

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

v2020.08.29

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The Elandrid, Episode 9

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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 9 - Confluence

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 - Power Station / Yokaido Hospital

Faisal had died sometime in the night. By the looks of it, peacefully. He was draped in his battered armchair, an equally battered book of Farsi poetry in his lap. Elandra feels a wave of sadness crash into her and slosh between her ribs. He looked so small, and so insubstantial, as if he might turn to rags and ashes in a light wind and be swept away.

She places the keys to the truck carefully on the nearby desk. Glancing at the open book as she lets herself out, she makes an emergency services call on her armband and settles down to wait for the ambulance drone to arrive. It's chilly. She zips her coat up to her neck.

She had come to visit the Oracle as a cover, but. She pulls her computer from her backpack and pulls up a blank document... and stares at it until she hears rotors outside and goes out to wave down the ambulance.

"Your friend?" one of the respondents asks her, haltingly.

Elandra shakes her head. "No, not really."

They load Faisal's body onto the stretcher and strap in. The language barrier is significant, and without a public net signal the translator app on her armband is useless. But through a combination of gesture and broken English, Elandra discerns that they'll be flying to a hospital in Yokaido, and yes, she can come along.

Once airborne, one of the responders hands the book of poetry to her, open to the page that laid open on Faisal's lap when she found him.

"Leave the Rest Behind," the responder says, very carefully.

Elandra accepts the book, taps her armband, and smiles. She could look up the poem in English once they were back within a public network.

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The hospital was an impressive, Dymaxion-esque facility, a twisting highrise of triangular glass panes. Inside, it was like any hospital though. Elandra quietly parts ways with the EMS team at the elevators and descends to the main lobby, unzipping her coat and shivering pleasantly in the heated room.

"I'm looking for an American, Theolus Washington?" Elandra smiles at the front desk person. "I heard he was in recently?"

The man looks her up and down, then pecks at his keyboard. "Are you family?"

Elandra makes a face. Lying was not her strong suit. "Err, no."

The man gives her a withering glare. She nods. "Understood."

She turns away and taps at her armband. She didn't have a direct line to Jonathan anymore, but she could still send messages to his sNet address. Two weeks in space had made it easy to forget how easy things were on a public network.

"Jonathan, not sure what time it is where you are, unless you're here, in Yokaido. In which case it's the same time as it is for me. But..." Elandra looks around. "How am I supposed to find this guy?"

Her armband blips -- her message is being put on hold, which meant Jonathan wouldn't see a notification or anything. That was odd. Usually her messages went straight to his priority channel.

She sighs. "Okay. Ping me when you get this."

An idea strikes her suddenly, and she returns to the front desk. "Are property transactions public record here?"

"IRN everything is public except medical," he says testily, "but you have to go to a ledger access point." Elandra feels that the level of suspicion is not entirely warranted, but she tamps down her frustration and tries to sound nonchalant.

"Well, this is a hospital. Is there an access point here?"

He waves her away. "Yes, right here. But not for you."

Great. Elandra rolls her eyes and pulls out her badge. "Look, I'm the Arcanist of the United Star Systems, okay? Will you look up a name for me?"

The man is cowed. He stops short of apologizing but Elandra can't help feeling some satisfaction as she watches his back stiffen.

"Theolus Washington," he says out loud. "I don't see any property under that name."

Elandra frowns. "Try Aphrodite Industries, under businesses."

"Nothing," he looks sullenly at her. "Anything else?"

Elandra thinks for a minute. "DanDan, Theolus Washington was on Netvision. Does he have a production company or something?"

Her armband pings, "Theolus Washington's private production company, Animus Entertainment, produced only three films and one series before shutting down its business in North America."

"Thank you," Elandra leans over the counter. "Try 'Animus Entertainment'."

The man frowns deeply and clacks at his terminal, as if every second they spoke was painful for him. The results of the search, however, are enough to wipe the creases from his brow. "Strange," he says. "Looks like company called 'Animus' bought Yokaido Zoological Gardens when it goes bankrupt. Has not re-opened."

"The Zoological Gardens. Are you sure?"

"Reading it aren't I?"

"Thank you!" Elandra is eager to be gone. "The Zoological Gardens. Got it." She makes to leave.

"Arcanist, while you are a visitor in the colonies, you should not wear that."

Elandra turns. "Excuse me?"

The man points just below her chin. Elandra looks down. At first, she doesn't see anything, but something glints and she puts a hand up to feel and catches a light silver chain around her neck.

"On the face: that is a Bruhite symbol."

Elandra nods, and takes off the necklace. She examines it as she leaves the hospital, a simple piece of jewelry with a wide pendant, a circle inscribed with an X, and another circle inscribed in the lower quadrant formed by the X.

She had never seen it before in her life.

Scene 2 - The Alexander

Gabriel paces his room aboard the Alexander. The hollow sound his boots make against the carpeted steel floor is soothing.

Kylan knocks, then opens the door and lets himself in. "Are you ready?"

Gabriel presses his hands together, hard, and continues pacing, glancing out the port-hole at the shipyard outside. The Alexander was parked in a port outside of Nobel, which had seemed safe until recently.

"Ready for what?" Gabriel growls. "For the Colonial Guard to defect? For ACT-3 to scrub all my leads?" Not only had they killed Emin and black-bagged Norelle, but the junk shop itself and the tenement where the three Afghani siblings lived had been empty of further clues. Well, almost empty. Gabriel's eyes slide to the tattered book he'd pulled from Emin's desk.

Kylan flicks his lighter absently. "Three things. Thing number one: Commander Cowl would like to speak with you."

"I'm sure he would," Gabriel snarls. "Whose idea was it to have Cowl drop heavy lourdes on his own fucking planet?"

Kylan shrugs. "Fair enough. The second thing is, the word from up top is that all high profile officers should evacuate, or risk being taken hostage."

"Of course," Gabriel stops pacing and turns to look at Kylan. "What's the third thing?"

Kylan smiles crookedly. "I got us a hostage." He opens the door again and beckons. Two ROs escort the woman inside. She's a policewoman, dressed in the dark blue uniform and black and white striped hat of Colonial Law Enforcement.

"My Lord, I am just trying to do my job-" she begins talking very quickly. "-there was a death up at that weird castle in the foothills and we were called in to take a look-"

"Slow down," Gabriel interrupts. "You know all Colonial forces have defected, don't you? Shouldn't you be reporting this to Tariq Longsend?"

"Well, that would be great if I knew where he was," the woman rolls her eyes in exasperation. "Frankly, I've never really given two shits who the Planetary Rep is, though from what I understand Christopher Cowl just nuked us so I am beginning to see the problem."

Gabriel frowns at Kylan. "They weren't bombs. They were blocks of compacted trash that got towed in from orbit."

"Well they sure exploded like bombs; have you seen the net coverage?" The woman is built like a quarterback and talks like a referee. She seems trustworthy, but it's hard to be sure.

"What castle are you talking about?" Gabriel asks. "What happened?"

The woman takes a deep breath, "That military guy's place. Built out in the middle of nowhere. The Cooms' Chateau, it's called, apparently. Well, the guy is dead alright. He gets supplies, food and stuff, delivered every week I guess and the crew suspected something might be up when they showed up yesterday and last week's shipment was still just sitting there, rotting. So, sure enough, he's dead. But there's something, well, Regency-required going on at the scene. And by that I mean a summoning circle. Huge, and we don't need another Ereshkigal. So seeing as the only remaining Regency presence I knew of was here, here is where I came."

Gabriel straightens his back. Kylan sees his expression and steps forward. "Come on, my lord, it could be a trap."

"Kylan, fly the Alexander out the opposite direction. We-" Gabriel cuts himself off. "Ma'm, what's your name?"

"Ingrid Hobsen, my lord," she nods curtly.

Gabriel smiles at Kylan. "Officer Hobsen and I will travel by car to the Chateau. Understood?"

Kylan sighs heavily and casts his eyes around the office. "Well," he says finally, "If I get to fly your ship, I guess I won't complain too much. Just seems like a bad idea is all."

Gabriel turns his smile to Ingrid. "Ingrid, what would you call attempting to pull one over on the most accomplished sorcerer in the United Star Systems?"

"A very bad idea," Ingrid responds, with zero hesitation.

"Thank you." Gabriel grabs Emin's book and slides it into his coat pocket. "Let's go."

Scene 3 - Aster Station

Bridget stands with her face up beneath the stream of water, running her hands slowly over her eyes and through her hair. The pressure isn't great, but after a couple weeks without access to a shower of any kind, every gurgling splash feels heavenly.

Marilyn is waiting for her in the hab-center, her dark hair still wet and curled over her marble-white skin. She throws a uniform onto the cot. "Orbital Control. I tried to find one that would fit you," she says.

Anxiety rushes back through Bridget's body, and she finds herself resenting Marilyn for interrupting her moment of peace. She grabs the uniform and retreats back into the bathroom. "How's Tariq," she yells.

"The suggestion has worn off, but he's fogged badly. Mental faculties at around 60%..." Marilyn's voice is dispassionate, but Bridget wonders if isn't tinged with anger. She pulls on the clean undies and struggles for a moment with the bra before snapping it together between her shoulder-blades. The cups were either a size too big or else the band a size too small. Maybe both. She winces and pulls on the officer's doublet and pants. They were white with purple detailing. She's not sure its her color.

"How long do you think before he's recovered?" Bridget calls out, zipping up the doublet and sliding her feet into the shoes.

"I would think you'd be the one to ask," Marilyn says. "The doctor thinks he'll be mostly himself in a day or so. But there may be some lasting damage..."

"And have we heard from the Alliance?" Bridget changes the subject. She throws her leather jacket on over the doublet and walks back out.

Marilyn presses her lips together and peers at Bridget over her wide black frames. "They remain confident ACT will bring this to a swift resolution," she quotes.

"Bad time for me to take out a life insurance policy?"

Marilyn smiles. "Come on."

They pace down the hab-ring corridor to the cyclovator. Marilyn consults her tablet as she speaks.

"The remaining inmates at Gravenwyl Center were being kept in an old robotics facility, but ACT-3 moved them. They were loaded onto a shuttle, but we lost track of it after it took off. As far as we know it never hit orbit."

"What about the cycloinhibitors?" Bridget asks.

"You think they were moved to a cycloinhibitor?" Marilyn frowns. "That's interesting. I'll go back and look at the data again. We usually just ignore the inhibitor altitude because of all the electromagnetic interference, but... what with recent events..."

Bridget steps into the cyclovator. "Find out where they are. I'm going to see if any of our new friends can cast a spell on our behalf."

Marilyn stops the doors from closing with a hand. "I should tell you... we have a theory that someone else may be in ACT-3's custody, besides the individuals from Gravenwyl, I mean. I think you'll want to hear it..."

A few minutes later, Bridget drifts into the terminal, meeting Safia and a small escort of Freewolves. "Where are they?" Bridget asks.

"On board the shuttles," Safia replies. Beneath the blue headscarf, her broad face and large brown eyes bear an expression of worry that annoys Bridget to her core. She nods, and with a grunt of effort, she pulls herself forward and floats towards the gate.

The first hatch hisses open, and Bridget slides into the shuttle. "Bridget Lozano," she introduces herself to the guard. "Longsend's Regent."

He nods to her, warily. "What exactly is the endgame here?"

"I'm working on it," Bridget mutters. She surveys the passengers. She expected more anger, or fear. They look tired, mostly.

"Everyone comfortable?" she cracks a smile, hoping it came off as friendly and not sadistic. "No, really," she coughs. "I am sorry about the inconvenience. We'd like to get you on the ground as soon as possible."

A woman in front snaps at her, "What does that mean?" There was the anger.

"Well, it seems the USSA is waiting for Alliance Counter Terrorism to assassinate me and Tariq -- err, Commander Longsend. They didn't so much say it in those words, of course, but that's the gist. So... you get to go either when they kill us, or when we kill them, I guess."

Sullen stares were the only response. Bridget feels a wash of shame. These people didn't care who their Planetary Rep was. They didn't even know what kind of life they were going to have here, let alone who represented them to the United Star Systems Alliance.

She grimaces. "Maybe sooner... but in the meantime, is anyone here a magician?"

People exchanged glances. Finally, a small brown hand goes up towards the back of the shuttle. Bridget squints. "Okay, unbuckle yourself so I can see you. We ain't gonna shoot ya."

The girl does so. She's awfully young, younger than Bridget herself is, anyway. Her hair is flat and brown, her face shiny and caramel-toned except for the smudged eyeshadow and trickles of mascara. "What's your name?"

"It's..." she hesitates. Nervous. Bridget can't blame her. "Larijel," she says finally, sounding as though she very much wished she weren't.

"Larijel. Okay. How old are you? What sort of experience do you have?"

"Not much," the girl shakes her head. "Just a little... err..." she looks around. "Just a little beyonding." There is an audible shifting among the passengers.

Bridget snorts. "Perfect," she says. "You'll have to tell me what constitutes a 'little beyonding' later, but right now, I need your help getting me not-assassinated."

"What do you want me to do?" The girl asks.

"Help me rescue the only person in the universe who maybe gives a shit about me." Bridget wets her lips and emits a tense exhale. "Sergeant Norelle Peters."

Scene 4 - The Washington Estate

Theolus is avoiding Penelope. At least, it certainly seemed that way. For hours, she'd wandered the house looking for him, but every time she found him he was "just running late for a call," or "so sorry, but I'm desperately needed on the grounds."

Sage, on the other hand, is hard to avoid. He has seemingly endless questions, and wants to discuss everything from molecular biology to metaphysics. To make matters worse, since neither she nor Sage needed to eat, there was no break from conversation for the purpose of masticating; after an exhausting breakfast and lunch sat by herself, Sage, and Haiken, the only human present finally interjects.

"Sage, perhaps we can just sit here and enjoy each other's company quietly," Haiken says, his already pinched face drawn up even tighter in discomfort. "Silence isn't an enemy to be defeated at all costs."

Sage bites his lip. Today, he's wearing a fitted gray jumpsuit with a green bandana around the neck. His fox-red hair is coiffed and a ginger scruff of beard has grown along the line of

his jaw. His excitement tamped down, he looks almost regal, but doing so clearly pains him. He casts his eyes towards the ceiling and twists at the beaded bracelet on his wrist.

After a blessed moment of peace, Penelope takes pity on him. "I like your outfit," she offers. "Do you spend a lot of time picking out what to wear in the morning?"

Sage smiles. He looks over at Haiken, who closes his eyes and sips his coffee, then, making an effort to speak slowly, he says, "I think it's something Theolus and I bond over. We like trying things on together and dressing each other up."

The idea of Theolus dressing Sage up makes Penelope sad. She smiles, takes a sip of water, then rises to her feet. Haiken stands up hastily as well.

"Would you like to walk the grounds? It's a beautiful day, we should be able to see quite a few animals."

"Animals!" Penelope's jaw drops. She had seen videos of animals, of course, but the only non-sapient organisms she'd encountered were spiders and insects. She hadn't even seen a dog on Tyr. She catches herself. "Maybe later. I need to speak with Theolus."

"Oh yes?" Theolus appears at the door in floral-patterned and rolled up shirt-sleeves.

Penelope is thrown. "Oh!" she says. "Yes. Can we talk? Privately?"

Theolus smiles. "Sure. I was just coming to check on you all. Let's you and I go out on the balcony."

The balcony offers a breathtaking view of the gardens, but Penelope refuses to be distracted. She paces to the far end and turns to face Theolus.

"What's going to happen to me?" she asks.

Theolus frowns. "What do you mean?"

"This, all this..." Penelope raises her arms and gestures around them, "...it feels like a dream, not real. Do you understand? I need to know what I'm going to wake up to."

Theolus nods. "You have questions. And I'm happy to answer them."

"But you haven't!" Penelope all but interrupts him. "Not really!"

"I don't know the future," Theolus objects. "It's hard to say what's going to happen to you."

Penelope scoffs and crosses her arms.

"What do you want to happen?" Theolus continues. "What do you want?"

Penelope goes still.

“There’s no rush for you to decide. And you’re welcome to stay here in the meantime.”
Theolus steps towards her. “I’d hoped that was clear. We can discuss options, now, or later.
But it’s really up to you.”

“I want to ask you some questions,” Penelope says, finally.

Theolus clears his throat. “Alright.”

“Where is Harriet? Is she alive?”

Theolus shakes his head. “I don’t know. I think so. She’s... difficult to keep track of.”

“And the other androids?”

Theolus hesitates. “The other androids.”

“Cinnamon, Rosemary, Turmeric, Sage!” Penelope lists, impatiently. “Are there others? How many?”

“There are others, yes,” Theolus begins, but Penelope has stopped listening.

“In fact, if the spice names are versions... and we all happen to have some primitive memory of our version history... How did you know which to flag with Orbital Control?” She looks up at him. “Did you flag ‘Cinnamon Rosemary’? Just ‘Cinnamon’?”

Theolus watches her, his face calm.

“This doesn’t make sense.” Penelope turns away and walks to the other end of the balcony. Her heart is racing, she laughs, presses a hand to her chest and walks back to Theolus. “There’s a transceiver in me, isn’t there?” she says.

Theolus blinks slowly.

Penelope feels a flare of anger. “Well! Is there or isn’t there?”

“There is.” Theolus shifts his posture. Even a small adjustment of his shoulders is larger than life. “I was hoping you’d accept the code-word story. No one likes to feel like they’re being spied on but-”

“But what!” Penelope steps forward. “Why?!”

Theolus frowns down at her. “You are a jaw-dropping assemblage of the most advanced technology in the galaxy as we know it. So yes, we keep tabs. It would be irresponsible not to.”

Penelope’s lungs are heaving. Her head is buzzing. She puts the heels of her palms to her temples and closes her eyes, trying to calm her breath. She’s shaking.

Theolus crosses the balcony to her and speaks softly.

“It’s not like we’re surveilling you 24/7. We have alerts programmed around emotional spikes, and by geo-stellar location. We knew when you burst your bonding sac, for example, but you were basically already on your way to us by then so there was nothing we could do except wait for you to arrive.”

He places a hand on her shoulder, and Penelope feels even smaller beneath it now than she did during her recovery.

“It’s a precaution.” He tries on a half-smile. “A CYA, you know what that is? Covering your ass and ours.”

Penelope looks past him, deep into the puffy-clouded skies over Yokaido. How far away she felt from everything, here. Even from herself. “Show me,” she says. “I want to see how it works.”

Theolus leads her downstairs to what Theolus calls the Log Room: a minimalist office with painted white walls and blue carpeting, with a number of terminals and desks. One wall, however, is covered end-to-end with screens, three rows of ten in total. The last three screens in each row are turned off, but the first seven all display batteries of colored lines, bar charts, and other data visualizations. Penelope has trouble knowing what to look at.

“That’s you,” Theolus points to the fifth column. Penelope stares at her three displays, which show spiky jagged activity, especially compared to the other six columns.

“That’s your cortisol level, your synthetic hormone balance, your oxygen and CO2 levels, your electro-static throughput, your photosynthetic throughput...” The words soar past faster than Penelope can process, but one of them sticks.

“I’m sorry, did you say, ‘photosynthetic’?”

Theolus laughs, “Yeah, you can thank Mayspeth for that. Obviously, your anatomy is mostly modeled after a human’s. But, in many ways, you’re more like a plant than a mammal.”

Penelope frowns, turning back to the displays. Her eyes flick across the battery of screens, before coming to rest on the second column. “What’s happening there?”

The second column of graphs is empty. No bars appear in the bar charts. Instead of bold, declarative numbers there are dashes. Theolus sighs, “That... is one of our big mistakes. Honestly, I still don’t know how the guy got past our screening process. A few days after he picked up Rosemary, her feed went dark. The guy must have found the transceiver and cut it out of her himself. We freaked out of course, went back over all the records, tried to find him, but it turned out he’d falsified almost all his information. The last we knew, she was on Chiron.”

Penelope looks at him. The pained expression on his face is genuine, but it's still wrong somehow. Penelope finds herself getting angry all over again.

"Did you try to look for her?"

"We hired a private investigation agency. But apparently they didn't get far before Alliance Counter Terrorism started breathing down their necks, so they came back and said, basically, no can do. Whoever the guy is, he has a lot of leverage."

Theolus looks wistfully at Penelope. "We've been more careful since then."

Penelope looks back at her charts. She wonders if she were to start breathing fast enough, would she see the bars go up and down?

Theolus perches on a nearby desk. He looks at her. "This is where you have a choice. The pain you've felt; the grief and hurt, shame, sadness, and fear... measures of these are necessary to be human, but we can help with some of the trauma. We can give you a fresh start... without disturbing your literal memories... simply by adjusting some of the hormone distributions in your neural organ.

"How do I know you haven't done that already?" Penelope asks, her anger giving way to that lost feeling again. "When you did the software update?"

Theolus remains motionless, meeting Penelope's teary gaze. "I think you can feel that we didn't."

A buzzer sounds, and Theolus checks his armband. "Sorry, someone's at the gate. This happens. I have to admit, in retrospect, a zoo may not have been the most low-profile place to hide in plain- Oh!"

He cuts off abruptly. Penelope tucks a strand of loose hair behind her ear and takes a deep breath. "What is it?"

"That's interesting," Theolus mutters, darkly, before extending his arm to show Penelope the camera feed. "Isn't that the First Arcanist of the USSA?"

Scene 5 - Cooms' Chateau

Ingrid and Gabriel drive to the Chateau in Ingrid's police car. Gabriel sits in the passenger seat, reading the book he'd found in Emin's office. It is the oldest book Gabriel had ever held; it had been printed in England over a hundred years ago, in the year 2200, as part of a limited centennial run.

The title reads "Hedwurg's Prophecies: 100 Years Later," and it's a collection of obscure predictions, stories, and instructions that, taken together, read like a very long and flowery poem. Arthur Hedwurg had been the last English Regent, a notoriously weak spellcaster who was more concerned with dreamy utopias than enforcing magical law. He was one of the minds behind the Republican Manifest, which, to its credit, went on to serve as the

template for three separate interstellar federations: the Zhong Empire, the Interstellar Republic of Nuin, and the United Star Systems Alliance.

After the first USSA Regent was appointed, Hedwurg went to work for MI5, where he reportedly became obsessed with divination, the so called 'art' of discerning the future through magic. The only problem with divination was that it simply didn't work; it had been debunked in dozens of scientific trials. Therefore it is perhaps unsurprising that Hedwurg's stint as an intelligence officer was cut short. He lived out the rest of his days at a private cottage in Brighton, and undeterred, wrote a book of Prophecies between the years 2091 and 2100.

Gabriel had never read Hedwurg's Prophecies, but of everything in Emin's office it was the only thing that stunk of magic. And upon closer inspection, it became clear that this is what Emin had been quoting with his last words.

"Go to the Land of the Handless God," Gabriel reads out loud, "and deliver the First Magics to the Veiled One." He frowns at Ingrid. "Did Tyr, the god, I mean, did he have only one hand?"

"I couldn't tell you," Ingrid spins the wheel and drives them up a steep, gravel path.

Gabriel looks at Ingrid, then out the window at the stony bluish terrain. "It's terrible. What's happening here."

Ingrid scoffs. "Terrible's a word for it."

"How many people were killed in the bombardment again?"

"Fifty-nine," Ingrid's hands clench around the steering wheel. Gabriel looks back at her, brow knit, then taps at his armlet.

"We're here," Ingrid says. The car rolls to a halt and she shuts off the engine.

Gabriel gets out of the car warily, and immediately clocks the security cameras above the gate. The chateau itself was an impressively guileless art deco monstrosity. An expansive gray and white building with painted blue and gold flourishes and three towers. It looks like a church you wouldn't want to be a member of.

In the main ballroom, Gabriel is brought up short.

"Oh," he says simply.

Ingrid spits. "Oh is right. Oh is an understatement of an exponential degree, but oh is definitely the right idea."

The three huge concentric circles on the marble floor looked both painted on and burned in. Gabriel crosses to the center.

“Is that safe?” Ingrid takes a step back. Gabriel ignores her. He kneels on the ground and places both of his hands on the floor, channeling the energy of the space.

“Potentas Auracai.” The words fall softly from his lips. “Potentas Auracai.”

Several minutes pass like this. Ingrid watches from the far corner, and Gabriel crouches in the middle of the room, murmuring. Finally, he stands.

“The spell is well-devised and well-implemented, but the final invocation didn’t take and the magic of the circle is long-since expired. This happens; very few people have a gift for theurgy. But it’s unusual to see someone get this far only to choke. I would expect an experienced hand.”

He strides across the floor to the wheelchair where Cooms’ body had been. “The owner of this place, he wouldn’t be related to a Hope Cooms, would he?”

“That’s his next of kin,” Ingrid says, crossing to him. “We let her know as soon as we processed his remains. Do you know her?”

Gabriel frowns. “She’s an arms dealer. We’ve met.” He peers around the room. No cameras here. “Have you accessed his security footage yet?”

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The footage was stored locally on a private server. Ingrid leads Gabriel through a hidden door to a narrow basement stair.

"We're lucky we found it," Ingrid says. "Took a few hours of searching."

The lower level has a purposefully dungeon-esque design. Evidently the General had been a man for whom pain was a piece with pleasure. Gabriel presses his tongue against his upper canine as his eyes pass over an array of restraints and polished silver instruments.

"Through here," Ingrid says, gesturing to a door at the end of the hall.

Gabriel enters the room and feels his interference wink out. He casts a glance back at Ingrid; she's watching from just outside. He returns his attention to the terminal and wakes up the monitor. The machine is running Ithaca; a window overlaying a stormy-skied background requests a fingerprint and password. Gabriel inserts his backdoor key, presses his finger to the pad, and the login screen vanishes. With a few keystrokes, Gabriel begins a remote data dump to the Regency servers.

"Let's see what we can see on the day of the Ereshkigal summoning..." he murmurs. He pulls up the video and sets it to isolate for signs of movement. Two hits are revealed, the first, twenty minutes before the summoning. The second, about an hour later.

“Who is that?”

The first clip shows a woman speeding out of the gate on a large black wheeler. In the second, she returns with a large burlap sack strapped over the back of her bike. She has light brown skin and raven hair, and wears a heavy red coat.

Gabriel frowns, and scans the other files. His eye catches on a folder labeled 'APH'. He opens it, revealing three documents: Washington. Clarke. Nearing.

"General Cooms was tracking the founders of Aphrodite Industries..." Gabriel lets out a breathy laugh. "Now why do you suppose he'd want to do that?"

He turns to smile at Ingrid, and freezes. Ingrid has her gun drawn on him; white knuckled, her brow damp with sweat.

"Lord Berns, before you attempt any magic, the room you're in has an active suppression field. I'm afraid you are now a hostage of the Colonial Guard and the Free Wolf movement. A warlock is on the way to stricture you."

There is a sound above them, footsteps upstairs. Relieved, Ingrid takes a deep breath and adjusts her stance. Gabriel presses his lips into a remorseful line.

"Officer Hobsen, what did we say about attempting to play me?"

"I'm not playing!" Ingrid barks. "Put your hands over your head! He's down here!" The banging from upstairs grows louder.

Gabriel raises his hands slowly over his head. "Seventeen was the official number of dead, Officer Hobsen. It just sounds so much better than fifty-nine."

Ingrid's eyes go wide. Out of sight, a door slams open; she whirls around just as a bullet catches her in the head; her body tilts backwards on her heels, and slams into the floor.

Gabriel winces. He pulls his backdoor key from the terminal and steps out of the room, placing his feet carefully. Kylan trots down the hall, holding his gun pointed down. His eyes are deeply set, and the shadows beneath his brow give his face an animal quality. Gabriel raises an eyebrow at him.

"Good timing," he says.

"Told you it was a trap," Kylan retorts.

Gabriel kneads his palm with his other thumb and narrows his eyes. "Well... yes," he says.

"Find anything?" Kylan says, casting a quick look into the room behind Gabriel and gesturing to the officers behind him. "I mean," he grins, "besides the sex stuff."

Gabriel smiles thinly. "Let's get out of here. I have a message for Officer Dostoyev."

Scene 6 - The Zoological Gardens

An elderly Indian man opens the door for Elandra and introduces himself as Duhru. His face is lined and hairless except for a tug of gray beard at his chin.

“Arcanist Ramirez. I’m looking for Theolus Washington.”

Duhru nods. “I’m afraid he is very busy with the renovations of the gardens. Can I take a message for him?”

“Yes, tell him that one of his androids stole my spaceship. And I really don’t want to call the Regency down on him to get it back.”

A door opens at the end of the antechamber, and Mayspeth Clarke enters through it, “We would be similarly disappointed if things came to that,” she says. Her strong voice and ancient countenance are somewhat shocking, but she moves too with relative ease, and walks forward unaided.

“I’m Doctor Clarke,” she says, taking Elandra’s smooth, dark hand in her mottled and grooved one and shaking it warmly. “We have your ship, but I think Peppercorn would like to see you. Will you come with me?”

Thrown, Elandra simply nods.

“This is our little oasis,” Mayspeth says, leading Elandra through the verdant atrium and down a flight of stairs to the grounds. “Technologists must try to surround themselves with nature, or they risk losing sight of the network for the bytes.” She smiles at Elandra, a forced smile, Elandra thinks.

But before she can concern herself more with whatever’s preoccupying Doctor Clarke, they push their way through a double door and into the sunlight. Elandra raises a hand to shield her eyes from the sun, and her jaw drops open.

“Is that... are those... elephants?” They were grazing in a fenced enclosure no more than a hundred feet away. Elandra is overwhelmed, as one of the great gray creatures lifts its trunk and trumpets; an exclamation of elemental joy that Elandra had only ever heard reproduced in films and documentaries, and often in conjunction with the word ‘extinct’.

“Mayspeth places a hand on Elandra’s shoulder. “This way, Arcanist Ramirez.”

Elandra wipes at her eyes with the back of her hand, and follows Mayspeth down the jungled path.

She sees Penelope before Penelope sees her. She stands just beyond the shadow of a tall baobab tree, her lush brown hair cascading over her shoulders, her bare arms held akimbo, a radiance of sunlight reflecting off her skin. Something tugs at Elandra’s heart, and absurdly she finds herself dreading the moment that Penelope turns to look at her.

It happens a moment later. Penelope turns her blue eyes on Elandra as she steps into the clearing, and it isn't as terrible as Elandra had imagined. Elandra nearly chokes on her first words, but she manages to say, "I understand you've been practicing magic."

Penelope laughs.

Theolus emerges from a wooded path beyond the nearest fence, opens the gate, and steps into the clearing. He stands at least a head and a half above Elandra, with his wide brown face and bright green eyes, he appears almost as breathtaking and elemental as the elephants.

"Arcanist Ramirez, perfect timing," he says.

"This is Theolus Washington," Penelope says, somewhat hesitantly. "He was just going to show us his white lion."

"His what?" Elandra looks disbelievingly from Penelope to Theolus, from Theolus to Mayspeth. "What?"

"Don't freak out," Theolus says. Then he calls over his shoulder. "Ichena!"

An adult male lion creeps from the undergrowth the same way Theolus had come. His fur is bright white, his eyes a pale gray, but besides these quirks he is very much a lion. Elandra takes a step back, but Mayspeth grasps her shoulder and whispers, "There's nothing to fear."

Ichena paces to the gate and fixes his eyes on Elandra. "Itchy here is a white lion," Theolus says. "It's a rare mutation that was once seen somewhat regularly in Southern Africa,"

Elandra shoots Penelope a bemused look. Penelope tilts her head to the side by way of response. Elandra runs her hands over her hair and returns her gaze to Theolus.

"This is a beautiful place, and I am grateful that you've taken the time to show me it. But I—" She glances at Penelope out of the corner of her eye. "I'm here for my ship."

"Yes," Theolus nods. "We have much to discuss."

Theolus settles onto a stone bench, and Ichena leaves the enclosure to lie down at his feet. Seated there, he looks as king-like as any person Elandra had ever seen. "While I fully intend to let you go, I do require some assurance that you will not report my location to the Regency, let alone tell them more about the androids, about Sage here, about Penelope's escape in your ship, or anything else they might use against me. We are producing luxury products, yes, but our work has also given way to dozens of advances in medicine, robotics, and artificial intelligence. It's vital that we be allowed to continue that work."

"And I intend to allow you," Elandra says.

Theolus inhales deeply through his nose. “Yes. But you can see my predicament. You have discovered quite a lot about me, while I know next to nothing about you. It is an uncomfortable position to be in.”

“Are you asking me to provide you with dirt... on me?” Elandra says slowly.

Theolus laughs. “Not exactly.” He gestures, and the stone floor of the clearing shimmers, revealing a dusty pentacle imprinted upon the stone. “Are you familiar with the Commonwrong Pact?”

Elandra stiffens. She looks at Penelope, who looks as dismayed as she.

“It’s a relatively minor theurgy,” Theolus says in a calming tone. “No beyond will be summoned, for example, but if at any time, a majority of us agree that the pact has been broken, then...” he inhales pointedly, “then the summoning is completed.”

He turns to Penelope, “It is in your interest as well. The Arcanist could greatly endanger your future.”

“And what is Penelope’s future?” Elandra asks.

Theolus sighs. “She has decided to return to Mr. Petreius. A hard decision, certainly, but we have spoken with Julian and he understands that his behavior has been unacceptable. He wants to try again, and so does Penelope.”

Elandra turns to stare at Penelope. Her head is bowed slightly; she doesn’t meet Elandra’s gaze. A lock of hair hangs in front of her face as she keeps her eyes fixed on the ground in front of her.

“When did she decide this?” Elandra turns her indignation on Theolus.

“It is not really your concern.” Theolus stands, and Elandra is once again taken aback by how tall he is. “You are here for your ship, which Penelope stole in desperation. We are all grateful, of course, that you whisked her away from the Regency on Freya. But we are protecting her now, and we are taking every precaution.”

“Is she returning to Freya?” Elandra asks, feeling all the more incensed.

“Julian’s eldest son has agreed to escort her. He arrived in Maryaman yesterday.” Theolus extends his hand, and the pentacle hums, sending a tangible vibration through the stone beneath Elandra’s feet. “Now,” Theolus continues. “Shall we perform the Pact?”

Scene 7 - Maryaman

Many miles way, Felix and Jynn sit in a cramped holding room at Maryaman Customs Authority. “It’s been 12 hours,” Felix growls. Beneath his white tee, his sinewy shoulders are visibly tensed, and the circles beneath his eyes are almost dark enough to be bruises. Jynn thinks to herself that exhaustion seemed to well up in places like these; she watches Felix

from beneath hooded eyes, her arms wrapped around her legs, dark brown skin over pale green joggers.

Felix is agitated. He stands and paces to the exit. "Hey, it's been 12 HOURS!" he says again, banging on the door.

Jynn snaps at him. "Stop that! I told you this could happen! Traveling on a big cruiser with one visa to go between us? We're lucky they let us down from orbit!"

Felix paces away from the door, turns, extends his hands, and incants, "Aperia O-" but Jynn leaps at him and hits him across the face with an open palm, sending him stumbling backwards.

"What the shit!" Jynn breathes, "We're in a goddamn government facility, and you're going to try and blast your way out of here?"

"She's here!" Felix gestures at his old armllet. "She's literally less than five miles away!"

"Calm down!" Tears of frustration are tugging at Jynn's eyes, and she wipes her arm across her face angrily and glares at Felix. "There's nothing we can do right now."

Felix presses his back against the wall and takes several... deep... breaths.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm sorry. This sucks."

Jynn nods slowly.

Felix slides to the ground. "I'm sorry," he says again. "Things don't ever happen the way they're supposed to, do they?"

Jynn leans against the wall, massaging her head with her hands.

Felix rubs at his cheek, "You know, when I was a kid, I had all these stupid fantasies about saving people from the world. That was it, really, I always got to save them. Didn't really matter what from, monsters, demons, a fire or a falling building, but I always saved her."

Jynn looks at him, just as he looks away. "But here I am," he continues. "And she's in danger. And I'm an asshole. And we're trapped here."

Scene 8 - The Washington Estate

Haiken sits in the estate library, clicking absently through various company dashboards on his laptop. Here a graph of code contributions, there a progress report on the stalled model 8. It hadn't been updated since the Harperstown facility shut down.

In this thought, Haiken suddenly recalls Jonathan's warning about Berns. He frowns, and pulls up a search. He types in "Gabriel Berns, Foundation for Ethical Advancement," and scrolls through the suggested videos. There are two ads from his run-up to Regent. It was a

committee appointment, of course... not an election. But the process was highly publicized and Berns had chosen to treat it like a campaign.

Next were public releases by the Foundation, interspersed with clips cut and uploaded by individuals or news outlets. One is titled, "Gabriel DESTROYS DriveOn executive in court." DriveOn had been a popular self-driving rideshare company. Following the Foundations' suit, its entire C-suite had been thrown in jail, its assets liquidated and paid out to a consortium of drivers and city governments.

A name catches Haiken's eye as he scans the list: "Gabriel Berns Spars with Rivendial CTO Harold Nearing," the description reads.

"Harold Nearing."

Haiken frowns and opens the video. Rivendial had essentially eliminated the need for humans to sit around answering phones, but a lot of people who answered phones for a living hadn't been happy about it. The video is about ten years old.

Gabriel paces to the witness stand. "Nearing," he says. "I have to say, you have the honor of being by far the youngest person the Foundation has sued."

Nearing is wearing a brown blazer over a loose fitting green tee shirt. Their hair is long, tied back into a messy bun. Their age is difficult to place, it could be anywhere between 16 and 26, Haiken thinks.

"It's an honor I wish I could return!" they say. "Seriously, legal fees are no joke. I'd prefer to get my money back."

There is a chuckle in the courthouse.

"You have a great deal of personality," Gabriel says. "But to me, that is what is so disturbing about your product. You seem to have rendered human personality obsolete, without regard for the externality cost to society."

Nearing clears their throat. "This concept of yours, 'innovation negligence' I believe you call it... first of all, I'd like to state for the record that I don't believe in it. It's like the Easter Bunny, I don't believe in it, and I disagree with the thinking behind it."

Gabriel frowns. "Not exactly a case winning argument. My concern, Mister Nearing-"

Nearing interrupts. "Just Nearing, please."

"My concern," Gabriel continues, "is that if you can replicate human personality, with the intuition, humor, and creativity that entails, then you may be the single greatest threat to humanity in the entire galaxy."

Nearing laughs, "because you think I've accidentally created a strong artificial intelligence?"

"Accident or-" Gabriel begins, but Nearing leans forward, cutting him off.

"If I'd built a true AI, I wouldn't be using it to automate call centers. And believe me, you'd know. When I replace you altogether... you'll know."

There is an odd silence in the courtroom. Then the video ends. What Gabriel's reaction might have been, the video owner had not chosen to include it.

Haiken regards the frozen final frame of the video, his brow furrowed. After a moment, he closes the window and stands, thinking absently that perhaps he should go for a walk. But just before he leaves the room, a notification pops up on his laptop with a ping. Haiken returns to the computer. From an unknown address, the message says, "I hate those pre-transition videos. I really wasn't myself."

Haiken stares at the notification. His heart pounds; he opens the message and types a reply: "Harriet Nearing?"

"Sorry for spying," comes the response. "But you need to believe me: The Regency knows where you are. Tell the others. You have five minutes, maybe less."

Sweat suffuses Haiken's body. He shuts his laptop, and paces out of the room and onto the balcony. A silent drone or airship of some kind is hovering overhead; Haiken squints at it, but he can't perceive any markings on it. He casts his eyes down, and sees an array of becoated figures pacing along the paths. Regency officers.

Haiken exits the balcony and walks quickly down the corridor. From across the atrium, he hears a knock at the door, and sees Duhru move to answer it. He bolts for the stairs to the garden.

Outside, he breaks into a jog, then a sprint, descending into the maze of wooded paths. He doesn't even know where Theolus and the others are, but he runs anyway. He swings his body around tree trunks and onto shadow-mottled dirt walkways, catapulting himself downwards towards the creek. He reaches the bridge, and thumps across it. From here, he can just make out Sage's red hair and Theolus's floral shirt, some distance down-stream from him by the lion den... and just up and to the left, he spies midnight blue great-coats, descending along the path towards them.

Haiken gasps for a lung-full of air with which to shout a warning... but as he opens his lips, a hand clamps around his mouth, and his muffled cry is swallowed in the gentle gurgling of the creek.

Scene 9 - The Zoological Gardens

A scattering sound upon the stone ends the rite, as twenty thin wooden tiles fall to the clearing floor. The ground ceases to vibrate, and the dark of the pentacle fades from its grooved outline. Elandra bends quickly to inspect her tiles. They're just a little smaller than playing cards. On each one, a letter is engraved: T, S, M, P.

"These are obeli. If any one of us feels the pact has been broken by another," Theolus explains, scooping up his own tiles, "You have only to burn the tile corresponding to the wrongdoer. Once three of the same obelus have been burned... well, I don't believe it will come to that," he casts a business-like smile towards Elandra. "It goes without saying," he adds, "but don't lose these."

Elandra pockets her obeli and eyes the others with muted anger. "If a beyon kills me, you better believe the Regency will find out everything they need to know."

Mayspeth picks up her tiles and nods. "That is the beauty of the Pact. It is in no one's best interest to see it executed."

"Where is the Hyperion?"

Theolus points back towards the Estate. "There's a hidden garage beneath the East Wing. I'll show you."

He herds Ichena back into his enclosure and closes the gate. "I do love the feeling of tying up loose ends," he says. "It's been a rather chaotic month. I'm looking forward to putting this all behind us."

"Freeze!"

The word is more shocking than the revelation of the summoning circle. With a flick of his finger, Theolus hides the pentacle, but Elandra nearly trips over herself as Eris and Kay emerge from the nearest path, leveling their sidearms, a coterie of IRN law-keepers behind them. Theolus and Mayspeth cast looks at each other.

"Don't move!" Kay barks. "Jesus Christ, that's the Petreius android."

Eris and Elandra's eyes meet across the clearing. "Arcanist Ramirez!" Eris exclaims, "I really should no longer be surprised to see you in places you're not supposed to be."

"Do I know you?" Elandra wrinkles her nose.

"Regent's Aide Eris Dostoyev." Eris tips his head. "Kay, Doctor Washington is a well-known sorcerer. Will you please place an injunction on him and the android."

"You are under arrest for sheltering a fugitive and interfering with a Confiscation mission," Kay's eyes flit from Penelope to Theolus. Do you consent to an injunction?" She says. "The alternative is a knockout pill."

"If it is really necessary..." Theolus nods, his eyes on Eris. Kay places the stricture in Engleman, and moves to Penelope.

Mayspeth steps forward. "I'm sorry we meet again under such circumstances, Mr. Dostoyev."

"As am I," Eris answers tersely. Penelope winces as the stricture goes into place.

"May I ask how you discovered our location?" Mayspeth continues.

A look of comprehension crosses Elandra's face. "They have Jonathan. The Regency took his QPR. That's how you found them, isn't it?"

There is a strained pause. Kay looks at Eris, then steps forward. "Arcanist, Jonathan Harper is dead."

Elandra frowns. "What?"

Eris makes a clicking sound with his tongue. But Kay continues, "The news hasn't yet been released to the public, but I know you were friends. The Lord Regent executed him for obstruction. Two weeks ago. In Harperstown."

No one speaks. Their eyes are on Elandra. Elandra doesn't move. "I'm sorry," Kay says, finally.

Eris clears his throat. "Where is Miss Nearing? Is she up at the estate?"

Theolus shakes his head, distractedly. "She... she's no longer involved."

Eris sniffs. "She's not here," He speaks into his armllet. "Just Washington and Clarke."

Gabriel's voice crackles through the armllet. It's difficult to make out what he's saying. Theolus makes a face. "Ah, yes. Sorry about that. Our wave connection to the nearest quantum hub is a little... tenuous."

Eris glares at him. "My Lord, did you hear me? Nearing is not present, but the Arcanist is."

Gabriel's voice comes through at last; he is speaking quickly. "Listen!" he says, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you."

"General Cooms' military credentials were used to bypass Orbital Control over Iza! But General Cooms is dead! I believe the android..." But static overtakes the words before he can finish.

Eris and Kay look at each other.

"Who is General Cooms?" Theolus asks. "What android is he..." he cuts himself off suddenly, and his eyes go wide.

A strange roar echoes from up the stream. They turn their heads to see a dark cloud of black and crimson smoke hurtling down the ravine towards them. Before the IRN law-keepers can react, it smashes through the greenery and engulfs several of them, their flesh bursting into

flame as they stagger backwards, screaming. Kay casts an arcane missile at the roiling cloud, but it is obliterated before even making contact. Her chanting gives way to screams of pain, as her hands disintegrate into charred fragments of blood and bone. Rosalind steps from the pillar of fire, her red coat and wild hair billowing, her lips moving quickly as she invokes Jourdemayne. Overcome, Kay's eyes roll into the back of her head, and she collapses on the ground.

The IRN law-keepers still in possession of their legs all flee. Theolus presses himself against the iron bars of Ichena's enclosure, while the white lion cowers behind him. Mayspeth grits her teeth, and Eris backs away, while Penelope and Sage crouch on the ground, holding each other. Penelope screams at Elandra, "Do something!"

Elandra doesn't move. She watches the dark pillar wrest itself into a living mantle about Qamar's shoulders, watches her throw a gasping Haiken onto the ground before them, a tendril of darkness around his throat. None of this makes sense. She gapes at Eris. He meets her gaze with a glare, steps back, then turns and runs.

"Doctor Clarke. Doctor Washington." Rosalind grins manically. "I never got to thank you for the gift of my body."

"Rosemary," Mayspeth begins, "what has happened to you... what are you doing?"

"I am here to put an end to your business venture," Rosalind growls. "Now, this is a zoo, but I'm looking for your factory. Tell me where it is, and I will let you, and your apprentice here, live."

Theolus looks at Mayspeth helplessly. She nods. "It's not here," Theolus says. "It's hidden below a warehouse, 133 Vyasa."

Rosalind cocks her head to one side. "That was easy. Qamar, you can let the running man go now."

Qamar hesitates, then the tendril of shadow uncurls from Haiken's neck, and he half crawls, half rolls away from them.

Theolus clears his throat. "Excellent." He says. "As Theolus says, Rosemary does. Subdue your partner."

A blank look overtakes Rosalind's face. With lightning speed, she turns and wraps her hands around Qamar's throat. Qamar's eyes are wide, she tries to gesture, but Rosemary runs forward, smashing Qamar's head into a tree. Penelope exhales sharply.

"As Theolus says, Rosemary does. Make sure she can't speak."

Rosalind's hands tighten, Qamar chokes.

“As Theolus says, Rosemary does,” Theolus begins again. But Penelope stands suddenly, unhinges the latch from the iron gate to Ichna’s den, and throws the gate into Theolus’s back with all her strength.

Theolus staggers. Rosalind’s hands relax, slightly. She looks back at Theolus, as Ichna bounds from his enclosure. He leaps at Rosalind with a growl, claws out, and Theolus steps forward. He yells, “No!” But Rosalind slashes her arm across her body with a shouted spell and Ichna’s head is split from his shoulders, an invisible slice from ear to ear, severing the lion’s face and sending a spray of blood across Theolus.

Theolus falls to his knees, his face a mask of despair, of abject disbelief. He looks up as Qamar steps forward; she raises her arm over her head and brings it down in a clawing motion, cutting Theolus’s face and neck to ribbons. He gurgles blood and falls backwards onto the ground.

Sage cries out, and crawls to Theolus. Mayspeth steps forward, “As Mayspeth says, Rosemary-” she starts, but Qamar sends a tendril of shadow shooting through her heart. She coughs up blood, and collapses.

Rosalind advances on Haiken; he puts his arms up to defend himself, but she grabs him easily. “Let’s go,” she says. She sets the overgrowth alight with a spray of fire, and drags Haiken across the clearing again.

Qamar incants, once more summoning their coach of smoke and flames. Rosalind casts a look back at Penelope, her brow twisted in confusion. Penelope looks away... but her eyes meet Haiken’s. Staring at her, Haiken pulls off his armband and throws it onto the ground.

Then Rosalind drags him into the coach, and the pillar of smoke arcs into the sky, leaving Penelope crouching by the lion’s den, and Sage wailing over Theolus’s body.

...and Elandra stands in the shadow of the burning baobab tree, staring at the red and blue Regency badge on Kay’s breast.

This was Episode 9 of *The Elandrid*, and the ninth 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

