

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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The Elandrid, Episode 3

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*This text has been edited slightly for distribution.
Scene headers have been left in, while sub-headers have been cut.
But by and large, it reflects what was spoken.*

Episode 3 - Dread

Hey there. My name is Thomas, and this is a story I wrote. I originally read it aloud on my podcast, *Thomas Tells a Story*, with a small audience of friends in my living room in Brooklyn. I still believe the best way to experience this story is to listen to it, but for a number of important reasons, I've decided to also release the text. Some people just prefer to read, or are hearing-impaired, but whatever the reasons, I'm glad you're here. There is no music on the podcast (well, except at the beginning and end), and there are no sound effects, so you aren't missing too many so-called production values. It is an exercise of imagination.

If you like, you can imagine that we are sitting around a low-burning fire on the coast of Greece. You can faintly hear the crackling of the fire, the crashing of waves on a dark shore, and a distant hum of wind through the olive groves.

But that's it.

This is *The Elandrid*.

Scene 1 - Space

The Hyperion One is floating in the void. Its jacket of ice has been thawed off, and water droplets roll along the surface of the ship, or float like bubbles into the expanse before freezing into blots of ice again. Elandra, in a red exo-suit with a fishbowl helmet, is welding the crack in the main engine shut, her boots magnetized to the hull and a safety cord clipped to the nearest utility ring.

If it weren't for the grim silence of space, the Hyperion would look like it was hosting some kind of lazy-river floating party. A long cable stretches from the side of the Hyperion to a 10 foot long rust-colored engineering barge. Elandra finishes her welding, and lets the torch float from her hands as she transfers her carabiner from the utility ring to a transition cord.

"That's the exterior damage," Elandra says, a small pool of mist forming on the front of her fishbowl, as she walks slowly along the transition cord to the barge cable, the welding torch in tow.

"Excellent. Last thing's the fuel injection, one of the pintles is unresponsive. Luckily it looks like we have a spare."

"Barge code?"

"B9."

Elandra transfers her carabiner from the transition cord to the barge cable and pulls herself along hand over hand. Once on the barge, she clips the welder back into place and searches along the row for the spare injector.

"You know, when Jonathan and I put this wreck together last year, I really didn't think I'd have to do it all again so soon. Let alone in space."

She welcomes the distraction of the task at hand. Without it, she's afraid she might just replay the earlier events of the day until her brain collapsed.

~

"You can do magic." They were the first words out of Elandra's mouth after they'd entered slip.

Penelope had looked frightened. "Yes."

They were still sprawled across the Hyperion's cockpit, shaken but unhurt. Elandra stammered, "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you- Why couldn't you-..." she trailed off... when it inevitably dawned on her.

Penelope pulled her hair away from the back of her neck and turned her head, revealing the logo of Aphrodite Industries tattooed there: A haloed Venus symbol, the outer circle

stopping just short of meeting the lower cross. “Julian directed me not to before you arrived...” she said. “After they told him you were coming, he was afraid of what would happen.... if I corroborated his own report...”

She pushed herself up then, gingerly, and leaned over the Hyperion’s dash.

“I guess he just wanted things to stay how they were,” she had said.

Almost unthinking, Elandra had reached out and touched the symbol, the manufacturer’s mark on the back of Penelope’s neck. She could still feel the way the muscles tensed every so slightly beneath the skin. It was convincingly human-like, and Elandra had recoiled quickly.

“Are you going to turn me in?” Penelope asked.

Elandra looked hard at Penelope for a long moment. “What other schools of magic have you studied?” she asked, finally.

“Besides conjury, you mean?”

“Yes, which disciplines have you been practicing?”

Penelope’s eyes had remained locked with Elandra’s. “All of them.”

~

They hadn’t spoken since then. DanDan warned they were exiting the safety zone, which meant they risked slipping into something too big to slip past. That was not survivable, so Elandra had shut down the slip drive, pulled on an exosuit, and begun repairing the Hyperion’s rocket engine. Now, she was almost done.

It’s a good thing too. As Elandra bolts in the access plate, her suit beeps to signal that her air supply is starting to run short. She pulls herself back out to the barge to put away her tools, a gradual wash of relief passing through her. It had been worth doing the refurb herself. She allows herself a tingle of pride; even Jonathan would be impressed, she thinks.

DanDan’s voice sounds suddenly in her earpiece. “Arcanist!”

“I’m headed back in,” Elandra exhales. She climbs up onto the barge and replaces her power tools.

“Yes Arcanist. I don’t mean to alarm you, but- something is coming towards us, very fast.”

Shit. Elandra looks around, but sees nothing. “Regency ship?”

“No, Arcanist,” DanDan’s voice sounds sped up slightly. “In fact,” he continues, “It’s not coming from the direction of Wolf System.”

Elandra shivers reflexively. “Where is it coming from?”

“Far space. I don't know.”

Of all the times for her headset to be broken. “Do you have a visual?” she says. “I'm eyeballing it out here; I need you to describe it to me.”

DanDan's speech is halting. “It's not a traditional Interstellar vessel. It's.. thin... and... snake-like.”

“DanDan,” Elandra tenses, “That sounds like a-”

DanDan cuts her off, “It matches the description of an early century DREAD.”

Elandra was born on the day of the RIF's surrender, so the War Between Worlds lurked in the corners of her childhood like a ghost. Elandra grew up learning about the war second-hand in Current Events, in the abstract, impersonal way that recent atrocities are taught. But the truth was out there, or at least some reflection of the truth, and Elandra looked for the truth wherever she could find it. What she found was this: The Russians had deployed a particularly deadly weapon during the War Between which was designed to target fleets in orbit, a self-sustaining interplanetary menace that could eat spaceships alive. Or so it was said. The weapon was called DREAD, but soldiers took to just calling them eels. Unmanned, uncontrollable, and capable of supersonic speeds, the eels rammed into ships and tore them apart from the inside out. They ranged from smaller, less dangerous scouting drones to 500 feet long juggernauts that spewed electromagnetic radiation, but all of them were composed of millions of adaptive, cell-like microbots. The Three Republics hunted them all down and destroyed them after the Juno Convention... but there was always the fear that some of them had gotten away... following some unknown programming out into far space.

Elandra feels the breath tighten in her chest--she has to remind herself that she still has 15 minutes of air left--as sweat prickles up and down her arms. She presses a button, causing a motorized metal cover to start rolling out over the equipment. “How long till it's on us?”

“97 seconds, Arcanist. Should I run diagnostics and prepare to enter slip?”

Elandra looks back at the Hyperion. It floats serenely before her, and yet far away, the cable connecting it to the barge winding out a hundred feet or more. Elandra's breath quickens. “That's not enough time. DanDan--I can't get back inside the ship that quickly.”

“90 seconds Arcanist.”

Elandra slams her palm on the controls, halting the cover slats motion, and pulls herself along to the center of the barge. “Put me through on the main intercom. Penelope, you there?”

After a moment, Penelope's voice replies, wavering slightly. “Yes, I'm here.”

Elandra releases the clasps on the long yellow barrel of her railgun. She pulls it from its bin, plugs it into the barge's power cable, and magnetizes its base to the barge cover. "Alright good. I need you to go to the cockpit and get ready to enter slip. If DanDan counts down to 3, you go!"

"What?!" Penelope is incredulous. "Without you?"

Elandra kicks her right foot into the stirrup on the gun's rotating base. "Just if I can't stop this thing! Listen carefully. The override phrase is 'Rational Marigold Tokyo Denim.'"

Penelope's incredulity morphs into fear. "What thing? What are you talking about?"

"Just be ready!"

Below the gun, there are several cases of ammunition. Elandra selects a box with two bullets in it, 14-inch long armor-piercing explosive rounds, and loads one directly into the chamber of the rail gun. Her fingers pass over Jonathan's signature, inscribed along the barrel, and she murmurs, "Thank you..."

She peers through the scope--it's difficult, she has to press the rubber sight up against the glass of her helmet and then squint through it. "Am I looking the right direction, DanDan? I'd like to shoot this thing."

"I don't know, Arcanist. The DREAD is coming at us from 3:27 o'clock and an incline angle of -2 degrees. It's small at least... only about 40 feet at my estimation."

Elandra glances back at the Hyperion and adjusts, swinging the barrel of the rail gun a few degrees to her right and down. She peers through the sight, moving the gun in small circles, trying to place something in the expanse.

"There!" The border of the scope lights up red. The DREAD's flat, shark-like nose is making a beeline for them, glinting dully in the Hyperion's work lights.

Sweat rolls into Elandra's eye and she blinks it away. "I can't believe this thing drifted all the way out past Wolf System."

"20 seconds. Arcanist, you'll only have one clean shot."

"Better make it count then," Elandra turns a dial, setting the rail gun to its highest-energy setting. "Penelope, remember, enter slip when DanDan gets to 3!"

She takes three deep breaths. Finds the DREAD in her sight. And pulls the trigger.

The explosive force of the shot is eerily silent, even as the rifle hums with vibration under Elandra's gloved hands. The force of the expelled round nearly throws Elandra from her makeshift turret, as the entire barge begins to spin. Her right boot catches painfully in the stirrup, and Elandra grunts in exertion, tightening her grip.

She struggles to keep breathing. She can feel the blood rushing to her head as the galaxy spins around her, her vision blurs, and she can feel darkness tugging at her mind, pulling it backwards into nothingness.

“You missed, Arcanist,” DanDan’s voice is tinged with sadness, and for a moment, Elandra marvels at the absurdity of her artificial cohort’s artificial regret. “10 seconds.”

Summoning all her strength, Elandra reaches down and grabs the second round. She pushes it into the chamber of the rifle, looks up, and tries to keep the bile from rising in her throat. Hyperion. Space. Hyperion. Space. Hyperion. Space.

In her last moment of consciousness, Elandra throws her body weight to the right, swinging the rail gun 180 degrees as the barge spins her upside down to face the eel, huge and barreling towards her. She pulls the trigger, and blacks out.

~

The first thing she sees when she opens her eyes is Penelope, staring concernedly at her. She’s wearing the other space suit. The blue one. She must have come out and got her.

“You didn't go into slip,” Elandra says, thickly. Her head is pounding.

“No, you got it. You got it. And you stopped the barge from spinning.”

Elandra rubs her brow. “So the DREAD...?” she begins.

“Blew past us,” Penelope finishes. “What was left of it, anyway.”

Elandra places her head in her hands. “No one's going to believe us...” She thinks back to the last moment before she lost consciousness. There had been something odd about it; there was something daubed on the DREAD’s broad face, in faded red and yellow paint. A bird of some kind.

“Elandra, there's something else. And I'm so sorry--I know this complicates everything--I mean I don't even know how he found your ship.”

Elandra squints at Penelope. “What?”

“He just appeared while you were out doing repairs. He must have followed me somehow.

Elandra raises a hand. “Penelope, what are you talking about?”

Penelope steps aside. Standing behind her, draped in the dull brown invisible duster, is Henry Petreius.

Scene 2 - Badlands Bar & Grill

Jonathan Harper sits alone at the bar in a dimly lit joint called the Badlands Bar & Grill, watching Netvision Live on the big screen. The news broke around midday. No official Regency announcement yet, but someone in local law enforcement must have guessed at the payday for an exclusive story on a Confiscation of Dangerous Artifacts mission gone awry.

A young man with a slightly pinched face enters the bar, and Jonathan jumps to his feet. "Haiken!"

The man sees Jonathan and frowns, then crosses the bar to him. "Jonathan. I have to say, I really didn't expect to see you ever again after you bailed on our Final Seminar."

Jonathan's face falls, the hand he'd extended to shake dropping back to his side. "I... bailed on our Final Seminar?"

"You bailed on a lot of things, as I remember." Haiken smiles. "I guess I shouldn't expect you to remember them all."

Jonathan is nonplussed. "Geez. I'm sorry, Hai. Honestly, I don't even... that wasn't Cybernetics was it?"

"It was."

"Shit," Jonathan smiles uncomfortably. "Can I buy you a beer?"

"I don't drink."

"Can I buy you a villa?"

Haiken makes a face. "Only you, Jonathan. I can't believe I have to explain this to you, but throwing around your family's money does not an apology make."

Jonathan laughs. "Okay. Let me start over. Hi! Thank you so much for meeting with me. How've you been?"

Haiken Morimizu was a little older than Jonathan when they were at university together, but they were the two youngest people in the program. Jonathan dropped out. Haiken stayed. Jonathan went to Earth to pursue an apprenticeship in Interstellar Engineering. Haiken stayed.

"Look, I'm on a short lunch, so just tell me why I'm here, yeah?" Haiken slides onto a barstool and orders a water, as Jonathan sits back down beside him.

"You've heard the news right?"

Haiken nods. "I have."

"Aren't you guys freaking out?"

Haiken shrugs. "The year after I joined Aphrodite, three of our manufacturing partners fell out from under us. It took us two years to produce another android. But we did. Bad things happen. But we have something that always keeps us going."

Jonathan cocks an eyebrow. "More investment capital than you know what to do with?"

Haiken makes a pitying face. "Dedication, Jonathan."

"This is one of yours though, right?" Jonathan indicates the news screen. "I'm not making that up?"

"If Mr. Petreius is to be believed," Haiken follows Jonathan's finger, dubiously. "The company's very careful about our clients' privacy--I've never known their identities. Until now, I guess."

"So you don't know how many androids you've made in total? Or where they ended up?"

Haiken narrows his eyes. He asks, "Why do you care?"

Jonathan takes a breath. "Elandra--The Arcanist-- is a friend of mine. I'm not exactly sure what her plan is but I'd like to know what she's got herself into. Especially if these things turn out to be dangerous after all."

Haiken frowns at his water. "Jonathan. I don't think I can help you." He stands. Jonathan stands too.

"Don't go back to work today."

Haiken snorts. "What?"

Jonathan speaks quickly, "I don't know how much you keep up with politics. But this new Regent? I've read up on him and he's bad news. And not just for magic. You ever heard of a law firm called the Foundation for Ethical Advancement? It's a non-profit he founded that torches tech companies like yours in court. They seek damages on the basis of economic displacement, un-accounted-for externalities, anything--it's fucking insane. Neuronetics, CyrusCor... companies that were utterly liquidated when he went after them. Up and coming CEOs reduced to nothing. Engineers jailed for criminal negligence. So--play hookie. Help me. Help the Arcanist. Help your fugitive android."

Haiken looks quizzically at Jonathan, very much taken aback. Then he looks down at the floor. His shoulders shake. Jonathan realizes he's laughing.

“Look, Jonathan. I actually like you. You’re smart, and you were a great lab partner, actually, before you left. But you don’t know what it’s like to pour years of your life into a company, building something greater than yourself.”

Haiken steps forward, and pulls a pad of paper from his pocket. “If you really want to help, get on the next carrier to Iza. We’re building a new facility there. One of the founders, Theolus Washington, he’s overseeing it and they could use someone like you on the ground. Maybe I’ll even see you out there.”

He rips the note out, and hands it to Jonathan. “I really shouldn’t be telling you this, but I’m pretty sure we made an android for him too... right after I joined. I remember they were jumping through hoops for months to get the IRN to approve shipping the thing.”

Jonathan looks down at the name and address. “Thank you. I mean. Thank you.”

Haiken rolls his eyes. “I’m going to lose sleep over this, I can tell,” he says, then turns, and makes his way out of the bar.

Scene 3 - Radcliffe Tenements

It’s nighttime on Tyr, and Safia is currently losing sleep. She often does though. Nightmares are frequent visitors, filled with dark, amorphous shapes that appear suddenly, pulling apart the walls of her apartment and swallowing her alive.

She lies on her bedding, eyes open, feeling one such nightmare tugging at the edges of her consciousness, in that particularly noxious state of wakefulness where you know exactly what sort of horrors await you if you allow yourself to drift off. Sometimes this feeling goes away. Sometimes it doesn’t. Finally, she gets up, lets herself out of the apartment, and walks to the kitchen. She tries to turn on the lights, but the power must be out. She finds her way to the sink in the dark and splashes water on her face, then returns, rolls out her rug, and prays.

The other non-assimilates all agreed that 5 times a day was the thing, though occasionally someone would say 6. One of them even had a printout of the Qu’ran that they said they’d found on the deep net, but there was no way of knowing if it was authentic or not, or if the translation was any good. So there was some disagreement about when those 5 times were supposed to be. Safia typically prayed when she woke up, after lunch, before and after dinner, right before bed, and a 6th time only if she had nightmares. Sometimes it was less though. The man who owned the bakery she worked at was good about most things, but he didn’t like praying. So when she had long shifts, she would pray silently to herself in snatches of time alone, checking on the ovens or while cleaning the toilets.

After Safia is finished, she still feels the tingle of dread in the back of her mind, and wishes she wasn’t alone in the apartment. Yusef and Qamar must both be working.

She pulls clothes on and wraps her hijab around her head, lets herself out quietly, and walks down the hall to the fire escape, thinking that perhaps she can practice some force shells. That’s what she called them—she was sure official magicians probably had their own word

for it, but she had taught herself by throwing stones over her head and deflecting them as they came down at her.

She pushes the window up and slides out over the ledge onto the metal grate of the fire escape. It's incredibly cold, and there's frozen snow up and down the handrails. A small pile of stones sits in the corner of the brick window, but as she reaches to pick one up, voices drift down to her from the roof. Qamar's voice, and Yusef's.

"How can you be so sure?" Yusef says.

"Because you'll go through security," Qamar answers. "There will be lots of people around."

"I don't want to get shot," Yusef says.

Safia's eyes widen. She strains her ears, but she can't make out Qamar's reply. Slowly, she edges up the fire escape stairs, taking steps as slowly and quietly as possible. She's a single flight down when she stops to listen again. Qamar's tone is matter of fact. "People will pull out their handsets and take videos. You'll get posted on Netvision and Polaro and Galacticat. You will make people face our pain."

"But they'll arrest me," Yusef grumbles.

"You'll have to be quick. These videos get cut down to 15 seconds anyway when they get popular."

There's a pause, before Yusef says:

"What if they throw me in jail?"

"Many great prophets and heroes have been put in jail for speaking the truth. But they won't, I promise. You won't be breaking any laws."

Safia shivers, and adjusts slightly. One of her feet goes out from under her on the icy metal, and she slams her shin into the step with a bang.

She can almost hear Qamar and Yusef tense up. "Hello?" Yusef shouts.

"Yusef?" she tries to sound surprised. "I thought you were at work!" She ascends the stairs and climbs onto the roof, trying to ignore the throbbing pain of the fresh bruise.

Yusef and Qamar are bundled tightly. Qamar is twisting a ring idly on her finger. Yusef is smoking a cigarette, which he puts out hurriedly in the snow.

Safia latches onto this. "Yusef, how many times have I asked you not to smoke? Is that why you're out here in the cold?" Safia looks with dismay at Qamar, to say something indignant like, "what were you thinking"--but when her eyes meet Qamar's the words die in her throat, and she's left with her mouth hanging open, looking pleadingly at her.

Yusef tugs at his beard ruefully. "I'm sorry. It's just... all the guys at work."

Safia snaps her mouth shut and looks back at Yusef. "Well, come down and get some sleep. Honestly."

Yusef grumbles unintelligibly as he descends the fire escape. It's freezing, Safia can't help shivering as she looks back at Qamar. "Are you coming?" she says, teeth jittering.

Qamar looks evenly at her. "I'm going to stay up here for a while. Thank you."

Safia's eyes catch on the silver band around Qamar's finger. "Where'd you get that ring?" She couldn't remember if she'd ever seen her sister wear a ring before. "Is it worth anything?"

Qamar looks at the ring, as if she'd forgotten she was wearing it. "I don't think so. I found it in a junk shop."

Safia nods. Why was she asking about her stupid ring? What she wanted to say was, 'What in Tyr's name are you planning, and why couldn't she know?' ...But she doesn't find the courage to say it. So after a moment, she turns, and follows Yusef back into the apartment.

Scene 4 - Bohumir's Tower

On the other side of the planet, Norelle bandages the Archmage while Bridget paces around the library. "What the fuck do we do?"

"We'll call the Regency from the hospital," Norelle wrinkles her nose as she examines Bohumir's stumps of arms, cut off and scorched black just below the wrist. Bohumir's tongue has been cut out as well. He's still barely conscious, his chest shaking as he takes shallow breaths through his nostrils. "Whoever attacked him must have wanted him to live... but barely." Norelle grimaces. A splatter of track marks were blotched across the mage's arms.

Bridget suddenly collapses to her knees and retches. A thin yellow bile splattering on the stone floor.

Norelle rolls her eyes. "Grow the fuck up! You've seen worse."

Bridget coughs. There are tears in her eyes. "No I fucking haven't. I didn't work on a death squad like you."

Norelle grinds her teeth and illuminates her armlet. "Wormwood, call an ambulance. Assault victim."

As her cohort rattles off a confirmation, she stands and goes to the desk on the far side of the room. She picks up a couple books and examines their spines.

"What are you doing?" Bridget chokes.

“Bozidar Bohumir is one of the most famous living beyonders.” Norelle casts her eyes around the bookshelves. She notes the places where books have fallen against each other, over suspicious spaces of dustlessness. “All the books on theurgy are missing. Including the spellbook I commissioned.”

Norelle unclips a canteen from her pack and returns to kneel next to Bohumir. She casts a disjoining over the water, then splashes it on Bohumir’s face, causing him to sputter and choke as his eyes fly open.

“What the fuck are you doing?!?” Bridget scrambles to her feet.

“First the Tome of Shadows, now this. Either someone is targeting me, or they’re gathering as much knowledge about summoning beyonds as they can.” Norelle grabs Bohumir by the jaw and forces him to meet her gaze. “Who. Did this.”

Bohumir’s eyes roll towards Bridget. Bridget takes a step back. “Whoa.” She can feel her interference humming with activity as something tries to get in, with a magical signature that she hasn’t felt since Texas.

Norelle looks between Bohumir and Bridget. “What’s going on?”

Cautiously, Bridget moves her hand behind her back and suppresses her interference with a gesture. The projection immediately takes, an image suddenly visible in front of her, as if it were overlaid on top of the world in very wobbly AR.

Bridget falls against the wall, rubbing her eyes. Norelle stands. “Are you reading his mind?”

Bridget shakes her head. “ ‘Mind-readers’ are either frauds or party clowns.”

Norelle looks back at Bohumir. “Then-”

“He’s projecting an image right into my eye. It’s an old coyote trick for giving silent instructions. Fuck that hurts. Cut the brightness!!”

The image dims. When Bridget closes her eyes, it’s easier to make it out. “I see a woman in a red coat. Hard to make out any details. Dark hair.”

The image melts and shifts. “There’s a... a crazy wound on her neck.” The image suddenly is in motion. Bridget’s body jerks. “He cut her. Deep. And her bones are like, metallic? Gold.”

Norelle stands up. “Did you say gold bones?” She moves to Bohumir’s desk, examining its cluttered surface.

Bridget’s eyes are clamped shut, and her fists are pressed against the wall. “It was a good cut. It should have killed her. But she healed... the wound heals, and...”

Bridget hesitates. The images are muddled, flashing from moment to moment, confused.

“On her neck, between her shoulder blades almost... there's a tattoo.”

Norelle's eyes fall on an antique hairpin in a black velvet case. It looks out of place, not to mention quite expensive, among the strew of books and papers. She tilts her head at it, questioningly. “What's the tattoo?” she asks.

Bridget squints her eyes shut tight, concentrating. “Like, the woman symbol, with another circle around it?”

Norelle reaches out quickly and pockets the hairpin, then lets out a bark of laughter.

“What?” Bridget's eyes snap open.

“It was on the news today.” Norelle grimaces. She can hear sirens approaching from afar. “Come on. Time to go.”

Norelle starts down the stairs. Bridget's jaw drops with incredulity. “What do you mean it was on the news today? Hey! What's going on?”

Norelle doesn't even look back. “It's Aphrodite Industries. A fucking sex bot did this.”

Bridget follows her, signing her interference back to life. “What about the hospital? We're just gonna leave??”

“Fuck yes, we're leaving.” Norelle tugs at her surgical mask, readying to pull it up over her face again. “There's a killer android on Tyr with the intention of summoning a beyon, and I'm not going to be here if that happens.”

“You're the one person who should be here! Who else stands a chance of performing a binding? That gringo upstairs?” Norelle ignores Bridget, adjusting the mask. Bridget reaches up and pulls it off her face with a snap of elastic. “Hey, I'm talking to you!”

Norelle pushes Bridget. Really pushes her. And when a magician really pushes you, you're likely to feel it for a long time. Bridget hits the scorched wall on the other side of the room before she can think, and crumples to the ground. Anger and pain floods her mind, and without thinking her lips begin to form the words of Kaze's Subduction.

But Norelle is ahead of her. As the incantation leaves Bridget's throat she feels something clamp around it too, deadening the magic, deadening everything, like a vice inside her chest suddenly tightening. The spell ends in a gasp, as she falls to all fours and throws up again. Hot bile and blood.

Norelle is standing over her. “Don't presume to tell me my business again. I've jeopardized my career for you. I will not let you jeopardize my life.” She grabs Bridget by the collar of her jacket and heaves her to her feet, face inches from hers. “You aren't the only person I have to watch out for.”

Scene 5 - Paris Beach

Andrea Peters, 16 years old in a loose gray silk-screened tank top and exposed black bra straps, places a cigarette to her lips and inhales deeply. The dark circles under her eyes are her mother's, though they're mitigated by youth. Her hair is a tangled brown mess. She's ten light years away from her mother, and four and change from Earth. But this Chiron is her home, and always has been. She's lying out on the sand at Paris Beach, near Juno, looking up at the greenish-blue sky and listening to the squawking of the gulls.

In Andrea's opinion, it was definitely a mistake to introduce seagulls on Chiron. For whatever reason, the things really thrived here, gobbling up the specially engineered acid-resistant fish like popcorn.

Andrea rolls over to one side and looks down the beach at Juno's gleaming chrome skyline. It's a nice day. Perfect for ignoring all the homework she's not going to do.

Her handheld buzzes, a trendy pink oval that Owen says was definitely meant to remind you of a vulva. As if anyone needed reminding. She picks it up and opens the text message: "Where are you? I'm here."

Andrea stubs out her cigarette in the sand, collects her things and returns then to her purse, a hinged wooden skull with a silver clasp between its teeth on a leather bandolier. Andrea throws this over her shoulder and trudges toward the lot.

She sees Owen before he sees her. A dark haired boy with a round-face and a bomber jacket, he's idling on his bicycle, moving the kickstand up and down and up and down with his heel. When his eyes fall on Andrea, he waves stiffly.

"What's up," Andrea drawls, making a peace sign as she approaches the bike.

Owen looks distinctly uncomfortable; as Andrea leans in to kiss him he turns to catch it on his cheek, kicks the stand up again and tightens his grip on the handlebars.

"Jump on. I wanna go to Silverwood."

Andrea leans back on her heels. "What's at Silverwood? Why are you being all weird?"

Owen looks at Andrea. "Look, I have something I wanna talk about but like, not here, okay?"

The wind is blowing Andrea's hair in her face. She pushes it out of the way angrily and makes a face. "What's wrong with here?"

A long silence follows. Silence punctuated only by gulls and the trembling of Owen's lips.

"This... us... it's not working for me."

The words scatter like pebbles on hot asphalt, a thin clatter. Andrea sways, looks up at the sky, laughs once. "What?"

"I think we should break up."

Andrea sits down on the cement sidewalk. Owen starts to get off the bicycle.

"Don't! Don't come near me!"

"Andrea, I'm sorry."

"I guess your image couldn't take the hit, huh? Thought it would be cool to date the Demon-Girl for a few months, but then you realized what a drain on your social capital I was, huh?"

"No, Andrea-"

"Just, stay the fuck away from me, Owen!" Andrea gets to her feet and starts walking off down the road. Her heart is hammering, her stomach feels like it's twisting up against her lungs.

She hears Owen swear behind her, and tries not to look at him as he pulls up next to her on his bike. "Andrea, I really love you but-"

Andrea turns and slams the heel of her boot into his bike chain, tearing it off the gear and tearing a section of skin off her leg in the process. Owen, and the bike, fall onto Andrea, knocking both of them to the ground.

"Fuck!" Andrea disentangles herself as quickly as she can. Tears are flowing freely down her face now, at least partly due to the stinging pain in her leg. She wipes her eyes, smearing a long streak of mascara down her arm, and takes a deep breath.

"Owen, what part of 'stay the fuck away from me' didn't you understand? Is this social dynamic too advanced for you? Figure it the fuck out!"

Andrea turns and begins to walk away, trying her damndest not to limp. She scoffs humorlessly through her tears. Just what she fucking needed. One more way that Libby and Friends can compare her to her mom.

Scene 6 - Aphrodite Industries

On Freya, Haiken drums his fingers against a desk. He checks the time on his armlet, stands, and moves towards the entry hall.

A thin polished-gray obelisk stands outside the Aphrodite Industries headquarters, an aquamarine dome streaked with the pale reflections of clouds. No words are carved on the obelisk, just the necklace of Aphrodite (which is a necklace by the way, not a hand mirror as was popularized in the 19th century), partly enclosed in a second circle.

Just past the obelisk, there is a small lot, with a single Regency vehicle parked by the wide glass entryway.

Haiken steps into the waiting room and smiles graciously at the two officers. “Welcome. My name is Haiken Moromizu, I’m the Head of Engineering here.”

Eris and Kay stand and shake Haiken’s hand. Eris is blunt. “Regent’s Aide Eris Dostoyev, this is Lieutenant Kay Berring.”

Kay raises her eyebrows. “Engineering, huh? We thought we’d have to fight through a crowd of marketing or public relations types to get to you.”

Haiken bows his head slightly. “We don’t have any of those types here. 7 years, and we’re still a very small operation. In fact, we have fewer than 20 full-time employees. Right this way.”

Eris and Kay follow out of the office and down a short hallway.

“I take it you know our business here?” Eris needles, “It is important that you understand the gravity of the situation.”

“I do, officer,” Haiken looks back at them, as he swipes a badge and enters a short code, unlocking a security door. “It is my job to convince you that our androids are no more or less dangerous than you or I.”

The door slides open with a smooth *swsh*. Haiken smiles. “Welcome to the future,” he says, and somehow makes it sound humble.

The ROs step out into the main dome, a huge circular space, illuminated by natural light filtering in through the smart glass overhead. The outer walls to their right and left are paneled entirely in magnetic ink displays, covered with diagrams, drawings, blocks of text, mathematical algorithms and snippets of code.

Eris walks to the railing and looks down at the stairs dropping into the lower levels of the building, while Kay examines one of the display panels. “What is all this?”

Haiken steps beside her. “It’s pretty much everything. Designs. Documentation. Source code, hardware, manufacturing details. We have some machine intelligences crunching most of it, looking for optimizations. It all automatically updates when they find one.”

“This is incredible.” Kay turns and looks out across the dome. “You can see clear across to the boards on the other side.”

Haiken nods. “We wanted to create a workspace where immersion in the project was not only essential but beautiful, literal, even social.”

Eris rolls his eyes and turns to face them. "Do you have any 'works in progress' for us to examine?"

Haiken leads them down into the lower levels of the building. "We've averaged about one a year since I joined. That probably seems slow to you, but it's a whirlwind every time. Six months is spent just in design, and iterating over the personality and physical model with the client, which we do in AR. It's an..."

Haiken pauses on the stair, bringing Eris & Kay to a halt. "I won't say that it's like giving birth, but it is like watching a child grow up. It is a spiritual experience, and a challenging one."

They continue into a well-lit work room with a large glass chamber in the center. Kay feels a shiver go down her spine as she approaches it, but there's nothing inside when she peers in. "The body is composed of proprietary nanotech fibers. We've simplified the organ structure--they don't need food but they can taste--we suggest they purge following a meal. Their digestion is really only meant to handle waters and oils, which can be sweat out through the nano-fiber, or expelled in urine. We're testing a new approach now, but historically the bones take the longest to manufacture--they're titanium gold alloy, printed on Lei-Kung."

"And you don't use magic at any step of this process?" Kay cocks an eyebrow disbelievingly.

Haiken shrugs. "I'd be happy to provide you documentation on our employees. We do pretty thorough background checks. No one on our staff is a magician."

Eris nods. "Do that. And we'll need the locations of all your current androids in the field."

Haiken's face falls. "I... I'm afraid we don't have that information. Anonymity is key for our customers--we ship through a dark carrier and wipe all personal data from our systems."

At that moment, the door opens, and a broadly built woman with long, wild hair enters the room.

The woman's age is very difficult to place. Her skin hangs in spotted folds from her arms, her face is so wrinkled it gives the impression of crumpled and coffee-stained paper. But Eris guesses that she must have had her eyes replaced, because they shine as bright as anything, dark and hungry and young, and indeed, so is her whole demeanor.

Haiken gestures to her. "Ah! You should be honored. You are about to meet one of the most intelligent people in the universe. This is Doctor Mayspeth Clark."

Eris takes a step back. "Mayspeth Clark?"

Haiken is surprised. "You know her?"

"It seems highly unlikely." Mayspeth smiles humoringly. "I have lived a fairly obscure existence."

Eris can barely keep his jaw from shaking. He reaches out, as if for balance, and Kay steps forward to steady him. "Sir?"

"I'm sorry," Eris can't take his eyes away from Mayspeth's. He grinds his teeth together and sniffs, pulling away from Kay. "I read your book, some years ago. And found it very moving."

Understanding dawns on Mayspeth's face, and Eris looks away, sharply. "We've gotten all we need here."

Haiken steps forward. "But, we've barely started-"

"It makes no difference." Eris's voice is cold and sharp. "We have no choice but to shut down your operations."

"What?" Haiken's face flushes. "You can't do that!"

"We most certainly can, and here's the warrant to prove it." Eris retrieves a thin, dark blue envelope from his pocket and throws it onto a nearby table. "It may only be temporary, but until we have ascertained the threat that your androids pose, we cannot allow you to continue making them. I understand the Lord Regent intends to hear testimony on the matter this Coven, but in the meantime, a regiment is on its way to quarantine the building. I suggest you use the next thirty minutes to brief your staff and evacuate. Good day."

Mayspeth's voice nearly makes him jump. "Officer."

He turns. "Dr. Clark?"

"Your copy of my book. Did it have a red cover?"

Eris breathes heavily, eyes flitting between her and Haiken. "I seem to recall it was green, Dr. Clark. Excuse me."

Haiken sinks into a chair. "What are we going to do?"

Mayspeth is frozen, frowning after the departing figures. "Green..." she says.

Haiken looks at her. "What?"

Mayspeth inhales deeply, "I just, they never published my book with a green cover... not that I know of anyway." Mayspeth shakes her head and flashes a worried smile at Haiken. "We have half an hour. And they don't know about Theolus. Rally the troops. Wipe all the local servers. We don't want to give them anything they don't already have."

Scene 7 - Radcliffe Park

It's a full day before Safia finds the courage to confront Yusef. Qamar and Yusef often leave for the night together, but tonight Safia makes a big show of needing Yusef's help cleaning the floor kitchen, and Qamar leaves wordlessly while they work.

"Why tonight of all nights..." Yusef grumbles as he wipes down the oven rack. He throws the towel on the ground and gets to his feet hurriedly. "There."

Safia watches him carefully. He sees this, makes a face, and crosses his arms. "What?"

Safia says, "You know you can talk to me about anything, right Yusef?"

Silence.

"What were you and Qamar talking about on the roof last night?"

Yusef looks at her sharply. "How much did you hear?"

Safia backpedals. "Nothing really, just something about..." She searches for the right word to key into. "Something about jail. I just... you're not doing anything illegal are you?"

"No," Yusef grumbles. "I'm not doing anything illegal."

Safia frowns. "Why were you talking about jail then?"

Yusef meets her gaze, and Safia tries desperately to read him. She knows her brother trusts her, but there's something in the way of that. The sullenness he'd developed since leaving the Reclamation camps. "Yusef, you can tell me anything."

"Qamar thinks you wouldn't understand," he says finally.

Safia throws her hands in the air. "How can I understand if you won't talk to me?"

Yusef makes to leave the kitchen. And Safia surprises herself by reaching out and grabbing his arm.

"Hey!"

Yusef looks down at her, surprised.

"Don't do this to me," Safia says. "We don't keep secrets from each other, we can't. Do you hear me? Because we, the three of us, are family."

"No!" Yusef pulls his arm away sharply, and Safia recoils, shocked by the sudden anger and violence in his voice. "Family is what the West took from us. The Americans and their allies have eaten away at our family until there is nothing left. Taken us apart bit by bit. Sons

from their mothers. Mothers from their sons. Brothers, sisters, fathers. Family by family the Republic has crushed us. Our faith. Our family. Gone now.”

Yusef exits the kitchen and dons his coat. Safia follows him into the main room cautiously, watching as he ties a scarf around his neck, and swings open the door, trying to think of something to say, feeling that anything she could say would be immeasurably insufficient.

But Yusef pauses in the door of his own accord, his frame outlined in the faint light from the hall. “We aren’t a family, Safia. Only the ghost of one.”

The door slams behind him, leaving Safia alone in the dark.

Scene 8 - Pelman Terrace High School

Luna has been in one of her moods. She spent the night sitting on the couch crying at NetVision infomercials, and is now passed out on the couch. Which really doesn’t mean much except Andrea has to make her own lunch. Luna is her aunt, but she just knows her as Luna. Perhaps because Luna has never been anything but Luna. Mom once described her as having a ‘weak conscience,’ and while Andrea’s not sure she can attest to Luna’s conscience, she certainly has a weak everything else. If Andrea got sick for a few days, Luna would be sick for weeks. When Luna’s cat disappeared (probably trapped and eaten), Luna refused to leave her room for a month.

Andrea pulls the straps of her backpack tight around her shoulders and tries to ignore the sucking pit in her stomach. On second thought, maybe she’ll just skip lunch. She slouches her way out of the house, trying not to wake her aunt, and begins the long walk to school.

Pelman Terrace High School is on a hill, and she and Luna live on the ‘bad side’ of it. Still not a terrible place to live, not like the neighborhoods even further west, but she’s the ‘middle’ of what’s a distinctly upper-middle-class school district. As she goes through the metal detector, she catches a glimpse of Libby-Anne (Lipgloss) and her friends tittering behind their hands at her. Great. The breakup must have been big news on Attachat last night.

Some VG jock asks her if Owen didn’t find her horns a turn-on or something. Andrea ignores him and heads into class, only thinking for a moment that she wishes she really did have horns, the better to impale people who made these stupid jokes. No, she was a perfectly normal high schooler with a perfectly abnormal mother, and somehow it had become popular culture that she was some kind of unholy spawn of Lucifer.

The day passes normally enough. Libby makes pointed comments in Current Events about how awful Reclamation is and how anyone who was ever involved should be ashamed of themselves, but that’s par for the course. Andrea spends lunch with her face buried in a fantasy novel about millennium-era vampires. But when the bell rings for 5th period she notices that Libby and a couple of her hangers-on are staring at her.

Andrea looks back down at her book for a few deep breaths, then back up and-no, they’re all definitely staring at her. She flips them off.

She tries not to think about it, but all through Astronomy she can feel them looking at her. And sure enough, they seem to be waiting for her on the back steps when she tries to slip away at last bell.

“Andrea?” Libby waves at her, as if they were friends. Andrea opens her eyelids wide at the ground, so at least Satan will know that she’s absolutely not having this.

“Hey Libby,” she says, trying to sound tired.

Libby pulls her down the stairs and around into an alcove. If it weren’t for Libby’s demeanor, Andrea would be positive she was about to get beaten up. But Libby seems breathless and enthusiastic.

“Hey, you know Petrus and Jimmy, right?”

“Yeah, hey guys,” Andrea drawls, noncommittally. Petrus is handsome, with long dark hair, but Jimmy looks like something you might find on the end of your fishing line. Petrus plays football, Libby plays class royalty, and Jimmy amounts to their court jester as far as Andrea can tell.

Libby attempts an expression of contrition. “Hey, I just wanted to apologize for being rude in Cur-V today. That was totally uncalled for. It’s not your fault your mom was in the army.”

Andrea looks between the three of them, searching for a smirk or other indication that this is all a joke. But there is none.

“Navy Seal. Not really the same thing.”

Jimmy cocks his head to one side and looks at her appraisingly. “Is it true that your dad’s a demon?”

One of Andrea’s earliest memories was when a girl in the 2nd grade told her that her dad was a demon. She cried so hard the school had to call her mom to come get her. But it wasn’t until later that night when Andrea, eyes dry, had come downstairs and approached Norelle. In the memory, her mom is impossibly tall, a giant, at a giant table, illuminated island-like in the darkness of their living room. It was back when Luna still lived with her boyfriend in Seattle, on Earth. And her mom still lived at home.

“Mom. One of the girls at school said my dad was a demon.”

Norelle didn’t look at her. She didn’t like to look at her, or talk to her much, after dark. Andrea remembered that. She just sipped from the glass in her hand and stared absently at the table.

“Was he?”

Norelle’s nose twitched. Her eyes closed. She placed her glass on the table with a dull thud, and looked at Andrea.

“Yes,” she had said.

Libby hits Jimmy on the arm. “No, of course not. Are you retarded? Anyway, it’s beyon, right Andrea? When you say ‘demon’ you sound like a religious ‘natic from the middle ages or something.”

Andrea shifts on her feet. “What do you guys want?”

Libby looks at Petrus. “Well, the three of us have been talking, and we had this idea. But then we had no idea where to begin and then--I dunno. We all heard about Owen, you know?”

Of course. Andrea turns to walk away.

Libby back-pedals, “Oh, I mean, it’s not about him. We just thought as part of things, I dunno, you could maybe get it to punch holes in his stupid bike tires or something.”

Petrus snorts, and Libby looks offended. “What?”

Andrea juts her jaw forward. “What it? ...What?”

Petrus shrugs. “Just a small one. Steal some cash. Give people a scare.”

Andrea is beginning to feel very thick. “What?” she says again, and immediately regrets it when Petrus frowns at her, as if he were trying to figure out what she could possibly still be missing.

“Your mom’s a famous beyonder. We want you to summon a beyon.”

Andrea takes a step back. All three of them are staring at her, just the way they were in the cafeteria. A number of possible reactions flip through her mind, including acts of physical violence, screaming, and walking away. But what she finally settles on is:

“Oh. Yeah. I could help with that.”

Scene 9- The Hyperion One

Elandra’s worst fears have been confirmed. A press release has been made revealing Penelope as the ‘dangerous artifact’, capable of “unknown powers of conjuration, enchantment, and the like” and she, the First Arcanist, has been implicated as “knowingly harboring a fugitive.” The press release is purposefully sensational and notably lacking in real information, with no mention, for example, of whether Penelope is a homunculus, an enchanted robot, or... whatever else she might be, and it’s evidently gone out by quantum link to every planet in the system, and possibly beyond.

She, Penelope, and Henry sit at the small table in the mess room. Elandra's fingers pressed to her temples, while Penelope watches her, brow knit.

Penelope clears her throat. "Well... what should we do?"

Elandra takes a long breath through her nose and passes her hands over her hair. "I don't know. ...I feel like I've been drunk for the past 36 hours and I'm suddenly waking up with the hangover."

Penelope looks down at the table, and Elandra's eyes land on her. "Can you get drunk?"

"Yes. Julian has informed me that my digestive tissue recognizes over 300 different varieties of psychoactive compounds and adjusts brain activity accordingly."

Elandra takes another deep breath. "Okay. Realistically, we can't outrun Berns. Or... I can't, anyway. I'm not technically Regency but I still have to answer to them. So really, the best thing for you to do is get away from me."

Penelope looks up at Elandra, eyes wide. "Get away from you where?"

"I don't know." Elandra shakes her head. "This is all... this is just all a lot for me to handle."

She looks up to see Henry and Penelope staring at her, and realizes suddenly that she's breathing too quickly. She takes another deep breath. "First, everything that happened in Harperstown. Then, nearly getting torn apart by a decades old Russian war machine. Now... your 13-year-old sort-of-son? I don't know. I don't know what to do with this."

A long silence follows. Then Henry looks at Penelope.

"What's the worst punishment that can happen to a witch?"

Penelope clicks her tongue disapprovingly. "Don't say 'witch,' Henry."

"Dad says it! Anyway, what's the worst that can happen?"

Elandra rises to her feet. "Excoryation," she says, bluntly.

Penelope throws a desperate glance at her before turning her attention back to Henry. "It depends, Henry. Sometimes they put bad magicians to death, but not so much anymore."

Henry makes a face and turns his gaze to Elandra. "What's 'excoryation'?"

Elandra looks out the slit window at the starry expanse. "Excoryation is when they rip the magic out of you once and for all. One of the strongest sorceries there is. Usually takes three of them to do it."

Penelope manages a thin smile of reassurance at Henry. "So you can't cast spells anymore, but you still get to live, so it's better than being burned or hanged."

“No, it isn’t.” Elandra’s voice is like ice. She strides past them and off the grav pad into the central column. “We’ll microslip to Tyr in a few hours. I can’t take you any further than that.”

Scene 10 - The Phantom

Bridget and Norelle begin their journey back to the Phantom the same way they left it. In silence. Though perhaps a little more hastily. Two hours in, Bridget realizes that she hasn't eaten anything today, and sits down on the ground. Norelle turns without missing a beat and heaves her up by the collar again. Bridget tears herself away and sits down again, and Norelle paces away and crosses her arms, surveilling the stone plains. The sunlight warms Bridget’s leather jacket, even as a cool wind causes her to shiver, and she wraps her arms around herself. Even this close to Tyr’s equator, the light of Wolf always feels a little wan, as if stretched too thin.

Bridget takes off her pack and removes a sandwich. She unwraps it and takes a bite, wondering if it's really that flavorless or if that's just a side effect of the injunction. This isn't the first time she's been strictured--it's standard procedure when arresting a non-licensed magician for a criminal offense. But the feeling is no less sickening for being familiar. Though there are no physical bonds involved, everything feels strained and muted. Even the deepest breaths feel shallow. And whatever flavor might have once existed in this cucumber and faux-tein sandwich is undetectable.

Norelle walks over and unslings her pack--removing her sandwich and tearing a bite out of it. The wind blows her short hair about, and she narrows her eyes against it to look back towards Galensloch. Looking up at her in her dark green khakis, one leg cut off above the spring loaded prosthetic, and her tight, military thermal top, Bridget finds herself thinking that Norelle is oddly handsome. Considering her diminutive size, she must really have been an amazing soldier. And whatever horrors that had entailed, she had endured them. She had survived. And what had Bridget done? Thrown her weight around El Paso for a few years and gotten herself nearly killed or excoryated.

“Who do you have?” Bridget asks, raising her voice against the muted feeling of the injunction.

Norelle frowns at her. “What?”

“You said I’m not the only one you have to look out for. So who is it?”

Norelle peels at the brown paper around her sandwich. But she doesn’t respond.

Bridget shrugs. “I don't have anyone,” she says.

Norelle finishes her sandwich and crumples the paper in her hand.

“I know,” she says. “Come on. Let's get off this damn planet.”

It's another hour of hiking up to the plateau. The sloping stone, which felt gradual on the way down, is arduous now. Bridget's not sure how much of that's the injunction and how much is just the nature of things.

At long last, she hears Norelle say, "There's the Phantom."

They approach the ship, a near-perfect sphere of chrome that shines in the late afternoon sun, and Norelle exhales loudly as she swipes her key across the entry panel.

The bay door slides open to reveal 5 men in the blue and red uniforms of the Regency, sitting around a makeshift table, drinking and playing cards.

"Shit."

Norelle raises her hands in the air, and Bridget turns and starts running. One of the ROs flicks his fingers lazily and she falls on her face, some invisible force tripping her up and keeping her down. Two men retrieve her, while the Captain steps down out of the ship and handcuffs Norelle.

"Sergeant Peters. You and your ward are under arrest. We're taking you back to Halspur to await a tribunal."

"What for?" Bridget struggles against the ROs' grip as they drag her back to the Phantom.

The Captain looks grim. "Mass-enchantment of free citizens, and for negligence in your duties as ward and warden. Sound familiar?"

"Yeah, that sounds pretty familiar," Norelle mumbles under her breath.

The ROs fling Bridget onto a crate, and the Captain slides the bay door shut. He grimaces humorlessly at Norelle. "It's a real shame, Sergeant. You used to be quite the hero of mine."

Norelle chuckles mirthlessly. "Well, we all make mistakes."

The faint hum of the ship's magnetic drive vibrates through the room, as the Phantom lifts off the ground and hurtles into the sky.

Scene 11 - Jonathan's Workshop

Jonathan slams an armful of shirts into his suitcase and returns to his closet, eyes scanning for what he ought to know he needs.

"Archimedes, what's the weather like in Yokaido?"

"Yokaido is in the southern hemisphere of Iza, where it is currently late spring. Yokaido is expecting sunny days between 60 and 70 degrees."

“Great.” Jonathan throws a big fur lined jacket he'd been holding across the room. “Book me a passenger ticket on the next freighter headed that direction. Then open up a private voice call through the soulmate.”

“Channel open. You can begin your secret message now.”

Jonathan leans excitedly over his terminal. “Elandra it's me. Obviously. Uh, listen, I shouldn't be telling you this but I know where you can find out more about the androids. Not just Penelope but all of them. They're opening a new factory in Yokaido, out in Amaterasu system, with uh, someone named Theolus Washington. Meet me there—I'm hopping the next freighter.”

He goes to shut it off, but hesitates. “And uh- I... I hope you're safe.” He ends the call.

An abrupt rapping at the door takes Jonathan by surprise. He is rarely disturbed here in his workshop, which doubled as his rather lavish living space.

“Archimedes, who is it?”

“I don't know, sir,” his cohort replies. “There's been some kind of system override of building security.”

“What?”

Jonathan turns back to the door just as it swings open, and Gabriel Berns steps through it, followed by Eris and four other officers.

“Mr. Harper. You are under arrest for obstruction of justice and hacking into an orbital control system.”

Jonathan's jaw drops open. He almost laughs. “Oh my god. You're him. You're Gabriel fucking Berns. I recognize you from NetVision. Jesus I feel like I should ask for your autograph or something.”

Gabriel cocks an eyebrow. “Mr. Harper. It is not the time for trivialities. The charges leveled against you are serious.”

“Sure, sure.” Jonathan nods, zipping up his suitcase. He pauses, as if the thought had just occurred to him. “Except, you aren't the police, so you can't charge me with any of that, can you.”

Gabriel cocks an eyebrow. “You think you're safe because we aren't the police? You have directly countervailed an operation under the CDA. The Regency may not have the jurisdiction to take you off planet, but we are authorized to detain you until your criminal hearing.”

Jonathan takes a step back. “You're serious.”

“As serious as I need to be,” Gabriel smiles thinly. “You defied the law. And I take defiance very seriously.”

Jonathan makes a face. “Where's your proof?”

“The artifact was spirited away by Arcanist Ramirez, and you were the one who told her I'd come for it. We checked the Orbital system logs and traced the unrecognized sessions back to here.”

Gabriel nods to Eris, who steps forward with a pair of handcuffs. Jonathan backs away.

“This is crazy. What does it matter if the robot can do magic? Why do you care?”

Gabriel frowns slightly, and rubs his hands together in thought. “Because, Mr. Harper. The world we live in hangs in a delicate balance. Some of us see the threads that hold it up; most do not. But suffice to say that some disturbances are graver than they first appear.”

Jonathan smirks. “Man, it must really eat at you that Elandra got away.”

Gabriel's eyes slide to meet Jonathan's. But he only flashes that tight-lipped smile again. “On the contrary. I admire her ingenuity. But trust me: I will find her. I will destroy her kidnapped android. And I will strip her of her rank at the first Coven. Perhaps a long-term injunction would do her good as well.”

Jonathan's face falls. “You can't do that to her.”

Gabriel places his tongue against his left canine and regards Jonathan coolly. “You certainly seem comfortable telling me what I can and cannot do. But I can, and it may well be the best thing for her. I assure you, most people who learn magic on the streets never learn a proper respect for the craft. ”

Jonathan feels rage boiling inside of him. “Funny,” he spits. “I remember a speech earlier this year where you bragged that you taught yourself everything you know.”

Gabriel shrugs, spreading his arms in mock deference. “Ah yes. But I am not most people. Cuff him.”

Eris clicks the handcuffs into place around Jonathan's wrists. Once they're on, Jonathan shoulders Eris off, and Eris responds by shoving him onto the ground, hard. Gabriel nods to Eris, casts one more vaguely amused look at Jonathan, then turns to go.

Jonathan starts laughing. Quiet at first, then bursting into a full-throated chuckle.

Gabriel slows his pace, frowns, and turns.

“What's so funny?”

Jonathan slides himself across the floor to sit up against his desk, and jangles the handcuffs behind his back. “Just how long do you think these will stay on me?”

Gabriel watches impassively. Face motionless.

Jonathan shakes his head. “You sad, stupid man. You think you have power. Do you have any idea what my father’s name means? The fortune we control!? Terraforming contracts are fucking crazy, they had to change the standard invoice format just to fit all the zeros onto one line. I was born into more obscene wealth than you’d know how to spend; we could buy a space station out from under you and barely feel it. And you think you can arrest me? What, throw me in jail? For intercepting your secret message?”

Jonathan leans forward. “I’ll be free before you clear orbit. And I will bury you. I’ll make it my personal mission to obstruct and defy you at every turn, even if I have to buy every planetary rep in the galaxy to do it. Hell, it’ll be easy! So I hope you’re ready. If you haven’t learned yet, you’ll learn soon: Money is the only law that matters.”

Gabriel hasn’t moved a muscle. Jonathan is breathing heavily, staring challengingly up at him. Finally, Gabriel sighs heavily.

“What a disgusting thing to say.”

In a single, smooth motion, he pulls the revolver from his belt and fires it, once, the CRACK of the gun-blast reverberating through the workshop.

As the echoes die, the ROs shuffle backward. Gabriel holsters his weapon, shakes his head, and turns on his heel, resuming his exit. Over his shoulder he says, “Call his father. Tell him what happens to men who threaten the integrity of the Republic.”

This was Episode 3 of *The Elandrid*, and the third episode of *Thomas Tells a Story*. I intend to release all of *The Elandrid* online, for free, with a suggested donation upon download, and I'd like to eventually commission cover art for each episode. If you liked this episode, I hope you'll consider supporting us at thomastellsastory.com/download. All funds go directly to paying artists and contributors in support of this story and others like it. If you'd like to try the listening experience, subscribe to *Thomas Tells A Story* on Spotify, iTunes, or wherever you get podcasts.

Thank you for reading,

- Thomas

