Episode 1: Homecoming

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TEMPLE OF THE GODS

Victory and betrayal tasted the same—like blood. It filled Elspeth's mouth, spilling out the edges with her shock. She gripped the familiar spear as if she could take it from Heliod's grasp and free herself from its blade. But strength was leaving her fingers faster than life was leaving her body.

Ajani roared at a distance, too far to get to them. But what would he do if he could? They were both wounded and weary from the battle with Xenagos, and even if they had not been, there was little point now. Her life had been forfeited from the moment she had made a deal with Erebos, God of the Dead and Heliod's sworn enemy, to bring back her lost love, Daxos. She had already bartered her life. Heliod was merely helping the process along and cementing his vengeance for all her transgressions.

"Carry her back to the mortal realm, leonin. Deliver her to Erebos," the god commanded Ajani. With a twist, Heliod withdrew Godsend—the weapon she had found originally as a sword from the heavens and that Heliod had transformed into a spear and made her responsibility, her burden. Without its support, Elspeth collapsed, her knees meeting the hard stone of the Temple of the Gods. She felt the full weight of her mortality, crushing her as her body slowly succumbed to her injuries.

"If she dies here, she will disperse to nothingness." Heliod's eyes narrowed, their divine glow dimming with his disdain. Elspeth fought for words. But there were none to be found. She and Ajani had fought their way to Nyx to slay Xenagos and right the wrongs she had caused. They had won.

But her victory did not undo her transgressions and had only hardened Heliod's cold displeasure. He had resented her for the mysteries of her powers, for her deals, for slaying a god. Heliod had no warmth for her now.

"Elspeth!" Ajani's usual grace gave way to scrambling and jerky movements as he rushed toward her.

She pressed her hand against the mortal wound at her middle, as hopeless as it was. Instinct, really. "Ajani," she whispered, trying to lift her head. But it was too heavy. Her body was turning to lead.

His arms wrapped around her. The world spun as Ajani carried her through a portal out of the land of the divine and back onto the mortal plane of Theros. Her friend set her down gingerly.

"Hang on," Ajani urged, grabbing her hand. "I'm going to find help."

Elspeth blinked; each time was slower than the last. Ajani was there and then he wasn't. Her sight was growing hazy, oscillating between blurry and painfully crisp. His absence became more painful by the second. Cold. Come back. She didn't want to die alone, but she no longer had the strength to even call out.

Distant cries washed over her. Was a great battle taking place? Or were these echoes of their struggle against Xenagos rattling around her final thoughts? None of it mattered now. Her days of battle were slipping away, pooling beneath her.

With the last of her strength, Elspeth turned her gaze skyward. What she was looking for, she didn't know. Maybe she was looking for nothing. A spot of darkness between the stars to focus on. Quiet. Peace.

A soft exhale slipped through her lips. She had spent so long searching for a place to rest, to simply be; perhaps death was how she would finally find it.

The last thing she saw was a flash of light, cleaving the heavens in two.

MAESTRO'S MUSEUM

Sumptuous disorder: both an aesthetic and a way of life in New Capenna.

The impossible city indulged itself on strong, gilded lines that soared upward and broke apart into delicate ironwork. The decorations mirrored the waterscapes and fauna of the terraced gardens that were the signatures of Park Heights. If Xander could capture it in the stroke of a brush or pen, he would. But alas, his talents had never lain in the making of landscapes on canvas.



Art by: Grady Frederick

And yet, the town knew his mark as well as those of the most famous creators. He'd painted it in blood enough times.

Xander stroked his beard, a slight smirk curling his lips. Those had been fun days, indeed. The days of a younger man, a man whom he had enough distance from now to notice lacked a little finesse. Editing, as it were.

How he wished he could go back and repeat some of those early assassinations. To do them better. If he had the hard-earned skill and control that he possessed now with the body he had then—free of all its old, aching wounds and present ailments—New Capenna would know true fear. But time continued its march, dragging him and New Capenna along with it. The city he'd once prowled was vanishing before his eyes and these days he much preferred the company of canvas and sculpture over blade and mark.

It was a wonder, really, that the city still stood. It rose from vast emptiness and long-abandoned townships, a testament to the might—or hubris perhaps—of its long-forgotten founders. The barrier those builders had left behind remained, a last bastion of hope against a great, now forgotten evil. But the danger that New Capenna now faced was not an external threat, but a rot festering within. The fragile alliances that fostered peace between the five families that ruled the city were being strained to a breaking point from which there would likely be no return. Some relationships, once broken, could never be repaired. All Xander could do now was ensure that he and his family were on the side of the victors at the end of it all.

A knock on the door interrupted the thoughts he'd been worrying over all evening. Xander drew a pocket watch and checked the time. A few minutes late. Permissible. "Enter."

"My apologies," Anhelo said with a bow of his head. He continued without lifting his face; it made him look almost small underneath the chandeliers and overwhelming opulence of the room. "Matters took a little longer than expected to resolve." Concern weighed down his words.

"You weren't delayed. You were giving me time to appreciate the new landscaping across the way." Xander motioned to the window. Workers had been out in the terraced gardens he so admired all day, changing flowers like hemlines. The greenery was breathtaking to behold, stitched together with unnatural streams and waterfalls, cascaded down the side of the building opposite the museum.

"Even still, it's not-"

"It was no trouble," Xander said with a firmer edge at the end of the statement. He did not need Anhelo's prostrations or verbal fumbling. All Xander required of his Deacon was loyalty. Unconditional, unabashed, unyielding loyalty. And that he already held in spades. "Now, stand here, I need to make some modifications to your ensemble before your next assignment."

Anhelo crossed the room to a low pedestal, stepping up. Xander did the same, ignoring the cane propped against his desk. The old injuries didn't ache as badly today, which was fortunate since he needed both hands to take Anhelo's measurements.

"How is the Mezzio today?" The ribbon slipped between Xander's fingers, still nimble after all this time, as he confirmed the last of the numbers.

"How did you know I was in the Mezzio?" Anhelo seemed more amused than disturbed.

"What don't I know?" In truth, it was the smell. The oils of the shoeshiners combined with the aromas of the open markets, the incense of the fortune tellers layered atop, and the undernotes of sweat from the dance halls; it was a unique perfume that stuck to clothes and was distinctly the Mezzio. It clung to people as though it were a calling card sent to lure them back to the city's center, whispering sweetly of danger and decadence.

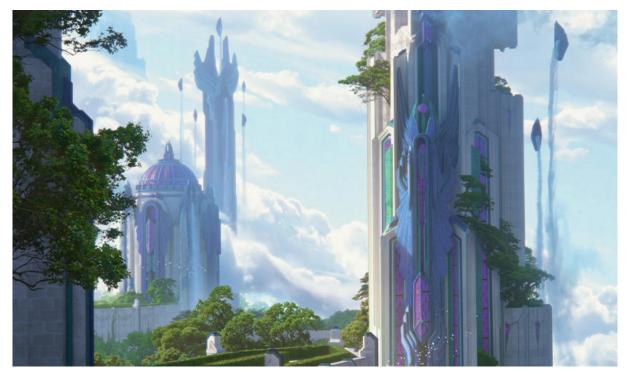
Anhelo's mouth tugged up on one side, a trademark smirk that revealed one of his vampiric fangs. "And that is why you run this town."

Xander chuckled, setting down his tape and running his fingers over the assortment of pauldrons he'd selected from his collection. Anhelo's attire had been lacking for a few weeks now, and that simply would not do. Moreover, he needed some changes if he was to blend in properly with the rabble of lower levels.



Art by: Christian Dimitrov

Every level of New Capenna held its own charms, from the lowest rungs of the utilitarian Caldaia, reimagined in its ghastly fashion by Ziatora and her Riveteers, to the bustling midtown of the Mezzio steeped in the crime and opportunity the Cabaretti promised. Xander's favorite level was, by far, his museum in the heavenly expanses of Park Heights. Which was one of the many reasons why he rarely left and Anhelo always came to him.



Art by: Christian Dimitrov

"If only I ran this town," Xander mused, finally settling on an adornment for the shoulder that would clip into a high collar of steel. It was closer to the chin than Anhelo usually preferred. But the Deacon

wore his shirts open far too low in Xander's opinion, and when it came to fashion, there were none with a better eye than Xander.

"Something is weighing on you." Anhelo kept his eyes forward as Xander settled the pauldron on his shoulder, testing the fit.

"Many somethings."

"May I ask what they are?" Anhelo's pale eyes searched his face. Expectant, but not demanding.

"Where to begin?" Xander had returned to the table, pauldron back in its place among the lineup. He now examined daggers, poison rings, rings that also functioned as brass knuckles, and his personal favorite, silencing cuffs that reduced the sound and flash of magic to almost nothing, the perfect tool for an assassin. "This, I suppose," Xander chose both a cuff and a thought. "The balance of power in this town is shifting."

"I've heard the whispers—the Adversary, they call him."

"I am less concerned about a shadowy upstart than I am the supply of Halo. The Adversary is a brute and a symptom. Not the problem." Halo—the magical substance that had been sustaining power and life within New Capenna for years—had a dwindling source. Desperation for power made men clumsy and brash. And there was no greater power than Halo. If it were to ever run out, it would surely spell anarchy for New Capenna.

"The Adversary is gaining a foothold in the city. He's more than just an upstart."

Xander knew all too well the foothold the Adversary was gaining. The man had been slowly siphoning from the Maestro's ranks, promising them a steady supply of Halo in return. Xander hardly minded seeing the disloyal weeded out from under him. But where this Adversary was acquiring the magical substance was a greater mystery. One Xander was determined to solve.

"Perhaps so," Xander relented as he clipped the cuff around Anhelo's wrist. "But the Adversary would not gain that power without steady access to Halo."

"Do you think he's in league with the Cabaretti? They've been amassing their stockpiles." Anhelo curled and uncurled his fingers, no doubt testing his magic against the bracer.

"The Cabaretti demands are high in preparation for their Crescendo. If the Adversary had access to Halo and was working for them, the Cabaretti would have already consumed his supply." Anhelo considered this, and in his silence, Xander continued, "What I am most concerned about, regarding the Cabaretti, is this rumor of their 'new supply' that they plan to unveil during the Crescendo celebrations. That is what I'm going to need you to focus on—gather the information on what this source is by whatever means necessary."

"Spying? Sounds like a job for the Obscura, no?"

The family Obscura specialized in illusions, distractions, and manipulations. It was a natural inquiry and came off as curious, rather than accusatory, so Xander allowed the affront to his station slide. Very few in the Maestros possessed the rapport with him to inquire so boldly. "For matters involving Halo, I prefer to keep things in house and with the man I trust above all others. No one will know of this task but you."

Anhelo's smirk fell. He knew something deeper was amiss, of that Xander could be sure. Anhelo was his right hand, his Deacon, and he hadn't achieved that rank with obliviousness.

"There is more you're not telling me."

"Isn't there always?" Xander returned to the table of assorted tools, ready to step away from the conversation. For all he trusted Anhelo, information was like Halo itself—just a taste made a man strong and too much made him reckless. "I think this is just the thing to round out your ensemble." He handed Anhelo a ring.

"What does it do?"

"Look terribly fashionable."

Anhelo chuckled alongside him. But Xander's tone quickly became serious once more. "We must stay one step ahead. The powers of New Capenna are shifting, and if we're not careful, our position will slip out from underneath our feet. The Maestros have held onto our influence for far too long to let it go now."

"I will not let you down."

"See that you don't." Xander stepped aside as Anhelo stepped down from the pedestal. His final outfit was not what Xander would generally approve of, but it was what the Mezzio expected—practical while maintaining just enough flair. Effortlessly fashion-forward. "I hear that the Cabaretti have been relentless in the Mezzio in search of Halo. Return there and see what you can find."

Anhelo departed, and rather than returning to his window, Xander headed to the far corner of the room. Behind a curtain was a locked door to which there was only one key, and it was perpetually within a hidden pocket on his person. The small storeroom was cramped with all manner of ancient relics. Statues of winged angels were locked in stony prayer, guarding the texts Xander had killed to collect and protect.

These were the last remaining histories of the founding of New Capenna, a time he should remember but that had become murky following his deal. Xander lifted two cotton gloves, donning them before leafing through the first text. He had read these words many times but had yet to give up hope that somewhere in the annals of the past, he just might find the key to their future.



Art by: Martina Fačková

OFFICE OF GRANDFATHER CABARETTI

A lively tune soared to the upper archways of the Vantoleone. The warmth of the brass horns wove together with the trellised flowers that hung like chandeliers. Jinnie's foot tapped lightly against the carpet of Jetmir's office, in time with the thrumming beat and the thumping of patrons' feet as they swung across the dance floor below.

"Go and join them." Jetmir chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "These matters can wait. There's a party."

"There is always a party." Jinnie grinned and lightly stroked the cat curled in her lap. "But there is only one Crescendo, and I want to ensure that everything is absolutely perfect for it."

"There will be another Crescendo next year," he countered playfully. "Assuming the plane doesn't come to its end between now and then and there are still new years to celebrate."

Jinnie fought a roll of her eyes. Jetmir always knew just what buttons of hers to push and how to tease. But that was what fathers were supposed to do, even the adoptive kind.

"You know what I mean." From where she sat on the opposite side of Jetmir's desk, she could only see the glass ceiling of the Vantoleone and the mirrored figures shining against it. Tonight was a decent celebration, as good as any by Cabaretti standards. But Jinnie wanted everything for the Crescendo to go off without a hitch. It was her foremost priority. "I've received replies from almost every family, save for the Maestros."

"And the Adversary."

Jinnie waved the notion away, causing the feline in her lap to give her a very offended look. She quickly returned to scratching Muri between her ears. "The Adversary isn't worth inviting. Doing so would be a show of respect he doesn't deserve."

"It's sometimes better to show respect before it's due. You never know how a small friend now might become a big ally later."

"You actually think he might form a new family?" she asked, incredulous.

"I think anything is possible in New Capenna." Jetmir's tone sucked the levity from the air and demanded Jinnie's attention. She had known him for a long time—well before he was the wealthy head of the Cabaretti, and long enough to know when a matter demanded her focus. "He's beginning to amass power, attracting loyalists with promises of riches and Halo."

"Those who would betray their existing families because they think having some Halo gives license to start their own are not worth the blood in their veins." Her words were venomous, lacking an ounce of compassion. The only thing traitors were good for was being turned into examples for other would-be turncoats.

"I don't disagree."

"Besides, the moment the Font is revealed, everything in New Capenna will change and the Cabaretti will be on top." Merely saying so aloud sent a tingle down her spine. The plane was about to undergo a fundamental shift, and she, as someone who'd grown up strong and influential despite neglect and abandonment, would be at its center.

"How is the Font?" Jetmir steepled his fingers, claws lightly tapping. The light glinted off his signet ring, one Jinnie had kissed many times.

"In hand. No issues," Jinnie was pleased to report. "Everything is just as we would hope, and no one is aware of the Font beyond the inner council of the Cabaretti."

"Then the Crescendo will be a celebration for the ages." Jetmir tilted back his head and let out a roar of laughter. He was usually in a good mood. As the grandfather of the Cabaretti, he had every reason to be. Jetmir had ensured the world around him was a celebration, filled with food and drink and dancing. It had never been hard for Jinnie to swear her life to him.

"Without doubt."

"Now, you should go and rejoin the evening's festivities. We'll discuss the other details later. You're far too lovely to be cooped up in this office all evening."

"I could say the same for you." Jinnie leaned down, grabbing her purse. It bore the same crest as Jetmir's ring and the heavy gold bands he wore as ornamentation on his two crescent-shaped horns. Muri hopped from her lap and into the bag. Her other familiar, a dog named Regis, raised his muzzle from his mighty paws and regarded her inquisitively. She stood, and the beast mirrored her movements. Jinnie rounded the desk that was between her and Jetmir, settling her hand on the cashmere scarf around his neck as she leaned forward to kiss his cheek lightly.

"I am not lovely. I am an old man."

"You are not that old!" She slapped his shoulder playfully. "And everyone knows that you are still the life of every party. It's why everyone wants to be a Cabaretti."

"They only think that because I bankroll those parties." Jetmir smirked. She could tell he was jesting. The Cabaretti were the beating heart of the city. They were joy. They were life. They were rhythm and music and sound and color. And soon they would be the ones responsible for giving New Capenna the Font and all the Halo the people could ever dream of.

"That is not true, and you know it." She returned to her chair, slinging a bejeweled shawl over her shoulders. Its gossamer threads glistened in the light, looking as though she was wrapped in a spiderweb made of diamonds. "But you're right, I should return. I don't want to leave Kitt or Giada for too long."

"Give them my best." Jetmir pushed away from his desk, situating his own sash around his shoulders and taking up his scepter. At its top was the face of a crowned leonin—the symbol of the Cabaretti.



Art by: Ryan Pancoast

"Always." Jinnie flashed him a dazzling smile and stepped out the door.

Jetmir's office was upstairs from the main hall of the Vantoleone. Viridian curtains imprinted with golden flowers and shapes reminiscent of the peacock feathers that lined the hem of her dress muffled the music below. But the sounds returned in full as Jinnie emerged into the entry that led to the dance floor.

Two women lounged on a nearby settee, right where Jinnie had left them. Kitt's furred ears twitched, spinning in Jinnie's direction before her head did. Kitt knew her by footsteps alone.

"And how do the preparations for the Crescendo go?" A mere question from Kitt had a lyrical nature to it, as if her voice was always one short breath away from song.

"Swimmingly."

"Will I have my solo?" Kitt's mouth curled in a grin.

"Toots, was there ever any doubt?" Jinnie's attention settled on the teenager next to her dear friend. "And you, Giada, are you excited?"

The young woman forced a smile that didn't reach her longing eyes; the almost tortured expression was always odd to Jinnie. Giada wanted for nothing, Jetmir offered her sustenance, shelter, and luxuries. The air around her was filled with the finest perfumes. Her nails were perpetually manicured. Jinnie was always present to ensure no one would ever lay a finger on Giada's short dark hair—currently pinned up with rare feathers. She had everything she could possibly wish for, apart from her leave.

"I am," she said. Though the words lacked sincerity.

Jinnie knelt before her, scooping up Giada's hands. "Good, because in no time at all, we're going to change the plane."

DEPTHS OF THE CALDAIA

Vivien Reid was on the hunt. Not for prey, but for something that might not exist. For a balance that could finally put to rest the ghosts of Skalla that haunted her every step. She searched for a place—a people—where the constructed and natural worlds were in harmony.

But she was quickly learning that New Capenna was likely not that place.

Beyond this city was a plane devoid of nature and life, fallen to ruin. Within its walls was a synthetic metropolis of steel. A temple to industry. The motifs found within the architecture were natural enough. Vivien could pick out the shapes of palms in fanned windows; metal had been hammered and polished to be reminiscent of waterfalls. But when there was actual greenery, it was encapsulated in concrete and iron, carefully sculpted and plucked to resemble the zig-zagging patterns found in many of the citizenry's clothing.

Nature might exist here, but it wasn't real. This plane was out of alignment, dissonant, and weighted at each pole of synthetic and natural, and she didn't give New Capenna long before it split at the seams. That was always the way of it when the scales tipped too far in one direction.

She had entered the city in a central location by way of one of the many trains and headed down from there, away from the soaring spires and sculpted reliefs of angels that looked down upon the city with their vacant eyes. Instead, Vivien had plunged herself into the reddish haze of the lower levels, searching for some long-lost connection to the earth below, hidden deep underneath the smoke and grime. Forgotten roots, but enduring, nevertheless.

The well-paved walkways above had given way to suspended streets of steel. Vivien traversed girders with feet as confident as the citizenry. The locals seemed to have no problem scrambling from beam to beam—leaping across sections of open air with only a careful step separating them and certain death. The city above this underbelly was supported by columns shaved into impossible points, balancing on the tips of pyramids beneath.

She had seen many impressive places in her travels. But this was certainly a marvel unto itself so long as she was willing to look past its grave errors in rejecting nature so completely.



Art by: Jake Murray

A raucous uproar erupted from the open doors of a nearby building. Abandoning her initial curiosity—an anvil surrounded by flames on a nearby platform—Vivien leapt from the girder she had been crossing onto one lower that connected to the doors. The light of the room within struck clean lines through the smoke and fog. Vivien slipped inside, her smooth movements going mostly unnoticed. Those who did see her paid no mind. They were too engrossed in the speech.

"—are not to take orders from the people sitting in the estates that we built, sipping the Halo that comes from our stores," a voice thundered over the assembled crowd, mostly composed of people in workers' clothing. The source of the declarations was a mighty dragon, perched high above them all. Judging from how the crowd hung on her every word, the dragon was clearly a skilled orator. "The Cabaretti demand too much for this Crescendo without spreading its benefits. The Brokers impose themselves on our streets. And I have no doubt that the Obscura are lurking among us right now, eager to report back to the highest bidders like the lapdogs they are."

The masses cheered agreements. Some grumbled grievances alongside the dragon. A curl of smoke escaped her nostrils before she continued, "They would do well to remember not to step on the hands building their cabarets and lounges. A few weak bolts and old beams can make such untimely accidents."

"You're not from here." A man bundled in heavy coats, gloves, boots, and a wide-brimmed hat approached, disrupting Vivien's focus.

"Neither are you," she appraised. He was nothing like the other workers of the hall and their practical garb.

He chuckled. "I am, at least, not wearing clothes from another plane."

Vivien straightened away from the wall she'd been leaning on. The stranger's eyes were bright and shining underneath the shade of his hat. Something in the air around him, in the way he held himself, made her skin pucker into gooseflesh. He was different. And while they couldn't be less alike, they shared one distinct kinship.

He was also a planeswalker.

"Ah, so you see it now, too. Come, let's share a word before the rabble is released from Ziatora's thrall."

The man left through the same doors she'd just entered, not looking back once, trusting her to follow. Vivien glanced between him and the dragon, still giving her speech. Between the two, he held more interest in Vivien.

"I hadn't been looking for another planeswalker tonight but you're a far better find than what I came in search of." He stood at the edge of a girder, looking out over the smoke and steel. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough." The noise of the hall faded away as she approached. He began to walk once more, staying one step ahead. Vivien let him lead, one hand ready to reach for her bow in an instant. She didn't come here looking for a fight, but she'd end anyone brazen enough to bring one to her.

"Long enough to know there are others here like us?"

"Others?" More planeswalkers? Why? She had come here for personal reasons, but it now looked like she had stepped into something deeper than expected.

"How much do you know about Halo?"

"Little." She had heard it mentioned among the citizenry and surmised it had something to do with the iridescent substance that filled the flutes of the revelers she passed. But Vivien hadn't had enough time to learn more than that.

"This plane thrives on it, and it holds immeasurable power. The man I'm currently working for is in the process of acquiring it. But his real goals lie elsewhere."

"Which is?"

"Curious?" He glanced over his shoulder with a smirk. The sound of metal clanking softly followed his every movement.

"Perhaps." Vivien wasn't yet sure if she trusted him or not, but she didn't need trust to glean more information from him.

"Good, come along then. Urabrask will be eager to meet you."

She didn't move this time when he began walking. "And what is your name?"

He paused, then spoke without looking back. "Tezzeret, and I have people waiting for me, so if you could hurry along."

Vivien did not hurry. She did not move at all. While she had never met him before, she had certainly heard the name Tezzeret. They'd fought on opposite sides during the War of the Spark, and she always had a sneaking suspicion he had access to the Planar Bridge. Tezzeret wasn't someone to be underestimated. If he was here, then there were deeper currents, indeed.

"Well?" He stopped when he realized she wasn't following.

"Let's get one thing straight "Vivien hid her concerns and suspicions behind a mask of determination and crossed the gap between her and Tezzeret in a few long strides. Now, she walked at his side. It was tight on the girder. But she didn't cede any space to him. "You are not one to order me around."

Tezzeret huffed in amusement. "Understood."

"So, who is Urabrask?" she asked. A friend of Tezzeret would put her even more on guard.

"It's complicated." Tezzeret's eyes were distant. He focused on a point somewhere beyond what Vivien could see. She knew that look all too well; it was the look of a man who had stepped between the veil of planes and witnessed all the horrors that were often found between. "It will make more sense once you've met him. But for now, all you need to know is that he is on our side."

"And what side is that?"

"The side of freedom."

MEZZIO TRAIN STOP

Elspeth startled at the transport that whizzed overhead, rattling on suspended tracks that hung a little too low for something so noisy. She blinked several times, eyes still adjusting to the bright lights of New Capenna as compared to the dim train. The city was teeming with people of every shape and size, wearing all manner of strange clothing.



Art by: Thomas Stoop

Buildings towered above her, connected by a maze of rails and walkways, decorated with balconies and ornate designs that spoke of nothing but indulgence. Every ceiling seemed to be another's floor as the city continued to stretch higher and higher, reaching dizzying heights before plunging into the low cloud cover.

She adjusted the pack on her shoulder. It contained what meager possessions she could think to bring when she'd planeswalked to this plane. What little she still had to her name after everything she'd been through.

Elspeth swallowed the initial sense of disappointment that the city wasn't what she'd been expecting. What expectations could she reasonably carry? None. It was unfair to have preconceived notions while searching for a place that she had long stopped believing existed.

"Home," Elspeth murmured, seeing if the word fit New Capenna when said aloud. It was no better. "Ajani said this was it."

Her friend had never lied to her and had always given sound council, even when she didn't want to hear it. She had every reason to trust him. If he said this was her home, then surely it must be. She had been searching, dreaming, and longing for this moment for years

So why had she never felt more out of place?



Art by: Sam Chivers



