

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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The Elandrid, Episode 5

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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 5 - Ereshkigal

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 - The Republic Building

Henry is wearing one of Elandra's sweaters. It's a fluffy, mint-green and down-gray pull-over that's only slightly too big for him, and only not quite warm enough for the cold mist of Halspur.

Next to Henry, Penelope walks, mercifully unrecognizable in the heavy brown soldier's coat. And then Elandra, in a white winter thermal and gloves under her signature yellow jacket.

"You could find good work as a mage-for-hire," she's saying to Penelope. "Your conjuries are quite strong... especially if you get some training in integrated sorcery and super-physical-components... I mean you could earn 700 a week just enchanting gravity pads." Elandra stops suddenly, consults her armlet, and turns to Penelope.

"Probably shouldn't get any closer than this. I think that's the Republic Building." She points at a tall glass dome that rises just above the buildings ahead, and squints against the brightness of the sun, and the bitter wind, thinking they couldn't have picked a better day to be on the run. No one had spared them so much as a first look, let alone a second.

Penelope takes a deep breath. "Well."

Elandra nods, not quite meeting Penelope's eyes. "Yeah."

"Thank you, for everything."

"Don't mention it."

An awkward, tense moment follows. Elandra opens her mouth as if to say something, then closes it again, and Penelope frowns at her, searching for what it might have been. A siren sounds in the distance. And somewhere, a man yells indistinctly.

"Good luck," Elandra says, finally.

"Thanks." Penelope smiles thinly.

"Penelope?" Henry points towards the Republic Building. "Arcanist?"

The two women turn to look. The siren has been joined by another, and another, and from beneath the sirens another sound is growing, the sound of screaming. Something is moving beneath the glass dome of the Republic Building. They watch as the dome suddenly buckles upward, then disintegrates into a run-off of wreckage that pours down and out of sight as an amorphous black shape heaves itself from it.

Elandra wheels on Penelope. "Stay here!" she says, and takes off running. Penelope turns to Henry, "Please do stay here, I won't be able to find you if you don't," she says, then goes sprinting after Elandra. Henry clutches Elandra's sweater around himself, then helplessly, sits down on the nearest stoop.

~

Norelle hears the commotion first. Being an architect of catastrophe herself has made her sensitive to the sound of screams, and she gets up suddenly and moves to the door.

“What is it?” Bridget gets up too.

“No...” Norelle starts banging on the door. “Hey! Hey let us out of here!”

The yelling is getting louder, and somewhere there's a great crack, followed by a series of crashing sounds, and the clatter of automatic gunfire.

“Oh we've really done it now...” Norelle murmurs to herself.

“What? Who's we?” Bridget paces from one of the cell to the other. “What the hell is going on out there!”

The ground shakes beneath their feet so violently that Bridget falls hard against the wall. And an unearthly sound echoes around them, an alien howl put through a white noise filter.

Norelle looks hard at Bridget. “That injunction I put on you will last another day, at least, so if you want to get out of here alive, you have to do exactly as I say. Immediately. With no questions asked. Understood?”

Bridget looks up at Norelle, the blood draining from her cheeks, eyes wide. She nods.

Norelle nods too. “Okay.”

She turns to the door. “Now you're going to see some real fucking magic.”

~

As Elandra approaches the Republic Building, she yells to those fleeing past her. “Hey! Was anyone inside? Did you see the summoning circle?” The most she gets is panicked looks. As she rounds the street corner onto Alaskan Avenue, a squad of military and emergency vehicles overtake her.

“Ma'am! Ma'am!” A soldier leaps from his truck and blocks Elandra's path. “You do not want to be here right now!”

Elandra flashes her badge. “Elandra Ramirez, First Arcanist! I need you to form a perimeter around the Republic Building. And I need a CNR!”

The man looks stunned, but he fumbles in his pack and hands her a handheld radio. “Yes, ma'am, I mean, yes, Arcanist.”

Elandra takes it and grabs the man's shoulder, "I don't really know what I'm doing here, but I'm gonna go find someone who does. We'll need spellcasters stationed around the perimeter. At least 5. So find me two other competent magicians! That thing is going to get a whole lot more mobile when it's done growing."

The beyon makes a sound, the first sound they've heard, and it sends a shudder through the ground and down their spines like a ripple on the water. The soldier looks up at the black mass gathering ahead of them.

"When it's **done** growing?"

Elandra doesn't seem to be listening. She just stares up at the beyon, breathing hard. "Yeah. At least five," she says to herself, then takes off running down the street again, dodging far-flung chunks of masonry and rubble.

The soldier turns back to his platoon. "Someone get me the Major! We need to get MK Johns and MK Auburn in position! Let's go!"

~

In the hall of the Regency Wing, the cell door explodes from its hinges and hits the opposite wall with a clang. It slides to the ground amid the wailing of an alarm. From within the cell, a flickering light emits, casting shadows around Bridget as she stumbles into the hallway. She is followed by Norelle, whose skin appears to burn with a soft glow as she chants Jourdemayne, her fingers latticed before her in a sign of protection.

The beyon screams again, as Norelle drops her fingers, the flames in her eyes subsiding.

"Where is it!?" Bridget hisses.

Norelle narrows her eyes. "Near the main atrium. We're in the east wing. Come on."

They run down the hall, emerging through a door at the other end to find the office in a state of panic. An overweight young man shivers in the corner, visibly sweating, while an older gentleman in an unbuttoned coat picks a large computer up off a nearby desk, and heaves it through the nearest high glass window. As Norelle enters the room, several officers lift their sidearms. Roijacker Slingshots, the 330 model, Norelle notes. Even the Regency Armory was starving out here, it seemed.

"Stop where you are, Ma'am!" one of the ROs yells.

Norelle practically snarls at him. "Sergeant is the word you're looking for. And you have bigger problems than me. Where the hell is Captain Kerrick?"

"He-" the RO hesitates. "He's in Galensloch."

"For fucks sake. Who's the next ranking magician?"

The guards look around the room. Finally, the fat man in the corner raises his hand, trembling. Then winces as another alien scream echoes through the room, followed by an uncomfortably close splintering sound.

Norelle turns her eyes upward. “Jesus. Okay! Everyone else, out that window! Bridget, help them.” As the other ROs beeline for the exit, Norelle kneels in front of the shaking officer. “Sir. What’s your name?”

“F-f-Fowler. Lieutenant Fowler.” The man looks to be in his late thirties, with a broad, lined face.

“Fowler.” Norelle repeats. “Okay, Lieutenant Fowler. Do you know who I am?”

The man nods.

“Then you know I’m the best chance this city has right now.”

Moments later, Fowler is punching his security code into the Black Cabinet. Black Cabinets started as a joke on people’s fearmongering superstitions, but had evolved into common parlance. It meant the secure storage where you kept your enchanted boots, protective amulets, etcetera. The magic stuff you wouldn’t want to fall into the wrong hands.

As the keypad beeps and turns green, Norelle hurriedly throws open the door, scans the interior, and unceremoniously begins removing long metal rods, like 4 foot long tent-spikes with bands of copper around them, and throwing them onto the floor.

“Are there any more of these?” she jabs her finger at the staves.

Fowler shakes his head. “Just five... it’s a standard set.”

Bridget paces over and wrinkles her nose. “What are they?”

“Warding Staves.” Norelle picks up two and frowns at Bridget. “Go through the window and I’ll pass them to you.”

With a crash, a dark, viscous mass breaks through the wall on the far side of the room, sending liquid shadows spilling over the floor and crawling towards them.

Norelle’s eyes widen. “GO GO GO!”

Bridget clammers out of the window, her head filling with an unpleasant, buzzing sensation. Norelle and Fowler hurry across the room with the staves. The dark mass of the beyond seems to be carrying its environment with it. As the tentacle that destroyed the far wall slides out of sight, the broken beams and crumbling drywall are coated in a living darkness that spreads rapidly.

The last of the staves pass through, and with a practiced economy, Norelle places her left foot on the filing cabinet below the window, leans forward, and leaps through with a grunt. The lieutenant scrambles after her, but has trouble pulling himself up over the sill.

Norelle picks up three of the staves and looks up to the collapsing structure and down at the crowds fleeing from the main atrium to the west. "Come on. Let's go."

Bridget looks between her and the struggling officer. "What?"

"Either he makes it or he doesn't! Now come on!"

The man is crying and wheezing, trying and failing to pull himself up, as the black oozing matter spreads like acid over the desks behind him.

Bridget places her hands on the window ledge and vaults back into the building, ignoring Norelle's shouts. She kneels, cups her hands, and waits as Fowler's panicked foot kicks at her hands once, twice, three times before finally finding purchase. It's enough. A moment later, the officer is falling forward onto the brittle grass. Bridget places her hand on the sill just as the seeking tendrils of shadows creep across it.

She screams in pain. It feels like a shard of ice through her palm. She resists the temptation to pull her hand away, tenses her muscles and throws herself up and over the ledge, sprawling out next to Fowler and the staves.

But the pain continues. She screams and pulls off her leather jacket. It's cold outside, but she feels like her arm is burning off. She hears Norelle curse, then a series of Latin words, and looks down to see the shadow snaking up her forearm from the palm of her hand, like ink just below the surface of her skin.

And the pain is just getting worse.

"W-we have to cut it off! Before it gets to her neck." Fowler is clutching his head with both hands, his feet shuffling backwards. Norelle interrupts her Jourdemayne to reach back and grab his arm.

"Adanaar's Siphon!" she yells. "Now!"

Fowler nods, and reciprocates her grasp in a Roman handshake. He speaks a phrase of Engleman, and Norelle's grip tightens around his arm as power flows from him to her.

She lurches forward, clamps her other hand around Bridget's arm, just below the shoulder, directly over the questing tip of shadow, and gritting her teeth against the pain she speaks one last Latin phrase, then screws up her eyes as the heat beneath her palm intensifies, and Bridget's cries are suspended in a single, drawn-out scream.

It pierces the dull cacophony of panic and collapsing masonry. A short distance away, Elandra's head whips to look toward the sound. She begins to run towards it, then zags left to pull a woman from a burning car. The vehicle has been partially crushed by a large slab of

concrete, and the woman's leg has been broken. Elandra drags her a few yards -- there's no such thing as a safe distance right now -- then rushes on, yelling the woman's location into her hand radio.

She crests the hill and sees Norelle and Fowler dragging Bridget's twitching body away from the building, hampered by the 5 warding staves. Norelle is so shocked to see her she drops Bridget's arm, causing Fowler to nearly trip over himself.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Norelle shouts.

Elandra gasps for breathe. "Checking on you! Thank the light you made it out!"

Norelle jerks her head towards Bridget. "Give us a hand?"

Elandra looks up at what's left of the Republic Building. There isn't much. The last wall of the Regency wing crumbles in front of them, giving way to inky blackness.

"Norelle. We don't have time."

"Let's go!" Norelle hisses.

Bridget's still only semi-conscious. Elandra and Fowler hoist her onto their shoulders and drag her upright, her feet trailing in the grass. Elandra knows better than to waste time asking Norelle what happened to her. The four of them move quickly down the slope towards the main road.

But before they reach it, Norelle stops suddenly, and drives a stave into the ground. "Here. Gather them all here."

Elandra shoots a panicked look back at the building. "Here? These need to go to the perimeter for an area binding!"

Norelle shakes her head. "You were right. There's no time for that."

"You-" Elandra stumbles over her words, as she tries to recall what little she knows of beyonding. "Are we doing an offset binding?" she asks.

Norelle snorts. "Have you seen that thing? No, we're going to create a Caylix Beacon. It's like an invisible fence that keeps the beyon in one place while we bind it."

"Is that difficult?" Elandra asks.

"Yes, immensely, but it gives us a chance to escape. " Norelle drives the remaining staves into the ground and does some quick mental arithmetic. "Only problem is, we need 8 hands to connect all 5 staves. So we might be fucked."

Bridget struggles to a sitting position, her left arm flopping weakly against the ground. "I can help." She says hoarsely. "I can help."

“No you can't.” Norelle doesn't look at her when she says it. “That injunction on you is still fresh.” She looks at Elandra. “Any ideas?”

Someone clears their throat behind Elandra, and the group turns as Penelope shimmers into view, her fingers pressed to the arcane mark on the lapel of her duster.

“Hi,” she says.

Norelle's eyes flick to Elandra's. Then towards Fowler, who is gaping at Penelope.

“Is that-” Fowler begins, before Norelle cuts him off.

“Shut up and take hold of these.”

Fowler, Elandra, Penelope, and Norelle all wrap their hands around two of the staves, forming a connection from the first to the last.

Bridget, propped up on her arms, feels something curl in her stomach as she watches them... for a second it feels like the beyon's shadow in her again, but no, it's an altogether human feeling... though she can't quite place it. It's like she's suddenly outside of her body, watching the events unfold before her like a NetVision ad. She watches as Norelle begins to speak the Caylix Beacon into existence. She watches as arcs of blue light spark across their arms, gathering in the space between the 5 staves in a neon fog.

The incantation is long, and complicated. Bridget doesn't know much Engleman but setting up verbal boundaries was a lengthy process in any lexicon. She turns her head and watches the beyon pull a mediadrone out of the sky. That will make for some exciting NetVision. She feels hands grasp her arms and turns her head back to see Elandra pulling her to her feet.

“What's happening?” she asks, feeling very stupid as she says it.

“We're running,” Elandra says, kindly.

And they are. They fly across the empty roadway, then round a corner to enter some kind of improvised military safeport. A practicing officer stands there, chanting over a warding staff of his own. Norelle delivers a series of quick-paced orders that fly over Bridget's head, and she watches as Norelle and Fowler commandeer a military vehicle, and Penelope reactivates her duster and shimmers out of sight. Elandra kneels down next to Bridget, who is somehow sitting again. She says, “You'll be okay, stay here!”

And Bridget, knowing how far from the truth that was, watches as Elandra jumps on the back of an army autobike and whirs out of sight. She notices that no one seems to be paying much attention to her. For now, she was just another survivor after all. But how long would that last? She wobbles to her feet, flexes her left arm, and winces. Then, looking straight ahead so as to look like she knows what she's doing, she paces away.

~

MK Johns turns out to be a middle-aged magician with thinning gray hair, who seems to be under the impression that he should be preparing to fight the beyon with conjured lightning or a flaming sword. Elandra shows him the binding mantra on his armlet, reassuring him that Norelle will do most of the work; he just needs to channel through the warding stave till someone gives him the all-clear.

At least, she's pretty sure that's how it works.

As she remounts the borrowed autobike and heads for the 5th binding point, she finds herself wishing that Lakiri had taught her at least basic theurgy. But no, Lakiri was deeply opposed to the practice, and everything Elandra knew of beyonding was from books and theoretical whitepapers.

“Summoning is a bad business.” Lakiri had said. “Stars must work in darkness, but they should never become it.”

She arrives at the binding point and dismounts. She flashes her badge to the army officers there and approaches her new stave. While the Regency ones had been dyed black and banded with copper, Colonial Defense’s staves were plain steel. Elandra wasn’t sure if it made any difference. A young woman salutes awkwardly as Elandra approaches. She has tight dreadlocks pulled back into a bun, and her uniform bears white lapels instead of the purple sported by the MKs.

“Mage Squire Iris Paulson,” she says. “How can I assist you?”

Elandra glances at the beyon, which is thrashing about the south side of the perimeter. “At ease. I’m not Defense.”

Iris seems surprised, and awkwardly shifts her shoulders. “It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Thanks.” Elandra pulls up the binding mantra on her armlet and scans. “You know a siphoning transfer?”

Iris nods.

Elandra inspects the stave and gives a thumbs up to the nearby soldiers. “Good. Hopefully I won’t need it, but be ready if I yell. And pull up the binding mantra, just in case.”

She lifts her CNR and says, “Ramirez here. Ready.” The two MKs and Fowler also sound off. Norelle’s voice crackles through the other end.

“Alright -- please make sure you have the JOURDEMARYNE area binding pulled up, we are NOT using the Engleman version. Also, we finally got the security footage sent to us and the summoning circle had 7 points, so add two additional repetitions at the end of each binding and forbiddance strophe.”

It begins. More chanting. And Elandra feels the draining effects of the ritual pulling magic from her words and through her hands, into the stave. Elandra's not sure how far they've got, at least halfway she thinks, when there is a distant *bang*-- and a yellow beam of light shoots into the sky to the south. It must be the Caylix beacon giving out, because suddenly, the black shape of the beyon roils towards them, back towards the wreckage of the Republic building. Elandra's grip tightens on the stave as she looks from her armlet to the approaching darkness, then back again, then up again --

Is that?

Iris speaks aloud what Elandra is thinking. "How the fuck did they survive?"

Two figures, their wool coats gusting about them, are making their way up the street towards Elandra and the military outpost. One of them seems to be trying to conjure a protection spell of some kind -- but it's fading fast -- and only flickers to life every few seconds.

Elandra turns to Iris -- "Can you take over for me?"

"What?!?" Iris shoots her a panicked look.

"Can you do it?"

Iris nods, and Elandra cedes her position to her and runs towards the approaching figures. The beyon is barreling towards them. She wonders if it somehow knows that it left two alive.

The survivors are Middle Eastern, and wearing traditional clothes beneath their winter coats. One of them, male, is wounded, but there's no point in trying to help them back to the binding point. For all its size, the beyon is crawling towards them with an unholy speed, obliterating everything in its path. Elandra seizes onto the broken pieces of the protection spell, and with a cry she weaves them into a bright green shield of light that shines in a great crescent from one side of the street to the other as the beyon comes crashing down on them.

It hits the shield with a flash of light and an explosive, deafening boom. The shield is immediately broken, whatever scraps of it remain fizzling into nothing, and an overwhelming wave of exhaustion hits Elandra in the same moment. The beyon recoils, then with a roar, it sends a flurry of tentacles rushing towards them again. Elandra, her arms shaking, pulls another shield into the air, this one a faint and desperate parody of the first, but the concussive blast doesn't come. The attack dissolves in the air, and the beyon's howl goes suddenly shrill and faint, as it phases suddenly transparent -- then begins to shrink, and shrivel, pulling into itself with a tinny sound, like a kettle whistling in a faraway room. Before Elandra can quite process what's happening, it is simply gone.

Elandra falls to her knees on the pavement. Soldiers' boots fall heavy and fast around her, and the survivors are pulled roughly to their feet and handcuffed.

“What are you doing?” Elandra wonders, vaguely.

“That’s the summoner,” Iris says, helping Elandra up. “He’s in the video. That’s the guy who did this.”

Elandra watches them get dragged away. “What?” she says.

She’s suddenly aware of how cold she is. Heavy flakes of snow are falling all around them, blanketing the scene of carnage with a veneer of white. Shivering, she pulls her jacket tight around her. Iris throws a blanket over her shoulders, and Elandra sighs gratefully. Teeth chattering slightly, she says, “Penelope-”

Then stops herself.

“Penelope?” Iris asks.

Elandra turns slowly, looking all around her. Penelope, as is generally the case with the invisible, is nowhere to be seen.

Scene 2 - A Diner

Bridget walks for a while before she finds a diner that wasn’t hastily closed or abandoned. She pushes her way in and walks over to the bar, where everyone sits or stands, transfixed by the Netvision loop, in silence.

After a minute of shifting awkwardly on her feet, she finally interjects, “Can I get a coffee?”

The man behind the counter pours her a mug and sets it down in front of her. He barely seems to register her presence. “Can I borrow a handset, too?” Bridget adds. Her armband had been confiscated after the arrest. The man fishes in his pocket and pushes his device across the counter to her. She takes it, along with her mug of coffee, and slides into a booth. She grimaces through her first sip of the synthetic brew.

She checks Galacticat first, a microblogging and discussion service that showed trend pools across the Republics. Halspur is the number one keyword in every USSA system except Sol. There, it’s number two, after the tag SunSword4, which is a movie nobody seems to like.

She dives into the Halspur tag and scans the discussion threads. There’s the expected slew of thoughts and prayers, a general fervent outcry against terrorism, and a not-insignificant group of self-assured idiots linking it to Bohumir and implicating Norelle by extension. There aren’t any conclusive reports yet, but Halspur Emergency Response is estimating casualties in the low hundreds, based on surveillance.

She logs into her Polaro account and scrolls through people’s photos of the beyon, of the destruction and carnage. She starts to feel a little sick, drains the rest of her coffee, then snaps a picture of the winding black mark that stretches from her palm and ends just below her shoulder. She posts it -- “new tat, wyt.”

It's only a few seconds before someone comments. "You got a tattoo while your disgraced warden set a beyon loose? Kill yourself," it reads, followed by a sexually explicit racial slur.

Bridget smiles. The world hadn't changed too much, after all.

That's the last thing she thinks--before she feels a sharp sting in the back of her neck, and everything goes black.

Scene 3 - Austland Station

Gabriel pauses the video, and kneads his forehead. He's sitting in a conference room at Austland Station, with Commander Christopher Cowl and Regency Captain James Kerrick. Cowl was Tyr's planetary rep, a middle-aged man with pitted eyes and the complexion of a gnarled tree trunk.

"Let's go over it again," Gabriel says, slowly.

Cowl and Kerrick shoot each other looks of competing antitheses to enthusiasm. "At approximately 1300 hours Halspur time," Cowl begins, finally, "Reclamation case 50HRA8 walked into the Republic building with a clay pot full of ash, soapboxed for 30 seconds, then smashed the urn. The urn's contents were enchanted to form a summoning circle; it brought forth a 120 foot tall beyon, which the Arcane Standards Commission has named, Ereshkigal. (They're still working on a full classification.) Ereshkigal destroyed the Republic Building and most of the surrounding blocks before being banished. The banishing was completed about 25 minutes after the initial summoning, and was carried out by two Colony Defense MKs, a Regency staff magician, former Seal Sergeant Beyonder Norelle Peters, and... err... the First Arcanist."

Gabriel sits back in his chair, and places his hands on the table in front of him, feeling the wood beneath his fingers, the strange weight of his resting palms.

"What about Lozano. Where is she?"

Cowl gnaws on his lip. "We're not sure. The building lost power--we're missing surveillance just after she exited the Regency Wing.

"And the android?"

"Fowler claims it has activated invisibility, and that it assisted in casting the Caylix Beacon."

Gabriel's raises his eyebrows. "Where is it now?"

"We're not sure," Cowl says, through gritted teeth.

Gabriel rounds on Kerrick. "Where were you?"

Kerrick, a small man with graying hair, drums his fingers on the table and watches Gabriel carefully. "I was in Galensloch, m'lord. Speaking with the Archmage."

Gabriel leans forward. “Did the Archmage have very many interesting things to say?”

“He’s...” Kerrick licks his lips nervously. “He’s in a lot of pain, my Lord. And heavily sedated. However, we believe Sergeant Peters discovered him several hours after he was attacked, so it’s unlikely that she is resp-”

“OBVIOUSLY,” Gabriel booms -- Cowl and Kerrick both shrink in their seats. Gabriel stands suddenly, and begins to pace, rubbing his hands together and glowering.

“So. Let’s talk about Ramirez.”

Cowl nods grimly. “Yes,” he says. “Soren, bring up all the media footage on the Arcanist.” His cohort complies, and a slideshow of images and videos, paired with headlines and Galacticat messages.

“There are several of these photos of her on the autobike, circulating at a rate of 50 new views per minute. Then there’s the woman she pulled out of the car, she’s recorded a video thanking the Arcanist, and that’s circulating at 70 new views per minute. And then there’s this.”

The screen shows media-drone footage of Elandra running towards the approaching beyon, conjuring the great shield into the air, an arc of shimmering green light that intercepts the charging monster with an explosive blast.

“This is circulating at 180 new views per minute with 87% positive association, despite us having pulled it from every major loop feed.”

Gabriel grips the back of a chair and narrows his eyes at the screen. “It doesn’t make any difference that she’s saving the summoner?” he asks.

“We’ve experimented with some spin-bots targeting that fact, but it hasn’t been very effective. Reduces the probability of sharing but doesn’t affect the overall opinion.”

The video plays on repeat, a ten second refrain of Elandra running past the be-coated figures, casting the shield across the street, and being rocked back on her heels as the beyon strikes it.

Kerrick shakes his head slowly. “Have you ever seen a single magician conjure a shield like that?” he says, a little breathlessly.

“Yes,” Gabriel responds, tersely. “What is the political mood like? I understand you have a serious revolutionary on your hands.”

Cowl makes a face. “Tariq Longsend. And he’s not a revolutionary -- just a sheep in wolf’s clothing. He and his gang of Luddites have organized a few raids--the Rocketburger thing last week for example.”

“What are his numbers like?”

There is another uncomfortable silence.

“64% of mentions are positive,” Cowl says. “...after factoring in spin-bots.”

Gabriel furrows his brow at the screen.

Kerrick rubs his chin and looks anxiously from Cowl to Gabriel. “What are you thinking, my Lord?”

“I’m thinking,” Gabriel says, “that you had better get a hold on Arcanist Ramirez... before Tariq Longsend does.”

~

Gabriel shuts the door carefully behind him, eyeing Eris meaningfully.

Eris smiles thinly. “How'd it go?”

“It’s a mess.” Gabriel shakes his head. “I haven’t been to Tyr since I was a child -- I didn’t realize the political climate had become so unstable.”

He rubs his hands together, thinking hard, then fixes his eyes on Eris. “Any news from our side?”

“Actually, yes. Sergeant Peters submitted a report.”

“What?” Gabriel is stunned. “What does it say?”

“She says Lozano was able to communicate with the Archmage by means of retinal projection, a sort of low energy signaling method used by cheap hedgewizards. The Archmage indicated that-... Well, I think you'd better read it “

Eris hands Gabriel the blue envelope, and Gabriel hastily extracts the document and scans it.

He looks up at Eris, his face grim. “This is bad.”

Eris casts his eyes skyward, thinking. “Could just be that an android makes a convenient patsy...”

“How would Lozano have known about their bones?”

Gabriel paces down the hall, holding the envelope to his temple as if it were a poultice. Eris watches him, knowing better than to chase after him. “I can start doing a demographics search on likely Aphrodite customers in the area.”

Gabriel shakes his head, pacing back towards Eris. “No. We have to pull this up by the root.” He hands the envelope back to Eris. “I need you to start for Iza tonight. You and Berring. I’ll make the arrangements with their Regent.”

Eris nods. “Then I suppose I should say goodbye “

“For now.” Gabriel makes to embrace his lieutenant, but stops himself, and clasps his hand instead. “It’s what, a 15 day slip?” he says, placing his other hand on Eris’s shoulder. “I’ll see you in a month.”

Scene 4 - Colonial Hall

Norelle stretches her arms wide as she and Elandra exit Colonial Hall. The sun is setting, casting purple shadows across the snow covered grand square.

“Jesus,” she groans. “How many times did they ask us how he got the summoning spell into that urn?”

Elandra turns a dubious smile Norelle’s direction. “You’re in a good mood.”

Norelle shrugs. “Yesterday all I had to look forward to was losing my Practitioner’s License. Today I’m kind of a hero. Most people would call that a step up.”

“You’re not concerned about, uh, sorry, what’s her name?”

Norelle’s face darkens. “Bridgeta. She made her choices. We all have to live with em.”

She pulls back her sleeve to consult her armlet and zips up her winter coat. “How about that drink? You got my message, right? I mean, you’re here after all. If I knew that hitting on you inappropriately would actually work I would have done it earlier.”

Elandra shakes her head. “I should finish writing up my report on the Aphrodite androids. People seem to think they’re out to destroy humanity -- someone has to be the voice of reason.”

“Yeah.” Norelle frowns and looks down the street. “Lan, about that-”

“How DID he store the summoning in that urn though?” Elandra exclaims, suddenly. “Where did he learn that?”

Norelle grimaces. “Well...” she says, “you can trigger a summoning off a certain condition... and some people carry ‘pocket-demons’, inscribing the circle on an amulet or small stone... but I don’t know if anyone’s ever enchanted an 80 foot circle to expand like that. Like I said inside, it’s not really something we’ve seen before.”

Norelle exhales heavily, and mutters, “It must have taken her months.”

“Her?” Elandra frowns at Norelle.

Norelle turns. "Sorry. Him. Anyway, I'm going to find a hotel. Bastards impounded my ship."

She starts to go, but she turns back. "Hey, I uh. I didn't know how to tell you. When we met. But... Thank you."

"When we met?" Elandra is nonplussed. "You don't have to thank me, I'm just glad I was here."

"No, not for-" Norelle pauses and shoots an exasperated look at the darkening sky. "I grew up in Virginia. I knew one of the girls who-..."

She trails off. The square suddenly feels very quiet.

"Oh..." says Elandra. She crosses her arms instinctively, her fingers coming to rest on the scar beneath her left rib.

"I always wanted to say, thank you for taking him down. It just took me a couple years to get around to it." Norelle smiles, thinly. "Anyway. Thanks."

Elandra forces a smile in return. "Yeah well. You don't have to thank me."

"Whatever happened to him?"

Elandra shifts from one foot to the other. "The Virginia Mason? Excoriated and imprisoned on Mars, last I heard."

"Good." Norelle nods. "Good."

"Yeah," Elandra says.

"You're way cooler than the last First Arcanist."

Elandra laughs.

"Alright. And we're back." Norelle smiles. "I'll see you around, Elandra."

Elandra watches her go. She shivers, and surveys the square -- people have really shut themselves in. There's almost no sign of life, except for a solitary black van driving towards her. ...Directly towards her.

Elandra double checks her interference and basic deflections as the van slushes to a halt in front of her, the passenger door opens, and a man in a dark suit gets out.

"Arcanist Ramirez?"

"Yes?"

The man opens another door to the vehicle. "Commander Cowl and the Consul would like to speak with you. Will you come with me?"

"I haven't finished my report," Elandra protests.

"It's not about the android," the man says. "Please, get in."

There didn't seem to be much of a choice. She steps into the vehicle -- the agent presses a button, and the van's wheels spin for a moment before it jerks into motion... and drives off into the night.

Scene 5 - The Tunnels

Bridget comes to in a dark space, for a moment wondering if she's back in her bunk on the Phantom.

"Bridgeta Lozano," a voice says.

"Just Bridget, thanks," she says. "Also, hi. You sound like those natural male enhancement ads that play on guys' Netvision loops."

A rich chuckle rolls across the space, which seems to be a large dome of some kind. No, not a dome, an ellipsoid or something, with dark tunnels leading off of it. Bridget is sitting in a remarkably comfortable armchair, on a platform of some kind. A man with the darkest skin she's ever seen is kneeling about ten feet from her, light reflecting off of his eyes, and off a few shiny spots on his cheek-bone and jaw.

"What's up, Bridget. I'm Tariq Longsend."

Bridget looks around. There's half a dozen other people on the platform, some carrying hand-torches. Some carrying guns.

"Whaat the fuuck-"

Tariq raises a hand. "I know. I know, it's a lot. Trust me, I didn't choose the setting for dramatic effect."

"What did you do to me?"

Tariq shrugs. "You have your way of putting people to sleep. I have mine."

Bridget stares at him.

"Oh yeah, now you're putting it together. You got a lot of my good people arrested this week. Not to mention fogged out of their minds. But how fogged? Can't be sure. Hence our decision to move underground."

Bridget nods. "Underground. Where, exactly, underground?"

Tariq sighs, turning his head to look up at the tunnel wall to his right. "Halspur was one of the first colonies on Tyr," he says. "That means there was a whole level of infrastructure beneath the city that predated humans. They send in whole fleets of diagnostics and mining machines to get things ready for us meat-bags. And they leave these behind." He gestures to the tunnels on either side. "We call it the Honeycomb."

Tariq gets to his feet. "Sometimes even I can't believe it's come to this. I wake up and it feels like, like... everyone's overreacting. Like if I just called up Commander Cowl and said, 'hey, this is crazy right,' it could all go back to the way it was before."

He fixes his eyes on Bridget again. "But it can't."

Bridget regards him, warily. "What do you want with me?"

Tariq's brow falls. "What do I want? I want a better life for the colonists of Tyr. I want justice for the homeless, who came here for promise and ended up starving in the streets. I want leadership that cares more about good governance than appeasing their voting blocs on Earth. Is Cowl building more greenhouses? No. Is he building more sustainable housing? No. And to add insult to injury, they install service bots at every corner store -- so now we can't eat, we can't work, there's no food to buy and no money to buy it with. And the Slate Act ensures that we get 20,000 new migrants every damn season. Every one of them a poor sap that was cluttering the streets in one of Earth's shiny happy cities. The United Star Systems Alliance doesn't care about us. Adam Dane and Chris Cowl don't care about us. In fact, if we all die out here, it's a rather convenient tragedy for them. So we know we're the galaxy's human waste bin. We can either wait to be suffocated, or we can tip the damn thing over."

Bridget watches Tariq from beneath a furrowed brow. "You haven't answered my question," Bridget says. "What've I got to do with any of that?"

Tariq purses his lips and regards her. "Come with me," he says finally, "And Dreyfus!"

A stout man to her left steps forward, holding his hand torch aloft. "Good work," Tariq says. "You can get back to your patrol now."

"Thank you, sir," the man says, and whistles. He and the others pull on goggles and turn off their torches, effectively disappearing. There's a moment of utter darkness, before a light clicks on ahead of Bridget, casting long shadows as Tariq strides down the tunnel directly in front of her.

"Hey!" Bridget surges to her feet. She suppresses the urge to vomit, steadies herself, then paces after him.

-

Bridget has barely caught up to Tariq before they enter another illuminated ellipsoid, this one with a table and chairs, and wires hanging down from the ceiling all over the place. A pale woman with dark hair and glasses is sitting at one end of the table, typing on a laptop.

Tariq gestures to her. "This is my chief strategist, Marilyn Cosgrove. Marilyn, meet Bridget Lozano." Marilyn looks up from her work and smiles at Bridget.

"Hi, Bridget. We're so very glad you survived the attack on The Republic Building."

"Yeah, me too," Bridget mugs a trollish smile. "Why am I here?"

Tariq pulls out a chair for himself and sits down. He looks expectantly at Marilyn. Marilyn pushes up her glasses and laces her fingers in front of her.

"I'm sure Tariq has given you the speech. I know you're not from here, but the thing is, it's not just a sales pitch. Things are bad here, and Cowl has made it very clear that they aren't going to get better. Our numbers were already good, but frankly--" she looks at Tariq, who shrugs. "The fall of the Republic Building is a catalyst."

"Viva la revolution, as the French say," Tariq smiles, grimly.

Marilyn nods. "We're well-liked, we're well-armed, we have the resources to pull this off, except..."

She sighs. "The Republic guards its magical talents very carefully. Almost all the practitioners on Tyr are Colonial Defense or Regency. We need someone who can advise us on the Commander's magical defenses, recruit or train new magicians--"

Bridget snorts in disbelief. "So you're asking me to be your mage-for-hire?" she scoffs.

"No," Tariq leans in. "I'm asking you to be my Regent."

Scene 6 - Austland Station

The Consul's video feed was turned off, but the microphone icon loomed large on the wall-mounted screen, animating aggressively as he spoke. Elandra watches the audio-reactive meter -- marveling that this was the most powerful voice in the galaxy.

"My dear Arcanist. You've gotten yourself into quite- a little- pickle... haven't you."

Elandra's face is tired from forcing smiles. "I... don't know what you mean, sir," she says.

"Wanted for questioning by the Regency? Rumors flying about your behavior, mutiny in the face of a Confiscation mission?"

Elandra glances at Commander Cowl, who regards her impassively. "I thought this wasn't about the android."

"It's not." The Consul's voice growls. "Lord Berns seems to think it's the seventh sign of the apocalypse, but he answers to me, not the other way around." The Consul sighs heavily into his mic, causing a heavy crackling sound.

"The thing is, you've carved out a reputation for yourself. And who can dispute it? You've done some great, some really fine things. First, you single-handedly incapacitate the Virginia Mason, the man who, among other things, killed your predecessor, and forced my last Regent to resign in disgrace. Now, you're the most visible actor in the response to this deadly act of terrorism. People trust you. And that makes you useful."

"Useful?"

Commander Cowl leans forward. "Morale here is bad. There aren't that many jobs, and not much need for them, to be honest. The time is coming when there will be nothing for people to do but line up outside the synthiate plants three times a day. They need someone to remind them that we have their best interests at heart. That this tragedy is an exception to the rule, and the rule is, we keep them safe. We know what's best. And we will get through this. Together."

Elandra looks from Cowl to the great looming microphone icon. "How do you expect me to do that?" she says, trying to sound innocent, not confrontational.

The Consul simpers. "It's really nothing to worry about. Politics as usual. We'd like to set up a press conference for tomorrow afternoon. The reporters can get their hee-haws out, and you can shed some light."

Elandra pushes herself away from the table. "Ooh -- you do not want me. I don't know a summoning circle from a bad piece of interior decoration, honestly. You want Norelle--"

"Sergeant Peters is a veteran, yes," The Consul's voice is dismissive, "but a veteran with the baggage of Reclamation around her neck and a mysterious exit from the armed forces to boot, not to mention the recent scandals following her highly dubious decision to take Miss Lozano on as her probational ward."

Elandra runs her hands over her hair and inhales deeply. "Okay. Fine. I'll talk to the reporters. Then what?"

"Then... whatever you want. Head back to your ship. Go home. Visit your parents."

Elandra lets out a mirthless snort of laughter.

"Or don't," she can almost hear the Consul shrug.

"I mean, what should I do next? As First Arcanist. What's my next assignment?"

"Ahhh," the Consul breathes moistly -- "Isn't that just wonderful, Commander Cowl."

"Wonderful," growls the Commander, as if it were anything but.

“It’s not often you see a woman of your background with such drive, such a thirst for work, really, it’s inspiring. But, if you ask me, you’re due for a little vacation. All this excitement--jumping off of cliffs, facing down a beyon...”

Elandra interrupts. “You’re telling me to take a vacation?”

“I’m telling you, you can do what you want. If there’s an investigation you’d like to work on--”

Elandra begins, “I’d like to keep pursuing--” but the Consul stampedes over her.

“OTHER THAN the Aphrodite Industries case--if there’s some OTHER investigation you’d like to take on I’m more than happy to sanction it. The one thing you CANNOT do is interfere with the androids. That’s the Regency’s business now.”

“Got it.” Elandra nods.

“I knew you would understand. Such a smart young woman. Well, Commander, I’ll let you take it from here.”

Elandra stands up. “One more thing, Consul Dane.”

“Yes?”

Elandra takes a breath, wondering how to begin. “I was stranded for a few hours... about 8 light-minutes counter-orbit from Wolf System. And I nearly got run over by a DREAD.”

“A what?” the Consul coughs.

“A DREAD. One of the small ones. I managed to destroy it out with an explosive bolt, but, on one of the exoskeleton plates, there was a picture of a red and yellow bird... like a phoenix or something... painted on it.”

There’s a short pause. Then the Consul chuckles. “Mercy me, but I thought we got the last of those damn things. Bully for you, blowing it up though.”

Elandra has to stop her jaw from dropping. “You’re not worried? The things self-replicate, don’t they? If there’s one, there could be a whole hive of them in a nearby asteroid belt or something!”

“I’ll send out a bulletin. But I wouldn’t worry about it, Miss Ramirez. As far as I know, you’re the first person to see a DREAD in twenty years. Good luck tomorrow.”

There’s a low tone, as the Consul disconnects.

Elandra sinks into her chair. Then she notices that the Commander is staring at her.

“A phoenix, you said?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Just that... at the Juno Convention, there was a faction from the RIF that refused to sign the accords. They called themselves the Zhar-ptitsa... the Firebirds.”

Elandra frowns. “What happened to them?”

“They were executed. Every one of them.”

The Commander gets up, and collects his things. “By the way, after this thing tomorrow, I wouldn’t stay long, if I were you... ACT-3 is taking over the Halspur situation. I don’t consider myself a paranoid person, but persons of interest in cases like these have a habit of just... disappearing. I don’t consider myself paranoid, but I don’t consider myself stupid, either.”

He checks his armlet. “They’re touching down now, in fact. Goodnight... Arcanist Ramirez.”

Scene 7 - Halspur Interstellar Port

The ship was one of the largest classes capable of grounding. 300ft long and 60ft high. “THE BLOOD EAGLE” was printed on its side in faded red paint, and it had the character of an abstract artist’s sadistic reimagining of a narwal.

The machine’s landing gear wheezed onto the platform at Halspur's Interstellar Port with a sound like gears grinding down to dust.

Captain Kerrick steps forward, protecting his face from the jet exhaust, as the bay door clanks open and a coterie of heavily armed soldiers hustle onto the tarmac. From another bay, a score of engineers usher an armored car and a procession of auto bikes from the ship. They were followed by Hadrian Helser, his lieutenant officers, and two dozen others.

As soon as the last boot hits the ground, the Blood Eagle’s landing gear screeches as the ship lifts off again and slowly, laboriously, pulls away and moves off into the night.

“Have to park the damn thing in orbit!” Hadrian yells. “Surface gravity's bad for the reactor.”

“You brought an army!” Kerrick shouts back.

“I brought a contingent.” Hadrian extends his hand. “Hadrian Helser. Cell 3 Administrator.”

“James Kerrick. Regency Captain and Colonial Lordsman.”

Hadrian makes a face like a snarl as he peers past Kerrick to the rest of the welcoming committee. “Where's Commander Cowl?” he says.

“He’s en route,” Kerrick says. “We’ve prepared the Allenshire Hotel for you and your men, figured we could rendezvous there.”

Hadrian twists his lip, and casts a glance back at the departing shape of his ship.

“And the Lord Regent?” he says.

“He’s...” Kerrick looks uncomfortable.

“What?”

“He’s interviewing 50HRA8.”

A dark look overtakes Hadrian’s face. “I thought I made it clear. We’re happy to work with the Regency on this, but Alliance Counter Terrorism is taking over this operation. Was he not informed?”

“He was informed. He uh...” Kerrick presses his lips together before finishing: “He said, ‘well they aren’t here yet.’ “

“Where is he now?”

“At our Emergency Detention facility in Walford. Gravenwyl Center.”

Hadrian signals to one of his officers, and the men mobilize instantly, some boarding the cars and bikes, others moving off the platform towards the gate on foot.

“We’ll head there directly. If his lordship wants to play at cards, I’d like to watch him shuffle. Will you show the off-duty pods to the Allenshire?”

Kerrick looks decidedly uncomfortable. “Yes sir,” he says.

Hadrian grins toothily. “Hey, you’re the Captain here. I’m just a public servant.”

Scene 8 - Gravenwyl Center

“Two hundred and thirty seven.” The spoken number is stifled within the cell at Gravenwyl Center. Yusef doesn’t react. His head lolls to one side, his eyes unfocused. He’s handcuffed to a steel chair. Safia is handcuffed to a matching one on the opposite side of the room. And Gabriel’s new lieutenant, an overtly handsome young man with jet black hair and the perpetual shadow of a beard around his jaw, slouches by the door, arms crossed and impassive.

“Two hundred and thirty seven.” Gabriel says again, watching Yusef carefully. “That’s how many people were killed by your beyon.”

No response.

Gabriel pulls off his armlet and consults the screen. "I have a list of the casualties here. I'm going to read them off to you."

"Sandra Min was a city councilwoman, a mother of two, and a volunteer at the local resource fund."

"Patrick O'Hare was the owner of a zero-digital coffee house and arts sanctuary, where he was known to perform his poetry every other Thursday."

"Joan Tamarind was an advanced biologist working on a cure for osteoporosis. That sounds important."

"Bailey Crestwood was a singer and actress on tour with a production of the 22nd century classic, Ezemon's Star -- she was filing a request for sponsored housing on behalf of her cousin, who lives here."

"Armin Isaad worked at a bodega-" Gabriel looks up at Yusef. "That's what you did, isn't it?"

Yusef hasn't moved. But Safia is crying, softly. Gabriel turns and looks over his shoulder at her.

"What if your sister had died trying to save you? Would you feel something then?"

Yusef speaks then. His voice flat and hoarse. "I didn't want anyone to die.." he says.

"Then why are two hundred and thirty seven people, dead, Yusef?!"

Yusef clutches the bandages on his side, and grits his teeth.

Gabriel prowls around him. "You're obviously not a fucking theurge, so who gave you the urn?"

The door opens, and an officer clears his throat. Gabriel looks up irritably. Then stands and walks over to the man. The officer whispers in his ear, then leaves.

Gabriel turns back to the room, with a long suffering air that suggests everything would be so much simpler if people would just do as he said.

"Our time is running short. And I'm afraid my replacement will be far less pleasant. So. Once more. Who performed the theurgy?"

Yusef says nothing. Gabriel casts a look at Safia, then strides over to Yusef and heaves the chair on it's side, causing Yusef to yelp as he strikes the floor, his legs sprawled awkwardly.

"Stop!" Safia cries.

"He doesn't know anything, can't you see?"

Gabriel shrugs. "You know what they say, you don't get to be space sheriff without breaking a few legs!" Gabriel raises his boot over Yusef's leg, and Safia nearly rocks her chair off its feet as she throws herself forward.

"I'll tell you! I'll tell you who did this."

Gabriel wheels on her. "Who?"

"My sister," Safia says through tears. "My sister, Qamar." Gabriel gives his lieutenant a sharp look, then advances on Safia.

"Where did she learn? Was it the same person who taught you?"

"I don't-" Safia stammers, "No one taught me. I- I just threw rocks--I- I don't know! I didn't even think she practiced. She and Yusef were always scornful of it."

Gabriel frowns. "Why do you think it was her then? Where is she?"

"I don't know," Safia chokes. "I haven't seen her since yesterday."

Gabriel points his finger at Safia. "You are not giving me useful information. Once Alliance Counter Terrorism gets here, I give you both about 24 hours before you disappear into black bags. Your only, I repeat ONLY chance depends upon me finding your sister before they do. So tell me. Where. She. Is."

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't know." Safia tries with all her might to think of something, but her sister was a closed book. She could hardly tell the Lord Regent of Magical Affairs to go down to Portside and interview johns at random.

"Emin's Accessories."

Yusef's voice is hoarse and tinny, and strangely tremulous, in a way Safia hasn't heard since the camps.

"What's that?" Gabriel turns to face Yusef again.

"Emin's Accessories. It's a junk shop in Radcliffe. I saw Qamar there late one night, when she usually would have been working."

He breathes for a moment. Then rasps: "That's all I know."

The officer outside opens the door again, this time with a greater sense of urgency. Gabriel throws one more long look at Safia, rubs his hands together, and turns to meet Hadrian Helser's eyes as he strides into the chamber.

"Mr. Helser."

"Regent." Hadrian casts a critical eye across the room. "Well, how goes the investigation?"

“Slowly. Maybe you'll have better luck.”

“I never count on luck.” Hadrian paces over to a corner and folds his arms, turning and resting his shoulders against the walls. “Well... carry on.”

Gabriel frowns. “Carry on?”

“Carry on with your interrogation.”

“Oh, thank you. But I've just finished.”

Hadrian smirks, mirthlessly. “Well then, I suppose we have nothing left to say to each other.”

Gabriel leaves, without another word, and the rest of the Regency officers leave with him. Once outside the facility, Kylan lights a cigarette and watches Gabriel pace.

“You were right,” Kylan says.

Gabriel makes an annoyed sound, something between a click of the tongue and a growl. “I'm always right. But a junk shop isn't much to go on.”

Kylan takes a long drag on his cigarette. “You actually think ACT'll let em go if you find Sister Sociopath?” he says.

Their car pulls up, and Gabriel opens the door for Kylan, shaking his head. “Oh no. They're absolutely fucked.”

Scene 9 - Halspur

Dawn is breaking over the city, and Penelope waits anxiously with Henry by the fuel line.

“This is insane,” she says. “There are still ads playing with my face all over them.”

“Yeah,” Henry says, “...but they're an afterthought. The day after a big disaster is the best chance we have.”

Penelope pulls the collar of the dull brown duster up and glances down the line of trucks and power carts. Some people were tired, some looked frustrated. None of them were paying attention to her, aside from the occasional leering. She and Henry had spent a miserable night shivering in each others arms on tenement stoops, getting up and moving every 30 minutes to avoid cops, and to avoid Henry freezing to death. Penelope wasn't sure if she herself could freeze to death, but she also hadn't especially felt like trying her luck.

Penelope speaks quickly under her breath to Henry. “How do we get the fuel back to the ship? We're the only ones standing in this line with no way of transporting it. What was Elandra going to do?”

“Just use my tile,” Henry presses the plastic and metal bar into her hand. “There’s no way Dad flagged it.”

One of the attendants is coming down the line with a tablet. He stops in front of Penelope and whistles. “Damn, now you’re the last kind of person I’d expect to see waiting in the ration line.”

Penelope flashes a weak smile. “We’re visitors. Touched down outside the city and didn’t realize how low we were. Can we get an Oxide 5-series cell?”

“Picked a helluva time to visit. You know what kinda ship you got?”

“Yes, it’s a Springsteen.”

The man laughs. “Can’t blame me for asking. Half the time, moonlighters like you don’t know an em drive from a burner.”

He taps at his tablet. “I’ll have to put your name into our ration list with a special dispensation for touristy.”

“It’s, uh, under my husband’s name. Julian Petreius.” Penelope hands over Henry’s Transaction Tile, trying to keep her hand from shaking.

The man taps the tile against the side of his tablet, taps again, and frowns. “Sorry, there’s some kind of alert on this.”

Penelope forces a laugh. “Oh, really?”

“I’m uh-” he casts a hard look at Penelope, catches himself, and looks down again. “I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about. Stay here.”

The man walks off with the tile, frowning at his tablet.

Henry swears under his breath. “Do you know what this fuel cell looks like? We should find one of the drones--I can reprogram it.”

“What?”

“It’s basic stuff, it’s just like how I got the Arcanist’s coords from her autobike- Come on!”

Henry takes off running towards the drone bay, and Penelope has no choice but to follow.

“Henry!”

The bay wasn’t even really fenced off. There were security cameras but otherwise it was just a muddy lot behind the station. Penelope tries to jog casually, casting worried looks over her shoulder as she trails behind Henry.

“That’s it, right?” He points to a fly-away drone loaded up with a multi-bot and a fuel cell. It looks right, there’s the Oxide Industries logo and a 5-series code printed on the cell, but Penelope can’t even respond before Henry has leapt onto the machine and opened a compartment to reveal a console and keypad.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s an Iotel drone – all of these things have a physical override, and you can get around the security step using one of the developer backdoors. It’s this huge security gap. I think someone went to prison for it.”

“How do you know all this?”

Henry kicks his leg against the machine as he types furiously. “I’ve been cooped up inside with a terminal and a robot for company for 13 years.” His body stiffens for a second, and he casts an embarrassed look at her. “No offense...”

Penelope eyes the cameras. “Henry, I think this is a really bad-”

She doesn't even finish the sentence before the drone emits a loud chirp, then proceeds to blare a siren-like alarm as red and yellow lights flash across the station.

Henry scrambles out of the drone. “Run!”

Penelope whips around, her hand flying to the collar of the duster. A Regency rotover whirrs overhead, wheeling to a pause above them with dizzying alacrity. She raises an arm to shield her face from the wind and watches it shimmer out of sight as she breathes power into the activation sigil, but before she can flee, a figure drops from the rotover, extends his hand, and speaks a word in a voice that somehow echoes between her temples.

“Nisuru!”

And Penelope staggers forward, watching her invisible body begin to glow with an unearthly red light, as more Regency officers, two... five... seven... drop into the bay around her, surrounding her, with guns drawn.

Scene 10 - Press Room

“Now remember, if they ask you a question you don't know how to answer, just say, “I’m not in a position to comment on that.””

“I’m not in a position to comment on that,” Elandra tests the sounds of the words. Trying to think of them as a life-preserver. Trying not to think of how nervous she was.

The aide smiles, and brushes something off Elandra’s shoulder. “Perfect! And remember, you're a hero.”

Elandra walks onto the stage, feeling stiff and sweaty. The reporters' cameras were all silent, but there was still an energy in the room; perhaps just the knowledge she was being photographed weighed on her.

She briefly thinks of her mother. What she must think of this.

Then it began.

“Yesterday, this city suffered a terrible attack, carried out by radicalized non-assimilates. At midday, a 24 year old man entered the Republic building with a powerful summoning spell. The spell created a summoning circle 80 feet in diameter, and activated a theurgy that brought forth Beyon Ereshkigal. Ereshkigal killed at least 237 people and caused several million dollars worth of property damage, the extent of which is yet to be determined. The Regency is collaborating with Alliance Counter Terrorism to trace the theurgy to its source and ensure that this never happens again. Rest assured, they will have more information for us soon. But now, it is time to rebuild and heal.”

PAUSE, the teleprompter reads, and Elandra takes a long, grateful breath. She feels like she's struggling to keep up.

“What is clear to me is that the colonies of Tyr are stronger than this. It's my first time in Wolf system, and I have already been overwhelmed by the resilience and vitality of the community here in Halspur. And we cannot let the malicious actions of a few dictate the rules of our society. We allow them to control our policies, and we allow them to control our lives. Which is why it is vital for the community, now more than ever, to support the protectorate in whatever way you can. Tyr is a diverse, emerging economy. And to shut out refugees is against the spirit of the Alliance.”

Someone in the audience groans, loudly, and Elandra loses her place. She glances at Cowl, who is standing on the other side of the stage. He glowers back at her.

“I'll take a few questions.” Elandra stammers.

A man raises his hand immediately. “Arcanist, are you aware that of the eight thousand, seven hundred and ninety new colonists that arrived last week, 94% of them were subsidized by the Slate Act?”

Elandra responds hesitantly. “I'm aware that Tyr is a popular Slate Act destination, yes-”

“And did you know that of those eight thousand, over 30% of them are being shipped here against their will?”

Elandra shifts her weight. “I'm sorry; I'm not sure how this relates to-”

“I just want to say that, to equate accepting refugees to supporting the Slate Act is profoundly insulting.”

Two security guards are making their way down the aisle towards the reporter, a pale man with the ghost of a beard. He sees them coming and raises his hands in the air. "You know what, that's fine. I'm leaving."

Elandra extends her hand. "Wait. Let him stay." The security guards pause, but remain close, eyeing the young reporter. Elandra meets his eyes. Trying to read his intent.

"I think, sir, you may have mistaken me for a senator. I am the furthest thing from an expert in Alliance policy, and it's not my job to be. I don't know how to change the law. I know magic. So if you have a question about magic, I'll answer it."

Another reporter raises his hand. "Excuse me, but isn't it inseparable in this case? Wasn't the summoner a Reclamation case? Probably one of the many who got out of the program only to realize that there twice as many immigrants coming in every week than there are jobs created."

"Twice as many. Is that true?"

The man nods.

"Well, that's..." Elandra clears her throat. "That's awful," she says. "But honestly, if I learned one thing growing up during the Harlem housing riots, it's that you can't rely on the government to do what's right on it's own."

She catches a sharp glance from Commander Cowl, and notices a flurry of activity as the room collectively scrabbles at their tablets.

"I just mean-" she starts. But someone cuts her off. "So you agree the republic is unreliable?"

Elandra nods frantically at Cowl and tries to clarify. "I just mean that governments aren't good on their own. You have to make them good. You have to hold them accountable, and force them at times to see your... Look, the takeaway here is that there's a community in pain. And you're only going to fix that by addressing the pain. By coming together to find a better way forward."

"Arcanist Ramirez!"

A woman from a local outlet is straining for her attention. Elandra gratefully calls on her. "Yes, uh... PNT."

The woman is sharp-featured and light-skinned. She glances quickly at her notes as she speaks and peers critically at Elandra over her glasses. "This was a Class 2 Hostile Summoning Event, which is an unusually positive outcome given the size of the beyon, and the analyzed sophistication of the source theurgy. Is that correct?"

Elandra looks at Cowl, who nods. "That's correct, yes."

“In your estimation, Arcanist, If it weren’t for the coincidental presence of both yourself, and Sergeant Peters, would the government response have been adequate?”

Elandra tenses. “There’s no such thing as ‘adequate’ when it comes to- I can’t comment on-”

“Would the area binding have been successful?” the reporter presses.

“Colony Defense was equipped with warding staves,” Elandra begins “...as was the Regency.”

The reporter cuts in again. “But there was no standing forbiddance in place, isn’t that true? Nor is there an automatic counter-system. Both of which have, supposedly, been implemented successfully in New York, for example, isn’t that right?”

Cowl makes a throat-cutting gesture at her from the far side of the stage. “I’m not in any position to comment on the capabilities of Colony Defense,” Elandra says, a little too quickly. “Thank you for your time.”

She moves to leave, but one of the reporters yells after her. “Aren’t you currently wanted for questioning by the Regency? Is the android dangerous?”

Elandra grimaces, then turns, and steps back up to the podium. “My job is to investigate magical phenomena on behalf of the Republic,” she says. “And that’s what I did. The Regency never informed me they had invoked the Confiscation of Dangerous Artifacts -- so I pursued my investigation. Yes, the android can do magic. But so can I. So that makes her just about as dangerous as me.”

A heavy hand falls on her shoulder and she jerks violently, narrowly suppressing the instinct to elbow the security guard in the throat. She allows herself to be guided out of the room, her stomach tied in knots, her mind racing. She is almost too zoned out to notice, but her attention catches on the hasty words of an aide walking quickly past her down the hall.

“Commander. The android has escaped.”

Elandra turns, dazedly, to see Cowl’s face twist into an even more contorted version of itself. “What!?”

“The Regency was holding it, sir, it was being interrogated when it created some kind of explosion. It blew a hole through the wall and took off in a fuel-drone.”

Elandra ducks under the arm guiding her and practically leaps towards Cowl and his aide. “What kind of fuel?” she says.

The aide starts, his mouth opening and closing uncertainly. Elandra grabs him by the shoulders. “What’s the make of the fuel-cell!?”

“I...” The aide glances at Cowl before answering. “...an Oxide cell, I think. Why?”

“Shit.” Elandra backs away. “Fuck.”

Cowl starts to speak. "Arcanist?"

Elandra turns, and sprints down the hall.

Scene 11 - Outside Halspur

She slams her way through the double doors of Austland Station like a bullet, dashes down the steps, and swings her leg over her government-lent autobike. It wheels into the air as the jets roar beneath her. She zooms down the main road towards the city limit, her heart pounding like a jackhammer in her chest.

Once clear of traffic, Elandra kicks the pedal to the floor and speeds out of the city. She shoots under the aqueduct and up into the purplish-white hills. She's only a mile or two away from the Hyperion when she sees it rise into the air ahead of her. She pulls up on her bike, nearly peeling out, and absurdly, she finds herself leaping from her seat and running towards it, waving her arms in the air, yelling, "Nooo Nooo NO!"

The Hyperion's wings extend as it picks up speed, and with a rush of air that buffets Elandra's coat, it screams overhead. Elandra screams too, her hands balled into fists as she watches her ship disappear into the sky.

This was Episode 5 of *The Elandrid*, and the fifth 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

