

Episode 6: The Last to Leave

K. Arsenault Rivera

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Fear is the first thing she remembers.

Next comes the smell of the thing: burning pitch, ozone. It sticks to the roof of her mouth, and there is nowhere she can go to escape it.

By the time she hears the skittering of its claws against the stone her eyes fly open, and she reaches for her sword. There: the monster with talons as long as a hunting hound, hundreds of sharp teeth, sightless vestigial sockets. A girl cowers opposite the beast, pressing herself to the cold stone wall. Between the girl and the monster there is a body curled on its side: an older woman, her throat torn open. Her blood slicks the monster's chittering jaw as it lunges for the girl.

What strikes her then—beyond the fact that she has eyes and can see—is that none of this is new to her. She knows this place. She was here, once. This mildewed dungeon is only a stone's throw from her old family home. She knows that the girl has been here for a week, possibly more—that she is hungry and thirsty and has lost all hope. She knows that the woman on the ground is the girl's mother.

This time, she does what the girl could only dream of doing. This time, she has a sword. The creature lunges for the girl, but she steps between the beast and the child. Claws rake against armor as it closes in. Just as it opens its jaws to bite at her, she drives her sword through the roof of its mouth. Black tar bubbles from the wound and drips down the length of her blade. She withdraws it. The creature, rasping, curls up on the ground. Another cut sees its head separated from its body. She kicks it away.

So easy. It had been so easy. Had she ever found this sort of thing difficult?

Memories knock about in her head. The girl needs to go somewhere. There is something else she should be doing. The woman needs a proper burial, but she will never have one, and it is best not to dwell on such thoughts.

And wasn't there something else?

What is it she's forgetting?

She shakes her head. The girl has thrown her arms around her in embrace. She tousles the girl's hair. "You're safe now."

"Thank you," answers the girl, in a voice without any trace of youth. "You did the right thing."

She looks between the creature's body, and the dead woman. "Keeping people safe is what I do."

"So it is. But keep in mind that you are seeing this with new eyes. Once, this was difficult for you."

Steps down the hall—heel, click, heel, click.

The girl's eyes begin to glow. She points to the door. "A splicer is coming."

The word tugs at something in her mind—the thing she’s meant to remember. It occurs to her that she should find a girl with glowing eyes strange, but she doesn’t. There’s something familiar about her, too—so she kneels to get a better look.

Two thick black brows, with the glossy hair to match—hair that never stayed put in anything but the sturdiest of braids. Round cheeks her mother used to pinch. A scar along her jaw from a fall she’d taken. What was it her mother had said then? Wounds like that belonged only to the flesh; to wear a scar was a choice. At the time she’d liked that choice. It made her feel braver, even if the cause wasn’t so brave at all.

A sword sliding into a sheath.

She understands now.

The girl nods.

“Elspeth, it’s time to wake up.”

The floor gives out from under them, the walls fly away, the moldy ceiling is flung into another dimension. Around them the stars whisper their eternal secrets. The girl’s face—her own face, but younger—shifts into her mother’s. Blood drips from her torn throat onto her cloak.

“You have a choice to make.”

Once more, she drops.

All around her the world starts to change. This village she was in—her village—is sealed beneath stone. Blocks build upon it bit by bit, assembled as if by some unseen child at play, while the trees rapidly fruit and wither, fruit and wither. The air begins to shimmer.

“Do you remember what you’re becoming?”

A young girl’s shadow. A face amidst the shimmering, beaming at her. Elspeth looks down at her own hands. They, too, are opalescent in the light of this place. A curious sensation prickles along her shoulder blades; a glittering feather falls from nowhere to float before her. “Just so,” says her mother. “You’ve done so well to get here, but there’s one last step to take. You first must leave your old self behind.”

“Is that why you brought me here?” she asks.

“You came here of your own volition. When presented with the impossible, you made a choice where others balked. You rewrote fate. Part of you knew it was time to awaken. The consequences of that choice are unfolding—and we are just ahead of its author, waiting for your chance to join the tale.”

In killing the Phyrexian beast? No another memory wells up: the sylex, her friends arguing, a way that seemed clear and right if not easy. Didn’t it explode? Maybe she’s dead. Maybe all of this is a hallucination.

“It isn’t.”

“I don’t like having someone read my thoughts,” Elspeth says.

“You think loudly,” answers the voice.

She sighs, or thinks she does, in this strange body. Before her the stones are stacking themselves higher and higher—a needle against the sky. As it reaches its peak she begins to recognize it. New Capenna.

“What do I have to do?”

“You must make one more choice—and you have little time to make it. Your mortal wants and desires must not enter into the equation.”

It sounded simple enough, but she had the feeling it wouldn’t be.

“What do I have to choose?”

“All the planes are aflame. You’ve seen some of what’s happened, but not all. Soon, you’ll see the rest. You must choose where to intervene,” says the voice.

What did she mean by ? Ah. A cabin, an old friend in tears outside it; a woman in a ship swaying uneasily through the sky; a young man at war with something that was once a dragon. The fragments come together in her mind like a blasphemous sheet of stained glass.

Phyrexia.

This is about Phyrexia.

The moment she has the thought, the world above her shatters. New Capenna’s skies go red as a pomegranate; a massive white structure pierces through the clouds. The structure—something like the tendril of a god—wraps about the city. Windows shatter, monuments tumble, girders snap. Cracks run up the side of the tower. Oil spills from the tendril, coating the surface in glistening black. Pods like carrion insects descend on the city.

But New Capenna isn’t dead. Not yet. It can’t be—the whole city is fortified against attack. She learned that herself.

Elsbeth wants to see more. Soon she’s surrounded by fire and rubble. The blood is ankle deep on the streets of New Capenna. It takes her a moment to realize the piles of leather along the curbs are the shucked skins of too slow citizens. There are more Phyrexians around her than there are people.

And worse: floating above them all is something that once was an angel. The sight makes her feel sick in ways she cannot express.



Art by: Gaboleps

“They call her Atraxa.” The voice is different, now, yet not unknown. Her mother’s. It isn’t a convincing mimicry—but there is some warmth in Elspeth’s heart at the sound, nonetheless. “An angel corrupted by the hands of four praetors. One of their most fanatical generals.”

A whistle in the air. Something explodes against Atraxa’s helm, but in its wake nothing. Not a crack. She sweeps her scythe through a cluster of survivors as easily as a farmer reaping wheat.

Elspeth has seen war before. It is familiar to her, if never quite comfortable, to be in the thick of the melee. On Alara, Theros, and Mirrodin, she raised her sword to protect the innocent, to find peace.

But this place is different. There isn’t anything she can do. The quill of a Phyrexian beast shoots clean through her body. A faint tingle is all she feels—but behind her, its prey sinks dead to the ground. A bat-winged creature that might have once been a Maestro descends on a fleeing man. She tries to save the man only for her hands to fade through him.

“Remember what you’ve been told, El,” says her mother. “You have to choose where to help.”

Elspeth swallows. As she looks up, Atraxa sweeps the plaza once more. Heads and torsos fall to the ground beneath the watchful eye of the seraphs.

“This place used to be home. I never imagined it’d grow to this size, of course, but it was home all the same,” says her mother. “The Capennan people welcomed us with open arms. Decades later, they welcomed you, again.”

Atraxa lets out a horrific screech. In the skies, the winged creatures array themselves into a grid.

“The invader has been given strict orders. There are to be no survivors on New Capenna. Only our organs and bones will live on.”

Like arrows, the winged beasts descend upon the upper levels of Park Heights.

And it seems they have reason to.

Riveteers dangle precariously from whatever holds they can find, red-hot tools in hand. Bolts and nuts drop from the surface of the place like falling petals.

“There are some who fight,” says her mother. “There are more who have given themselves over to corruption. Power’s voice is booming, isn’t it? But there are always some who fight against impossible odds. People who need help. Inspiration.”

Closer still. Within the belly of Park Heights, orders are shouted to and fro, a cacophony of engineering. Gouts of steam melt the invaders’ armor as they reach for those inside. Yet they cannot protect everyone—for every Riveteer that is saved, two more are carried away between metal jaws.

They don’t have long.

“You could be that for them. This was our home once. You could save it with your own two hands. Build something new.”

Could it be? Although she’d met kind people who did welcome her, there were those who’d take any excuse to see her fall. Could she spend the rest of her days here?

The woman’s words echo in her mind: she must make the right choice. She must do what’s needed. Elspeth turns. She catches sight of the seraphs once more and nods to them.

As dire as things seem, New Capenna had its defenders.

“This isn’t the place,” she says.

A thundering sound. The walls fly out again, becoming as flat as paintings before fading into the black. The longer she falls the more of them she sees. Students slinking down corridors, away from their changed professors; a woman in a black bridal dress singing above a horde of zombies; kor flying on mantas toward a great white structure.

She jerks to a stop between a red sky and a red sea. Overhead the fine fabric of stars ripples. The air tastes of salt.

Theros.

“Welcome home.”

Elspeth’s mouth opens. At once she is turning about in the void, searching for the speaker. “Daxos?”

“So you’ve not forgotten me, even with the new station,” he says. His voice is warm and honey sweet. Hearing it is enough to work loose the tension in her soul. “I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she says. “I couldn’t forget you if I tried.” Yet there is a tightness in her chest, too, when she realizes she cannot see him.

And when her eyes land on Meletis.

Here, too, there is fire; here, too, there is rubble and ruin. Houses in which she’d taken tea are smashed to the ground. The market is little more than a smoldering heap.

“It is our time of need,” he says. “And it is *his* time of need.”

The view around them shifts again—though this time without Elspeth’s say-so. They’ve left Meletis in favor of a temple’s belly. Bright white statues are now slick with oil, their faces painted with Phyrexian masks. Thick, dark smoke chokes the inner chamber. Within, people are packed so tight none can move. Porcelain masks and bony protrusions speak to their state.

A leonin stands atop the altar.

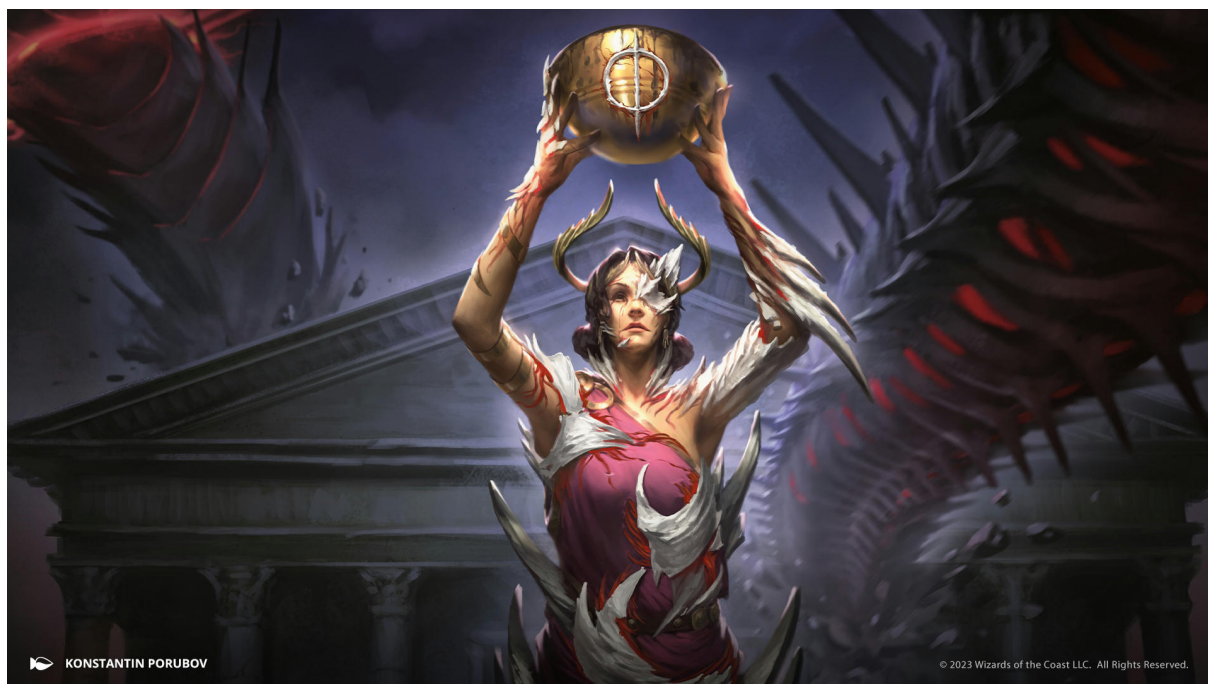
“The gods of Theros exist because we will it to be so. They serve at our behest. You know now the glory of Phyrexia, the glory of true unity—an unending bond between all that lives. Is that not a greater divinity?”

“Persuasive as ever, isn’t he?” Daxos says.

Elspeth’s throat threatens to close.

“Do you see the cup in his hands? It’s full of oil. And the woman there, kneeling next to him?”

The sight of Ajani disturbed her so much she’d missed the woman. From the smooth fabric she’s wearing, and the gold jewelry adorning it, she must be a priestess.



Art by: Konstantin Porubov

Realization like a knife in the back. “He’s trying to convert the gods?”

“Trying is putting it lightly. He’s already changed three of them. Didn’t even have to try. The Phyrexians are so fervent in their beliefs the gods have little hope of fighting back,” Daxos answers.

“Phyrexian gods,” she repeats. “With that sort of power, it’d be easy to “

“There wouldn’t be many places to hide,” Daxos agrees. “But do you know where we are? Whose temple this is? Look carefully.”

A statue’s severed head among the wreckage. The moment she turns her attention to it, she feels like a fool. Helioid. Of course. This is meant to be a test for her—and what better way to test her than these two? On Theros, Elspeth found a new light to guide her. They’d parted on bad terms—but could she stand back and watch as Ajani anointed him in this foul oil?

The whistle of an arrow kills her thoughts. The bowl in Ajani’s hand shatters; falling shards cut the priestess’s face. As Ajani turns toward the shooter, the priestess tries to get away. Two in the crowd hold her aloft.

Another arrow slams into Ajani’s shoulder. He pulls it out, snaps it in annoyance. “Find them!”

“So there are still heroes on Theros,” Elspeth observes.

Somehow, she feels Daxos’s hand on her shoulder. “Keep watching.”

Darkness swallows them an instant, only to return them to a slightly different part of the temple. Hunters pursue a youth down one of the halls. Their leader—bearing multiple metallic heads—flings a net over him. One of the others takes the captured youth back to the altar. Ajani holds aloft the net with a single hand.

“Behold, one who turns away from the pack! One who plots against us!” The youth is screaming. Ajani cuts him loose, only to catch him by the hair. “What use is a mind that plots to sow dissent?”

Elspeth can't bear to look. She turns away—but there is no escaping the sound of crushed bone, or the cheers that follow. How could that be Ajani? How could he do such a thing?

"He was forced," Daxos says. "You could save him from this. If he were here—the real him—he'd welcome release."

"I'm not sure it's so simple."

She forces herself to look once more. The priestess is kneeling, again, and he is forcing her to drink the oil.

Light is coming to the temple.

But it is not rosy-fingered dawn, nor violet-cloaked dusk—it is the searing white light of the forge. The burning sun. Despite the fiery corona in the temple the faithful do not look away. Plumes of smoke rise from what remains of their skinless flesh.

"You're the bravest woman I've ever known, and you've always tried to do the right thing. If I were to trust anyone with saving Theros—it would be you."

She turns away again. Her thoughts race. If she chooses Theros, she must fight Ajani. If she fights him—there's likely no way to save him anymore. Once the corruption's taken root like this, there's little to be done. Yes, she's killed gods. Yes, she's loved this place, called it home.

And yes, she longs to see Daxos again.

But this isn't meant to be about her own wants and needs. What good does saving Theros do? The thought should pain her and yet it doesn't. What good does it do? If Ajani falls here, the invasions continue. Phyrexian gods will wreak havoc on Theros—but are the people here any more worthy of salvation than the people of New Capenna?

Her mind's split in two. On one side her emotions rage like the seas outside the temple. On the other, only the waters of ablution.

Daxos's arms wrap around her waist. "I think you know what you have to do."

"Don't make me say it," she says, leaning back against him.

But there isn't anyone there.

The world falls away again.

She falls into a landscape where a lizard the size of a mountain fights its quilled silver counterpart. The oil and blood from their wounds form rivers along the lush green earth.

She falls into a castle, once shining, now reduced to rubble. A young man rifles through the broken remains of an armory. The plate covering him is cobbled together from these remains, and already pitted with black. When he finds a sigil among the dreck, he exclaims happily. Now, he thinks, he will be able to defend his family. But he hasn't so much as secured that armor properly, and his sword is of ill size for his body; he will fall. She tries to call out to him to find a proper Sigiled knight, but he does not hear her, as she has already begun to fall again.

Through ranks of horsemen beating war drums, their hounds on the hunt for Phyrexian enemies; through a neon city protected by towering mechanical guardians; through strange swamps and twisted hills, she falls and falls.

Until she lands in a place she hoped never again to see.

The Invasion Tree stands as proud testament to the unending triumphs of Elesh Norn. Red pulses from beneath its clean white plates as it reaches for the heavens—and, indeed, pierces them. An undulating army packs one of the bridges before it. Their banner and their forms—strangely curved, rife with tubes and vats—mark them as Jin-Gitaxias’s creations. There must be thousands of them. How many are newly formed? How many come from the places she’s just seen?

“You have a choice to make.”

Desperation drives her closer to the base of the tree. She left—but the others must have stayed. They wouldn’t abandon such an important fight. Surely there’d be someone.

But when she arrives at the base of the tree, Elesh Norn is the first creature she sees. Sat upon a porcelain throne, its sides uncomfortably close to spines, she surveys her creation. Before her, Urabrask is lashed to a machine. Two centurions on either side wind wheels nearly as large as they are. With every turning of the wheel, Urabrask’s limbs are wrenched further away from his body. Now, he is little more than a howling pile of sinew.

Flanking Norn are two makeshift choirs—living instruments who sing the glories of Phyrexia. Still, what emerges from their unholy throats can hardly be called a song: they keen, they screech, they double their voices. Not once do they approach anything like a melody. Urabrask’s dying screams do little to add harmony.

“There is no room for error.”

Norn snaps her fingers. The choir stops. With another snap she dismisses Urabrask—the centurions chop him into quarters and carry him off. With a third, she summons a group of flying creatures carrying great cargo between them. It isn’t until they land that Elspeth recognizes Karn’s ravaged body. Somehow, his eyes still show signs of life—but the pain within them is far stronger.



Art by: Artur Nakhodkin

Even more so when he, like Elspeth, beholds what Norn is celebrating.

So small are the mortals before her that Elspeth hadn’t noticed them at first: Mirrans, shackled together, their heads bowed. Blood slicks the faces of many. Some have already lost limbs. Splicers attend to

those, grafting unwanted limbs onto unwilling recipients. Elspeth knows them. She's fought side by side with them. None deserve a fate like this.

"We understand that your minds cannot comprehend the glory that awaits you," Norn speaks, "and for that we offer our eternal pity. You have your skin's treachery to blame. Without it you will find yourself free of all burdens."

Elspeth reaches for her sword.

"Think about what you're doing. You only have one opportunity to choose." It's the woman's voice again. "Choose falsely and everything ends here."

"Norn has to die," Elspeth answers.

"Once, long ago, there was a beneficent woman in white who created a world all her own," the voice begins. She remembers now. There was a god, wasn't there? One whose name was forbidden within the dungeon. One she prayed to, as a child. "A beautiful place—bright, peaceful. A place where angels dwelled. She made it so pleasant that she never had any thought to leave or look beyond it. Years passed, and a wizard came to her for aid. She never imagined the kind of threat that would follow in his wake." She gestures around them. "This threat. And it is not carried on by Norn alone. She believes herself to be the beginning and end of Phyrexia, but she is wrong. Killing her will not end this."

Centurions bring three more prisoners before Elesh Norn. They're tossed onto the ground. Two can't stand under their own power, or even kneel. Elspeth's stomach sinks as she recognizes them: a beaten Koth; the dryad Wrenn, torn from her tree; and a bloody Chandra Nalaar.

"Behold the traitors," speaks one of the centurions—and it's then that Elspeth recognizes her as Nissa. Or, at least, someone who once was Nissa Revane. Parts of her new body have melted down to slag. "Mother of Machines, we await your righteous judgment upon them."

"We applaud your work in apprehending them, Nissa," Norn speaks. "The trials and tribulations you faced have only served to scour all traces of your old life away. When you look upon them now, what do you feel?"

"Contempt. Pity."

"As it should be. But you needn't pity them for long. Soon they shall be reshaped and made whole. Completion's rapture shall cleanse them as it has cleansed you."

Hovering behind them, Karn groans.

Elspeth's hand twitches around the pommel of her blade.

"Let our embrace of these rebels prove to all Phyrexia that we are not without mercy toward lesser beings. Phyrexia embraces all. Phyrexia perfects all. With your individuality flayed from your mind, you will come to understand what a blessing you've been given." Norn's smile is all sharp teeth. "Jin-Gitaxias. Come harvest what is left of Koth's little rebellion. You shall be the architect of their perfection."

The army parts. A figure slithers between them, tubes swaying from its maw. Jin-Gitaxias is soon at Norn's side. He bows. "As the Grand Praetor speaks, so Phyrexia wills."

He takes a step toward the gathered—and stops.

Everything stops. The rebels are frozen mid-breath; the army no longer teems. Time comes to a standstill. Part of her wonders if it's Teferi's doing—if she will see him atop the tree, staff in hand. When it comes to Phyrexia, Elspeth knows better than to nurse such hopes.

"Why have we stopped?"

“The time has come,” says the woman. A shimmering shape coalesces between Jin-Gitaxias and Koth, his first target. She is a serene-looking woman, her features kind. Still, there is a certain sadness weighing down her shoulders. “I must hear your decision.”

“Who are you?” It slips out without her thinking.

“My name hardly matters anymore, but you once knew it,” she says. She walks between the prisoners, stopping now at Chandra. The Pyromancer cannot even kneel under her own power—the woman steadies her. “Think carefully. Do you still think Norn must be killed?”

Try as she might, Elspeth cannot imagine the Multiverse at peace so long as Norn lives. “When a limb’s gone sour, you have to cut it off,” she says.

“Strange. We heard something similar once, didn’t we?” the woman says. She moves to Wrenn—kneels to prop her up. The dryad is looking toward the Invasion Tree. “Do you remember, Elspeth?”

Now that she mentions it—it was familiar. Where had she heard that before? She racks her memory, sifting through all that she’s seen, until at last the voice comes back to her. *When a branch has gone rotten . . .*

Wrenn. They’d said the same thing, the two of them, separated by time and place. Just as Elspeth knew what had to be done, so did Wrenn. That must have been why she came here. And if she’s looking at the tree

Something shifts. When she looks on the scene, Norn’s gone translucent, like a spirit. So too has Jin-Gitaxias. The more she looks around the more ghosts she sees. Only Nissa and Wrenn remain themselves. Were they the key players? Wrenn must be tied to her earlier revelation—but why Nissa? Beyond their excursion to New Phyrexia, Elspeth hadn’t spoken to her much. By the time Elspeth arrived Nissa was already gone.

“We cannot stay here forever,” she says. “You must answer.”

“I know,” Elspeth says. “It’s just give me a moment to think.”

Why Nissa?

If it was someone who’d already lost—why not Ajani? Why not repay her old mentor for everything he’d done for her? Maybe there was still a way to save him.

And for that matter, why not take to the field in New Capenna? If she struck down Atraxa, perhaps the angels there could return—and perhaps their returning might cleanse the plane.

As much as she doesn’t want to read them, the answers are plain across her heart: if she saves Ajani, she will only be saving a single person. Alone he isn’t enough to turn the tide. New Capenna can save itself. Which leaves Wrenn, and Nissa, and the glowing thread tying them together.

Yes—she understands.

The decision isn’t whether to save Nissa or save Wrenn.

It’s to keep Nissa occupied long enough for Wrenn to reach the tree.

“You’re certain?” the woman asks.

Elspeth nods. Her body feels strange, as if every nerve is alight at once. “This is the right thing to do.”

“So it is. I cannot fight this threat alongside you, much as I wish I could. But I can forge you into what you were always meant to be.”

Elspeth looks down at her hand, forming itself anew from the ether of this place. Here are her nails, here are her calluses, here are the lines of her palm. Fortune tellers said they could read fate in those lines. She wonders if any of them knew where she'd end up. "I'm afraid," Elspeth says. Once more it simply slips out of her. She didn't even know she was afraid until she spoke—but she is. There's a numbness creeping into the back of her mind. She thinks of Daxos, of Theros, of the home she once imagined. It all seems like a pleasant dream.

The woman embraces her.

"Fear is always the last thing to leave," the woman says. "You've slain it time and time again. Do not falter now, Elspeth."

It is the last thing she hears before Serra fades away.

What an odd sensation it is to be reborn—to feel yourself being stripped away and changed. The wings on her back are heavy as plate mail, yet she cannot remember a time she was ever without them. This body of hers is different—and yet it is as it has always been. She is Elspeth, and she is not.

There is no more room for indecision. The Multiverse hangs in the balance.



Art by: Rovina Cai

All her life she has been asleep. It's time to wake up, time to become what she was always meant to be. Jin-Gitaxias raises his claws.

Elspeth's sword is there to meet them.