

What You Expect to See

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The sun glittered off the glass and steel buildings of New Capenna, and a pair of green and red birds chased each other through the air. Kamiz paused in the shadows while her apprentice stepped into the sun and gaped.



Art by: Grady Frederick

“Look, Kamiz!” Queza pointed. “They’re beautiful.”

Kamiz sighed. “*Erithacus rubecula*. They’re robins.”

“They’re artists. Even you can appreciate beauty, can’t you?”

“I appreciate facts, kid.”

The robins sang as Kamiz and Queza entered Tivit’s fortune-teller shop, locking the door behind them. Floating crystal balls lit the room, illuminating the Obscura sigil—hand, keyhole, and dagger. Kamiz appreciated the display of loyalty.

“Ah, Kamiz: Raffine’s right-hand cephalid.” Tivit padded on heavy paws and folded their bright white wings. “And Queza! The right-hand’s right hand!”

“How’s business, Tivit?”

“Busy. Passing through the back?”

Kamiz nodded. “Keep the door locked.” She pushed aside the hanging tapestries covering the entrance to the vent shaft underground. The tunnels let Kamiz pass through New Capenna covertly—how she preferred it. One of the perks of being Raffine’s spymaster: minimal interaction with people. Let Queza be personable, Kamiz had no time for it.

“Can’t we stay for tea, Kamiz? I’d love to have my leaves read.”

“No.”

“Tivit, look into the future. Any chance Kamiz ever smiles?”

“Outlook not so good, sorry.”

Kamiz tapped her foot. “Queza.”

“She’s mad now,” said Queza through stage whispers. “The marks around her eyes pulse blue-green when she’s mad. I’m coming!”

“I see glowering and silent disapproval in your future, Queza,” Tivit called. “I see no, I see “



Art by: Chris Rahn

Tivit threw their head back and screamed. The floating crystals shattered mid-air as blue smoke twisted through the room like a hurricane. Kamiz smelled metal in the air, a storm building in the corners. Darkness suffocated all light, including Kamiz and Queza’s bioluminescent markings. Silence descended, heavy and taut.

Tivit’s open wings crackled with electricity. Light blazed from their eyes and mouth, knocking the two cephalids back. A chorus roared from Tivit’s throat. Kamiz cast a spherical lens into the room, to record. She’d spent too much time with Raffine not to recognize a prophecy.

“The kitten hiding the cream Corvidae, flitting and pecking Gold in the water Hiding the cream, the kitten!”

The room shook, Kamiz held her ground. Halos formed in the swirling light. She tried to look for Queza, but the cyclone of power forced her eyes shut. The sound rose to a crescendo then stopped.

Shattered glass and shredded books fell. Sunlight streamed through Tivit's modest windows, and the sphinx seer collapsed.

"Queza?" Kamiz blinked her watering eyes. Her apprentice lay sprawled beneath a bookcase, cradling her head. Kamiz cast the viewing spell as she rushed over. Bruises and scrapes lit up across Queza's body—none serious.

"I'm fine. Kamiz that was "

Kamiz called the spherical lens back to her hand. "I'm sending the recording to Raffine now."

Queza rubbed her head, filled a water carafe for Tivit and pushed them to rehydrate. "Kamiz, I've read every account of Raffine's visions, from the founding. This was exactly like them. This is big. Different."

Kamiz kept her face blank. There was an explanation. There was nothing she did not know, only things she did not know yet.

The reporting amulet against her throat vibrated: another seer reporting a vision. The amulet shook again. It buzzed and rattled against her skin, heating with the friction, as though the stone inside would crack. Kamiz fumbled the amulet in her palm and pressed it to display the reports.

Magic windows flashed blue before her, revealing fortune-tellers, soothsayers, and augurs from Park Heights. From the Mezzio, the Caldaia. All reporting the same thing.

"Halos Halos Kitten hiding the cream."

"The kitten hiding the cream. Gold "

"In the water, gold. Corvidae Halos, halos "

"Halos everywhere "

"The same vision?" Queza whispered. She gripped a milky-white talisman with a halo inside. A token from the superstitious angel-faithful?

"Put that away," Kamiz muttered.

Queza stared at the reports. "What does it mean?"

Kamiz's wrist summons-charm tightened.

"We'll know soon enough." Kamiz straightened her cuffs and walked to the back tapestries. Raffine was calling her to the Cloud Spire.



Art by: Chris Rallis

The elevator lifted from the city depths, through girder streets, past dazzling buildings, and into the clouds. Kamiz sent Queza to the Interfactorium's map room to begin analysis. Queza was a daydreamer, but also the best Exactor in the Obscura. Once or twice, she'd caught details Kamiz had missed—no small feat.

The elevator doors opened like beetle wings.

Whispers swirled through Raffine's sanctum; New Capenna's secrets and schemes. The glass walls let the powerful sphinx demon overlook her city, the stained glass above depicted her rise to power, how she joined with the archdemons as the angels fell, and how they enhanced her visionary capabilities.

Ghostly images of reports, crimes, and movements floated through the room. The sphinx demon paced, scattering the whispers and reports into mist. Every time, Raffine's presence was a kick in the gills. She was older than memory, powerful and mysterious. With her infernal visions, Raffine knew everything.

Kamiz dropped to her knee.

Like a storm, Raffine unfurled her wings, banishing the swirling reports and images to the corners. Her voice filled the room like thunder.

"Report."

Kamiz made a point never to tell Raffine something unless she was sure. "You've seen Tivit's vision. Other seers in New Capenna saw it at the same time. We're mapping them to pinpoint a pattern. The common elements include—"

"Do not rehearse the contents of a vision to a seer. Kittens splashing in milk, gold in the water, halos, halos, I have seen it. I am not interested in the details of your craft. I want to know who sent this vision!"

Kamiz clenched her jaw to keep from flinching. Did she say sent? Raffine's visions came from the archdemons. Who else could've sent a vision of this magnitude?

"Someone attacked the visionaries of New Capenna. Unacceptable."

The implications hit Kamiz in her stomachs. She'd warded the Cloud Spire herself. If a spellcaster managed to reach every seer, including Raffine it meant her wards had failed. Someone got to Raffine, and it was her fault.

Kamiz stood. "I will find your answer."

"Quickly." Raffine retreated into her whispers and shadows. "Do this personally, Kamiz. Feet on the pavement. My trust is in you, alone. For now."

Kamiz swallowed the lump in her throat. "Understood."



Art by: Johannes Voss

The Interfactorium walls shone brighter than a Cabaretti party. Queza gathered information orbs in her palms and flicked them to the map. Two side searches gathered data in one corner, and she traced lines of light between disconnected areas. If Queza thought they were connected, it was worth investigating.

"Each dot is a seer who experienced one of those visions." Queza pointed to the map. "Every one on our payroll, and a good number who don't know they are. Same vision, same time. No exceptions."

"Add a dot to the Cloud Spire." Kamiz grimaced and kept her coat on. She'd be going to the city to investigate soon. Feet on the pavement. "Raffine gave me her report. Same vision, same time."

Queza snapped the report into place. "I'm researching the vision's images: kitten hiding cream, gold in the water. Corvidae, which I thought referred to crows, could be any number of birds: crows, magpies, jackdaws, ravens"

"Cut that search," Kamiz said. "We're investigating who sent the vision, not the vision contents."

“Sent?”

“We’re treating this like an attack. Someone cast a spell or poisoned the proverbial visionary waters.”

Queza pursed her lips and rubbed her talisman. “Kamiz, I’m telling you, this is exactly like Raffine’s visions at the founding. The big ones! It’s not—”

“Why do you have that?”

Queza looked at her talisman. “You don’t believe in the angels?”

“What is there to believe or disbelieve? Angels are a historical fact. They existed. They helped build New Capenna. They left.”

Queza shrugged. “Some have faith they will return. Don’t you suspect there’s more to things than what we can see, some higher power?”

“We are the Obscura spymasters, Queza. We question everything and believe nothing without proof. Give that to me.”

Queza handed over the talisman.

“Raffine says it’s an attack. I know you’ve studied New Capenna’s founding, but Raffine was there. The people who didn’t listen to her are dead. This is the direction we’re going.”

The markings along Queza’s neck pulsed a deep violet. She nodded and turned to the map. “Understood.”

Kamiz pushed on. “Did anything significant occur right before the vision hit?” She called the aven surveillance reports from the stack in the corner and limited the search to the hour prior. There. An explosion in the Mezzio.

Queza zoomed into the map. “An abandoned warehouse.” She spread an arch of reporting over her head, chose one, and cast the others to the side. “One person’s been in the area this week.” The enhanced picture revealed a leonin woman, orange tabby fur with pale yellow eyes. She wore a trench coat, a smart fedora, and a suspicious expression, like she was sniffing for a story. Lacey Lanine: reporter.

“She works for Denry Klin, at the Capenna Herald.”

“Sounds like the kitten hiding the cream, boss,” Queza said. “Lacey and Denry have a secret scoop about something. Or they created their own scoop, to beat out the other papers.”

Hmm. Kamiz knew reporters, she used to be one, before she found a job where she didn’t have to talk to people. Reporters would do anything to sell papers. “Plausible theory, but—”

“A theory is no good without evidence. I know.”

Good girl. “Look into the abandoned warehouse.”

Queza minimized the maps and sanitized the room of secrets. “Call Oskar?”

Good choice. Kamiz liked Oskar—his trashcan treasure hunts and sewer salvages revealed a lot about people. Plus, he hung out with rats to avoid people. They were kindred souls. She cast the calling spell and brought Oskar into view, then pulled his image into the room. He blinked at the bare walls.

“How do you do this boss? It feels like I’m here.”

“It looks like you are, too!” Queza passed her hand through Oskar’s shoulder.

“Basic illusion. I suggest a few details, your mind fills in the rest. People see what they expect to see.”

Queza and Oskar passed hands through each other again, and grinned. “New hat, Queza?”

“It is! I’m trying a new style before the Crescendo. Are you going?”

“To the Crescendo? Me?” He shuffled. “Hey, I found two more stained-glass halos for you. I’ll send the locations.”

“Great!”

Kamiz cleared her throat.

“What’s up, boss?” Oskar wiped his nose on the back of his hand.

“Abandoned building exploded this morning. What do you know?” She pulled up the map.

“That building ain’t abandoned, boss. Based on the trash, people’ve been inside for a week. And it didn’t explode. It imploded.”

She glanced at Queza. Feet on the pavement. Kamiz replaced her hat.

“I’m sending an Echo Reader team to view the implosion site. Queza and I will head there soon.” She closed the illusion, then handed Queza her coat. “Why is Oskar finding halo-signs for you?”

Queza winced. “I’m an Exactor, Kamiz, you pay me to notice things.”

Kamiz tilted her head. “Go on.”

“Halo imagery’s been popping up in the architecture. Without evidence of construction. I’m waiting to see if a pattern emerges. Oskar’s my lookout.”

Kamiz grunted. That is indeed what she paid Queza to do. “Very well. Question everything, follow your hunches—”

“And verify with evidence. I know, Kamiz.”

“Good. Let’s go find a reporter.”



Art by: Josh Hass

Denry Klin tried not to jump when two Obscura agents appeared in his office.

“Yeah, I’ll talk, I got nothing to hide.” Denry ran his claws through a well-manicured mane. “Lacey Lanine? No, she didn’t have work down there. Lacey does fluff pieces for the society pages. Nothing important.”

The tips of Kamiz’s tentacles prickled. If this was how Denry talked about Lacey, the reporter would be looking to prove herself with some big scoop. Motive to attack the seers?

“I’ll show ya, here’s her latest article. A preview of the Crescendo menu and entertainments. A line or two from Jinnie Myra and Kitt Kanto, see? Harmless. Anyway, she ain’t been in today. Probably out with her lady friend all night.”

“Lady friend?” Queza asked.

“One of those straightlaced Brokers. Lagrita or something.”

“Lagrella?”

“Yeah, Lagrella!”

Kamiz and Queza rolled their eyes together. Lagrella the Magpie was a Broker lieutenant. If she was hanging around Lacey Lanine it was because she was manipulating her. A subtle push to control the Capenna Herald, most likely.

“Contact us when you see Lacey,” Kamiz said. “If you don’t, we’ll know.”

Denry swallowed hard. Kamiz and Queza left the building.

The Echo Readers stood in the warehouse rubble with their eyes closed, reading the spectral afterimages. Kamiz squinted through the dust hanging in the air.

“There’s a four-person team working in darkness,” the Readers intoned in unison. “Their faces are shadowed.”

“Shadowed?” Queza asked.

“They’re under a spell.” Kamiz explained.

“They cast dozens of spells, aimed at a bottle in the warehouse center,” the Readers continued. “Every spell fizzled, until this morning. Something stuck, and it devoured the room.” The Echo Readers raised their heads, eyes still closed. “Everything. Building imploded, and then—” The Readers shielded their spectral eyes. “Shadow burst from the explosion.”

Kamiz put her hands in her pockets. “Do you see Lacey Lanine?”

The Echo Readers pointed to a northern side street. “There. On the first night, she entered the warehouse from that direction, handed them a bottle of Halo, and left.”

“From the Vantoleone,” Queza whispered. “Where she was writing an article about the Crescendo. Not out with a lady friend, eh?”

Kamiz nodded. Red herring. “Denry underestimated her. She’s ambitious. Tried to make her own story. Stole Halo from the Cabaretti and arranged for experimentation. Now she’ll publish her exposé about how all the seers in New Capenna were compromised.”

“Easy fix,” Queza said. “Give her name to a Ruiner. By morning, no paper will touch anything written by Lacey Lanine.”

Kamiz frowned. This would answer Raffine’s question. She had the who, but not enough of the how and why. Halo did enhance spells. But enough to cover the entire city, even to the Cloud Spire? Something wasn’t adding up.

She tapped into the Obscura network and summoned a mentalist. “Find Lacey Lanine. I need to pick her brain.”

Her reporting talisman shook. Oskar’s face appeared. He pulled back to show the figure swaying beside him. Lacey.

“Someone beat you to it, boss. Found her sitting in a dumpster in a stupor. Mind wiped.”

The mentalist dusted off her palms. “I can’t get anything. Her mind is blank. Whoever did this was thorough.”

Kamiz grunted. “Take her to the infirmary.”

“You got it, boss.” She guided Lacey into a car.

Queza and Oskar sifted through the trash Lacey left behind. Rats scurried from the dumpster, bringing offerings. The alley was familiar, they were just down the street from Tivit’s shop. Kamiz and Queza might’ve passed by just this morning. Did it mean anything that Lacey was so close to Tivit? Unlikely. Meant more that she was so far away from the blast site.

“These are connected to Lacey.” Oskar handed Kamiz a notepad, a business card, and a tight scroll. All three were blank.



Art by: Leonardo Santanna

“Even her notes are scrubbed,” Queza said.

Kamiz sighed. "Lacey might be a victim of her own plot. The Halo-infused spell put images into seers' minds and wiped her memory. She survived the implosion, but the magic hit her brain at point-blank range."

Good theory, it fit the evidence. Did the Echo Readers mention Lacey being nearby for the implosion?

Kamiz's head snapped up. Glass shattered nearby. Metal crashed against wood. Tivit's shop. Kamiz shoved the blank scraps into her pocket and sprinted. Queza caught up in a few steps, her coat's dagger-shaped fringe tinkled as she moved.

They pushed through screaming, panicked pedestrians to see flame burst from Tivit's shop. The balcony above the shop entrance buckled on one side, a breath away from crashing to the ground. The storefront's stained glass rained on the sidewalk. A crowd of looky-loos bunched up to watch the destruction, slowing Kamiz and Queza's rush to the front. Tivit shook in their entryway, terrified and stunned. The balcony overhead creaked and showered sparks.

"Tivit!" Queza leapt forward as the balcony broke from the wall. They would both be crushed! Kamiz projected her magic forward, gripping Tivit's thick fur and Queza's long coat, ripping them out from under the balcony. It crashed to the pavement. The fire spread, attracting more voyeurs.

Kamiz strained to see where she'd thrown the two. Tivit lifted their head, but Queza's coat lay flat and empty. She'd grabbed the coat and missed Queza. Kamiz stared at the flaming balcony. No movement. The crowd clogged the street, blocking her attempts to get closer. Light flashes signaled the arrival of the Brokers, ready to offer protection for a price.

Kamiz's markings flared blue-green. Queza.

Magic gathered in a blue storm around her hands. "Oskar!" she shouted, but he was already in motion, relaying orders to his rats. The rodents surged, feeding on his fear and fury. Kamiz's spell lifted them, enhanced them, splashed them down upon the crowd.

Illusion. The crowd saw giant flying rats and their minds filled in the rest. Everyone scattered, including the Broker's contract mages. Tivit, shaking off the shock, called water down to extinguish the flames. Kamiz rushed to the fallen balcony and flipped the charred wood to find her apprentice. Oskar sifted through the ash, cutting his fingers on broken glass. "No, no, no" he muttered.

Nothing. No Queza. Kamiz's three hearts stopped inside her chest. She'd failed Raffine, and now her apprentice, her right hand, her—

"Oof, ouch."

Kamiz held her breath. A thin hand emerged from the gap between two buildings. A hand with bioluminescent markings.

"Queza!" Oskar jumped to his feet. Inch by inch, Queza poured herself out from the small gap. She shook herself and let her body pop back into shape.

"No bones," Queza cracked a smile. "Cephalids excel at getting in and out of tight spots. Oh!"

Kamiz pulled the young woman into a tight hug. A moment passed. Queza returned it. "Thought you were dead, kid," Kamiz muttered.

"Not dead, boss. Just squished."

Kamiz cleared her throat and let go. She straightened Queza's collar and looked her over. She was fine. Smart kid. Kept her wits about her. She never should've worried.

Oskar shuffled foot to foot, unaccustomed to talking with non-rodents. Queza tucked a wavy tentacle into place “Alright, Oskar?”

“Your finger webs are singed,” he said.

“Yours are bleeding,” she answered.

He shrugged. “Glass.”

“Yeah.”

Kamiz rolled her eyes. Across the street, the exhausted Tivit talked with a man in a well-tailored, armored pinstripe suit. He waved a scroll in Tivit’s face. A contract.

Broker.

Kamiz spread her webbed fingers and viewed the man through a window of magic. Contract magic circled the scroll like chains. Kamiz plucked mirrored glass from the debris and projected it between the agent and Tivit. The binding magic reflected to the agent and fizzled. He scowled at Kamiz and scurried away.

Queza gasped. “Quick thinking, boss.”

“Mirrors expose the loopholes in contract magic. Then you can exploit them. The agent knew he was beat. Always keep a mirror handy. Tivit? Never sign a contract with a Broker. They’re vultures. They see minor property damage and rope you into a protection racket.”

Tivit ruffled their feathers, indignant. “I was confused for a moment.”

“Who did this?”

“Riveteers,” Tivit said. “After the vision this morning, I took a sleeping potion to calm my nerves. When I woke up, the new stained glass was above my door. They said it was scab work and smashed it. Ah, my shop!”

Queza rushed to Tivit’s side. “The stained glass appeared? What did it look like?”

Tivit waved their paw, bringing up a picture. Queza gasped.

The stained glass was a halo.

“Queza,” Kamiz started.

Queza sent report requests to all agents. “Pictures of the buildings where the visions occurred this morning.”

Their talismans shook. Images floated around them like bubbles. One halo. Another. Halos, halos.

“Halos, everywhere,” Queza whispered. “It’s the vision, Kamiz.”

“We’re not looking into “

Her excitement grew. “Raffine was right,” she said. “Someone did send these visions. Not Lacey Lanine, or Denry Klin. It’s a message from the angels!”

Kamiz waited for the punchline.

It wasn’t coming.

“Enough, Queza.”

“But!”

“Enough!”

Oskar and Tivit froze. Queza set her jaw.

“Have I taught you nothing?” Her eyes narrowed. “You didn’t take a moment to ask how or when these halos were crafted? Or consider interviewing the glaziers in the Caldaia? Your first thought is folktales? Your angel obsession makes you sloppy.”

“What about you?” Queza blurted. “You don’t even follow your own rules!”

“What?”

“Have you questioned everyone, Kamiz? Your objectivity falls away at certain altitudes. I’ve been collecting evidence. Are you examining your assumptions? Are you questioning Raffine?”

No sound but their pounding hearts.

Kamiz straightened her coat. “You’re off this case.”

Queza exhaled like she’d been punched. “What?”

“Give me your sigils and talismans. You’re not ready for this. Report back to the Kallock Library for Exactor duties.”

Queza glared, her markings flashed purple and violet. “Fine.” She pulled the talisman from her neck, shucked the sigil bracelets from her wrists and slammed them into Kamiz’s open palm. Kamiz turned away to let her know she was forgotten.

“Tivit, we’ll send a crew to clean up. Oskar, good work today.”

“Sure, boss,” Oskar muttered.

Kamiz pretended not to see Queza in her peripheral vision, fists balled and jaw clenched. She’d been wrong about the girl, as she’d been wrong about the Cloud Spire’s wards. Queza was not her problem anymore.

Time to report to Raffine.

Kamiz lifted her forehead from the elevator’s glass wall and sighed. Blackbirds flew past in a tight vee. She spoke into her bracelet before the elevator doors opened. “Check it out and report back to me.”

“Understood,” the aven surveillance chief responded. She closed the link and took a cleansing breath. The doors opened. Raffine paced as before. For a moment she looked smaller. Diminished. As she knelt, Kamiz inspected the sanctum’s magnificent architecture. The walls, the carvings. The stained glass.



Art by: Sam White

“Stand and report.”

“We—I found the vision catalyst. Spellcasters using Halo. It killed them and destroyed a building.” Wiped a reporter’s mind, she almost said, but she made a point never to tell Raffine something unless she was sure. She fingered the notepad and scroll in her pocket. “The Halo was stolen from the Cabaretti.”

“The spellcasters?”

“Dead, evaporated. The only witness was a reporter, Lacey Lanine. Her mind was wiped.”

Kamiz waited for Raffine to call out her passive voice, but the sphinx demon ignored it. She seemed more relieved that there was any explanation.

Kamiz knelt again, arms spread. “I made a mistake, boss. I warded the Cloud Spire, but this spell got through somehow.”

The report chimed in the rune by her ear. “Kamiz? I looped the Spire three times and compared it to prior photograms. Everything is the same. Looking into your second question now.”

Kamiz sat back on her heels. Raffine stopped pacing.

“What?”

“I came here to tell you I made a mistake, boss. And I did.”

Raffine shook her wings. “You’re forgiven. Re-establish the wards, check them again. That will be all.”

“That wasn’t my mistake.” The clues came into focus. “My mistake was assuming every seer saw the same vision. They didn’t. Everyone saw a kitten hiding a bowl of cream. You said it was kittens splashing in milk.”

Raffine halted her pacing. “Hiding, splashing, they are the same.”

“You didn’t see the same vision.” Kamiz stood. “Because you didn’t see any vision at all.”

Raffine drew up like a storm. “You dare?”

“No halos, boss.” Kamiz pointed at the stained glass around the room. “Not a single halo here in the Cloud Spire. Halos, halos everywhere, but none here. That’s why you’re scared. For the first time someone sent a vision, and they didn’t send it to you.”

Raffine’s wings drooped.

“Boss?” The second report came to her ear. “You were right. She was in the dumpster all night. Nowhere near the implosion.”

Kamiz looked Raffine in the eyes. “We gotta deal with this vision. Something big is coming, and we need to protect the family. I can’t do that if you hide the truth from me.” She turned to the elevator.

“Where are you going?” Raffine demanded.

“To get justice for an innocent reporter. Lacey Lanine wasn’t at the building when it imploded. The spell didn’t wipe her memory.”

“Where was she?”

Kamiz pulled the scroll from her pocket. “Out with her lady friend.”

Mergino Fountain was a calm oasis in the heart of the chaotic city. Lagrella stood between orderly rows of palm-leaved bushes, admiring the winged architecture. She tapped a toe in the blue-white mist spilling from the fountain. Kamiz stepped from the shadows, alone, but ready.

“Congratulations, Spymaster,” she said. “You found me.”

The mist swirled underfoot. Lagrella the Magpie. Corvidae, flitting and pecking. “Are Brokers always this sloppy?”

“Pardon?” Lagrella said.

“A window gets scratched, and there’s a Broker signing people up for protection. An entire building implodes in the heart of the Mezzio, and not a single Broker comes sniffing? You might as well have signed your name. Once I found your girlfriend, it was basically a confession.”

“You mean Lacey?” Lagrella twisted the heavy rings on her fingers. “Not my girlfriend. If I could’ve robbed the Cabaretti myself, I would have, but the Cabaretti don’t let anyone into the kitchen. Except harmless reporters for the society pages.”

Kamiz felt the puzzle pieces fit into place. The kitten hiding the cream wasn’t Lacey or Denry Klin. It was the Cabaretti. Lagrella’s magic pooled around Kamiz’s ankles, hiding in the mist. She stood still.

“Alas,” Lagrella continued. “I only love two things. My fish tank, and the Prophecy.”

Kamiz knew she decorated the tank with contract breakers, dipped in gold and silver. Gold in the water. “Prophecy?” The Magpie’s magic danced along Kamiz’s wrists, stinging her tentacles. She kept her face blank.

Lagrella pulled a scroll and fountain pen from her coat. “The Prophecy is locked in a vault below Nido Sanctuary. A demon foretold New Capenna’s destruction. When the city’s Halo supply is gone, we die. I don’t mind telling you, soon you won’t remember.”



Art by: Donato Giancola

“You believe this?”

“Raffine’s right hand questions a demon’s prophecy? I discovered something recently. The Cabaretti figured out how to make Halo. Imagine. I sent Lacey to get me a sample. You know the rest.”

Magic tightened around Kamiz’s wrists. “They didn’t agree to die for you.”

“You’d be surprised what people agree to when they’re desperate.” Lagrella’s smile dropped. “For example, you’re going to tell me the vision that’s shaken the Obscura. It came the moment the building collapsed. I know you know what they saw, Kamiz. Tell me!”

Hmm. Lagrella didn’t know the vision’s contents. The images were real, not manufactured. Kamiz blinked. A flash of light caught her eye.

Light from a mirror.

Lagrella didn’t see what Kamiz saw, but of course not. People see what they expect to see.

“Why care that the Cabaretti can make Halo?”

Lagrella gaped. “How do you not understand? There’s an angel somewhere in New Capenna! Only angels can create Halo! I’m trying to save this city! I opened a door, and before those worthless wizards failed, a message got through. You will tell me what your fortune-tellers saw! Sign here.”

Kamiz gasped. Lagrella’s magic jerked her hands forward. A pen materialized in her fingers, poised above Lagrella’s contract. Ink threatened to spill from the tip. The ties of magic pushed her hand toward the paper. “You’re forcing me to sign a contract? I thought Brokers were bound by justice, and ethics.”

“I’ll do anything to save New Capenna.”

“No “

“Yes. I’ll add you to my collection, Kamiz. Silver, I think. Sign.”

Sweat dripped under her collar. Lagrella boosted the spell, forcing her hand to the paper. Kamiz pulled her hand back, grunting, fighting to not sign away her mind. She fought against it, pulled back !

Her hand fell through the paper.

“You get all that, Queza?”

A cheery voice piped behind her. “I did, boss. Doomsday Prophecy, fresh Halo, angels. All recorded and sent to the Cloud Spire.”

Lagrella whirled about, searching for the hidden cephalid. “Kamiz is bound! She’s signed my contract!”

“This contract?” Kamiz lifted the scroll and the pen. They dissolved into mist.

Lagrella fell back a step. “What?”

“This isn’t real, Broker. Not the paper, or the pen. This isn’t even Mergino Fountain. Look, the bushes are identical, it’s not my best work. You saw what you wanted to see. Just like a magpie, distracted by shiny objects.”

“My magic circles your neck, cephalid.”

“It looks that way, doesn’t it?” Queza stepped into the illusion. “My boss showed me a trick earlier. If you can see the loophole, you can exploit it.” She lifted the mirror she’d brought. “Magically forcing someone to sign a contract leaves some big loopholes.”

The magic ensnaring Kamiz fell away, an optical illusion. Lagrella looked from her hands to Kamiz.

“Shift your perspective,” Kamiz said. “You’re the one in the trap.”

Kamiz’s illusion fell at once. The fountain, plants, and architecture disappeared. They stood in a bare, windowless room. Queza stood before Lagrella, using her mirror to reflect the magic back at her, snaring her like a spiderweb. She cried out at her hand, holding the fountain pen, poised above her own deadly contract.

“Wipe your own mind with your signature or nullify Lacey’s contract.” She pulled the scroll from her pocket. “Your choice.”

“Nullify a contract? Never!”

Kamiz pushed Lagrella’s hand toward the paper. “It’s amazing what people will agree to when they’re desperate.”

Lagrella bared her teeth, hissed, and kicked against her magical restraints. A furious scream ripped through her throat, then she slumped in defeat. “Fine,” she seethed. Kamiz replaced the scroll with Lacey’s contract, and Lagrella’s signature cracked the paper in two.

“Nice doing business.” Kamiz feigned a salute and signaled Queza to the door.

“Kamiz you can’t leave me here!” Lagrella called out. “I can’t move!”

“Be glad you aren’t dipped in gold, Magpie. It’s your magic. Untangle it yourself.”

Queza closed the door behind them.

“Lacey’s waking up.” Kamiz touched the rune in her ear. “Memory restored.”

“Why’d you help Lacey?”

Kamiz shrugged. “Got a soft spot for hapless reporters. Used to be one.” She paused. “I wasn’t expecting you to back me up.”

Queza rubbed her arm. "Oskar realized Lacey's scroll was a Broker contract. I connected the dots. Followed you here."

Kamiz cleared her throat. "You were right."

Queza held her breath.

"I checked. No halos on the Cloud Spire. Raffine didn't see the vision."

"You checked?"

"Question and verify. You were right." She stepped toward the shops, where they would find an entrance to the vent shaft underground. "Come on, kid. Time to report to our boss."

Queza tilted her head. "You fired me."

"Because I wasn't listening." She met Queza's eyes. "You were looking at facts. I should've trusted your analysis. You were right. And if someone in New Capenna is making their own Halo, and angels are returning—Raffine will need you to talk her through it."

She pulled Queza's talisman and sigils from her pockets. Queza took them reverently.

"This is also yours." Kamiz lifted the angel talisman. It twisted in the dusk, halo twirling within.

Queza quirked a smile. "Does this mean you believe the angels will return?"

Kamiz laughed. "Ridiculous. But maybe maybe I don't know everything."

Queza grinned. "I'll take it."

A pair of blue feathered birds chased each other in a spiral around steel columns. Their birdsong echoed off the stained glass, piercing even the shadows of New Capenna.

"Kamiz?"

"Just appreciating the beauty," she said. "Let's go."