

THE ELANDRID

EPISODE 1



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THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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The Elandrid, Episode 1

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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 1 - Promises

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

Her ribs are broken. Her arms bruised and swollen. Every ragged breath is agony. She looks up, her eyes watering in the wind, and marvels at the bright streaks of fire in the night sky: a hundred thousand burning arcs, like hell itself was opening up above her.

She is alone. Her boots crunch and sink into the icy ground with every step. A light snow is falling. Her blood looks only like a spattered trail of darkness in the white, her shadow disintegrating behind her as she lurches on.

She stumbles and falls, landing face first in the snow as her arms are dragged down by the black stone in her hands. It was barely the size of an eight-ball, but a moment's distraction was enough for it to take her down.

She takes quick breaths, the pain and the freezing cold melding into a single, stark demand. Stop. Die.

She heaves her body up. She throws her knee forward. She manages to push herself onto her feet again. The lights of the nearest colony are miles away. She checks the network access on her armband. Still nothing. She takes her first step since the fall. And another. And another. And another. And another.

This is not the beginning of the story, or the end.

Scene 2 - The Hyperion One

It is the year 2348. Elandra is in her bed, between white sheets and a gray down comforter, on board her spacecraft the Hyperion One. She has just woken up from a nightmare, one that she has had frequently since... well, we'll get to that later. This world is not unlike our own, with the main exception being that humans have been practicing magic in a systematic way since the 15th century, maybe earlier. Since magic filled gaps that technology couldn't yet, we achieved incredible feats as a species far earlier, while slowing the growth of technology by a not-inconsequential factor. For instance, wizards landed on the moon in the late 1800s, Jules Verne style, so humans have been interplanetary for six centuries and interstellar for two, but rockets weren't invented until the early mid-2000s. History diverges even more dramatically following World War II, which wasn't won with D-Day, or the atom bomb, but was instead ended by a group of 89 magicians summoning something called a 'beyon' and letting it loose on Germany for a week. But WW2 is basically the last somewhat recognizable event that our histories share. Anyway.

Elandra Ramirez is 27 years old, and the youngest person ever to be appointed to the position of First Arcanist of the United Star Systems Alliance. Arcanist is an office, an appointed position within the government. It's sort of like Special Investigator in magical affairs.

She's been traveling through space for almost two weeks. Each day is the same. Every 24 hour cycle, she sleeps 9 hours, works out for an hour, eats, showers, spends the afternoon

studying spell-books or practicing simple conjuries, works out again, eats, and spends the evening working on her adaptation of Kaze's Lexicon. Elandra enjoys space travel, though she's only been as far as Chiron up until now. She likes the quiet, and that feeling of having nothing but time. But 14 days in space is very different from 4. When her alarm goes off (the first alarm she's set since leaving Earth) her first feeling is one of excitement. She gets out of bed. Breaking routine, she showers right away. She turns the water cold and wraps her arms around herself, and as has become her habit, her fingers trace the rough raised scar tissue that begins by her spine and wraps around beneath her left breast. She dries off. Pulls on a pair of white jeans, a white shirt, and her yellow jacket, which is her favorite. Exits her quarters and floats down about 10 feet to the cockpit, where she uses a bar to swing her body right way round before activating the gravity pad and dropping to her feet again.

The lights on the dash come to life, as the voice of her artificial cohort greets her, "Good morning, Arcanist."

"Is it morning?"

"It will be when you touch down, assuming Orbital Command doesn't withhold clearance as punishment for pestering your ACI about semantics."

Elandra pulls her hair back into a puff with a simple white headband.

"That might've actually been funny if it were a bit snappier. When you exceed a certain syllable count, DanDan, the humor just dies. How far out are we?"

"Fifteen minutes in slip, another ten to orbit."

Elandra thumps into the captain's chair and pokes at her ear to try and get the water out. "Play back my messages."

"Arcanist, we are currently outrunning all traditional wave-sig-

"I'm aware. Play the ones from two weeks ago."

"You know, if you got your QPR repaired, we could just listen to the news."

"Well, I haven't yet, so play the old ones."

"Yes, you got it." One of the screens blinks on, displaying the face of Avander Thorn. Avander is a political commentator, sort of an Anderson Cooper type person. He helped get Elandra her initial nomination and has remained her mentor in negotiating the political aspect of her job.

"Sorry, this'll have to be short, we're shooting this stupid satire video about the Regency and I've got a ten minute lunch break. Hi there! Don't know when you'll get this, probably you're in the middle of your take off sequence, actually. But I can't tell you how excited I am that you're finally coming out to my neck of the woods. You'll stay with me, obviously. I have a fairly ostentatious apartment downtown, near the studio, not too far from the Petreius

estate either, in fact. I've sent the address to DanDan (why you named it that I will never understand). Oh, and about the Regency. Listen."

At this point in the video Avander leans forward.

"I don't know if you're thinking much about it, but, I just wanted to say that I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. There's absolutely zero chance of them actually going for Berns. They'll pick Engleman, or Haley, or Carl Danning. My money's on Engleman though, I mean it's all in the name."

Elandra watches this impassively, resting her cheek against her finger and thumb. Avander leans back and looks off camera, clearly being called away. "Got it. Sorry, love, I've gotta run. Have a good flight, I'll see you in a couple weeks. Can't wait."

The video ends. "You have a pure-text message from Norelle Peters."

"Read it, please"

"Should I try to do her voice?"

"God no."

"Hey you. Been a while. I'm headed to Tyr picking up a couple of spellbooks, believe it or not. Bump orbits after you interview the magic toaster and we'll get a drink. ... then there's a winkey-face."

"Thank you."

"You still have the video-message from Mr. Harper-

"Yup, I don't need to hear that one."

"Should I delete it, Arcanist?"

"No." Elandra hesitates. Then she rolls her eyes. "Let's just avoid a critical mass, shall we? Delete the old one next time he sends one."

"Yes, you got it."

Elandra takes the controls. "Exiting slip in 5, 4, 3, 2..." She pulls back a sliding lever with a gentle movement and the spacecraft jerks once, as if it had been kicked, as the universe comes into focus in front of her. In slip, no particle interactions can occur, so it's always pitch black. Exiting slip then, especially near a star, is sort of like stepping out of a cave and into the Sahara desert. In the same moment that the ship kicks, the burning crimson light of Wolf floods the cockpit. The expanding sphere of Freya standing out like an island oasis in a volcanic black sea of space and meteor-dust.

"Hello Wolf System. Hope it's worth the trip."

"There's a saying that people who visit Freya never return..."

"Why's that, DanDan?"

"Because it's the way Earth used to be."

Orbital Command reaches out via radio. She scans her badge, the thaumaturgic triangle with stars at each edge, and is quickly cleared for entry. She doesn't even have to change course to go into a holding pattern, which she's thankful for, since the Hyperion One still burns fuel and she always feels like that's a waste of it. As they hit atmo, the ship's wings start to extend, slowing the descent and pulling the craft into a position for planar flight. Soon, they're gliding at 20,000 feet. The ocean spread out beneath them in dark hues and Harperstown glittering ahead.

"Terraforming really, *really* worked here," she breathes.

It's about mid-day over Harper's Town when they land. On Earth, she would have had to dock at port. But most exoplanets aren't as strict. Besides, on Chiron, spaceports aren't exactly safe. Reactors are valuable things, and there's almost a cottage industry around the ones stolen from personal spacecraft. So she swings low over the hills a few miles north of the city and engages the landing procedure, lifting her hands from the controls and bracing herself as the fore-thrusters roar and the Hyperion One rears up, decelerates, and finally touches down in the long grass.

Scene 3 - Avander's Apartment

Avander greets her at the door of his building. Though it's only been a couple weeks, he looks older and more tired than in the video message. But as he's often remarked to Elandra, "age has always looked good on him." His dark hair is streaked with silver and the lines on his face seem to only accentuate the tight angles of his face.

"Welcome, welcome. Where'd you park your auto-bike? Ah, fine. Good. Fine. Come on up and we'll have a pick-me-up."

It's only after they're seated in his suite, all polished chrome and wood paneling, that he meets her gaze.

"They fucking gave it to him."

Elandra replaces her glass on the table.

"To Berns?"

"Lord Regent of Magical Affairs in the USSA."

Elandra raises her eyebrows, sits back in her seat.

Avander's eyes watch her carefully. "Look, I know it's not optimal, but I've been thinking about it and I don't think it will be as bad as we thought."

"He wants to abolish free practice, Avander! Abolish!"

"I know."

"Which is just another way of saying that he wants to control who can or can't do magic, and we both know what that means."

"Well, if anyone can reason with him it's you. He can't enact policy until the first Coven."

Elandra picks up the glass of whiskey and drains it.

"Elandra you have to go this year. Everyone gave you a pass last time because, well. You know. But like it or not you represent something now. This is part of your job."

He downs the rest of his glass.

"Now tell me about this magic android you're here to see."

Scene 4 - Halspur

80 million miles away, two women wend their way through a crowded street in Halspur, the second largest city on Tyr. Norelle Peters, exactly 5 feet tall with bleached blond hair and heavy circles under her eyes, strides ahead as Bridget Lozano follows hers, stopping every few paces to narrow her eyes at the locals and then hurrying to catch up.

"Remind me what we're looking for."

"Odard's Rare Books"

"Rare Books' seems a little redundant in Halspur, don't you think?" Bridget looks around at the passers-by, most of whom are better dressed for the cold. It's winter here, not that it's generally pleasant. The gravity is about 7% greater than that of Earth's. Bridget hates it.

The street empties out into a square. Norelle stops to read a help-screen. Bridget backs up towards Norelle and illuminates her armlet. "Did you try to nav it?"

"Obviously, but it's not there"

"Oh man"

"What?"

Bridget extends her armlet to Norelle, who looks down at it. "Have you seen this Polaro account?"

The screen shows a photo sharing application profile. It's basically Instagram. The account name reads "Babes4Gabe" like with a number 4, and it displays pictures of attractive women wearing dark blue shirts with the Regency crest on it or silkscreened images of Gabriel Berns face. One image shows a girl kissing the cheek of an apparently life-size 3D-printed sculpture of him which looks eerily like an ancient Greek statue.

Norelle let's out an abrupt bark of laughter. "God I hate people."

Bridget looks critically at her armlet.

"You have to admit, he is kind of hot."

"It's moments like these I thank the stars I was born gay."

"Do you think that's it though? People are genuinely like here's this like, movie star sexy, this like, Robert Caspian type to save the universe?"

"Robert Caspian died on the set of his last movie because some moron helped him cast a Questellar Circle as part of his 'research' "

Norelle turns slowly, as Bridget hugs her leather jacket tight around her body and shivers. "It's starting to snow."

"Maybe you should have checked the weather before putting on your standard band tee and crash jacket outfit. You know it's my job to keep you out of trouble, not to keep you alive."

"Leather is warm!"

"And what's on your choker? Little tiny skulls? Yes, that will keep the cold at bay." Norelle points through the crowd at a tiny door crammed between a clothing store and a pharmacy. "There it is."

Norelle starts traipsing across the square. Bridget hurrying after again. "How come you have tiny short lady legs, one of which is made of fucking cogs and springs, and you still walk so much faster than me?"

"Because you move like a newborn colt." Norelle shouts this over her shoulder as she moves through the crowd.

Bridget mutters, "*A la verga*," and hurries after her. A commotion of some kind draws her gaze to a fast food place on their right, but she can't determine what's happening before Norelle pulls her into the dimly lit bookstore.

Odard's storefront comprises a rusted metal door, and a tall glass window that's so dirty Bridget only realizes it's a window once inside. She peers out at the burger place while Norelle bangs on the desk bell. Ding ding ding ding!

The group outside the restaurant, a franchise RocketBurger, are trying to catch the attention of the rest of the crowd, holding signs and shouting. Bridget rubs at the dirt on the window, trying to see what the signs say, as behind her she hears an old man greet Norelle.

“Hello. Can I help you?”

“Norelle Peters. I called about the Tome of Shadows?”

“Oh yes! I remember you. Coming all the way from Chiron, yes?”

“Yes. It's a long trip for two books.”

“Two?”

“I commissioned a spellbook from- ...doesn't matter. I'm here for the Tome.”

Bridget is still peering at the crowd, which has grown quite substantial. She can hear the chanting, but can't quite make out what they're saying.

“Well I'm afraid to tell you that a young lady came in here yesterday and bought it off me.”.

Norelle straightens up and pulls her head back to a rigid attention.

“What.”

“What can I do? She offered me three times the price, and food is scarce.”

Bridget is vaguely aware that Norelle has just received bad news. But her eyes are glued to the RocketBurger. One of the full-wall windows is smashed suddenly with a brick, and a roar of approval goes up from the crowd.

“Who was this lady!”

“No idea. She had an RO badge. It was old, but what do I know?”

“Regency?? What do you mean the badge was old?”

“Three stars instead of four. So at least before Ra System was colonized.”

Bridget lets out a low groan of shock. “Holy shit.”

Odard and Norelle turn. Men in bloodied white shirts have hooked a truck up to a chain and winch, which is pulling one of the big RocketBurger service bots out of the broken window and onto the street. The service bot is purposefully cartoonish, a big boxy head plastered with a permanent smile, and a painted carapace from which its multi-articulated arms drag on the ground. As the robot is pulled into view, a cheer goes up from the ground. Men detach the chain from the thing and heft its torso up, so that it almost appears to be

kneeling. Police sirens can be heard approaching from the other end of the square, as one of the men lifts a shotgun above his head, provoking yet another cheer.

“Holy shit,” Bridget says again.

The service bot turns its head back and forth haplessly, searching for people to offer burgers to. For a moment, Bridget could swear that its eyes meet hers, because the swivel of its head stops for a moment, and the mechanical crinkles around its eyes lift ever so slightly. Then the man with the shotgun lowers it at the service bot’s head and it explodes in a spray of metal and circuitry.

Everything seems to happen at once. Odard yells, “Get away from the window!” as sirens, screams, and the chatter of an automatic weapon fill their ears. Riot police flood the square, pushing civilians to the ground as they try to get a bead on the agitators.

Odard and Norelle pull Bridget away from the window and onto the ground, finally sliding their way behind Odard’s heavy steel desk, as chaos reigns outside in the square.

Scene 5 - The Petreius Estate

The sun is low over the hills when Elandra arrives at the Petreius Estate. Though Avander said his apartment was ostentatious, it’s nothing compared to the grandeur of this building... a Romanesque villa built at the edge of a canyon through which the Jonathan River runs, rushing south to the sea from an immense waterfall. The distant white noise of the falls is even audible from here, just barely.

Elandra parks her auto-bike and flashes her badge to the private security team at the gate. On her way up to the villa, she passes a number of bronze statues, and tries hard not to look at them. On the stoop, an automated security system scans her face and unlocks the door for her, revealing a sunlit atrium replete with ferns.

A man in his late 50s, immaculately dressed in blue linen, steps into view at the other end of the atrium.

“Arcanist Ramirez?”

Elandra adjusts her jacket. “Yes sir.”

The older man sweeps past the ferns with the air of a large bird of prey. “Julian Petreius. Thank you for coming. Thank you.” He shakes her hand, eyes never leaving Elandra’s.

“Is... uh...”

“*Mrs. Petreius* is in the small parlour with my son, Henry. She’s tutoring him in math. He’s much too advanced for traditional schooling. We took a short tour of the city school Felix attended back in the day but I’m afraid it’s fallen to ruin. I mean they don’t even have a full-time nutritionist. Please, come through.”

Julian Petreius says all this with the anxious, false nonchalance of someone who is not used to speaking to normal people and as a result has no idea what they talk about. He's taller and older than Avander, and there's a haughty, owl-like look to the lines of his face. He's a man with the kind of glossy veneer of someone who moisturizes daily and has never wanted for anything.

Elandra follows him out of the atrium and down a hall, then through an enormous living room (perhaps the 'large parlour', Elandra thinks), and down another hall. The whole time, Julian talks as if he were giving a somewhat hasty tour. "This was donated by the Better Worlds Initiative," he says, gesturing at a painting, and, "My grandfather rescued that during the Mid-East Reclamation Project." In the final hallway, he actually stops to direct her attention at a glass case. "This is an Invisible Duster from the War Between. One of the prototypes. The rest were disenchanting after the Juno Convention."

Elandra tries to 'hm' agreeably, because Julian is looking at her expectantly. The duster is a very light brown, with a wide collar and a decidedly ugly zipper in the front. "Thank goodness it makes you invisible, I guess," she actually says out loud, before remembering who she is speaking to. Julian frowns, turns, and pushes open a large double door.

"Penelope? The Arcanist is here to see you."

Elandra steps through the door, casting her eyes quickly over the room's relatively humble furnishings (relative to the rest of the house that is) and then stops dead in her tracks.

A quick note about androids. Remember that, thanks to magic, in this world, technology is still only a little more advanced than ours. So the robotics and AI revolution is in full swing, and the two have even been joined, to a certain degree, but mostly to the end of automating repetitive tasks. A few companies have made claims to that fabled achievement: the perfect android, but all of them have fallen short of the mark. The skin is wrong. The eyes are too glassy. It's a pursuit where less than perfect is worse than not trying, and a lot of people still dismiss it as impossible or at the very least foolhardy.

So that's the context to remember when I tell you that Elandra walks into this room expecting to meet a robot, and Penelope Petreius looks up from her work, reaches up, and tucks a strand of loose hair behind her ear. Her hair is a lustrous auburn, her skin is inviting, rosy and warm. She is beautiful, alert, disarmingly and immediately friendly but not without the hesitancy you would expect when greeting a stranger in your home. Perfect can be a clumsy, unspecific word, but in this case there is no other. Penelope Petreius is perfect.

Penelope blushes and looks down, and Elandra realizes she's been staring. And she's not the only one. Henry Petreius, who must be about 12 or 13, is staring at Elandra so hard she wonders suddenly if he's ever seen a black woman in person before. Penelope closes the math textbook and places her hand on the boy's. "Would you go and play in the drawing room, Hal?"

Henry stands, grabs the textbook, gives Elandra one more wide-eyed look, and just about hurtles out of the room.

Julian glances between them twice. “Well.” He says.

Penelope turns her attention to him. Waiting patiently.

Julian clears his throat. “Well.” He says again, quietly. “I’ll be in my study.” He turns swiftly, and closes the door behind him.

The room feels suddenly too big, and too well lit. The late afternoon sun is filtered by gauzy white curtains, casting the antique wooden tables and dark green upholstery in an attractive, elfen light.

“Would you like to sit down?” Penelope watches Elandra carefully, inquisitively, perhaps sadly, Elandra thinks, though she’s not sure why.

She sits down in the least comfortable looking chair, a plain wood affair facing Penelope over the coffee table.

“So,” Elandra begins, eyeing Penelope carefully. “I understand you have been practicing magic.”

“Yes!” Penelope leans forward, earnestly.

Elandra nods. This is a very different meeting than she expected. The android—the woman—sitting in front of her with flushed red cheeks and night-blue eyes flecked with gray, is 100% lacking in exposed gears, glowing LEDs, or fashionably cyber-industrial mesh alloy, all the features Elandra might have expected.

“How long have you been with the Petreius’s?” she asks, desperately searching for a seam, or switch, or sensor.

Penelope sits back. “5 years. Shortly after Julian’s wife left him.”

“And are you...?”

Penelope smiles wryly. “There has been no marriage ceremony, and I have no citizenship paperwork, if that’s what you’re asking. Penelope Petreius is just the name I was given.”

“You’ve been raising Henry?”

“Yes.”

“And Julian-”

“Yes, I ‘raise’ him as well.”

Penelope adjusts the books on the table. Elandra suddenly regrets this whole line of questioning. What was the point?

She tries to 'hmm' obtusely, and unshoulders her satchel.

"I've prepared a series of tests... fairly standard depth of proclivity and aptitude stuff. But first, I have a few more questions."

Elandra reaches into her satchel, a water-proof military-surplus affair, and takes out a small, stone dish, a millenium-era coin, and a vial. "Does anyone in the house do magic besides you?"

"No."

"Not Julian?"

"Julian collects artifacts like trophies, but he has no proclivity."

"Do you recall any magican ever casting a spell on you, of any kind?"

"No."

"Are you familiar with the term homunculus?"

"A mundane construct, typically though not strictly non-living, imbued with limited and often temporary magical abilities by a gifted sorcerer."

"Mhm."

"No one homunculized me, Lady Arcanist."

"When did you begin your practice?"

"I- I don't remember."

"You don't remember?"

"I've been finding exercises online."

"Sure."

Elandra furrows her brow. "Let's start with a classic simulacry." She pushes the coin towards Penelope, who eyes it with a look of... what is it? Trepidation? Anxiety? "You're going to make this coin walk across the table."

Penelope stares at the coin. Her face inscrutable.

"There's nothing to worry about. You haven't done anything wrong."

"The new Lord Regent may disagree with you there."

"Well, he's not here." Elandra tightens her lips. "Go ahead."

Penelope sits motionless. Her eyes fixed on the coin. Elandra tilts her head to one side, and leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees and letting her hands fall slack. A long moment passes, the women utterly motionless. Elandra watching Penelope. Penelope looking down at the coin.

The stillness is broken by Penelope, who turns her head and looks past Elandra. "I'm sorry. I-I can't."

"You can't."

"No."

Elandra collects the coin, and pushes forward the granite dish. "Then let's move on to conjury. I typically start with a ring of carbon. How's your physics?"

Penelope is shaking her head fervently. "No."

Elandra's cocks her head to the other side. "No?"

Penelope's cheeks are bright red, and she appears to be staring intently at the floor lamp on the other side of the room.

Elandra picks up the vial. "Alchemy then. This is gold—you'll be dissolving it into mercur—"

"I can't," Penelope says again, cutting Elandra off. "I'm sorry. Excuse me." She stands, abruptly, and leaves the room through the doors Henry left by, with the quick steps of someone who is doing their best not to run. Though she never looked back, Elandra could have sworn that there were tears in her eyes. Elandra is flabbergasted. She feels somehow guilty, and wonders if she should have said something, called her back, or- but what would have been the point? She rubs her face, smoothing the wrinkles of confusion out of her brow, and sweeps her belongings back into her bag.

"I think she was just embarrassed," she explains to Julian in the hall by his study. "She's certainly knowledgeable. I think she's been reading a lot on the network. But she certainly didn't do any magic."

Julian is visibly relieved. "Thank the graces for that."

"Did you actually see her cast a spell? The report made reference to some fairly advanced simulacries... illusions, pseudo-conjuries, and enchantments."

Julian shakes his head. "Most of those were Henry's claims. I made the report when... well- it must have been one of Felix's going away gifts."

"Felix is your other son?"

"Yes. He's 12 years older than Henry, nurses an interest in the arcane, and in punishing me for my divorce. Or he did, before he left." Julian shrugs. "Boys will be boys."

Elandra narrows her eyes. "What exactly did you see?"

Julian waves his hand. "I can see that I completely overreacted. Penelope was coming to bed one night and an image of my ex-wife walked in behind her." Julian clears his throat uncomfortably. Then lets out a bark of laughter. "Christ, and to think I'm just now thinking of this. Of course it had to be Felix."

"Why's that?"

"Penelope has no idea what my ex looks like."

Scene 6 - Avander's Apartment

On the autobike ride back to Avander's, Elandra tries to tear her mind away from the Petreiuses. She turns on her visor, and DanDan greets her warmly, "Good evening, Arcanist."

"Did you catch all that?"

"Yes, you got it."

"I take it you don't have much to contribute."

"No, Arcanist. But you're missing a gorgeous sunset."

Indeed, the sky has turned to a bloody purple bruise, feathered with crimson clouds.

"Take a picture, DanDan, it'll last longer."

"Yes, you got it."

When she pulls up outside Avander's, a familiar figure is waiting by the door to the complex. Elandra covers her face with both hands as Jonathan Harper touches one finger to his forehead in salutation. "What the hell are you doing here?" she shouts, over the muffled-roar of the auto-bike's jets.

"You ignore all my calls!"

Elandra engages the parking-protocol and jumps down off the bike. She walks up to Jonathan, stopping a few paces away and looking him up and down. He stands at about her height, with short sandy blonde hair that's somehow both tousled and coifed. He wears a dark brown leather jacket, and blue jeans, and though he's gone to the effort of cultivating a blue collar machinist aesthetic, he hasn't quite escaped the look of money. The image of Julian flashes in her mind, and she finds herself hoping fervently that Jonathan holds onto his humanity better than that. She steps forward and pulls him into a hug, ignoring his look of surprise and relief.

"I promise I'm not going to have a meltdown at you like last time," he says, holding her tightly.

"Fine. Come up and meet Avander."

It turns out Avander has already gone to bed. So Elandra pours them both a glass of whiskey, and they talk quietly over the kitchen bar. "How did you even know I'd arrived?"

Jonathan taps his earpiece. "I was a little bad. I patched my cohort into Orbital Command."

"You hacked your Dad's terminal?"

"If by 'hacked' you mean I know what his favorite baseball team is, then yes."

"Better hope no one finds out."

Jonathan rolls his eyes. "Wouldn't be my first slap on the wrist. Perks of the city being named after you."

"Mm. See I always confuse those with the perks of your family owning Harper Terraforming. Or the perks of your dad being Freya's Planetary Rep."

"Oh my god." Jonathan sits back.

"What?"

"I think I just checked my privilege."

"I'm going to kill you."

They're both laughing, but Jonathan's eyes are starting to shine a little too brightly and hang a little too long on her, so she 'hmm's', and replaces the whiskey bottle in the cabinet.

"I brought you something. Two things, actually."

"I don't need another role gun."

"Good guess, but, no it's not a weapon, or a spaceship. How's that old Springsteen holding up, by the way?"

"Hyperion's doing just fine. Thanks for asking."

"Good. Working on her with you was like, the most fun I've ever had."

Elandra looks down. "So what'd you bring?"

Jonathan hoists his leather backpack up onto the stool next to him, which seems to take an unusual summoning of strength, and extracts, with a grunt, a black sphere about the size of a plum.

"Oof." He sets the sphere on the kitchen bar, where it lands with a dull but impressive 'thud'.

"What do you think this is?"

The sphere is perfectly black, and matte, reflecting no light whatsoever, as far as Elandra can tell. The effect is rather strange, it almost looks like dead pixels in the center of the granite counter-top. Not something, at all, but the total absence of something.

"My great grandfather found it on Freya while we were terraforming, kept it in the family because, why not? But honestly, we have no idea what it is. We just call it the blackstone."

Elandra reaches out and touches it, and is surprised at how cold it is. She picks it up—or tries to—and hits her elbow hard against the countertop instead. "Ow!"

"Yeah. It weighs 50 pounds."

"Osmium?"

"Not as far as we can tell. We've had tons of experts try and analyze it. Geologists. Physicists. Magicians. No dice."

"So why-"

"You're the smartest person I know. If anyone can figure it out, it's you."

It's a strange gift, but a welcome kind of strange coming from Jonathan. "Thank you."

"Second gift."

"Uh oh."

Jonathan takes out a small receiver, an oblong metal instrument, with a mic, and a couple generic ports. "You've heard of these, though I admit the commercial name doesn't do me any favors. I made this one myself though."

He pushes it over to Elandra. "It's a 'soulmate' QPR. On the latest protocol. Quantum paired with exactly one other. So you can communicate instantaneously at any distance... even in slip. It's not cohort enabled but it's got a C3-port, so it'll plug into your visor or your armlet or whatever."

He swirls the ice in his glass, and smiles embarrassedly at her. "I have the other one."

"Jonathan... I..." She notes the engraved plate monogram on the side. "E.R."

"I know yellow's your favorite color, but I smelted my own bronze and, well it didn't really turn out yellow at all, so... whoops."

"It's really beautiful."

"Look,"

Elandra takes a deep breath.

"I know, I know. Here it comes you're thinking. But I promise, I'm just gonna say one thing and then I'm outa your hair for the night."

Jonathan takes a pull of whiskey and exhales through his nose, then raises his eyes to meet Elandra's.

"I know you don't love me. Not... not now... anyway. And that's okay. I didn't come here tonight expecting... expecting anything. But... I want you to know that I will be here. When... Whenever. I'm not going anywhere. And I'm not trying to say that I will wait for you, though, I suppose that is what I'm saying but, I think what I'm really trying to say is..."

He smiles.

"is that, you just aren't gonna get rid of me. Like, there is nothing you could do that would make me love you any less. And whether or not we ever get to be together... in that way... I just want you to know that I will always be here. For you. For anything. I will always be here."

"Jonathan, that's like... so unhealthy."

Jonathan's eyes slide almost imperceptibly from left to right to left, as he changes his focus from one of her eyes to the other.

"No it isn't."

He stands up, and shoulders his backpack. "Wow that's so much lighter."

He starts to move for the door, but stops and turns back.

"And hey, it's good to see you. You seem... well, you seem better."

"Thanks, Jonathan."

"Later, Arcanist."

Scene 7 - Halspur

Hours earlier on Tyr, Bridget and Norelle were still sheltering behind the stacks in Odard's store.

"How often does this happen?" Norelle continues, as Bridget peers out at the crowd.

"We haven't gone more than a couple weeks without some kind of protest. People here were already subsisting, and with jobs disappearing the way they've been, they got nothing to do but riot."

"But it's not like they're starving."

"Depends on the week. When the generators go down, which they do, all the time, the synthesis plant stops production as well, and there just aren't enough greenhouses actually growing things here. You should see the price of tomatoes right now."

"You mean people are actually living off of synthemeal?"

"Slate Act colonies. They basically left us here with a generator and a few last-generation multibots."

Another spray of gunfire shatters the bookstore window, causing all three to cover their heads.

Odard groans. "I tell you, the minute I save up for a carrier ticket..."

Bridget frowns at the open window, the sounds of chaos now even louder than before.

"People are dying." she says.

Odard mumbles something in response, but Bridget has stopped listening. She gets up, slowly, and moves towards the door. Norelle looks up and sees her, she scrambles to her feet, but her prosthetic leg jams suddenly, and she curses.

"Bridget!"

Bridget opens the door of the shop and walks slowly out into the square. She closes her eyes and raises her hands in front of her, breathing deeply, the smell of gunsmoke filling her nostrils.

Norelle pulls herself up using the counter as a lever, ignoring Odard's cries of warning. She reaches down and manually resets the main coil in her prosthetic, and as she does, she's yelling in this constant stream, "Bridget! I need you to listen to me. Turn around and come back here RIGHT NOW."

The coil springs into position and Norelle sprints for the door, "BRIDGET!"

Bridget opens her eyes, and with intensity and focus she intones in a low voice: "*Neruz Okaza*"

The square falls quiet. Norelle stops in the doorway, supporting herself on the frame.

A clatter echoes across the silence, as a rifle drops to the ground from its owner's hand... slack at his side.

Every person in the square is standing in this sort of dazed, upright, pose. They all just seem to have stopped, straightened up, and fallen asleep on their feet.

Norelle looks behind her. Odard is standing in the back of the shop, eyes glazed over, hands swaying at his side.

"Okay. Okay okay. Okay okay okay okay okay okay okay okay." Norelle walks up to Bridget and grabs her arm. "Okay. You're okay. But we have to get out of here. Come on." Bridget lowers her arms slowly, looking around the square as if dazed.

Norelle bangs her armlet against her leg, bringing her cohort to life. "Wormwood, we need to get Regency ambulances to our location now."

"Alright! Would you like to specify your emergency?"

"No. Yes! Just- flag for enchantment. Kaze's lexicon. But make the call by VPN. Anonymous tip. Just get them here!"

She shakes Bridget. "Come on."

"I was just trying to help."

"Come on!"

Across the square, Bridget sees a woman in a blue hijab. The woman is standing very still, but as Bridget's eyes fall on her, the woman clearly turns her head, looks at Bridget, and then quickly looks away and goes motionless again.

"She's pretending," Bridget says slowly.

Norelle yanks on Bridget's arm so hard for a moment she's sure it's been dislocated. She cries in pain just before Norelle grabs her by the jaw and turns her face to hers.

"Look at me. You just fucked up, but there's no time to yell at you about it now, so snap the fuck out of it and use those skinny legs of yours!"

Bridget nods, and almost unconsciously, she begins to run after Norelle, running through the square, past smoking tear gas cannisters and past the police and protestors gently swaying around them.

But her eyes are fixed on the blue hijab.

Scene 8 - Harper's Fall

Avander knocks on Elandra's door shortly after dawn. Elandra's been up for a while, sitting up in the beautiful guest bed and rereading the Petreius report.

"Come down and have some coffee—do you have to work today?"

Elandra shakes her head. "I should swing by the facility where the android was built sometime... Aphrodite Industries. You heard of them?" Avander shrugs. "Anyway, it can wait till tomorrow."

Avander claps his hands together, "Excellent! I'll see you downstairs."

They take Avander's car to the hills near Harper's Fall, not far from where Elandra left the Hyperion, and spend the day hiking down to the river where it pours down into the ravine.

"You can see how the stone changes color right around the falls..." Avander points out, as if it were a painting that he was particularly fond of. "Totally different composition. That's also why there are so many flowers blooming south of the Falls, and mostly long grass to the north."

The view is spectacular. The ravine seems to split the world in half, as if Harper's Fall was the impact point of some devastating blow. The cliffs are a rich mottled brown and red, hung with flowering vines and scrub.

Avander smiles, looking from Elandra and back excitedly. "It gets better," he says, "they're not exactly sure why yet, more phosphorus in the air or something, but all the flowers here glow bioluminescent at night."

They have lunch by the falls, and then hike back towards the Hyperion—Avander wants to see it.

The sun is already low in the sky when they reach it—the orange light of evening glinting off the forty foot tall yellow ship.

"And they call this a 'personal spacecraft'!" Avander scoffs.

"Yeah well, you show me how to fit a cockpit, a bunkroom, a kitchen, recroom, and life-support system, a nuclear reactor and 50 tons of compressed fuel into a shoebox and I'll try flying that."

Avander chuckles. He passes his hand over the Oxide Industries logo. "What's the model again?"

"She's a Springsteen. Came out, what 20 years ago? Named after a millenium-era rockstar. I still remember the NetVision ads they ran when I was a kid. Just blasting a plasma-trail across the grand canyon with 'Born to Run' playing."

Elandra looks up at the lowering sun. “We should get back.”

Avander furrows his brow. “What? And miss the sunset?”

“I’m tired!” Elandra thumps her back against the side of the Hyperion. The warm metal feels good against her back, solid and comforting. “I haven’t even checked in with my cohort all day.”

“Let’s stay till the sky turns red. It’s unbelievable,” Avander is saying, as Elandra taps on her armband and it blinks to life.

“Emergency Pure Text Message from Jonathan Harper!” Dan Dan states, rather calmly, as if he didn’t think it was much of an emergency.

“Pure text... he never sends those. What does it say?”

“Dad’s Baseball Team. Not Secure. Patch in your soulmate.”

Avander laughs. “Is this the guy who’s obsessed with you? What does “Dad’s baseball team” mean?”

“It’s something he intercepted from Orbital...” Elandra frowns. She reaches into her pocket and her fingers close around the smooth, oblong piece of metal, which feels almost impossibly delicate. She flips open the C3 cover on her armband and fits the soulmate into the port; it slides in with a satisfying ‘click’.

“Quantum protocol device detected.” DanDan says, facetiously. “Parsing audio encoding. This transmission was timestamped 67 minutes ago and set to loop until it was received.”

A sort of scratchy audio feed follows, the kind that gets transmitted by wave over supposedly very good wave transmission. “Regency. We didn’t receive any advance—”

“Obviously because I didn’t want to literally telegraph my presence here.”

The voice is warm and friendly, almost like Avander’s, but deeper, and with a more commanding edge to it. It’s the kind of voice that gives orders so naturally, you’d have to really be paying attention to notice you were being given orders.

“Now unless you have some strong objection, I’m putting my fleet into geosync and I’m docking the *Alexander* in Harperstown, and, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like you to send out an APB to law enforcement and all private security forces—advising that in accordance with the CDA, they are to defer to Regency Officers in all matters until such a time as the artifact is contained.”

The audio cuts off abruptly,

Avander clears his throat, and emits a breathy laugh. “What on earth was that about.”

“CDA is Confiscation of Dangerous Artifacts.” Elandra feels like her whole body has been shocked into stillness, electricity shooting through her muscles. “Gabriel Berns is here, on Freya. He must have left right after the appointment.”

Avander frowns. “What would he be doing here?”

Elandra looks up at him. “He’s come for the android. The house-bot that can do magic. But she can’t. She can’t do magic. She’s helpless.”

Avander steps forward, “Now, Elandra, calm down.”

“You don’t understand, this robot is—she’s a person, Avander. She’s a person. Confiscation is just a euphemism, you know that right? They’re going to destroy her. They’ll kill her, Avander.”

“Elandra.”

“I have to go. I have to stop this.”

Elandra looks up at the setting sun, West, towards the falls and the Petreius Estate, she moves towards it, stops, turns and hugs Avander.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“Wait, Elandra—I’m sure-”

“I’ll see you back at the apartment,” Elandra takes off running down the slope of the hill. “DanDan, how long to the Petreius Estate?”

“At your current speed, you will arrive in two hours and forty minutes.”

“Call my autobike, plot a course to intercept.”

“Yes, Arcanist. Autobike intercepting your path in approximately fifteen minutes.”

Elandra tears down the hills, the long grass whipping at her jeans, staining the white denim with streaks of pale yellow-green. She nearly loses her footing a dozen times, sliding down through the loose earth, brown hands skidding along the ground to try and balance.

She’s so out of breath she’s choking when she reaches the bottom of the first hill, her knees crying in pain as she struggles up a small hillock, then careens down the slope again.

At the top of the next hill, she collapses to her knees, utterly unable to run any further. Her breath ragged, she narrows her eyes against the setting sun and scans the sky.

A small black speck is barreling towards her from the south.

“Autobike incoming” remarks DanDan.

“Set course for The Petreius estate as soon as I’m on.”

“Yes, you got it. You should arrive in ten minutes.”

Elandra gets to her feet. She can hear the jets of the autobike as it speeds towards her.

“DanDan...” Elandra says horsely. “...Estimate the ROs arrival time at the Petreius Estate...”

“Based on the transmission timestamp of 22:23 Freya Hours, and average travel times from Orbit to Harperstown and from Harperstown to the Petreius Estate, I estimate the Regent will arrive in 12 minutes.”

Scene 9 - The Petreius Estate

After what seems like an interminable period of hammering on the front-door with her fist, Julian himself opens the door.

“Arcanist Ramirez. What are you doing here? How did you get onto the grounds!?”

“Penelope. Where is she?”

“She’s in the drawing room. We were just having a nightcap. Arcanist, it’s nearly 11.” Julian is wearing what looks to be the most comfortable pants in the world and a partially unbuttoned henley. He would almost look cozy if it weren’t for the garish silver silk blazer, which kind of spoils it.

Without waiting, Elandra charges through the atrium, relying on memory to guide her through the halls towards the ‘large parlour’ she remembers passing through, as Julian chases her, yelling, “Arcanist! What are you doing!”

Elandra bursts into the huge, tapestried drawing room, startling Penelope to her fee. The sounds of Beethoven’s Fifth abruptly die as Henry looks up from the baby grand he’s sitting at, then about levitates off the piano stool and darts out of the room, just like before.

Elandra strides up to Penelope, adjusting the collar of her jacket and passing her fingers absently over her hair. “We have to go. For your safety, you need to come with me.”

The doors crash open as Julian enters behind her. “Arcanist! What is the meaning of this!”

Elandra turns on him. “The Regency is coming to destroy your house-bot! Gabriel Berns himself is here. And believe me, they will not be bargained with!”

Julian steps back in shock.

“The Regency? But... I’ve received no word, no warning-”

“He’s invoked the Confiscation of Dangerous Artifacts. How do you think I was able to get past your security? They’ve been instructed to defer to Regency Officers without question! Luckily for you, they don’t seem to know the difference between an RO and an Arcanist.”

Julian is left sputtering. Elandra turns back to Penelope.

“I wish there was time for you to pack a bag or something, but there really, really isn’t. You have to follow me if you want to live.”

Elandra strides past Julian, who still stands gaping. At the door she turns. Penelope hasn’t moved. She and Julian are just staring at her.

“What are you doing!”

Penelope looks down at her hands and knits her fingers together. Her body is shaking, but her feet are planted firmly on the floor. “I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t!”

Penelope glances at Julian.

“I can’t leave the grounds. It’s on my directive stack.”

Outside the estate, three cars pull silently up the asphalt road to the gravel park by the gate, where they grind to a distinguished halt. The two outside cars spring their doors open in unison, and men in dark blue coats and shiny black shoes spring out of them, quickly arraying themselves around the perimeter of the gravel circle. One of the men approaches the gate, flashes a badge, and exchanges hushed words with the security guard. The guard moves away, and the gates swing open. The man at the gate turns to the other officers and raises his left hand in the air, then swings it down and folds it behind his back. The other officers do the same, then fall to one knee.

The door of the middle car opens.

The officers kneel, their right hands rest on their sidearms, their left hands pressed to their backs in courtesy. Their eyes glued to the center car.

For a moment there is only cool night air and quiet—quiet so profound that the crunch of gravel has the effect of a hammer striking an anvil, as a worn leather boot swings out from the car and lands in the stony ground. The boot is a thousand shades of brown, polished and repolished a hundred times over a hundred casual scars of use. The eyes of the officers click upward, as a tall shape in a tall overcoat unfolds itself from the car and onto its feet, the second boot grinding into the earth as its owner stands.

Back inside, Elandra advances on Julian. “She can’t LEAVE?”

A console lights up near the door to the parlour. “Guests have entered through the front door.”

Elandra points towards the door. "Do you hear that!? They're inside!"

To her surprise, Julian starts crying. "I was so afraid this would happen. After I made the report. I was so afraid you would take her away from me!"

Julian starts to sink into a chair, but Elandra grabs him by the collar of his silver jacket and pulls him into the center of the room.

"Listen to me! It was never my intention to take this woman from you. But there are people coming now who will. People with guns. And badges. People who would rather destroy Penelope than let people think there's a robot out there who can summon beyons or ensorcel men."

Julian is shaking his head, "No. No!"

"Look at me! When they walk in here, they WILL take her, and there is NOTHING you can do to stop them."

Julian's eyes lock with hers, red rimmed and leaking. Elandra places her hands on either side of Julian's face, pressing her palms firmly against his smooth cheekbones.

"If you really love her. If you care about her at all. You have to un-program every directive in her stack that might hurt her chances of survival. Right down to the fundamentals."

She lets Julian go. He backs away like a feral animal, wiping tears from his eyes.

"If you don't, she'll die," Elandra says.

Julian looks up at her and blinks away tears. He moves to Penelope and whispers in her ear. She straightens up, and he places a hand behind her neck.

Penelope cries in pain as blood spurts from the back of her neck. Elandra starts forward, but Julian is pulling a leaf of skin up from her neck as if it were a sheet of marzipan. He presses his fingers in a practiced typing, whispers into Penelope's ear again, then pushes the sheet of skin back into place and collapses on the couch.

"It's done. Reset. Factory directives."

The sound of glass shattering from down the hall towards the interior of the house makes them all turn their heads.

Elandra turns on Julian. "What's the fastest way out of here?"

Julian gestures towards the curtains. "That way, to the back garden."

Elandra runs to the curtained wall and pulls the drapes aside, revealing a mass of hedges and statues artistically lit. Elandra shivers—for a moment, she is transported to a similar

garden, a dim, artistically lit statuary in Virginia, and she unconsciously places a hand over the scar on her left side—then she pulls the glass door aside and gestures to Penelope.

“Come on!”

Penelope presses one hand to the back of her neck as she moves toward the door. She turns and looks at Julian and Elandra notices the skin seems to have already closed up, smooth and perfect even beneath the blots of blood.

“Thank you,” Penelope says.

Elandra looks towards the entry door—she can hear the loud drum of footfalls on the other side.

“They're coming” she shouts, and Penelope looks at her, and then runs past her, through the glass door and out into the garden.

Elandra casts one more look back into the room, just long enough to see the door begin to swing open inside the parlour, then she too is running, running into the dark outdoors after Penelope.

They flee from innocuous fountains and ferns into a corridor of hedges, turning corners every instant as they dash through the maze. Elandra's heart is beating in her throat as she sees the maze open up in front of them, and she races ahead of Penelope and around the corner and

“Whoa!”

The ground drops away in front of them. Suddenly they take in the sound of the rushing river beneath them, the falls—they see the phosphorescent green and blue flowers dotting the dark cliff on the other side of the chasm. A sudden wind rips through them, buffeting Elandra's jacket about her frame.

Elandra turns to Penelope, and is shocked by how scared she looks. Somewhere in the garden, they hear a shout, and Penelope winces. Flashlight beams swing wildly out of the gardens between them and the house, each corresponding to some anonymous enemy charging towards them, all of them are close. Someone has turned on an alarm—so the estate security will be coming for them too.

Elandra steps towards Penelope, who is shivering—staring blankly at her—arms wrapped around her body, her paper-thin blouse and tapered pants wholly unfit for fleeing in the night.

“Look, it's going to be okay. I promise. Look at me! I just need you to take my hand.”

Penelope looks at her. She nods.

“I trust you.”

“What?”

“I trust you!”

Elandra crinkles her brow, as if confused.

“Come on!”

Penelope steps forward and takes Elandra’s hand. Elandra is struck by its warmth, its softness. She closes her hand around Penelope’s. She closes her eyes and tries to quiet her mind. She tries to shut out the tramping of boots. The ROs who will be on them in seconds. The siren sounding and the yelling men. Then she turns and drags Penelope off the side of the cliff.

This was Episode 1 of *The Elandrid*, and the first episode of *Thomas Tells a Story*. I intend to release the text for all 12 episodes 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

