

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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The Elandrid, Episode 4

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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 4 - Summonings

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 - Gabriel's Office

It's late.

Gabriel sits at his desk, resting his index and middle fingers on the blackstone. He is almost motionless, eyes focused blankly on the dark sphere.

He illuminates his desktop terminal. "Audrey, call Eleanor"

Audrey's voice is crisp and efficient. "Video or voice?"

"Voice." Gabriel says emphatically, rubbing his face with one hand.

"Pinging Eleanor," the cohort confirms.

Gabriel watches the animation on the screen — a dark terminal icon that shakes back and forth every few seconds. He breathes out in relief when the icon lights up and stabilizes, accompanied by a pleasant tone.

"Gabriel?" The voice on the other end is warm and breathy.

"Angel Eyes," Gabriel rests his elbows on the desk and sinks his head below his shoulders. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"What's the matter?" she responds.

Gabriel shifts his jaw to the left, eyes examining the wood grain of his desk.

"I killed a boy today," he says.

There's a brief pause.

"How old?"

Gabriel shifts in his seat. "27."

Eleanor's voice is sharp, yet comforting. "A boy at 27 is a boy by choice, and choice alone."

Gabriel smiles.

"Did he make you angry?" she asks.

Gabriel shakes his head.

"No... no. ... He made me sad."

Gabriel can hear Eleanor's breathing on the other end. It's even and calm. His mouth twists into a wry smile, as he imagines her thinking of what to say.

"What did he do?" she says, matter-of-factly.

Gabriel shakes his head. "He... he was a Harper. Jon Harper's son, of Harper Terraforming. He threatened to use his family's money to- it doesn't matter. I believe he was serious. He could've made things difficult."

"Then you did the right thing," she says.

Gabriel sniffs, rolling the blackstone under his palm.

"Have you told his father?" she asks.

"Yes. Eris called the man."

Eleanor is quiet on the other end. Gabriel goes still, brow furrowed. "You think that was cold of me,

"I think you know the meaning of sacrifice, but you forget that others do not," she says.

Gabriel leans back in his chair.

"Are you still there?" Eleanor asks.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm here."

"I know you're beating yourself up about this right now. And that's okay, tonight. Life is precious. That's why your work is so important. But knowing that doesn't make it any easier."

He runs a hand across his jaw and leans over his desk. "When does it get easier, then?" he says.

He can almost hear Eleanor smile. "It doesn't," she says.

Gabriel lets out a single breath of a laugh, and Eleanor continues. "Speaking of which, I have an early meeting for the Foundation... I should look over Tom's report again."

"What time is it?" Gabriel asks. "What date?"

"In New York?" Eleanor responds. "Just after 6 in the morning. November 9th."

Gabriel looks up. "Who's going to be president?"

Eleanor speaks quickly. "Vera Walton still. Like we expected. I'd better go, Gabriel."

“Go. Thanks for picking up.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The connection drops, and the icon on the screen goes dark. Gabriel inhales deeply and passes his hands over his face, wiping away whatever tension he can. He casts his eyes over to his second monitor, and reads the Consul’s directive once again. He rises from his desk and stretches, briefly. Then he lies down on his cot, turns out the light, laces his fingers over his stomach, and waits to fall asleep.

Scene 2 - The Hyperion One

Elandra wakes to the sound of sobbing. In the space between dreaming and consciousness, it is her mother who’s crying, and she’s five years old, watching the housing riots on NV. But only for a moment. Then she’s throwing off her covers and pulling herself down the central column towards the room below hers.

When she reaches their door, she sees Henry Petreius, looking small and washed out, holding Penelope tightly as she heaves in his arms, tears streaming down her face. Perhaps it has something to do with having just woken up, but as much as Elandra has gotten used to the strangeness of enchanted gravity-pads, the image is still disarming. While she stands outside in the Zero-G corridor, Henry and Penelope’s pale figures huddle upside down on their cot; they seem to cling to the ceiling of the room from her perspective. It is so surreal that for a moment she wonders if she might still be dreaming.

Elandra swings her body right way round and into the room, landing deftly on her feet. “What’s the matter?”

Penelope hides her face, as if in shame. “No... no.”

“She’s okay.” Henry says. “She’s just...” Henry’s voice is as washed out and frail as he is.

“It’s just so embarrassing,” Penelope finishes.

“Embarrassing?” Elandra steps forward, unsure, then tentatively sits down on the edge of the bed. “Penelope?”

Penelope places a weak hand on Elandra’s arm. “I’m sorry. I just miss him so much.”

“Who??” Elandra is perplexed. “Julian?”

Penelope laughs through her tears. “I know he’s awful. I know. But it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to miss him but I do. I know I shouldn’t love him but I do. I do. I love him so much.”

Penelope pulls away from Henry and tries to catch her breath, but tears continue streaming down her face.

Elandra looks helplessly at Henry, who is staring at Penelope, ashen-faced, eyes wide.

“Has this happened before?” Elandra asks.

“Only when he brought prostitutes home,” Henry replies dully.

“What? But he-” Elandra looks at Penelope, then back at Henry. “Why?!?”

Henry shrugs.

Elandra places a hand on Penelope's shoulder and rubs it experimentally. Penelope grits her teeth and clutches her pillow, rocking back and forth as she cries. “God I hate this. I fucking hate this!”

Elandra nods. “Yeah. Men are snakes, and stuff.” She looks desperately at Henry again.

Henry places his hand on her shoulder as well. “Hey. Penelope. Hey. It's okay. Cinnamon, Rosemary, Turmeric, Sage, right?”

Penelope gasps for breath.

“Is that right?” Henry smiles, weakly. “Cinnamon, Rosemary, Turmeric, Sage?”

Penelope nods her head, laughing. “Cinnamon, Rosemary, Turmeric, Sage,” she says, over-articulating the words between ragged breaths.

“Cinnamon, Rosemary... What now? What is this?” Elandra frowns from Henry to Penelope, back to Henry. “What are you saying?”

Henry flashes a weak smile at Elandra. “It's just something she's always says. Like a mantra.”

“I don't know why—” Penelope laughs. “it's just stuck in my head.” She inhales deeply a few times, trying to slow her breathing. “Cinnamon, Rosemary, Turmeric, Sage.” She looks helplessly at Elandra. “See? It helps.”

Elandra shakes her head. “What is it though?”

“Ahh. I don't know.” Penelope sniffs and wipes tears from her eyes with the heel of her palm. “I don't know,” she says again. “It's just always been there. Cinnamon. Rosemary. Turmeric. Sage. I don't know. It feels familiar. It feels good to say.”

Henry stands up. “I'll get you a glass of water. Err... where's the kitchen?”

“Oh, yeah,” Elandra waves her hand absently out at the central column. “It's two doors down towards the bow. Gravity's on the left wall as you swing in. Uh, water-spout's by the countertop. Can't miss it.”

“Thanks.” Henry gingerly steps off the gravity pad and nearly floats face first into the other side of the column. He coughs, manages to turn himself upside down, and climbs out of sight.

Elandra and Penelope regard each other.

“I’m sorry.” Penelope rubs her eyes again. “I know you didn’t... ask for this.”

Elandra shrugs. “Hey, that’s life, right?”

Penelope laughs. “Right. I guess. I just mean... your job is kind of a solo gig, isn’t it? I can see how this... well, I just really appreciate what you’ve done for me already.”

Elandra fixes her eyes on the bare wall across from her. The last person to sleep in this room was Jonathan. When they made their first test slip to Chiron. When he had first told her he loved her.

She gets up. “It’s all the same,” she says. “I’m going back to sleep. Try not to think about Julian. Programming or not, the guy was an ass.”

Scene 3 - Cooms’ Chateau

The red paint is fresh and wet and bright—standing out against the white marble with an uncompromising clarity. gets back to her feet and wipes sweat from her brow, then looks critically at the wet on the back of her hand. She sniffs at it. It smells warm and sweet and Rosalind feels a familiar blush spread across her face. She shakes it off with a snarl, and surveys her handiwork. Three perfect concentric circles, daubed in thick lines on the floor of General Rondall Cooms’ mansion.

The General had been a war hero, an entrepreneur in weapons technology, and a successful strategist. Fascinated by the role of magic in warfare, he served a brief stint as a Regency Captain. After reaping the benefits of the War Between, he found he had more money than he knew what to do with, and a mounting paranoia to go with it. After alienating most of his friends and former allies within the government, he retreated to Tyr and built a castle there, a chateau with all the excesses of Versailles.

And there he remained. He sits now in the corner of the Great Hall. Watching Rosalind with dull eyes.

She casts a scornful look at him. “What do you think?”

“Hope... Hope...”

“Hope is your daughter you cretin. Rosalind. Rosalind.”

Rondall closes his eyes. Rosalind strides across the floor and grabs his jaw, hard, forcing him to look her in the eyes. “Don’t you dare fall asleep. I want you to watch me.”

Something twitches under the General's pants, and Rosalind withdraws in disgust. She looks at him, arms sagging, a dribble of mucus hanging from his nostril, and her revulsion intensifies. She looks away, covering her mouth with the back of her hand.

"You really look like shit, Ronnie."

She glances back at him, fighting tears.

"If I could kill you myself I would."

She paces back across the pale marble towards her work. She squats down in front of a spread of books, all open on different pages. One has a diagram of the three concentric circles; she consults this text critically, eyes scanning quickly from left to right.

It takes another hour to paint in the runes. It would have taken most people twice that, but Rosalind works quickly and methodically, only occasionally consulting the book. When she has finished, each circle is ringed with smaller symbols, chained together into clauses and punctuated by a binding mark. She circles each ring, holding the book now, touching each rune and whispering an incantation over it. When the rune is activated, she is pleased to see it shine for a moment, then sizzle to black, as if scorching itself upon the floor.

When the red rings are all encircled by black writing, she returns to Rondall's side and gestures before her, excitement rising in her.

"Look at that! Can you feel the power coming off the paint!?" she laughs. "What a pitiful excuse for a magician that Bozar Bonehead guy is, really, when you think, he could do THIS."

Rondall looks at it, but no comprehension crosses his face. No fear or awe. No anything. It incenses Rosalind. She raises a hand to hit him but her breath catches and she freezes, arm upraised.

After a moment, she lowers her hand. She pulls a handkerchief from the General's breast pocket and dabs at his nose.

"It's not your fault that your mind failed you. It's only human." She straightens up. "But it will all be over soon. I promise."

Book in hand, Rosalind advances on the circles and chants, her voice growing in volume until it reverberates through the Great Hall.

***Komensorcas alvokante
Kere la beyon elvenu tatal
elvenu forta, elvenu malas
Kun tatal fortore en mi
De mi, de sorcasm
Kaj la tatal rapide mortodas
Finitefari alvokante!***

Silence.

Rosalind's breathing is heavy. Her eyes flicker over the runes, searching for activity.

There's nothing.

"NAAOO!" Rosalind heaves the book across the hall. She lifts her arms, and the book stops, mid-flight, and rises into the air, pages fluttering. Eyes flashing, she claps her hands together, and flames erupt from the book. She screams and the fire explodes into a thin column of white hot flame, the charred black and curling remnants of the book spinning like panicked birds around it.

Possessed with rage, heat sends shivers through the air around her body as she writhes and yells, "I DID EVERYTHING RIGHT, I DID EVERYTHING RIGHT, I DID EVERYTHING"

She stops suddenly, her hands outstretched towards Rondall, who is weeping and gasping in fear, as if he were trying to scream but his lungs had forgotten how. And still, she can't hurt him. She can't burn him. She can only stand there, hating him.

He tries to get up from his chair and falls to the ground. Rosalind hisses impatiently. She pulls him back into his chair and searches for his handset. "Let's put on some nice, distracting, news," she says testily. "Does that sound good?" She starts playing the local NetVision loop, and presses the handset back into Rondall's trembling hands. His dim eyes settle on the glowing screen, and his breathing calms. Rosalind turns her back on him, running her hands through her wild black hair, as a newscaster's voice sounds from the device.

"-not known if there is any connection between the incidents, and the Regency has not yet released an official statement on the Archmage's condition."

Rosalind freezes.

"For the time being, the only charges leveled against Sergeant Peters, herself a well-known beyonder, are mass-enchantment and warden's negligence, which is magician-speak for her letting Lozano break magical law in her presence. That's right, isn't it, Lori? Right. So for now, the two of them are being held at the Republic Building in Halspur, awaiting a Regency tribunal. We'll get you more coverage on this story- as it develops."

Rosalind turns and moves slowly back towards Rondall. She kneels down in front of him, turns off his handset, and places a hand gently on his cheek. "I have to go away again, Ronnie," she says. "May I go away for a while?"

Scene 4 - The Republic Building

Bridget kicks at the steel door. It bangs loudly, and she shouts in pain, but otherwise nothing happens. Norelle is sitting in the corner, absently fiddling with the release latch on her mechanized prosthetic.

Bridget whirls on her. "You just HAD to cast an injunction on me didn't you!"

Norelle doesn't look at her. "They would have done it if I hadn't. Probational wards can't exactly be trusted to come quietly."

Bridget slams her fist into her palm. "Why don't you break us out? How hard could it be?"

Norelle sighs. "Let's see. There's certainly an alarm on the door, probably it's hexed against anyone passing through it if a key isn't in the lock. I could try and bash through the wall, but that would take too long. And then there's, what? At least three staff magicians and a dozen officers with guns? I don't want to die today. Do you?"

Bridget groans in frustration. "What if they excoryate you?"

"They won't." Norelle responds tiredly. "They might you. But not me. I'll just lose my Trusted Practitioner's License."

Bridget grips her temples with both hands and slides down the wall. "Chingada fucking Christ."

"They say the pain only lasts a few years," Norelle offers. "Dulls down to an ache after that. It's a consequence. There are always consequences. Especially for people like you."

Bridget starts to weep, quietly. Norelle takes this in, without moving. Her lips parted, eyes unfocused. Still looking at the cell wall.

"You know how I lost my leg?" she says.

The question is so unexpected Bridget stops crying immediately. She looks up at Norelle, not sure what to expect, but Norelle's demeanor is unchanged. She continues, as if reading an instruction manual.

"I was on a tour in Afghanistan... 17 years ago... it was right after-... a rough patch, in my life. There was a terrorist compound the United States just wanted torched. High tech nuclear bunker. On the opposite side of a town that was occupied. Tough job. Perfect thing for a beyon."

"I was halfway through the command binding when it happened. I must have missed something in my abjuration. The thing reached out and took my leg off like it was a stick of carrot. I went into shock pretty immediately, we were just lucky that I'd got mostly through the commanding. It took off towards the compound alright, but it took out my partner, half my platoon, a hospital wing in town and most of their schoolhouse on its way."

Norelle's eyes are bright. Bridget just stares at her.

"I don't believe in god," she adds, "But I thank god every day it happened at night, when there weren't any damn kids in that schoolhouse."

"I don't know what I missed. I've played through it a million times. Every night I play through it. I still don't know what I missed."

Bridget doesn't know what to say. She just looks at Norelle. The faint plop of a dripping pipe is the only thing that breaks the silence.

Norelle takes a long, deep inhale. "I never had a partner again. They told me that she, my partner I mean, they told me that she'd let me down too. That she should've been faster. Should've caught my mistake. But... she's the one who died. So... I was a solo act from then on. Until you."

Bridget scrunches up her nose. "Why? Why did you take me on?"

Norelle shrugs. "You reminded me of... someone."

Bridget feels deflated, withered, her arms heavy and small-feeling at her sides.

"I don't deserve this." She says, finally. The words sound thin and insubstantial as she utters them.

For the first time since they were arrested, Norelle looks at Bridget. "No one deserves anything," she says.

Scene 5 - The Alexander

Eris finds Gabriel reading off a tablet, eyes intent, one brow cocked as if it hadn't quite decided how interested it was.

"The Consul has you scheduled for a briefing."

Gabriel slides the tablet onto his desk. "I remember. Any more Intel on Aphrodite?"

Eris shakes his head. "Servers wiped down, which we expected. And our wavetap didn't pick anything up, so they must be using a private QPR."

"Pity..." Gabriel stares out the porthole above his desk, taking in the skyscrapers downtown. "The custom operating system was a nice touch. So much for the standard backdoors."

"Perhaps we should have just stormed the place."

Gabriel shakes his head. "They're too careful. They'd have wiped the servers at first sign of a raid. At least this way we got the bone manufacturer. The Zhong Regent thinks they can shut them down by the end of the week."

Gabriel claps his hands together and fixes his eyes on Eris. "So. Have Regency Intelligence go through the employment charter they gave you. I want a list of the top three candidates most likely to sing for thirty silver. Just the way we used to do it at the Foundation."

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dostoyev. Audrey, put the Consul through.”

Eris retires, as Gabriel’s monitor lights up, then goes dark and displays the circular crest of the United Star Systems. Four white stars lined up on a blue field, like someone’s minimalist reinterpretation of a flag belonging to the nations of Earth. The Regency crest was quite similar, with only a red thaumaturgic triangle appended to the right.

“Lord Berns,” oozes the voice from the other end. Gabriel allows himself a wince. Consul Dane spoke in a mix of wet, treachery vowels and rasping consonants. While some called the quality ‘expressive,’ really it obfuscated expression behind affect; it arrested your attention utterly and left little room for determining tone or motive. Gabriel curls his lip.

“Well met, Consul.”

“Turn on your camera, Berns. I cannot talk to a man without looking him in the eye.”

Slowly, Gabriel leans forward and presses an icon on the monitor, then leans back, a vague half smile plastered opaquely over his face.

“That’s better.”

Consul Adam Dane was the head of the United Star Systems. During the Juno Convention, it was agreed that the governing bodies responsible for multiple planets circling multiple stars should retain certain common structures. Consequently, the Three Republics were founded, with a shared root constitution. The Consuls were ‘elected’ officials, and served five year terms, but how they were elected was not specified, and each Republic had very different ideas about what qualified as an ‘election’.

“How goes the hunt for the missing android?” drips the Consul’s voice.

Gabriel shrugs. “By now the Arcanist knows she has no support. My guess is, she dumps the android on Tyr. The longer she has it, the more culpable she’ll seem at tribunal, and she’s smart enough to know that.”

The Consul jumps the end of Gabriel’s sentence. “Well that is great news. Really good.”

“I’m glad to hear you think so,” Gabriel shifts in his chair.

The Consul continues. “It’s especially good, Berns, because I need you to go to Tyr, right away. Did you read my message? Do you know what’s happening there?”

Gabriel inhales slowly through his nose. “Yes, sir. Ex-SEAL Beyonder Norelle Peters allowed her ward to enchant a crowd of rioters.”

“AND they assaulted Archmage Bohumir.”

Gabriel's lips tighten. "The Archmage is a reclusive anarchist who works for the government only when he's run out of drugs. For all we know, it was a summoning gone wrong. In any case it seems very unlikely that an ex-military officer would attack him especially when she Commissioned. A book. From him."

"It makes no difference," the Consul says. "You need to be there."

"There is a strong Regency presence on Tyr; I'm not certain my direct intervention is—"

"I want you there. You must go."

Gabriel rubs his jaw, and forces a smile. "What about the android?"

"Well according to you, the android's on Tyr as well. And if she isn't, send a squad to look for it. Send your manservant. I can't have you chasing a wild dog across the galaxy. I need you on Tyr. ACT-3 is already calling it domestic terrorism."

Gabriel nods, once. ACT-3 was Alliance Counter Terrorism, Cell 3. And when they got involved, things tended to get... messy. "Very good, sir. I just need to pay a quick visit to Commander Harper."

"Why?"

Gabriel eyes the door. "Just a debriefing. I'll be breaking orbit in Tyr by end of day."

There is a brief pause, and Gabriel wonders for a moment if his nonchalance was too obviously forced. But after a moment the Consul just says: "See that you are. Well met, Regent."

...and the line shuts off with a low tone.

Eris raps at the door, and enters. Gabriel swivels to greet him.

"Admin is on it," Eris says. "Should have a list for you in a few days."

"Slow. You'd think an institution as old as the Regency would be familiar with the concept of industrial espionage." Gabriel rubs his hands together, brow furrowed. "The Consul has asked that I intercede in the Peters-Lozano affair."

Eris narrows his eyes. "Seems unnecessary. What do you know about the enchantress?"

"American by birth. Her parents were both illegal aliens, and they died in a deportation incident when she was five. Someone made the mistake of teaching her Kaze and she made the mistake of using it on a police officer."

Gabriel makes a face. "The Bohumir incident certainly looks bad. If it drags out, I may need you to go after the androids without me."

“Why me, sir?”

“You know why,” Gabriel looks meaningfully at Eris. “But you’ll have a squad and a practicing officer with you as well. How’d you like working with Lieutenant Berring?”

Eris purses his lips. “She actually found something quite useful on the alloy printer that makes the bones.”

Gabriel leans forward. “Yes? Manufacturing records?”

“Not exactly.” Eris sniffs. “Just a Zhong export permit for shipping directly to Harper’s Town.”

“Doesn’t tell us anything new, does it?”

“No,” Eris says, “but they have identical permits for Yokaido. Iza.”

For the first time all day, Gabriel smiles. “Well, it sounds like you’ll be sending me a postcard from the IRN.”

Scene 6 - Libby’s House

It only takes Andrea a few minutes of hastily searching her mother's room to find the book, a dusty leather-bound volume in a tissue-filled shoebox on the top shelf of the closet. The first time, it had taken hours. And each time she went back for it, it was in a different place, even if her mother hadn't been home in months. Andrea suspected it was on some kind of schedule—there had been a number of repeats—but it certainly wasn't as simple as day of the week.

It was one of the oldest books Andrea had ever seen. Norelle used to sit with it in the evenings quite regularly, poring over it for the hundredth time while Andrea watched NetVision. When Luna moved in with them, and Norelle began spending more and more time away, Andrea had spent many nights with it, always returning it in the morning to its hiding place du jour in case Norelle came home unexpectedly. She was drawn to it inexorably, perhaps—as she was self-aware enough to note—because it was the closest she ever felt to her mother.

The title was printed in gold, “Jourdemayne's Servants,” it said, in an old blackletter script, and “edited by Charles Engleman.”

She studied the book all evening and all the following day, speaking segments of the Latin out loud, and praying that she had the pronunciation right. Searching the net whenever possible for reference and trying her best to grasp the intricacies of a basic summoning.

Her mom used to say that theurgy was an “unflattering reflection of human ingenuity.” Beyonds could be useful things, but even after hundreds of years of summoning tradition, very little was really understood about them, in large part due to the enormous variance seen from summoner to summoner. Sure, a standard binding would constrain any beyond in

approximately the same way, but how effective it would be was hard to predict. Some beyons radiated disjunctions, which could quickly tear through all but the most resilient magical barriers, and others oozed pure anti-magic. There was even dispute about the nature of summoning itself, with some magicians asserting that it was just an advanced conjury, while planar theurges assured anyone who would listen that beyons were native residents of another dimension.

The one thing everyone could agree on was that they were dangerous and hard to control, and that only magicians with a powerful proclivity and many years of training could hope to successfully summon one.

“Fuck it,” Andrea mutters to herself. And she shoves the book into her bag, leaves the house, and begins the trek over the hill to Libby’s.

Andrea arrives, sweaty and breathless, at Libby’s doorstep, and takes a moment to roll her eyes at the wide green lawn and red brick driveway, all manicured within an inch of the uncanny valley of landscaping.

When the doorbell rings, she hears hurried footfalls inside, and then Libby is at the door, excitedly letting her in.

“Hey,” Libby says, and Andrea forces a smile.

“Hey.”

“Are you hungry? We made veggie burgers.”

“Thanks.” Andrea steps into the wide entrance hall, trying not to stare too much at the high ceilings and the austere glass ornaments presiding over them. “Where are your parents?”

Libby raises her hand conspiratorially. “They’re in Helen’s Bay for the weekend. So we should be clear! We set everything up downstairs.”

Libby leads Andrea into the kitchen, where Jimmy and Petrus are playing video games

“Hey, Andrea’s here.”

Petrus gets up immediately and turns off the console, ignoring protests from Jimmy.

“Hey,” he says.

Andrea tries not to laugh. “So, are we doing this?”

They head down to the basement, which is really too comfortable to be called a basement. Libby has put candles absolutely everywhere, and she now hurries around to light them all.

“Do you have the sand?” Andrea asks, and Petrus nods, handing her a bottle. She pours the black grains in 5 thin lines, forming a rough pentacle. Libby giggles nervously and turns out the lights.

Andrea glances around at the other kids, their features golden and shadowy. It suddenly feels so stupid. The candles. The excitement on their faces. For a moment she wonders what her mom would say if she could see them. But she pushes this thought from her mind and opens the book of Jourdemayne.

“Okay, we’ll each give it one request. And remember, we’re only summoning an imp, so nothing too crazy. Anything bigger than a bike tire is liable to overwhelm the thing.”

“What’s overwhelm?” Libby is actually looking at Andrea with something akin to awe, and Andrea makes a mental note to remember this feeling forever.

“It’s when your command exceeds the beyon’s power and it either dissipates or breaks its binding, in which case we all die.”

Jimmy shifts uncomfortably. And Petrus furrows his brow.

“Kidding. Kind of. I’m doing something called a Challenger’s Summon, which means it only comes through if our requests are acceptable. Oh, and turn off your handsets.” The three seniors scramble to do so. “Guys, I thought that would be obvious! Any kind of distraction or sonic interference could fuck the whole thing up, and we only have one shot at this. We’ll all be pretty drained afterwards.”

She lays the book down and takes a deep breath. “Anyway, the fourth command will complete the spell... so who wants it?”

Petrus raises his hand. “Me.”

“Great.”

Andrea focuses on the pentacle. “Here we go,” she whispers. And begins to chant.

The words feel almost familiar on her lips. She supposes that’s natural. She’s read them enough times over the past few years. Just never all together and out loud. When she’s finished, she looks up and sees that the floor within the pentacle has turned a deep, dark, red.

“Holy shit,” Jimmy mutters.

“Okay,” Andrea tries to sound calm, like she’s done this a million times. “Now the commands. Make sure that you picture it very clearly in your head while you say it.”

Jimmy goes first. “I- I want my sweatshirt back from Shelly Corbyn. Don’t hurt her though. Maybe scare her a bit.”

Then Libby. "I want The Lost Hominids, the Allen Sharpe painting. The original. It's hanging at the Daru Inesh museum right now."

Andrea tries not to laugh. A painting and a sweatshirt? Seriously? She rubs her face. "I demand a beyonder's token," she says, and with a grimace, she bites her tongue as hard as she can.

It hurts more than she expected and she cries out, coughs, then leans over and spits blood onto the pentacle. It sizzles like water thrown on a hot pan, then solidifies into a round, black coin.

Libby is staring at her. Andrea tries to shrug at her as if to say, that's how the pros do it. But Petrus has already started speaking.

"I want you to chop off Owen Connors legs," he says.

Andrea jerks her head around to look at Petrus, eyes wide. "What the fuck?" Libby shrieks, her voice a strange pitch. The pentacle is humming, the crimson bubbling and seeping as if there was a current beneath it, growing steadily stronger.

The tactile sensation is similar to a heavy dose of psychedelics. A buzzing, vibratory energy that is neither audible nor visible permeates Andrea's body, and her mind begins to race uncontrollably.

Eyes wide, Andrea watches something begin to crawl out of the pentacle, and before she can think she is on her feet, her skin crawling as Jimmy falls backwards screaming and Libby rakes her nails across her face.

Unable to breathe, Andrea realizes she is panicking. The thing coming out of the pentacle makes her brain feel like it's turning in on itself when she looks at it. It has eyes, at least eight of them, she can feel them staring at her; but every time she tries to meet its gaze they slide out of view, as if only visible out of the corner of her eye, creating the feeling that it is always looking at her, while she can never really see it looking.

As the blobby form of the beyon heaves itself from the five pointed star, viscous and dripping. Andrea raises her voice, which sounds strange and alien. It feels like trying to punch someone in a dream. Tinny and constricted, as if funneled through a can telephone. "I, the challenger, reject these commands! I reject them! Be gone!"

The beyon's blood red body flashes white-hot, and it emits a sound that might be called a scream of rage if it weren't so utterly inhuman. Andrea covers her ears and falls backwards, landing hard on her tailbone.

The beyon quivers, and as it does the air in the room seems to quiver with it. Andrea can sense the pentacle sucking it back in, she can almost see it. In its final act, it twists its body and sends long, many-jointed appendages lashing out in all directions. The arms are thin and bony, extending with lightning speed with an endless unfolding of sharp elbows and pale skin pulled taut over bone and pulsing veins. Andrea lurches backward, but the thing

does not strike her. Instead, she watches it slash Libby across the face. She watches it peel the skin like a glove off Jimmy's hand, and she watches it reach into Petrus's chest, burning through cloth and flesh as if it were nothing. Blood pours from Libby's wound and Jimmy's mutilated hand, and Petrus screams and clutches at himself desperately as the beyon breaks something inside him, and pulls out a single, bloody fragment of bone.

Then the beyon slithers into the pentacle like water down a drain, and with a BANG, the portal turns black, and the four are left in darkness.

Then comes the screaming.

Andrea feels her way to the wall and flips on the lights. It's like something out of a horror movie. She can't think, she can't believe what's happening.

"Fuck fuck fuck. Fucking fuck." She runs her hands through her hair. "This is real. This is really happening." She pulls out her handset, squeezing the sides of it to turn it on. "Come on come on come on."

"Hello, Andrea," her cohort intones.

"Spike, call an ambulance!"

"You have requested an emergency service. Please confirm."

"Yes! Confirm! Yes!" Andrea yells into the phone.

"Emergency medical services requested. What is the nature of your emergency."

"We were, uh," Andrea looks at the three seniors, Libby pressing her hand over her eye, Petrus coughing blood and gasping, Jimmy screaming in short bursts. "Shooting off fireworks," she finishes. "In the basement."

She notices the black coin, still sitting on the burnt carpeting within the lines of sand. She snatches it up hastily and pockets it.

"Ambulance en route. ETA 6 minutes."

Andrea strides over to Petrus. "What the fuck was that? If you weren't such a psycho we'd all be okay right now!"

"I fucking hate that guy," he coughs out, between ragged breaths. "I hate him. I thought you'd be happy."

Andrea stands up, her face a mask of confusion. "What is wrong with you?" she says.

Petreius passes out, and Andrea looks around her, mouth agape. She's committed one of the most serious crimes on the books, and maimed three kids in the process. "I need to get the fuck out of here," she says. Dazed, she walks up the stairs, and out the front door.

Scene 7 - The Hyperion One

Elandra plays the message for the third time, trying to decide how surprised she should be that Jonathan has found a new and genuinely helpful way of inserting himself into her life.

“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. And uh- I... I hope you're safe.”

She flips to NetVision, and listens, brow cocked in a permanent grimace of disbelief, to a reporter speculating that Bridget had ensorcelled Norelle and forced her to dismember the Archmage. She shakes her head, mumbling, “Shit is crazy,” to herself. Then plays the message from Jonathan again.

“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. And uh- I... I hope you're safe.”

“How does he know?”

Penelope's voice comes out of nowhere, and Elandra's body jerks in surprise. “Jesus. Could you make some more noise when you enter a room, please?”

“Sorry.” Penelope casts her eyes down. “Who is he?”

“He's... a friend. He uh... he helped me refurbish this ship... on a whim. Because he wanted to meet me. Which says a lot about him.”

Penelope raises her eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“I don't know.” Elandra looks out at the stars on the other side of the glass. “He's a very well-intentioned person, and he's got the right idea about things, which is nice. But he... he's had every opportunity to do anything he wants... he doesn't know what a closed door looks like.”

“Is that why you don't love him?”

Elandra turns to Penelope, brow twisted into a nearly comical expression of incredulity. “What?”

Penelope raises her hands. “Sorry, I just- sorry I just wondered. Because he clearly- ...and the way you talk about him...”

Elandra looks away. “No,” she says. “No. That's not why.”

Penelope sits in the co-pilot chair, and she and Elandra regard each other for a moment in silence.

Elandra wrinkles her nose. “Tyr is a big planet. There’s plenty of people who’d rather have money in their pocket than call the Regency.”

Penelope smiles. “But I don’t have any money.”

Elandra looks away, fixing her eyes on the console. She wraps an arm around herself and runs her fingers over the bumpy scar tissue beneath her shirt.

Penelope takes a deep breath, “Look. You didn’t have to come after me, at all. You just decided to. And I’ll never forget that. I hate to ask for more but-”

“We can’t risk landing at a port,” Elandra interrupts, deliberately, swiveling suddenly and busying herself with the control panel, entering a sequence of keystrokes that brings the engine to life with a hum. “We’ll park outside Halspur and go into town for fuel... I need to check in at the Republic Building.” Suddenly Elandra’s face lights up. It’s so obvious. “I’ll just say you’re still on Freya — that we lost each other in the canyon. I didn’t know about the CDA, so technically, then, I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Penelope frowns. “What about me? And Henry?”

Elandra flips a safety switch and enters another command, initiating a short countdown. “You’ll be fine,” she says, eyes on the stars before them. “You’ll figure something out,” The slip drive hums, and the stars wink out of existence, replaced by the hulking gray globe of Tyr.

Scene 8 - Jon’s Office

Commander Jon Harper, terraforming magnate and brilliant technologist, casts himself about his office like a wild animal, bellowing so loudly that the chandelier above him shakes.

“I don’t care who he is! I want him brought here, and I’m going to pull his fucking head off!”

His Chief of Security, Samuel Blake, makes an effort to be heard. “Sir. Gabriel Berns is one of the most powerful men in the galaxy, and that’s before accounting for his talent for sorcery.”

Jon advances on the man, named Samuel Blake. His whole face is red, a kind of wild fury in his eyes that burns all other thoughts out of existence, because it has to, because it must. His normally smooth gray hair is fraying around his head, his body heaving with every breath. Under other circumstances, he was known for a calm and laconic demeanor, a quick but reserved wit. He was barrel chested and round faced, and he wore a fake beard every Christmas.

“How did this happen?” He grabs Blake by the shoulders, his hands tightening like vises around them. “HOW.”

“Sir, I swear on every grave on Earth, I am as shocked as you are. We didn’t even know they planned to detain him!”

“Tell me why my son is-” Jon cuts himself off, with a strange choking sound.

“I don't know sir.” Blake trips over his words. “Commander I watched Jonathan grow up. I-”

Jon pushes himself away from Blake. “No. No I cannot hear this.”

He wheels around, pointing his finger, his hand shaking. “I have a new grave for you to swear on. The grave of the Regent. Gabriel Berns does not get off this planet!”

A knock comes at the door, and Blake opens it. Jon’s assistant, a mousey woman by the name of Elma, steps into the room, her eyes puffy and red from crying.

“Commander. Mr. Blake. I'm sorry but, the Regent.”

“What? What about him?”

Elma clears her throat. “He's here.”

It's as if a sudden cold front had come through and frozen everything in the room. Blake thinks for a moment he could almost see his breath, if only he dared to breathe. The silence turns a few seconds into an Ice Age.

“Where.” Jon says, finally, the word drops like molten glass.

“In the audience hall. He said he needed to speak with you.”

Jon’s jaw quivers. “How many men did he bring with him?”

“None, sir.” Elma looks behind her nervously. “He's alone.”

Jon emits an abrupt, humorless sound—to call it a laugh would be a gross misappropriation of the term—and moves toward the door.

Blake shakes himself out of his torpor. “Sir, stay here! SIR.” He makes to intervene, but Jon pushes him out of the way, and Blake stumbles back. Elma presses herself against the wall as Jon strides past her.

Blake draws his gun and speaks into his armband. “Evans. Woodhouse. Audience hall, now. Bring backup. Bring... fuck it. Bring everything you’ve got.”

The audience hall is a circular room with tall arched ceilings. Real wood is a luxury in the colonies, and this room is ringed with hand-carved mahogany chairs and tables. Gabriel sits in one of the chairs. He has removed the glove from his right hand, and he runs his fingers slowly over the hewn curve of the arm-rest.

He stands when he hears footsteps, and pulls on his glove. "Commander Harper," he begins, then cuts himself off.

Jon advances on Gabriel, fists clenched, his face a mask of rage. Gabriel's eyes flit around the room. He clocks the sound of more oncomers, heavy boots on stairs, and quick steps just out of sight, behind the door he came through or another. "Commander," he says again, before Jon leans forward and rams his shoulder into Gabriel's gut.

Jon is a few inches shorter than Gabriel, but no less physically imposing. Gabriel is bent over and sent staggering backwards into the chair he'd stood up from. He ducks, as Jon's fist smashes into the wall where Gabriel's head had just been.

Gabriel uses the moment to push himself up on the chair arms, bunch his legs up and kick with both feet, hard. Jon stumbles back, as Blake enters, his gun raised. "Sir! Out of the way!"

Jon doesn't seem to hear, Gabriel stands and side-steps hastily as he rushes at him again. Blake fires his gun, twice, and Gabriel winces as the bullets ricochet past him, burying themselves in the wall. He dances under Jon's swinging fist, and with a grunt, delivers a sweeping kick to the leg. Jon falls face-first on the ground, and Gabriel seizes upon the opportunity to plant his knee in the small of Jon's back, staring meaningfully at Blake as he does. Breathing hard, he reaches down the back of Jon's shirt, pulling at the chain of Jon's pendant and twisting it taught around his fist, as the other doors to the room fly open and a small army of guards pours in, along with Jon's staff magicians.

"Alright," Gabriel says, a little out of breath. "That's enough. Everything's alright." He looks around the room, and the many guns pointing his direction. "Why don't we all lower our weapons," he says, "and try to calm down."

No one does. Gabriel looks down at Jon. "Commander Harper, are you alright? Can you breathe?"

Jon wheezes, curling and uncurling his fingers against the carpet.

Gabriel catches the eye of Woodhouse, a thin gentleman with dark mustache, and nods at the pendant chain. "This your handiwork? Very impressive. Keep your men back. Wouldn't want them hurling any curses at me while I've got this wound around my hand, would we?"

Woodhouse stares cautiously, his hand frozen in the gesture of a prepared spell. Gabriel nods.

"Commander," he says, "would you be so kind as to put your guards at ease?"

A long moment passes. At last, through shuddering breaths, Jon says, "9 generations. For 9 generations, Harpers have worked to elevate humanity above the cruel bonds of nature. For over 200 years, my heirs have named their firstborn son Jonathan. And with one stroke you..."

He trails off. Gabriel moves his weight from Jon's back, still clasping the pendant, the back of his hand pressed to Jon's neck.

"Please, let us stand."

Jon grits his teeth, and shaking, he and Gabriel adjust and rise slowly to their feet.

"Your amulet. Will you undo the clasp, please?"

Jon obliges. Disconnected at last, Gabriel takes a step backward. The chain of Jon's pendant still wrapped around his left hand.

"Commander Harper, I recognize the horror of your position. I have not come to ask your forgiveness or your friendship."

"Of course not." Jon laughs mirthlessly. Drunk with grief, he reels on his feet, steadies himself, and pads over to one of the still upright chairs.

"Fucking wizards. You think you can do whatever you want."

Gabriel gives Jon a sharp look. "On the contrary Commander Harper. It was your son that believed himself above accountability. He threatened to use your money to protect his personal interests at all costs, to pursue a vendetta against me, and to destabilize the interplanetary economy if that's what it took. I will not indulge intimidations of any kind, least of all those that carry weight and malice."

Commander Harper sinks into his chair. Silently. Tears now flowing freely, streaming down his face.

Gabriel furrows his brow, his eyes on Harper. "I am sorry for your loss," he says. "My heart is as heavy as the duty I shouldered 16 days ago. I never expected that the price of justice would be so steep. Nor did I expect so deep a resistance within the ranks of the Republic."

He walks over to the chair, and kneels before the Commander.

"Sir, it is no consolation, but you must understand: I do not take this burden lightly. Your son's death has taught me a valuable lesson. I will not forget it."

The Commander remains still. Tears falling off his face and forming small dark splotches on the cool, blue carpeting. Finally he turns his face, and meets Gabriel's eyes.

"There is nothing more important than the preservation of our society," Gabriel says. "We must all make sacrifices."

Jon's eyes narrow. Then, with great effort, he nods, once.

Gabriel stands. "Good," he says. "I'll be out of your way now." He looks at the guards arrayed between him and the exit.

Jon looks up. "Stand down," he says. "...Let him go."

The guards lower their guns. Jon's eyes remain focused on Gabriel, his jaw still quivering as he strains to keep his voice from cracking.

"Lord Regent. My son... was good. He was reckless, arrogant, and yes, I am sure he said... what he said. But he was good. And he was brave. And he was kind."

Gabriel stands where he was, almost as if he had just paused to take in the architecture. He looks down at the floor, looks into the eyes of one of the guards, then looks straight ahead, and leaves.

Jon stares after him. "Elma," he says. "Blake. And all of you. This. What has happened. If I so much as hear a rumor of it, I'll shut down the Dyson aperture and watch the planet turn back into a desert. Do you understand? There will be no statement. There will be no ceremony. Not yet. I need time. To make... arrangements. I need time."

He gets to his feet. "Do you understand?" he says again.

Elma's voice shakes. "Yes, Commander."

"Thank you." He gets to his feet, and through gritted teeth he says, "There is nothing more important."

Scene 9 - Radcliffe Tenements/The Republic Building

The extra gravity was especially noticeable in Halspur today, or perhaps that was just the fickle weather. Icy sleet and lancing rain broken intermittently by a clammy sun that seemed to draw a cold fog up off the streets.

Safia is released unexpectedly early from the bakery, and she's pretty sure it's because they're installing a new automated system. Which in turn means that, with any likelihood, she's out of a job.

She pulls her feet down the pitted road from the bakery, her eyes passing hopelessly over the identical slate-blue stone buildings, thinking how even so beautiful a shade of stone was made ugly by these formulized and pockmarked walls. Misery had a way of seeping into the atmosphere of places, and with the added weight here, it seemed to have been concentrated in the dull grooves and uninspired graffiti that seemed to inevitably plaster itself upon every building like shrink-wrap.

As she lets herself into the apartment, mind going over her slim job prospects for the hundredth time, her eyes are immediately drawn to a bit of crumpled paper pinned to the wall, a leftover warehouse receipt, with words scrawled across its back. She reads it, utterly motionless, and gasps for air when she reaches the end.

Safia yells for Qamar, but she's not home. She has a sudden feeling that it's all too late. That she can see it all. That she had the power to stop something from happening and failed, because she was too weak, or too naive, and now it was all gone. It had all already slipped away. Like the moment you realize you've dropped something off a precipice, and now there is nothing to do but watch it fall. And just like that, she realizes she knows exactly where Yusef has gone, and without wasting another moment, she dashes out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her, and sending a wave of dead air rustling through their bed sheets, and flapping the pinned note against the wall.

The note said, "By the time you get home, you'll see what I did. Hopefully they don't keep me too long, but either way. I'm sorry. You wanted me to talk to you, and I'm sorry I couldn't before. But now I'm asking you to understand. Understand that if we do not raise our voices in the halls of our oppressors, they will never listen to our cries. Wish me luck. - Yusef."

As they close in on the city center from the east, Elandra and Henry walk on either side of Penelope, who wears the invisible duster with its high collar pulled up around her face, ready to vanish from sight if she needs to. Elandra offers half-hearted facts about Halspur. "I've heard Halspur is the number one destination for Slate Act refugees," and things like that. Each time, Penelope smiles wanly, wondering why the Arcanist has allowed them to continue with her so far.

To the south, the roads wind away from the Republic Building through Elemen park, a rolling emerald in an otherwise gray, flat urban landscape. Further south, Rosalind roars up the road on her motorcycle, her black hair streaming behind her, her eyes intent.

And in the holding cells of the Regency Wing, Norelle and Bridget still sit, wordlessly, awaiting whatever fate has in store for them.

Fate, or perhaps just gravity.

~

Yusef slides through the metal detector, scowling and clutching his bare arms to his chest.

"What's this?" one of the officers holds up a small clay vessel, decorated with carvings.

Yusef frowns. "It's a cremation urn for an old resistance fighter. Some anarchists in my building seem to think its spirit is talking to them, so I stole it and I'm handing it over to Reclamation like I'm supposed to."

"What's in it?" the guard asks.

"Ashes, I would assume. Is there a problem?"

The officer shrugs, still examining the urn. "Not often that you see a non-assimilate turning something into reclamation."

Yusef collects his shoes, his Kameez, and his wool coat from the conveyor belt, eyeing the other side of the entrance hall. Natural-born Alliance citizens didn't have to take their clothes off. Nor did Reclamation survivors who signed the Oath of Assimilation. Yusef makes eye contact with a brown faced man across the cordoned barrier, in a checked tie and felt hat. Yusef recognizes the man's expression, but there was no word for it. It was equal parts disgust, pity, and shame.

"I am disgusted by all false idols," Yusef growls, and is surprised to hear the officer chortle good-naturedly behind him.

"Fair enough." The man smiles and hands the urn back to Yusef. "You know they just incinerate these things right?"

Yusef paces into the wide entry hall of the Republic Building, noting the huge ferns growing in the center of the room, and the great skylight above. He eyes the armed guards all around him, and remembers the last time he was here, when they shoved a piece of paper in front of him offering extra rights in exchange for his soul.

"No one can take your soul from you," he hears Safia say in his head. "No man, no woman, no government." Yusef curls his lip. He wasn't so sure.

He makes his way to the cement lip of the wide interior oasis. And eyeing the guards once more, he takes a deep breath, and steps up onto it.

Immediately, he sees the guard note his presence, and begin making their way towards him. Everyone else just continues on their way.

"Hey," he yells. "Hey!"

A few people stop and look. Most ignore him. He can't see if anyone has pulled out their handheld to record him, but the guards are making their way through the crowd. There won't be much time. But what had he meant to say?

"Hey!" he yells again, turning a few more heads. "My name is Yusef Ali. My village was destroyed by Reclamation. My parents were killed, brutally! My sisters and I were lucky to survive!"

The guards are running towards him now, pushing through the throng. At least one person has lifted up their phone to record him. He only has a few moments left.

"I-I... I don't have the words! You took them from my throat. And so I can only speak the pain of my people in my oppressor's tongue!"

The guards are almost upon him. He holds the urn high above his head, and shouts. "These are the ashes of my village! The ashes of my parents! This is the price of your Republic!"

And he smashes the urn on the ground.

As the clay shatters, a cold wind seems to fill the room, buffeting Yusef to the point of almost falling off the cement wall. Men and women hold onto their scarves and the guards draw their weapons, as the ashes lift into the air and swirl around the huge enclave. The wind grows so intense, it pushes people back, away from Yusef, who falls to his knees on the platform, staring in disbelief as the ashes fly from the urn in great smoky clouds, in hurtling columns, in endless quantities, and the rushing wind begins to howl around him.

One of the guards fires his weapon, three times, BANG BANG BANG, and Yusef falls off the platform, clutching his shoulder, as the rest of the crowd screams and begins to trample each other as they try to escape the room.

The ashes settle, suddenly, forming an impossibly perfect 7 pointed star of intersecting lines around the interior oasis. And with a strange hum that vibrates through the floor, the ash turns black and burns itself into the tile.

Safia enters the building, moving past fleeing security guards, clutching her headscarf around her head. She passes surreally through the metal detector, eyes searching ahead of her, past the panicking crowd.

And there he is, staggering towards her, as the floor ripples behind him and something sinuous and inky begins to pull itself from the floor.

“YUSEF!” she screams, as an enormous shape, like that of a giant squid composed all of shadows pulls itself out of the summoning circle, consuming the platform and sending out tendrils of darkness to impale the security guards as they fire their weapons in vain. The thing is massive, billowing out of the circle as if it were being inflated, and every second it sends tentacles flying, ripping people apart and exploding stone columns into dust.

Safia stumbles forward, arm outstretched towards Yusef, as gunfire blasts and the beyon froths towards them in a mist of blood and falling tile. A man barrels towards her and is pulverized by a huge, black tentacle smashing into him, spraying Safia with blood. She leaps over it and nearly falls across Yusef, grabbing him up in her arms as he sobs, holding him close, her only thoughts of his hot breath and tears before the beyon’s huge bulbous head smashes through the skylight above them, blotting out the sun and sending shattered glass raining down on them.

Scene 10 - Elemen Park

Elemen Park is overrun with fleeing pedestrians. Rosalind can hardly believe that she is experiencing it in real time. It’s all so vivid—just like the videos she’s seen of terror attacks, but really happening in front of her. She parks her bike and dismounts, not sure where to look. She wants to take in everything: the panic, the sirens, the shadows billowing out of the Republic Building ahead of her. But her attention is suddenly grabbed by something totally unexpected.

At the top of a hill to her right, Rosalind sees a tall woman in a beautiful, hand-embroidered hijab, calmly watching the chaos unfold beneath them. As the hard footfalls of desperate

men pound around them, as screaming children are pulled headlong by their mothers, this woman is utterly still. Watching.

Rosalind paces up the slope of the hill, and comes to a stop next to the motionless woman. She too is utterly transfixed. Tentacles of shadow are pouring out of the windows and wrapping themselves around the ornate stone masonry, simultaneously solid and smoke, as if searching for their own shapes.

As the tentacles of shadow tighten and take on a more physical dimension, the stone buckles and cracks, and they watch as the building implodes.

Rosalind's eyes are wide. Her lips glued shut.

The woman turns her head abruptly to Rosalind. Her eyes looking up and down, taking in the red overcoat, the tangled hair. The rapt expression.

"I did that," she says.

She turns back to face the carnage. Her arms still crossed. "I did this." She says.

The words sink in. For the first time in memory, Rosalind experiences the meaning of the word 'incredulous.' She turns her head, very slowly, and looks at Qamar.

This was Episode 4 of *The Elandrid*, and the fourth 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

