

The Side of Freedom

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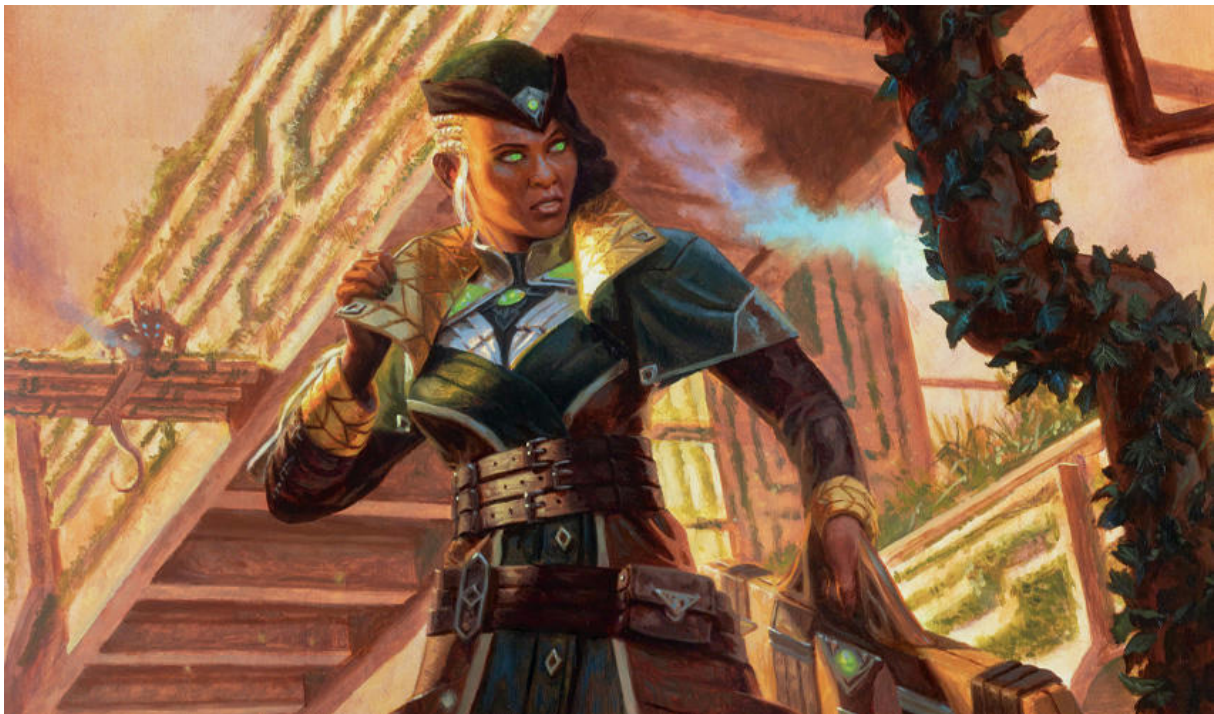
Depth of the Caldaia

The side of freedom, Vivien silently repeated Tezzeret's words.

That could mean a whole lot of things, especially coming from a man like Tezzeret. They'd fought each other on opposite sides during the War of the Spark, and while she'd never known him personally, she'd heard enough stories to get a general sense of the man.

Tezzeret had been known to look after himself foremost, which meant that there were innate risks to following him when they'd only just met.

Vivien adjusted her grip on her bow, holding it out for balance as they dropped down onto a lower girder suspended across the seemingly endless abyss of red smoke and industry that was the underbelly of New Capenna. Tezzeret glanced back as she landed lightly behind him, silent compared to the heavy metallic clang every time he fell to a lower rung. His long coat concealed most of his body, but given the noises, Vivien suspected a good portion of him was encased in metal of some kind. She was already trying to figure out the best place to shoot him if it came to that.



Art by: Jake Murray

"Do you want to tell me where you're taking me?" As they retreated from even the farthest reaches of the city, the more curious Vivien became—and the more keenly aware of just how far away they now were from any other soul. *Could this be a trap?*

“You’ll see soon enough.” He continued down along a long girder, his gray braided hair swaying behind him.

“Are you always this chatty?”

“Do I seem like the type who engages in small talk?” No, he didn’t. “And I didn’t think you were either.”

“What do you know about me?” She didn’t even bother trying to sound casual.

“I make it my job to know things about people, especially fellow planeswalkers. Why don’t we say I know *enough*?” And that was too much.

She was still wary, but not on alert: despite his brevity, she didn’t feel animosity or danger coming from him. Her senses were hard-won and honed by time and experience—Vivien trusted her gut and followed him deeper into the underbelly of this strange, new plane.

A steel web of titanic girders tightened around them, slowing their pace. Rebar, easily four times thicker than her thigh crossed between them, coated with dirt and grime that had collected into mountains over what must have been centuries. The filtered light turned faint and rusty, casting everything in an ominous hue.



Art by: Christian Dimitrov

Eventually, the metal buildings and their supports gave way to rock. The city of New Capenna did have a bottom, and it seemed they had finally, at long last, reached it. This deep, there was only the whisper of light buzzing through long-forgotten bulbs that flickered like the determined ghosts of the city’s forefathers. The girders that supported New Capenna had been plunged through ruins and attached by rivet and screw to the rocky top of what appeared to be some giant plateau.

These ruins must have been the first Capenna. Its humble and early days were buried by the “progress” that pushed its people toward the skies. The way a wall had crumbled, claw marks still gouged into the stone, caught Vivien’s eye. Perhaps it hadn’t all been progress. Perhaps it had been recovery following some other devastation.

Vivien paused at the edge of a girder where it met a pile of rubble. Kneeling, she touched the dirt. It was packed hard, dry, and dead.

It had been a long time since the people of this city had connected with the earth that still strained to support them.

Tezzeret said nothing and led her deeper still. Down a winding path that cut into the plateau itself, he led her through crag and cave. Just when all light vanished, Tezzeret shrugged off his coat and crimson bloomed against the rough walls that surrounded them. The glow came from before him—within him—outlining his form in an ominous red. It turned his pale skin almost the same shade. Vivien drew an arrow from her quiver. Its green haze mingled with Tezzeret's vermilion as he turned.

"What is that?" she demanded.

"A show of trust and good faith." He motioned to the source of the light in his chest. It oozed between breaks in the metal plating that covered his body like haphazard bandages, replacing flesh entirely in some places. The plasma that took the place of bone and sinew was barely contained by the strips of metal. "The Planar Bridge."

"It's true; it wasn't destroyed." She'd only ever heard rumors.

Tezzeret smirked. "I see my reputation precedes me."

"More than you know." She kept her arrow nocked.

"It's harmless to you." Tezzeret shrugged. "But it looks quite ominous, doesn't it, the way it glows?" He inspected his arm as if it were someone else's, stitched to his body. "It changed after transporting *them* across planes. Corrupted, perhaps. The process has become quite unpleasant for any other than myself," he mused.

"Them?"

Tezzeret returned to the present. "The praetors."

"Who?" She'd not heard the title before.

"The leaders of New Phyrexia"

The tiny hairs on the back of Vivien's neck stood on end. "You're working for New Phyrexia?" Kaya had fought one of them on Kaldheim, and word of their presence on Kamigawa had found its way to Vivien. They were a virus, a threat, and Tezzeret their main vector.

"I was," Tezzeret said. "I am. I'm saddled with the architect of the undoing of the Multiverse, the one being who would see all life bow to and become Phyrexia by force—Elesh Norn."

The bowstring was at her cheek in a breath, her opposite arm outstretched. Tezzeret had the audacity to grin down the edge of her arrow.

"Such sudden hostility. How will you ever make friends, Vivien?"

"I'm not sure if I want to be friends with my enemies." The words were rough. There was no greater crime against the whole Multiverse than aiding the horrors Phyrexia was unleashing.

"It's a regrettable necessity."

She took the bait. "In what way could working with Elesh Norn ever be a 'necessity?'"

"I don't yet have what was promised."

"Nothing Elesh Norn promised you justifies or excuses occupying, violating, or destroying life." Vivien's grip tightened further.

“I completely agree.” That was the only thing he could’ve said to keep her from loosing her arrow and a whole menagerie of beasts with it. As if to make himself seem even more harmless, Tezzeret folded his hands behind his back. “I can’t rightly use what Norn has promised me if life as we know it ceases to exist, or if I’m transformed. But I still need it all the same.”

He was playing both sides. The tension in her shoulders relaxed some. He might not be an outright ally, but he wasn’t solely an enemy, either. She could work with this, she hoped.

“My accomplice isn’t far now; Urabrask will be able to tell you more.” Tezzeret took a half step back. “I’m afraid I don’t have the time to explain it all. I can’t afford to linger. Norn will wonder where I am if I’m gone for too long.”

Vivien took a full step forward and demanded, “Tell me more about Urabrask?”

“I’ll tell you what you need to know: he’s of no threat to you. In his current state, you could likely kill him with your bare hands.” Tezzeret’s eyes shone with the same shade as the magic swirling within him. “Are you going to kill me, or will you carry on, Vivien Reid?”

Her name on his tongue ran a chill down her spine. His eyes were full of power—full of knowing. Nothing about him could be trusted. Vivien knew it, and yet

“Lead on.” She’d come this far. She’d see it through.

They continued their descent through the tunnels. At once, the space opened to a massive cavern. At the far end was a wounded beast, large even as it huddled and fought for every breath it drew through its glistening beak. In the crimson light of Tezzeret’s Planar Bridge, the beast’s body looked all the more brutalized. Its flesh had been seared off from its inorganic components with horrifying precision. Vivien could imagine that the beast had been imposing, deadly, once. An apex predator. A pang of pity shot through her for its lost magnificence.

“Vivien, meet Urabrask,” Tezzeret said. “Praetor of the Quiet Furnace.”



Art by: Simon Dominic

Despite Urabrask's state, Vivien kept her distance. In part to make a quick escape. But also because her muscles had locked with shock. The wounded beast before her was a Phyrexian.

"You betrayed me," Urabrask hissed to Tezzeret. It looked like Vivien wasn't the only one who didn't trust Tezzeret.

"Calm down, Urabrask," Tezzeret sighed. The sight of a mostly metal man shaking his head at a barely alive Phyrexian, as if the latter was a small child to be scolded, had Vivien reeling from the sheer oddity of it all. She had seen many marvelous and horrible things in her travels, but this might just be the strangest. "Quite the opposite. I brought us a new ally."

"I've promised nothing of the like." Vivien glanced between Tezzeret and Urabrask, running her fingertips over the fletching of her arrows. If she had to shoot, she'd shoot between them, sending spectral wolves to both.

"You consider New Phyrexia your enemy, don't you?" Tezzeret said.

That was putting it mildly. "You're not the only one who thinks the Phyrexians seizing control of the Multiverse is a bad idea, Tezzeret. In fact, welcome to the majority opinion."

"Then we're all on the same side. The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"Why would *you* be working against New Phyrexia?" Vivien focused on Urabrask. She could understand why Tezzeret, an underling, a non-Phyrexian auxiliary, might work against Elesh Norn. But a Phyrexian praetor?

Urabrask struggled to sit more upright, as if trying to gain some of the height and ferocity lost from whatever cruelty had been so clearly suffered. Just what happened to wound a Phyrexian so badly?

"Elesh Norn has dominated all of New Phyrexia. Jin-Gitaxias, Vorinclex, and many of the Black Thanes have pledged themselves and their spheres to her grand vision. But I serve no one, and those I lead wish to be left alone. We do not share Norn's vision." Urabrask's claws raked softly against the stony ground in a movement that Vivien assumed was frustration. "Norn wants the Multiverse to be one singularity, for all life to be Phyrexian, and all Phyrexians to be under Norn. We do not consider that progress. I will not give her the Quiet Furnace."

Vivien slowly returned her arrow to its quiver as Urabrask spoke. Her better sense would have her firing on them. *Kill them both while you can.* Phyrexia was the antithesis to all she stood for—a twisted parody of her arkbow's fusion of nature and artifice.

But another instinct told her differently. Or, perhaps it was dangerous curiosity blooming.

Urabrask might be a praetor, and acting in Urabrask's sole benefit, just as Tezzeret was. But if Urabrask was telling the truth, then this praetor was also the enemy of her enemy. And, perhaps, there was an opportunity for some good here. It never hurt to have allies on the inside. Even better that Urabrask was uninterested in seeking out expansion at all costs.

"Do you really think you can stop Norn?" Vivien asked.

"Yes. I will lead a necessary challenge to Norn's control." *A revolution, in not so many words*, Vivien thought. She did find it interesting that the Phyrexian didn't phrase it as such.

"How will you win?"

"Perhaps I will tell you when I know you can be trusted." Urabrask slowly slid back into a slouched position, as if sitting upright had become too much effort.

The irony of *her* being the one out of the three who was considered untrustworthy was not lost on Vivien. "Very well. How can I prove myself?"

“You’ll do a favor for us, of course,” Tezzeret said. “I am limited in where I can go and what I can do without arousing suspicion. Moreover, Norn is still demanding I ferry Phyrexian troops and praetors; I can’t risk being away for too long. Thus, I cannot stay with Urabrask throughout recovery from the tolls of the journey here.”

The Planar Bridge did this to Urabrask? Vivien appraised the Phyrexian from head to toe. It appeared the Planar Bridge was a fearsome power with all the finesse of a hatchet.

“What do you need?” she asked Urabrask directly.

“Time to heal and Halo. The latter is a magic substance of this plane that I need to study. Bring me Halo, be patient, and I will tell you how we will bring Norn down from the throne,” Urabrask answered.

A simple agreement. Vivien could walk away at any point with what she already knew and relay Urabrask’s revelations to the others. But if Urabrask wasn’t lying, if there was more to know for want of a vial or two of Halo

“You have a deal.” Vivien turned, ready to begin the long climb back to the city proper.

“One more thing,” Urabrask said, stopping her in her tracks. “While you hunt for Halo, there’s someone else I need. Even if I had the strength to look for her, I can’t move freely on this plane without suspicion.”

“Who?”

“Elspeth, one of your kind. A planeswalker. Tezzeret spotted her on the surface but wouldn’t risk approaching her due to their history.”

“Elspeth,” Vivien repeated, committing the name to memory. “What do you want with her?”

“Norn fears her. That is all I know.”

And an enemy of Elesh Norn was someone Vivien wanted to know.

THE STREETS OF NEW CAPENNA

Of the three levels of New Capenna, the Mezzio was Vivien’s least favorite.

The depths of the Caldaia were laden with the haze and chorus of industry, but the constant thrumming made the city sound alive. There was a heartbeat. Those were the groaning, wrenching, exhausted noises of growth—even if it was of the industrial sort. And, of course, deep below was the earth itself, the closest connection New Capenna had to the natural.

Park Heights was all forced growth and carefully manicured nature. But there were parks containing real trees worthy of strolling whenever she found herself aching for something green and alive.

Sandwiched between them, she might have thought the Mezzio would find the balance of both worlds. But it had neither. It had all the commotion of the Caldaia, but none of the soul. Indulgence and overconsumption of others’ labors reigned supreme. And everyone moved far too fast to stop and appreciate a dandelion springing, as determined as hope, from a sidewalk crack.



Art by: Sam Burley

However, a benefit of all that movement was that no one ever paid her any mind. She could put her tracking and hunting skills to use to hear and see things. One moment she would be present, and the next she was gone, no one else the wiser. That skill was how she had ended up as an informant for an Obscura spy.

Vivien leaned against a shuttered storefront in a more subdued section of the Mezzio. It was busy enough that loitering didn't seem suspicious. Quiet enough that two could talk without raising voices. Footsteps approached.

"Arrow," a shorter woman with russet skin and a navy bowler hat settled atop cropped, silken, black tresses murmured softly.

"Navy," Vivien replied without looking.

Their names for each other were intentionally unoriginal and inspired by their outfits so they couldn't be traced. Vivien had found a striking gold and hunter green coat that offset nicely against her dark brown skin. It opened to reveal a crisp white shirt and necktie that was reminiscent of an arrowhead.

"Tell me something good." Navy leaned against the railing opposite Vivien and pulled out a small notebook from her breast pocket. Vivien had seen it many times—a book of secrets, she'd surmised.

"I've heard a lot of talk about the Cabaretti moving the Font around regularly." Vivien had taken an interest in the Font initially as a possible source of Halo for Urabrask. But the Cabaretti kept it too guarded to make trying to steal it worthwhile and, moreover, *everyone* in New Capenna was hunting for information about the Font. Which put their focus elsewhere and made it easier for Vivien to skim a little bit of Halo off the top, here and there, without being noticed. Fortunately, Urabrask didn't want large quantities of the substance.

"How regularly?"

"Daily."

The woman hummed thoughtfully. "Anything else?"

“There’s talk of a lounge run by the Adversary. He uses it as his base of operations.” This Adversary had also caught Vivien’s attention early on. The Obscura said they ruled the shadows, governing the secrets of the city. But as far as Vivien could tell, it was the Adversary who held the real control.

“You know where?”

“Not yet, but I’ll find out,” Vivien lied. She’d absolutely uncovered where the Adversary’s lounge was. But she wasn’t going to share *everything* she’d found, just enough to get the information she needed in return. Becoming too entrenched with the Obscura family—or *any* family here in New Capenna—was where Vivien drew the line. She was a visitor and a bystander on this plane. She had no interest in further meddling.

“Let me know if you do.”

“Of course.” Vivien pushed away from the storefront. “You have anything for me?”

“No solid avenues for any substantial amount of Halo. I’d be a rich and powerful woman if I had that kind of information. I did hear that a little spot called Angel’s Breath on the lower west side of town was getting a restock from the Cabaretti later today, might be able to lift a bottle, if you’re careful.” Navy still scribbled furiously in her notebook as Vivien went to leave.

“Oh, I got a lead on your Elspeth character, however.” Vivien halted. “I hear there’s been a woman taking odd jobs throughout the Mezzio, mostly on the main street by the station. Seems to favor construction, cleaners, or kitchens—simple manual labor, day jobs—nothing steady and keeps to herself. Hard to pin down. I’d say she’s likely the one you’re looking for. Not too many people with that name anymore. Good lu—”

Vivien didn’t hear the rest. She was already off, racing through the now familiar back alleys and bridgeways of the industrial forest. She stopped by every construction site she knew of, cleaners, and kitchens. Just when she thought she’d lost the only possible lead she’d had, however slim it was, magic exploded, followed by shouts and screams.

She burst into a main artery of the city. People rushed into her, packing toward the edges of the street as a woman darted into a side alley, some Maestro enforcers on her heels. Fights weren’t unheard of in the Mezzio. But the way the woman moved pivoting, dodging their blows, keeping them at bay, even unarmed and outnumbered, all while avoiding the citizenry. The woman was better than every street brawler Vivien had ever seen.

It couldn’t be, could it?

Vivien gave chase. She scrambled up the side of a building with the ease of climbing a tree and perched herself on a lower rooftop. By the time she had a vantage to see that a fight had broken out, the woman had already rendered her attackers harmless.

She now spoke with an eager-looking vampire. But Vivien couldn’t make out their conversation from the rooftop. Shifting onto her side, Vivien drew an arrow and fired toward the opposite side of the rooftop, where they couldn’t see. A spectral squirrel shot out and promptly went skittering down the gutters, lurking just out of sight from the two. Through the magical creature, Vivien could hear their words as though she was right next to them.

“You’ll be jazzed to know that all young family members start in the museum up in Park Heights.” The vampire came to a stop, holding out his hand. “Wait, where are my manners? Forgive me. I’m Anheló.” Vivien had heard the name whispered and had seen the museum—he was part of the Maestros.

The woman ignored the gesture, continuing to walk before she said, “Elspeth.”

Vivien had found her; she was certain of it. But now she had a choice. Would she run right back to Urabrask? Or, would she first learn more about who this planeswalker was?

Urabrask still was nowhere close to being healed enough to be transported by way of Planar Bridge again. Which meant that Vivien would still be waiting and gathering Halo for him for at least a few weeks yet. She had time to get her own read on this Elspeth character before bringing her to the praetor.

Vivien wanted to find out for herself just what made Elspeth so special.

A SHADY LOUNGE

Vivien hadn't managed to find a moment with Elspeth yet. Anhelio had taken her right to the Maestros' museum after Elspeth had agreed to join the family—which Vivien found to be a curious decision for a planeswalker. Vivien had stalked the museum, lurking as best she could and leveraging Navy's information to try and find a way in. But the Maestros were good at keeping their new recruits under lock and key until they were deemed "ready" to take on family business.

But, with any luck, Elspeth was finally ready, allowing Vivien to finally catch her alone for a word.

Navy's latest piece of information said that the Adversary was holding a gathering tonight and a Maestro would be in attendance. She'd also hinted the Obscura had recently seen Elspeth on the move for the Maestros. Vivien hoped against hope that the Maestro tonight would be Elspeth—it seemed a good enough mission for a new Maestro to cut their teeth on—and she could think of no better location for the Adversary to meet than the lounge Vivien had uncovered as one of the Adversary's bases of operations.

And if Elspeth didn't come, Vivien could at least find some additional Halo for Urabrask to study. The praetor had begun to look better as the weeks progressed. But he was still far from well.

Vivien sat at the counter, a sickening purple glow turning everything plum colored, her drink included. They had offered her Halo—an overt display of power to have so casually on the menu—but Vivien had refused. She'd tried Halo once for her own curiosity and information gathering, and after it went straight to her head with a rush of wild magic, she didn't need any more. It was a false strength that risked making her overconfident. A surplus of confidence led to mistakes, and Vivien needed her better senses about her.



Art by: Scott Murphy

The substance was potent and powerful, indeed. She could see why it held New Capenna in its grip. But she didn't yet know why Urabrask wanted it. Just holding it seemed to cause him to wince. Or, well, she assumed the expression shift was a wince. It wasn't always easy to gauge his emotions, given the beak and hollow eyes.

So, Vivien nursed a glass of something far less exciting. The man behind the counter had given her a side-eye when she'd ordered water. But water was a very fine drink as far as Vivien was concerned, essential even.

The door to the lounge opened, and a young woman slipped in. Not Elspeth. But the woman was a Maestro without doubt—she had the steely eyes of a vampire.

Vivien set her drink down, cursing under her breath. Well, Elspeth wasn't the Maestro coming tonight. Time for Vivien to engage the backup plan.

"I've changed my mind, but I need to run. Could I have some of that Halo for the road?" Vivien asked the man serving patrons.

He snorted at the audacity of the question. "All drinks stay in house, boss's rules. He likes to be where the party is."

"Can't blame him for that." She flashed a coy grin. The man chuckled; he didn't seem to be too suspicious of her unconventional request. "I'll take one here, then." He reached for a bottle of Halo and a glass. "The boss is here tonight?"

"If you don't know the answer then that's not your business." The levity vanished.

Vivien eased away from the counter, holding her hands up. "I just hear things is all."

"This is a city of open ears and loose tongues if you ask me. Busy yours with Halo before I have to ask you to leave." He handed her a glass that swirled with a living rainbow.

"Cheers," Vivien murmured, watching him cross to the opposite end of the counter to speak with some other patrons. She shifted so her back was to them, pulling a small vial from the leather pouch at her

hip. With a steady hand and a careful pour, Vivien could sneak some of the Halo out of the lounge and back to Urabrask without arousing suspicion. She'd done this movement enough times now that it was second nature.

It was because of her angle that she saw the Maestro slip out the back. In the brief crack of the door, she saw a familiar bowler hat. What was Navy doing here?

Vivien eased away from the counter, leaving the rest of the Halo behind. She couldn't take more without looking suspicious, and her internal alarm bells were already ringing loud and true. Navy had made it sound like she had no idea about this place when Vivien had brought it up. Glancing around, and trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, Vivien slinked into the shadows and approached the back door, still ajar.

"—everything is all set then?" Navy whispered.

"Yes, the Maestros loyal to the boss will be ready at the Crescendo."

"Good, he will reward you handsomely for your assistance. I'll pass along what you've told me." Navy was a double agent. Vivien wondered who held her true loyalty—the Obscura? The Adversary? Or was she like Tezzeret and only loyal to herself?

Movement at Vivien's left distracted her. A back wall opened, revealing a hidden door. Men and women spilled from the room. She heard a deep chuckle echo from the back somewhere. The sound was vaguely familiar. Menacing. Wrenching.

She'd heard that laughter somewhere before. But where?

Her curiosity would have to wait. The lounge was filling. Too many eyes to notice she didn't quite fit in.

Vivien made a hasty decision and slipped out the back door.

A sharp *whizzing* noise had her dropping to a crouch. A flash of silver accompanied the movement of a person lunging for her. Then the reverberation of a *thud* as the dagger sunk into the door where her neck had just been.

Navy loomed over her, panting softly, hand still on the dagger. The woman's eyes were wide with rage at being discovered. Vivien could almost smell the Halo on her—it was no doubt making Navy feel powerful enough to attack a clearly trained fighter like Vivien.

"I knew you would come if I waited long enough. You're so curious about the Adversary and the Maestros. Once you mentioned this place, I knew all I had to do was wait."

Vivien slowly reached toward the belts cinched at her waist. She hadn't brought her bow and quiver—they were much too conspicuous—but she hadn't come completely unarmed.

"Why are you after me?" They certainly weren't friends, but Vivien hadn't thought there was any animosity brewing between them.

"You're getting a bit too good at your job," Navy freed the dagger. "And the boss doesn't like people sniffing this close to his doorstep." She brought the dagger down toward Vivien's head.

Vivien sprung up; with one hand she caught Navy by her forearm. With the other, she drew her own dagger and, in a fluid motion, plunged it into the woman's gut. It was horribly easy. Navy wasn't a fighter.

A clatter rang out as Navy's knife hit the ground; she went limp in Vivien's arms. Vivien eased her down and against the alleyway wall.

"If you pull out this knife, you'll bleed out," Vivien said softly. "Leave it in, and you have about ten minutes to find help." She met Navy's eyes and held her gaze. The woman was younger than Vivien had thought. Young enough for Vivien to watch as Navy's own mortality dawned on her for the first time. "Go to your Obscura. Tell them the Adversary's goons did this; the Adversary is *not* your family, and he *will* let you die. The choice is yours."

Navy's body trembled from pain and shock. But she managed a nod.

As Vivien released the dagger, she noticed the notebook she'd seen scribbled in many times tucked in Navy's pocket. Without a second thought, she took it. Whatever an Obscura thought was important enough to write down must be very important indeed to be worth the risk.

"The price of your life." Vivien held up the notebook. Everything had a balance. Everything had a cost.

Growing noise from inside the lounge had Vivien on her feet, retreating into the night.

PARK HEIGHTS

It was harder to move freely following the incident at the lounge. The Adversary's roots ran deep in the hearts and minds of the people of New Capenna.

None of her previous haunts were as safe as they once were. She couldn't even enjoy the trees of Park Heights. Not when there were enemies lurking in the shadows. Keeping her head low, Vivien consulted the note she'd taken from Navy's pocket.



Art by: Muhammad Firdaus

This was the drop off point for Halo, and the bag was waiting just as the memo said it would be. Now, all she had to do was wait. Either the Maestro that came would be Elspeth, or they would be no one, and Vivien could strong-arm the substance away and be lost to the night.

A figure emerged from the gloom, stepping into the lamplight. Vivien instantly recognized her dark hair, khaki skin, bright brown eyes, and jaw set with determination. There was no doubt.

Elspeth.

Tonight was going better than Vivien could've hoped. She moved at the same time as Elspeth did for the bag, emerging from her cover in a few long strides to grab Elspeth's wrist.

"I was wondering who would come to collect." Vivien kept her voice low. There were others in the park, drawing near. It wouldn't serve her well to alert them too quickly.

"I forgot this earlier," Elspeth said. She was an awful liar.

"Don't lie. You don't seem cut out for it," Vivien said with a slight smile as she looked at the woman for the first time, close up, trying to determine what was so special about her by sight alone and coming up empty-handed. "You also don't seem cut out to work for one of these families, either."

Elspeth chuckled softly. "I have my reasons."

What could those be? Whatever they were, they must be important for a planeswalker to meddle with local affairs. "I'm sure you do."

"I'm trying to learn more about the history of this plane," Elspeth admitted.

"Why?"

"It might be my home." A pang of surprise—and loss—shot through Vivien at Elspeth's soft sentiment. A lost home. She knew what that felt like all too well. Elspeth went on. "But more importantly, I think a threat is looming and I'm trying to get information on it."

"One most certainly is," Vivien said. "And we share motivations." She was surprised to learn Elspeth didn't seem to have any inkling of Urabrask's presence. But, without running into Tezzeret, neither would Vivien. And Urabrask had said Tezzeret had avoided approaching Elspeth due to some kind of "history" between them. "I'm Vivien, by the way."

"Elspeth."

Vivien refrained from telling her that she'd long since committed Elspeth's name to memory. That didn't seem like a good way to endear herself. "Who are you gathering information for?"

Elspeth hesitated.

Vivien was confident the woman as a planeswalker had a greater purpose than being a pawn for one of New Capenna's warring families. But she clearly also wasn't working for Urabrask. That left "Let me guess, the Gatewatch?"

"Ajani sent me. Are you here on their behalf as well?"

"Originally no. But you know how these things happen. We might be able to—" Vivien jerked her head to the right. Her eyes narrowed slightly. Their time was running short. "The goons following you are catching up. I should go before they ask questions about me." Vivien released Elspeth's wrist. "But I might have some pertinent information for you on this threat."

"You do?" Elspeth took a step forward, voice falling to a whisper.

"I have a lead that could prove interesting. You could come with me and—"

"I can't," Elspeth said hastily. "I have a chance to learn how the New Capennans beat the threat before." *Before?* What threat before? The ruins deep below with the claw marks flashed through Vivien's mind. There was more to New Capenna than what was on the surface, and secrets rarely stayed buried for eternity. "I can't leave until I have that information."

"Very well." They were indeed aligned. Moreover, Vivien was pleased that Elspeth seemed like a genuine person worthy of trust. "I'll look further into these matters also and contact you when I have more information."

“Why are you helping me?” Elspeth asked before Vivien could leave.

“Before you become too entrenched in this plane’s affairs, you should have all the details of them,” she said with a grave note. She needed to find more of her own information before she said too much. “Until we meet again.”

“When?”

“When I have something worthwhile.” Vivien gave a small nod. She wasn’t going to bring Elspeth to Urabrask just yet. She had to earn the woman’s trust first and gain more of her own information. “It’s been a pleasure to meet you.”

Vivien retreated into the underbrush. She looked back once at the woman and then down at the hand she’d used to grab Elspeth’s wrist. Phantom pins pricked the flesh of her palm. That woman. She looked back to the bench to find Elspeth gone.

There was something special about her, indeed.

THE UNDER-CAVERNS OF THE CALDAIA

“I found Elspeth,” Vivien announced the moment she entered Urabrask’s cavern deep below the city.

“You did?” Urabrask went still. “Why is she not with you?”

“She’s not ready to leave yet.” Vivien said, recounting her interaction with Elspeth for him.

“Can we not make her ‘ready’?”

“I doubt it,” Vivien said plainly. Elspeth didn’t seem the sort to be easily swayed when her mind was made up.

“Then we will wait,” Urabrask said. “She is the key to our success. I will not depart without her—her spark will ignite my people and the Mirrans both.”

“This city is nearly at its breaking point.” Vivien had felt the balance shifting for some time, and the movements of the Adversary were only speeding up the process. “I suspect that when it does, Elspeth will know if she’s found what she’s looking for or not.”

“Then break it faster.”

Vivien bit back a snort. The Phyrexian clearly wasn’t intending to be comical. Urabrask only spoke in a matter-of-fact way that held no sarcasm or levity.

“I will be ready when Elspeth is. We won’t delay,” Vivien said with a note that emphasized all this was still her choice. She was not blindly taking orders from a praetor. “Plus, I know just where to find her when the time comes.”

The Maestro had told Navy that there would be those who had infiltrated the upcoming Crescendo, and the notebook Navy held had notes that further corroborated the revelation. Either Elspeth would be among them, which Vivien doubted, considering she didn’t seem like the sort who would align herself with the Adversary. Or, she would be fighting against them. No matter what, Vivien would bet Elspeth would be at the Crescendo and that would be the start of the end of New Capenna as it was.

“The Adversary won’t be the only one laying traps at the upcoming Crescendo,” Vivien vowed.

“I advise caution toward him,” Urabrask said. “Tezzeret mentioned he is a planeswalker, too.”

Vivien had growing suspicion. “Did he say who?”

“The demon,” he said unhelpfully.

“Demon? Lovely.” She grabbed up her bow and quiver, already wracking her brain for who it might be. That laughter still haunted her. “I’ll be needing these then. When I’m done and return with Elspeth, we will finalize just how you’re helping the Gatewatch, and how we’re helping you with this revolution of yours.”

Urabrask dipped his long head. “The Planar Bridge will destroy my body when I return to New Phyrexia. It has taken me weeks to recover here, and I suspect it shall take just as long on my return. But the time is almost right for me to make the journey.”

“Good.” Vivien started back out of the caverns, running her fingertips along the fletching of her arrows in thought. *There could actually be a path toward containing the relentless expansion of New Phyrexia*, it seemed almost too impossible to fathom.

But, first thing’s first, she needed to get to Elspeth, and the Crescendo would be her best shot and Vivien never missed her mark.



Art by: Remi Jacquot