



THE ELANDRID

EPISODE 2



THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

v2020.08.12

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The Elandrid, Episode 2

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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 2 - Komensorcas

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 - Harper's Canyon

Two to three people die falling into the grand canyon every year. The canyon is about 1800 meters at its deepest point, that's over a mile, but most people don't fall all the way down—the most common distance fallen seems to be around 500 feet, a trip which takes under 6 seconds to complete. Even if you were to find an outcropping from which you could drop all 6000 feet, that's still only a 19 second journey. I thought you might find that relevant, since it just so happens that Elandra and Penelope have found just such an outcropping to leap from.

For the first three seconds, Elandra panics. Falling is terrifying—the air seems to be ripped out of her lungs as she and Penelope plunge downward. It almost extracts a scream from her, a mindless expulsion of noise and horror before the end. Instead, Elandra reaches for the words she'd prepared. Komensorcas, Suprena for subteni. Suprena for subteni. She begins to chant desperately, concentrating on the space around her arms. The initial force jerks her body out of the dive. She nearly loses her grip on Penelope's hand as Penelope falls past her, and Penelope lets out a sudden cry of pain when their arms jerk taught. Elandra chokes on her words. Her focus falters, and they hurtle down again, the dark rocks rushing towards them with inestimable speed. The thought appears unbidden in Elandra's head. "We are about to die."

She shakes it away. She forces her eyes to stay open even as they fill with water, and with all her will she marshals her trembling lips into the shapes of words. She extends her focus down her right arm and up Penelope's. She pictures a warm updraft carrying them aloft as one. She pictures a conjoined pair of angels, their two bodies suspended between a single set of feathery wings. And as she resumes chanting, she feels a gentle pressure across her chest and along the goosebumped skin of her arms. Their fall begins to slow. Her lungs heave and she continues to chant, her heart still screaming with exhilaration. Their bodies pass below their shoulders and they begin to float, right side up, Penelope gasping for breath beside her.

They had already fallen so far; there was just another six hundred feet or so below them.

"We can make it," she thinks.

Above them, an array of Regency Officers gather at the cliff's edge to look down at the falling figures. Two of them illuminate hand-held spot-torches. They emit an intense white light that jitters wildly around the canyon floor as the ROs' hands shake. The rest glance at each other, unsure of what to do. One of the men draws his weapon, a light assault rifle holstered on his leg, places the stock against his shoulder, and narrows his eye through the lens, aiming downward.

"Stop!"

The word is almost lazily simple. With no expectation of being either misheard or ignored, it rings through the air with the simplicity that the word deserves.

The officers turn, as Gabriel Berns strides out of the hedge maze and up to the cliff's edge, his midnight blue greatcoat billowing around him. His boots crunch in the small stones at the cliff's edge. The officer with the gun straightens up, holsters his weapon, and salutes.

"Lord Regent."

"Stand down. That's the First Arcanist you're aiming at, and besides, you'd have better luck throwing rocks at this range."

Gabriel Berns looms like a colossus at the cliff's edge. He stands at 6 foot 4, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. His well-groomed brown hair blows in the wind like stiff grass. Everything about him is taut and muscular, from the way he stands to the way he moves his jaw as he casts his eyes down into the abyss.

"My lord," one of the ROs objects, "She's interfering with the CDA, doesn't that mea-

"She shouldn't even know we invoked the CDA." Gabriel interrupts, furrowing his brow. "How long since they jumped? Twenty seconds?"

The officers look at each other. "Something like that."

Gabriel extends his left hand. "Spider-net. Now."

A rail thin RO with combed blond hair and a hawkish look steps forward, retrieving a large metal cylinder from his belt. He places this in Gabriel's hand, then paces away along the cliff, staring after the falling women.

"Thank you, Eris." Gabriel takes the cylinder. It's a hefty metal thing about 18 inches in length. Gabriel twists the top and bottom in opposite directions in a single smooth motion, and the cylinder beeps in response, red LEDs lighting up in sequence around the top of the cylinder. "Audrey, how deep is this canyon?" Gabriel asks.

His armband, just visible under his left coat-sleeve, illuminates. "2153 meters," it says, in a cool, feminine voice.

"Thank you," says Berns, giving the canister a final twist. "That should do it then,"

He drops the canister over the ledge.

~

Elandra and Penelope's descent, which at first felt incomprehensibly fast, now feels interminable. Sweat gathers on Elandra's brow, and she struggles to maintain focus on the spell, as the rushing river grows slowly louder, larger, and more menacing beneath them.

"Arcanist?"

Penelope's voice is still smooth and inquisitive, despite the terror moments before. Elandra ignores her.

"Arcanist Ramirez."

Elandra chants harder. They're so close. Less than a hundred feet.

"Elandra!"

The faint beeping reaches Elandra's ears a second too late. She turns her head up just in time to see the falling cylinder burst open in a wave of concussive force. It sends Penelope and Elandra spinning, its contents exploding into a wide silver net that glints in the moonlight.

"Hoshit!" Elandra yells. The tightly woven steel mesh is speeding towards them; at 30 feet in diameter it already seems near to enveloping them. Penelope's hand slips from Elandra's as the force conjuration dies on Elandra's lips and they tumble backward. In the moment the net threatens to close around them, Elandra emits a wordless yell and twists her body in a wild gesture, as if pulling something from the rock wall of the cliff itself.

A sound like tectonic plates grinding in unison cracks the air. Stone heaves itself from the cliff in a jagged spike, nearly missing their falling bodies and just catching the spiderweb. It snaps around this new outcropping of rock with a metallic CLANG, wrapping it several times over. Tightly bound about the earth above them, the steel mesh takes on the eerie semblance of a cocoon.

Before Elandra can take another breath, they hit the river.

The force of the water on Elandra's back feels like hitting wet cement—it stuns her senseless for a moment, and the next thing she knows is the frigid cold of the water, the pressure, the realization that she is deep below the surface, out of control, tumbling down-river. Which way is up? She forces her arms into a cone above her head and kicks her legs, swimming with everything she has.

How long has it been since she was last in the water?

Riverside Park. Two years ago. Before her appointment as Arcanist. Before the hospital. Before Virginia.

She can almost hear Lakiri's voice. "Everyone needs to know how to swim. The world's more water than land, just the way people are more water than skin."

She kicks and kicks, arms sweeping as fast as they can, her chest tightening as she runs out of air. She wishes she had thought to take a breath before-

Her hands touch air. Her face splashes out of the water and she gasps for breath. The river is starting to slow and widen here—she can see the faint outlines of boulders ahead. And

Penelope. Penelope seems to have been swept up against the rocks. She's floating, face down, her already thin blouse rendered ghostly and transparent by the wet.

Elandra floats towards her and grabs her arm, hefting her over her shoulder with one hand. She guides them towards the shore with the other. She casts a quick glance upward... but can make out nothing in the darkness. Hopefully they lost track of them when they went underwater...

She pulls Penelope out of the river onto a smooth bank of stone, dragging her backward toward a crevice in the canyon wall that the river had presumably carved a thousand years earlier. Penelope is unresponsive, so Elandra, unsure of what to do, straddles her and presses hard on her solar plexis. She would have continued to try CPR, but on the first push, Penelope's eyes open wide, she rolls her head to one side, and just about fountains water from her throat. For a second, it's like a hydrant's been opened up on the streets of Harlem, river-water positively pours from Penelope's mouth in a steady stream as her chest collapses. When it's over, Penelope takes a few short, ragged, breaths, then a single long inhale, and sits up, clutching at Elandra's arms.

"Are you okay?," Elandra says.

Penelope's grip tightens on Elandra's arms. "I... Yes." She's shaking visibly. "What was that thing?"

Elandra clenches her jaw before answering. "That was a spider-net. A so-called 'non-lethal deterrent.' They messed people up pretty bad during the Harlem housing riots."

Penelope nods. The sound of the river just outside their hiding place fills any span of silence. Elandra shivers, and stands up.

"What now?" Penelope asks.

Elandra takes a long breath. What now?

Scene 2 - The Republic Building

Tyr has significantly shorter days than Earth, making a complete rotation every 21 hours and change. A hundred years earlier, the days were even shorter, but Harper Terraforming had put in place giant low-orbit satellites around Tyr called cycloinhibitors, which had slowed the planet down by about 3 minutes a year since the original colony was established. So while it's near midnight in Harperstown, it's early morning and an extra day in Halspur, when Safia is woken up by a loud banging on her door.

She's in a holding cell at the Republic Building. She adjusts her hijab hurriedly, and a man enters in a clean white shirt and an unbuttoned Regency jacket. He carries a cup of coffee and a folder under one arm. Safia wonders idly if the Regency springs for real coffee from Freya... then decides no, it's probably the powdered stuff, judging by the face the officer makes after taking a sip.

The officer sighs heavily as he sits down opposite her. Underpaid and overworked, she thinks. Still better than starving...

“So, miss. Tell me again how you were the only one left unaffected at the enchantment site.”

“I told you.” Safia begins, “I cast an interfere-”

“No,” the man cuts her off, dryly. “What you told us is, ‘what do you mean? I fell asleep like everyone else.’ You only changed your tune after Captain Kerrick’s examination.”

Safia leans forward. “Look. You’ve held me here for close to 30 hours. I know I don’t have the same rights as a willing assimilate, but I still have rights. And furthermore, you KNOW I had nothing to do with it!”

The man shakes his head. “How’d you even learn to cast an interference. I didn’t think they taught sorcery in the Reclamation program.”

Safia feels a heat rise in her cheeks. “No. They don’t teach sorcery in the camps. Any more than they teach Arabic or Islam.”

The man looks critically at her. Safia feels the urge to glance away, but she forces herself to meet his gaze, and just sits back in her chair.

“Look, you’re clearly a competent magician, so I don’t see the point in pretending otherwise. And you’re right, Kerrick confirmed that the center of the spell was somewhere on the South side of the square, opposite side from you. We even have a good guess about who did it, but with no witnesses, or at least, no one who isn’t brain-fogged, we can’t prove it.”

The officer retrieves a pair of reading glasses and dons them, opening the folder. “So, all I’m asking is that you confirm the description of the enchanter. A woman, about 5 foot 6, black hair, Hispanic. Often seen in a black leather jacket.” He looks up over his glasses at Safia. “Any of that sound familiar to you?”

Safia shakes her head. “I already told you. I didn’t see anything.”

The officer raises one eyebrow. Then he looks back down at the folder, rifling through papers. “Memory’s a funny thing. You never know what’ll make you suddenly recall some detail or other. For instance,” he extracts two printouts and slides them over to Safia, “I just remembered that your brother and sister have missed their last three check-ins.”

Safia looks down at the reports. Filed and updated after they each made their decision to refuse the Oath of Assimilation. Yusef’s is the most recent, maybe only a year old. But he’s almost unrecognizable. Younger, clean-shaven, still defiant, but less sullen, almost hopeful... Qamar on the other hand looks exactly the same. Both reports are littered with flags of obstinance and poor behavior, rejection of pro-social conditioning, and a willfully persistent interest in Afghan culture. A flood of emotion fills Safia, and she looks up at the officer, struggling fiercely to keep water from gathering in her eyes.

“Yes,” Safia says. “I remember now.”

Scene 3 - Harper's Canyon (Above)

Gabriel narrows his eyes. The spot-torch beams zag wildly across the canyon while the ROs search for the women, but even with their headsets down and full magnification up, finding two figures in a dark river at night from a mile away is not a promising venture.

“Torches off,” he commands suddenly, and the officers obey. “There's no point in getting eyes on them from up here anyway. Better to let them think we've stopped looking.”

He gestures to Eris. “Officer Dostoyev will take the Arcanist's autobike down to retrieve the spider-net, and examine the Arcanist's conjuration. I'm guessing she used a mimacry, from the way she pulled it out of the cliff. The rest of you, start coordinating with local law enforcement. We'll need to set up a patrol along the cliffs. The good news is, we don't have to go down. We just have to wait for them to come up. Focus the patrols on the southwest, where the cliffs sink towards the ocean.”

The ROs move off, speaking to each other in low tones and issuing commands to their cohorts. Gabriel strides up to Eris. “Did we get anything off the bike?”

Eris shakes his head. “Rawling just checked. Someone wiped its navigation history.”

Gabriel looks out at the horizon, now littered with stars. “That's unfortunate.”

“Lord Regent, what if we don't catch them coming up from the ravine?”

Gabriel rubs his hands together. “We may well not,” he says. “It's a big canyon. And we can't be sure how far the river carried them.”

Eris cocks his head. “So what then?”

Gabriel's eyes linger on the sky.

“Her ship's not registered at port, so she landed outside of the city. And she'll know the Orbital fleet will lock her down if they get a chance—” he points up at the stars. “They have stations there, in the west, south, over Harperstown, and east over Davenshire. That means the Arcanist will have to fly low to the North Hills before attempting to break atmo.”

Gabriel smiles, placing his tongue against his upper left canine as he thinks. “Audrey, isn't there an old military base from the War Between on the North Plateau?”

“You are correct, my lord,” his cohort responds. “Fort Cameron was constructed in 2317 amidst fear that the Russian Interplanetary Federation would initiate an atmospheric strike on Harperstown. It was taken out of service in 2340.”

“Get me all the documentation on their surface-to-air battery.” He turns, still grinning, and pops his eyebrows once at Eris as he moves past him. “I have some reading to do.”

Scene 4 - Harper's Canyon (Below)

In the relative safety of their stony hollow, Penelope sits, while Elandra takes stock. Her headset is totally busted. It was a cheap, off-brand device anyway, basically just a pair of goggles with a cohort-enabled wireless earpiece. Luckily, her armlet seems okay, and the 'soulmate' receiver Jonathan gave her is still snugly attached. She shakes water from her hair, it feels heavy and rough against the back of her neck.

"DanDan, call my autobike."

"I'm sorry, Arcanist, but your autobike is unresponsive."

"Try again."

"While I can understand why you might question my judgment following a warranty-voiding submersion in an alien river, I assure you that I am pinging the autobike without success. I appear to have been locked out."

"Shit."

Elandra looks over at Penelope, who is huddling in the corner of the crevice, her knees pulled up tight against her chest. Still shivering.

Elandra takes off her jacket and walks over to Penelope, draping it around her. "Seems kind of unfair that you probably have some kind of electric heater inside of you and yet you're the one who's cold."

She meant it as a joke, but Penelope looks miserable as ever. "I wouldn't know."

Elandra frowns. "I know you've been studying the arcane. Have you read any Engleman?"

Penelope nods. "Any education in magic would be incomplete without Engleman's lexicon, the most modern and syntactically consistent arcane language ev-

"Yeah, you don't have to recite the network page to me," Elandra smiles. "You might have heard of this one, then."

She takes Penelope's right hand and positions it, holding her own hand up so that their palms are facing. "Komensorcas Varmakrei," she incants.

Tension drops away from Penelope's face as a heat spreads from Elandra's hand to hers, as if Penelope were warming it at a fire. "Thank you," Penelope almost gasps.

Elandra smiles reassuringly, and passes her hand slowly up and down Penelope's arms and above her chest. When Penelope's shivering begins to calm, Elandra stands.

"We should get moving," Elandra says. "We need to get out of the canyon by sunrise."

“Why did you come for me?” Penelope’s voice echoes slightly off the rock wall.

Elandra turns back to face Penelope. Penelope looks searchingly at her. Elandra frowns.

“You didn't ask to be made the way you are. It just so happens you were made, built, not born I mean, but...”

Elandra shakes her head.

“I don't know. You seem human enough to me.”

Penelope nods, slowly.

“Where are we going to go?” she asks.

Elandra nods also, thinking hard. “We have to get back to my ship, as quickly as possible...”

She moves to the overhang of the crevice, looking northeast along the canyon.

“They’ll expect us to move south, where the canyon shallows. They’ll probably keep some officers directly above us, too. We need to climb fast, And ideally, we don't want to be visible when we climb.”

Elandra turns back to Penelope. “Come on. We have a long walk ahead.”

Scene 5 - The Radcliffe Tenements

Safia is nearly overwhelmed with exhaustion as she mounts the stairs to her apartment. She and her siblings lived in Radcliffe, a neighborhood predominated by cheap government housing, where she and most local non-assimilates live.

She washes her face in the communal sink outside her quarters, takes off her shoes, and lets herself into the apartment interior. It’s quiet. She checks her watch, and decides now is as good a time as any to make up for her missed morning prayer. She rolls out a small rug and touches her forehead to the ground, praying, as she always does, for Yusef and Qamar, for her homeland, and for humanity at large. As always, she wishes she remembered the words to pray in Arabic. As always, she prays in English, but in her head, so no one will hear.

When she’s finished, she pulls up a loose floorboard and extracts a plastic bag with part of a loaf of bread inside. She peels a slice out of the bag and replaces the remainder of the loaf, then exits to the shared kitchen. She toasts the slice, and returns to her bed chamber, where she sits in her corner of ragged blue and white bedding and munches slowly at the warm bread, savoring every brittle bite.

She makes a gesture, and the interference lights up around her head, pale blue lines of whirring energy. She's shocked by how threadbare it looks, the light is pale and insubstantial, almost transparent. She'll have to spend hours repairing it.

She's about to begin, when the door bursts open, and Qamar and Yusef enter. Safia hurriedly dismisses the illumination.

“Safia! Where have you been?” Yusef’s voice is hoarse with tiredness, but it nonetheless shows concern. He's been working night shifts at the corner store—Safia knows he hates it. His face is bearded, his eyes dark and hollow.

“It was nothing, Sunnu. There was an incident at the East Square,” she says. “I was held for questioning as a witness.”

Qamar removes a heavy wrap and hangs it by the door. In contrast to Yusef, she is statuesque and beautiful, always wearing pristine makeup, her sharply bridged nose somehow just the perfect shape to complement her pointed chin and high cheekbones. People at the camps always used to say that if she chose to assimilate, she could be a model no problem. But that wasn't exactly Qamar’s style. She would use her beauty to make money, knowingly and with indifference, but she would never consent to its public consumption.

“What happened at the square?” Qamar asks. Her voice always carried the quality of equivocation. But Safia knew this was just an affect. At least, she was pretty sure.

Yusef makes a beeline for their hidden bread, and Safia watches him. “There was a riot,” she says. “People angry about the service bots. Same old story. But then...” She hesitates. “There was a witch. And she made everyone stop rioting.”

Qamar is impassive. Yusef immediately incensed. “Magic! It is just another tool of oppression. They will not silence us!” He stomps out toward the kitchen.

“How did you escape?” Qamar asks. “You don't seem fogged.”

Safia casts her eyes down. She can never match Qamar’s stare. “I... I got lucky.”

A smile twitches at the corner of Qamar's lips.

A psychologist at the camps once told Safia privately that something had broken in Qamar a long time ago. This psychologist was one of the nice ones, and she had taken Safia’s hand in hers and pressed it tightly. She said it had happened before reclamation, maybe even before their great tragedy. And she said that Qamar would never quite be like other people. Safia hadn't really known what to make of that. But in the years since she'd been released and joined her sister in Radcliffe, she had begun to understand.

Qamar turns her head to Yusef, who has just re-entered, shoving a piece of bread in his face. “Yusef Ali!” He stops dead in his tracks. “Slow down. You'll choke to death.”

Yusef retreats back toward the kitchen to finish his bread in peace. Qamar looks back at Safia. “Well, a big ensorcellment. That must have the Regency in a fit.”

Safia nods.

“Has there been much news about it?” Qamar sits down on her bedding, in the corner opposite Safia.

“I don't know. I just got home.”

Qamar nods. “Get some sleep,” she says finally. “You look like you need it.”

Scene 6 - Harper's Fall

It takes Elandra and Penelope an hour or so to finish their preparations, and another hour to pick their way up the canyon towards the falls. A few times, they have to duck behind boulders until the hum of the hover-jets goes by, searchlights occasionally passing within inches of their cover. But there is no shortage of hiding places on the rocky floor of the ravine, and each time, once their breathing has slowed, they continue on. Perhaps it's the tension of the journey, perhaps the exhaustion coming off doing a great deal of magic, but the time passes mostly in silence, except for the occasional call and response of any arduous endeavor. A grunt of pain. A “You alright?” A “Fine, thanks.” And silence again.

Elandra has turned off her armllet, just to be safe. People sometimes said that all these devices had trackers in them that you couldn't turn off. Elandra's not sure she believes that, but she's certainly not going to take the chance of a rogue GPS signal giving them away.

There are more searchers in the air than Elandra might have hoped, but she tells herself that just reinforces the necessity of the plan. Not much to be done if they get caught out on the rock face of the cliff mid-climb.

Nonetheless, as the crashing sound of the falls gets ever louder and closer, so does the breath tighten in her lungs. Her heart is beating very fast indeed when they make their way around the last jagged rockfall, and the mile-high monolith of falling water comes into view. The raging white foam of mist reflects the moonlight perfectly, so that the entire column of the waterfall appears haloed in silver light.

Elandra turns her face up to the sky. Only one of Freya's moons is even partially visible. It peaks past the edge of the rock wall before them, bright and breathtaking. Elandra wonders which it is, Huginn or Muninn, and for a moment she considers turning on her armllet to ask DanDan. A bad idea for a number of reasons, she knows. And besides, they've lost too much time already, and they haven't even gotten to the hard part.

When they reach the basin of the falls, Elandra places her hand on the wet rock face and looks up at the dizzying journey ahead of them. The static noise of the water echoes around them, and Elandra turns to Penelope and murmurs an illumination, a simple spell to make visible other magics.

“Pick up a rock. Any rock,” she says.

Penelope obliges. Elandra nods. "This is called Loman's Pulley," she says, and a golden emanation surrounds the stone. "Philip Loman figured out that, just like a system of pulleys, you could harness the power of gravity, especially a constant, nearby momentum, around a system of conjured fulcrums, or axles."

Penelope nods, slowly. Elandra smiles. "So I've tied one end around the stone in your hand, for example, and I'll place my first axle... there," she points above them, drawing a ray of light from the stone to a shimmering point in the darkness a few feet above their heads.

"And finally," Elandra continues, "We add water."

Elandra has only to point at the waterfall. The stone flies from Penelope's hands and goes soaring into the sky. Penelope laughs. Elandra catches herself smiling too.

"So," she grins. "We'll do that, but slower."

The spell takes some time to prepare in earnest. There were ways of giving non-practitioners the ability to control certain magics, through enchanted stones or rings or the like, but that would be much too time consuming. Instead, the easiest thing to do was mirror-bind the spells, so that Elandra could modulate them as one.

Elandra makes a point of breaking up the casting into pieces, just like in the demonstration. First the tethers, then the fulcrums, then the transference of the fall's momentum, throttled so that Elandra can ease it on and off. Halfway through the mirroring, a drone buzzes the basin. They hide behind a boulder till it moves on, and Elandra has to start the last spell over again.

Finally, they wade into the water. They skirt the edge of the basin, and when they reach the point where the roiling froth of mist becomes almost opaque, Elandra pauses, and looks back at Penelope.

"You ready?"

Penelope nods.

"Okay. Here we go."

They place their hands on the rock wall. Already drenched again, Penelope grabs onto Elandra for support as Elandra murmurs the activation word. The stone is slick, and sharp in places, and Elandra grimaces as Penelope makes some misjudgement and knocks them both against the cliff-side. Soon though, Penelope's weight lessens in Elandra's hand, and then they are both maneuvering themselves upward, climbing almost effortlessly up, and up.

They move fast, a passive concentration on the spell serving to hoist up the majority of their body weight. It works well, but the climb is still wildly scary. Elandra tries not to look down while searching for footholds.

Though it's too loud to speak to each other—and too loud to hear the whir of a hover-jet, Elandra is the first to notice the beam of light crossing the falls above them. She exhales sharply. Her heart pounds. As the beam moves towards them, Elandra slaps Penelope's ankle, hard, and jerks her head toward the fall. Penelope looks at her, sees the beam of light and nearly loses her grip in shock. Still pressing themselves against the wet stone, they both inch towards the cascade on their left. Penelope spots an opening and clambers up to it. Elandra finally has to drop down several feet before practically rolling into a small fissure. They wait there for several minutes, protected by the pure tonnage of frothing river falling around them, before inching out to resume their climb.

They take many breaks. Nesting themselves wordlessly on ledges and natural-forming balconies, rubbing their arms and catching their breath. Time passes all too quickly this way, and it is difficult to tell how far up they are without exposing themselves to possible surveillance.

So it's something of a surprise when the flood of water changes directionality, suddenly, and the two of them come abruptly to a sloping ledge. Eager to be in the clear, Elandra pulls herself up and over. Smaller stones press painfully on her bruised hands. She turns quickly to help Penelope up, dispels Loman's Pulley, and attempts to ring water out of her shirt.

"Arcanist," Penelope says.

"Call me Elandra. I feel like after climbing up a mile high waterfall together, we're on first name terms for sure."

"Elandra then," Penelope starts again, "Look up."

Elandra looks up. The sun is breaking out of its night-time prison in the sky, glowing steadily brighter and casting the gently waving grass around them in molten gold.

Penelope laughs. A pure, light sound that infects Elandra with relief.

"We made it!"

Elandra can't help smiling herself, but she shakes her head. "Not yet," she says. She stretches once, with a deep inhale, and adds, "Not yet, but almost."

She nods to Penelope, turns, and sets off for the Hyperion.

Scene 7 - Avander's Apartment

Avander has already done his hair and makeup when his cohort bleeps to life with a raindrop noise. "Regency Officer at the front door."

"Go ahead and let him in."

Avander throws on a dressing gown over his undershirt and sweats, and slips his feet into brown suede slippers. He descends the stairs to the main room to see Gabriel rubbing his hands and looking out the glass window at the early morning sun.

"Lord Berns. When my cohort said 'Regency' I did not expect the Regent himself."

Gabriel turns, a wan, close lipped smile of appreciation on face. The dark circles beneath his eyes are the only thing out of sync with the image Avander has come to know from the televised speeches and rallies.

"Late night?" Avander asks.

Gabriel nods. "A magician's propensity for study is never satisfied and easily piqued."

Avander smiles uncomfortably. "Can I offer you some coffee?"

Gabriel raises his eyebrows. "Please!"

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The coffee is real, and excellent. Gabriel sighs exultantly after his first sip. "Remind me how you first met Arcanist Ramirez?"

Avander watches Gabriel carefully. "I flew to Earth to interview her. Five years ago. Back when she was called the Harlem Witch, not the First Arcanist."

Gabriel sniffs. "Hm."

Avander purses his lips "My lord. I did try to keep her occupied yesterday."

Gabriel sets his mug of coffee on the bar. "I have no doubt you did. But your diversion was only meant to be a precaution." He leans in. "How did she learn I was here? I do not think it was you that told her."

Avander busies his hands, opening the dishwasher and returning cutlery to a drawer, "Obviously not," he says.

"How then."

Avander looks up. Despite the bags beneath his eyes, Gabriel's stare is laser focused, burning into Avander with an intensity that almost physically drives him back a step.

"Jonathan Harper," Avander says, shortly.

"The Planetary Rep?"

Avander shakes his head. "His son. A very talented mechanical engineer by all accounts. He and Elandra—the Arcanist—became friends shortly after... shortly after the Virginia Mason."

Gabriel holds Avander's gaze for a long moment. Avander is shocked at how his eyes seem to hold him. One of his mother's odd sayings springs to mind: "As a mouse to a cobra, so the cobra to a snakecharmer," and Avander suddenly feels all too aware that he is the cobra, and Gabriel is the man playing pipes.

Finally, Gabriel casts his eyes to one side, stands, and places his hands on the bartop. Avander has to stop himself from audibly sighing in relief. "One other thing," Gabriel drawls, sounding almost bored. "You wouldn't happen to know where the Arcanist left her ship, would you?"

Avander freezes again, and without thinking his eyes slide down to the ornate grip of the revolver at Gabriel's hip. He forces his eyes away quickly, looking off towards the espresso maker, as if thinking hard. "No..." he says. "No, she never told me."

Gabriel fixes his eyes on Avander a moment longer, brow furrowed. Then sniffs, and rubs his face. "Oh well." His eyes catch on something resting to his right on the countertop. "What's this?"

Avander looks at it. A small, perfectly black sphere. Somehow he hadn't even noticed it before now. "I... I don't know. It must be Elandra's."

Gabriel extends a hand, and with a grunt of effort, he hefts it into the air.

"Hm." He looks at Avander, still holding the blackstone aloft. "Well. I'll make sure she gets it back. I'll be seeing her later today."

He moves to leave, but turns on his heel.

"Oh, Avander."

Avander inhales sharply. "Yes?"

"About that sketch you ran before the appointment..."

Avander grimaces, wondering vaguely if he should be worried about being turned into a toad or something. Wasn't that what it always was in the stories? A toad? He clears his throat. "Yes..."

Gabriel nods his head to one side, as if mostly talking to himself. "I liked it. But tell that actor who plays me not to blink so much. It's out of character." He smiles at Avander again. "Good day."

The door clicks shut behind him.

Scene 8 - Degon's Tower

Norelle shakes Bridget awake. "Hey, we're here."

Bridget sits up, eyes adjusting to the harsh sun lamps in her bunk room, and nose adjusting to the smell of vodka on Norelle's breath. "What time is it?"

Norelle hands her a glass of water. "Drink this. There's good news. Our names aren't attached to any of the stories cropping up on the incident. In fact, there isn't much coverage at all. You remember our story?"

Bridget nods, sipping slowly. "We didn't go to Odard's because of the rioting. We were on our way round the planet to Galensloch when a reactor gauge started complaining. We stopped for a day in Sharp's Bay for repairs, then continued here."

"Good," Norelle nods. "Only flat lie is the 'never making it to Odard's' bit. And knowing your Kaze, he'll be too fogged to know a customer from a book."

Norelle slaps Bridget on the cheek a little too hard to be purely affectionate. "That's for fucking up my interference. Took me four hours to recast it last night."

Norelle turns and leaves the bunkroom.

"You're a terrifying little brain-bender," she calls over her shoulder. "that's for damn sure. Meet me outside in 10 minutes."

Norelle is rearranging things in their packs when Bridget slips out of the hatch and descends the ladder to the ground. It's a lot warmer in Galensloch, which is located just below the equator on the opposite side of the planet from Halspur. A light summer wind is blowing over the plateau, and there isn't a cloud in the sky. Well, no clouds, but one of the cycloinhibitors is currently passing in front of the sun, casting an enormous and correspondingly ominous shadow over the marbled gray stone they stand on.

"How far is it?" Bridget asks.

"13 miles"

"Ay dios mia."

Norelle whips around sharply and Bridget takes a step back, instinctively.

"Do you want to take the chance of parking the Phantom in the center of Galensloch? For all we know, our faces are on display on every help screen from here back to Chiron!"

"I thought you said-"

“Fuck what I said! They could still be waiting for us! I’ll lose my license as a Trusted Practitioner, and they’ll cast an injunction on you or worse! Shit, if I’d had any sense, I would have done it myself, the minute I took you on.”

She pushes one of the packs into Bridget’s arms, hard.

“Come on. I refuse to let this trip be an utter waste.”

Norelle shoulders her pack and starts off across the plateau.

Bridget inhales slowly. “Well! Maybe I needed a warden who wasn’t a clinically depressed alcoholic!”

Norelle stops. She turns around. Just loud enough to be audible, she says, “No one else volunteered, Bridgeta...No one else. So I’m afraid I’m all you got.”

The 6 mile trek is completed in silence. The shadow of the Cycloinhibitor passes slowly over them, or perhaps they pass into it... and then out again.

Slowly, they begin to make out the shiny metal shapes of buildings in the afternoon sun, and the shiny surface of the lake around which the city was built.

When they get to a road, Norelle pulls a surgical mask on, and passes one to Bridget wordlessly, who dons hers as well. They must have looked an odd pair, entering the city on foot... Bridget suddenly questions whether it wouldn’t be less conspicuous to just call a car. She illuminates her armlet, but she can’t seem to connect to any of the local transport apps.

They walk around the perimeter of the road. Past a large bank of abandoned shops, past a number of help screens, none of which are displaying wanted pictures, Bridget notes, past a grassy park, past a group of protestors and counter-protestors who seem close to blows. Norelle turns and gives Bridget a hard look as they pass them.

They finally come to a tall tower, which is much more tower-like than the usual bot-driven construction projects that built up the early colonies. An iron wrought gate swings in the wind and an overgrown path leads to the tower entrance, a heavy steel door. It’s basically just what you might picture a “wizard’s tower” looking like. Bridget thinks it’s rather pretentious and ugly.

Norelle pulls off her mask and knocks, with a hollow ‘clonging’ sound, followed by an unexpected rusty creak as the door swings open.

“That’s not good.”

Norelle frowns. “No, it isn’t.”

The door swings open to reveal a wide antechamber with several doors and a circular stair leading off it, a room that might once have been functional and perhaps even welcoming.

But it is difficult to reconstruct a complete image from the skeleton of a scorched couch and the blackened tiles on the floor, the rest of the furnishings reduced to ash and kindling.

Norelle and Bridget both pull off their surgical masks, mouths gaping.

A crash from above them causes them to start. Norelle looks back at Bridget, then both of them whisper spells under their breath. Norelle bounds silently up the circular stairs, her feet slamming into the stone without making a sound, as if they'd been placed on mute. Bridget meanwhile begins to shimmer as if in an intense summer heat—the effect intensifying until her shape can barely be discerned.

She follows Norelle up the stairs, making decidedly more noise, but it doesn't matter. At the top of the steps, she careens right into Norelle's shoulder, which catches her right in the chest. She coughs, and falls into a splintered piece of cabinetry with a loud bang, the shimmer effect dissipating as she does.

Norelle barely notices. She's staring up at the tall ceiling—where a man has been lashed to the chandelier. His mouth gapes open and a rope of blood and saliva splashes onto the ground, as he jerks his body and emits a horrible, wordless, sound.

Bridget pulls herself to her feet, watching the man flail and kick his legs into a tall bookshelf, which thuds dully against the wall. “What the fuck!?”

Norelle's eyes are narrowed. The room smells like a torture chamber... piss and shit. Fear and blood.

“Bridget,” she says, endeavoring to keep her voice even. “Would you please climb up and cut Archmage down?”

Scene 9 - The North Hills

Elandra feels like she could hug the Hyperion when she sees it, even though it's been less than 13 hours since she left Avander here. How much time has passed? Elandra realizes she doesn't even know.

“This is yours?” Penelope is looking starry eyed up at the hulking metal ship. The yellow paint job seems even brighter and cheerier in the light of dawn, it's top fin sparkling like a beacon.

“That.” Elandra points at Penelope. “That is exactly how I looked when I first saw her.”

The ship is defiantly boxy, but in an aesthetically pleasing way. It had been designed with a sort of retro, aerodynamics-be-damned panache, all flat planes and acute angles with rounded off corners, instead of the gentle curves characteristic of most Interstellar/atmospheric class vessels.

Elandra scans her face and punches her door code into the exterior console. The rubberized entry hatch depresses inward, then slides up with a satisfying FOOSH of air. Penelope's eyes

catch on the way the long grass bends sharply to and fro around the door. It looks so strange, as if something were moving through it as the ship de-pressurizes.

Elandra fires up her armlet again and “DanDan, what’s our best shot of getting off the planet without Orbital knowing?”

“There are three nearby space stations, forming a triangulated defense system over Harperstown. I would recommend the best way to remain unseen would be to fly north two to three thousand miles before attempting our escape path.”

“Good enough for me.” Elandra steps into the dim entryway of the side entrance, turns, and looks back.

“Welcome aboard the Hyperion One,” Elandra smiles at Penelope. “Anywhere in the galaxy you’ve always wanted to go?”

Many miles north, Regency officers mill about, inspecting the old equipment. Fort Cameron had never seen action. The feared attack on Freya by the Russian Federation never came. As such, the facility has the strange quality of a thing abandoned before ever being used, like a lego set left shrink-wrapped on a shelf for decades. It had been used, of course. Men and women undoubtedly more or less lived here for months at a time, for many years. But there are no scorch marks, no crumbling walls. It is a pristine ghost town.

Gabriel steps down out of the helidrone and onto the main deck of the base. It’s cold up at this elevation. He pulls on leather gloves and checks his armlet. There are a number of urgent notifications from the Consul’s office. He ignores these. Plenty of time for politicking later.

“Eris! Any trouble?”

Eris steps down from a platform, around which a mixed group of Regency officers, military, law enforcement, and worried looking engineers are gathered. Eris and the ROs bow as Gabriel approaches. Eris straightens up and casts a sidelong look at the military men.

“Questions were asked,” Eris says. “Why you needed a counter-evasive-intelligence missile, for one.”

Gabriel slows his pace as he nears the group. Eris closes the distance and Gabriel quiets his voice. “Hence the escort, I take it.”

Eris casts his eyes critically at one of the military officials. “Townies. That one didn’t even know who you were.”

Gabriel nods, and strides past Eris to shake the hand of the man in question. “Gabriel Berns. Lord Regent of Magical Affairs.”

The man takes Gabriel’s hand and attempts to squeeze the life out of it. Gabriel smirks in lieu of a grimace, as the officer speaks in a reprimanding tone, never quite looking at him.

“General Matthew Torrance. I report directly to Commander Harper. Now look, I’ve been given to understand that this... Confiscation of Dangerous Artifacts business demands our compliance to the best of our ability, but it would be deeply irresponsible to hand over a super-sonic guided missile to a civilian, who knows nothing of the technology or firepower in question.”

The general releases Gabriel’s hand and reaches up to clap him on the back. It has the effect of slapping a tree.

“This weapon is a Silverhawk 3. It accelerates continuously towards its target at the rate of a bullet fired from that peashooter of yours, reaching terminal velocity at six times the speed of sound, and uses advanced onboard intelligence to replot its course continuously to the target, at which point it delivers enough explosive power to knock a cruiser on its ass. So that’s what you’ve-”

The general trails off as he turns around to land his point, and finds he’s missing Gabriel, who’s walked behind and past him, mounting the platform and picking a power-drill up off the plate floor before the general places him.

“You’re quite right,” Gabriel says carelessly, as he ascends the rungs of the battery ladder towards the Silverhawk. “It would be irresponsible to hand this over to a civilian who knows nothing of the technology in question.” Gabriel snaps a metal band off of the weapon, whirs the power drill to life and in a series of quick motions, unbolts a ring of fasteners beneath it. “Fortunately, I spent five years running a company that recycled weapons like these into energy resources for colonists and exo-miners. There was a lot of money in that, in the years after the War Between.”

“Mr. Berns!” The general begins, “What do you-”

Eris cuts him off sharply. “General Torrance. You will address the Lord Regent by his title, or else as, ‘my lord’. He is not a banker or a lawyer. He is charged with keeping the rule of magical law across the four stars of our Republic, and while the Regency is not a military outfit, the Regent most certainly outranks you.”

Torrance opens and closes his mouth several times. Up till now, the Regency was just a wing of the Republic building that he never entered. His field magicians mentioned the word often enough, but hearing people say “The Regency” was very different from watching The Regency dismantle a rocket in front of you.

“Do you know why I carry a six-shooter?” Gabriel grunts, as he pulls off the nose of the missile with a hollow-metallic POP. “It’s because if you need more than six shots, you’re either a lousy marksman, or you’re using the wrong weapon.” He slides the warhead out of the missile, and almost lazily, passes it down to one of the attendants. “Every tool has a purpose. And a revolver’s purpose originated in the Wild West, when individuals who fancied themselves above the law came head to head with those who defined it.” He snaps the nose of the missile back on, extends his hand for the power-drill, and bolts it back into place. He then begins whispering to the missile. This goes on for quite some time, as Eris and the other officers watch.

The general appears undecided on whether or not to speak again. Gabriel is muttering in a constant stream, with a quiet but firm voice, as if coaching a loved one through performing an open heart surgery.

Finally, he stops, smiles vaguely at Eris, and descends the ladder onto the platform.

“What now?” Torrance asks, baffled.

Gabriel shrugs, adjusting his gloves idly. “Now, we wait.”

Elandra leans over the main console, watching the readouts and radar-screens on the dash carefully, as the Hyperion flies over a sea of rolling green hills.

“Stay low—we want to get as far away from the Command stations as possible before hitting our escape path.”

Penelope is holding onto the bars in the cockpit doorway as if her life depended on them, “Does it always feel like this?” she says.

Elandra turns her head to her. “Have you never flown before?”

Penelope shakes her head fervently.

“Christ.” Elandra gestures to one of the guest chairs. “You might feel better sitting down. There’s a safety belt.”

Penelope gingerly steps forward, waiting till the last possible second to let go of the bar and dart into the guest chair, where she immediately buckles herself in.

DanDan’s voice pings to life, “Arcanist, we are about to pass on the West side of Fort Cameron.”

“What's that?”

“A decommissioned high-elevation military base from the War Between Worlds.”

“Great. Do you have a visual?”

“Throwing it up on Display 3.”

Elandra peers at the screen. Fort Cameron appears to have been constructed at the top of the largest hill in the neighborhood—even after the generous application of dynamite that was undoubtedly used to flatten it into a plateau, it’s still a good sight taller than anything else around. The base itself is just flat gray cement and gray outbuildings. A few hulking batteries and...

And...

No...

Elandra slams her fist on the forethruster override. The jets roar and the nose of the ship lifts sharply upward, throwing Elandra bodily into the captain's chair. "RETRACT THE WINGS, DANDAN—PREPARE FOR ESCAPE VELOCITY."

On the base-deck, the targeting computer emits a shrill beeping. Gabriel leans over it eagerly, straightens up, and looks through a pair of binoculars.

"She can fall, but she can't fly" he calls, cheerily. "That's our yellow Springsteen."

He returns to the computer, quickly confirming the target and preparing the missile for launch.

"General," Gabriel demurs, "You ever fired one of these things before?"

"Err. No," Torrance admits, stiffly.

"Would you care to do the honors?"

The General mounts the platform and, after looking searchingly at Gabriel for a moment (whatever explanation he hoped for was not provided) he flips the launch switch.

Gabriel covers his ears, the computer beeps through a short countdown—and the enormous battery recoils with an explosive BOOM.

On board the Hyperion, the Defense system goes online with a low siren of alarm.

Elandra searches the dash for something useful. "DanDan, what's going on?"

"They appear to have shot a missile at us."

"What!"

"They appear to have shot a missile at us."

Elandra slams the side of her chair with her hand. "I know what you said!"

Penelope's breath catches in her throat as she tries to speak. The force of the ship's acceleration flattens her body out against the back of the co-pilot's chair. "Can we outrun it?" she stammers.

"I'm... sorry..." DanDan is uncharacteristically halting. "I am not sure"

Elandra's mind is racing. She curses, unbelts herself, and pushes herself up in her chair to lean over and look down at Penelope. "Pen—we have to—"

The de-fanged missile hits the Hyperion just below the main rocket-engine. The missile still explode. Its remaining propellant momentarily super-condenses and then combusts on impact. But this does little more than throw Elandra forward and onto the ground, as the Hyperion's stabilizing jets hiss. But then, something very different begins at the point of impact. The rocket engine flickers, then goes out. The engine itself cracks, as water droplets condense around the white-hot-metal and then freeze—the engine turning black beneath the ice. Ice creeps over the Hyperion from the point of impact forward, until the ship looks as if it just freed itself from a glacier, a cloudy veneer of frozen water coating it from the back to midriff.

And as the engine goes out, Elandra finds herself floating off of the ground in zero gravity.

Elandra pushes herself gently off the floor with her feet and reaches for the switch that turns on the gravity pad. "DanDan, why are we still alive?"

"It... appears that our main engine has been disabled."

"Can you get it up and running again?" Elandra falls heavily against the control panel as she flips the artificial gravity on.

"I am diverting power from the reactor to thaw the combustion system, but if the temperature readings I'm seeing are correct, it would seem that the engine has been frozen solid."

"Berns." Elandra turns to Penelope. "You okay?"

Penelope looks even paler than usual, but she nods. "I'm okay."

"Okay. And we haven't suffered a hull breach?"

DanDan's voice is genuinely reassuring. "Not as far as I can tell."

Elandra rubs her face with both hands. Her brain is on fire, buzzing with the unpleasant frenzy of moving directly from crisis to crisis for a long period of time. Her elbows slam into the dash as she hunches over the controls.

"DanDan, how long till we start losing altitude?"

"About 17 seconds, Arcanist."

"Start a countdown. We have to be as far up as possible!"

"Why? What are we doing?"

"We're going to enter slip."

"But, Arcanist. Entering slip in a non-vacuum is next to impossible. The energy required—"

“I know the science! Just start the countdown!”

DanDan starts counting down. Penelope grabs onto the edge of her seat as the engine coughs and the ship shudders. “What are you trying to do?”

Elandra wipes sweat from her forehead and places her hand on the lever. “The slip-stream reduces space between particles to close to nothing. The energy expenditure is proportional to the concentration of particle-matter.”

“So we just need a lot of power to get started.”

“Well, that’s what the reactor is for.”

3! 2! 1!

“Here we go.”

Elandra presses the lever forward. “NOW!”

There’s a humming sound as power surges to the slip-bow, the long, straight rod that points directly from the nose of the Hyperion. It begins to shudder visibly.

“Come on! Come on!” Elandra says under her breath.

The humming intensifies as the light coming through the window seems to dim—then all the lights in the cockpit go off suddenly. The humming dies. And the lever kicks back in Elandra’s hand.

Darkness.

“Fuck.”

The lights flicker as the system comes back online. “Arcanist, we seem to have experienced a brief loss of power and are now losing altitude.” DanDan says, “Should I extend the wings and attempt to glide safely to the surface?”

“Fuck fuck fuck.”

“Arcanist?”

Penelope removes her seatbelt.

Elandra whips around, “What are you doing!? We’re in freefall!”

Penelope pushes herself toward the dash.

“Where’s the power line?”

“What?”

“Can we access the slip drive’s power supply?”

Elandra points, “It’s behind that panel, wh-”

Before she can finish the sentence, Penelope has jammed her fingers underneath the plate and pried it off, using her foot as a lever. It clangs off the ground and floats toward the ceiling. Penelope grabs onto the aperture and places her hands over the massive cable.

Elandra stares at her. “What are you doing!?”

“Engage the slip drive again!”

“What!”

“Engage the slip drive, now!”

Elandra throws all of her weight behind the lever—the hum of the charge buzzes through the cockpit, and Penelope places her hands above the exposed cable and yells,

“Komensorcas! Elektrokrei Fulminar!”

With a thunderclap, the cockpit is filled with a blinding white flash, and the starlight of Wolf is snuffed out like a candle as the Hyperion vanishes from the sky.

This was Episode 2 of *The Elandrid*, and the second 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

