

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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The Elandrid, Episode 10

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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 10 - Command

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 - Cycloinhibitor 6

Bridget tugs at the strap of her parachute. It's a snug fit, but it seemed to her there was no such thing as tight enough under these circumstances. She looks around the ship. Safia is there, wide-eyed and stiff. She meets Bridget's gaze, clenches her jaw, and gives her a determined nod. Bellam had volunteered as well; his dreadlocks are pulled back into a braid that falls between his shoulder-blades. And there is Xavier, the least reprehensible warlock from the original raid on Gravenwyl. He is short and small-boned, with a weasel-y face. But he'd volunteered, and though his initial eval had been disappointing, he'd actually proven to be a very decent simulacrist once his stricture was worn out.

Lastly, there's Marilyn and the girl, Larijel. Marilyn is wearing her white Orbital Control uniform. And Larijel has washed up, exchanging flat curtains of hair for a rambunctious mess of curls, and revealing a spatter of light freckles across her cheeks.

Marilyn gestures at the mounted screen. "This is Cycloinhibitor 6, or Yaslow. Based on the public records on the CI trajectories, and the last trace of the ACT-3 ship from Gravenwyl, we believe this is where Hadrian Helser is."

"What about the Blood Eagle?" Bridget interjects.

"I'm getting there." Marilyn pulls in on the image of Cycloinhibitor 6. "We got ahold of the blueprints for the CIs. They're equipped with anti-aircraft turrets, but they're very short-range. The electromagnetic field these things generate is also a double-edged sword. We won't be able to contact you while you're on the Yaslow. But they probably won't be able to detect four bodies dropping in either." She looks at each of them, then says, "Probably," again.

"The Blood Eagle is Helser's carrier. It's been in far orbit since ACT-3 arrived, but on closer inspection, we noticed it's synchronized with the Yaslow. We assume that means it's on standby to engage at any sign of trouble. So... this is a stealth mission. The longer you can go undetected, the better. The good news is, the CIs aren't equipped to support long-term habitation, so it's likely a small garrison."

Bridget grimaces, and flexes her left arm. The unpredictable twinges of pain had given way to a constant ache. She's not sure which she preferred. "So that's that," she says. "We chute down. Sneak aboard. Kidnap Chris Cowl and rescue Sergeant Peters."

"And Yusef," Safia says, sternly.

Bridget looks at her. "Right," she says. "And Yusef."

Bridget looks at Larijel, her brow knit. "You wanna tell them your part in this?" Larijel clutches her book tightly in her hands. She nods.

"I'm... I'm going to summon something Jourdemayne calls an 'Agent Protector'," the girl says, loudly. "The beyon will be bound to protect the blood we feed it, which means it will also protect blood relatives..." she looks at Safia. "...to some degree."

"Excuse me," Bellam frowns. "Did you say, the blood we feed it?"

Marilyn cuts in. "Don't worry about it. We already got your blood."

"And here I thought you was givin' me a drug test." Xavier wheezes. "Well, long as the thing's on our side..."

"Oxygen masks! We're coming up on the drop point," Marilyn hits a button, a buzzer sounds, and the bay door begins to roll open. The others pull on their oxygen masks. "Everyone ready?" Marilyn shouts over the rush of air. "I'll call you off!"

Bridget puts her hand on Larijel's shoulder, pulls off her headset, and leans in to speak directly into her ear. "Hey. You sure you're up to this?"

"CROSS," Marilyn yells. "ON THREE, TWO, ONE." Bellam raises his eyes skyward for a moment, then steps out of the bay and falls out of sight.

"It's a really good idea," Bridget continues. "But... it's serious magic. So I'll- you know, we'll be okay, if you can't do it. You know?"

Larijel nods. "Okay," she says.

"MILTON. ON THREE, TWO, ONE." Xavier grits his teeth, and follows Bellam.

Bridget squeezes the girl on the shoulder. "Okay," she says. She starts to move away, but the girl grabs her arm.

"Regent Lozano? Will you look for someone... sort of like me?"

"What?"

"SAFIA. ON THREE, TWO, ONE." Safia lips move in a whispered prayer, and then she too disappears into the sky below.

"Someone my age," The girl shouts. She looks distraught. "Someone named... Larijel!"

Bridget cocks her head to the side. "LOZANO!" Marilyn yells. "ON THREE, TWO." Bridget pulls on her headset and oxygen mask, turns, and leaps out of the ship.

Wind rushes past Bridget's face. Her whole body shivers as she falls through the icy vapor. It's the gray hour before dawn, and Wolf is just beginning to bleed color into the world.

She breaks through the cloud layer and inhales sharply. Disoriented, for a moment she wonders if she missed the CI altogether, and the great expanse of shining panels below her is Tyr.

But of course she hasn't missed it. She's falling directly towards it.

Hundreds of feet below, Safia is hyperventilating. The mission-guide in her headset is instructing her to take slow breaths, but she feels like her lungs won't expand all the way. Her arms pinwheel and she spins upward. She sees the dark speck that is Bridget above her; and she clamps her mouth shut. She inhales through her nose, and exhales through her mouth. "I can do this," she says. The words are muffled by her mask; they exist only as a vibration in her chest.

She spins herself back around, and pulls her first chute.

Above, the bay door closes, and Marilyn pulls off her headset. "What do you think?" she says. "Bridget talked to you, right? We can head back to Aster Station."

Andrea nods. "Maybe..." she says. "Maybe that would be better."

Marilyn nods, her expression kind. "If it had been up to me, someone your age... that would have been a non-starter. But Lozano... well you've seen for yourself," Marilyn enters a sequence into the ship computer. "She's not much older than you are."

Andrea frowns at the book in her hands. She reaches into her pocket, and wraps her fingers around the Beyonder's token. "How did you get involved with... with the Free Wolf movement?"

"I watched my parents starve to death," Marilyn says, simply. She jabs at the controls, her face impassive. "It was during one of the worst famines; a couple of the greenhouses went down and... they always made sure I had enough to eat. They pretended nothing was wrong. But my dad died of hypothermia in the platinum mines and my mom had a heart attack."

Andrea regards Marilyn; feeling... she's not sure what. Marilyn smiles thinly at Andrea over her glasses. "I spent so long wishing I'd done something, saved them somehow. Joining a revolution seemed like the next best thing." She sighs heavily. "Alright, we're headed back to Aster station."

Andrea's lip is trembling. "Wait." She says. "Take us back over the Yaslow. I want to help."

~

Bridget lands on a solar panel with a bang. She almost expects it to crack beneath her, but superglass was clearly no joke. Her boots magnetize to the surface, and she crouches forward, gloved hands seeking traction on the shiny glass surface.

She presses a button, and her chute begins to spool back into its container. She'd landed towards the rear of the cycloinhibitor; she can see Safia up ahead, and Xavier beyond her.

Xavier. The small man is getting pulled backwards by his own chute, sliding across the smooth photovoltaic sheeting that covers the massive aircraft. "Goddammit, my boots ain't sticking!" His voice is thin and crackly in Bridget's earphones.

"Safia!" Bridget shouts into her earpiece. "On your left!"

Safia sees him. On her knees, she gestures, summoning a curved shield into existence in Xavier's path. The chute is swept past it though, and Xavier slams into the edge of the shield before being carried past it.

"Shit," Bridget looks back at her chute. It's still got plenty of sail to it.

"X! Release your chute! Let it go!"

There's no response. His legs are dragging on the ground, his body limp.

Bridget curses. He's about to fly past her. "Hang on!"

She powers down her boots, and takes off running across the cycloinhibitor's surface as her still spooling chute begins to drag her back.

She races to intercept Xavier's path, her boots sliding under her on every step. His chute whips past her, and she leaps forward, tackling him onto the surface and re-magnetizing her boots. They keep sliding, she can actually see the edge of the air-machine sinking towards them, like the edge of the world itself.

She yells, "Kennkatto!" and slashes the air with her arm, severing the cords of Xavier's chute. Like a lost kite, it darts into the sky, then makes a jagged movement off the edge and is sucked out of sight.

Bridget and the unconscious Xavier slide to a halt. Bridget's chute flaps a bit as it's wound into her pack. "Are you two okay?" It's Bellam's voice in her headset.

Bridget checks Xavier's pulse. "We're okay." She affirms. "Have you found a hatch?"

"We have, but you need to hurry."

"More than the usual covert mission hurry?"

"Yeah, I don't know how covert is working out for us."

Bridget looks down at Xavier, blood is trickling from a small gash on his head. "X, you still with us!?" No response.

She's tempted to try and enchant him awake; some enchanters were known for their ability to revive the unconscious. But she couldn't risk fogging him.

She works her shoulder into his hip and lifts him in a fireman's carry. One blessing of being this high up... the gravity was noticeably less punitive. She draws her weapon and begins to tread back across the glassy surface of the machine.

Three agents in black body armor are fanning out across the panels. Assault rifles stirred up in their shoulders, they move in a wide spiral, one eye on each other's backs.

There aren't many sources of cover. Every two hundred feet or so is a spinning vent, or a satellite dish. Less frequently, hulking anti-aircraft turrets rise like cairns. Bellam and Safia shelter behind one. Bellam hefts his gun and peers over his shoulder at the approaching men.

"They're ACT, alright. We need to take em out quickly."

Bridget breathes hard. She sees the dark figures ahead of her and tries to duck behind one of the vents, but amidst a spray of gunfire, a bullet catches her in the chest. It flattens against her body armor and knocks her onto her back.

"Lozano!"

"I'm okay!" Bridget feels Xavier move and rolls him off her shoulders. She drags him behind a vent, wincing through a second clatter of gunfire. The sun is growing hotter in the sky, and the air continues to blow through them in waves of pressure and sudden blasts. Bridget adjusts her oxygen mask, and turns off the safety on her rifle. "X, you okay?"

"I'm alive," he responds. "Incredibly."

Bridget scoffs. "Safia!" she yells, "Protect Bellam; Bellam, follow my lead!"

She closes her eyes, and takes a deep breath.

"Shinkirō!" The diffusion spell bends the light around Bridget's body, blurring her form. Bridget stands and zags out from behind the vent, firing her weapon at one of the further agents. The one nearest her trains his gun on her shimmering outline, but Bellam stands and shoots him in the back, a blue shield of light deflecting a volley of bullets from the third. Bridget slides behind a satellite dish. Two of the agents are still standing, but Xavier rolls from behind the vent and takes aim from the ground, shooting one in the leg, then the shoulder, then the head. The third runs for cover, but Bellam steps from behind Safia's shield and fells him with a few well-placed rounds.

"We better find you some marksmanship training one of these days, Lozano." The jab doesn't quite cover the strain in Bellam's voice. The four of them scour the bodies quickly; one of the agents is still alive, two bullets flattened like paint against his chest-plate.

Bellam pulls off his headset and exchanges it with the agent's. With one knee planted on the man's chest, he nods to Bridget.

"How many people onboard?"

"Enough to kill you lot!" the man growls.

"Oh yeah, then why'd they send you three up to die? Why not just wait us out?"

"You're here for Commander Cowl aren't ya? Helser needed to make sure you weren't a demolition crew." The agent spits.

Bridget looks at Safia. "Where are the prisoners being kept? The ones from Gravenwyl?"

"Them?" The man starts laughing. "They're in the refuse center, where else?"

~

It was a bigger summoning circle, for starters, drawn in thick black lines of paint on the bay floor of the ship. At each point of the pentacle, Andrea had placed a candle. In the center, she'd poured a pile of salt.

Marilyn watches from a bench, taking off her glasses and polishing them every few minutes. Andrea finishes reciting the binding strophes, and the inert candles flame to light.

Marilyn whistles. "How many times have you done this?" she asks.

Andrea doesn't answer. She extends her hand. "Do you have the blood?" She hesitates. "And something sharp, a knife or something."

Marilyn hands Andrea her utility knife, and unlocks a heavy-duty cooler containing the four vials. "Does it matter what order?" she asks. Andrea shakes her head. She chants:

"Cuius sanguinem bibete: memini Pallas, protegit et defendit.

Custodi sanguine suo, ut facies iterum gustare."

The phrase is repeated four times. On each repetition she screws open one of the vials and pours it into the pile of salt, staining it a brownish red. She looks at Marilyn; she watches with guarded interest, the flames of the candles reflecting in her eyes.

Decisively, Andrea cuts open her palm with Marilyn's knife; she holds it over the pile of salt and repeats the phrase a fifth time. Marilyn leans backwards, she cocks an eyebrow and mouths, "Do you need a band-aid?" Andrea shakes her head.

She speaks one last word: "Evoco."

The noise of the jets is extinguished. In silence, the salt pile steams and melts, filling the five sided shape at the center of the star with a bubbling liquid. The candles burn higher, hotter, the wax sizzling and burning instantly down to stubs. The liquid assumes a solid, reflective surface, and from the mirrored reflection something steps into the ship with them. Its semi-translucent form is difficult to make sense of, but it is tall, and its face, what must be its face, is marked only by a yawning black mouth; Marilyn presses her back against the wall, her eyes wide. The buzzing sensation in Andrea's head is more intense than she remembered, she stands up, her senses overwhelmed. She can't tell if she's screaming or if the screaming sound filling her ears is coming from something else. She sees a red alarm flashing towards the front of their aircraft, then the yawning black mouth of the beyon closes around her. The last thing she sees is Marilyn on her feet, drawing her gun, shouting... something... then an explosion rocks the ship, consuming Marilyn in fire, and Andrea is enveloped in darkness.

She can't breathe. That's the first thing she notices. When she tries to inhale, she chokes on something thick and wet, with a coppery taste. Blood. She panics, squirming with all her might. Faintly, far away, she hears a muted thum, a distant shriek of machinery. She gasps, and chokes, blood burning in her throat and in her lungs.

Then she is expelled onto a slick glass surface. She coughs and retches, drenched, her clothes sticking to her body. The barely visible shape of the Agent Protector stands over her, its huge black mouth turning away from her, dripping red. Above her in the sky, she sees the flaming wreckage of ships, how many she can't be sure, flying apart in streams of smoke.

She takes a breath, but the air is too thin. Her chest heaves and her lungs drag atmosphere, but it's like there's nothing there at all. She looks up at the slavering mouth of beyon. It smiles. Then it strides across the solar paneled carapace of the cycloinhibitor, and vanishes into an open hatch.

A piece of twisted metal smashes into the glass a dozen steps from Andrea. Charred and blackened, she can still make out the painted letters on its surface. 'BLOOD EAGLE'. Andrea resists the temptation to look up; instead she scrambles after the beyon. More debris fall around her, shattering the solar panels and toppling the anti-aircraft turrets. Andrea's vision has tunneled, she can hear the destruction but all she sees is the circular metal cap in a pinpoint of light. She slides herself into the airlock, and pulls the hatch door closed above her.

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Bellam and Xavier step over a dead ACT agent, Bridget and Safia behind them. Their oxygen masks hang around their necks, and their heavy headsets have been removed. Their hostage leads them, his mouth duct-taped shut and his arms pinned to his sides. The corridor is dark and narrow, built for maintenance crews, not gun-toting revolutionaries.

The hostage agent stops at a new tunnel, which curves sharply down. Ahead, the corridor continues. "Down, will that be the way to the refuse center?" Bridget asks. The hostage nods.

Bellam places a hand on Bridget's shoulder. "Hey. We need to get Commander Cowl before we free the prisoners. As long as he's out there, this doesn't end."

Bridget frowns at him. "They're waiting for you down that way. It's a death trap."

Bellam glowers back, "well, it would certainly be less of a death trap with you two backing us up."

Bridget looks at Safia, then back at Bellam. "The three of you go."

Safia starts to protest, but Bridget cuts her off. "I promise I'll get your brother out too. I promise. But they need you more than I do." She grabs Safia's shoulder. "Look at me. You've come through for me, okay? Let me come through for you. Okay?"

After a moment, Safia nods. Bellam casts a side-eyed look at Xavier. "Lozano..." he begins. But Bridget shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I have to do this. I'll see you on the ground." With that, she takes off running down the tunnel.

Scene 2 - The Zoological Gardens

The garden is burning. It must have been a dry summer, the long grass is ablaze and the flames are spreading along the low-hanging branches of the trees. Over the crackling of the fire, a siren sounds, a drawn-out wail of grief that rises and falls from Sage. He is crouched over Theolus's body, his face streaked with soot and tears.

Penelope picks up Haiken's armlet. An sNet chat is open on the screen, with messages from an unknown sender. "What's happening?" The last message reads. "Did you get to them in time?"

Penelope frowns. She looks up, and sees Sage staring at her.

She shrinks.

Sage gets to his feet. "You killed him!" He shouts at Penelope. And..."You let him die!" at Elandra.

Elandra meets Sage's glare. She looks at the burnt corpses of the IRN law keepers, Mayspeth, Theolus, and Kay. The half-decapitated white lion, its face resting upon the ground, fixing its grisly stare upon the sky. By contrast, Theolus could almost be sleeping; his eyes are closed, and the deep cuts across his face and neck look unreal, as if he was made of paper, or clay.

"Who..." she starts, then notices the wooden tiles on the ground.

"Shit!" She falls to the ground and gathers them up. They were Mayspeth's obeli. They must have fallen from her hand when she died, and Elandra had been given to understand that if three of the same obelus were burned, a beyon would be summoned with a deadly and singular intent.

"We have to get out of here," Elandra says. "Before the fire crosses the creek. We can call emergency services from the house!"

She stands; Sage and Penelope are staring at her. "Come on!" She says. She looks back at Kay.

"Is she alive?"

Penelope checks her pulse. "I think so," she says.

Elandra steps forward; she casts her eyes upwards and gestures, concentrating magic around an unburnt tree-branch. It creaks and snaps from its trunk. The limb of wood twists in the air, it snaps in two and strands of fiber twist from each log and weave themselves together between the two halves, forming a rough stretcher. It alights on the ground, and Elandra lets her focus drop; she leans forward and takes several ragged breaths. "Okay," she breathes. "We can carry her now."

Penelope rolls Kay onto the stretcher, and she and Elandra heft it into the air. Elandra looks at Sage. "Let's go!"

Sage is looking at the four wooden cards in his hand. They had each traced their initial as part of the ritual, and they had been burned into the obeli as drawn. The T is stylized and graphical; the P and M are in cursive, and the E is printed in plain, straight lines. There were other markings around the borders of the cards, alien runes in jagged, threatening shapes.

"Sage?" His name is a question; Penelope is staring at him with wide, worried eyes. Sage feels himself harden against that look. He clenches his fist around his obeli, then casts them all into the flames.

Scene 3 - The Alexander

Gabriel and Kylan sit in the helmsroom of the Alexander. Gabriel rest the tip of his nose on his hands, clenched around the blackstone, his elbows resting on the console. Kylan flicks his lighter absently.

"I don't know how long they've been working together," Eris's voice emits from the comms terminal. "Or how they found each other in the first place... but unless it's somehow a different powerful Afghan beyonder, she seems to have joined up with the Cooms android."

Gabriel peers out the windshield. The Alexander is moving into low orbit. Keeping distance between itself and the main orbital stations, the ship will zag across each hemisphere in wide arcs several times before they can enter slip.

"No more confrontations," Gabriel says. "We have to stop acting on incomplete information... Keep out of sight. Follow them if you can. Meet me in Herculaneum after the Coven. You know the place."

"Yes, my Lord," Eris says. Gabriel shuts off the connection.

Kylan pockets his lighter, and crosses his legs. “You know what I don’t understand? What is Arcanist Ramirez’s stake in this? What does she want?”

“Nothing...” Gabriel says. “She doesn’t want anything... not in the way you mean.”

Kylan looks at him. Gabriel twists his face in thought.

“Most people don’t have a grand vision of the future. They want to be happy. They want to have sex. They want to be good at their jobs... and loved by their families. They want to go home and watch the new show on NV.”

Kylan snorts. “It’s so pathetic when you put it that way,” he says.

Gabriel looks at him. “Those are exactly the sorts of people we have to protect.”

They regard each other for a moment. Quiet. Then Gabriel turns his head, and fixes his eyes on the stars.

“Everything’s sort of spinning out of control,” Kylan says, finally. “Isn’t it?”

Gabriel breathes. “Everything is always spinning out of control,” he says. “That’s why we exist: to pull the universe back together, as much and as often as we can.”

Scene 4 - Cycloinhibitor 6

Bridget's tunnel slants downward until it gives way suddenly to a vertical shaft, Bridget trips forward and catches her hands on the metal rungs of the ladder across from her, dropping her Roijacker to do so. The rifle swings on its shoulder strap and hits the ladder with a bang.

Bridget curses. If this mission were any more stealthy it would be a Mariachi Band. She checks Cosgrove's cycloinhibitor blueprint on her armband and searches for the refuse center. And there it is, at the base of the machine, towards the front. Seems like she’s in the right place at least. She peers down, but sees only darkness. She hardly has a choice. She begins her descent.

There are two ACT guards outside the door to the refuse center. Bridget spies them from down the dark corridor. She unpockets a silver coin and casts a fascination upon it, then flings it down the hall, and drops to the ground. Winking back at the fluorescent bulb from above the door, the coin clinks in front of the guards. They stiffen, raise their weapons and fire several rounds down the corridor... Bridget grits her teeth and waits for them to stop, which they do. She looks up. Both of them are staring at the coin, their shoulders slack, quite hypnotized.

Bridget lets out a satisfied sigh. She gets up slowly, and walks up to them cautiously, her gun raised. Very slowly, she lifts one of the guards’ hands from his rifle, and with a bit of string, she ties a knot of friendship around his ring finger.

“What’s your name?” she asks.

“Sebastian,” he says. “Most people call me Bash.”

“And who’s this?” she asks.

“Gordon Holt,” he says.

A voice yells from the other side of the door. “Hey, what’s going on out there?!”

Bridget makes a face. “Okay, sorry Gordon Holt.” She places a sign of subdual on the other guard’s forehead, and his eyes roll into the back of his head as he collapses on the ground. “Bash, let’s go in together and make sure your friend doesn’t shoot anyone.”

Bridget picks up the silver coin, and Bash opens the door. “Sorry about that Louie, this lady threw a coin at us.”

Louie’s eyes widen. He casts a spell; a jet of energy launches itself towards Bridget. She tries to sign a counter-spell, but the fingers on her left hand don’t move quickly enough. The silvery missile tears through her interference, but thankfully it doesn’t do more than that.

“Bash, stop him!” Bash nods and shoots Louie in the chest several times. Louie falls to the ground, dead. Bridget takes a step back.

“I never liked that guy,” Bash muses.

“Fuck.” Bridget looks around the room. It’s low-ceilinged and narrow. Some thirty feet away, there is a plexiglass observation window looking into a bigger room, with several large tubes, or chutes really, leading into it. “Where is Sergeant Peters? And the man from the Ereshkigal summoning?”

Bash leads Bridget through a door and down into the cavernous space on the other side of the plexiglass. It’s cold here, There are a few small piles of junk and trash-bags scattered beneath the chutes. “What is this?” Bridget asks.

“The dumping bay,” Bash responds.

He leads Bridget across a 4 foot rubber seam in the ground to a set of maintenance closets on the far side of the space. He unlocks the first, revealing Norelle, manacled to the wall next to an old hazmat suit and a desiccated mop.

“Holy fucking shit,” Norelle says. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Bridget almost laughs. “What does it look like?”

“You couldn’t have brought me a crutch? Whatever. We need to find my leg anyway.”

“What? We have to get out of here!”

“I’m not leaving without my leg!” Norelle says, as if it was completely stupid to suggest anything else. “It can’t be that far, can it?” She looks over at the ensorceled guard. “Hey, where’s my leg?”

“It’s in a storage closet by the shuttle deck,” Bash answers, willingly.

Norelle looks back at Bridget. “See?”

There’s banging on the other maintenance closet doors. “Open them up and release them,” Bridget says. Bash follows instructions, revealing Yusef, and finally a round man Bridget doesn’t at first recognize, before realizing it’s the Regency Lieutenant who helped with the Caylix Beacon in Halspur. Fowler was his name.

He is particularly agitated. There’s duct tape over his mouth and his cheeks are puffing with strain as he tries to shout. Bridget rips off the tape.

“He’s got the Invisible Duster! The coat, the one we took from the android!”

Bridget frowns. “What?”

“Helser, the ACT-3 Admin!” Fowler says, but a moment too late. A knife is at Bridget’s throat and her arms are twisted into a lock behind her.

“Miss Lozano.” The heat of Hadrian’s disembodied voice mists against her ear. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

Scene 5 - Washington Reserve

Elandra and Penelope set down Kay’s stretcher on the marble floor inside the estate house. Sage paces outside for a moment, then follows them inside. They keep their distance from each other, their shoulders raised.

No words are exchanged. Elandra walks out of the room and makes a call on her armlet. She returns to say, “the fire brigade is en route.”

Sage is staring out the huge glass doors overlooking the gardens. The sky is darkening quickly, smoke rising from the flames into purplish clouds. Panicked animal sounds can be heard over the low roar of the fire.

“What’s going to happen to me.”

Penelope and Elandra look at him. His slight frame silhouetted against the hellish scene outside.

“I don’t know,” Elandra says.

Penelope looks back at Haiken's armlet. The anonymous messenger has become agitated. "What am I reading about an attack?" They write, and, "And now a fire? What happened?"

She scrolls up, and reads Haiken's messages. "Harriet Nearing?" he had said.

Penelope takes a deep breath, drawing stares from Elandra and Sage.

"Harriet Nearing," she says. "Haiken wants me to find her, I... he's with them. With Rosemary and... I need to help him. And he must think finding her will help him."

"Are you going to murder her too?" Sage's voice is sharp.

Penelope's lips tremble; she stumbles over her own words. She sputters for a moment, struggling to find the words. To her surprise, Elandra interjects:

"Are you dumb?!" She says. "Theolus Washington is not your friend, or boyfriend, or whatever he told you he was! He can control you! Maybe anyone can!"

She turns her ire on Penelope. "Whoever the hell Harriet Nearing is, she probably can too!"

Penelope feels a heat rise in her face. "She designed our brains," she starts.

"Then she definitely can!" Elandra interrupts. "I don't blame you for what you did, but you need to get as far away from these people as possible now!"

Penelope grits her teeth. "And you? Should I get as far away as possible from you now?"

Elandra is thrown. "What?"

"You know the phrase, you heard them say it. You could get on NV tomorrow and tell the whole world how to command Aphrodite androids! Should I just go into hermitage now? Would that be safe?"

Elandra wipes her eyes on the back of her arm. "I'm not going to-"

"Just because she can, doesn't mean she will," Penelope continues. After a moment of quiet she adds, "if I can't trust the woman who designed the way I think, I don't see what matters anymore. I just don't see the point."

Sage pipes up. "I don't understand why you did it."

There is another tense silence. But after a moment, Elandra says, "I do."

A noise from above makes all three of them jump. Duhru appears at the top of the stairs, distraught, his beard fraying.

"Where is Doctor Washington?"

Elandra and Penelope look at each other.

"We should get out of here."

Elandra and Penelope carry Kay up the stairs. Sage holds a whispered conversation with Duhru and the elderly butler collapses into a chair, his face slack. Elandra presses the back of her hand to Kay's forehead, and to her chest. Her skin is clammy. Strings of her dark hair are stuck to her forehead with sweat. The blackened stumps at the ends of her forearms aren't bleeding; the spell had essentially cauterized the wounds as it inflicted them. "She probably passed out from the pain," Elandra murmurs. "She's in some kind of shock but... she should be okay."

Penelope nods. "I'm... sorry I stole the Hyperion," she says. "I didn't know what else to do. Or where to go. But I'm glad you found me."

Elandra scoffs. "Yeah well. Had to get my ship back."

"Where are you going now?"

"Where am I going now... Well, a mad android has joined up with a terrifyingly powerful beyonder. Two of the Aphrodite founders are dead, I have a maimed Regency officer to put in an ambulance, and..." She trails off, her eyes bright. She takes a jagged breath and checks her armet. "If I leave soon, I should make it to Chiron just in time for the Coven... I think it's past time for the new Lord Regent and I to meet."

Before Penelope can respond, the front door creaks open down the entry hall from them. They look up to see two figures in the doorway, in loose-fitting traveler's clothes and backpacks.

"What the hell is going on?" the woman says. "We saw some tulla running away from the property, not often you see policemen scared like that."

Penelope steps forward.

Elandra frowns. "I'm sorry, who are you? You're not the EMTs."

Penelope takes another step forward.

"I'm Jynn Varjha. I'm here with-

She stops, as Penelope races across the marble entry hall with tears in her eyes, throws her arms around Felix Petreius and presses her cheek to his. So tight is their embrace that Felix is knocked backwards, he falls to one knee and Penelope falls with him, and they kneel together, locked together for some indescribable time, in silence but for their breath, loud in each others' ears, as Elandra and Jynn stare at them in shock.

Scene 6 - The Factory

General Cooms' ship was a Ganymede tern. It was one of the first nuclear powered interstellar-atmospheric class vessels, but this particular ship had not seen much use. Rosalind sets it to hold position over the warehouse on 133 Vyasa, and she and Qamar board the shuttlecraft with Haiken. Rosalind looks at Qamar, wondering if she felt as exhausted as she did. They hadn't discussed it. They'd flown downtown in silence.

The shuttlecraft touches down on the darkening street, and they then step from the craft and move quickly to the unassuming entry-door, Qamar still dragging Haiken. Rosalind blasts open the door with a force spell, the loud bang echoes down the street. Qamar makes a face, but she follows Rosalind in.

There seems to be no one about. A security bot perks up: "Please state your name and business," it says, before Rosalind melts it into post-post-modern sculpture. They turn on the lights and illuminate a mostly empty space, an abandoned fork-lift, and a dozen or so stacks of industrial barrels.

"Look for the stairs," Rosalind says. "They said it was hidden below here."

Qamar eyes her. "Are we going to talk about what happened?" she asks.

Rosalind wheels on her. "What do you mean? Talk about what?"

"You nearly killed me," Qamar says simply. "You were being controlled."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rosalind says.

Qamar narrows her eyes. "You don't remember attacking me?"

"Oh," Rosalind frowns. "Yes I... okay, yes," she exhales. "I'm sorry about that, he told me to subdue you and... that seemed like a good idea. It was the heat of the moment."

Qamar looks at her for a minute longer, then averts her eyes. "That looks like a promising door over there," she says.

Sure enough, the door opens onto a service elevator. It requires authentication of some kind to operate. Rosalind begins to cast a spell, but Qamar stops her with a hand. "Let's see if the running man can do it."

They look at him. Haiken meets their gaze, hoping he's not visibly shaking. "My name is... Haiken Moromizu," he says. He'd read once that in situations like this you were supposed to tell them your name, get personal... fuck, who was he kidding? There were no situations like this.

"Can you make the elevator work, Haiken Moromizu?" Rosalind says, as if she were speaking to a child.

"I... can try," he says. He checks his pockets; he still has his keychain, his Aphrodite Industries keyfob. He presses it to the elevator's reader. The elevator beeps, a green light illuminates. Haiken breathes a sigh of relief.

Qamar looks almost impressed, as the elevator hums into motion. "Who are you again?"

"I'm..." Haiken's throat and mouth are dry. He gulps. "I was... Doctor Clarke's direct report. Almost... almost like her apprentice."

Qamar nods.

The elevator stops, and the doors open, a cool breeze of air conditioning hitting them in the face. They step off the elevator... and onto the factory floor.

It's not enormous by any means; it's about as big as the warehouse above them, but built more recently. Its vaulted ceiling is thirty feet above them and the whole space is lit with a dim blue light. Banks of computers hum quietly to their left, and on the right there are three large tanks with glass tops, each about 5 feet in diameter and 10 feet long. From the far wall, a bulbous white dome juts, with a door facing them. And above the computers are arrays of dark monitors.

Despite everything, Haiken feels a rush of excitement. "This is the fully-cellular production setup," he says. "God, I designed half of this!"

"Fabulous," Rosalind growls. She stalks towards the computer banks and inspects one of the whirring machines.

Haiken and Qamar watch her. "What exactly is our purpose here?" Qamar asks.

"Well, I was hoping there would be people to kill here!" Rosalind exclaims, throwing her arms out wide. "Specifically, Harriet Nearing. Where is she, Haiken Moromizu?"

Again, Haiken chokes on his words. "I... don't know. She hasn't been with the company since I joined."

"Can you find her? Can you get her here?"

Haiken looks at Qamar, "Probably not if I tell her you're going to kill her."

"Fine," Rosalind looks deeply dissatisfied. "We'll burn this place to the ground... then find Harriet Nearing and kill her."

"No!" Haiken shouts, hoarsely. "I mean, let me try. Let me try to contact her. She... she wouldn't want this place destroyed, maybe I can use that..." he looks between the two women. "Maybe I can use that as bait. Does that make sense?"

Rosalind nods. "Yes, Haiken Moromizu. That makes sense." She takes a deep breath. "But," she says, "if anyone who isn't Harriet Nearing shows up, we'll just have to start with killing you and burning this place to the ground."

She walks up to Haiken and grabs him by the jaw, hard, bringing his eyes level with hers. "Does that make sense?"

Scene 7 - Cycloinhibitor 6

"You know what I hate more than anything?" Hadrian asks. His knife arm is just visible, the magic of the duster waving in and out at Bridget's neck. As he leans into the words, glimmers of his face appear as well.

"Violence. I've made it my life's work to weed out violence wherever I can. And the sad truth is, there is violence everywhere. As fast as you kill it, it comes to life in some other form..."

Bridget gasps as Hadrian twists her arm painfully. "But it's noble work," he continues. "And it must be done."

"Should I still let the prisoners go?" Bash asks.

"No, I don't think so," Hadrian says. "Go. Take the last shuttle and report to Cell 9."

Bridget starts to speak but Hadrian twists her arm again. "DON'T. talk. Mr. Teller, go."

Bash frowns, but he crosses the room without further comment and exits up the stairs.

Hadrian's voice is mocking. "You've delivered to me both yourself and 5OHRA7, Miss Lozano, and for that I thank you. But you brought down my ship. I don't know how you did it, but I'm going to enjoy making you pay for it."

He presses his knife to Bridget's throat, a droplet of blood beading on the tip of the blade.

"Because as much as you've made yourself a pain in my ass... I get the sense that you don't actually know anything."

There is a rumbling noise from above them, almost like the purring of an engine. Hadrian looks up to see a semi-translucent arm slice through the control room wall with a shriek of metal.

"What the... Fuck!" The beyon leaps from the platform above, black mouth agape. Hadrian manages to whip Bridget around between him and the creature. It doesn't so much land as it simply springs off the metal floor between them, barreling directly towards them with its wide, shimmering arms outstretched. Bridget closes her eyes; she hears a grunt, and a gooey bludgeoning sound like that of a knife stabbing into a grapefruit.

There is a new sort of strain on her arms... a hot, damp pressure, which she can't quite identify. She squints her eyes open.

A dark, curved mouth greets her, a cloying smell of iron. The beyon's arms encircle her, she is pressed between them. She shivers reflexively, gags, and turns her head slowly to look.

The knife falls from Hadrian's hand with a clang.

The beyon has pulled her into a grisly hug. Its arms are wrapped around her tightly, its hands, if you could call them that, sunk deep into Hadrian behind her. Iridescent claws lacerate him from what seems like every possible angle. With a wet, slushing sound, the beyon's arms pull apart, and the remains of Hadrian Helser fall to the ground. From the shoulders down and the waist up, he is slashed to ribbons of meat and cloth. The brown collar of the shredded invisible duster connects only to a bloodied capelet; his eyes stare off angrily into space unknown. Grinning, the beyon straightens from its hunched position; it steps backwards; shimmering, and like a flare of reflected sunlight, it passes suddenly out of existence.

The three prisoners are frozen in shock. Even Norelle seems struck. She looks up at Bridget, then past her. And her face falls completely slack.

“Andrea?”

Bridget turns. A blood-soaked Larijel has descended partway down the stairs. She's shivering slightly, gripping her arms tightly around herself.

“Hi Mom,” she says.

~

At the front of the ship, Bellam kicks down the door of the bridge.

“Cowl!”

They are greeted with silence, but for the low murmur of a news broadcast playing from one of the terminals. The bridge is empty. Safia and Xavier follow Bellam in with their hostage and shut the door behind them. It's a small room. As the cycloinhibitors were not intended to be manned, the command deck is constituted by a ten foot wide console with two chairs behind it. Not much room for hiding.

“Dammit!” Bellam slams his fist into the wall.

Safia wanders over to the terminal playing the news loop. A local network is reporting on a protest of some kind; people have gathered at Colonial Hall in Nobel.

A voice emits suddenly from the coms terminal. “This is Commander Cowl,” it says. “I have a message for Tariq Longsend.”

Bellam strides to the computer and picks up the old-fashioned hand microphone. "This is Bellam Cross. Where the hell are you?"

"I am en route to another safe-haven at this moment. When we detected your landing on the Yaslow I was moved immediately."

"What's your goddamn message?" Bellam growls.

Cowl's voice is icy. "My message is this. End this, now. If you don't, the United Star Systems Alliance will simply destroy you, no doubt causing death to thousands, and effectively deleting you from history. But if you surrender the orbital centers, the space ports, and yourselves, we can look at all of this as an emphatic form of civil disobedience. Your lives will be spared, and your demands considered. Together, we can take a step in the right direction."

"That's going to be a hard step to make," Bellam says, "When we remove your legs."

"I don't think you understand," Cowl emphasizes every syllable. "You cannot remove me from power, because that power is vested in me by the Alliance! I am the Planetary Representative of Tyr! Even if you could capture me, you cannot capture the Consulate, or the Republican Manifest, the leaders of Earth or our allies in the IRN and the Zhong Empire! By this collective authority, I and I alone am the Commander of these colonies!"

Bellam breathes heavily. Safia glances up from the news loop. "Bellam," she says. "Look at this."

He looks. After a moment, he lifts the microphone to his lips again.

"And who exactly do you command? The Colonial Guard has defected. Orbital Control is under our administration. The Republican Army is nowhere to be seen."

Cowl sneers audibly. "ACT-3 is loyal to the Alliance."

"Satellite reporting shows that their ship has been destroyed. Is Mr. Helser with you? What threat does he pose without a base of operations?"

"The people-" Cowl begins, but Bellam cuts him off.

"The people hate you, Commander Cowl. Right now there are protests happening at the Colonial Halls in all five major cities. The people are demanding your abdication. They just started cheering when the news about the Blood Eagle broke out."

Safia's eyes remain glued to the loop feed. Tens of thousands of people have flocked to the city centers of Halspur, of Galensloch, Nobel, Gemini, and Point Clair. They hold signs and shout words, words of encouragement to Tariq Longsend and the Freewolves, words admonishing Chris Cowl and the United Star Systems Alliance. There are people of every class and culture, of every color, of every kind. She thinks how peculiar it is, the texture of a

people, of many people gathered together. How it could be different but still so much the same, from place to place to place.

“What power do you command, when no one will be commanded?” Bellam asks, and turns off the channel.

“I was wrong,” he says. “We don’t need him.” He looks at Xavier, then at Safia. “We’ve already won.”

~

Arms around each other’s shoulders, Bridget helps Norelle hop to the shuttle bay, with Andrea, Fowler, and Yusef in tow.

“What the hell is my daughter doing here?” Norelle hisses in Bridget’s ear.

“I had no idea who she was,” Bridget intones. “You have to believe me! She said her name was Larijel, that she knew some magic.”

Bridget looks at Norelle out of the corner of her eye. “I didn’t know you had a daughter, let alone taught her theurgy!”

“I most certainly didn’t,” Norelle bites. “Here we are.”

The shuttle bay is a squat room with two airlock doors on either side and a row of lockers at the far end. Both of the doors have a red light above them, indicating that no shuttles are present.

Bridget whispers, “Fuck,” and Norelle disengages and pulls open the locker doors, one after another.

“Ha!” She yells triumphantly, her prosthetic leg toppling from one of the compartments. Bridget paces over. “What are you doing?”

Norelle is digging her fingers into a seam in the metal of her leg. She pries open a panel to reveal a small compartment, and sighs in relief. “It’s still here.”

“What? What’s still here?” Bridget peers over Norelle’s shoulder. “Is that a hairpin?”

“Yes,” Norelle answers curtly.

“You have a pixie-cut.”

Norelle meets Bridget’s eyes. “I’ll explain later,” she concedes.

An alarm wails, and red lights begin to flash through the room. A jarringly calm recorded voice begins repeating: “A major hull breach has occurred in the top-most deck. Habitable zones are de-pressurizing. Evacuate immediately.”

The sound of jogging feet telegraphs Bellam stepping into the shuttle bay, Safia and Xavier behind him.

“No Cowl?” Bridget asks.

Bellam shakes his head. “No shuttles?” he asks. Bridget raises her eyebrows in the affirmative.

“We have 8 bodies, and 7 functional parachutes...” She looks around, checking her math. “We’ll double up of course but-”

Xavier grins. “A lucky someone gets to live dangerously with me.”

Fowler raises his hand. “Seems only right, since this is the second time Lozano’s saved my life.” He looks at her, before returning the smirk to Xavier. “Besides, I’m not sure you’d ever make it to the ground without me.”

“Very funny.” Xavier snarls good humoredly. “Nobody tell him how we lost my primary chute.”

Safia undoes her tandem straps and helps Yusef cinch himself to her. Norelle and Bridget exchange glances, and Bellam gestures to Andrea. “Over here, girl. Christ, what happened to you?”

Norelle pockets the hairpin and tosses her leg to the side. “We don’t need the weight,” she says, taking the tandem harness from Bridget. She points at Bellam. “Make sure your legs hit the ground first, not my daughter’s!”

“Your daughter’s...?” Bellam’s brow creases.

Bridget hits the air-lock override, and the inner doors slide apart. “Brace yourselves!” she calls, before pulling on her oxygen mask.

Strapped to Bellam, Andrea tries to calm her breathing. Norelle hadn’t looked at her since they’d left the refuse center.

“Mom,” she says. “Mom!”

Norelle is focused on inspecting her equipment. “What?”

Andrea searches for words. What had she wanted to say? “Are you...” she begins... “Are you proud of me?”

Norelle raises her eyes to Andrea’s. “Proud of you?” she says. “I don’t know where to begin.” Then the outer doors of the airlock slide open, and she and Bridget are sucked out into the sky.

Scene 8 - The Washington Reserve

Sage kneels in front of the armchair, clasping Duhru's hand in his. Duhru's eyes are fixed on the darkening sky. Tears gather in the creases of his face, shining rivulets in his earth-brown cheeks.

"I have worked with Doctor Washington for over a decade." Duhru murmurs. "That your sister would do this... it has put us in a terrible position..."

"What should I do?" Sage's bright eyes shine up at Duhru from beneath a heavy brow. "Should I... avenge them somehow?"

Duhru's eyes flick to meet Sage's. He leans forward with an inhale. "God no Sage. No. You would only compound this tragedy. No. No. That is not the way of preserving their legacy."

Sage's jaw shakes. "Then... how?"

"I will do what I can..." Duhru says. "But you cannot stay here. The government will not... You must take your life and go."

Sage's breath quickens. "Go where?" he gasps. There is a rising pressure in his chest, a tension in his neck. "Duhru I can't breathe. I can't think; I want to... hurt myself, hurt someone; I want to rip the world apart so that I can stop feeling like this."

"Sage, the Quran advises us not to blindly repay violence... but rather to put things right. It is not an easy thing to do. But perhaps you... and Peppercorn... can find a way. Put things right... with each other. With Rosemary. However you can. But guard your life, Sage. Stay alive. For Theolus, if not for me."

Sage chokes, fresh tears streaming down his face. "But I'm not alive, Duhru. Not really. Not without him."

Duhru takes Sage's face in his hands. "You are as alive as you decide to be. Now go."

~

Upstairs, Penelope disentangles herself from Felix. She looks up at Jynn, "I'm sorry," she begins, before returning her gaze to Felix. "I didn't know it would feel this way. Seeing you," she says.

Felix nods.

Elandra looks from Penelope, to Felix, to Jynn, and back to Penelope. "What is this?"

They stand, hurriedly, Penelope gestures. "This is... Felix. Felix Petreius... Felix. This is Elandra Ramirez... the First Arcanist."

Elandra frowns at Penelope. "This is the guy taking you back to Julian?"

"We're here to help." Felix looks at Jynn, then at Penelope. "What can we do?"

"We can go," Elandra says. "Before the fire brigade shows up. I don't want to get locked into an inter-republic investigation, do you?"

Penelope places a hand on Felix's shoulder. "I'll explain while we move." To Elandra she says, "To the Hyperion?"

"This way." They turn to see Sage mounting the steps behind them. Behind dark smudges, his face looks paler than ever, hastily wiped clean on the sleeve of his gray jumpsuit. "I can't stay either. So... I hope it's alright if I..."

He trails off. Elandra nods, slowly.

"Duhru will take care of the fallen officer." Sage says. He gulps, clears his throat, inhales audibly. "The East wing is this way," he continues. "Follow me."

Scene 9 - Aster Station

Back on Aster Station, Bridget paces out of the hab-center towards the commons. On the surface, the Colonial Guard was still consolidating power, rounding up those deemed most dangerous and organizing crews to scour the other cycloinhibitors. In a day or so, Tariq would take up residence in the Commander's Post, a secure homestead near Colonial Hall. After that... Bridget wasn't sure.

Once again, Safia is waiting for her. This time in the outer concourse, with her brother beside her.

"They really didn't give you a last name?" Bridget says on her approach. "It somehow feels so formal, always saying Safia."

"They gave us serial numbers," Safia shrugs. "That was considered sufficient."

"Where are you from then? What was your village called, or whatever?"

Safia and Yusef look at each other. "Do you remember?" Safia asks. Yusef shakes his head. Safia smiles sadly..

"Tashkan," Safia says. "I don't know if it's still there."

"Safia Tashkan. Doesn't sound half bad."

"We want to find our sister," Safia says abruptly.

Bridget is taken aback. "I'm sure a lot of people would like to find your sister," she says. "What are you going to do if you find her?"

Safia hesitates. Yusef raises his voice. "We're going to bring her home."

Before Bridget can respond, they hear the thwack, step of Norelle behind them. She levers her way over on a single crutch, eyeing Safia and Yusef. "Stalling your big meeting, huh?" she says to Bridget. "What're you three chattin about?"

"Their old village..." Bridget says distractedly. "You're right, though. Excuse me." She looks at Safia. "We'll... continue this later." She says. Then she turns, and heads for the infirmary.

~

Outside, Bridget stares at the door for a long time. Finally, she pushes it open, and steps into the room.

Tariq is sitting on the side of the bed, his feet on the ground, his hands resting on the mattress. He's dressed in a white Orbital Control doublet and dark pants. His head is lowered. The nurse makes eye contact with Bridget and exits hurriedly.

Bridget sits down next to Tariq. "How are you doing?" she asks.

"I've been better," he grins. But he doesn't look up.

Bridget forces a conciliatory laugh. She immediately fears she has come off as sadistic, and clarifies. "I uh.. That was meant to be a, 'I know it's my fault' laugh. Not a 'fuck you' laugh."

Tariq nods. He looks at her. "It's your fault. Yeah. I suppose you could say that. Some things happened a certain way, that maybe they didn't need to. And yeah, some of that is your fault."

Bridget feels her heart drop into her stomach. "Yeah. That's... that's what I'm saying."

Tariq's eyes rest on Bridget's like weights. "I really took a chance on you, Lozano. Cosgrove thought it was too big of a risk; she recommended against it."

"It hasn't been..." Bridget gulps. "It hasn't been all bad."

Tariq's nostrils flare, his lip twitches, "I don't know," he says, and he looks away. "Can you honestly say, it wouldn't have worked out without you?"

Bridget feels a heat rising in her face. She searches for words; it feels impossible to her that this is how the conversation is going. She blurts out, "I saved your life!"

Tariq takes a deep breath. "Yeah, you saved my life. 'Course, you gave me brain damage in the process. And you went rogue on Cross during that cluster-fuck of a rescue-mission. And you got my best girl killed in the very-same."

There are tears in Tariq's eyes. Bridget doesn't know what to say. She doesn't know what to feel, either; shame and rage are battling it out and it's too close to call.

"I won your revolution," she chokes out, finally. "I'm your Regent."

Tariq looks at her. "No you're not," he says. "You're done."

Bridget leaves the infirmary. It feels almost as if she is levitated from the bed, as if she is mobilized by an external force and manipulated out of the room. The feeling doesn't stop until she is back in her quarters, on the floor, her back against the wall and her arms around her knees, sobbing as hard as she can stand.

Scene 10 - A Cell on Mars

Far, far away, in a distant complex on a distant planet, not too far from Earth, Jane Ellis closes her eyes and sips her tea. English Breakfast, with honey and lemon, and her secret ingredient, a single leaf of mint. She inhales the cool steam and hums with satisfaction.

She's of an average height, with long brown hair and greenish-brownish eyes. She's wearing flats, wide black slacks, and a white buttoned blouse. The elevator stops, and Jane steps into a plain entry hall. "Morning Bill," she says to the guard as she passes. He smiles and waves her through.

She passes down a plain hallway, knocks at a plain white door, and enters without waiting for a response.

"Good grief, why is it so dark in here? What are you doing?" Jane laughs. "Lights Up!" The lamps glow on, illuminating a large chamber with soft brown carpeting, a king-sized bed, a hand-carved wooden desk, and a shiny black grand piano flanking a circular breakfast-table in the center of the room.

A man sits at the piano, a waft of blonde hair atop his head. He swivels on the bench to look at Jane; his thin face lined with thought, his ice-blue eyes curious. He is immaculately attired in a brown tweed suit with a gray vest and red tie. An ankle monitor blinks above the shiny brown shoe on his left foot.

"I find it very pleasant to sit at the piano in darkness," he says, slowly. "I find that I need not even put my fingers to the keys... I can hear the music just fine." He smiles. "It's been a while since your last visit, Miss Ellis. It's become more and more difficult to conjure your image to mind when I am... getting comfortable."

Jane regards him coolly. "You know how happy I am that you are comfortable, Mr. Hayworth, but unless you intend to remain merely comfortable, I'll thank you to keep your diseased thoughts to yourself."

The man smiles, and raises his hands demurely. "Apologies, Miss Ellis. What was it you wished to speak with me about?"

Jane pops her eyebrows, takes one last sip of tea, and sets it down on a side table. "As a former... problem person... you know how dangerous one or two individuals can be. Especially when existing institutions fail to check them." She fishes in her purse, "Lucky for you, you are now an asset of one such institution. And that comes... with a second chance at life." She pulls a long, white, leather glove from her purse, and throws it on the breakfast table between her and the man. His eyes fix upon it with an almost feral intensity. Jane smirks.

"Are you ready to be a team player, Mr. Hayworth?"

The man nods. Jane smiles.

"I look forward to solving many people problems together. Welcome to ACT-9, Atticus Hayworth."

Atticus leans forward, and gingerly picks up the ivory glove. It is embroidered with brown and gold thread: tightly rendered columns of strange symbols. Reverently, he pulls it over his right hand, and flexes his fingers experimentally. Jane watches him carefully. "Who knows," she says, "perhaps you could return to Virginia someday after all."

This was Episode 10 of *The Elandrid*, and the tenth 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

