

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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The Elandrid, Episode 6

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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 6 - Fallout

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 Wyvern Theater

The chair smashes with a satisfyingly dry shatter, and a cheer goes up from the crowd outside the ring. Damien Locke, the White Snake of Tiryns, throws his fists in the air and lets out a throaty “Haahhh!” exhorting the crowd to cheer again. He is a huge man, characterized by great slabs of muscle, shoulders the size of bowling balls, and a well-groomed white beard that falls neatly between his enormous pecs. He finishes his lap around the ring, chugs water out of a canteen, and turns back to his opponent.

Felix Petreius, the recent recipient of a chair being broken over his back, is draped across the ropes, panting. Sweat drenches his skin, tanned to a deep olive tone, and loose rounds of sun-scorched brown hair fall over the shaved sides of his head.

“Come on, two more rounds.” Jynn says, forcing a tube between Felix’s lips. He sucks water through it, as she whispers conspiratorially. “You don’t have to beat him. Just don’t get knocked out!”

“Glasses,” Felix coughs.

“What?!” laughs Jynn, in response.

Felix puts a hand on her shoulder. “Jynn, give me my glasses.”

Jynn shakes her head. “Are you insane?”

Felix, feeling a little drunk with exhaustion, rolls his head to one side to catch Locke in the corner of his vision. “The guy is fast, but he drops his shoulder for a split second before his cross. I just need to pick it up sooner.”

A bell rings, and the voice of the announcer sounds. “Round 6! Is Felix Foolheart joining us?”

Boos. Locke growls, cracks his knuckles, and pulls his hands apart, conjuring a line of crackling electricity between them as he does.

Jynn rolls her eyes. “What a showboat.”

“Glasses, Jynn!”

She pulls them out of her bag and places them on Felix’s nose. “Don’t blame me when they’re shattered.”

Felix turns and shambles back into the ring, to applause and jeers. Compared to Locke, Felix is slight and willowy, tight cords of muscle shrink-wrapped beneath skin. He pushes the glasses up on his nose and stretches. The electricity dies between Locke’s palms as he guffaws, actually bending over with laughter.

“This isn’t a book club, Foolheart!” he roars, to enthusiastic applause from the onlookers.

Felix shrugs his arms modestly. "Really? Cuz I've read novellas... that packed a harder punch."

The effect of the zinger is somewhat diminished by the fact that it takes him a couple deep breaths to get through it. Locke grins toothily, the bell rings, and he is flying towards Felix again.

Felix parries the first jab and dodges the second, just barely. It's incredible how fast Locke is considering his size. Caught off balance, Felix stumbles backwards, but with a quick summons he pulls a nearly full beer can out of an audience member's hand and sends it careening into Locke with a satisfying kersplash. Locke roars, and Felix scrambles past him into the center of the ring.

Electricity crackles along the White Snake's shoulders and up and down his beard as he turns towards him. Felix raises his fists. Ready. Locke advances again, but this time, Felix steps forward with his right foot as he dodges the jab, eyes fixed, left hand chambered against his cheek. The shoulder drops, and Felix swings, his whole body rotating behind his fist as it smashes into Locke's jaw.

Locke's body rotates slowly in the air. His eyes drift upward. And finally, The White Snake of Tiryns hits the mat like a ton of bricks. Knockout.

~

Jynn is ecstatic. They collect their winning and she insists they spend the rest of the night celebrating. For Jynn, that meant vodka lemonade and betting people at the bar that they couldn't beat Felix at arm wrestling. People usually figured out he was using magic eventually, and then they always had to leave the bar in a hurry.

"It's not exactly fair," Felix asserts, as they make their hasty exit from a nearby tavern, to a chorus of 'and stay outs'.

Jynn pushes him playfully. "You make your living in illegal wizard boxing. 'Fair' shouldn't be in your vocabulary. Oh, and Felix,"

Jynn places her hands on Felix's shoulders and looks up at him with adoring pity. "I absolutely forbid you from fighting with your glasses on ever again."

Felix starts laughing first, then Jen joins in. They sit down on a park bench, wheezing with inebriated mirth. "It worked, didn't it!" Felix protests. "It's not like I can wear contacts,"

Jynn throws her head back with a hearty cackle. "I would love to see you take a punch to the head while wearing contacts," she bellows. "Just let me know ahead of time so I can put money on the other guy."

When Felix arrived on Chiron some 18 months ago, he'd had a fair bit of trouble. For fear of his father trying to track him down, he adopted a series of alternate last names. With no

credentials to back them up, and not much in the way of a practical education, he soon found himself bar-backing at one of the dingiest establishments in Tiryns, a former mining town several miles south of Juno. That's where Jynn found him, after an encounter with two belligerent drunks left the two drunks fleeing the bar in terror.

To hear her tell it, Jynn was a champion martial artist who'd fallen on hard times. The truth was a little more complicated than that, but it amounted to the same thing. She was an underground boxing trainer with no clients, and had Felix ever been in a wizard duel before?

"You're such an endearing little dumbass," Jynn wipes her eyes with her thumb, still chortling.

"Yeah well. Yeah." Felix smiles and leans back on the bench, spreading his arms out over the top of it, his eyes lingering on the glaring news-screen that presides over the park, casting everything in an artificial pale light.

Jynn turns her head slightly and eyes his arm behind her. They look at each other.

"Sorry," he says, withdrawing his arm.

"It's okay." Jynn smiles. "You're fine."

Felix crosses his arms, shifting slightly and looking back up at the news screen. An alert of some kind has come up on the NetVision loop--and he recognizes the blue seal of the Regency, emblazoned with 4 white stars and the thaumaturgic triangle in a line.

Jynn takes a deep breath. "Felix, can I ask you something? ...Do you think it's weird that we've never... I mean--"

Felix stands up.

Jynn raises her hands. "Hey, whoa, never mind. Forget it."

Felix isn't listening at all. His mouth drops open.

Jynn juts out her jaw and narrows her eyes. "Felix?"

"Oh fuck," says Felix.

Jynn stands up. "Are you okay?"

Felix looks at her. "I... I'm sorry. I have to go."

"Go? Like, go home?"

"I'll talk to you tomorrow."

“Okay?” Jynn watches Felix jog off into the night. Under her breath, she murmurs “what the fuck,” and turns to look at the screen.

The screen shows an image of a woman. A banner above it says, “Kidnapper Housebot! Wanted & Dangerous” and below, that it reads, “Penelope Petreius.”

Scene 2 - North of Halspur

Elandra lies on her back in the tall grass, feeling the cold fog seep into her clothing and dew her skin. She watches the low-hanging clouds twist and furl above her, the grayish-blue stalks of hulwheat swaying at the outskirts of her vision.

“Elandra. What's happened?”

She doesn't remember calling Avander. It had just happened.

Elandra closes her eyes. “Avander, the android...”

“The android.”

“She's gone.” Elandra tries to calm her breathing. “She took my ship and-”

Avander interjects, “She took your ship? How?!? Don't you have biometrics in place?”

“I gave her the override code when we were floating off Freya,” Elandra grimaces. “I- I wasn't thinking,” she says.

She can almost hear Avander's brow furrow. “Do you know where she's going?” he asks.

Elandra shakes her head. Then her eyes snap open. “Yes!”

She sits up and presses her hands to her temples. Avander prompts her gently. “Yes? Where?”

“She's going to Iza,” Elandra says. “Jonathan found out that there's an Aphrodite facility there. Theolus Washington.”

“Theolus Washington??” Avander interrupts once again. “The witch doctor?”

Elandra frowns at her armband. “What?”

“I keep forgetting you were born in 2300. He was a big name in the 90s. Brilliant surgeon, and athlete, and a talented conjurer to boot. He had a Netvision show. He's building androids now??”

“Jonathan just said he ran a facility there,” Elandra replies.

Avander's voice darkens a shade. "Speaking of Jonathan," he says. "His father's office has been... well it's just a bit strange. Have you heard from him?"

Elandra throws her hands in the air "As far as I know, he's on his way to Iza too! Avander, what am I going to do?"

"I suppose following her is out of the question?"

Elandra kneads her forehead between her hands. "I've been expressly ordered not to pursue the Aphrodite investigation any further. If I follow Penelope to Iza and they find out, I could lose a lot more than my ship."

Avander emits a grumbly 'hrrmm'. "What if you went to Iza for something else?"

"Huh?"

"It's the biggest inhabited planet in the galaxy. There must be some unusual arcane phenomenon to investigate. You pop in, do some research, then track down your ship."

Elandra straightens her back, and runs her hands over her hair. "That could work. That could actually work."

"I'm not all hair product. I have ideas sometimes too."

Elandra allows herself a weak smile. "Okay, and how do I get there? Jump a freighter?"

She can hear Avander scratching at his beard stubble. "Have you checked the passenger schedule?" he asks.

Interplanetary passenger trips, while not uncommon, are still far, far less common than say, booking an international flight on Earth. After all, an airplane does not have to concern itself with the engineering complexities of attitude adjustment in zero gravity, or navigating in deep space. Freight moves more regularly, but access is tightly controlled.

"I haven't done anything yet," Elandra says, tapping at her armlet. "DanDan, what's the inter-system passenger ship schedule from Tyr to Iza this week?"

DanDan sounds genuinely regretful. "I'm sorry, there's nothing till the end of the arc. There is a cargo ship leaving from the Danvers OTC tomorrow morning, however."

"I have to be on it." Elandra rises to her feet. "Book me a ticket."

"I'm afraid I can't," DanDan continues. "You need a writ of dispensation from the Trade Authority."

Elandra emits a short "Ah!" of frustration. "Avander, tell me you know someone."

"It's damn short notice, Lan."

She thinks for a moment, then says, "I'll do the interview."

"I've already interviewed you." Avander sounds suspicious.

"Yes, 5 years ago, before..." Elandra notices her teeth are chattering. "You know what interview I'm talking about. The interview. About... I know you still want it, even if you stopped asking about it. But I'm ready. I'll do it."

"When?"

"Soon!"

"Before the Coven?"

"Fine! Or during. Yes!"

"You promise?"

"I promise. Avander, please!"

After a short pause, Avander says, "Get me the topic of your proposed research in two hours and I'll get you the writ."

Elandra's knees nearly give out as she exhales. "Thank you."

"You know it's 4am here?"

"Oh for- it's an emergency!" Elandra hangs up. She paces over to the grounded autobike and with a grunt of effort, pushes it onto its feet.

"Alright," she murmurs. "Two hours."

Scene 3 - Colonial Hall & Norelle's Hotel

Hadrian Helser kicks at the broken glass in the lot outside Colonial Hall. "I'm really at a loss for words," he rasps. "Such a blatant display of incompetence is hard to get one's head around."

Gabriel's eyebrow twitches, but otherwise he remains motionless.. "Mr. Helser," he says, "I can assure you that I am exactly as interested in your opinion as I am in the migratory patterns of a flightless bird."

Hadrian smirks. He and Gabriel had arrived at roughly the same time, and now they stand in the gravel lot looking up at the building from which the Aphrodite android had lept.

"Why on earth was the android brought here and not to Gravenwyl?" Hadrian makes a popping sound with his lips. "Why was an injunction not cast on it?"

“I don't have time for this,” Gabriel growls under his breath.

“Perhaps ACT should take over the Aphrodite investigation as well.”

Gabriel wheels on Hadrian. “I would like to see you try. Cell 3 is a band of thugs, not an intelligence agency. You have all the precision of an oversized mallet, and this is a humanist cataclysm of technology and magic. You. Are not. Qualified.”

Hadrian raises his eyebrows. “I don't know why you dislike me. We have never met before this week and until the special appointment I had never even heard of you. Where's all this coming from?”

Gabriel gives Hadrian one last sidelong glance, then stalks away. “Audrey, instruct Kerrick to put Lieutenant Fowler on immediate suspension, pending review. And tell Sergeant Peters to meet me at Emin's Accessories. Now.”

~

A few miles away, Norelle's armband buzzes.

“What is it, Wormwood?”

“Private message from Gabriel Berns,” it responds.

“Oh goody.”

Norelle is standing in her hotel room, her back against the wall, her arms raised over her head. A mostly empty bottle of whiskey has been knocked over on the table next to her. Five ACT officers stand in front of her, their guns trained.

The squad leader smirks. “Go ahead, let's hear it.”

Norelle smiles back humorlessly. “Wormwood, read the message will you.”

“The Lord Regent says: Meet me at Emin's Accessories. Now.”

Norelle shrugs. “No idea what that means.”

The agent curls his lip. “Well, lucky for you, it's no longer your concern. Get in the bag.”

“You do know I was working *against* the terrorists, right?” Norelle wobbles slightly.

“In the bag!”

Norelle eyes the heavy black body bag lying open on the carpet in front of her. Her muscles tense, and she prepares the image of a concussive spell in her mind... but before she can cast

it, there's a popping sound, and her body shudders with electricity as the taser buzzes and she falls to the ground.

The ACT agents shove her head-first into the bag, pulling it roughly over her left leg before detaching the prosthetic from her right. They zip it closed, One of the men throws his shoulder through a strap at one end, and they drag her out of the room.

Scene 4 - The Tunnels

They gave Bridget private quarters, which meant she got a cot in an inscrutable alcove off one of the smaller tunnels. She wasn't being supervised, but she did not mistake the meaning when one of her escorts advised her, "don't wander away." If she got lost in the Honeycomb, she would starve before she found her way to the surface.

She couldn't sleep. She had already been unconscious for most of the day, apparently. She cycles quickly through potential escape plans, all half-formed and amorphous, but catches herself: what is she escaping to?

Jail. Possible excoryation. She shudders. Okay. What are the alternatives to escaping?

There was the possibility of actually accepting the offer. But that was absurd. She had learned magic from a hedgewizard south of the border, and later from a Korean woman named Vee who used her gifts to tell particularly compelling (but no more accurate) fortunes. That wasn't Regent material. Gabriel Berns had basically developed his own theory of sorcery before he even entered the public eye.

What could she even do? A Regent commanded scores of practicing officers, not to mention staff specialists. She was the only practicing member of the rebellion, as far as she could tell.

She falls into a fitful sleep, her mind racing through chaotic dreams of tunnels, wolves, and shadowy tendrils that grasp at her wherever she turns. She wakes up often, after 30 minutes or 3 hours; it's impossible to tell without checking her armlet. She finds herself growing increasingly afraid, and in turn, frustrated with herself. What was there to be afraid of? Things could be a lot worse. She could be dead, or locked up wherever they took those Reclamation kids that summoned the beyon.

She sits up suddenly in her cot.

~

"Longsend." The voice pierces the darkness, and Tariq blinks awake. He and Marilyn often fell asleep at the strategy table, and tonight had been no exception. Zan Tooley, one of the younger guards, stands in the doorway, Lozano doing a dance of impatience behind him.

"She insisted on speaking to you -- I told her it was the middle of the night, but--"

"It's no problem," Tariq rubs his face, and looks over at Marilyn, who is adjusting her glasses. "I'm up. Are you up?"

"I'm somewhere between down and up," she takes a sip of water, her canteen striking the table with an echoey clink.

Zan nods. "I'll be just down the tunnel if you need anything."

Bridget trips over the cables in her haste entering the room. She nearly falls, but manages to somewhat transform catching herself on the table into a pound of emphasis.

"Where do they detain criminal casters?" she asks, breathlessly.

"Excuse me?"

"Enchanters, unregistered alchemists, petty warlocks -- where are those Afghanis that summoned the beyon yesterday?"

Marilyn and Tariq look at each other. "If they're not dead, they'd be kept at Gravenwyl Center. It's a high security detention facility used by both the Regency and Colonial Guard."

"Perfect," Bridget slides into a metal chair. "That's where we get our new talent."

Tariq frowns. "I'm not a terrorist. I don't want anything to do with rogue beyonders."

Bridget groans. "Haven't you ever heard that the enemy of your enemy is your friend? These people hate the Republic; you can discuss ethics with them after you've won independence."

Marilyn raises her eyebrows. "She makes a certain kind of sense."

"You like the idea?" Tariq turns a disbelieving eye at her.

"I don't hate it." Marilyn rolls out a photonic sheet, and types something into her attached computer. The sheet glows, and a map of the city appears in black and red lines. "Gravenwyl Center was converted from one of the first colony living quarters." She points to it on the map. "It's in the old part of town, where the Honeycomb is most developed. With a little help from the demolitions department we could come up through the sewers."

"There will be arcane barriers, and everyone in the center will have injunctions on them," Bridget closes her eyes. "Mine is still strong too." She opens her eyes. "So that's a problem."

"Sorry," Tariq raises a hand, "so you can't do any magic?"

"Not right now," Bridget makes a face. "It depends on the injunction, honestly -- but it would take an accomplished spellcaster several hours to take this one off me."

Marilyn and Tariq exchange looks.

"How many practitioners you think we get out of the place?"

Marilyn shrugs. "A lot more than we have now."

Tariq nods, slowly. "Let's do it then. Today."

"Wait, today?" Bridget feels a freezing pain in her arm and winces. "Why today? I just told you, I'm useless."

Tariq rises to his feet. "You can hold a gun, can't you? ACT-3 is setting up shop in Halspur. The longer we wait, the longer they have to dig trenches and kill or maim our allies."

Marilyn stands too. "I'll inform the men. We'll raid the center first, then move directly into Operation Highjump."

"Operation what-?" Bridget looks at Marilyn, but Marilyn is already exiting down the passage. Bridget fixes her eyes on Tariq.

"If I'm going to be your Regent, you have to tell me what that means, right?"

Tariq cocks his brow. "Are you going to be my Regent? You haven't agreed yet."

Pain flashes in her arm again, and Bridget grimaces. "Oh, what the hell. Just don't ask me to die for the cause or anything."

Tariq's face turns serious. "I won't ask that. But I can't promise you'll live through this, either."

Bridget twists her lips into a humorless smile. "No one's ever promised me that. So, what's Operation Highjump?"

Scene 5 - Octavia Helman Space Station

Andrea had run away twice before. There was a numerological elegance to the third time, she thought.

This time was different.

She had gone straight home from Libby's. She walked till she was out of the neighborhood, then hailed an auto-car. From her house she took a backpack full of clothes, a loaded hashtab on which she'd stockpiled a year's worth of allowances, and her aunt's ID card. She figured there was a rat's chance in hell of passing herself off as her aunt, but maybe she could figure out a spell or something to make the picture look more like her. She had the book, of course, Jourdemayne's Servants... and the Beyonder's Token, the black coin that she'd paid for in blood before the spell was terminated.

Where could she go? It didn't even occur to her till she was walking back out the front door. If she stayed in Newset, she would definitely be recognized and arrested. Elsewhere on Chiron, her options probably expanded to drudgery or prostitution. If only there was a way

of getting to mom. Mom would be able to protect her; she'd probably be mad at first but there was no denying that she had summoned a beyon and successfully dismissed it. That had to count for something, right?

The only problem was, her mom was on Tyr. She'd been trying to get some 'Archwizard So-and-so' there to enchant a book for her for years now and the guy had finally agreed. Her mom hopped between Earth and Chiron quite frequently but Wolf system was a hike; Andrea supposes her mom must have welcomed the opportunity to take a break from consulting ill-informed weapons tech people. The last time Andrea had asked Norelle what she did, Norelle had responded, "I get paid to tell idiots all the ways their counter-beyon tech won't work."

Of course, she couldn't just tell her mom, "hey, I'm coming to Tyr, where should I meet you?" But she could figure that out in slip. Andrea whips out her pink handset and searches "how to get to Tyr from Chiron." That ends up being too general, so she searches, "cheap tickets Newset to Tyr."

They aren't cheap. There's a carrier leaving tonight, but she can't even afford the shuttle fare. Jesus.

Andrea sits down on her front steps and starts taking deep breaths. Panic was welling up from the pit of her stomach like hot oil, but she didn't have time for panic because she needed to get out of here. She needed to get off this planet. She needed her mom.

She looks up the penalty for summoning a beyon. The first words she read are, "juvenile excoriation." She vomits into her aunt's flower bed.

She creeps back into the house, careful not to wake Luna. She's napping in front of the Net screen, as she often spent her afternoons. In the same purse from which she'd purloined the ID is Luna's credit tab, which was only meant to be used for emergencies.

Well, if this didn't count, what did?

She takes Luna's handset too. She'll need it if the tab gets fraud-checked.

Thirty minutes later, she is hurtling along the mag-rail towards the port south of Paris Beach. From one moment to another, time seems to fluctuate. The train ride takes an eternity, then she hardly has time to breathe between buying the shuttle fare and climbing up into the painted aluminum ship. Maybe it was the air pressure, but when she steps from the shuttle bay into the gate at Octavia Helman space station, it occurs to her that everything that has happened might easily have happened in a dream. Even as she thinks this, she sees a news story playing about three teenagers in the ICU, and shrinks away.

If they named her name, and it was only a matter of time before they did, this whole getaway was doomed. Andrea's only hope, she thinks, is that the fear of being caught summoning a beyon outweighed the instinct to pass blame. She turns, and hurries on.

Octavia Helman was one of the biggest space stations in the USSA. It traveled at around 20 thousand miles per hour, making a complete trip around Chiron every 80 minutes. As Andrea zags between distracted travelers towards the directory, her eyes linger on the armed guards. The place was crawling with them. She remembered that there had been a violent incident up here a few months ago. A Zhong freighter full of badly needed medical supplies got torched by the customs authorities.

She enters the large space with the directory and sees a small group of people gathered around the central screens. As Andrea approaches the directory center,, she spots someone she recognizes. At first she can't place him, but then she realizes it's not someone she knows but someone she's seen.

“No way.”

Her troubles momentarily forgotten, she pushes her way through the crowd and stops in front of the young man. “Felix Foolheart?”

Felix jerks his head toward her with a vague expression of shock. “Hi!”

“Oh my God I can't beLIEVE it! I'm Andrea, I'm like obsessed with wizard duels! You fought the White Snake yesterday?”

Felix is blushing, ruddy rose hues darkening his face. “It's nice to meet you. I don't think I've ever been, err, recognized before. You know it's illegal, right?”

Andrea laughs. “Well yeah, but you can still find it on the net if you know where to look. What are you doing up here?”

Felix rubs the back of his neck sheepishly with one hand. “I'm... looking for someone. But I don't know where they are. They've... gone off... and I don't know where they'd go.”

Andrea raises her eyebrows. “Is this a girlfriend?”

Felix grimaces. “No it's... no.”

Andrea emits a breathy laugh. “More complicated than that, huh. Well, where's her family?”

Felix frowns at her. “What?”

“Does she have family?” Andrea asks.

“No. Not really.”

“Then where would she look for family?”

“What do you mean?”

Andrea shrugs her backpack strap over her shoulder. "I think people are always looking for family. Whether that's their real family, an adopted one, or a person, place, or thing. People always move towards home."

Felix nods slowly. Andrea thinks to herself that perhaps he was a bit slow.

"Well, anyway, it was super weird meeting you! If I had friends, I would be all psyched up to tell them. I gotta get on my carrier."

Andrea turns to go.

Felix calls after her, "Hey, I hope you find it."

Andrea looks back at him, "What?" she asks.

"Home."

Andrea smiles. Then she turns and disappears into the crowd.

Felix looks down at his feet. "Family," he murmurs. He takes off his satchel and kneels down to fish something out of it: an old armband, well, only a couple years old. But it was the kind of old that objects become when you haven't seen or used them in a very long time.

Felix takes a deep breath, and powers it on.

"Hi Dad," he speaks into the receiver. "It's me."

Scene 6 - Odingard Library

Before visiting the library, Elandra stops in a cafe to take stock. Most of her possessions were on the Hyperion; all she had taken into the city was a small rucksack, which she could swing over one shoulder and belt around her waist.

In it is a dopp kit, a tiny makeup chest with a mirror in the lid, a bottle of lotion, a note-tablet, its charger, a fingerprint hashtab, a change of underwear, a tampon, and her scar cream. She reflexively runs her fingers along the bumpy skin beneath her ribs. The scar cream hadn't done much.

It was an extreme take on simple living, but it would do as long as she had a sink to wash things in. The only other items in the bag were the soulmate transmitter Jonathan had given her and a packet of dry noodles.

She runs her finger over the engraving in the QPR. Then, impulsively, she snaps it into her armband and texts, "hey, I'll see you in Yokaido."

Then she packs everything back into her bag and walks out the door.

On her way to the library, she runs suddenly into a throng of rioters, and ducks hastily down a side street. She can hear the heavy thock of distant gun shots, and picks up her pace, thinking she can't get out of Halspur fast enough. There was a heavy, humid quality to the air; the city felt like an autoclave. It was breaking down into blood and steam.

The Odingard Library was a small building with a smaller entry-chamber. There was a check-in desk, but no one behind it. It would have been a prime target for Ludds, but there was nothing much of value inside.

Elandra checks in with her hashtab and receives a headset from the automated machine. Large block letters remind her to return the headset to the bin when done. The headset also acts as her entry pass, she taps it to a panel by the door and it slides open, revealing a 60 foot cubic space, painted completely white, floor to ceiling with thin black grid lines. There are two other people in the space, both wearing their headsets, one staring at the wall, the other sitting on one of the curved white benches that are spaced out in the center of the room.

Elandra pulls the elastic strap carefully over her puff, squinting in pain as it snaps against her ear, and gingerly releases the goggles to rest above her cheekbones. She blinks, adjusting the earphones, and looks around to get her bearings. The room has been transformed into a warm but modern looking space, wooden shelves (currently empty) lining the walls and lit by a chandelier.

“Welcome to the Odingard Library,” a crackly, calm voice sounds in her ears. “the only library to exist fully in virtual space, boasting the largest collection of human readable digital archives in the world. Have you been here before?”

“Yes,” Elandra says. The other two visitors show up as silvery 'ghosts', the books in their hands discreetly anonymized. The owner of the voice however is realistically rendered, sitting on the nearest bench, looking up at her with a welcoming attitude, his face crinkled and warm.

“Excellent. Where would you like to start today?”

“Mysteries.”

“Mysteries?”

“Of the arcane variety. Prioritize by references to Iza in the Interstellar Republic of Nippon.”

“That would be just to your right, the second section. Remember, just say 'help' and I'll gladly remind you of the controls.”

“Thank you,” Elandra walks across the carpeted floor, trying not to think about the textural dissonance of the grooved aluminum-alloy beneath her boots.

She steps around another bench and approaches the wall of previously empty shelves, now rendered with an attractive multi-colored collection of bound volumes.

Elandra frowns, at the collection. “Activate overlays, please.”

Readable white text animates into view over each book’s spine.

Elandra rolls her eyes. “Non-fiction only, please.”

A whole shelf of the books slide out of view to the left, and a new set of books slide in from the right, accompanied by the satisfying susurrous of leather against wood. *Shff.*

“Add soft search term: unsolved.”

Shff.

“Filter out criminal investigations.”

Shff.

“Filter out Regency investigations.”

Shff.

Elandra regards the shelves. Only a few volumes remain, rendered at natural, organic angles, as if placed there by a human hand. They weren’t especially promising though. The text overlays indicated that one was a 700 word blog post about an enchanted flower garden, one was a biography of the current IRN Regent, and one was titled ‘The Peculiarities of Oriental Magic’ and featured decidedly racist cover art.

Elandra bites her lip and rests her hands on her hips. “Are there any restricted titles matching this search?”

“I’m afraid that information is restricted. Please place your credentials within view of the visor to authenticate.”

Elandra pulls her badge from her pocket and holds it up, meeting her eyes in the attached photo ID. She looked tired, she thinks.

The headset beeps. “Thank you. Your security clearance has unlocked one new result.”

The book slides into view. The overlay indicates that it is not originally a book but rather a briefing from the New Tokyo Regency. Elandra picks the book off the shelf, its lack of heft only momentarily disconcerting, and opens it to the first page. The author is Shevek Agarwal, and the subject line reads, “The Oracle of Iza.”

She taps her armlet, and records a voice message for Avander. “I’ve got something,” she says. “Listen to this.”

Scene 7 - Gravenwyl Center

Bridget is struggling to keep up with the other revolutionaries. They had made an attempt at quesadillas that afternoon, with factory-made vegan cheese and frozen veggie bars that they broke into pieces. They weren't good, but Bridget was so hungry by that point that she ate five. She's regretting it now. Her stomach is cramping up as she hustles along the dark tunnels with the other men and women of the movement.

They had a far more extensive network than Bridget had guessed. Which was good, because she'd only seen maybe a hundred people down here in the Honeycomb, tops. But these, it turned out, were just the elite officers, recognizable faces who were known associates of the party, and anyone else who, for whatever reason, was likely to be arrested above ground.

They called themselves the Independent Citizens Party, or more often, the Freewolves. Tariq said it was both a reference to the fact that so many of them had been born in the Wolf star system, and a callback to the Sons of Liberty, an organization that gave way to the American Revolution over 500 years ago.

Bridget shook her head in amazement. The idea that none of these people had ever even felt the warmth of the sun boggled her. She had to catch herself: they had never felt the warmth of Sol. There was more than one sun, nowadays.

"We're here." Tariq's voice carried exceptionally well down the tunnel. He and Marilyn looked impressive: they were wearing War Between-era body armor, gray-blue plates over a dark purplish mesh. They looked like desaturated video game space marines.

Bridget hadn't felt comfortable in the plates, but she'd conceded to pulling on the heavy woven armor. She could still wear her black leather jacket over that and she was worried someone would lift it if she didn't keep it on her; leather was just about priceless out here.

"Collins has been working with his team all day," Tariq claps the man on his back. "When we hit the detonator, it'll blow a hole in Tyr that you can see from space... twenty miles west of here. At the same time, we'll quietly knock out Gravenwyl's plumbing, network cable, and electricity. While emergency services and Colonial Guards dispatch to the other side of the city, we'll come up through the utility tunnels and begin our work: for a Free Wolf!

"Free Wolf!" the soldiers bark, in unison. This takes Bridget by surprise, and she jumps rather embarrassingly, but no one seemed to be looking at her.

Tariq continues. "We've also organized a 'protest' near the center itself. Again, the goal is to keep attention outside of the building for as long as possible. The protest organizers are ours, they'll coordinate to obstruct any attempt at intervention."

"That said, this is a get-in, get-out operation. There will be plenty of time for relaxing after we've won independence, but for now, move quickly. For a free Wolf!"

"Free Wolf!" The soldiers echo.

“Good. Remember, the mission is to extract as many inmates as possible. Doesn’t matter their race, creed, or gender. If they’re in a cell, you relay them down to the honeycomb, just like we did in training today. You find your corner, and you stick to it, and you give directions. Who knew revolutions were so much like working a help desk, right?”

A chuckle from the squad.

“If you see red and blue, that’s Regency. Shoot and run, unless you have a turtledove. Silver tabs at the neck, that’s ACT-3. Engage and kill. Green and gray, we all know is Colonial Guard. Wound or incapacitate. Remember two divisions are already with us, and we won’t win this if we alienate the rest.”

Tariq pulls a brown and white object from his belt. It looked like an egg the size of a fist, with a single black stripe along one side. “If you do have a turtledove, use it wisely. Anti-magic is just about the most expensive sorcery defense spending can buy, and we’re guessing we’ll need them to bypass security at each floor.”

Bridget wraps her hand tightly around one of the two turtledoves on her own bandolier. These were the foundation of the plan. Captured from a poorly guarded depot several months prior, they were grenade-like containers of inverted arcane energy, colloquially known as anti-magic. There was a lot more to it than that; the sorcerers who knew how to make it we’re some of the best-paid practitioners in the galaxy, but the long and the short of it was that once detonated, they would effectively cancel any nearby magical effect, as well as rendering casters useless for at least a few hours. They had fifteen of them total, and they were the only thing that made raiding a magical detention facility with zero casting power anything but delirious.

Tariq returns the device to his belt and looks at Marilyn. “Alright, well. What are we waiting for?”

Marilyn pulls her night vision goggles on, and points ahead.

“We’ve erected ladders up to the utility area. After the first detonation, we’ll have fifteen minutes to get in position before we cut Gravenwyl off the grid. First unit with Tariq in the Northeast quadrant. Second unit with me in the Southwest. Lozano, you’re with Tariq. Let’s go.”

Collins nods, turns away and says something into his headset. He raises three fingers, and counts down silently. Bridget braces herself for the explosion, but of course it’s twenty miles away, so all that happens is Collins sweeps his arm down in a triumphant gesture, and Tariq nods a ‘follow me’ in her direction.

The group divides in two as Marilyn moves off to the left with her unit. The honeycomb had been used as a base layer for construction and infrastructure in certain parts of the original colony, they had simply to climb a hundred feet up to the level of the center’s basement. There was only one ladder at each corner, so it took some time. After ascending the ladder, the unit arrayed around the service door at a safe distance. They had turned off their hand

torches now and pulled on their goggles. It would be any second now. Bridget looks at Tariq's face, unearthly in photocathode green.

"You don't seem nervous," she says.

Tariq laughs. "This is either the beginning of a revolution, or the end of it. I'm not sure which scares me more."

"That's not the same as nervous," Bridget says.

"No," Tariq takes a deep breath. "No, it isn't."

The explosive on the door flashes ten times quickly, and Bridget covers her eyes with one hand. The BANG is louder than she expected; her ears ring with pain, but there's no time to process it. She's already two soldiers behind and she is running into the building and up a flight of stairs.

She can hear gunfire. She wonders if someone has died already. She wonders what their name was. Then she turns a corner and there's a guard pulling his gun on her and she shoots him; at least she thinks she shoots him. He collapses and she runs up another flight of stairs and hits the first force barrier.

It throws her backwards a step--she might have fallen down the stairs if someone in her unit hadn't caught her. "Turtledove!" the man shouts, and Bridget pulls one from her bandolier, arms it, and smashes it against the invisible barrier. It explodes in a cloud of gas, at least that's what it looks like in the goggles, and the soldiers either side of her rush forward and up and through the smoke uninhibited. She follows. There's more gunfire at the top of the stairs, by the time she mounts them, one of the Freewolves is gasping, wounded on the ground, and the other is pressed against the wall. "Clear!" he says, and Bridget is racing down the corridor.

There's a loud buzzing sound, and dim lights illuminate along the hall. Someone behind her says, "there's the generator," and Bridget pulls her goggles off, taking in the dim red glow.

There was a veritable shootout happening at the first floor security gate. Maybe it was Marilyn's group that had arrived first? Bridget can't parse much from the rattle of automatic gunfire, but it doesn't last long, and then two men smash through the gate with a hand-held ram.

The cells themselves were relatively low-tech. One of the guards had a set of keys, and they used these to quickly unlock each cell on the floor. The relay began, passing inmates down from Freewolf to Freewolf as they were ushered out of the building.

They repeated the process on floor two; by then they seemed to have churned through most of the guards. There was less resistance at the second floor security gate.

Most of the inmates were men; Bridget hadn't even thought about it until they came to a cell with a woman in a headscarf. The man with the keys begins to open the cell, but a rune

illuminates and electricity sparks across the door and throws his body backwards against the back wall. Bridget curses and arms her second Turtledove. "You okay?"

He doesn't respond. She smashes the turtledove against the cell door, picks up the keys, and tries again. This time the door swings open. "Come on!"

"Yusef! Where is Yusef?"

"I don't know who that is! Come on! See the man at the end of the hall? Go to him!"

The woman grabs the collar of Bridget's jacket. "I'm not going anywhere without my brother!"

Bridget pushes her off. "Fine! Is he nearby?"

He turns out to be three cells down at the end of the row. The woman falls against the door, shouting hopelessly through the small window. Bridget is about to slide the key into the lock when she stops, and looks up at the woman.

"Hey, holy shit."

"What?"

Bridget looks at her empty bandolier, then back to the woman. "You're the only one so far with a magical ward. I know who you are."

The woman sputters. Bridget laughs hoarsely and shakes her head. "No manches. We're out of here."

She starts to move away but the woman leaps on her. It's so unexpected that Bridget falls to the ground. She rolls over and slams her assailant against the wall. Feeling her attacker's body weaken, Bridget stands and half-drags her back down the hall to the last checkpoint. "Get this woman down to the honeycomb; Hall's cleared."

They carry the dazed woman down the stairs, and Bridget looks up to meet Tariq's eyes a few feet away.

"Hey," she says.

"Well hey," he replies.

"What's a guy like you doing in a-..." Bridget trails off, feeling lame. "It's going well, I think. Is it going well?"

"It's going well, I think," Tariq nods.

“Good,” Bridget says. Something about the red emergency lights makes everything feel a bit dreamlike. It reflects off Tariq’s dark skin, glowing around him like an aura. “Good,” she says again.

“Good,” Tariq says.

Bridget steps forward and throws her arms around Tariq, pressing her lips against his.

Scene 8 - Cooms’ Chateau

Qamar came to, slowly, in a dim room. Her first thought is that she’s home, in Radcliffe, that Safia and Yusef are likely sleeping nearby. Her second thought is that she’s been jailed, perhaps anyone wearing a hijab was rounded up after the building went down. But then she remembers the woman in the red coat. Her confession. The way the woman looked at her.

Awe.

Or something like it. It wasn't horror; it wasn't anger or fear. Qamar was well versed in other people's emotions but this, this was not one she had ever read before.

Where was she??

She sits up and nearly faints as blood pounds in her head. There’s pain too, but Qamar pushes this to the side, and once she's sure she can remain conscious, she swings her legs over the side of the bed. She's naked, she realizes. She touches her hand to her left ring finger quickly; the silver band is still there. She exhales slowly.

There is a pounding of steps from across the room, and Qamar looks up as the door swings open and Rosalind enters, breathlessly.

“You're awake!”

She crosses the room and throws Qamar’s clothes onto the bed.

“I hit you too hard, I was scared you wouldn't wake up.”

Rosalind sits on the foot of the bed. Qamar considers attacking her. But her body still felt weak and this woman had a fierce energy about her.

“You and I must be friends,” Rosalind leans forward and places her hand on Qamar's shoulder. Her hand is warm.

Qamar says nothing, but continues to watch Rosalind cautiously, careful not to show skepticism or confusion, which could set people off. Rosalind searches Qamar's face.

“I’m not stupid. I know these aren't the traditional circumstances out of which friendships are born. But here we are. And I need you to understand. Because when you spoke to me in

Elemen Park, as we watched the Republic Building come down, I saw something in you that I recognized in me!"

"What?"

Tears well up in Rosalind's eyes, and her voice cracks with emotion. "I saw your commitment. Purpose. Hate too. And pain. And unquenchable, unbridled power."

Qamar shifts slightly, and hesitantly pulls her underclothes from the pile.

Rosalind wipes her eyes. "God, I'm sorry. I've..."

"What's your name?"

"It's Rosalind. What about you?"

"Qamar."

Rosalind takes Qamar's hand and clasps it between her own. "I promise I will never hurt you again. If you'll be my friend, I will protect you and help you in any way I can. But I need you to do something for me first."

Qamar pulls her undershirt over her head, and slowly, methodically, wraps her hijab around her head, her eyes on Rosalind.

"Tell me," she says.

Qamar follows Rosalind down a flight of gilded stairs, trying (with some difficulty) to process both Rosalind's story and the wild opulence surrounding her. She weighs the possibility that this woman is simply insane. She didn't have to be an android to have been imprisoned here for her entire life. There was no shortage of rich sociopaths, and no limit to human cruelty left unchecked.

The stairs open up into an enormous ballroom, and Qamar feels momentarily dizzy at the sheer space of it, the vaulted arches soaring overhead were like nothing she had ever seen.

"Hope..." Qamar's eyes search for the source of the word.

At the far end of the hall, a man sat in a wheelchair at a folding table. There was a newspaper in front of him, but it seemed clear that he hadn't been reading it. Though his age was hard to guess, there was a blank look in his eyes that you didn't need to be an expert to read. It was almost comical, this decrepit man with a newspaper, considering what was directly in front of him.

The floor had been daubed with red and black paint--Qamar immediately recognized it as an Enquist Circle. Someone tried to summon a beyon here. The runes had already been activated, though they had likely expired.

“What is this?”

Rosalind sighs and pulls a lock of her ink-black hair behind her ear. “This was my failed attempt. That is my... husband.”

“Your husband.”

Rosalind paces across the hall, her eyes on the general. “He... is the last thing standing between me... and freedom..” She extends her hands in front of her face and closes her eyes. “I can literally feel it. It’s humming just in front of me, just out of reach.” Rosalind opens her eyes and fixes her gaze on Qamar. “So I need you to kill him.”

Qamar crosses her arms, and moves across the room at the opposite angle, watching Rosalind.

“How do you want me to do it?”

“How do I-” Rosalind presses her hands to her temples, pushing her hair into a tangle above her head. “How do I want you to do it? What kind of question is that? I don’t know! Quickly! As fast as possible!”

Qamar narrows her eyes. “Why don’t you do it?”

Rosalind flashes anger. “I- can’t. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“So it’s your... programming?”

“Something like that.” Rosalind glances back at the general, her jaw trembling. “What’s the problem? I thought we were friends.”

Qamar nods, slowly. She uncrosses her arms, pivots on the ball of her foot, and moves directly to the man’s side, her bare feet making a soft thwopping sound against the marble. Gently, she pushes aside the table, its motor whirring to life as it rolls itself out of the way. Then she steps in front of the wheelchair and regards the general.

He had a miserable countenance. Like a candle that had melted in on itself, his once square features had gone soft and pock-marked, like poorly kneaded dough. His nose, mouth, and eyes dripped continuously, and if there was a shred of consciousness left within his skull, it was too addled by dementia to constitute awareness.

“Hope...” He wheezed as if it were the only sound his lips knew how to make anymore.

“Hope...”

Qamar picks up a clean napkin from the table and presses it over Cooms’ nose and mouth. His face shook a little when her fingers clamped around his nostrils, but other than that, he barely resists. In fact, the person who cries out is Rosalind.

Qamar looks up at her. She is visibly shaking, her shoulders hunched forward, her knees bent, her arms halfway outstretched. "It's not him, it's not him, it's not him, it's not him," she murmurs, barely audible.

Qamar nods. "This man has been dead for a while now," she says.

Rosalind's breath comes hard and ragged. She takes a step forward, and a look flashes across her face again that makes the hairs on Qamar's neck prick upward, her muscles tensing, sensing an attack. But no attack comes. Whatever is happening to Rosalind is so utterly strange that for a moment it is suddenly and absolutely apparent to Qamar that everything she has heard is true, that this is not a human but a machine, a machine that is somehow fighting against itself, brought to a violent standstill by two conflicting sources of data.

"How could anyone be so cruel," Rosalind stammers, tears pouring down her face, "to willingly inflict mortality upon their creations."

Cooms' feeble groping falters, and Qamar feels the faintest pressure beneath her hand give way to inanimate flesh and nothingness. Rosalind collapses to her knees, weeping with abandon.

Qamar's lip twists, and she withdraws her hand. "So," she says loudly, hoping the crying will stop. "What now?"

"Now?" Rosalind looks up at her, her eyes red with grief and fury.

"Now we kill the son of a bitch that did this to me."

Scene 9 - Halspur Interstellar Port

Elandra looks over her shoulder as she scans her badge at HISP. The guards are on edge, but everything clears, and they let her through to the shuttle loading point.

"Scary times, scary times," the charter officer intones, checking her in.

"Brother you're not wrong," Elandra forces a smile, and checks over her shoulder again. The dull boom of tank fire sounds beyond the launchpad.

"We can't board you till we're done with the freight. Policy. Hang tight."

Elandra nods. Feeling a little shaky, she unshoulders her rucksack and sits on an idle cargo roller, watching the cranes load the shuttle, their long metallic arms moving in carefully eased patterns, sliding into place cube after cube after cube after cube.

A spat of yelling draws her attention, and she looks over at the gate to see a troop of men pushing their way through to the launch pad. They were dressed in inconspicuous winter garments, but as they approach, she notes the shine of body armor at their necks, a

form-fitting black material with silver stripes. ACT-3. There were 5 of them, and their guns were drawn.

“Arcanist Ramirez!”

Elandra raises her hands high in the air. “I am unarmed! I am unarmed!” She yells, loudly.

One of the men laughs. “We can see that.” He throws a bundle of heavy cloth onto the ground. A body bag. “You are hereby apprehended for questioning by Alliance Counter Terrorism. Get in.”

“I haven’t done anything!”

“Did I ask?” Elandra cringes as the man fires his weapon at the ground, the gun blast echoing hollowly off the station walls. “Get in!”

Shaking, Elandra steps towards the men. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the charter officer sheltering behind a bank of machinery. The shadows of the loading cranes pass over her face, in unaffected synchrony.

The men circle her as she nears them, their guns still trained on her. Elandra’s mind is numb, Her hands still raised above her head as she lowers herself onto her knees. “In the bag!” one of the men yells, and she feels a heavy pain in her back as she is kicked forward onto her hands.

“Slowly!” One of them shouts. “Any sudden moves, or the barest hint of a spell, and we will shoot you!”

Elandra breathes raggedly. She keeps her hands planted on the asphalt, and places one foot carefully into the bag, worming it in, before following it with her other foot, and lifting a hand gingerly to spread the bag in front of her. Everything feels loud around her, a cacophony of heavy boots, of eager violence, of imminent death. “Face down!” The man yells. “In the bag!”

Then came gunfire. Blaring, automatic blasts, all around her. She collapses forward, pressing her hands over her head, squeezing her eyes closed. The gunfire and the shouting seems to last forever, then it’s only boots again. Heavy footfalls. A different voice, with a heavy accent shouting “Clear!”

She opens her eyes.

Blood is pooling beneath the bodies of the ACT agents. A strange man is slumped over a rail by the entrance. The station’s massive glass panes are riddled with bullet holes, each connected by a spider-web of cracks. Bridget Lozano is crossing the asphalt towards her.

“Arcanist,” she extends a hand, and helps Elandra to her feet. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“What- What are you doing here?”

“Taking over the space port, what does it look like? What’d you do to piss off ACT-3?”

“I have no idea. What do you mean you’re taking over the space port?”

“Welcome to the revolution. I’m recently appointed as the Longsend Regent.”

Elandra takes a step back. “Longsend? The guy arguing for independence from the Republic?”

“He’s not arguing anymore.” Bridget frowns. “Hey I don’t know if you noticed but we just saved your ass!”

“You just killed five agents of the Republic!”

“And I’d do it all again! They’re not exactly teddy bears.”

“I have to go, I have to-” Elandra notices one of the rebels ousting the charter officer from his hiding place. “Hey, leave him!”

Bridget steps forward and grabs Elandra by the wrist. “Hey!” They lock eyes.

“You should come with us. Do you know how much good you could do on this planet? You know in your heart that things have reached a tipping point. The empire is crumbling.” Elandra catches her mouth hanging open as she stares wide-eyed at Bridget, trying to read her expression.

“Honestly,” she continues. “It should be you. People here already think of you as hero. It should be you.”

Elandra pulls away. “Please, let me go.”

Bridget can’t hide her disappointment, though she tries. “It sounds like I might have to shoot you next time I see you,” she quips. “¡Oye! Enviarla arriba!”

The terrified attendant nods. Elandra, trying to still her quaking body, picks up her bag and walks shakily toward the shuttle.

“Lozano! The cargo’s gotta be worth something -- shouldn’t we hold it?”

“We just took control of the largest port in the hemisphere. What’s one shuttle?”

Elandra ascends the steps to the cabin. She steps through the portal, then looks back at Bridget. “Thank you,” she yells, over the hum of the engine.

Bridget shrugs. "You know, I envy you! Some of us didn't get the chance to..." Elandra can't make out the rest. The hatch slides closed, and she is instructed by the automated take-off sequence to secure her bag and strap in.

"Welcome aboard the Ganymede Hayworth Shuttle, Florentine. We will reach orbit in approximately 15 minutes, and rendezvous with the Danvers Orbital Trade Center in 4.2 hours. Please secure your oxygen mask."

Elandra pulls the mask over her face and tightens the strap. As the sterile air floods her lungs, her breath quickens in her chest, her ribs fluttering over shallow gasps. She gulps, choking back her terror and relief, and laboring over slow, steady inhaleds the shuttle blasts from the platform.

Scene 10 - Colonial Hall

A loud buzzer sounds, and the door opens. Henry is standing outside, flanked by two guards. It's exactly 24 hours earlier, and Penelope has spent half an hour in shock, sitting with her back against the wall of a holding cell in the Colonial Hall. Seeing Henry brings her back to the present, and she extends her arms, welcoming him into a hug.

"What's going to happen to you?" he says, the words muffled against her shirt.

"I don't know." Penelope looks up at the guards. "What's going to happen to me?"

"The Lieutenant wishes to inspect you immediately."

"And after that?"

"Just come with us, please."

"What about Henry?"

The guards look at each other. "He offered us each 500 kin if we let him see you. We looked up his dad. Seemed like it was worth a shot."

Penelope nods, weakly. "Can you give us 5 minutes please?"

One of the men looks at his armlet. "We can give you two," he says. And they shut the door.

Henry is fighting tears. "This is all my fault."

"No, it isn't."

"I mean what was I thinking? First with the tab, then trying to hack the drone--"

"You were just trying to help. Henry, listen,"

He looks at her, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand. "When you see Felix, I need you to tell him something, okay?"

"I don't even know where Felix is."

"He'll find you. Someday. Probably soon. When you see him, will you tell him something for me?"

"Sure."

"Tell him," Penelope looks up over his head, searching for inspiration. "Tell him, I don't know," she laughs, fighting tears herself. "Tell him Cinnamon, Rosemary, Turmeric, Sage. He'll know what it means."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know."

The door opens, and the guards enter, separating them roughly. Cuffs snap around her wrists, and she and Henry are led away from each other down the hall. Penelope tries to think of something else to say, but nothing comes to her. She wonders if the same thing went through Henry's mind -- then he's gone, around the corner, and the static returns. She tries to think and thinks of nothing, she feels useless, she feels nothing. This, she thinks, is the end of the road.

She is thrust into an office, and uncuffed. She looks up to see a familiar face, a wide brown face creased with lines of stress, atop a slightly ill-fitting red and blue Regency jacket.

"Thank you, Kowalsky. Would you please check on the casting circle downstairs? The Regent does not wish for any delays."

The guard wrinkles his nose. "You sure? She- It's supposed to be dangerous."

"I know what I'm doing, Kowalsky. Go."

The guard doesn't quite look convinced, he casts an uncertain glance at Penelope before leaving, but he leaves, and shuts the door behind him.

"Please sit down."

She sits.

"My name is George Fowler. I'm the First Lieutenant here in Halspur."

Penelope manages a wistful smile. "Nice to see you again."

"I wouldn't say that." Fowler clears his throat, awkwardly, and fiddles with some papers in his file. "Now, I've prepared a document for you on what to expect through the, err,

Confiscation process. As you might guess, this is, uh, new territory for us. Previous artifacts disjoined under the CDA have been, well, uh, artifacts.”

Penelope nods, and accepts the file handed to her. “Read it carefully, please,” Fowler says.

The first line is in bold; it reads, “Confiscation of Dangerous Artifacts - Notification of Process.” Below that, the word, ‘IMPORTANT,’ in all caps, and then several blocks of text.

“I am going to ask you a yes or no question,” it says. “Answer the question as if I had asked, ‘Do you need anything besides that fuel cell to get off the planet?’”

Penelope looks up. Fowler inhales heavily. “Now, I’m afraid we can’t permit you to contact your, um, husband. Is there a message you’d like relayed to him?”

“No,” Penelope says.

“Good. Please finish reading.” Penelope returns her eyes to the file.

“I have a wife, and two children. When we were shipped here, we felt like cattle. There were bad years, but we carved out a life for ourselves here. Now we own an apartment in the commercial district. Just a few blocks away from the Republic Building.” Penelope feels the breath quickening in her chest; she stops herself from looking up at Fowler again, and continues to the next paragraph.

“We confiscated the fuel drone from the service center. It’s sitting, unlocked and awaiting coordinates, in the lot outside the window to your left. I have dispatched all Regency rotovers to surveil the area near the summoning event, so you won’t be followed in the air. But the Lord Regent and Captain Kerrick are on their way, so there’s no time to waste. I’m wearing an amulet of interference, but nothing else in the room is warded.”

She looks up at Fowler, who is sweating profusely. “Do you understand?” he says.

“Yes,” says Penelope.

The desk lunges into Fowler’s body with a loud whoomf, toppling him in his chair. He attempts to scramble free, but Penelope turns the desk over on him and pins him with a hasty incantation. She suppresses the urge to apologize. It takes her three attempts to smash the window, and she hears Fowler muttering a laboriously slow and unnecessarily loud obstruction spell behind her. She turns and counters it, then winces as she topples a not too heavy looking cabinet over him for good measure. An alarm is sounding from within the building. She casts her own obstruction on the door, then takes a running leap out the smashed window.

It was higher up than she anticipated, and the gravity pulls her down faster than she can react. Her body slams into gravel, and she feels an explosive pain in her abdomen, as if something has burst inside of her. Gasping, she pushes herself to her feet on one hand, clutching her stomach with the other. She feels the tears in her skin close, but a crucial metabolic organ has ruptured, specifically something called a Bonding Sac -- she suddenly

knows this, with a certainty that she can only assume is programmed into her nervous system.

The fuel drone is a few yards away, its enormous rotors looming with the character of a hungry vulture. With a grunt of pain she crosses the distance and pulls herself into the ridealong seat. Opening up the same console that Henry had attempted to hijack, she finds a navigation prompt, just as Fowler had promised.

A security bot is wheeling towards her from the southernmost corner of the building -- Penelope coughs another phrase of Engelman and sends it careening into the wall with a satisfying crash. She punches the Hyperion One's coordinates into the console and prays it's still where they left it. Elandra will understand, she thinks. Elandra was going to abandon you here if you let her, she thinks.

The drone's rotors spin up to a deafening roar as it finally takes off, much too slowly, complaining that Penelope should fasten her safety harness. She does so, as the drone picks up speed and altitude. Penelope looks down at her stomach. A dark blot has formed beneath the skin. The pain is intense. She needs to drink a liter of water and lie down immediately. Sounds nice, she thinks, checking over her shoulder. An officer is leveling a gun at her from the broken window. She ducks, as a salvo of bullets ricochet off the drone's rusted hull. Then they clear the neighboring building, and Colonial Hall disappears into the fog behind them.

Twenty minutes of flight pass in excruciating pain -- but miraculously, they pass without incident. They break from the clouds and touch down next to the yellow Springsteen. Penelope practically falls out of the drone, and half stumbles, half crawls to the door, as the multibot goes about its pre-programmed business of replacing the fuel cell. She inputs the code Elandra gave her when they were attacked by the DREAD--"Rational Marigold Tokyo Denim"--and makes her way to the bridge.

"Hello," DanDan's voice is as cheerful as ever. "The Hyperion One is in emergency override mode. How can I assist you?"

"Take me to the Amaterasu System."

"This journey will take 15 days and 9 hours. Press Go to confirm."

Penelope presses Go, and collapses onto the floor.

This was Episode 6 of *The Elandrid*, and the sixth 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

