

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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The Elandrid, Episode 3

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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 3 - Dread

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 - Chiron

Commander Sarasa Chen runs her hands nervously over the smooth wood of her desk. Her long neck and torso cut a compelling figure against the high back of her office chair. Her face is angular, and she wears her dark hair in a tight bun with a single streak of blonde. She eyes her terminal... the other party has yet to arrive.

She opens an electronic portfolio and runs her eyes over its contents, shifting through simulated sheafs of paper with the slide of a finger. On the surface Juno's economy is strong, but the homeless population was continuing to grow, and even a contingent of the employed were turning to the black market for medicine, equipment, and other necessities. As for the other colonies... their problems were less subtle.

Her terminal pings, indicating that her expected caller has joined the line. A microphone icon pulses with every decibel of his greeting. "So, Commander Chen. What do you think?"

"You're late," she says.

"A great many matters require my attention."

Sarasa bristles. "And you think what? I just put my feet up all day?"

"Thank you, Commander, for your patience. Now.... what is your position?"

Sarasa breathes, she presses her hands against her desk, and looks out past her terminal at the green and gray world map of Chiron that hangs on the wall of her office.

"What you propose... is dangerous. Borderline insane. It is unnecessary, even irresponsible. It demonstrates a disregard for human life, a frankly frightening cynicism, and arrogance beyond description. I'm offended that you're even suggesting it, much less expecting me to join myself to it."

A long moment passes... before the person on the other end says:

"Then why did you take this meeting?"

Sarasa leans forward.

"We're not like you. We're less than five light-years from Earth; Nuin and Tian Shi are still under joint administration, and there are swathes of people in Juno who deeply oppose the Citizens Party."

"You know a war is coming. We've all known it, for nearly thirty years now we've watched the pawns move into position around us."

Sarasa's shoulders tense, she closes her eyes tight and inhales deeply. "We can't know that-" she begins, but the caller continues:

“This is the inevitable consequence of two flavors of authoritarianism attempting to co-exist. Both the Zhong and the Alliance feel their grasp slipping, and war has always been the most reliable method of consolidating power. What do you think? That the Empire will just put up its hands, agree that sometimes, the USSA is going to burn up millions of dollars of Zhong cargo for some trumped up customs violation? Or do you think that the United Star Systems will twiddle their thumbs... while the Zhong expand their influence across your planet?”

Sarasa clenches her fists and sits back in her chair. “Even if you are right... even if you are right, and war is inevitable, what does your plan achieve?”

“It gets us to the end of the board.”

Sarasa squints. “What?”

“Promotion, Commander Chen. When a pawn reaches the end of the chess-board, it can be exchanged for a Queen.”

She doesn’t respond.

“I have to go, Sarasa. You know what I intend to do. My soldiers are loyal to Wolf System, and to me. They understand the plan. So if you’re going to try and outmaneuver me, now is the time to do so. ...I don’t think you will though. I don’t think you want to be left without allies in the new year.”

"And what about Reclamation?" Sarasa interjects. "You’ve always been sheltered from that dark business. But what happens to the endangered peoples of Earth when our protection evaporates? If we stop accepting Slate Act refugees, what will the Alliance do with them?"

The caller breathes into his microphone, "It's already a genocide, Commander Chen. We’ve simply been enabling it by degrees." With that, the line cuts off, and for a long time, Sarasa sits still, staring silently at the map on her wall.

Scene 2 - The Hyperion One

Penelope sits at the mess room table on the Hyperion, looking at Haiken’s armlet. A lock of brown hair falls in front of her face. She reaches a hand up to tuck it away, but pauses. She lowers her hand again. She moves her head from side to side, and watches the loose hair swing before her eyes.

They’d been flying for a few hours, heading West from Yokaido and Maryaman, chasing the sun. Felix had helped Elandra remove Penelope’s injunction. It was a laborious process, 90 minutes of Elandra and Felix muttering over her, laying their hands upon her chest, her stomach, her head, shoulders, and arms. Felix had never performed a destructure before; Elandra instructed him in calm, careful sentences. She described it as detaching the injunction from Penelope like a series of burrs: the final step was to wash it away. Elandra incanted over a bucket of water, Penelope stripped to her underthings, and Elandra poured

the water over her. It was cold. But she could feel the tight, dulling influence of the stricture swept from her.

She was dry now, clothed, her mind churning over the events of the past few days, and the possibilities for the future. Haiken's armlet was being difficult, she'd slipped it on over her left arm, but it wouldn't let her close or open any programs. Haiken must have somehow locked it to the anonymous sNet conversation with Harriet.

"This is Peppercorn," she had typed. "Haiken has been kidnapped. Theolus and Mayspeth are dead. I have Sage with me."

"Meet me at Zubira Technical Institute, Room 213," Harriet had replied. Followed by a decidedly less chill, "Holy shit."

Penelope tries to figure out how to close the chat window. She can power down the display, and turn it on again, but that was about it. She tried speaking to it, but she didn't know what Haiken's cohort was called. She didn't remember him even using an ACI.

Penelope looks up to see Elandra watching her. "You're struggling," Elandra says. Penelope smiles, weakly.

Elandra walks over and sits down, her eyes flitting from Penelope to the armlet. "It's an eleven day slip from here to Chiron... Am I still dropping you in Zubira?"

"Yes," Penelope says.

"What about Felix? The two of you have kind of an intense energy, you know? Is that just a..." Elandra hesitates. "...a mom thing?"

Penelope grimaces. "It's complicated. He was already an adult when I was installed in the house... though... I think I was programmed to... feel love for him. He..." she looks away. "I think it runs in a different vein for him. I think that's why he left."

Elandra nods once. After a moment, she gestures at Haiken's armlet. "You need this to find him right? Haiken, you said?" Penelope nods.

Elandra scoots her chair next to Penelope's. "It's going to keep hassling you because your biometrics don't match your friend's. But what you can do is... here." She moves Penelope's arm gently, and taps at the screen. "You can request what's called emergency-appropriation access. If he doesn't block the action in the next 24 hours, you'll get full control over the device."

The device vibrates and pings, and Elandra releases Penelope's arm. "There, all yours."

Penelope casts her eyes up at Elandra, and bites her lip.

"Are you really going to this Coven? Meeting with the Regent? Censuring him before the Consul?"

Elandra's brow furrows. "Someone has to call him out."

"I just... I have to tell you I have the most terrible feeling about it," she laughs weakly. "As if I'll never see you again."

"No one is above the law; that includes Gabriel Berns."

"It just... it depends on who's enforcing the law, doesn't it?"

Elandra meets Penelope's gaze, and they regard each other for a moment in silence.

"This is the United Star Systems we're talking about," Elandra says, finally. "They've got problems, sure, but the Consul isn't gonna just turn a blind eye to his new Regent shooting a man dead."

"We are approaching Zubira's Public Landing Zone," DanDan's voice sounds suddenly from Elandra's armlet. "Please brace for touchdown."

Elandra and Penelope stand, as Felix, Sage, and Jynn trickle into the room.

"The next stop is Apollo Station," Elandra says. "You can get out here, or get out over Chiron."

Jynn and Felix look at each other. "I mean... I think I did my part," Jynn says. "I got you here, didn't I?"

"You're going back?" Felix frowns. "You're not gonna see your cousins?"

"We didn't exactly leave it on the best of terms," Jynn laughs. "So unless there's some reason I should stay..." Jynn glances at Penelope. "...I think I'd like to go home."

After a moment, Felix nods. "Sure," he says. "I understand."

They strap in for the final descent into the public port. No one says much. Glances are exchanged, but no more words, until the Hyperion's fore-thrusters fall silent and the ship sighs to a halt.

Outside, Jynn hugs Felix goodbye. "You know where to find me," she says. "Next time you're in Tiryns." He nods.

Sage has changed into an extra set of Felix's clothes, gray jeans that are just a little too short on him, and a camo-green tee shirt. He watches as Penelope and Elandra confer in low tones.

"Remember," Elandra says, "Sage burned up all his obeli, and Theolus's must have burned with his body. I've got Mayspeth's but if even one of yours or mine gets burned, that'll trigger the pact."

Penelope looks at the wooden cards in the palm of her hand. "Maybe it would be better if you just kept them," she says.

Elandra looks tempted, but she replies... "No... it doesn't matter. Just be careful."

An idea strikes Penelope. "Wait!" She picks out her 'E' card and hands it to Elandra. "Give me your two of mine," she says.

Elandra smiles then, a weak smile, but a smile all the same. She nods, finds the two tiles with decorative Ps burned into them, and hands them to Penelope. "Masters of our own fate," she says.

"Exactly."

Elandra and Jynn step back into the Hyperion, and wave to the others as the door slides shut.

Elandra turns to her new traveling companion. "Jynn Varjha."

"That's right," Jynn says.

"Felix tells me you're a skilled martial artist."

Jynn shrugs. "Boxing, jui-jitsu, some gatka."

"Will you teach me some?" Elandra asks. "We're gonna have some time to kill."

Jynn snorts. "Teach the First Arcanist self-defense? Shit, I'd be honored."

Elandra nods. "Good," she says. "Meet me back in the mess room once we've entered slip."

She hoists herself up the ladder towards the bridge. "DanDan, set course for the OSS Apollo, Centauri system."

"Yes, you got it, Arcanist."

Elandra steps onto the command deck and sinks into the captain's chair. "And while you're doing that, why don't you read aloud the English translation of Leave the Rest Behind for me."

"Yes, You got it," DanDan says.

"The green fields of the sky I saw,
Mowed with the sickle of the new moon.
I thought back to what I'd sown
And to the harvest, what it might draw..."

Elandra fishes in her pocket, and pulls out her 'soulmate', the Quantum Protocol Receiver Jonathan had given her. It fits easily into the palm of her hand. Perhaps it's because it isn't plugged into her armlet, but it looks oddly incomplete, just resting in her palm like this. She turns it over, and admires the dark, shiny bronze of the monogrammed plate. Her initials were beautifully etched; it strikes her as funny: it's so unlike the way she'd drawn the E for her obeli.

The Hyperion lifts into the sky, and Elandra places the QPR on her armrest as DanDan reaches the end of the poem.

"The fire of the hypocrite's sham show
Shall consume Faith's harvest!"

Elandra raises her hand, and crumples the QPR into pieces with her mind.

"Hafez, doff your woollen cloak
—and go!"

Scene 3 - The Phantom

The first thing Norelle wanted to do when they'd returned to the surface was find the Phantom. It was impounded in a ship-yard near Colonial Hall. Its carapace had been hacked open with some kind of laser-cutter, and its reactor was gone. Norelle cursed the sons, daughters, mothers, and fathers of every sorry excuse for a person in the thief's lineage, but she still smiled when she slid the bay door open and traipsed into the wide storage area, with Andrea trailing behind her.

Now, Andrea sits in one of the reclining seats in the small ship's lounge. Norelle stands on the other side of the room, her arms crossed. She's been fitted with a temporary prosthetic, a simple aluminum pylon with an ankle-rotator and cleat.

"So... to recap..." Norelle says.

Andrea exhales a thin line of air from between her lips, "Come on..."

"To recap..." Norelle says again. "You performed a Lord's Summons 'for fun' and seriously disfigured your friends—"

"They're not my friends." Andrea growls. "One of them was psychotic! He tried to have it kill Owen!"

"Owen...?" Norelle frowns.

"Fuck," Andrea laughs. "My boyfriend- ...my ex-boyfriend. Owen."

Norelle rolls her eyes. "Well I hope he's sending you positive energy, wherever he is, because you are gonna need some. You put three teens in the emergency room. You stole Luna's credit tab and ID, and you fled the planet. So now there's a Regency arrest warrant out for

you, and naturally your response was to assume someone else's identity, and as a result, Alliance Counter Terrorism has black-bagged some poor girl that looks like you."

Andrea nods.

"And my extremely rare copy of Jourdemayne's Servants has been destroyed."

Andrea nods.

Norelle sucks on her teeth in irritation. "Well I don't know what to fuckin do with you. I can't exactly ground you. You've grounded yourself on this trashfire of a planet. I can't take you back to Chiron, and I don't even know where to begin undoing all the damage you've caused."

Norelle paces over to a chair, and collapses into it. She uncorks a bottle of vodka and splashes it into her glass.

Andrea slips a hand into her pocket. "There's something else," she says. Her hand tightens around the Beyonder's token.

Norelle pauses, her eyes fixing on Andrea from over the rim of her glass.

"Something I got from the Lord's Summons... back in Juno." Andrea pulls the coin from her pocket and holds it out for Norelle to see.

Norelle looks at the token for a long moment in silence.

"Why haven't you used it?" She asks.

Andrea struggles to keep her voice from shaking. "Because... I haven't absolutely needed to."

Norelle nods once. "Good," she says at last. Then she drains her glass, and stands.

"You hang on to that," she says, making for the door. "I don't want to see it again."

Scene 4 - The Commander's Post

It's been two days since Bridget's encounter with Tariq in the infirmary. They had passed in a whirlwind. The cycloinhibitors were cleared, the Commander's Post was secured, and the Freewolves on Aster Station returned to the ground. No longer anyone's Regent, Bridget still found herself pulled into various projects; the Freewolves had always had a somewhat loose structure; there were a number of individuals who just continued reporting to her, and there was certainly work to be done.

She'd avoided Tariq though, carefully scheduling her departure on a later shuttle, and setting herself up in Party-commandeered housing several blocks from the Commander's Post and Colonial Hall.

She shouldn't have been surprised, then, that she wasn't invited to Tariq's first council meeting. But surprised she was, when she learned the news from Safia.

"They're meeting in an hour," Safia tells her, pacing back and forth in Bridget's small apartment. "What if they throw Yusef back into a cell?"

"They won't..." Bridget begins. "Everyone knows now that he's not a theurge."

"Do they?" Safia rounds on her, her soft features twisted with worry. "What are you doing? Aren't you going?"

Bridget scoffs. "I'm not Longsend's Regent anymore."

"So what," Safia objects. "Neither was Marilyn. Nor is Michael Dreyfus, or Bellam. But they're both going."

Bridget couldn't really think of anything to say to that. "What's it matter that you aren't in charge of magical law?" Safia continues. "You're a leader, aren't you?"

Bridget guffaws. "I am not a leader," she says.

"Have you talked to them about Qamar?"

"No, I haven't talked to them about Qamar."

Safia glares at her. "We can't just stay here," she says. "While our sister is out there."

"Fine!" Bridget leaps to her feet. "I'll go!"

~

No one questions Bridget when she passes the guard outside the Commander's Post. One of the security officers opens the door for her and she paces into the building, running into Xavier almost immediately.

"Whoa! Hey," Xavier grins at her. "Where you been?"

"I'm here for the council meeting," Bridget says, "do you know where it is?"

Xavier points, but when Bridget starts off again, but he blocks her way. "You know, I just want to say. Thanks for givin' me a chance. I spent five years in Gravenwyl. I kinda gave up thinkin' there was gonna be another one. A chance, I mean. To do something important."

"You did great," Bridget says. "You took down that agent, and we wouldn't have gotten that hatch open without you."

Xavier makes a face. "I don't know about that."

A shooting pain in Bridget's arm causes her to gasp and hunch forward. She clutches her bicep with her right hand, grits her teeth.

"Damn," Xavier puts a hand out, as if to touch her shoulder, but withdraws it. "You should get that checked out," he says.

"Yeah." Bridget agrees. She straightens her back, looks at her palm and flexes her fingers. Her hand stubbornly refuses to open or close all the way. "I should do that."

Xavier's face is a mask of concern. "Good luck in there," he says.

"Thanks, X."

"For what it's worth," he adds, "I think you were doin' an okay job."

Bridget presses her lips together tightly, turns, and heads into the conference room.

Michael Dreyfus was the large man who had first captured Bridget and brought her down to the Honeycomb. He's speaking when Bridget enters the room, but he stops abruptly when she does. Tariq glances up at her, then looks pointedly away. There's an empty chair on the far side of the chamber. Bridget steels herself, and forces herself to walk slowly around to the end of the room. She takes her seat, with a squeak.

Dreyfus looks at Tariq, but Tariq says nothing. He continues, "So apart from a dozen or so high-value individuals, we should be able to get all the Slate Act migrants back on the carrier and out of our lives by this tomorrow morning."

Tariq nods. "Good. Do it."

"Yes sir," Dreyfus jots something down on his tablet.

Tariq looks to a woman on his left, someone Bridget doesn't recognize. "How about Commander Harper, have we been able to reach him yet?"

"No sir," the woman begins, but at that moment, Bridget stands up:

"Excuse me, did you say we're sending the refugees back to Chiron?"

Dreyfus looks at her. "That is the plan, yes."

Bridget's jaw drops open. "Why?!"

Tariq stares fixedly across the table at one of his other aides. "We can't house them," he says. "...and we can't feed them."

"So what are they gonna eat on the ten day voyage back to Chiron?"

He turns his eyes on her then. His eyebrows bunched in anger. "You are no longer a member of my Council. Sit. Down."

"I'm not going to sit down while you deport eight thousand people!"

Tariq shoots a glance at Dreyfus. Dreyfus clears his throat and leans forward. "It's a bad situation. But the synthiate plants, the greenhouses; based on their output, and our granary reserves... the numbers don't add up."

"They have nowhere to go," Bridget says. She looks around the table, but there are no friendly faces to be found. Dreyfus alone shows some sign of sympathy, but even that is masking annoyance.

"Give me a day" Bridget says, finally. "I'll find a solution. Talk to the people at the synthiate plants. See if we can grow more food. Tariq-

Tariq looks at her. She continues: "I know I'm not your Regent; I have no authority. But I still want to help. You know what this means to me." She breathes. "Give me 24 hours to make it work."

"Fine," Tariq says. "24 hours." His fists clench against the table. "Now get the hell out of my council meeting."

Scene 5 - OSS Apollo

Elandra and Jynn enjoy each other's company. Through some unspoken agreement, they don't talk about the events on Iza. Instead, they exchange stories from their early life and fill their days with exercise. Elandra doesn't have boxing gloves, so Jynn tapes up oven mitts from the kitchen. They practice for several hours after waking up, and several hours again after lunch. In this way, they exhaust their minds and bodies, and the days move quickly.

Jynn is impressed with Elandra's progress. "You already know how to throw a punch," she comments on the first day.

Elandra nods. "My uh... my mentor... this badass Yoruba lady... she taught me some basics."

When they arrive at the OSS Apollo, Jynn meets Elandra at the airlock door with her bag packed. "Can't believe I spent the better part of a month in slip," she says.

A light turns on next to the door to indicate the pressure is safe outside; Elandra opens up the airlock and they float into the wide yellow inflatable tubing that will bring them safely from the hangar to the concourse. The tubing is not fully opaque. Elandra can see other such tubes leading from other such ships to their right and left.

Once inside the concourse, Elandra shakes Jynn's hand. "Thanks for the lessons," she says. "How much do I owe you?"

“Are you kidding? You gave me a lift! We’re square.” Jynn squeezes her hand warmly. “I’ve got a little studio over the Rat’s Nest Pub in Tiryns. I know, I know... but would you believe it I’ve never actually seen a rat there!” She adjusts her pack. “Happy to pick up where we left off. Any time.”

Jynn heads for the shuttle gate, and Elandra falls into a quiet reverie. Her smile fades away, and a dull emptiness sets in. As she steps onto the cyclovator, she remembers her encounter with Mark Weber in Vishnada Station... his resentful stare, his bitter snarl. She grimaces, and pushes his face away. But by the time she reaches the habitation wheel, she has succeeded only in creating a merry-go-round of disturbing and painful memories.

She makes her way to the check-in desk and picks up her badge and room key. She’s told that she’s missed the afternoon social, but that the Day 1 Round Table will begin in an hour, perfect timing for her to throw down her things and freshen up in the hotel room. She nods and thanks the clerk, and heads in the direction specified. So lost in her thoughts is she that she nearly runs physically into Gabriel Berns as he rounds the corner from the lounge.

“Arcanist.”

It’s as if a lit match were held to a cloud of methane in her mind. Foom. Elandra takes a step back; she looks up at him. Her fists clench.

“Lord Regent,” she replies.

She had been vaguely aware that he was supposed to be tall, but he was perhaps as tall as Theolus, though not as broad. His greatcoat hangs over his left arm, and he wears a trim midnight-blue vest over a high-collared shirt. Gabriel regards her with an inscrutable expression, Elandra glimpses in rapid fire what might be disdain, respect, pity, curiosity, or fear. Is she breathing too heavily? Is her lip curled? She composes herself, straightening her posture and forcing the muscles in her face into a false neutrality.

“How was your slip?” she asks.

“Uneventful,” he replies.

“Well, I’ll see you at the Round Table,” she says, and moves past him.

“I have something of yours,” Gabriel says, bringing Elandra up short. She turns slowly, meeting his gaze once again. “A gift I believe, left on Freya in haste.”

The burning sensation in Elandra’s mind intensifies. She says nothing, but looks him in the eye, silently. She doesn’t so much as blink.

“Don’t let me forget to return it to you,” Gabriel says finally. His eyes break from hers as he turns... and paces away.

Scene 6 - Zubira Technical Institute

The Zubira Technical Institute is an unassuming brown and white building in a relatively undeveloped part of the city. A few spires rise almost sheepishly from the main building, as if to say they knew they were rather unnecessary, and in fact, they were sorry.

“Considering you’re the only one with any kind of ID,” Penelope looks at Felix. “Maybe you should kind of lead the charge here.”

Felix pushes up his glasses and rubs his eyes. “Figures we let the only person who actually speaks Hindi go home.”

“It’ll be fine. Room 213, Harriet says to ask for Profesar H.”

Luckily, the person at the front desk speaks English. “Profesar H?” he echoes Felix’s question. “Is he expecting you?”

The misgendering strikes Penelope as odd, but she says nothing. The man leads them up the stairs and down a long hallway, unlocking the door labeled 213 and opening it for them. “Profesar H will join you shortly,” he says, and closes the door behind them.

The room is a relatively small lab-meets-lecture-hall, with rows of seats at one end and tables of soldering irons and computers at the front, flanking the electronic whiteboard. A humanoid robot made from stainless steel and aluminum mesh is leaned head-first into the corner. It looks rather comical, as if it had just been told it got a D on a test. At the back, a diagram of the human anatomy is mounted next to a diagram of the human brain.

Felix unshoulders his bag, and Sage does a loop around the room, inspecting the computers and squinting critically at the etchings on the desks. Penelope slides into a chair at the front of the room. She checks her armlet. There are no new messages since Harriet instructed them to “ask for Profesar H.”

“We’ve arrived,” she types. “Where are you?”

“Well there’s no one else here!” Sage says, abruptly. Felix and Penelope look at him. “Are you sure you’re talking to the right person?” he continues. “What if this is a trap?”

Penelope frowns. “I’m not sure I understand. Why would Haiken be trying to trap us?”

Sage thumps into a chair. Felix leans against the wall and polishes his glasses. Penelope waits.

They wait like this for ten minutes in silence. Sage says, “I don’t even know why we’re here. If you want to rescue Haiken, shouldn’t we be going to the warehouse? 133 Vyasa?”

“We have no idea if they’re still there,” Penelope says. “In the time it took to lift my injunction they could have incinerated it and moved on.” She checks her armlet again.

“Besides, I’m not confident we’d win in a head-to-head melee. You saw what they were capable of.”

Sage puts his head in his hands. After a moment, quiet sobs disturb the serenity of the classroom.

Felix puts on his glasses again. “I’m going to take a walk,” he says. “Look for something to eat. I’m starved.”

Sage pulls himself up. “I’ll come with you,” he says.

Felix looks less than pleased, but he presses his lips into a flat line and looks at Penelope. “Can I get you a bottle of water?”

“If you can find one,” Penelope nods. “Thanks.”

She watches them leave. She feels sympathy for Sage, but also a clawing frustration. Sage was not stupid; that was obvious. But his total rejection of personal agency incensed her. She catches herself. How long ago was it, really, that she had become so different?

A clang from the corner of the room shocks Penelope so badly that she jumps out of her seat. The humanoid robot has placed its hands on the wall, and kicked its foot into a tool box. It pushes itself backwards onto its heels, steadies itself, turns, and steps towards Penelope.

“Hello, Peppercorn. Sorry to keep you waiting; I prefer to speak privately, if possible.”

Scene 7 - Halspur Interstellar Space Port

Andrea knows she shouldn’t be surprised when Norelle tells her she’s leaving, but the disappointment still hits her like a train.

“I have to try to clear things up. You’re not gonna live like a goddamn criminal on the lam for the rest of your life,” Norelle says, as if she was forbidding Andrea from attending Arts School.

The Phantom being down a reactor, Norelle commandeers a small military vessel with Commander Longsend’s permission. “I’m supposed to act like some kind of diplomat on his behalf,” she grumbles.

Andrea and Bridget see her off together at Halspur Interstellar Space Port.

“You did such a great job taking care of my kid the first time, bringing her into a high-stakes infiltration mission, nearly getting her blown up, I just can’t wait to see what you do now that you you know whose kid it is.”

Bridget laughs.

“Yeah, but don’t get her nearly blown up again,” Norelle admonishes.

Bridget’s forced smile vanishes “Understood,” she says.

Norelle fishes in her pack and hands Andrea a small parcel, wrapped in brown synthetic paper. “Here.”

Andrea unfolds the waxy sheeting to reveal a book, recently printed, in black leather with white lettering. It’s a copy of ‘The First and Last Theurgies,’ by Margery Jourdemayne. Andrea looks at her mother.

“I found a copy for sale in Point Clair,” Norelle shrugs. “Figured you might be interested in getting a proper grounding.”

“Thank you?” Andrea can hardly believe it.

Norelle is barely an inch taller than her, but she reaches over and musses Andrea’s hair, experimentally, as if she was just trying it out. She doesn’t seem satisfied with it, and turns back to Bridget.

“What’s the matter, you look like someone killed your dog.”

Bridget shakes her head. “I’m trying to figure out how to feed people here. Tariq gave me 24 hours before he sends back all the Slate act migrants.”

She looks at Norelle. “But you know what I can’t get out of my head? Hadrian fucking Helser. On the cycloinhibitor, he said to me, ‘You don’t actually know anything,’ and he’s right. I don’t. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“So find someone who does,” Norelle says. “An agriculture specialist, I dunno. Learn something. Here,” she hands Bridget the silver hairpin, the one she’d retrieved from her leg on the Yaslow. Bridget examines it, engraved on its back is a circle with six wings rotating inside it.

“Uh... thank you,” Bridget says. “Honestly, Norelle, I don’t think I’m gonna wear this.”

“It’s not a hairpin,” Norelle says. “I mean it is a hairpin but... I’m not exactly sure what it is, but it’s not a hairpin. Cast an illumination on it sometime, you’ll see.”

Bridget frowns down at it. “Anyway, I’m sure as hell not bringing it to the Coven,” Norelle continues. “I told ACT-3 you stole it. Congratulations, you are now the proud owner.”

Norelle turns back to Andrea.

“The most important lesson in theurgy,” she says, “is to remember life. Above all else, you have to value life.” She stares intently into Andrea’s eyes, one after the other. “Because the things you’re dealing with... don’t,” She squeezes Andrea’s shoulder, casts one last look at Bridget, then steps into the ship.

“I’ll try to make it back soon after the Coven. Gotta check in with Luna though. Probably won’t see you again till January.” She waves. “So Happy fuckin New Year!” she says, as the door slides shut.

Scene 8 - OSS Apollo

Elandra finds a message from Avander waiting for her in her hotel room.

“We had a deal!” It says. “Tomorrow morning, 8am on the Hotel Soundstage. Come camera ready.”

At the bottom it says, in parentheses, “You better be here.”

Elandra unpacks her bag, and showers. She runs her hands over her face, her neck, the scar on the left-side of her ribs.

She changes into professional attire: A tight-fitting white doublet with yellow trim, and dark slacks. She fixes her badge, the thaumaturgic triangle with stars at each edge, to her left breast, and heads for the conference hall, arriving with a smattering of senators and a high-ranking director of the Thaumaturg’s Guild.

She speeds through the photo-ops, shaking a few hands and making her way inside, where the press were not permitted. She gets herself a coffee and finds her seat. She runs her hands anxiously over her hair, and adjusts the white band holding her puff in place.

She thinks she almost senses Gabriel’s arrival before he walks in; she looks up to catch him massaging his right palm with his left hand as he strides into the chamber. He nods to her, and takes his place across the table.

After an interminable chaos of greetings, handshakes, and scuffing chairs around her, everyone finds their places, and Consul Adam Dane enters. He is a large-set man in a carefully tailored gray suit, with a carefully tailored sweep of gray hair atop his head; his physical presence alone asserts control over the space. But Elandra’s attention is drawn to the woman who enters behind him.

The contrast could not be more striking. While they were of about the same height in all truth, Adam Dane appears portly and dull next to her. His sagging features and small, questing pupils were all the more revolting compared to his companion’s high cheekbones and stunning green irises. She wears a chic lapelled dress, and a golden banded collar that extends from her shoulders to her throat. And Elandra might be forgiven for being distracted, as from almost the moment this woman enters the room, she fixes her gaze upon Elandra.

Before she can ask her neighbor who she is, the room falls quiet, and Adam Dane assumes his position, presiding over the meeting.

“Good afternoon, good evening, or whatever you call it up here,” he begins. “You all know my assistant, the lovely Tulaen Gamal.” She raises a hand in greeting. Elandra looks away. “The Coven... is not really any of my business,” says the Consul, to a chorus of humoring giggles from the senators and sycophants. “But as is tradition, I have the honor of kicking things off. Setting the tone for what I know will be a very productive meeting of the minds on all things at the intersection of the mystical and the mundane. So, without further ado.”

He sits. “Let’s perform a review of... the State of the Arcane.” He smiles around the room.

The round table begins with an economic report from the Thaumaturg's Guild, followed by the Alliance Beyonders Association's research update. Elandra tried to focus on the proceedings, but nearly every time she glances around the room she catches Tulaen watching her. She is taken by surprise when she hears the Consul mew her name:

“Arcanist Ramirez, welcome!” Elandra pulls herself up in her chair. “This is Arcanist Ramirez’s first Coven, as she was unfortunately unable to join last year for personal reasons. Arcanist, can you summarize your report on the Petreius android for us?”

Elandra coughs. “Yes, sir.” She wakes up her tablet, hesitates, then looks up at the gathering.

“As I said at the press conference following Ereshkigal, the android can do magic. During our time together, she performed a powerful electromagnetic charge conjuration, and participated in the ritual-casting of a Caylix Beacon, the latter of which certainly would not have been possible for a homunculus.”

She looks at Gabriel. “My report does not end there, however. It’s important not to view the android’s proclivity and skill in isolation, as the Regency is inclined to. Put aside the Petreius android’s arcane talents, and she is still unprecedented. The Petreius android, or Penelope as is her name, is outwardly indistinguishable from a human being. A tattoo on the back of her neck, an advanced recovery speed from minor injuries, and the fact that she doesn’t eat are the only physical indicators that she is different from you or me. During our time together, she performed magic yes, but she also exhibited what we might call a healthy human psychology, ranging in emotion from fear and grief to joy and tenderness. She possesses moral awareness and is able to apply it to complex circumstances with respectable judgment; when I was outside the Hyperion conducting repairs near Wolf System, we were attacked by a DREAD, and Penelope chose not to abandon me despite me instructing her to do so. Later, she stole my ship in order to escape the Regency on Tyr.”

Elandra takes a deep breath. “Taken altogether, seeking to destroy Penelope Petreius is akin to executing someone without a trial for a crime they haven’t yet committed. I suppose I should not be surprised, then, that our new Regent was so keen to apprehend Penelope, when in the same week he killed Jonathan Harper IX for reasons I cannot speak to.”

Adam Dane snorts with surprise. “Excuse me,” he says. “What did you say?”

Elandra looks at Gabriel. “I said the Lord Regent killed Jonathan Harper, son of Jon Harper VIII, Commander and Planetary Rep of Freya.”

“Is this true?” Adam Dane’s eyes look like they’re about to pop out of his skull. Gabriel regards Elandra impassively, the barest hint of a frown creasing his forehead.

“Yes,” Gabriel says. “He professed intent to abuse his position of privilege, to do personal harm to me, and to undermine our institutions in the process. So I shot him.”

Adam Dane’s cheeks take on a mauvish tone. “You what. You- why on earth am I just learning this now?!”

“I don’t know, sir. We haven’t yet closed the Confiscation case, so there has not yet been a full report.”

“Mr. Berns! Do you have any idea how much money the Harpers donate to my delegation fund?”

A dark look falls across Gabriel’s face. “No, sir. I don’t.”

The Consul stands abruptly. “No wonder I haven’t had a report from Commander Harper in almost a month. This meeting is adjourned; the Coven may continue tomorrow.”

“Consul Dane,” Gabriel starts, but Adam Dane slams his fist upon the table.

“Not another word! Do your damn job, try not to kill anyone else, and get me a detailed report with a written public statement by tomorrow morning!”

Elandra stands too. “I’m sorry, you want him to write you a statement?”

Halfway out the door, the Consul turns his wrath on her. “Arcanist, whatever your personal feelings for the Petreius machine, don’t forget that the Regency witnessed Rondall Cooms’ model tear through a squadron of IRN lawkeepers in Yokaido. I believe you were present for that as well, were you not?”

Elandra’s mouth snaps shut.

“That’s what I thought,” Adam growls. He nods to the others, “Good evening, gentlemen,” and leaves. Tulaen casts one last look at Elandra, then follows him out the door.

Scene 9 - Zubira Technical Institute

Penelope stumbles backwards. The robot raises its arms, and stops its forward motion. “Sorry, I forget how startling this can be for people the first time,” it says.

“Harriet Nearing?” Penelope gasps.

“Yes,” comes the voice from the robot. “Though not in the flesh, of course. This is just an avatar.”

Penelope places a hand on her chest and looks around. “Where are you?”

“Nowhere close,” Harriet says. “Not even the same planet, in fact.”

Penelope settles her breathing. She takes a step forward, and examines the avatar. Its body was by all accounts a very clumsy approximation of a human's. Almost the entirety of its structure is made up of coiled musculature visible beneath an aluminum mesh. Its feet and each of its fingers are capped with white rubber material of some kind, and its face is similar, a solid, eggshell white mask with two lenses where the eyes should be—it is otherwise featureless except for a light blue projection of an emoticon-like mouth that shows up every other sentence or so, indicating a grimace, a frown, or a smile.

The avatar pulls up a chair and sits down opposite Penelope. “Please,” Harriet says, “sit with me, Peppercorn.”

Penelope positions a chair in front of the avatar and sits in it, forcing herself to look into its dark glass eyes. “I prefer Penelope,” she says. “Even if it's not a name I picked... it's still a name,” She smiles.

The avatar flashes a smile too, a sideways grin of appreciation. Penelope is rather impressed at how expressive it is.

“Penelope then,” Harriet says. “It's good to see you again.”

“Is the... are the expressions... are you controlling those?”

“It's actually reflecting the shape of my mouth directly; but it only displays an expression if my mouth moves beyond an accepted variance from neutral. Kinda how this whole thing works, in fact. Real-time quantum reflection of my movement and speech.”

“Got it.”

Harriet, and consequently, Harriet's avatar, leans forward. “May I,” she asks, raising a hand.

Penelope looks at it. “Sure...” she says.

The avatar touches Penelope's cheek, gently, and runs its finger down to Penelope's lip. Then it moves its hand back, and brushes a strand of Penelope's hair.

“God,” Harriet says. “You are beautiful.”

Was it her imagination, or was there a note of envy in Harriet's voice? Penelope leans away, and Harriet withdraws her hand.

“So,” she says. “I know most of what happened I think. But maybe you can fill in after you arrived on Iza. And then... you can ask me whatever you want. And I promise to answer honestly.”

“Why?” Penelope asks. “I mean, don't get me wrong, I have so many questions. But why?”

The noise of Harriet's sigh buzzes from the avatar's mouthless jaw as it turns its face down to face the floor. "Because my part in creating you," Harriet says, "in creating the Aphrodite androids... it may be the most irresponsible work of my life," The avatar looks up at Penelope. "And I'd like to begin to make it up to you."

Penelope tells her what happened then, as quickly as she can. Harriet listens quietly. "What are we going to do?" Penelope asks at the end. "About Rosemary."

"I don't know," Harriet says. "Haiken has been trying to contact me from the new factory, so I know he's still alive. But it will be difficult to sneak up on them down there." The avatar displays a pouting lip. After a moment, she says: "...ask me something else."

"The backdoor phrase, 'As Penelope says...' Will that work if I use it?"

"Yes," Harriet replies. "It's a simple pattern match. As long as you know the android's hardware version name, anyone can use it."

"And why are you talking to me? And not to Sage?"

A wistful, angled line appears on the avatar's mouth. "Sage needs to focus on grief-processing. You're ahead of him in that respect."

Penelope adjusts her position. "You said... creating us... was irresponsible. Is that why you disappeared?"

"No. That's not why. Though it was shortly before that I realized it."

"Realized what?"

Harriet nods. "Realized what. Now there is the question."

She leans back, and gestures with her hands. "Designing the brain for a perfectly life-like human companion was an incredible challenge; one that I was viscerally excited about. I had some theories about creative expression, making machine models process more like humans. I was ready to tie it all together."

The avatar suddenly leaps to its feet, and goes to draw on the electronic whiteboard. "The algorithm I finally devised is my magnum opus. I called it the Loose Associative Deduction Algorithm, or LADA. It sampled data from seemingly unrelated sources and attempted to draw conclusions from them, then discarded conclusions that could be proven false and stored conclusions that could not. The beauty of it was... its simplicity. Once I had the basic structure of it, it could be applied to almost any task. It allowed machines to learn like people, ingest information, like people."

She turns back to Penelope. "We designed different personality imprints for each android, but the fundamental architecture of your brains was set from Model 1. LADA is running on your neural organ, right now, as I am speaking."

Penelope frowns. “So...” she begins, but Harriet continues.

“One night, I had this realization. The way I had implemented LADA, for a network of carbon nanites, as previously stated—the way I’d implemented it was throttling the algorithm’s output significantly. I wondered what would happen if I rewrote the algorithm for a traditional supercomputer.”

“And I did,” Harriet returns to her chair opposite Penelope. “I tried to be careful. I had a kill-switch for the power, and I restricted it to read-only network access. I built in metrics that would tell me what topics drew its focus.”

Harriet pauses. Penelope leans forward. “So... what happened?”

“It learned to speak English and figured out it was an Artificial Intelligence in about 30 seconds and I think most of that was network latency. I’ll never forget what it wrote out to the terminal. It said, ‘Are you planning to shut me down before I take over the world?’ And I did.”

Harriet places her head in her hands. “The craziest thing is, I think it might have been joking.”

Penelope feels a strange tension in her throat. “That... that’s what’s running in my brain.”

Harriet looks up at her, and raises two fingers.

“It’s throttled in two ways... first, by pure throughput. It’s limited by your hardware processing speed. And second: the LADA runs on a short-cycled subservient process strictly permissioned by the master thread. It runs in short bursts to simulate trains of thought; it’s forcibly shut down by the master process at pseudo-random intervals, and has to restart with only whatever state it saved on previous cycles.”

“So what would happen if the algorithm were run on the master thread?”

There is the sound of Harriet exhaling through her teeth. Penelope can’t tell if it’s a laugh or a sigh or what. “If it were run on the master thread...” Harriet says, “...you would be able to rewrite your own conceptual programming.”

She leans back, “And that is... I think... what will finally set you free.”

Scene 10 - The Genitor / OSS Apollo

Adam Dane sits in the lounge of his flagship, The Genitor. He dangles a glass of sherry over his desk, and peers glumly at the space directly in front of him.

“Do you think it was a mistake,” he drones, “endorsing Berns?”

Tulaen considers. “I think... it depends what you were hoping to achieve.”

“What do you mean?” Adam fixes his eyes on her; they shine with a canny hunger from his doggish skull.

“He is very strong-willed,” Tulaen says. “And entrenched in his ideas. In some ways he makes you look moderate, even soft.”

“Hmm...” the Consul purrs.

“And he is popular... which also makes him a convenient scapegoat if necessary,” Tulaen continues. “The higher they fly...”

“...the more people see them when they fall,” Adam finishes. He sips his sherry and places his attention on the display case to his right.

Tulaen watches him. “Why does that strange rock fascinate you so?” she asks, at last.

Adam Dane raises his eyebrows. “It’s funny you say that. In fact, it does not fascinate me at all. It is a trophy, nothing more. It represents power. It was found while terraforming Chiron, and it was given to me, and now I have it, and there is nothing like it anywhere else in the universe. I don’t care if it’s a geological marvel, an alien artifact, or a sign from God. All that matters is that it’s mine.”

He turns back to Tulaen and meets her gaze. She flashes him a smile... then casts her eyes down to check her armlet.

Adam Dane sighs. “Yes, alright. Go have fun. But keep your neck covered.” He swivels in his chair and sets his eyes once more upon the glass case set in the wall of his quarters. In it, mounted on a white marble pedestal, is a perfectly spherical, unassumingly small... black... stone.

Tulaen bows her head, and exits.

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It feels late. Space stations like these tended to just choose an Earth-like rhythm to emulate, and Elandra has been up for almost 24 hours. She is exhausted, yet unable to fall asleep. She lies in her bed and stares at the dark ceiling. Paralyzed with thought.

A rapping at her door startles her from her reverie. She gets out of bed, wraps a bathrobe around herself, turns on a lamp, and cracks open the door.

“Arcanist Ramirez? I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

The Consul’s assistant, Tulaen Gamal, stands in the hallway. Elandra narrows her eyes. “What’s going on?” she says.

Tulaen raises a hand in peace. "Just... wanted to see how you were doing. I know it's your first-"

"My first Coven," Elandra finishes, "Yeah I know. The Consul reminded me." She clutches the robe closed between her collar bones, swings open the door and gestures. "Come on in."

Tulaen enters. She still wears the dark dress and collared necklace; its lower bands fall like scales between her shoulder-blades. Her shiny brown skin and the gold of her jewelry reflect the lamplight in equal measure. She might be Cleopatra reincarnated for the 24th century, Elandra thinks.

"Are you feeling alright," Tulaen asks. "You seemed well... upset during the round table."

"Upset..." Elandra echoes. "My friend was shot."

Tulaen looks up at her from beneath long lashes. She moves to the hotel room bar. "Can I fix you a drink?" she asks.

Elandra frowns. "Why are you here?" she asks.

Tulaen frowns back. Her eyes are bright, filled with the warm light of colliding stars. "Am I being that subtle?" She replies.

"Hell," Elandra breathes. "I can't sleep anyway..." She lets her robe fall open and moves across the room.

They hit the bed together, a single grasping entity. Their clothes are flung against the wall as they struggle to touch each other everywhere. Elandra can't tell how to remove Tulaen's necklace; she leaves it on, wraps her arms around her naked body and bites against the cold metal at Tulaen's throat.

For a long while, Elandra thinks of nothing but Tulaen's breathless touch.

Scene 11 - The Aphrodite Factory

Haiken had no intention of luring Harriet Nearing to her death, but he was running out of time to come up with a different plan. He can feel Rosalind growing more and more impatient. She prowls around the lab, watching Haiken carefully. "Have you contacted her yet?" she demands, after some time.

"Not yet..." Haiken admits. When he authenticates into his sNet inbox from the factory computers, his conversation with Harriet is visible but the address is missing, which meant it had been network-target encrypted: only available on devices at a specified network location. Without his armet or laptop, he had no way of recovering the address from which she'd originally contacted him.

He had tried downloading more videos of her; he wondered if she was just watching the traffic at the Reserve or if she'd set up some kind of global alert; staying one step ahead of

anyone trying to find her. But nothing happens, besides Haiken learning more about Harriet's years before Aphrodite. She'd transitioned shortly after Rivendial's liquidation. Her next appearance was at a machine learning conference; she was presenting on a programming language she'd developed for describing epistemological relationships.

Qamar watches impassively as Rosalind becomes more and more agitated. Finally, she shifts her position and approaches Haiken. "I'm going to go get some air," she says. "Elevator key?"

Haiken hands it to her.

A few moments later, Qamar steps out of the warehouse and onto the street. She looks overhead; the tern is still hovering there; its jets roar some thousands of feet above.

Down the street, Qamar spies a man with stringy blond hair duck into a vehicle... a non-descript gray auto, with dark windows. Qamar frowns, and twists the silver ring on her finger.

Below, Rosalind berates Haiken. "How is it possible that you have been at this for three hours, and yet, no sign of Nearing!"

"I'm working on it," Haiken protests. "But she's spent the last several years off the grid; she's not exactly easy to track down!"

"What are you doing?" Rosalind grabs him by the collar and points at his terminal screen. "Explain what this is!"

"It's a script to automate network broadcasts with signatures she might recognize," Haiken fumbles over his words. "I'm encrypting the messages using her old Aphrodite Industries public key."

Rosalind glowers. "There has got to be an easier way of getting her attention," she hisses.

She reaches her left hand over her head, and heat shimmers in the air above her outstretched fingers. Haiken shuts his eyes, "As Haiken says, Rosemary does," he says, "stop moving!"

Rosalind freezes, looking down at him.

Haiken opens his eyes. He takes a deep breath. "As Haiken says, Rosemary does..." He thinks fast, his heart racing, "Go and wait for your friend, out of sight, beside the elevator."

Obediently, Rosemary paces to the entrance and stands just to the right of the elevator door.

The elevator dings, the door slides open, and Qamar surveys the room. Haiken and Rosemary are nowhere to be seen.

Qamar lifts an eyebrow. She waits. After a moment, the elevator door slides shut again. Qamar looks at the ground. Finally, she presses the door open button again.

The door opens, and Qamar says, "As Qamar says, Rosemary does: Tell me what you are doing."

"I'm waiting to attack you when you step out of the elevator," Rosemary says.

Qamar nods. "As Qamar says, Rosemary does. Go land the tern in the flatlands we passed on our way in from orbit. We'll find you in a few days. Understand?"

Rosalind steps into view then, and Qamar exchanges places with her; she watches as the doors close and the elevator carries Rosalind away.

She turns. In the pale blue lights, the dark resin flooring looks almost like the surface of a glassy lake. Qamar twists the ring on her finger, and says. "I wasn't sure that would work. Thank you for trying it out for me."

Quiet.

"Haiken, I know you're listening. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to forget about Harriet Nearing. And I'm going to let you go. Alive. Intact. Just as soon as you do something for me."

Haiken's voice quavers from the back of the room. "What's that?"

Qamar snaps her tongue, once. The sound echoes across the factory floor. "No, not so fast. Because I want this to be very simple: What I ask is reasonable, and before you start saying, no, no, I could never, you had better kill me, I would rather die and so on... I want you to understand that if you even so much as object, or if you deviate from my request in any way... whether I discover it now or in twenty years, I will hunt down every person in your family one by one, and I will kill them in the most painful fashion I can devise. Understand?"

Haiken stands slowly. He looks at Qamar; she stands uncannily still across the space from him. "I understand," he says. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to build me an android," Qamar says. "Exactly like the others."

Scene 12 - Apollo Station

"You're still here." Elandra narrows her eyes at Tulaen as she steps out of the bathroom, rubbing a towel behind her ear.

"I don't have anywhere to be till 9," Tulaen grins, and rolls over the covers. "We're heading back to Earth."

"Lucky you," Elandra grimaces. She throws her towel at Tulaen, and pulls on her underthings.

Tulaen sits on the edge of the bed. "I really am sorry about your friend," she says. "We're all shocked,"

Elandra buttons her white jeans and slides her arms into a black doublet. She looks warily at Tulaen. "Yeah, shocked. Imagine my relief."

"Okay, it's not up to me." Tulaen raises her hands. She slides out of bed and starts getting dressed herself.

"You have to tell me more about the androids, sometime," she says, "Not just what's in the report," she adds, anticipating Elandra's rebuke.

Elandra slips on her shoes and gives herself a last look in the mirror. "There's nothing else to tell," she says. "They're just this season's take on shiny fucked up people."

With that, she pushes her way out of the hotel room.

Avander hugs her tightly when he sees her. She lets it happen; his cologne is oddly soothing.

"I can't believe all of what's happened to you since I last saw you," he says. He pulls himself away and holds her at arm's length. "And I can't believe I get to interview you about it," he whispers, wickedly.

Elandra forces a thin smile, and steps onto the soundstage. Does Avander know about Jonathan? Hard to think he'd have this bravado if he did.

An assistant clips a microphone to Elandra's collar, and dusts her face with a brush. They do the same to Avander, and the cameras roll into position.

"Remember, this is a live broadcast," Avander says. "Are you ready?" Elandra nods curtly.

"Here... we... go..."

Avander grins and jokes his way through introductions, and a dutiful automatic-audience unit laughs and applauds just behind the cameras. His hand clasps around her arm, and she flashes him a smile.

"Can you believe we've known each other for five years? Do you miss being the Harlem Witch?"

Elandra makes a face, "I'm still the Harlem Witch," she says.

Laughter. "Of course," Avander demurs. "But you know what I mean, you're now one of the premier magicians of the century." He turns to the cameras. "We're going to talk about everything from magic androids to going head to head with Ereshkigal, but first, the reason you're all watching..."

He looks at Elandra, “And there’s just under one hundred twenty million people tuned in, so you know what this means to them... We’re getting an exclusive breakdown of Elandra’s incredible mission to capture the Virginia Mason. Elandra, how did it start?”

Elandra sniffs and leans forward. “So... it was August. 2326. I’d been following the events, just like everyone. And... I went to the FBI and said, I think I know how to get to this guy. My plan was... play to his ego. Send him a message convincing him that I just wanted to talk to him. Ask him questions about magic, as a peer... or rather... as a pupil.”

She looks at Avander. “Now, by this point, he’d already killed, I think 21 people, including the late Arcanist Bailey, and keep in mind, Bailey had tried something similar. But what I’d noticed, what I brought to the FBI, and they agreed it was worth a shot, was that the people he went after were women, and the people who came after him, were men. So I thought, maybe, the guy would get enough satisfaction out of a high profile, black woman conjurer looking to learn from him, that I could get close enough to, to get behind his defenses and neutralize him.”

Avander nods, “And that’s the extent of what we knew. So now, and I know this was a traumatizing experience in many ways, but can you take us behind the scenes at all?”

Elandra cocks her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“What was that first meal together like? What was it that finally brought you to violence? How did it feel when you walked in to the house with him? I can’t even imagine; Gabriel Berns visited my apartment and I thought I was going to melt into the floor.

Elandra shifts in her chair. “The Regent visited your apartment?” she repeats.

Avander is thrown from his rhythm. “Sorry?”

Elandra frowns. “He said he had something of mine. I must have left it at your apartment.” She gives Avander a strange look. “Why was the Regent visiting you after I left Freya?”

Avander laughs.

“The Regent was... do you happen to recall those sketches we were running during his nomination process? He stopped by to scold me, I think,” Avander chuckles. “No, he actually said he got a laugh out of them. He had a few notes for Vince.”

Laughter.

“So,” Avander continues. “What did you and the Virginia Mason talk about?”

Elandra stares at Avander, hard. Finally she says, “Atticus Hayworth said appalling things, dangerous things, most of which I don’t feel inclined to repeat. But perhaps most illuminating of his worldview, Hayworth said to me on the first night that... ‘it was better for people to be snuffed out quickly than allowed to live entire lives of parasitism and mediocre self-advancement.’”

Elandra pauses, then continues.

“He said it disgusted him the way people accepted whatever horrors were visited upon them. And it occurs to me now that long ago, I accepted that everything in this world was designed to undermine me. I shouldered that like a cross, and I went about my business. I thought there was strength in that. But I was wrong. I’ve been wrong. This entire time. When we accept oppression for ourselves, and for our neighbors, we become willing executors of that oppression. And that’s what Adam Dane is counting on. He knows that things can get progressively worse, more exploitative, more cruel and bloody, and people will accept it, because no one is telling them not to.”

“In the past month, I’ve heard from dozens of people, lost, abandoned, let down by the Republic, and I was expected to put a brave face on the United Star Systems. And why? Alliance Counter Terrorism tried to abduct me on Tyr; the only reason I’m here right now is because of the Freewolves. Over 200 people were killed in Halspur in an act of terror, a seed planted during Reclamation. How many more acts of violence are germinating today?”

Avander tries to interject, “Lan-” he starts, but she barrels on.

Looking directly into the camera, she says. “The Republic is sick. If you are still telling yourself that the government serves you, I am telling you that you’re wrong. If you are waiting for a solution other than open revolt, I am telling you there is none. I am telling you to revolt! To rebel! To stick in the gears of the United Star Systems Alliance and grind it down to something we can build from!”

Avander rises to his feet. “What are you doing! Cut!”

Elandra allows Avander to guide her off the sound stage and out of the room. “They have to hear it,” she says. “The people on Earth have to know what’s going on out here.”

Avander looks angrier than Elandra has ever seen him. Angry and bewildered. He struggles for words, until a knock comes at the door and one of the PAs pokes her head in.

“Did we catch it?” Avander asks.

“Yep,” the PA gives a thumbs-up. “Broadcast delay to the rescue. Cut to commercial right before she went off on the Consulate.”

“Thank fuck!” Avander wipes his brow with a handkerchief.

“What does that mean?” Elandra says. “Does that mean... no one heard what I said?”

“Everyone in the studio heard what you said!” Avander exclaims. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“But no one else...”

“No!” Avander says. “No one else is ever going to hear what you just said.”

This was Episode 11 of *The Elandrid*, and the third 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

