

Episode 4: The Font

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MUSEUM

These familiar halls, polished and carefully curated, were as sacred as a church to Xander. Tonight, on the eve of the Crescendo, he was determined to walk them all one final time and savor their splendor. Moments of peace were fleeting, and if his informants and assumptions were correct, there would be blood before the new year arrived.

"This is one of my favorites." Xander paused before a statue of an angel cradling a babe. "Every time I look at it, I think of my own mother." If only he could remember anything about her.

"It's beautiful." Anhelio humored him. Xander could feel his general's confusion as he followed Xander about the museum. Anhelio checked his timepiece. "My lord, if we are going to make the Crescendo on time, we should begin preparing for our departure."

Xander didn't move. Instead, he continued to stare at the peaceful visage of the woman. Had there ever been a time in New Capenna where such peace and tranquility truly existed? Had there ever been a time in *his* life?

He chuckled softly to himself and murmured, "I'm going soft in my old age."

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Xander folded both hands on the top of his cane. The golden claws he had adorned his fingers with tonight clanked against the metal. "You should go to the Crescendo and check on Elspeth in my stead."

As of the last update Xander received from her, she had done well infiltrating the Cabaretti. But no word yet on the Font. Still, he had every faith in her. There was something unique about Elspeth. He'd quickly gleaned she would never *really* be one of the family. There was an air about her of greater purpose. Perhaps that was why he had ultimately decided to open his archives to her.

"Are you not attending?"

"Not this year."

"But the Font—"

"I should like to stay here." Xander interjected.

"Xander, what troubles you?" Anhelio rested his hand lightly on Xander's elbow. The touch betrayed his deep worry. "You're not yourself tonight."

"You fret too much." Xander patted Anhelio's hand. "You will serve me best by going in my stead to the Crescendo. We wouldn't want the Cabaretti mistaking my absence for a Maestro slight."

"They will anyway, since I am not the leader of the Maestro."

"But someday soon, you will be."

“Pardon?”

“Go on. We will discuss more on these matters after the new year,” Xander encouraged. He had never outright planned succession with Anhelo. It had always been assumed, but in a distant, far-off manner. But there wasn’t time any more to prepare, and Xander could only hope Anhelo was ready. “Tonight, you are to go and enjoy yourself at the Crescendo and report back on any strange happenings, that’s an order.”

“You’re sure?”

Xander looked back to the statue, using the motion to glance out of the corners of his eyes without Anhelo noticing. *They’re close.* “I am very sure. Now, go, Anhelo. Use the receiving door to leave.” *The back door most don’t think or know of.*

“As you wish.” Anhelo bowed his head and set off. Xander watched him leave with a sigh of relief he didn’t bother hiding.

He stared back up at the statue as he waited. Would he meet his mother again once he had departed this long-occupied and aching mortal coil? Was there even enough soul left in this old vampire-demon that there could even be an “after” for him?

Movement ended his musings.

Xander turned to face the living shadows at the far end of the hall. Into that gloom, he asked, “Have you finally come to kill me, Adversary?”



Art by: Matt Stewart

CRESCENDO

Elspeth stood on the dance floor of the Vantoleone with a platter in hand. Jinnie had kept true to her word. After a few menial tasks—not much different than the tests Xander had put her through—she had given Elspeth a position helping with the Crescendo.

As a part of the floor team, Elspeth was well positioned to see and hear everything. Moreover, she could move unbothered. No one paid any of the uniformed staff any mind. They were as unimportant as the pennons hung against the pillars or the overgrown flowerpots at the base of each one.



Art by: Kasia 'Kafis' Zelińska

Well, she didn't go *entirely* unnoticed.

"Elspeth," Jinnie approached, her usual entourage of Kitt and Giada flanking her. "I'm glad we ran into you. I hope you're finding the Crescendo worth your effort?"

"And more." Elspeth forced a smile.

"Just wait, the real fun hasn't even begun yet." Jinnie helped herself to two of the cheese-filled pastries on Elspeth's platter and handed one to Giada. Per usual, the teen remained silent, her eyes hungry for something her mouth couldn't fill.

"I caught Kitt's performance already," Elspeth said.

"And? What's your review? Spare me no details!" Kitt perked up.

"It was lovely."

"That's hardly a critique at all." Kitt groaned.

"I'm afraid I'm not well versed in music so I can't give you much more than that." Elspeth offered an encouraging smile to placate her.

"Speaking of performances, I need to check on something for ours," Jinnie said to Giada then turned to Kitt. "I could use your hands, if you don't mind?"

"For you? Never."

"Do you mind keeping an eye on Giada for a moment?" Jinnie asked Elspeth.

Giada wasn't *that* young to need a constant chaperone. But Elspeth had seen over the past few weeks how Jinnie doted on and coddled Giada. It was a relationship Elspeth had yet to fully make heads

or tails of. She'd think it sweet and sisterly, if not for the perpetual discomfort that radiated off the young woman.

"It's no trouble," Elspeth said.

"Thanks, you're such a doll." Jinnie squeezed her shoulder and started off with Kitt.

"Would you like another?" Elspeth asked, holding out the tray for Giada.

"No, thank you." So, *she* could *speak*. "I'm afraid if I eat anything else I'll be sick."

"Are you not feeling well?" Elspeth eased the platter away.

"Nervous," Giada admitted. "This performance means so much to Jinnie, the Cabaretti, *everyone*."

"What type of performance is it?" Elspeth worked to sound casual. A harmless question, nothing more.

Giada glanced askance. "You'll see soon."

"Sorry about that!" Jinnie promptly returned and took Giada's hand. "Are you ready to change the plane?" Giada didn't have a chance to respond before Jinnie tugged her away.

Apprehension curdled Elspeth's stomach. *Something was wrong*. Every fiber of her being told her so. The sensation was further compounded when she saw Maestros begin to move behind Jinnie and Giada. She knew the look in the vampires' pale eyes. They were out for blood.

Elspeth quickly stepped away from the main floor and into a back room where she set down the platter. A few of the other floor staff gave her questioning looks, but none stopped her as she dashed back out into the main hall of the Vantoleone.

Giada was already on stage, Jinnie behind her. Four Cabaretti men manhandled a large empty bottle onto the stage, bringing it before Giada. The vessel was nearly as large as Giada herself.

"This year, the Cabaretti promised a Crescendo unlike any other. Now, we will make good on that promise," Jinnie announced.

Elspeth reached for the knife Xander had given her, hidden in her coat. It was the only weapon she had, and the only thing she could conceal in the attire the waitstaff were all required to wear. Elspeth hoped she wouldn't need it.

Jinnie said something to Giada, and the teen stepped toward the enormous bottle. She took a bracing breath, a look of sheer determination overcoming her. Giada touched it with both hands.

Light exploded.

The room let out a collective gasp of surprise. Like the rest of them, Elspeth was left blinking away the blue haze that the blindingly bright light left behind. As the stage came back into focus, murmurs rippled across the crowd. None could believe what they saw, Elspeth included.

The empty bottle was now filled with Halo. Tiny, golden bubbles rose from a cerulean bottom to a rosy top. Darker currents swirled within, like dusk filtering through water, and a distinct haze clouded the air around it, as if the condensed power within could barely be contained by its glass casing.

The horrible truth of what she had just witnessed began to dawn on Elspeth. There was no way the bottle could've been swapped. It was far too massive for that. It would take far longer than a flash of light to fill it.

"Your eyes don't deceive you." Jinnie responded to the collective skepticism of the room once she had managed to get Giada stable on her feet, though the young woman was still swaying slightly, visibly weary. "In front of you all, with no tricks or games, we have made Halo from *nothing*. You are the

first witnesses of a new order—an order that no longer knows limitations and is no longer held back by diminishing supply.” She paused for emphasis; the room was enraptured. Jinnie motioned back to Giada. “Behold, the Font!”

The crowd erupted with cheers. These people saw a resource, a tool, a solution to a problem plaguing them. All Elspeth saw was an exhausted and trapped young woman.

Their “new era” would come at the cost of Giada’s life.

MUSEUM

Shadows clung to the man approaching Xander. They hung to every fold in his pristine pinstripe suit, every hammered adornment of the armored plate that framed his shoulders and chest. Former attendants and allies Xander might have once thought of as his own family rushed around the Adversary’s bat-like wings, weapons drawn.

The first thing he offered the turncoats in return was a bitter smile. Next, he would offer them their own hearts.

The last few loyal officers in his employ were already cut down, no doubt. Old wounds and aching bones be damned, he would return that favor in kind, even if it was the last thing he ever did. He had readied himself tonight. Come what may, he wouldn’t go down without a fight.

The first of his former assassins charged.

Xander shifted his weight entirely onto his good leg, threw one hand back, tossed his cane up with the other, and caught it by its end. Steel rang out against steel as he deflected the assassin’s dagger. The other vampire’s eyes went wide with shock.

“I gave you that dagger,” Xander snarled. “Don’t think I gave you a tool I didn’t know how to best.” With a twist of his wrist, he disengaged from the blade and brought the handle of his cane into the man’s neck with a satisfying crunch.

Another was coming for him. Xander slid his grip forward on the cane. He flicked his thumb and disengaged a secret locking mechanism. The hilt of the hidden blade popped loose of its scabbard. Xander grabbed it, slashing through the air and sending a spray of ash across the room.

He used the death as a distraction, strategically retreating into his museum. Others were already giving chase. But Xander knew the pathways better than any of his people. He had been the one who built this place. Its father. Its curator.

In the narrow access halls between the galleries, he could prevent himself from being flanked, picking them off one by one as they came to him. He might have them beat in skill, but he was still an old man. He could tolerate pain, but he didn’t have the stamina to take them on all at once.

Xander crossed through the main hall of the museum. Shots rang out and bolts of magic chased his heels, leaving pockmarks in his marble floors. The quarry for this stone was no longer in operation; his pristine haven would never be the same after tonight.

He made it to a stairwell, gritting his teeth and ascending as fast as he could. Assassins scampered behind him, but Xander’s knowledge of the museum continued to pay off and he managed to stay ahead. He burst through a door, wind accosting his face the moment he took in the crisp air of Park Heights. Breathless, Xander spun and barricaded the door to the viewing deck.

There wasn’t much space on the balcony. It was meant to be a small sculpture garden, a reprieve to take in the splendor of the skyline among some pieces from the museum’s collection. Xander walked to the edge, catching his breath.

How he loved this view.

Mighty wings buffeted behind him. With a rumble, the Adversary landed.

“Did you really think you could escape me?” His voice was gravel rattling against pure hate. “To a balcony!” He howled with laughter, drawing air into his lungs to stretch out his chest and expand his wings for emphasis.

“Hardly.” Xander turned to face him. “I thought without your hired help we might have a fair fight.”

“I don’t play fair.”

Xander didn’t either. He lunged forward without warning. The Adversary went to deflect the sword with his bare hand, mouth set in a snarling grin of delight. Xander feinted, disengaged underneath the Adversary’s wrist, and twisted to bring the point up right in the soft spot underneath the Adversary’s jaw—the only vulnerable flesh exposed on his armored body.

But the Adversary was faster. Perhaps enhanced by Halo. Perhaps by an evil that was greater than Xander could ever imagine.

Xander never saw the Adversary lift his other hand to point at him.

The *bang* of magic reverberated through Park Heights. But the last thing Xander heard as he staggered away was the clattering of his trusted sword, the tool of his infamy, slipping from his fingers for the last time. His foot met open air, and he plummeted into the clouds below.



Art by: Yongjae Choi

CRESCENDO

The cheers of the masses turned into screams. All around them, revelers threw off the colors and signets of their family and reached for their weapons. No family was exempt from infiltration by the Adversary.

Elspeth drew the knife Xander had given her and began pushing through the crowd. The Cabaretti on the stage dropped the large bottle of Halo, the precious substance spilling a rainbow waterfall around Jinnie's feet. The Halo bubbled as if boiling, evaporating as starbursts and rings.

"Jetmir!" Jinnie called out over the crowd. Giada, forgotten, inched toward the back of the stage, gloved hands covering her mouth in shock.

"Jetmir!" Jinnie's eyes landed on a distant point, halfway through the room. Elspeth followed her gaze, seeing the horned leonin who ruled the Cabaretti, cornered and outnumbered. Jinnie leapt into the fray, weapons drawn, leaving Giada behind.

Shock and rage coursed through Elspeth, and she channeled the emotions into a quick jab at a would-be attacker, rendering him harmless in an instant. Giada was their *precious Font*. She was giving her life for the Cabaretti and their Halo. And for what? To be abandoned. Sure, Jinnie had left Cabaretti agents with her. But they weren't enough to handle the seven others scrambling up the stage.

Throwing elbows, squeezing past people, leaping over bodies, Elspeth pushed her way through the blood and chaos to the stage. She vaulted onto the platform as the last of the Cabaretti guards fell, turned into pincushions by the Adversary's loyalists now advancing on Giada. Elspeth didn't waste a second. She brought the butt of her knife down onto the back of the neck of one on her right. The man on her left tried to jab for her, but Elspeth was prepared for the motion and grabbed him by the wrist, clutching in such a way that his fingers went limp. She spun as the third lunged for her, tossing the man into the new attacker.

"Giada," Elspeth said calmly, despite the rising chaos. She knelt down before Giada, looking into her dark eyes, not unlike Elspeth's own. "Would you like me to take you from here?"

Giada inhaled slowly, the breath quivering at the end. "Yes." She spoke for the first time in what sounded like a hopeful manner. "I know a back door."

Elspeth nodded and stood, glancing over her shoulder at their assailants, rousing with groans. More had noticed them on the stage and were beginning to charge.

"This way." Giada tugged her hand, and Elspeth followed her stage right. They ran past the panels of forest-green curtains and deep into the wings. The heavy velvet muffled their steps. But it also concealed those giving chase.

Elspeth strained her hearing to listen for their pursuers. "Get down!" Elspeth put her weight in her heels, holding onto Giada's hand.

She spun the teen toward her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and bringing Giada to the ground with her as a blade ripped through the curtain at their right. Elspeth released Giada, rising. Judging from the slash, she could make a confident assessment as to the build of their attacker. And when her dagger sank into a man's gut with a gurgle, she knew she was right.

Stepping back, Elspeth gave Giada a nudge. "Keep going."

If Giada was shaken, she didn't let it show. She dashed off into the darkness with Elspeth close behind. She supposed Giada had seen far worse throughout her time with the Cabaretti. The thought filled her with a profound sorrow.

Giada was just a child. What had her life been like so far? Elspeth doubted it had been anything close to good. She knew a prison when she saw one, even if there were no bars and the wardens were dressed in sequins and gold.

"Over there," Giada whispered, pointing to the left as they emerged from the curtains that hung along the wings. Elspeth followed her through stacked props and instrument cases. Two more men caught

up with them, but Elspeth quickly dealt with them both. If she had time, she would hide the bodies to cover their trail, but it was best for them to keep moving. Once they were out, they could slip into the city proper and get lost among the populace.

Giada grunted as she pushed open a heavy backstage door. Elspeth put her shoulder in to help. The door hadn't been used in some time and squealed loudly as it permitted them access to an alleyway.

The goons at the far end caught sight of them before they'd taken more than two steps, no doubt alerted to their presence by the noise of the hinges. Elspeth cursed their luck. Had they still been facing the other way, she might have managed to get the drop on them.



Art by: Bud Cook

"There's more coming from inside," Giada said, glancing back toward the theater.

"I know, stay close." Elspeth held out her knife. What she wouldn't give for a spear or sword.

"Looks like we have two escapees," one of the guards said.

"The Adversary told us no one is making it out of there alive—sorry, ladies." The other cracked his knuckles.

"Should we call for reinforcements?"

"No, I think we can handle these two on our own."

Elspeth could tell by their smirks that these guards underestimated her. "I'd like to see you try."

Without warning, a flash of green blazed through the air from somewhere behind them. Charged with magic and cool green flame, the arrow exploded with a howl into a ghostly viridian wolf. It landed on the back of one of their first would-be attackers, driving him to the ground. The man yelled an obscenity, trying to twist away, but the spectral wolf sunk in its claws.



Art by: Olena Richards

“What the—!” His companion didn’t have time to finish. Two more shots were fired, summoning two more wolves.

The green-hued beasts made quick work of the two goons, their sharp teeth more effective than Elspeth’s knife could ever be. Giada clung to Elspeth’s side, half hidden as the creatures turned toward the two of them. Emerging from their spectral haze was Vivien.

“I told you I would find you again.”

“Vivien.” Elspeth heaved a sigh of relief and then looked to Giada. “Vivien’s an ally; she can be trusted.” Elspeth hoped.

Vivien’s expression briefly touched on surprise, but she didn’t object to Elspeth’s claims. “I have news for you, on the matter we last discussed. But first, let’s get somewhere safe.”

Elspeth and Giada were halfway down the alley, nearly to Vivien, when the door to the theater blasted open behind them, launched off its hinges. The metal echoed loudly as it skidded to a stop. Jinnie, Jetmir, and a group of Cabaretti walked out from the smoking doorway.

“Oh, thank goodness, Elspeth,” Jinnie heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank you for keeping Giada safe.”

Elspeth gave a wary nod, continuing to inch backward. Giada followed her lead, moving in tandem with Elspeth. She glanced down at the teen, who gave her a worried look in reply.

The same dread that filled Elspeth when Giada had taken the stage returned in force.

“Come, we have a secret passage out through the theater. Bring Giada here.”

No. The word rose clear and true, resonated from the very depths of Elspeth’s being. Under no condition should she ever bring Giada back to these people who would use and imprison her.

But it wasn’t Elspeth’s choice.

Elspeth locked eyes with Giada, trying to communicate without words. *I will do what you desire*, she thought, but didn't say so outright. She wasn't going to boldly go against the Cabaretti before knowing Giada's wishes. *What do you want?*

Giada's hand slipped into hers and she gave a light tug, much like she had when they'd started her flight.

"We're going somewhere safe. We'll return when things are quiet," Elspeth called back.

"We are 'somewhere safe.'" Jinnie's usually jovial nature began to slip away. Underneath was the woman who had earned her place as the adoptive daughter of Jetmir and his right hand. No one climbed as high as she did in New Capenna without leaving a trail of blood behind.

"It's better if we split up, for now."

"Bring Giada to me." Jinnie began to stalk forward.

Elspeth's grip tightened on her knife. She didn't want to fight Jinnie. The woman hadn't been unkind to her, but she was also the one who would turn Giada into a tool. Before Elspeth could make up her mind—fight or flight—a green arrow arced overhead.

It exploded into a beast far greater than a wolf. Clawing itself out of the viridian fire, the loops of a scaled dragon filled the alleyway. Two mighty wings stretched up to the very tops of the nearby buildings. Elspeth could only see the back of the spectral dragon, but if its front was even half as imposing, there was no way Jinnie was going to get to them.

Elspeth looked over her shoulder at Vivien, who lowered her bow. Green-fletched arrows smoldered in her quiver, illuminating the braids on the side of her head.

"Shall we?" Vivien gave a slight smirk.

The three of them ran into the night.

MUSEUM

"Not so smug now, are you?" Ob Nixilis wiped ash off his hands. The mighty head of the Maestros, the infamous Xander, *master assassin*. Not the master of anything now. Ob Nixilis snorted and spit on the mutilated body that lay at his feet. The vampire was hardly recognizable after the fall, especially after Ob Nixilis vented some of his frustrations at the vampire's frustrating tenacity.

"Boss." A young man ran out of the building, stopping short when he laid eyes on the carnage. He was a Maestro. Ob Nixilis wished he could hear what was going through the man's head as he laid eyes on the mutilated body of the assassin he'd once so revered.

"What?" Ob Nixilis demanded.

"I " The young man swallowed hard and tore his eyes from the remnants of Xander. "I have word from the Crescendo."

Ob Nixilis could tell by the man's shifting gaze and uncertain stance that the news would not be good. And if he was going to be given bad news, then he would sweeten it with a bit of torment first by making the kid sweat. "Good. Tell me of my triumph."

"Everyone was in place, just as you ordered. We quickly took control of the situation in the Vantoleone."

"But?" Ob Nixilis encouraged, allowing his voice to be dangerously quiet.

"But " He fought for words, crumbling under the weight of Ob Nixilis's stare. "The Font escaped."

Ob Nixilis grabbed the man by the throat and hoisted him into the air. He swung like a ragdoll, kicking helplessly, clawing instinctively at the bracers Ob Nixilis wore. “Tell me, how did the Font escape if everyone was ‘where they should be?’”

“We—we don’t—there was another—unaccounted for,” the man wheezed.

Ob Nixilis tightened his grip slightly and briefly fantasized about squeezing so hard the man’s head would pop off like a cork. But he released his grip. He still needed these worthless amateurs to do his dirty work. The man fell to the ground, clawing at his already bruising neck, gasping for air.

Ob Nixilis looked back to the remains of Xander. He grimaced, but not at the carnage he’d wrought. No he was disgusted with himself. He’d missed something. Even from beyond the grave, Xander had played him.

“No matter,” he snarled. “I’ll find it, even if I must burn this city to the ground.”

“Boss, the Cabaretti are all but neutralized—” Four other officers rushed out from the museum, stopping a few steps from their gasping friend. “We see you already know.”

“Yes, I have been informed of your *failure*.” Ob Nixilis forced the words through teeth clenched so tightly his jaw popped. “The Maestros are in hand. What of the others?”

“Jetmir escaped but was gravely wounded. The Cabaretti will crumble once he falters—and we’ll see he does,” one reported.

“The Brokers and Obscura have crawled into their holes and shadows, though we pursue them as well. The Riveteers are thoroughly compromised. The fighting is hot in the Caldaia; we’ll have the situation in our control soon.”

Ob Nixilis cracked his knuckles and rolled his head. “I want the families’ heads. *All* of them. Bring me every last one, attached at the neck or not.”

“And the Font?” the only one of his generals still brave enough to speak asked.

“Two of you—lead the hunt for Jetmir and Jinnie. If anyone will know how to track down the Font, it’ll be them. The other two, form search parties of our own for the Font. And *when* you find it, bring it to me, and your cups will never be empty and your families will want for nothing.”

STREETS OF NEW CAPENNA

The city was on fire. The families were at war.



Art by: Nestor Ossandon Leal

Elspeth, Vivien, and Giada fled through the streets, dashing up iron stairwells and onto rooftops as they raced through the Mezzio.

“It never fails to astound me how quickly things spiral out of control once a balance is upset,” Vivien appraised as they caught their breath.

“Where are we going?” Giada asked.

Elspeth wracked her brain. The early places she’d holed up in on arrival were now burning. The Maestros weren’t an option, either.

“I have an idea,” Elspeth recalled her second mission for Xander. “There’s a warehouse not too far from here—it’s abandoned. It *might* be safe.”

“I’m not sure why you bother,” Vivien said under her breath for only Elspeth to hear. “These family feuds aren’t the real threat.”

“I don’t care about the families right now,” Elspeth turned to hide her face from Giada so their companion wouldn’t hear. “I care about a young woman who’s in danger.” *Who deserves so much more than she’s ever gotten.* Elspeth would’ve given anything when she was trapped and helpless for the first years of her life to have someone fighting for her. No one had been there, then. Filling that role for Giada now felt like breaking a cycle, like giving hope to the scared, trapped girl that still existed deep within Elspeth’s soul.

“Then we see her safe and disengage,” Vivien folded her arms. “You and I have more pressing matters to deal with. Things that only people like us can handle.”

Elspeth had a thousand burning questions about what Vivien had found but kept them to herself for now. There would be time to ask when they were no longer fleeing for their lives.

“Am I clear?” Vivien asked, direct but not unkind.

“Perfectly. We see Giada safe and then we move on.”

“Good. Now, lead on to this warehouse.”

"I will, but first, I'm going back to the Maestro headquarters." Elspeth started toward a nearby ladder. "I need a better weapon than a knife. You two wait here until I return. If something goes awry, we meet at the bench in Park Heights."

"Understood." Vivien knew exactly what bench Elspeth meant.

"What?" Giada grabbed her hand. "I'm going where you go."

"I don't think it's a good idea. It's too risky to bring you into another family's den," Elspeth said gently.

Giada considered it a moment, released Elspeth, then said, "You're right. I'll wait here with Vivien."

Elspeth managed to make it to one of the civic elevators without major issue. There were a few opportunists who made the mistake of trying to attack her along the way, but Elspeth could handle them with ease.

She knew something was wrong the moment she approached the museum. There were no guards out front. Ash dusted the entry stairwell, turning it as pale as bone. The Adversary's attack wasn't just on the Crescendo tonight.

Fortunately, her time cataloging all the various pieces in Xander's collection had given her an in-depth knowledge of the museum. She used a side receiving door, smashing in the lock with her knife and rendering the blade useless. She was committed to finding a new weapon now.

Elspeth crept through the dark halls. The stink of death was heavy in the air. She could almost feel an ominous presence stalking the corridors in the form of enemies she had yet to meet and was determined not to. She hid the second she heard footsteps, then used two connected rooms to work her way around the noise and into one of the armories.

What weapon to pick? Elspeth scanned her choices. There were daggers, whips, *swords*. Voices froze her in place.

"You don't think it was really the new recruit, do you? The one Xander seemed to take a shining to?"

Elspeth's stomach churned. The way the man spoke about Xander, the state of the museum she knew what had happened here. Her hands balled into fists.

"It looked like her."

"The Adversary has deemed her as target number one, and the Cabaretti say she's out, too. Doesn't matter if she's the one who took the Font or not, she's got nowhere to turn; she'll be dead soon enough."

They were all after her now, starting with the two quickly approaching the armory. She steeled her resolve and turned toward the weapons. Hiding or playing down her skill and powers from now on would be pointless. A sword it would be.

She didn't have time to carefully assess which sword was the best weight for her frame. She ran her hands over the hilts, wondering if one of these was the weapon Xander had alluded to when they'd last spoke. The voices were nearing. She picked one on nothing but instinct and fled into the night.

The way those men talked made her sound like an easy target.

She was going to prove them all wrong.



Art by: Rémi Jacquot

