

Episode 5: Hymn of the Angels

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STREETS OF NEW CAPENNA

“What do you think?” Elspeth asked her companions, perching on the same ledge she had used when tailing the informant. It was hard to believe her tests with Xander were already a few weeks ago. Somehow, they seemed both like yesterday and years past.

“It’s the quietest section of the city we’ve seen so far,” Vivien admitted.



Art by: Adam Paquette

“Giada?”

The young woman looked bone-tired, so Elspeth wasn’t surprised in the slightest when she said, “I think staying here is a good idea.”

“You look after Giada. I’ll take a quick survey of the perimeter,” Vivien offered.

“Thank you.” Elspeth pointed to the side of the building. “The raccoonfolk were in the alley adjacent; keep an eye out.”

Vivien leapt off the ledge, descending into the inky night. She continued to impress Elspeth. Every motion was sure and deliberate. Even though New Capenna was new to her as well, she walked like she owned every bit of glass and concrete without seeming boastful or prideful. She had adapted to

the city more seamlessly than Elspeth had in what seemed like the same amount of time, even though it was supposed to be Elspeth's home.

"Elspeth." Giada broke the silence, saving Elspeth from personal turmoil and doubt.

"Yes?" When Giada didn't immediately speak, Elspeth turned her gaze to her. Giada was stretched out on the ledge, hands folded under her chin, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. Elspeth had felt that level of uncertainty before and placed her palm lightly between the teen's shoulders to offer some consolation. Giada continued to stare beyond the hazy skyline of New Capenna.

"I'm scared."

"What are you scared about?" Elspeth could think of several thousand reasons for Giada to be scared. But she wanted to hear which one of them weighed on her small shoulders.

"What if I'm not enough?"

"Enough of what?" Elspeth gently prodded.

"What if I can't help New Capenna? Can my magic really be enough? What happens if—*when*—it runs out?" Giada shook her head. "I don't know how much more I have to give, and I don't really know if it'll make a difference if I try. This city is so broken."

The words came out as a rush of air. As though, somewhere within Giada, a dam broke and these questions that had been slowly eating her from the inside now found a free moment for release. Elspeth listened intently to her companion's heartbreaking inquiries. Each question colored one of their past interactions in a new light—tainted it with a shade of fear that Elspeth had seen in Giada but had never understood until this moment.

So much had been placed on Giada's shoulders, without giving her autonomy or credit. The Cabaretti, the families, the Adversary, all saw her as a solution to their problems, a tool. They would wring her dry for their cheap solution to the dwindling Halo supply until there was no more blood in her veins, marrow in her bones, or magic in her soul, and they would do it without a second thought for her well-being.

Elspeth should have done so much more for Giada so much earlier.

Giada turned her eyes to Elspeth, who searched for answers she didn't know if she could give. She wondered if this was how Ajani felt all those times she had gone to him in search of answers she knew, deep down, he didn't have. She wondered if Giada would resent her for her answer as much as she had resented her dear friend in those long-ago moments.

"You're right," Elspeth started softly. "New Capenna *is* broken, and Halo is a flimsy bandage on the wounds of this city." *Real peace, real prosperity, had to come from within*—by addressing the demons that literally built the city and the figurative ones that still haunted its streets.

"What do I do, then? I still want to help—I want a purpose."

"Fulfillment purpose" Elspeth started softly, getting lost in her own thoughts as she had for months on this topic. But, for the first time, her chest didn't ache. The hollow feeling was not as gaping as it had once been. "Those things have to come from within you. I can't give them to you. No one can."

Giada frowned, resting her chin back on her hands dejectedly. Elspeth lightly rubbed between her shoulders.

"But I'll tell you this, Giada. You will have the opportunity to find those answers—for yourself. You will find your purpose." *Just as I will.* "And I will personally ensure you are safe to take the time you need to do so, however long that is."

"You promise?" Giada turned hopeful eyes back to her.

"I swear it."

Their conversation was cut short by Vivien's return. She landed lightly on the platform Elspeth and Giada were stretched upon. "It looks sufficiently abandoned. No signs of life within."

"Good." Elspeth stood. "Then we'll stay here tonight and catch our breath."

WAREHOUSE

Elspeth woke to a weight on her shoulder. The hazy light of dawn, spilling down through a skylight above, cast Giada's face in a warm glow as she slumbered against Elspeth's side. The three of them had huddled in a small office near the back of the warehouse. There was only one entrance and exit, easy enough to secure. And a mirror on the wall opposite the window overlooking the warehouse floor gave them a line of sight without exposing themselves.

"We should get moving. I don't think we're alone here," Vivien whispered, eyes darting to sounds Elspeth didn't hear. She was propped against the wall opposite them.

"Likely just the raccoonfolk. Give her a little bit longer." Elspeth had yet to move. She had never seen Giada look so peaceful. In every previous interaction, Giada had been haunted by turmoil that Elspeth hadn't understood until last night's revelations.

What was Giada's history? Had she always been trapped with the Cabaretti? How had she discovered her power to make Halo?

All questions Elspeth would keep wondering. Giada had enough asked of her already; Elspeth didn't need to be another making demands of her. For as long as she was able, Elspeth would keep her vow and protect her. That was enough.

Metal rang out, sharp and grating. Giada jolted upright, and Elspeth's hand flew to her mouth. Her other arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders, holding the teen to her.

"Stay silent," Elspeth hissed, her eyes scanning the mirror for movement.

Vivien was on her knees, reaching for her bow as the door swung open and glass rained down around them, their peaceful morning shattering with the window.

Jinnie stood in the doorway. Two Cabaretti enforcers stood behind her, brandishing axes. In the mirror, Elspeth could see three more with swords drawn.

Before Vivien could draw an arrow, Jinnie threw a dagger at her. Vivien raised her arm to block the dagger, which dug a gash down her forearm. One of the men rushed around Jinnie, knocked the bow from Vivien's wounded arm, and claimed it for himself.

"Not so tough without this, are you?"

Vivien's eyes shone with a challenge for him to find out just how deadly she could be, even without her bow. She smiled slowly, almost placidly. The sort of smile that promised to be the last he would ever lay eyes on.

"You didn't really think you could escape us, did you?" Jinnie stalked over, a knife in hand that she placed under Elspeth's chin. *How did Jinnie find them?* The warehouse was abandoned, the city huge. There had to be an explanation, something they overlooked that allowed Jinnie to track them. "To think, I trusted you."

The blade was warmer than the cold hard stare Jinnie regarded Elspeth with. Even though she was still breathing, to Jinnie, she was very much dead.

"I was trying to—"

"Spare me your lies," Jinnie snapped. "You in league with the Adversary?" The edge of her knife bit into Elspeth's neck.

"Never."

Jinnie probed with her stare. Finally believing her, she asked, "Then, why?"

"I was keeping Giada safe."

"Liar. You wanted the Font for yourself." Jinnie thrust the knife forward. A little further, and she'd hit the vein in Elspeth's neck. Elspeth didn't even dare to swallow.

"Jinnie, isn't it up to Jetmir on how we deal with traitors?" Giada found her voice. Hurt and confusion flashed across Jinnie's face. Elspeth glanced toward Giada. Did she know what she was doing defending her? But Giada clearly had been learning from the Cabaretti as she deftly wielded her words. "Let him decide what to do with the two of them. He always has a clear head. But *I'm so glad* to see you again. Thank you for saving me."

Jinnie's grip relaxed, and the knife eased away from Elspeth's throat. "It's good to see you, too. I thought we'd lost the Font forever."

"I'm right here." Giada smiled weakly.

"Yes." Jinnie exhaled anger, a cooler head prevailing. But when she looked back to Elspeth, the same hatred still burned. "Shackle them. We're taking them back to Jetmir."

"Are we going back to the Vantoleone?" Giada stood.

"No, it's compromised. We're going to friends," Jinnie answered ambiguously. "No family wants to see the Adversary take New Capenna for his own. And now that the Font is secure once more, we have a bargaining chip to make sure the others will work with us."

The Font. Bargaining chip. . . She has a name, Elspeth wanted to shout.

"We can all make it out of this alive." Jinnie's gentle tone was in stark contrast to the men roughly shackling Elspeth and Vivien.

Elspeth felt a tingle of magic singe her wrists as they were locked into place. Vivien seemed to be following Elspeth's lead. She paid careful attention to the Cabaretti man who collected her sword, keeping her protests behind firmly closed lips. Going along with this, for now, was the best way to remain close to Giada.

"And then you can bring balance to our plane," Jinnie finished.

Giada nodded, her lips pressed in a hard line. Jinnie grabbed her hand, and Giada's eyes drifted back to Elspeth, who dipped her chin slowly.

I will keep my vow to you, Elspeth vowed silently. She hoped Giada understood. But Giada kept her face blank as Jinnie escorted them out of the warehouse.

FORTUNE TELLER

Elspeth and Vivien shared wary glances as they were escorted through the Mezzio. Elspeth didn't dare say anything with the Cabaretti so close. She'd find a quiet moment to regroup with Vivien whenever they got to this "safe place."

The aroma of sandalwood and orange tickled Elspeth's nose.

"Jinnie," Elspeth called out, stopping in her tracks.

“Keep moving.” One of the Cabaretti shoved her. Elspeth stumbled forward, trying to use it to conceal the wide steps she now used to close the gap between her and Jinnie.

“This is an Obscura hideout,” Elspeth said.

“You don’t think I know that?” Jinnie arched her eyebrows. “Who do you think my friends are?”

Elspeth’s heart began to race. “You were at the Crescendo. The Maestros, Cabaretti, and Riveteers—every family was infiltrated. This could be a trap.”

“Unlike *you*, some are actually loyal.” Jinnie came to a stop before a door and knocked. It was identical to the knock Elspeth used when delivering Xander’s package.

Elspeth stepped back to stand next to Vivien, catching her eyes. “Stay alert,” Elspeth murmured. Vivien nodded. Elspeth didn’t exactly have the most faith in Jinnie’s ability to identify a loyal follower versus someone operating in their own interest. After all, she had thought Elspeth was nothing more than an eager sycophant.

The door opened before Jinnie could say anything more, revealing a cephalid woman in a navy trench coat embellished with gold. Her clothing and cloche hat were of a similar make to the Obscura Elspeth had delivered the package to. The hairs on the back of Elspeth’s neck stood on edge.

“Kamiz,” Jinnie said with relief. “How is Jetmir?”



Art by: Chris Rallis

“Stable, though ailing. I see you secured the Font. Excellent, I knew you would. Come in, before anyone sees you.”

“Thank you for offering us refuge.” Jinnie stepped inside, the rest of them following.

“Who are they?” Kamiz glanced between Elspeth and Vivien.

“Traitors—the ones who took the Font. Jetmir will know how best to deal with them.”

They entered a receiving area with a desk and a few chairs. Behind a curtain was a square table covered with a navy silk cloth. At the table’s center was a large crystal ball and a deck of cards. Kamiz pulled

aside a curtain to reveal a secret door that opened to a much larger back room. Judging from the crates and bookshelves that no doubt contained precious secrets, it was a resting place for Obscura spies.

"I see you were successful." Jetmir was settled in a lower bunk, a Cabaretti healer tending to him. The woman stepped aside as Jinnie rushed over.

"Father, how do you feel?"

"You worry too much." It was a non-answer. Even from across the room, Elspeth could see that Jetmir's eyes were dull. There was the heavy scent of blood in the air, a saturated cloth discarded at his bedside. He'd need a miracle to pull through.

"Giada, come, *come*." Jinnie waved the young woman over, fumbling with a satchel of supplies and producing a small vial. "Please, heal him."

Giada took the vial, and her eyes fluttered closed. There was a small flair of light, and Giada swayed, holding out the Halo to Jinnie. The vial never had a chance to exchange hands.

Both the door they had entered through and the back door were rammed open at the same time, revealing a dozen brawlers in aprons and heavy workers' clothing. Chaos erupted.

"Riveteers?" Jinnie whirled, her expression souring instantly to pure hate. "Riveteer *traitors*."

Vivien seized the moment. She balled both hands into fists and spun toward the man still holding her bow—arms straight like a battering ram—to strike him clean across the face. Her bow dropped to the floor, and she scooped it up. Still cuffed, she was unable to shoot with it, but she could, and did, use it to strike the other Cabaretti in the temple.

Elspeth forced power into her hands. It shimmered the air around her shackles. With a thought, her magic cracked open the locks, and the metal fell to the floor with a clang. Swinging her hand, she cast the spell Vivien's way, her ally's shackles dropping as well.

"Where have you been hiding that trick?" Vivien appraised, collecting Elspeth's sword from the fallen man and tossing it over.

Elspeth caught the blade by the scabbard. "Tried to keep a low profile and save my skills for when I really needed them. Now seems like the time."

"Glad you finally joined the fight properly." Vivien shifted her grip on her bow, reaching for an arrow in her quiver. "Get Giada. I'll clear a path."

"Thank you." Elspeth scrambled forward, drawing her sword as green flashed.

Giada was cornered with Jinnie and Jetmir. Jinnie was putting up a good fight, but she was vastly outnumbered against the Maestro assassins and Riveteer brawlers.

Were these brutes going to kill Giada? Didn't they want the Font for themselves?

Elspeth wasn't going to wait to find out.

She dashed to the right, swinging her sword for the Riveteer hoisting his hammer overhead. Her blade met his shoulder, and he dropped his weapon before he could strike. In her periphery, another lunged for her. She caught his arm and disarmed him. Hooking his dagger with the toe of her shoe, she tossed it up, grabbing the hilt in time to parry another. A third was lunging for her, and Elspeth dodged, sinking her elbow into his gut as she reared back to jab with the blade, sinking it between the ribs of the first attacker.

The fight was claustrophobic. Every movement Elspeth made had to account for the actions of several others. In addition, she had to keep an eye on Giada. Elspeth had made a promise that she would keep Giada safe until her last breath.

But there were too many, and she could hardly tell friend from foe. It was only a matter of time until Elspeth made a mistake. She ducked away from one man's swing, stepping back to get distance enough to swing her heavy blade. She didn't see the mallet until it was too late.

It smashed into her ribs as Elspeth had been straining to hoist her sword, knocking the wind from her. She could feel her chest compress, bones shatter. Elspeth coughed blood. A dagger skewered through her shoulder. Giada's screams were distant.

She knew this cold. The creeping of Erebos's cold, bony finger up her spine. He would wrap it around her neck and hold until the last breath left her.

Giada, I'm sorry. I tried to protect you.

Just as her vision tunneled, the man who had been rearing back to deal the final blow on Elspeth crumpled. Worker's clothing was replaced with deep green, the practical coat Vivien wore. A new figure appeared as the sounds of battle faded.

An arm wrapped around Elspeth's shoulders, hoisting her upright. A familiar pair of dark eyes looked on worriedly.

"Giada?" Elspeth blinked, trying to make sense of what she saw.

"Take this." Giada thrust something to Elspeth's mouth, leaving her no choice but to swallow.

Warmth radiated through her. Her bones shifted, knitting. Wounds mended. Invisible hands put her broken body back together, slowly restoring consciousness and clarity and shaking Erebos's grasp. The world had never looked sharper. The lights were brighter and—

"Giada" Elspeth lightly touched the young woman's cheek. "You're radiant."

Giada's lips parted slightly with surprise. "You see it, too?" she whispered.

"I—" Elspeth didn't have a chance to ask if "it" was the hazy aura surrounding Giada.

"This way!" Kamiz shouted.

Jinnie grabbed Giada, hoisting her by the arm. "Don't help *them*, we have to flee."

"Wait." Elspeth was back on her feet, the Halo surging through her veins making her nimble and strong once more. "We're coming, too."

"You think—" Jinnie's rage was cut short as she had to dodge an attack. She cursed loudly and glared between Elspeth and her fallen Cabaretti soldiers. "Fine. You're too good in a scrap. Keep up, and don't try anything funny."

Led by Kamiz, they escaped into a back alley, Riveteers and Maestros charging after them. Elspeth and Vivien took up the rear, holding off the attackers. Eventually no more followed.

"I think we lost them." Jinnie heaved a sigh of relief.

"Quick, in here." Kamiz opened a door, and they all plunged into near total darkness. "These are Obscura tunnels," she explained as they trudged upward, winding through New Capenna. "We use them to get around without being seen."

"How do you know they're not compromised?" Vivien stole Elspeth's question.

"I don't," Kamiz answered honestly. "That's why we need to keep moving."

“Where are we moving toward?” Jinnie asked.

“Park Heights. The main Obscura stronghold, the Cloud Spire. If it’s not safe there, we won’t be safe anywhere.”



Art by: Sam White

PARK HEIGHTS CATHEDRAL

As they continued to climb, Elspeth grabbed Giada’s hand and gave it a light squeeze. *Thank you for saving me*, Elspeth mouthed, hoping Giada could see in the blue-tinted light that emitted from strips along the tops of the walls. The young woman’s lips curled into a weary smile, and she nodded. As Elspeth’s fingers slipped from hers, Giada’s attention remained on her own hand.

Giada slowly slid a bracelet off her wrist and glanced between Jinnie and Elspeth. After confirming Jinnie’s focus was ahead, she dropped the bracelet and pointed to it, mouthing two words, *Tracking spell*.

Elspeth ground the bracelet under her boot. Giada had been asking the same questions that plagued Elspeth about how Jinnie had found them. A swell of pride rushed through Elspeth. Giada was clever, becoming stronger and more confident by the moment. The move to rid herself of the bracelet was also all the confirmation Elspeth needed to know that Giada still wanted to go with her. At the first opportunity, Elspeth would take her away again.

The passage came to a dead end.

Kamiz slid open a door, and the familiar earthy scents of Park Heights greeted them. Elspeth blinked into the afternoon light, already growing angry with a dusk that promised to be as bloody as New Capenna.

“Not much farther,” Kamiz said, leading through carefully manicured hedges. “Right around here.”

Vivien stopped short. Elspeth heard footsteps and the clanking of weapons, too.

“Wait, it’s a tr—”

Giada and Jinnie had already rounded the corner of the hedges.

“What is the meaning of this?” Jinnie shouted.

Vivien readied her bow, turning to the Obscura enforcers circling them in from behind. Elspeth trusted her to watch her back as she raced ahead.

More Obscura enforcers were waiting in a clearing. Jinnie had already engaged with them as a wounded Kamiz attempted to crawl away from Jinnie’s feet. Jinnie had no doubt turned her rage on Kamiz immediately upon realizing her deception.

This had all been a setup. The Obscura were as compromised as everyone else was. The fight in the hideout had just been an excuse to separate them from the other Cabaretti and lure them into a trap. But she’d bet that Kamiz hadn’t counted on Elspeth and Vivien still being around.

“Let’s go.” Elspeth grabbed Giada.

“But Jinnie—”

“She made her choice.” Elspeth practically scooped Giada up. “We have to leave or we’re going to die.”

Giada complied.



Art by: Ekaterina Burmak

Vivien at their back, they raced through the park, branches reaching out, clawing at their faces and arms as they bolted in search of a reprieve. *Let there be one safe place in this city, one sanctuary*, Elspeth silently beseeched the cruel and uncaring gods. They emerged back onto a path that connected to a nearby cathedral suspended below angel statues.

“In there.” Elspeth decided, dashing into the antechamber. Her steps slowed as they echoed into the nave.

The cathedral was a masterpiece. Countless angel statues lined the aisles leading up to the transept. Each had their hands upward, reaching toward the skylights above that highlighted them with a column of sunlight cutting through the relative shadow of the cathedral itself.

Elspeth blinked, several times. It wasn't a trick of the light. These statues gave off their own glow. Much like Giada. Like—

She stared at her palms. How had she not seen it before now? Dimmer than the rest but Elspeth was also emitting the faintest golden haze.

"Do you hear it?" Giada whispered.

"I do."

The chorus resonated from deep within every statue. It reverberated around the choir and ambulatory to fill the whole cathedral with a solemn requiem. There were no words, just sound, wrought from turmoil and a pain so deep that it made Elspeth's eyes prickle. A high soprano soared over the rest, singing notes in a language of reckless hope that they all so desperately needed.

It was warmth and goodness. It was fulfilling yet longing. It was

"What is it?" Elspeth whispered.

"My family. I'm home," Giada said reverently, as if struck with unexpected clarity.



Art by: Eric Deschamps

Suddenly, the word "home" held meaning. Elspeth shared a long stare with Giada who wore an enigmatic smile. She radiated like the angels of the cathedral. Her very form seemed to belong here, as though it were a piece finally returning to its spot.

"Home," Elspeth echoed. Home was purpose. It was defending those who needed her. Ajani had been right; home had never been about place. And for the first time, Elspeth felt like she had found somewhere she belonged—she had found purpose, someone and something to believe in and defend.

A low rumbling filled the cathedral and interrupted the song, followed by thunderous steps. Elspeth turned to see a hulking, horned man. Two wings of membrane, the color of old blood, stretched behind him.

The Adversary.

“Get behind me, Giada.” Elspeth drew her sword.

“Did you really think you could escape *me*?”

“Good of you to show yourself, Ob Nixilis.” Vivien didn’t wait for a response. She fired the first arrow.

Ob Nixilis smashed his fist straight through the face of the ghostly wolf. It dissipated with a yelp. Vivien had two fresh arrows knocked when more enforcers lined the cathedral behind him.

“Take care of him, I’ll deal with the rest. And be careful, he’s *like us*!” Vivien shouted. A *planeswalker*, she meant. Elspeth gripped her sword tighter.

“Run,” Ob Nixilis growled as Vivien passed. His voice was sandpaper and fire. “Play with my agents until I’m ready to torment you.” He kept his focus solely on Elspeth and Giada, wearing a cruel smile. Self-satisfied. As though everything was kindling for him to burn. “You thought you could best me? I’ll show you what happens to people who dare contradict me—who even think of getting in the way of my power. Once the Font is in my possession, I’ll end you both, one at a time, *slowly*.”



Art by: Slawomir Maniak

Elspeth could feel the immense power radiating from him. “Giada, if this goes sideways, run. Do it before I fall,” Elspeth whispered. “I’ll hold him off as long as I can, but you must get away while I can distract him.”

Ob Nixilis moved with the speed of a much lither man. Elspeth had incorrectly assumed that all his bulging muscle would slow him down. But using his wings for balance, he could propel himself forward at alarming speeds.

“I’m going to enjoy destroying you!”

Elspeth focused on defensive attacks. She had to wear him down. He had her beat on strength and speed, and her only shot was using those against him.

Whenever she saw an opening, she jabbed or slashed. But she landed nothing more than glancing blows. Enough to encumber and frustrate. But not enough to slow or stop. The sword was too large for her and unruly to wield. She had to wait for the right opening to present itself.

Reaching his tolerance for her diversions, Ob Nixilis unleashed a burst of power. It shot out from him, sending Elspeth flying back. Her head cracked against the stone, and everything spun. Nausea shot up from her stomach.

“Giada,” Elspeth wheezed. She tipped her head back, but it only made more stars pop into her vision. “Run.”

“No, there is nowhere for me to run.” Giada hovered; her form was growing hazy, glowing even brighter than before.

Ob Nixilis’s rumbling footsteps drew closer. His rough laughter rattled Elspeth’s bones. “First, you. Then the Font. Then the other planeswalker and then nothing will stop me.”

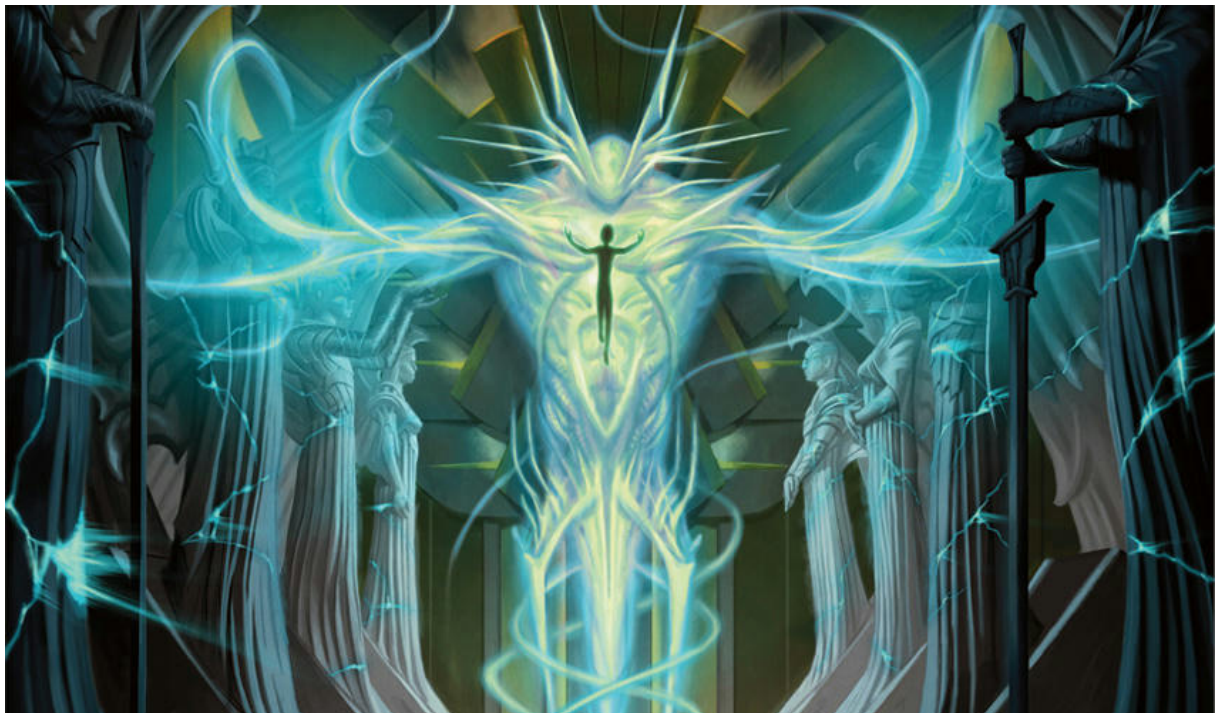
“Run,” Elspeth pleaded, eyes burning. She had sworn she would protect Giada. She had found duty and purpose only to be met with more failure.

“Don’t fear for me any longer, Elspeth. There is more for me out there—I am going to be with my family now.” Giada rounded to Elspeth’s side, kneeling. She was more of an outline of shimmering magic now than a physical being.

Family it was something Elspeth once knew through Ajani, Daxos. Giada’s words ignited something deep within her. A flickering candle of hope, no brighter than the faint glow she’d seen covering her earlier. Ob Nixilis’s footsteps stopped. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Giada’s focus remained solely on Elspeth. “Thank you, for everything. I found my answers. Let me protect you now.” She tipped her chin up and looked just like the rest of the sculpted angels. “I’m ready,” she whispered to unseen ears.

Light filled the room. It shot out in every direction from Giada’s body, the force of the blast strong enough to throw Ob Nixilis away. Elspeth, however, was unaffected. She looked on in awe as Giada was transformed into the radiant magic of Halo.



Art by: Eric Deschamps

Elspeth breathed it in, allowing it to coat her flesh like armor and sink into her bones. The singing returned, a full chorus in which every part was in perfect harmony. It reached a true crescendo of joy, as if to overwrite the screams of the Cabaretti celebration that had dared to take the same name.

Slowly, as the swirling lights began to fade, Elspeth sat up. Ob Nixilis groaned, still prone. Vivien and the men outside were also on their backs. Elspeth wondered if Giada's transformation had stunned all of New Capenna.

Elspeth, Giada's voice whispered from a great distance, barely audible over the fading chorus. She was fading, but she wasn't alone. Giada was framed by the shining outlines of others like her. *End this, protect New Capenna. You have the weapon you need. It's been at your side all along, following you, waiting until you were ready.*

I'm not strong enough.

You are, Giada insisted. *Your failures do not define you. Don't give up now, not when you're so close to everything you've ever wanted. Fight!*

Elspeth heard Ajani in Giada's words. Her friend still spoke to her, across time and place. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she sighed softly.

Home was duty.

Family was those she chose to defend.

She'd always had everything she ever needed.

Elspeth opened her eyes and stood. In one fluid motion, she hoisted the sword at her side. The weapon was no longer a clunky broadsword. It had been transformed into a narrower weapon, one far more suited in length and weight for her frame. The pommel wasn't a practical steel guard but an orb of Halo, shining with colors that shifted so often, it was every color at once.

The Halo seeped into the blade, running up tracks in the fuller. From middle to edges, the weapon glowed with the same faint light as Giada. Elspeth brought the hilt to her nose, blade upright, knowing that somehow, somewhere, Giada watched the salute and could finish her metamorphosis now that Elspeth would carry on her vow.

Elspeth would defend New Capenna.



Art by: Volkan Baga

She lunged forward, wielding her new sword with both hands. Ob Nixilis barely had time to roll away from her thrust. As he dodged, he raised up a hand, pointing at her. She could feel the magic collecting in the air and narrowly avoided his shot.

Fueled by Halo and purpose, wielding the blade gifted by Giada, Elspeth could go toe to toe with the mighty Adversary. Her blows were no longer clumsy and glancing but purposeful and skilled.

She felt like her old self. *No*. These weren't the movements of the woman she once was. These were the movements of someone stronger, better. Who she had been meant little when compared to who she would become.

Ob Nixilis grew increasingly frustrated every time she landed a strike on him. He roared, dodged back, and tried to raise his hand for one more attack. Elspeth didn't allow it. She closed the gap, jabbing straight for his chin.

At the last second, he attempted to get out of the way, but he wasn't fast enough. Steel met flesh, and she grazed off the side of his neck. Ob Nixilis gasped, though it only made the wound worse. Blood flowed from between his fingers as he applied futile compression. Elspeth withdrew, determined to slash again. She'd cut through his fingers if that's what it took to finish the job.

But Ob Nixilis staggered backward. The air wavered, distorting everything around him. It folded in on itself, collapsing Ob Nixilis's form beyond the realm of perception. In a blink, he was gone, having planeswalked away.

Elspeth stared at the now empty spot where Ob Nixilis once stood. Several curses were about to escape her lips when a groan jolted her back to reality. *Vivien!* Elspeth raced over to the entry, helping her friend up. Vivien massaged her head.

"What happened?"

"Giada saved us all. But Ob Nixilis got away. This is far from over."

EPILOGUE – MUSEUM

Elspeth and Vivien walked up the steps of the museum. Unsurprisingly, the ash had already been cleaned. But there were still pockmarks in the marble of the main hall. Maestros were hard at work putting their museum back together.

“I’ve been expecting you.” Anhelos crossed over from where he had been ordering around a few younger members of the now much smaller family.

“Expecting me?” Elspeth asked, hand resting lightly on the pommel of the Halo sword looped through her belt. She didn’t come here for a fight. But she wasn’t about to take no for an answer when it came to finally getting access to Xander’s archives.

“Yes. I found this stitched in my coat on the night of the Crescendo. As soon as I read it, I came straight back, but I was already too late though it spared me from the bloodbath in the Vantoleone.” Anhelos fished out a letter from his pocket. It bore Xander’s seal. Elspeth unfolded it, reading its contents:

Anhelos,

I thank you for your years of obedient service. You are as good a man as you are an assassin. But, my friend, I fear this will be where we part.

The Maestros are now in your hands, and I trust that after the long night ahead, you will help them usher in a new era. Everything that I have collected over the years should serve you well. Make our family your own as you see fit. It is well past time for the guiding vision of a younger leader.

Finally, should she survive the night ahead, which I have little doubt she will, Elspeth will come seeking my Archives. Give her access and try not to ask too many questions.

For one last time,

Yours,

Xander

“He knew I would come.” Elspeth scanned the letter twice more before handing it back to Anhelos.

“Xander always knew what would happen in New Capenna, often before any of the rest of us.” Anhelos folded his hands at the small of his back. “This way.”

She followed Anhelos through the museum and up to Xander’s office. He pulled back a curtain in the far corner of the room to expose a door. Unlocking it, he motioned for Vivien and Elspeth to enter.

“Anything in Xander’s archives is yours. Come whenever you please.” Anhelos left them.

They spent the day searching and scouring. No page was left unturned. Anhelos was kind enough to bring them lunch and dinner, as twilight descended on the city.

Histories of Capenna hidden in Xander’s office spelled out the story: In the distant past, the Phyrexians made an attempt on this plane. The angels tried to stop the invasion, but the threat was too great for them to face alone. In desperation, they formed an alliance with the Demon Lords. In the face of the Phyrexians, Capenna’s own rivalries were petty; however, those rivalries would not be forgotten. The demons ultimately betrayed the angels, trapping them in a kind of stasis from which they could convert the angels’ bodies into Halo, an essence that—as Xander had told her—could be taken to help protect the city. It was messy, but it worked. The Demon Lords used Halo to defeat the Phyrexians and then disappeared themselves.

Halo had been the key. If it held the Phyrexians at bay here this could be the answer Ajani sought, even if the supply of Halo was dwindling. Luckily, among the archives was a small cache of Halo that

Xander was no doubt saving for a rainy day. This seemed as rainy as things could be. Elspeth would take it and all the information back to Ajani and the Gatewatch.

Elspeth and Vivien stood side by side, staring out the massive window in the same spot Xander had. They hadn't said a word for hours. The silence was filled with revelations and knowledge.

"New Capenna will continue to fight over Halo," Elspeth said finally. "The supply is almost used up, and if it runs dry, they'll tear themselves apart." Her mind briefly wandered to Giada and the shining figures the young woman had departed with. Would the angels return to New Capenna to usher in a new age if the city were in dire need? Or had they all gone on to something greater?

"There's more to this plane than one city. If New Capenna's fate is to destroy itself, then nature will reclaim it. Life will persist on this plane." Vivien's words weren't cold, but thoughtful. Perhaps even intended to be reassuring that *something* would thrive long after the fall of the city.

"Even still, I can't turn my back on them."

"You will never be able to make them safe if you stay. The Phyrexians are now a threat to everyone."

"I know," Elspeth said.

"But now we can fight them," Vivien said, with a nod to Elspeth's sword and then to the cache of Xander's hidden Halo. "And if Urabrask is to be believed "

"What did he tell you?"

Vivien folded her arms. "Revolution." She furrowed her brow in intense thought. "On New Phyrexia. It might give us the window we need to stop them."

To stop her. The porcelain rictus of the Grand Cenobite—her former prison and the Phyrexian capital—loomed large in Elspeth's memory. Walking away from New Capenna meant heading once more into that metallic hell. *Koth, Melira, Karn* going back meant facing her nightmares. It meant another battle, another war.

Was she strong enough? Did she have a choice? Did anyone? All she wanted to do was rest, but how could she step away from battle now? She had to get back to Dominaria and tell Ajani all she'd learned, show him the Halo, and ready herself.

There was too much to be done. Elspeth nodded, determination fueling her as hot as the Halo swirling in the sword at her hip. If she had purpose and people to defend, she would find her home along the way. That was the best path forward for her.

"We should go," Elspeth declared.

"Where to?"

Elspeth was pleased it seemed like Vivien was ready to continue this journey with her. If war was coming, she could use more powerful allies.

"Dominaria." Elspeth turned away from the city skyline of New Capenna. "Time to meet some old friends."

