

Episode 3: Tests

Elise Kova

From set *Streets of New Capenna*

MUSEUM

Initially, the museum had been everything she'd hoped for. It was perched atop of one of the towering buildings of New Capenna in Park Heights. Anhelio had shown her to her "room." A barracks, more like, for new recruits. But she hardly minded.

Elspeth kept mostly to herself. She had no interest in cozying up to the Maestros. Anhelio might have said she was now "part of the family," but Elspeth would never feel such. Their fights were petty to her and methods dubious. These were not the sort Elspeth wanted to associate herself with.

But everything could be tolerated until she found a way to stop Phyrexia.

The sculpture of the Phyrexian remained in the forefront of her mind as she went about her menial tasks in the museum. She saw their monstrous shapes everywhere. Sometimes, Elspeth couldn't be certain she wasn't just inventing their shadowed outlines looming in the backgrounds of cracking portraits of warrior angels. But just when her doubt became strong, she would happen across a painting like the one she held now of a winged figure, praying as clawed hands stretched out of the umbra.

Elspeth turned over the artwork and made some notes in the ledger at her side with a sigh. Another day of cataloguing questionably procured art. Another day of feeling like she was no closer to the answers she needed. Elspeth ran her thumbs over the grooves in the ornate frame. There were secrets here, trapped in these relics of New Capenna's bygone days. But the Capennans who came before hid their tracks well, and she didn't have access to enough information yet to begin piecing together this centuries-old mystery.

But she was fairly certain she knew someone who did: the curator. The leader of the Maestros wasn't collecting all these relics by chance. He knew something, and that theory was what Elspeth continued to stake her time with the Maestros on.

Speak of the demon. . .

The door to the cataloging room opened. In walked a horned vampire—Xander, leader of the Maestros. A man and a woman flanked him, intently listening to his hushed words.

She had met the curator and boss of the Maestros briefly when she'd first arrived. After introduction via Anhelio, she had only ever seen him from afar. Even though their interactions had been limited, Elspeth was certain he knew something about the truths of New Capenna and the Phyrexians. Why else would he hoard such knowledge and relics?

Xander's attention swung in her direction, no doubt prompted by her intent stare. Elspeth didn't look away. She had been keeping her head down for weeks now, working hard and doing as she was told. But she wasn't going to allow herself to be forgotten in some back room, relegated to museum book-keeper forever.

"Go," Xander said to the man and woman at his side, loud enough now for Elspeth to hear. "You have your orders." He then motioned to her.

Elspeth wove through the dusty crates, burlap-wrapped sculptures, and muslin-covered portraits to stand before him. She gave a small bow of her head. Enough to be polite and give him his due. But not enough to be subservient. The Maestros valued loyal soldiers, not bootlickers.

“Walk with me.” Xander tapped his cane on the ground for emphasis, the furred cuffs of his belled sleeves nearly covering his hands completely. He led her out of the room and into the museum proper. “How have you found the family?”

“Well enough.”

“I hear no complaints about you. Your work is dutiful, skilled, and meeting expectations. Yet, no mention of you seeking to do more, either.”

“I am here to learn, not bloody my hands,” she answered honestly.

“But the price of knowledge is oftentimes found in the veins of others.” Xander’s eyes shone like the gold that capped one of the horns that framed his brow like an ivory crown. The other vampires of the Maestros lacked the feature, so it was not some quirk of the local variety on New Capenna.



Art by: Dominik Mayer

“You’re saying I must kill to get the information I seek?”

“Not yet.” He hummed to himself. “Sending someone to take a life who’s not inclined usually ends disastrously. But I’m not a charity. If you want more than you have now, you must work for it.”

His cane tapped against the marble, echoing through the main hall of the museum. Pillars rose into the shape of angels that held up the glass ceiling on their backs. Elspeth imagined the very foundations of the city appeared as such: Forgotten founders straining to hold up a temple to excess.

“What do I need to do?”

“A few jobs.” Xander came to a stop. “But know that choosing this will start you on the path toward becoming a true member of the family. You’ll be in the Maestros for life. So, think carefully if that is truly what you want. For, if it is not “ he pointed to the main entrance of the museum. “You are welcome to leave now. No ill will from us will haunt you.”

Elspeth glanced between him and the heavy doors of the museum. She hadn't come this far to back away now. Plus, if death couldn't hold her, Xander certainly couldn't either. No matter what he said, she wasn't about to be trapped anywhere.

She met his eyes. "I'm ready."

STREETS OF THE MEZZIO

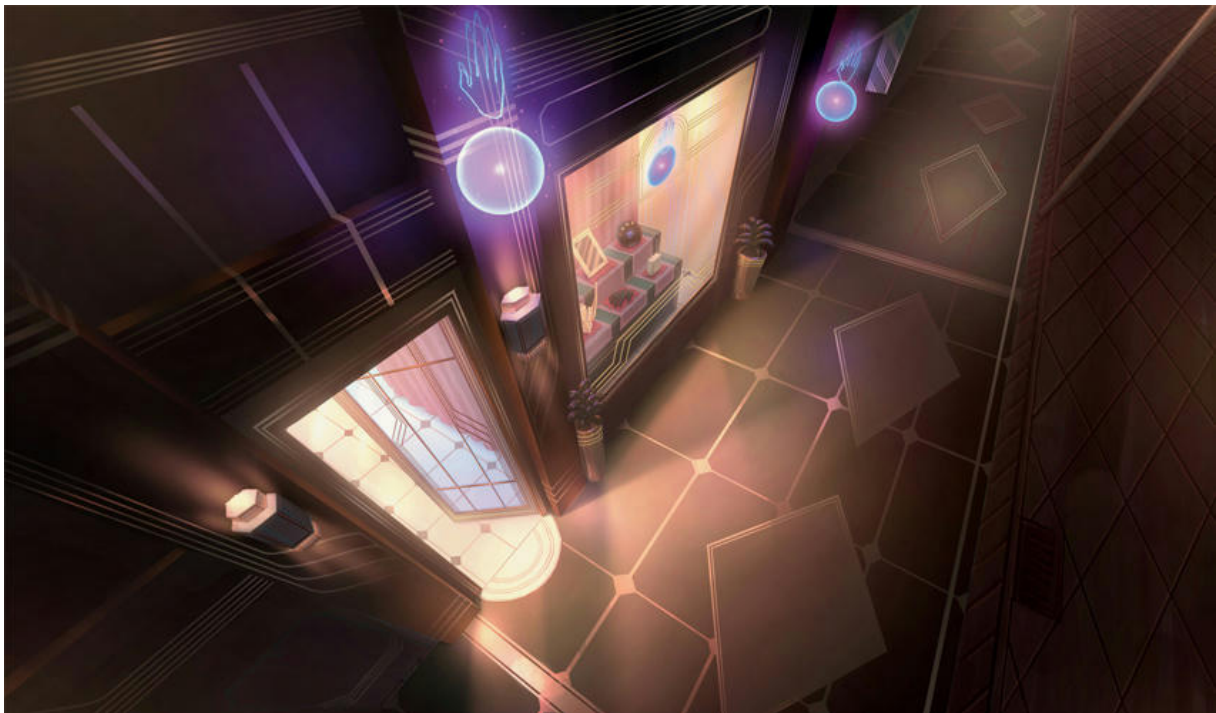
The small package Elspeth carried in a satchel at her side rattled softly. She was grateful Xander had given clear instructions not to open it. She really didn't want to know what was inside. All she had to do was get it from the Museum to a specific door in the Mezzio.

Simple enough.

Elspeth rode one of the city elevators down from the platform in front of the Museum to another hub. From there, she continued her descent. The entire time, she gripped the satchel carrying the parcel tightly. But no one paid her any mind.

She had been expecting there to be some resistance. But she moved effortlessly through the city. *Off a main road, down a side street, a hard left at the fork, across an alley, between two buildings.* . . Elspeth repeated Xander's instructions, following them to the letter.

It led her to an unassuming door, painted a deep navy, so dark it was nearly black in the dingy light of the alley. In place of a knocker or knob was a small sigil that looked like a palm, faintly outlined in charcoal that was only a shade darker than the door itself. The symbol was so subtle, it'd likely be missed every time if one didn't know what they were looking for.



Art by: Muhammad Firdaus

Elspeth knocked three times, and the door swung open to reveal a young woman. She wore a sloping metal cap, its drooping brim covering the tip of her nose. Elspeth could only vaguely make out her eyes through the slit in its front. The smell of sandalwood and orange drifted on whiffs of pale smoke that curled around her shoulders.

Obscura, Elspeth realized. Their laundry bags had always faintly reminded her of the incense they'd burned at the temple of Heliod. The scent carried with it an ache of nostalgia, and Elspeth worked to banish Daxos from her mind as he crept to the fore.

Wordlessly, the woman held out her hand. Elspeth placed the package in her palm and promptly left.

XANDER'S OFFICE

"I hear the package was delivered as promised. No trouble along the way?" Xander asked the moment she entered his office.

The whole museum was luxurious, but it paled in comparison to Xander's private quarters. Chandeliers glittered overhead. The crown molding was ornately carved with portraits of weeping angels and laughing demons. Everything that glittered was gold.

"No trouble at all." Elspeth refrained from asking how he already knew it'd been delivered. She'd come straight back. Then again, he had his ways. And that information wasn't what she'd entered this arrangement for. "Now, about the history of New Capenna?"

"I suppose one should start at the beginning when discussing these things." Xander rose slowly, favoring his left knee slightly. But he didn't take his cane. She'd only seen him use the aid outside of his personal quarters. "Our dear city was founded by an unlikely deal, brokered between archangels and demonlords."

"Working together?" Elspeth followed him over to a portrait hung underneath a spotlight. Sure enough, it depicted a winged angel and horned demon shaking hands.

"The enemy of an enemy is a friend, and that was no truer than during the construction of New Capenna."

"Who was their enemy?" Elspeth had a guess.

"A mystery I still hunt for the answers to." He rubbed his temples as though he was trying to remember something long forgotten, frustration tugging his lips into a line. "But it was a grave enough threat that the angels became consumed with the defense of the plane. Though the details of that time often differ, depending on who you ask." Xander's eyes shone. "The most common tale is that it became clear the demons needed to join the fray as well. When they did, the demons appointed five families to take over the city in their name, drafting a pact with the head of each family."

Her eyes darted up to his horns. Xander didn't miss the look and chuckled darkly.

"Yes, I am, indeed, one of those original signers and have willingly become part demon, in addition to my other sanguine gifts."

"So you were there before the founding?" She asked. "But you don't know who they were fighting?"

"It was so long ago that I signed the contract, time and the magic of the pact have distorted my memories. I was also not present for the great battles that took place " Xander trailed off, lost in thought a long minute. "It is part of why I hunt for the information now—to fill in the yawning gaps of my memories that threaten to swallow me whole."

Elspeth took pity on the vampire and didn't press the matter further. Instead, she took a different approach, remembering Anhele's bitter sentiments about the angels leaving. "After the angels and demons disappeared, did the threat vanish as well? Did they win?"

"We're still here, aren't we?"

That much was obviously true. But Elspeth had been hoping for something more concrete to take back to Ajani. Xander spoke before she could formulate another question.

"I think that is enough history for one day." Xander crossed back to his desk, still rubbing his head with one hand. "Await my next orders, and we shall speak again."

MEZZIO WAREHOUSE

Elspeth shifted, wiggling her toes to try to restore feeling. They had fallen asleep in the first thirty minutes, and she couldn't seem to bring back sensation without standing up. But doing so would give away her position unless she retreated away from the ledge. And that would prevent her from seeing the movements in the street below, so it wasn't an option.

The informant will come out of the cabaret at approximately two hours past nightfall and then will head to her next location. You'll know her when you see her—she's one of ours. You are to watch her without being seen, making sure she's not bothered, Xander had instructed.

It was now a few minutes after the scheduled time, and there was still no sign of any Cabaretti vampires —

The green lacquered door to the cabaret opened, and out walked a young woman, skirt swaying around her knees. She laughed, waving to the people still inside. But the moment the door closed, her smile fell and her expression intensified. She strode down the street with purpose.

This was the informant Elspeth had been waiting for.

Elspeth clung to the shadows as she trailed the woman; leaping with light feet along the ornate decoration of the buildings, she kept in mind the lights overhead and how they might reveal her shadow. The informant came to a sudden stop, leaving Elspeth clinging to the back of a statue.

The vampire made a hard turn. Elspeth pursed her lips. *Trouble?* Perhaps the woman had seen something—or someone—she needed to avoid.

Elspeth followed her to a small tunnel that punched through the buildings and connected to a large warehouse. "Where are you going?" Elspeth muttered under her breath, jumping from the statue to an archway that connected the two buildings. She quickly scurried across, crouching low and staying close to the roof. Anyone in the buildings that circled this warehouse would be able to see her, and she had no doubt that she looked *very* suspicious. She needed to get to the street quickly to avoid attention.

Scurrying to a skylight, Elspeth peered down, catching a glimpse of her informant passing through an empty warehouse. No issues yet. It looked like the woman was headed for a door opposite where she entered. Elspeth sprinted to the far edge of the roof; a strip of alley wound between two buildings with mostly smooth facades—nowhere for her to trail from above.

However, off to the side was another alleyway

It might work.

Elspeth dashed to the right side of the warehouse, stepping carefully as not to alert the woman below to her presence. Sure enough, there was another narrow street that ran parallel to the one the informant was headed toward. If what she saw was correct, then she could make it through a small gap in the buildings to catch up to the informant by looping back ahead.

She wedged herself through gaps in the stonework. With a foot and hand on each wall to support herself, Elspeth moved carefully and quickly down to the ground, shimmying one side at a time. She was so focused on not falling that she didn't hear the squeaking and scurrying until a violent shadow lunged at her from the darkness of a nearby alcove.

“What do we have here?” the beast snarled, its furred maw close to her nose. “Fresh meat?”

“Get off me, rat!” Elspeth grunted and heaved the creature away. In truth, it looked more like a raccoon than a rat. But Elspeth wasn’t about to correct herself as it snarled.

“We ain’t no rats, let’s show her, boys!” The raccoonfolk drew a dagger from his side. The alley was frustratingly narrow, making combat difficult. A feat that became even harder when three others like her first attacker launched themselves at her.



Art by: Aaron Miller

Elspeth dodged the blade and caught the creature by the scruff. “I don’t have time for you!” she spun and used him like a battering ram to bowl over the others. To her surprise, it worked. While they were stunned, she took her opportunity to disengage, running down the alley and hoisting herself over a low wall and into the gap in the buildings she’d seen earlier.

She listened while watching and waiting for the informant. The raccoonfolk were beginning to rouse, but it sounded like they hadn’t seen where she’d gone. Heaving a sigh of relief, Elspeth continued creeping away, freezing when the informant passed, and then continuing on.

There were no further incidents. Elspeth remained out of sight all the way to the shadowed alcove where the informant came to a stop. The vampire knocked on the door and waited. There was a flash of magic, and the door swung open, revealing an eerie purple light.

Elspeth couldn’t make out the words that were exchanged, but they didn’t seem hostile, and the woman was invited in.

XANDER’S OFFICE

“I need a weapon.” Elspeth didn’t mince words when she entered Xander’s office.

“Why, pray tell?” Xander was seated behind his desk, per usual, poring over dusty tomes that Elspeth hadn’t seen before. She’d spent enough time cataloging everything that came in and out of the Mae-stros’ museum that she could identify by sight something different. *Special*. It was further confirmation

that his rumored archives were somewhere close to his office. Likely connected. That was the real treasure she sought.

"You don't already know?" She arched her brows.

"Contrary to popular belief, I don't know everything that happens in this city." Xander had yet to even look at her.

"Could've fooled me."

"Good. That means I'm doing my job right." He closed the book, finally looking her in the eyes. "The informant?"

"Made it to her destination without issue. Though the same can't be said for me."

"Oh?"

"I was attacked by raccoonfolk."

"Nothing you couldn't handle, I presume?" He arched his brows.

"I'm fine." Elspeth helped herself to one of the two chairs opposite his desk. Xander seemed more amused than perturbed by her boldness. "But I might not be so lucky the next time something lunges at me from the shadows. I need something better than my fists to protect myself."

He steepled his fingers and regarded her thoughtfully. "You will get a weapon when you have earned one and are an officer among us. Until then, you'll need to make do." A sly smile arched across his mouth. "Perhaps, you might find some more rebar and use that?"

Elspeth wasn't sure if she found his remark amusing or insulting. She chose to ignore it and instead moved on, saying, "I held up my end of the bargain, now for yours."

He chuckled, sliding a pendant along the chain at his neck. "Must this always be business? Here I was, about to offer you a nightcap."

Xander lifted a small bottle and two tiny flutes from one of the drawers at his desk. Within the bottle was a faintly glowing substance. At the top, it shimmered like sunlight. Golden. Brilliant. Then it swirled down through deep orange and into a purple as dark as midnight. The solution looked as if the cosmos had been distilled and pushed through a sieve, leaving only the base elements of existence behind in solution that was neither liquid, solid, nor gas—more like pure magic condensed.



Art by: Aleks Briclot

“Is that “ Her voice had fallen to a whisper, as though she sat before the nectar of the gods.

“Halo,” Xander affirmed. He removed the crystal stopper, and the bottle released a sparkling sigh that made rings in the air above it before fading. “It seems a shame for you to have been in the city so long without having a taste.”

He filled the two glasses to the brim. Even topped off, it was barely more than a sip. Elspeth raised the glass to her lips, studying the strange concoction. A moment of hesitation. Then she imbibed.

She hadn’t expected it to be warm. It tasted of content, long, and lazy afternoons with Daxos. It tasted of sentimentality and homes that existed only in her memories and imagination. Consuming it wasn’t so much drinking as it was *absorbing*. The Halo filled her with strength, with purpose. Her muscles were no longer exhausted, and her senses were sharper. But most impressive was the surge of magic coursing through her, demanding release.

“I can see its appeal,” she admitted, setting the glass back down.

“It’s enough for men to fight over. And fight we have.” It was a bitter fact and brought the ghost of a scowl to Xander’s face. “Halo was the last gift of the angels.”

“Why bestow such a gift?” A possible connection was begging to form in the back of her mind. But she needed more information to confirm.

“Who’s to know? Perhaps so New Capenna would forever be one grand party.” Xander chuckled and shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe that explanation himself.

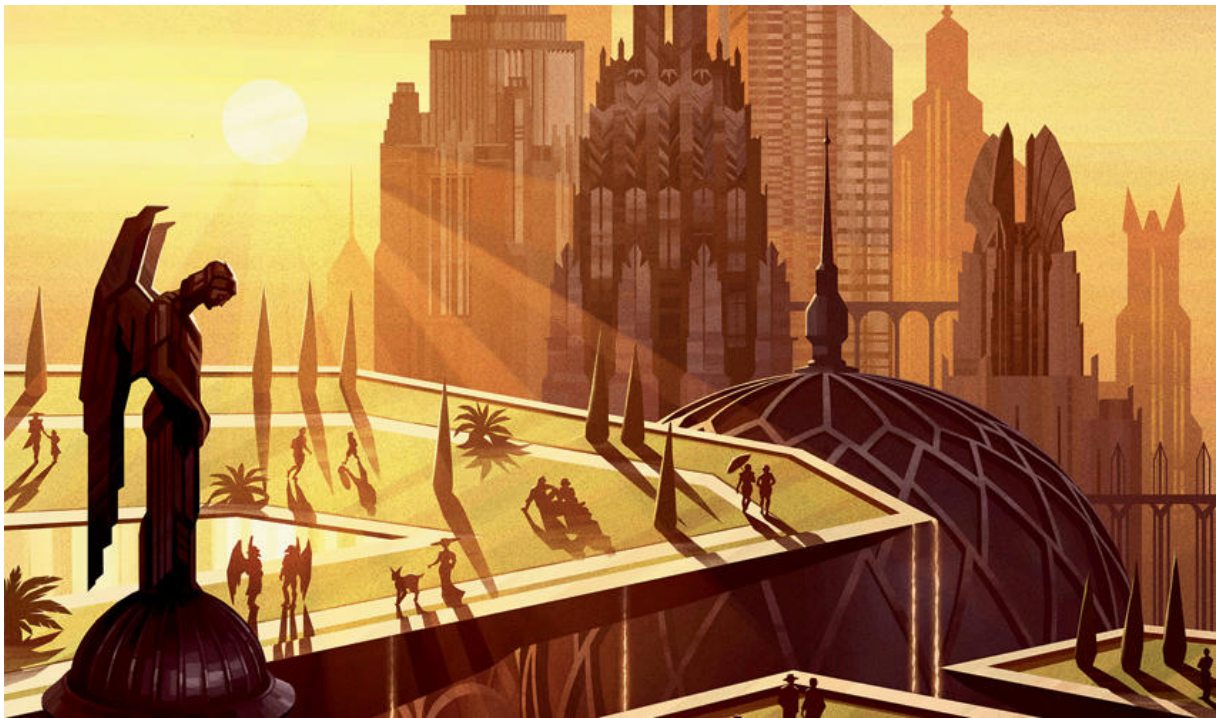
Elspeth didn’t buy it in the slightest. Something so powerful and rare as Halo wasn’t a cheap amusement. It had to have a purpose. And she was beginning to suspect that purpose might have just been to help defeat the Phyrexians.

CENTRAL PARK HEIGHTS

Tonight’s job was easy enough. The vial of Halo was warm in her breast pocket. Elspeth couldn’t tell if it was warm or if merely holding it brought back the sensations of imbibing it. She just had to carry it

to one of the wooded meeting areas of Park Heights, drop it off, and leave. No questions. No lingering. In and out.

Compared to the other tasks Xander had given her, this was—quite literally—a walk in the park.



Art by: Olga Tereshenko

Still, she kept an eye out for any would-be threats. There were a few late-night wanderers, but none that seemed particularly alarming. Elspeth gave others leeway, choosing darker, more secluded paths that rounded back to the drop point.

Sure enough, there was a brown paper bag left at the foot of a park bench like someone's forgotten lunch. She gave a quick scan of the nearby shrubs and trees and then went right for it.

A hand closed around her wrist as Elspeth reached for the bag.

Her eyes darted up the offending arm and met the emerald gaze of a human woman. Half of her hair was black, the other half white and tightly braided against the side of her head. She was as finely dressed as Xander, though perhaps a bit more utilitarian in her fashion. Elspeth didn't miss the arrow-head motifs in her clothing, likely due to the quiver at her back, and what looked to be a cased bow at her side.

"I was wondering who would come to collect." Her voice was a cool alto.

"I forgot this earlier," Elspeth said. This woman didn't seem like the one who was supposed to collect the Halo Elspeth was delivering. Something about her seemed *different* than the others of New Capenna. She hummed with a natural vibrancy unlike most.

Ah, she was like Elspeth, a planeswalker.

"Don't lie," the woman said with a smile. "You don't seem cut out for it." Her eyes flicked over Elspeth, no doubt appraising the Maestro colors. "You also don't seem cut out to work for one of these families, either." The words were curious rather than judgmental.

Elspeth chuckled softly. "I have my reasons."

"I'm sure you do."

"I'm trying to learn more about the history of this plane," Elspeth admitted, deciding she had more to gain than lose by disclosing that information. Perhaps a fellow planeswalker could help her cause. Or perhaps this woman already knew something about New Capenna's history.

"Why?"

"It might be my home," she said softly. *Might be*. But likely wasn't. The place she'd built up as home in her mind since her time in the dungeons as a girl likely didn't exist. She would be forever adrift. "But more importantly, I think a threat is looming and I'm trying to get information on it."

"One most certainly is, and we share motivations. I'm Vivien, by the way."

"Elspeth." She saw no reason for deceit. Elspeth always considered herself a decent judge of character, and Vivien seemed trustworthy.

"Who are you gathering information for?" Vivien asked. Elspeth debated her response for long enough that Vivien said, "Let me guess, the Gatewatch?" Vivien already had Elspeth's interest, but now she had her undivided attention.

"Are you here on their behalf as well?"

"Originally, no. But you know how these things happen. We might be able to—" Vivien jerked her head to the right. Her eyes narrowed slightly. "The goons following you are catching up."

No wonder Xander always seemed to know where she was and how things were going. He *would* send people to tail her.

"I should go before they ask questions about me." Vivien released her. "But I might have some pertinent information for you on this threat."

"You do?" Elspeth took a step forward, voice falling to a whisper. She didn't dare say too much outright.

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

"I can't," Elspeth said hastily. "I have a chance to learn how the New Capennans beat—" she didn't dare say "Phyreans" outright "*—the threat* before. I can't leave until I have that information."

"Very well." Vivien didn't press the matter, for which Elspeth was grateful. She needed a bit more time, not just for the mission Ajani gave her, but also for herself. "I'll look further into these matters also and contact you when I have more information."

"Why are you helping me?" Elspeth had been in New Capenna for too long. The idea of a stranger doing something for her out of sheer altruism had become foreign.

"Before you become too entrenched in this plane's affairs, you should have all the details of them," she said with a grave note. "Until we meet again."

"When?" Elspeth asked after the woman, not daring to raise her voice.

"When I have something worthwhile." Vivien gave a small nod of her head. "It's been a pleasure to meet you."

The foliage seemed to move around Vivien, *for her*, creating a clear path through the brush where there hadn't been one. Magic? Or a trick of how she moved—confident and without hesitation.

She could hear the movements of Xander's men on the path now, too. Elspeth crouched and placed the vial of Halo in the bag. Keeping her head down, she made her way back to the museum.

XANDER'S OFFICE

"I'm sorry I'm late," Elspeth didn't bother pretending to ignore it. Especially not since he sent men to trail her.

"It's no trouble." He stood before the tall window behind his desk. Elspeth had begun to imagine him as a large bird of prey. As stoic as a statue, but capable of raining death from above should easy pickings cross his path.

"Thank you for waiting up." She came to a stop at his side.

"I have important matters to discuss with you." He glanced her way, a smile gracing his lips. "And, as I've already said, it's no trouble."

She laughed softly with a shake of her head. She might never fully understand this place or its people. And she certainly doubted if she would ever see eye to eye with Xander on most things. But he had never been unkind, and at best, she found herself forging an unlikely kinship with the old philosopher-assassin. No, kinship might be too generous an understanding, perhaps?

"What are these important matters?" Elspeth asked, grateful that he didn't seem interested in prying into the source of her tardiness.

"What do you know of the Adversary?"

"The name has been mentioned." She'd heard the shadowy individual whispered in the barracks a few times. Always hushed. As if by simply saying his name too loud would invoke him.

"He's a threat to the very fabric of this city." Xander motioned to the window, across the jagged panorama of the skyline, turned pale in the moonlight. "There is peace in New Capenna because there is a balance—an understanding—between the five families. We have respect, trust, and cooperative competition."

"Cooperative?" Elspeth arched her brows.

"Everyone operates within everyone else's budgets, so to speak."



Art by: Dominik Mayer

“What a way to create order and structure.”

“It might not be *your* way, but it works.” Xander’s hands settled on the top of his cane. “We’ve created order from chaos. A structure people can depend on and thrive within and have a bit of fun while doing it.”

“Fun,” Elspeth scoffed under her breath.

Xander heard her. “Yes, *fun*. You should try and enjoy this life a little. It’s thrilling—as long as you’re on top.”

“I wouldn’t hold your breath,” Elspeth said, deadpan.

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t.” He smirked, briefly, but his expression quickly became grave once more. “The Adversary is a threat to everything. He’s strangling the Halo trade and destabilizing the balance we’ve managed to keep for centuries by making people desperate. If the Adversary controls the majority of Halo, the rest of us will be fighting over scraps. That will mean war.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” She cut to the chase.

“You seem competent, resourceful, clever, and diligent. And, perhaps most importantly, you’re still unknown in this town. Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you to go up against the Adversary. I want you to infiltrate the Cabaretti.”

“What do the Cabaretti have to do with this?”

“The Cabaretti claim to have a way around the Adversary—the Font, a way for them to make unlimited Halo.”

“And you want me to steal it?”

“No, of course not. I want you to find out if the rumors are true and, if they are, tell me where the Font is kept and leave a door unlocked. I’ll take care of everything else.”

“You’re sure about this?” Elspeth asked, studying his milky eyes. “Isn’t that an affront to the balance between the families?”

“If you do your job right and keep your loyalty to the Maestros a secret, the Cabaretti will be none the wiser of this slight. But their realization of my deceit is a risk I must take. Times change, and these are desperate ones. If I played only by the old rules, then I’d die with them. If war is coming, I will be the one to strike first,” he vowed, quiet and deadly. “Which, speaking of—” Xander reached for a knife on the desk. It wasn’t quite like the others she’d seen Maestros use—its grip was normal, rather than a horizontal handle perpendicular to the blade. But it was a fine and functional weapon. “This is yours.”

“A knife?” She accepted it.

“You wanted one, and you have earned it, as an officer of my Maestros.”

Even though she hadn’t been looking for a place in this family, Elspeth couldn’t stop the small swell of pride at the notion of a job well done. “Thank you.”

“Thank me by proving you’re worthy. If you succeed, I might gift you with a nicer blade than that when you return.”

“I will, but when I return—”

“Yes?” Her determination always seemed to amuse him.

"I don't want another blade; I want access to your archives. I do this last job for you, and no more drip-feeding information. I need *all* of it. There's a greater threat out there than the Adversary. I know I will be able to identify that threat if you give me the information I seek."

Xander was as still as a statue. But she could feel the full weight of his assessment on her shoulders. She wondered if his trackers had heard her conversation with Vivien. If he knew she would bring the information to others.

"Very well," he said, finally. "Do this for me, and all the knowledge in my archives will be yours."

"Good." Elspeth went to leave, but he stopped her.

"Oh, we're not finished yet."

"Pardon?"

Xander's face broadened into an amused smile. "You're not walking into any Cabaretti cabaret dressed like *that*."

EPILOGUE – CABARET

Elspeth adjusted the feathered side cape on her right shoulder. She had been wondering the entire way to the cabaret just when Xander had begun working on this outfit. It was impeccably tailored, and the plate fit her chest, shoulders, and hips immaculately while complementing the white silken layers beneath. But perhaps the most impressive element was the scale mail that hugged her legs, made to look like fishnet stockings. The diadem on her brow made her feel like a queen and gave her the confidence she needed to enter the cabaret Xander had directed her to, a location for new Cabaretti recruits.



Art by: Anna Steinbauer

After a quick scan of the crowded room, Elspeth went right for the bar.

"Halo?" the elf behind the bar asked, placing a small napkin emblazoned with the Cabaretti seal in front of her.

"I'm not here for that. I'm here for a job," she tried to say casually.

"I can't say I stock jobs here, just Halo." They chuckled.

Elspeth was already botching her attempt; she could feel it. She cleared her throat and tried a different approach. "I know the Crescendo is fast approaching and the Cabaretti must be looking for extra hands to help. I'd really like to work for the family."

"You think *I* can make those decisions?" they asked incredulously.

"I think you know the people who can."

"Why would I stick my neck out for some random stranger?" The bartender promptly turned to a leonin who arrived at Elspeth's left. "The usual, songbird?"

"You know me too well, Rocco," she said without looking up from the sheet music she was holding. It was a wonder she could see the staves past the thick, feathered cuffs and collar of her gown. "Just enough to take the edge off before my set starts, not too much, please."

"You got it." They passed a thimble of Halo to the musician and turned to leave.

"About a job—" Elspeth started, trying to get their attention again.

Rocco gave her a look that said, *Who do you think you are?* and promptly walked away.

Elspeth bit her lip, picking lightly at the seams of her gloves. She had been too direct, hadn't she? Too forward. This was why she—

The leonin laughed, and it took a moment for Elspeth to realize it was at her expense. "You want work that badly, *hmm*?" Her voice was lyrical, almost song-like.

"Who's asking?" Elspeth tried to curb her nerves. It didn't work.

"I'm surprised you don't know me." She ran her hands over the sequins of her dress. "Surely, you must have heard of the great songstress, Kitt Kanto?"

"I apologize, I can't say I have." Elspeth immediately wondered if she should've lied for the sake of Kitt's ego.

Luckily, Kitt didn't seem too perturbed. "Then you are in for a real treat. I'm on in less than an hour so be sure to give a listen, miss?"

"Elspeth."

"Elspeth? Really?"

"Yes." Elspeth was unsure why her name had Kitt's ears twitching.

"Now you *absolutely must* come with me. I know someone who'll be tickled by a name like that." Kitt took the lead, and Elspeth reluctantly followed her to a scalloped alcove lining the walls of the cabaret where two other women sat.

"Kitt, who's this?" The older of the two women raised a single brow. A dog curled at the front of the table raised its head in tandem.

"You tell her." Kitt nudged Elspeth playfully before sliding onto the bench.

"Elspeth."

"Elspeth," the seated woman repeated with amusement. "Never met an Elspeth that wasn't etched on a gravestone. Welcome to the modern day, doll-face. Love the dress, glad you didn't let the ghosts do tailoring that matches the name. I'm Jinnie."

Jinnie. The right hand of Jetmir, the head of the Cabaretti. Fate had smiled on Elspeth, it seemed.

“A pleasure.” Elspeth’s gaze drifted to the young woman at the table. She seemed underdressed compared to the rest of them. Her clothes were a size too large for her frame, as if she was trying to hide within them.

“This is Giada,” Jinnie spoke for the teenager while slowly stroking the purring cat on her lap.

“Nice to meet you, Giada,” Elspeth made it a point to speak directly to her. Giada only nodded.

“Elspeth was looking for work, specifically to help with the Crescendo,” Kitt said. “She struck me as someone you’d like. With a name like hers and a fashion sense like that, she could be a worthy addition to the floor team.”

“You usually have a better sense for these things than even I,” Jinnie admitted. She looked to Elspeth. “Is this true?” Elspeth nodded. “Then I think I have a few small jobs for you. Who knows, if you play your cards right, you might be in with the Cabaretti in time for the Crescendo. Trust me when I say, it will be a party you don’t want to miss.”

