them, festooned as they were with wooden panels salvaged from Old Capennan churches. Up above there were genuine eaves torn from the same, worked from oak and cherry. "Welcome to the Old Capenna exhibit."

"Old Capenna? Anhelio, a guy like you, rea—What is *that*?"

Even a rube like Fiero knew something special when he saw it. And it *was* something special. Standing twice as tall as Anhelio and twice as wide as Fiero, the Old Capennan Warrior's blade arm was fearsome even in death. A storm of sharp edges, a symphony of metal, Anhelio had never seen anything like it. He had no idea where Evelyn found it, either.

But he knew that if he could get Fiero to stand in a particular spot, the axe it held would sever his head just as the light came through the stained glass to illuminate him. And that was a delight to work toward.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Anhelio said. He now set his own hand on Fiero's shoulder and walked him to the marvel. The head of its axe alone was the size of a person curled into a ball. "Fresh shipment. I wanted your thoughts on how to pose it."

Fiero, for the first time, put away his stick of Halo. "The size of that thing. I wonder what I could do with an axe like that "

"Like to get your hands on it?" Anhelio said. Closer, closer "We can get it down. You could give it a test swing, if you wanted."

Fiero looked at him like a child told he can have whatever he liked in the candy shop. "You mean that? You'd do that for me?"

"For my old friend, Fiero? Anything." Anhelio grinned. His blood started to pump again, close as he was to the occasion. "Just stand right here and I'll climb up there to get it down."

Fiero planted his feet right in the perfect spot. The light was at his ankles already; it was time.

Anhelio whistled as he rounded the plinth. Even grunted as if he was about to start climbing. In fact, all he had to do was cut a tiny, nearly invisible wire. He didn't even need the knife to do it—snapped it with his fingernail.

Turns out whoever this warrior was, the axe soldered onto their arm was still sharp. Fiero's head came clean off. Blood sprayed in a perfect arc around the statue, then landed in the grooves Anhelio had

spent all morning carving. Bloody letters at the feet of the warrior spelled out his warning: *death to traitors*.

He allowed himself a moment to admire his work—the way the multicolored light played upon the scarlet of Fiero’s blood, the contrast of his body against the smooth white marble floor. It was almost perfect. After a second to adjust the body’s posture to that of a nearby icon, the image was complete.

And not a moment too soon. Anhelo’s watch read three. He had half an hour to make it across town.



Art by: Aurore Folny

Driving yourself was gauche. Much like he couldn’t kill Fiero the easy way last night, his brain wouldn’t let him get into any old car and drive off to the wedding. If the day ever came when Anhelo had to choose between death and showing up to a party in last month’s fashions, the *only* thing that might sway his mind was the thought of Errant in mourning.

Even when time was of the essence, he couldn’t force himself to steal a car and drive, no matter how fast it was. And, of course, he’d been so focused on Fiero dying beautifully that he hadn’t thought to call for a ride. He didn’t have time to wait for a Maestro-approved car—which meant, horror of horrors

Taking a cab.

But it was fine. It was for Errant, and he still wasn’t driving himself. It’d be fine. Cabbies knew their way around New Capenna better than anyone, didn’t they?

He stormed past his stooges at the gates and down the steps. Outside, a fleet of cars stood ready and waiting for whichever out-of-town mook wanted to pay their prices. Anhelo’s eyes landed on the finest of them—driver outside wearing a double-breasted jacket, tailored to kill. His ride was slick, too—all black with polished gold accents. With this guy, it wouldn’t even feel like a cab ride at all.

“Grand Capenna Hall, double time,” Anhelo said as he slid into the back seat. “Make it in fifteen, and I’ll buy you whatever you want.”

“You got it, Boss, you got it,” said the driver. He grinned—but there was something wrong in his eyes, something like a fire sparking to life.

But the second Anhelio had that thought the locks clamped down on the doors. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Maybe it was the stress of the situation, but wasn’t there something off here? The scent of cherries stuck to his tongue; he knew well enough the toughest industrial cleaners used cherry to hide the smell of solvent. And while the interior of the car was plush and new, it was *too* new. A cab wasn’t outfitted like this.



Art by: Dan Scott

“Grand Capenna Hall. Big day for you, isn’t it?” The driver’s voice was smooth and light, yet the burn was still there in his eyes when he adjusted the rearview. “Mister Anhelio.”

“Real big,” Anhelio said. He didn’t look away from the guy. “Look, my offer still stands. I don’t care who you are. Today, of all days, if you get me where I need to go—I’ll get you whatever you like.”

The driver pulled them out onto the street. Whatever his real goal was, he wasn’t shy about having a lead foot. The city lights around them became streaks of light within minutes. Other cars swerved out of the way and honked when they couldn’t. Every corner sent them listing from one side of the car to the other. Something rattled in the trunk—something that sounded glass, something that sounded expensive.

“You can’t get me what I want,” the driver said, still smooth, still professional.

Anhelio looked around for the guy’s medallion. There, on the divider, he caught sight of it—a small, sketched portrait and basic information. Antonio Swift. What a name for a driver. Not one he’d heard before, either. He’d have remembered it.

But, come to think of it, wasn’t that face a little familiar, too? The nose, especially—broken once and healed off center, like a crack in concrete.

“Oh, it’s starting to fall into place for you, isn’t it?” Antonio said. “This face of mine. You’ve seen it before.”

Anhelo closed his hand around his knife. It never rains, but it pours. "Might have. Do we have business, Antonio? Because it can wait. Today's the day of my daughter's—"

"Wedding. I know," the driver said. "I know everything about you. That's how I tricked you so easily. This car, this suit. I wasn't sure it would work, but you vampires, you're all so easy to read. Your addiction to luxury is pathetic."

Stolen car and stolen suit. Maybe it wasn't just a bad likeness.

"Your name isn't Antonio."

"No, it isn't. It's Severo. And three years ago, you killed my father on my birthday," he said, grinning the whole while. He twisted the wheel all the way to the right. Bright lights filled the cabin as they swerved into the wrong lane of traffic. "Congratulations on the big day. Hope your daughter hurts like I did."

Anhelo lunged for him across the divider, but even plunging the knife into Severo's chest wasn't enough to avert what was coming. A huge Riveteer transport crashed into them like an angry rhox. Anhelo's vision went red, then white; his head knocked against the divider. The last thing he heard before his ears started to ring was Severo's maniacal laugh.

But even as he danced on the edge of unconsciousness, he didn't let himself give in. Couldn't. Not today. Not with so little time to spare. And Severo had been right about one thing: Anhelo *couldn't* give him what he wanted.

He was going to get to that wedding. No matter if he looked like warm roadkill, no matter if the whole while his head spun like a roulette wheel, he was going to make it.

By the time the car stopped moving, it was his only thought. Glass dug into his skin; a shard the size of his dagger had gone straight through his forearm. Anhelo snapped it, then tore his hand free from its pinion to Severo's shoulder. He lurched out of the car. Had he been a mortal, his stomach would've emptied—but there were perks to unlife, and freedom from vomiting was one.

But it wasn't all good news. Anhelo set a hand on the wreckage of the car to steady himself, only to hear shouting coming from behind him.

"That a Maestro with our merchandise?!"

Anhelo let out a breath. Merchandise. The stuff in the trunk, the glass He shambled toward the back of the car only for his fears to be confirmed.

Whoever this Antonio guy had been, he'd been running Halo for the Riveteers.

Riveteers who had just run him off the road, and who wanted their merchandise back. Riveteers who were closing in around him, crowbars and wrenches in hand. He could hear them even if he couldn't see them.

He had fifteen minutes, *maybe*, to make it to the wedding before Errant missed him. He could hardly see, his suit was ruined, he'd killed two people in one day, and every bone in his body ached, freshly broken.

But as the toughs closed in around him, all he could think about was Errant's big day. He'd done the wrong thing taking this job, hadn't he?

Well, he wasn't going to let his mistake ruin the wedding.

Anhelo, bloodied and beaten, pulled a spare knife from his boot. "You want to dance?" he slurred. "Then let's dance!"

The mooks knew an invitation when they heard one. Footsteps shuffled around him as they closed the distance. A rhox swung a piece of rebar over Anhelos head. Preternatural reflexes were the only thing that kept him standing—he didn’t see the blow coming so much as he felt the wind overhead. But dodging came with a hefty price: Anhelos couldn’t recover his balance in time.

He fell face first against the road. Glass dug into his cheeks; ash coated his tongue. When he rolled over, he saw the gathered Riveteers but could not make out their faces with the world spinning around him. In the blur, he saw Errant, and in the howl of the horns and engines around him, he heard her voice.

You promise, right?

How many times had she asked him that? If he sat down and counted, probably more times than there were lights in this city.

“I’m I’m coming,” he mumbled. He set his glass-embedded knuckles against the asphalt and forced himself up.

He didn’t see the knife coming for his back.

But he didn’t have to—because Toluz did.

The knife clattered to the ground an instant before its wielder. If the crack of dozens of bones and the frantic whispers of “light’s-out” did not tell him who’d come to his aid, the sudden darkness was clue enough. A cloud of black swallowed up everything in sight. Within, he heard death rattles and sternums crushed, dreams snuffed and hopes dashed. When it was all over, she was the only one left standing—with not a drop of blood on her suit.

She gave him a hand. He stared at it a moment, at the blood across her palm, and considered his options. He could try and stand on his own, but what would the Family think if they heard of this? Getting his teeth kicked in by a bunch of goons, needing Toluz to save him. The boss wouldn’t take too kindly to it.

“Don’t let your pride get in the way of things,” she said. “You’re family, Anhelos.”

It caught him a little off guard. The waves of the world kept spinning—but her hand was a tether. “Did you follow me?”

“I protect my investments,” she answered. She slung his arm around her shoulder. That cane was supporting the two of them, now. Together, they headed toward the side of the road, where she had a car ready and waiting for them. “And I had some regrets about the job.”

He laughed, which only made him cough up blood. “Oh? *You’ve* got some regrets? Tell me about it.”

To his surprise she laughed, too. “Must sound rich coming from me, huh?” Her henchmen opened the door and helped him into the back seat of her limo. Waiting for him inside were a healer and a fella holding a new suit. Designer, even. “Hang in there, Anhelos. Anything happens to you, and Parnesse’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

The road goes fast when your head ain’t on right. He couldn’t keep track of any of it—his flesh knitting back together, the assistant changing him out of his messed-up clothes into his fresh new duds. As the lights swam around him, all he could do was keep checking the time. Ten minutes. Eight minutes. Five.

Promise?

When they got to the Grand Capenna Hall, he'd only begun to get his bearings. But he knew, even then, that if his heart yet beat, the metronome it would follow: his daughter. The thought of Errant huddled up in the bride's chambers wondering where he was

He threw himself out of the car without waiting for it to come to a stop. To his surprise, he saw Toluz doing the same—although she looked more collected than he did. Obscura might not have much in the way of style, but they knew how to keep it together.

And, okay, maybe that cane of hers was slick.

The party started the moment they cleared the entrance. All around them were gold and mother-of-pearl, feathers and silk. Obscura in staid gray wore grins and ruddy cheeks, champagne gladdening their spirits; Maestro assassins made small talk over Halo. Swing tunes put a pep in even Anhelos's tired step.

Next to him, Toluz lets out a relieved sigh. "Thought your crew would've started a fight by now."

"And ruin a beautiful night? Forget about it," Anhelos said. "If anyone was going to start a fight, it'd be your people."

She smirked and shook her head. "Not tonight, not tonight," she said. Like him, she was scanning the crowd for her daughter. Two Obscura at the other end of the hall were already flagging her down. Toluz pulled an envelope from her jacket and offered it to him. The paper was crisp and black, sealed with black wax. "I had my doubts about this whole thing. People like us don't tend to come together easy. Too much blood on our hands. But seeing all this, and how you put yourself out there I might have been too harsh on you. It was wrong of me to make you jump through all those hoops. Next time you need some information, it's on me."

He looked down at the envelope as he'd looked on her hand. Once more, the answer sprung to him. He waved her off. "Listen, I get it. Guy like me spends too much time thinking about the job, you needed to know I cared. We can leave business for some other day."

Toluz gave a considered nod. She hid the envelope away, then picked up a glass from a passing server. This she lifted toward him as she made her exit. "Congratulations, Anhelos."

"You, too, Toluz," he said. He saw the stairs up to the bridal suite and wasted no time. The dames on either side offered him a little liquid courage for his troubles, but he didn't need anything like that. What he needed was to get up there in the next three minutes.

Which was why one of his lackeys grabbing him by the arm wore away at the last little bit of patience he had. Even when he realized the guy was paler than the flowers flowing from the urn of a nearby caryatid. "You'd better have a good reason for this," he snapped.

"Boss, we lost some guys over at the Caldaia—"

Anhelos pinched his nose. "What did I just say?"

"That I'd better have a good reason," the guy said.

"Yeah. That wasn't one. Go find someone else to report to. Tell the Big Man you couldn't reach me if it comes down to it," Anhelos said. "Unless we got goons busting down the doors, for the next eight hours, the only family I care about is in that room. Now scram."

At least he didn't have to repeat himself. The lackey left, taking the last of work's aura with him. Only the bridal suite remained. Within, he could hear Errant and her friends chattering away, the happy bubble of laughter.

In that moment, it didn't matter how much he suffered to get here on time.

Anhelo opened the door. There she was, his little girl, wearing her mother's wedding dress. They looked so much alike that it stopped him in his tracks, robbed him of his breath. Has he ever seen her happier than this? Surrounded by friends, radiant with joy, the air itself around her seeming to sparkle? The flowers held in her lap couldn't hope to match her. She bounded to her feet at the sight of him, leaving the flowers to her maid of honor. "Daddy! Daddy, you're here!"



Art by: Justine Cruz

"Always, honey." He embraced her. There was a lump in his throat. The lump only got bigger when he realized her mother wouldn't ever get to see her like this. Anhelo had been there instead, when he could, but

It didn't matter. He'd be there. For Serena, and Errant, forever was a promise.

Today and all the days to come, they were the center of his world.

No work of art could ever compare.