

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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Thomas Tells a Story

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The Elandrid, Episode 8

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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 8 - Fourteen Days of War

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 - Emin's Accessories

Kylan bows perfunctorily as Gabriel steps out of the auto car. "My lord."

Gabriel crunches through the gravel toward him, adjusting his body camera. It's the day the Freewolves captured Halspur's ISP, the day Elandra escaped ACT-3, 15 days before her encounter with the Oracle, and the first of 14 days of war on Tyr. "This planet is coming apart at the seams." Gabriel growls. "Where the hell is Peters?"

Kylan stamps out his cigarette and casts a meaningful look to Gabriel's right. "No idea, but these goons have been waiting for ya."

Gabriel turns. An unmarked van has opened up like a clown car, spilling ACT agents out like ants.

"For fucks sake," Gabriel shoots Kylan a dark look. "Come on. Is he in there?"

"Unless he can teleport," Kylan smirks. "He's in there."

One of the counter terrorism officers yells at them. "Lord Berns! Mr. Helser said you might need some back-up!"

Gabriel turns. "I need you like a dog needs lice. Fuck off!"

The man looks dispassionately at them, his rifle held casually in front of him.

"Did you hear what I said?" Gabriel takes a step forward.

The man shrugs. "I don't answer to no Regent. I answer to Mr. Helser. Are we doing this or what?"

Kylan watches Gabriel carefully, slowly twisting a ring on his finger. There were a dozen ACT agents. He had four snipers positioned nearby. A single bullet could be one too many.

But Gabriel turns and continues toward the junk shop, the ACT agents in tow. Kylan looks up at the window of an adjacent building, nods to his man there, and follows them inside.

The shop is dark--it had been an auto garage in a former life and the few windows were boarded up. An electric fan-heater is blowing in one corner, slowly rotating from side to side. The only illumination filters in through a skylight above them. Gabriels steps over an overturned lamp and peers down the nearest aisle, vaguely delimited by dilapidated chairs and chests of drawers.

"Emin Patel?" Gabriel says loudly. "My name is Gabriel Berns. Do you know who I am?"

Something moves at the far end of the aisle. The ACT agents bristle, their weapons clacking against their body armor like giant insects.

Gabriel steps forward. "Tell me what you know of the woman Qamar."

There is a fit of muffled coughing. Kylan twists his ring. The ACT agents spread out across the front of the shop, the silver bars at their collar glinting occasionally as they form a half-perimeter.

"You are suspect of conspiracy, unlawful teachings in the mystic arts, and abetting the mass-murder of over two hundred men and women in an act of terror," Gabriel says. "Do you have nothing to say?"

"Nothing to you," slurs a gravelly, agitated voice.

Gabriel cocks an eyebrow. "Mr. Patel, I am the Lord Regent of the United Star Systems. Of all the people in the universe, no one stands to more influence your fate than I."

"My fate?" The man sputters and laughs. "You have nothing to do with it! The Last Demoniak has arrived, as He foretold!"

Gabriel clears his throat. "It's time to go, Mr. Patel. We can talk more in the comfort of a stationhouse."

"I'm not going anywhere." The man sounds manic, drunk, or both. He sways out of the path of the flashlight beam. "There shall be four pretenders! And we shall know them all. I've done my part."

"And what part is that, exactly?"

Emin creeps forward through the shadows, the light catching in his lined face like spiderwebbing.

"Verse 9. Instructions to those loyal to the crown of light! Go to the Land of the Handless God, and there pass the First Magics to--"

The eerie exchange is interrupted by an ACT agent's shout. "Knife! He's got a knife!" Sure enough, something glints in Emin's hand as the sudden blast of rifle fire illuminates the room, leaving Gabriel in a flash of darkness. He staggers backwards, flips on a hand torch, and lifts it to rest on the old man's remains: a bloodied body felled awkwardly, like a discarded doll, his hand still clutching a glass beer bottle, which spills the last of its contents in measured, gulping sobs.

"Huh," one of the ACT agents steps forward, lowering his gun. "I could have sworn he had a knife."

Scene 2 - The Honeycomb

Bridget rests her head on the heels of her palms, trying to find a position of equilibrium. How many hours has it been since she last slept?

She, Tariq, and Marilyn are gathered around the metal strategy table. 3 days have passed since the attack on Gravenwyl Center.

“Why are we still trapped down here,” Bridget mumbles. “We're winning aren't we?” Even she knew it was wishful thinking. Operation Highjump had been only a partial success. They'd taken HISP, but the next part of the plan had been a disaster. They had hoped to quickly commandeer the satellite stations, but Orbital Control had gotten ahead of them somehow and shot down all of their trojan horses.

They had Halspur and Gemini. And they had loyalists in several news outlets that were spinning things for them. A handful of other petty victories and a mounting death toll just about completed the picture.

Marilyn pans across the rolled out map-screen. “So look, the captured War Between missile silo is here. This is a big advantage for team us, and if we're going to use it we should do so as quickly as possible, before Cowl can prepare.”

Tariq leans in. “The Point Clair military base. That seems like the obvious target.”

Bridget looks up at him. “Seriously? You think any more Colonial Guards will defect after we shoot a missile at them?”

Tariq glowers at her. “It's not like they're sitting on their hands. You know why we have to keep meeting down here in the honeycomb? Because if we start meeting above ground we'll get dronestriking into oblivion.”

“Calm down!” Marilyn wipes her glasses. “Bridget is probably right, we should try to minimize loss of life. What about drone hangars? Can we target those?”

Tariq peers at the map. Bridget leans over it too, and her arm swings into a canteen knocking its contents across the electric map. “Whoaa!” Marilyn leaps to her feet and drags the map off the table.

“Fuck. Shit. Is it okay?”

Marilyn shoots her annoyed look. “Let's... take a break. Get a couple hours of sleep.”

Bridget feels a dull shame, dampened by her overall exhaustion. She gets up, steadies herself on the table, and moves for the exit.

Marilyn calls after her. “Meet back here in 3 hours. We still have to figure out our blockade and plan the raid on Nobel.”

Bridget steps out into the tunnel. It was cold. She had borrowed a set of long underwear from Tariq--it draped over her frame like an old, stretched out sock, but it helped. She heads for her cot.

“Lozano.” Tariq places his hand on her shoulder. She turns around. He looks sad. “I just wanted to- Don’t worry about the map. You know. It doesn’t matter.”

Bridget starts to speak, but trails off. She shrugs.

Tariq looks uncomfortable. “Do you want to... you know. Do you want company?”

“Tariq, come on,” Bridget makes a face. “I’m about to fall over. Not right now.”

Tariq’s expression hardens. “I didn’t mean- damn, Lozano.”

Bridget splays her arms. “Well shit, I’m 24, I know how to fall asleep on my own.”

“Fine,” Tariq walks past her. “Sorry I asked.”

Bridget stares dully ahead for a moment, before wheeling on Tariq’s retreating outline. “And I’m sorry we fucked!” she says, the words echoing a little in the passage.

He stops. Then after a moment, he continues, off and out of sight.

Bridget slumps to her cot. She crawls gratefully into it, and sprawls across the canvas, staring up at the blackness above her. “Fuck you,” she says aloud. “Fuck you.”

She rolls over on her side, and goes to set an alarm on her armlet before she remembers she’s not wearing one. They’d confiscated it when she’d first been captured. She groans, rubs her face against the back of her arm, and feels the tiredness rushing towards her like a wave. Just before she sinks into unconsciousness, she wonders what Norelle is doing.

Scene 3 - ACT-3 Facility

At that moment, Norelle is sitting in an improvised concrete cell. Perhaps an old robotics bay, or a drone hangar, she thinks. The wide garage door looks like it might once have opened automatically. Now though, it is slid out of the way by two ACT agents, with a squeal of metal.

“I have to hand it to you,” Norelle draws, “you really nailed it with this torture technique. Leaving me alone with my thoughts? Make it stop.”

One of the men laughs, or caws, really. He’s tall and reedy, and the other is fat with a face like rotten porridge. She hates them both equally.

“No torture will be necessary, Sergeant Peters,” the tall one says. “I feel confident that you won’t be withholding.”

Norelle fixes him with a bored stare. “Do you have names or am I destined to address you by increasingly unimaginative insults?”

He leers at her. “I’m Bash. This is Louie. He put that injunction on you.”

Norelle looks sympathetically at Louie. "Oh... It's not very good."

Louie snarls at her, "Good enough. I don't see you levitating or sucking demon arse."

"I have to be honest, I'd rather suck demon anything than be stuck in a room with you."

Bash rolls his eyes, "Enough." He drags a stool from the corner and sits down in front of Norelle. "Now, if you want to get out of here, and get your..." he gestures at Norelle's stump, "...robot leg back, we just need you to answer a few questions. Let's start with the basics. Where is your ward, err... Bridgiita Lozano?"

Norelle is stone-faced, "Easy. I don't know."

"Have you taught Lozano any theurgy?"

"Of course not," Norelle scoffs. "The woman has the discipline of an 8 year old."

Bash regards her. "What is the nature of the artifact you stole from Archmage Bohumir?"

Norelle wrinkles her nose, "What?!"

"The Archmage is making a great deal of progress with his prosthetic hand. He has written that after the android attacked him and stole his books, there remained an artifact of great importance to him, but that it is since gone from his study. He would not, however, tell us what the artifact did."

Norelle shakes her head. "Lozano..."

Bash and Louie look at each other. "You believe your ward stole the artifact?" Bash says.

Norelle grins sardonically. "She probably didn't even know what it was."

Bash looks dissatisfied. Louie glares at her sullenly. "And I take it..." he drones, thickly, "...you don't either."

"Of course not, you idiot." Norelle growls at him. "How would I know what Lozano stole if I didn't even know she stole it?"

Bash crosses her arms and looks appraisingly at her. "I don't believe you," he says, finally. "I believe you do know something. And I believe you're gonna tell us. Because what you don't know is that your daughter, Andrea, is on her way here, five days into slip, fleeing the scene of a teenage summoning gone awry. It seems that she set a beyon loose on her high school bullies, and right now, I'm the only thing between her and a Ship Marshall and a whole team of very nasty law enforcement officials. So what I'm saying is, if you don't tell us what you know, the next few days are going to be very unpleasant for her."

Norelle blinks. Then she says, “The whereabouts of my daughter and the details of her delinquency have absolutely no bearing on what I do or do not know. So please, call the Ship Marshall and have him do as he pleases; I’m afraid her poor behavior does not magically bestow wisdom upon me, and your threats only serve to highlight your absolute incompetence as an investigatory body.”

Bash stares at her, with the look of someone who had just watched a dog pee on his shoes. He laughs once, and stands up.

“Fine. I hope you’re comfortable, because this storage unit is gonna be your home until we get you, Lozano, and those three towel-heads into matching parrillas.”

Bash turns at the door. “Oh one more thing. Being as you’re so forthcoming, if you’d had any contact with participants in the Reclamation program, you’d’ve told us, right?”

Norelle is thrown. “Excuse me?”

“Coincidences are very strange,” Bash runs a hand over his jaw, watching her. “Reclamation Cases 50HRA6 through 50HRA8 were taken from that village you half-way destroyed. Their parents were school-teachers.”

Norelle stares at him. He grins. “Just think, if it weren't for you, they might still be eating sand on Earth.”

Louie re-ups her injunction with a phrase of mangled Engleman, and Norelle sits there, stupefied, as they slam the garage door shut.

Scene 4 - Gabriel’s Room

Gabriel paces around his room. It’s evening. The day had been consumed with logistics, setting up accommodations for family members and improvised barracks for Regency officers that had fled Halspur the day before. They had vacated the colony in a hurry when it became clear that the Guard there were defecting.

Gabriel’s cohort pings from his desk. “There is a new message on the Quantum Receiver.”

Gabriel stalks across the room. “Mr. Harper’s secret friend is more responsive than our Consul.”

The text reads, “Where are you?”

“Point Clair colony,” he types, hurriedly. Then says, “Audrey, will you please send the Consul another conference invitation? Our appointment was an hour ago.”

The Arcanist, (at least, he guessed it was the Arcanist) is finally feeling chatty. Distracted, Gabriel finds himself venting his frustration. His parents’ faces flash in his mind, and a bloodied tenement floor, empty but for a torn black bag. He unplugs the QPR.

“The Consul is ready for you,” Audrey’s voice is cool and collected. Gabriel envies her. He clears his throat, adjusts his posture in his chair, and joins the video call. As usual, the Consul’s video is off; the Consulate icon simply lights up, as his saccharine voice emanates from the machine’s speakers.

“Lord Berns. It’s good to see you. Just terrible that you’ve been caught up in this silly civil tantrum. I think it’s a terrible thing.”

“It is disturbing,” Gabriel agrees. “However it is not really my concern. The Republican Army will sort everything out -- I understand the entire garrison in Freya is on its way, though they’re certainly taking their time.”

“Yes, yes. We’ve seen all this before. Pioneers, I tell you. Ingratitude. To think, these people would be choking for breath on those rocks if it weren’t for us. It truly astounds me.”

Gabriel presses his right thumb into his left palm, massaging his hand irritably. “Sir, regarding the Ereshkigal investigation. We have, or rather, had two leads. Sergeant Peters believes that the Archmage, a known collector of theurgic writings, was attacked by an Aphrodite android. And separately, we have reason to believe that one Emin Patel, who owned a junk shop in Radcliffe, may have conspired to bring about the summoning.”

“Yes, yes. Good. Good work.”

Gabriel’s nostrils flare; he nearly snarls his next words. “Consul Dane, it is not good at all. ACT-3 killed Emin Patel before I was able to question him, and Sergeant Peters has disappeared from her hotel room without a trace, which I strongly suspect is their doing as well!”

Gabriel takes a breath.

“Adam. I know we don’t know each other very well, but I have to assume you endorsed me because you knew I would protect the rule of law. I urge you, order Mr. Helser to release Sergeant Peters, get ACT-3 out of here, and let me do my job.”

The Consul simpers. “Gabriel, you must learn to play with others. Institutional differences can be frustrating, but you are all there for a reason.”

Gabriel shakes his head. “You’re not listening to me.”

“I am listening, yes, I hear your whining-”

Gabriel slams his fist against the desk. “I cannot work with them here! You must recall them, or my authority is meaningless!”

There is quiet on the other end. A low tone sounds, as the Consul turns his video feed on. His face a heavily padded blunt instrument, a bulldog’s jowls and dark, beady eyes.

“Lord Berns, I would like to tell you a story. It is the story of the first Regent. The Queen’s Regent. Do you know it?”

“Thomas Barrows. He was named Lord Regent of Magical Affairs by Queen Elizabeth the First in 1559, the same year she became queen.”

“Very good. But those are the facts. The story is quite a different thing.”

Gabriel frowns, and leans back in his chair.

“Yes, settle in. You see, what your facts fail to do is imagine, or ask questions. For example, your facts do not wonder, why was the Regent so called? It is a question that many have simply ceased to ask. But there is a story there, even if it has been relegated to children’s books or fairy tales.

“You see, in that time, there were many kings and queens. All squabbling over castles, peasants, power... but there was another king. A King of No Nations. The Woodland King, or more often, The Wild King. This man was said to have power over magic in a way even you could only dream of. He was said to be advised by a host of shadows, he could walk from tree to tree as if stepping through a doorway, and he wore an antlered crown of sunlight and a robe of autumn leaves.

“While it is impossible to determine the exact line where facts end and myth begins, there is evidence that The Wild King did exist in some form or another, and ruled over all places where the other Kings could not for over a hundred years. He held court with wild beasts and gave shelter to escaped slaves and runaway serfs, and many accomplished magicians claim to have kept his company, including Margery Jourdemayne herself.

“But one day, The Wild King drew aside a favored lord and told him that a change was coming in the world, and that the Wild King was no longer needed. He invested his power, perhaps both literally and figuratively, in this lord, and named him Regent, ruling over magic in his stead. And with his final command, he ordered the Regent make his way to England, to find and serve Elizabeth, first of her name in House Tudor. And so, a few days later, Thomas Barrows stumbled out of the Hertfordshire forest, and pledged himself to the young Queen.

“But the tale does not end there, for the Wild King promised Barrows that he would return. Barrows waited all his life for the King’s return, frequently consulting with the stars and developing theories as to when it might be. Each theory was of course proved wrong, and Barrows went to his death with just enough breath to appoint the next Regent, and to say, ‘his Grace was never well-disposed to counting time’.”

The consul purses his lips and narrows his eyes, inspecting Gabriel carefully. Gabriel inhales deeply.

“What a story, indeed. Thank you.”

The consul’s voice becomes a menacing growl. “The point is, Lord Berns, that yours is borrowed power. Borrowed magic, and borrowed authority, granted long ago by a King, and

kept ever after by the grace of kings, presidents, prime ministers, and consuls. It is not yours. It does not belong to you. And it is not your place to tell me what I must or must not do.”

Gabriel nods, eyes fixed to the consul’s, who glowers across the video feed, nearly filling the screen.

“I understand.”

Dane pretends not to hear this—he looks off camera and mutters, “I have a call with the Zhong Consul. Learn to work with ACT-3. And find whoever’s responsible for Halspur.”

Gabriel leans forward. “What happens when the Wild King returns?”

The consul turns back to the camera, eyebrows raised in surprise. Then the corners of his lips curl upwards into a sneer, as if to say that this was the most vapid and absurd thing Gabriel could have asked. He says, “The world ends, Lord Berns.” and snaps out of sight.

Scene 5 - The Passenger Ship

Lightyears away on the passenger ship, Andrea has inhabited a waking nightmare. Following Ereshkigal, a contingent of the travelers opened a petition to turn the ship around. They were understandably frightened, and it turned from bad to worse when the Freewolves began their coup. Town halls were held, people made speeches, but ultimately what it came down to was that Christopher Cowl still nominally retained control of the planet. More importantly, there were several thousand Slate Act migrants on the manifest, and it would be a dead loss for Ganymede Interstellar if they were brought back to Chiron.

As if that wasn’t enough stress, Andrea was starting to get the distinct impression she was being watched. Personnel stared at her a little too long in the food lines. Guards tightened their grips on their weapons as she passed. She spent hours at night going back and forth, wondering if this was just normal or if she’d really been flagged. But if that were the case, she thought, why hadn’t she been dragged to the brig? She assumed the ship had a brig. But maybe it didn’t. Maybe that was why. Did they still call them brigs on spaceships?

She made friends with a girl on her deck who looked like her. Her name was Larijel, she was the same age as Andrea and the color of their skin was the same tawny-brown. Her father was Polish and her mama was Dominican, she said. They’d lived in Queens, until recently. Her dad had lost his job and gotten violent and when they applied for a restraining order they were told the safest thing to do would be to sign up with the Slate Act. She said she’d thought it was a joke at first. But here they were.

Larijel suggests that Andrea should try and get close with someone on staff. They had almost a week left in the trip, after all. “Just make sure you’re never completely alone with them,” she says.

The idea makes Andrea nervous. She had more experience flirting online than she did in person, but Larijel assures her it will be easy. She spends a day with Larijel narrowing down

likely candidates and finally decides on a younger guard who stands by the bar entrance above Deck 7.

His name was Will, and because the bar was relatively noisy, it was easy to carry on private conversations with him. Sometimes one of the other guards would come through and tell Andrea to get lost—the drinking age on USSA flights was 18—but she wasn't actually in the bar and Will certainly didn't object.

The two of them quickly fall into a veneer of friendship. Andrea visits him once, then twice, then three times daily. They talk first of life in slip, then of NetVision shows they like, then of God and death.

Andrea still doesn't know how to ask, "why aren't I in space jail," but as it turns out, she doesn't have to. On the last day of their journey, Will brings it up. It's drawing close to the end of his shift, and Andrea stands on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. He smiles, then frowns, and takes a step back.

"I don't get it," he says.

Andrea feels a flutter of nerves. "What?"

"You seem nice- I mean..." He looks uncomfortable. "I shouldn't be telling you this but, you're apparently some kind of dangerous criminal if the Marshall's to be believed."

Andrea feels a simultaneous flood of relief and fresh terror. "What did the Marshall tell you?"

"Well, what do you mean?" he looks stern. "Is it true?"

Andrea blusters, "No, obviously. But... there was an accident, and- I definitely made a mistake, don't get me wrong, but I'm not a criminal."

Will gnaws on his lip and looks around furtively. "Look, you seem nice, but they're planning on picking you up at Aster Station. They decided it was safer to just keep an eye on you in slip and let them arrest you at the gate. The Regency, I mean."

Andrea runs to find Larijel. She half yells, half groans, "What the fuck am I gonna do?!?"

"Can you do any magic?" Larijel suggests, half joking.

In truth, Andrea had been studying Jourdemayne's Servants like it was the Holy Bible and she was a seminary student, sleeping with it under her pillow and beginning and ending her day with its meandering passages. Charles Engleman, the editor, had led a team in developing the most popular arcane lexicon since Noberu Kaze's, but it was possible that he loved words a little too much, in Andrea's opinion. His annotations on The Lord's Summons were relatively straightforward. Far more confusing were loyalty bindings, chained commands, cyclical rites and Ottiker's Coach, whatever that was.

Andrea is about to show the book to Larijel but quite suddenly decides against it. Most people were a little leery of magic, and even other magicians mistrusted theurgy. Engleman had tried valiantly to rebrand the practice as 'beyonding', a more secular term which suggested something almost whimsical, but besides the official name, nothing much had changed. Anyway, Larijel didn't even know what Andrea had done.

"No, of course not," Andrea makes a face. "Even if I did I don't know what good it would do." She could think of quite a lot of good it might do, actually; she just didn't know how to do any of it.

Larijel frowns, wrinkling her nose and scrunching up her lips. Then her eyebrows lift, and her whole face lights up. "I know. You can become me!"

Scene 6 - The Missile Silo

Bridget flexes her hand and conjures sparks between her fingers with satisfying crackles. She still felt a little muted, like the volume had been turned down on her, but at least she could repair her interference and feel weight behind her words again.

She hears a buggy pull up behind her, heavy footsteps in the snow, and turns to see Carson approaching, holding the woman in the headscarf by her arm. "This the one you wanted?" he says, gruffly.

"Yes. Thank you, Carson. Wait in the car." Bridget regards the woman across from her for a minute, before asking, "What's your name?"

"Safia," she replies.

Bridget grimaces. They had freed a total of 13 prisoners from Gravenwyl, and to say they were disappointing would be an extreme understatement. They were simulacrists and alchemical drug-dealers. Enchanter-rapists and charlatan healers. Except for one.

"You were in the square during the Freewolves riot." Bridget says, "When I put everyone to bed."

"I remember," Safia says.

The shadow scar on Bridget's arm twinges painfully. She grits her teeth. "Not only that, but I understand your brother is the one who smashed that magic urn and turned the Republic Building into a rubble heap."

Safia's eyes flash. "It wasn't what he wanted. Yusef does not do magic."

"But you do." Bridget counters.

Safia looks down. "Yes."

Bridget nods, slowly.

“Where are we?” Safia asks, a little peevisly, Bridget thinks.

She turns and surveys the icy cement lot. It was almost like an enormous basketball court... with three ominous crop circles depressed in its surface, anti-aircraft units at each corner, and a nearby elevator panel from which Tariq is stepping.

“This is a missile silo,” Bridget says, regarding Tariq warily. “We captured it in a surprise attack two nights ago.”

Safia nods. “So, why am I here?”

“You’re here to use that shielding spell of yours to deflect any UAVs,” Tariq says, pacing towards them. “The anti-aircraft arrays should give you a heads up, but some of the things can evade wave detection.”

He hands a pair of binoculars to Safia, and clears his throat. “Hopefully after today we won’t have to worry about em so much.”

Bridget purses her lips and looks past Tariq. “Everything set down there?”

“Sure,” Tariq nods.

“And we still don’t know where Cowl is hiding?”

Tariq glares at her. “The coward’s disappeared. And this won’t be over til we find him. We need him to hand over power on Netvision... or put his fucking head on a pike.” He pulls his walkie-talkie off his belt and walks away, grumbling into it.

A shadow falls over Bridget’s vision, and she feels another twinge in her arm. She winces and looks up. A cyclonhibitor is passing over them, some 200 miles above.

A buzzer sounds as the missile bay doors begin to slide apart. Bridget looks at Safia “Okay, let me see your force shells. Once the weapons system is activated we’ll need to be on the lookout.”

Hesitantly, Safia waves her hand behind a wavy blue barrier.

Bridget scoffs. “You’re telling me that’s what stopped you and your brother from being pulverized?”

Safia scowls. “I can still feel the spell on me. The magic that stops me from doing magic.”

Bridget nods, and unscrews the cap on her water bottle. “It’s called a stricture, or an injunction. And it’s been a few days. So let’s see what we can do about that.” Holding the bottle between two hands, she leans over its mouth and whispers the words she’d heard Norelle use. Then she hurls its contents at Safia, splashing her in the face.

“Hey!” she yowls.

Bridget laughs. “Try again. We need to be able to deflect a small payload, might be five hundred, even a thousand pounds of pressure.”

Safia glares at Bridget. “Where is my brother now?”

Before Bridget can reply, an alarm goes off within the recesses of the silo. At first, Bridget isn't sure if it's normal, just indicating the countdown to launch or something. She grabs her binoculars and scans the sky for drones.

She doesn't see anything like a drone however. Through the binoculars, she sees a black dot hanging in the sky above them; it looks like a hole in the sky, growing slowly larger and larger.

For a moment, Bridget is transported. She is 9 years old, staring in awe at the bright wound in the evening sky. There has been some kind of collision in Earth's orbit. A satellite is falling to earth, landing outside El Paso. Experts expected it to break up on reentry and vaporize. But the experts were wrong. She clutches her blanket tight and shrinks into her hiding place as the mass of flaming metal buries itself in the horizon.

Safia grabs at Bridget's jacket, shocking her from her reverie. “What is it?”

Bridget looks around. The gunner stationed at the anti-aircraft battery is staring up at the sky, shoulders slack.

“They dropped something from the cycloinhibitor.”

“What did they drop?” Safia backs away. “Can we deflect it?”

Bridget's mind is racing. She shakes her head. “No,” she says. “We can't.” She looks at the elevator panel, at the gunners, at the buggy. Tariq. “Tariq!” she yells. “We have to go!”

“What?”

“We have to go, now! Safia, get in the car.”

“Pull yourself together,” Tariq turns away from her. “We're shooting it down!”

She steps toward him. “We can't shoot that down, Tariq, come on!”

“I'm not leaving!”

Bridget looks back at the buggy, then takes a breath, wheels on Tariq and howls, “*Jujun Konpuraiansu!*”

Tariq's eyes glaze out of focus. "Come on," Bridget grabs him by the arm, and he trots after her as she drags him toward the buggy. He has trouble getting in; Safia helps Bridget pull him physically on board.

Carson is unnerved. "What did you do to him?"

"Just drive!" Bridget shouts, buckling Tariq into his safety belt like a child. The motor roars and she grasps a rail for support as they jerk forward, spraying ice and gravel behind them as they wheel and speed back the way they had come. Safia looks up at the falling object, a massive, dark, almost amorphous shape spinning towards them out of the heavens. Hands shaking, she and Bridget put on their own harnesses.

Everything speeds up after that. Bridget looks behind them and freezes, watching helplessly as something the size of a house hurtles to the ground behind them. She looks at Safia and sees the fear on her face. "Shield!" she shouts, but Safia is petrified. Then comes the impact. A noise incomprehensible. The shockwave hits them; and the buggy goes flying over itself as hot air slams into them.

Bridget's ears are ringing. Her fingers grasp awkwardly, patting her legs and arms, checking for wet. Safia is alive. So is Tariq. Carson is unconscious, blood trickles from his head where it struck the steering wheel. The buggy is on its side.

She removes her harness and falls onto the ground. Her legs are shaking so badly she can barely stand.

"What was that?" Safia gasps, "How did they do that?"

Bridget looks out over the gray earth and flattened trees. She couldn't see the silo, whatever was left of it. But the blast had actually melted snow a few hundred feet away. Anger bubbles in her stomach, and she slams open the clasps on Safia's harness and pulls her roughly to her feet.

"You want to see your brother again? The next time I need help, fucking help me!"

Safia stutters, "I-I'm sorry, I was scared."

"Fuck you!" Bridget forces back tears. "We got lucky! I watched the Netvision coverage. I know you can do better!"

She pushes Safia away and stumbles away, breathing hard.

"They were waiting for us. They must have-" Bridget looks up at the sky. How many cycloinhibitors were there? They seemed to pass every fifteen minutes or so. Could they all be weaponized like this?

"We have to get back underground."

With a little coaxing, Tariq helps them push the buggy back onto its wheels. How fogged was he going to be once the spell wore off? Bridget didn't have time to think about that.

There was an abandoned above-ground robotics facility that connected up to the Honeycomb by a ramp. They drive back there in silence, Bridget at the wheel and Safia tending to Carson's head-wound.

As they approach, the sinking feeling in Bridget's stomach reaches up and wraps itself around her throat. Her arm spasms in pain and she nearly swerves into a fallen tree.

"What's wrong?" Safia looks up, and inhales sharply. Broken branches litter the ground, and as they drive on Bridget is forced to weave between burnt trunks and rubble. They slow to a crawl and finally stop some distance from the crater, just to the side of the facility's remains.

"Okay," Bridget forces herself to take deep breaths. "New plan."

She looks at Safia. "Anybody have a new plan?"

Scene 7 - The Reclamation Camps

In the cramped office of a Reclamation records keeper, Gabriel sits hunched and looming in his small metal chair, leafing through a file with growing impatience.

"How could you just lose it? Her psych evals, her proclivity tests, you're telling me it's all gone?"

The woman behind the desk was positively dessicated. A starving hyena might have looked the other way. No one born on Tyr grew particularly tall, but she looked like she wouldn't clear 4 feet standing.

"These are the files we have on 50HRA6. You already looked at the digital archive. I don't know what else to tell you, Mr. Berns."

Gabriel casts a look at Kylan. Kylan raises his eyebrows at him.

"Why isn't this in the Alliance Ledger?" Gabriel turns back to the records keeper.

The woman purses her lips. "We don't track Reclamation cases in the ledger. We do it all locally."

Gabriel buries his face in his hands. "Jesus, Moses, Mohammad, and Dick."

Kylan leans forward, "Doesn't Ithaca version control everything to an encrypted server?"

Gabriel looks up sharply. "Yes." He snaps his fingers. "Bring up the terminal again."

The records keeper looks annoyed. "Why?"

“Your computer system backs up everything automatically. It's part of the service subscription. We can search the version history as well as the current files. Terminal!”

The woman shrinks. Her hands waver. Gabriel stands. “Miss Walder. Has ACT-3 been here?”

The woman's whole demeanor changes. “They're going to kill me!” she hisses the words.

Gabriel's hands flex in anger. “No, they'll torture you first, and I'll let them if you don't cooperate. I do not like being lied to, Miss Walder, so hand my associate the terminal and tell. Me. The. Truth.”

Still shaking, the records keeper pushes the terminal towards Kylan. His fingers thrum against the keyboard as Gabriel resumes his questioning.

“So, tell me again. Do you recall 50HRA6 through 50HRA8, their given names Qamar, Safia, and Yusef?”

The woman nods. Gabriel continues.

“You must have seen hundreds of reclaimed children of Afghanistan pass through this facility. What was special about these three?”

The woman struggles to take a sip of water from her glass. “The eldest, Qamar. She- the other children were scared of her. And she was obsessed with demonology. Of course, we prohibit all writings on the subject but she would find it anyway. She joined a group for it on our approved social network -- we didn't find out for weeks because they spoke in code! We often punished her for drawing pentagrams and other theurgic runes, but she never changed. She was very secretive about it; I don't think anyone but the staff knew, and only then because we had security cameras, and monitored their time on the net and so on.”

Gabriel leans in. “And the proclivity tests?”

She takes a deep breath. “All three of them demonstrated a very high latent ability in magic. I have never seen those kinds of results, and I have been here for over fifty years.”

“Got it.” Kylan shuts off the terminal, and wags his armlet in the air. “They deleted the files yesterday, but we have em now. Thank you, Ithaca.”

“Good,” Gabriel buttons his coat. “Put this facility under surveillance until ACT-3 is long gone.”

They head for the door. Gabriel turns. “Oh, one more thing. The proclivity tests, who scored highest. The eldest?”

The woman shakes her head. “No, it was the boy. The youngest. Yusef.”

Scene 8 - The Rocketburger

Bridget isn't quite sure how things could get worse. Carson is alive, that's something. If he hadn't woken up they might be freezing to death in the woods right now. Still. Maybe that was preferable.

The four of them are sitting in a shuttered Rocketburger. According to Carson, the owner was "one of us," which meant he was "pretty sure" he wouldn't turn them in. Great.

A muted netvision loop plays on a small laptop. The owner, whose name is Bellam Cross, offers them synthetic coffee. Bridget and Carson each have some. Tariq sits amiably in a corner booth, his jaw slack, staring absently at the laptop screen.

Carson watches him. "Is he going to be okay?" he asks.

"He's just fogged," Bridget glances at Tariq and looks away hurriedly. "I overdid it a little. So sue me. He'll be fine."

Bellam sits down with them, and Bridget swears she can feel the whole booth sink into the floor. He is a huge man, his dark brown skin creased with age and scars. Long gray dreadlocks fell over his shoulders, and when his hands were still you might be forgiven for thinking they'd been carved out of wood. "If I'm not mistaken," he growls, "I was unlucky enough to be on the receiving end of that a couple weeks ago."

Was that only two weeks ago? Bridget presses her hands to her temples. "Different spell. Also, you were at the Rocketburger protest? You run a Rocketburger."

"Not anymore I don't. Corporate told me I could fire my staff and install their automated service bots or fire my staff and close up shop. I don't like being given choices like that, so I chose the latter. It's dead space till they send along a new manager to pick up the keys."

Bridget frowns. "You know, no one wants to flip burgers right? Isn't it better to have machines do it?"

"Sure, and if my burger-flippers were also certified machine technicians, it wouldn't be such a kick in the nuts."

Bridget lets out a frustrated "heh!" and turns to Carson. "Look, how do we get in touch with Cosgrove? Where are the other Honeycomb entrances?"

"Hold it!" Bellam heaves himself to the laptop and unmutes it.

"17 bystanders were killed, bringing the civilian death toll past one hundred today, when a series of heavy payloads were dropped onto older structures at the colony perimeters. Commander Cowl has been cloistered in an unknown safehouse since the Freewolves Rebellion escalated. But we have here now an official statement from his office,"

The newscaster reads from her tablet, "First, I must commend the people of Tyr for staying strong in the face of a string of vicious attacks. It is confusing and tragic when an otherwise peaceful community is disrupted by a malicious agent. It is with a heavy heart, but great hope, that I inform you today that this malicious agent has been killed. Tariq Longsend was supervising a deadly missile launch early this morning when we carried out our coordinated strike."

Bridget stands up. "Is this one of ours?" Bellam nods. "We have to get on the air."

"What!" Carson stands up as well. "They've clearly flipped. They'll trace the call!"

Bridget throws her arms wide. "Then we'll move! We can't hide here forever. If people believe Tariq is dead, the rebellion dies with him. So we have about 60 seconds to set the record straight while people are still watching!"

Carson shakes his head. "Absolutely not. We have to regroup."

"I am Longsend's Regent," the words ring false in her mouth but she says them anyway. "I outrank you. Get me on the air."

Carson spits. "Go fuck yourself! You've turned Tariq Longsend into a vegetable. And if we hadn't raided Gravenwyl center to find more freaks for you to manage, they would never have known we were in the honeycomb!"

Bridget turns to Bellam. "Call in."

Carson hits her. Hard. She falls to the ground, dazed. Carson gets on top of her and covers her mouth with his hand; Bridget struggles but her arms are pinned. He raises his arm. "Fuck you," he yells, and brings down his arm like a hammer.

A shimmer of blue light explodes around his fist, and Bridget winces at the sound of Carson yelps and falls backwards. Safia stands by the booth, her hand raised, a pained expression on her face.

Bridget pushes herself upright, her eyes on Safia. "Thank you," she says, then turns to Bellam.

"Now... call in."

Their plant at the media-station sounds as shell-shocked as they are. "You're alive?"

"Yes," Bridget says, "And next time, maybe don't switch your allegiance at the drop of a hat, no matter how big the hat is."

There is quiet on the other end. "One second."

They watch the newscaster receive a note. "We, uh - we have a call-in," she says. "From the Longsend Regent."

Bellam shoots Bridget a heavy look. "You better know what you're doing," he says.

The newscaster lets out a nervous laugh, "Hello, are you hearing me? This is Valentina Gonzalez."

"Hi Valentina, this is Bridget Lozano. Isn't it strange that the people who claim to protect these colonies would see nothing wrong with bombarding them from the sky? That's not a coordinated strike, that's the desperate lash of a usurped ruler."

"Wh-" the newscaster begins to speak, but Bridget cuts her off. "I have a message to the colonists in Point Clair, and Galensloch, to the Colonial Guard, and the Freyan Army, wherever they are. A planetary rep should protect and advocate on behalf of that planet's residents, not simply kow-tow to the Consul and drop improvised meteors on us, killing 17 innocent people in the process. So ask yourselves, whose side are you on? And who do you think is a better Representative of Tyr? Christopher Cowl? Or Tariq Longsend?"

The words hang in the air a moment. Bridget watches the newscaster carefully, waiting for the inevitable objection. "But Tariq Longsend is dead," Valentina says, helplessly.

"No, he isn't," Bridget says. "In fact he's right here." She pushes the laptop towards Tariq, leans over and hisses in his ear, "say 'For a Free Wolf'!"

Tariq nods serenely, "For a Free Woof," he says, slowly.

Bridget shuts the laptop. "Close enough," she mutters. "Let's get out of here."

Bellam shoulders a bag, "Where we goin? Buggy's kind of conspicuous, and we sure as shit can't use the network."

"We can't stay on the surface. And we can't go back underground," Bridget looks at each of the crew. "We need to get above them. The cycloinhibitors. The question is, how?"

Bellam's armlet pings, and he frowns down at it.

"What is it?" Bridget says, agitated.

"It's Cosgrove," Bellam looks up at her. "The Colonial Guard in Nobel just defected. She says Galensloch and Point Clair are expected to follow."

Bridget looks at him for a long moment. "Good," she says at last. "Does one of them have a fleet we can borrow?"

Scene 9 - The Passenger Ship/Aster Station

Becoming Larijel wasn't exactly a simple process. It took almost an hour to straighten Andrea's hair, and another hour of futzing with makeup before Larijel declared her, 'sufficiently unlike yourself.' Andrea took Larijel's plastic ID card and they cut up Andrea's.

But the last and most important piece of the puzzle was Larijel's microchip. All Slate Act transportees had one, embedded in the soft flesh between their thumb and forefinger. This would need to be removed, and transferred to Andrea. Not only that, Larijel felt strongly that they should put something that *looked* like a microchip in its place, so that it wouldn't be immediately obvious what they'd done. That didn't exactly make sense to Andrea, but perhaps it was better than nothing. Larijel had only seen the chip briefly before they injected it; now it was just a dark dot beneath her skin.

"What about a grain of rice?" Andrea suggests, after a moment. "The dark kind."

Larijel nods. "That would be great."

They spend a few hours scouring the decks for any camp in possession of black rice before a Chinese couple gives them a bag. They were well dressed, and their tent was expensive looking.

"Political refugees, I bet," Larijel explains to Andrea. "That happens quite frequently, I've read. They can't stay permanently in the United States or Europe but they can sign up for the Slate Act in Seattle as refugees."

They cloister themselves in a lavatory where someone had smashed the security camera. When and for what purpose was of no concern, but the stalls were frequented by grateful addicts and horny couples. Larijel sits on the toilet and explains her mother's first aid kit to Andrea.

"We'll use the alcohol to clean the rice before swapping it in. That's the bonding tape. It's terrific, pulls the skin together so you can't even tell there was a cut sometimes."

They have no scalpel, so they use a Swiss army knife and a pair of tweezers, which they sterilize first with alcohol and then with a lit match.

Larijel lays out the order of operations. "You'll make the incision. Extract the chip and lay it on the cloth. Replace it with the rice, then lay a strip of bonding tape across the cut."

Andrea can feel her breath tightening in her chest. "Are you sure about this? I don't know if I can do this!"

"You can. Come on, this will work. Do you have a better idea?"

Andrea's hand tightens around the black coin in her pocket. Maybe it was her imagination, but it always felt warm to the touch. Like the book, she kept the token on her person at all times, but while a demon servant could do many things, she didn't think it could smuggle her from Aster station to Halspur. She nods. "Okay."

They both grimace as Andrea puts the knife to Larijel's skin.

“For God's sake, get it over with!” Larijel says. Andrea pushes the knife in. They both gasp -- there is so much more blood than Andrea expected, it fills the wound, completely obscuring the chip.

“Come on come on! Get it out!”

“I can't see!”

“Andrea, I've seen more blood on my period! Get the tweezers!”

Andrea's hands are profuse with sweat; she fumbles the tool and drops it into the wound. Larijel winces. Andrea stammers an apology and secures her grip, probing awkwardly until she clips something hard and metallic.

“Got it!” she breathes. She transfers the bloody object to the towel and exchanges it for the grain of rice. She wipes away some of the blood and after a few attempts, extracts a strip of tape from it's packet and, as Larijel pinches her skin together, presses it over the cut.

The microchip was larger than the rice, and more pill shaped, like a capsule. And it was hard to tell if the rice was even visible beneath Larijel's skin, what with all the blood. But it was in there, anyway.

Larijel trades places with Andrea. “Your turn.”

In contrast to Andrea, Larijel is quick and efficient, with steady hands. Andrea feels an odd pang, whether of guilt or gratitude she isn't sure. Hardly before she can adjust to the pain of the initial cut, the chip is dropped in and the gash taped together.

The intercom buzzes, and they start in surprise.

“DECK ONE, HEAD TO THE CENTRAL COLUMN NOW. WE ARE ABOUT TO ARRIVE AT ASTER STATION AND WILL BEGIN DEBOARDING SHORTLY.”

Andrea looks at Larijel. “I should go get my stuff together.”

Larijel nods, tidying up the first aid kit and getting to her feet. “Me too,” she says.

Andrea extends her arms for a hug. Larijel ducks between them and pecks Andrea on the lips. “Don't forget me,” she says, her eyes wide. Andrea thinks that if she lived to be a thousand she would never forget those huge dark eyes and that kiss.

Then Larijel is gone, and Andrea is alone in the bathroom stall, her blood fluttering in her veins.

She breaks her handheld into pieces, flushes the pieces, and leaves the bathroom in a daze. She collects her few clothes and toiletries, pulls on a pair of fingerless gloves to hide the tape, and joins the throng of passengers waiting to climb up to the central column, where they would float to the jetbridge. She stays low and exchanges furtive glances with the ship

guards, but their orders were to let her off. The Colonial Guard was waiting on the other side. She scans Larijel's ticket at the airlock checkpoint and launches herself onto the jetbridge, floating down the wide, cloth tube ringed with metal bars that connected their ship to the gate. It was cold, and she tries to pull herself along quickly, three rungs at a time.

At the gate, there's a grav pad and a station where she has to show Larijel's ID and scan her chip. "Larijel Debrowski," she says, the sound awkward on her tongue. She sees a trio of Regency Officers eyeing her from behind the attendant's station. One points at his handheld and then to her. Andrea quickly turns her head away, and shoves her hands deep into her pockets.

The attendant shakes his head at the ROs. "This one's Slate Act."

"I could swear- hey, girl! Let me have a look at you!"

Andrea turns slowly, her mind racing. What photo did they have?

One of the ROs paces past the attendant's station and looks hard at her. "What's your name?" he asks.

"Larijel Debrowski," she says again, feeling like an idiot.

The attendant raises his voice, annoyed, "She scanned her chip, okay?"

Andrea looks up at the officer, hoping her real fear fit the circumstances, hoping her Going-to-the-Prom transformation was enough. The RO frowns down at her. "Take your hands out of your pockets."

Andrea freezes. "What?"

"Let me see your hand."

Andrea squeezes the beyonder's token between her fingers, panic welling in her. Before she can do anything though, one of the other ROs paces over and hisses in the man's ear. "It's the wrong girl. The last thing we want is the Peters girl to see us dragging someone off who looks like her."

The man casts one last look at her, then allows himself to be pulled away, back to lurk out of sight of the jetbridge.

Andrea joins the crowd of migrants headed for the shuttles, stepping off the accelerator and floating along the concourse. She finds her shuttle number, and trails into the queue to board.

It actually worked. Andrea dares to think it. It actually worked.

An official of some kind floats to the gate; he's wearing a white and blue uniform, a taser and baton secured prominently at his hip. He slams his fist against a button and speaks into the

intercom. "Took your goddamn time!" he says. "We've got five thousand people coming off the carrier!"

He turns to the waiting passengers. "I'm Ensign Bohmer, Orbital Control, aka your welcoming committee. I assume you've heard about the civil disturbance in the colonies. There's nothing to worry about; Point Clair is just as good of a human dumping ground as Halspur. But there may be some delays getting you to the ground." He clears his throat, and looks up and down the queue. "No questions. Good." He places his hand on the gate controls.

"Welcome to Tyr," he smirks. "You get used to it."

The airlock hisses, and the gate slides up. Pulling themselves through from the shuttle are three Colonial Guards, their weapons drawn. The ensign's jaw hangs open. "What are you-" he starts, before one of the guards shoots him in the chest.

The crowd panics. Eyes wide, Andrea brings up her leg and steps off the queue hand-rail, pushing herself up toward the ceiling, grabbing for a handhold, as chaos reigns below her. Colonial Guards stream from the shuttle. They move quickly to other gates, overpowering the controllers and opening the airlocks, allowing more soldiers to eject themselves into the concourse. The passengers meanwhile are flailing in the zero-gravity environment, kicking and screaming at each other in efforts to escape; instead they mill in a cloud of human terror.

Andrea's eyes fall on Ensign Bohmer. The force of the bullet has carried his body backwards, his arms and legs floating forward as blood trails from his heart in wobbling round globs. She looks away, feeling sick. Scrabbling at a ventilation pipe, she pulls herself back the way she'd come.

Other passengers begin to kick their way up to her level. One of them grabs at her leg, trying to pull himself past her. She kicks at his face, connecting with a clumsy thwack, and with a grunt of effort she heaves herself forward and let's go of the pipe, gliding towards the terminal proper. As she approaches the end of the concourse where it meets the main terminal, she sees a pack of Colonial Guards moving below her. Beyond, she recognizes two Regency Officers from before with a trio of black-clad strangers; between them they carry an odd-looking black bag, and their guns are drawn.

Andrea gasps for air and whirls her arms; she somehow manages to grab hold of the 2 foot metal lip that hangs down above her, and with her teeth clenched, she pulls herself up behind it, her knuckles pale and every muscle in her body tensed against the shallow cover.

The Colonial Guards are taken by surprise. One of the ROs casts some kind of spell; another takes a bullet to the neck. But the men in black body armor bring the encounter to a swift conclusion. The Colonial Guards' forward movement stopped; they rotate slowly over themselves in an expanding constellation of blood. The remaining RO and the black-clad agents kick themselves up to the ceiling and out of sight, their cargo in tow... Andrea tries to quiet her breathing. They must only be a dozen feet away, on the other side of the steel soffit.

“What the fuck is going on?”

Andrea recognizes this voice; the RO from the carrier gate.

“What does it look like?” This voice was new. “The Colonial Guard’s flipped like an omelette and the Freewolves are taking over Aster Station.”

“What do we do with the girl?”

“She’s not your responsibility anymore. We have a shuttle waiting in the far concourse.”

“And what am I supposed to tell my superior about this assignment?”

“Tell him there is no assignment. We’ve wiped her name from the manifest. We’ve removed all trace of her journey from the shuttleport to Octavia Helman and on. As far as you’re concerned, Andrea Peters no longer exists.”

“This is not your jurisdiction! I have an arrest warrant; what do you have?!”

“This,” comes a third voice. It’s followed by a gunshot. Andrea shudders reflexively. The RO’s body drifts back into her view; she makes eye contact with the man as he falls away from her; in surreal slow-motion. His incredulous blue eyes so much lighter than the Regency blue at his collar, his hands grasping at nothing as the life leaves his body.

“Let’s go,” The third voice says. “No time like the present.”

There is a scuffing of heels on metal, then nothing. From below her, the screaming of the crowd fades back into Andrea’s consciousness. She is frozen, still pressing herself into the corner of the ceiling. She’s not sure how long she is pressed there before a Colonial Guardsman pushes his way up to her.

“Hey,” he says. “It’s okay! We’re not going to hurt you.”

Andrea looks at him. He’s brown-eyed and brown-faced, but for a moment she sees the dead RO in his features. Or was it the ensign? Something about the cheekbones, she thinks. Then he takes off his helmet and it’s gone.

“I’m Oscar,” he says. “What do I call you?”

She looks at him.

“Did you hear me?” he says. “Are you okay?”

Andrea nods.

“Good,” he wets his lips nervously. “It’s gonna be okay,” he says. “What’s your name?”

This was Episode 8 of *The Elandrid*, and the eighth 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

