

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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Thomas Tells a Story

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The Elandrid, Episode 7

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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 7 - Time Away From Time

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 - The Lafayette

Eris Dostoyev and Lieutenant Kay Berring sit at the mess hall table playing cards. It is day 3 of their trip, and so far, this is their evening tradition. A leisurely consumption of grains and frozen veggies, followed by a few leisurely rounds of Two Man Tarroca.

Everything was leisurely during long slips. If you did anything fast at all, you started to go insane.

Kay sets down her hand and squints her eyes at Eris. "So how long have you and the Lord Regent known each other?"

"A long time." Eris sets down his cards as well. "We were involved in a... political group together towards the end of the war, on Chiron. We lost touch for a time when he relocated to Earth, but he asked me to come along when he founded Arms to Arms."

"And why did you?"

Eris shrugs, and Kay leans in, resting her elbows on the table and taking a sip of beer.

"You must be just about the only non-practitioner ever to be given a senior officer role in the Regency," she muses.

Eris cocks his head. "If that's true, it seems you've uncovered a rather shocking prejudice."

Kay snorts with laughter. "You're funny."

Eris smiles, a strange sort of smile, Kay thinks, but nonetheless a smile. She warms to it.

"Seriously, and I really don't mean this to sound patronizing, but do you ever feel out of your depth?"

Eris shakes his head slowly. "Not really. I don't pretend to be a magician, or to be any kind of expert in arcane matters. But I am a diligent and thorough person, which is, perhaps, more rare."

Kay leans back in her chair. "Sure but I mean -- take this mission for example. Say we find an android and it, uhh, resists. I don't want to go back to Chiron and have to explain why you didn't make it."

Eris raps his knuckles against something under his shirt. "Gabriel enchanted this amulet of himself. It would take quite a lot of magic to tear through it."

"I'm just not used to it," Kay persists. "What do you do if you catch one of them alone? You can't cast a revelation or an injunction. Even if the skeptics are right and they're just homunculi with a few spells, that's a few more spells than you can cast. How do you come out on top?"

Eris regards Kay for a moment. Then hunches forward, his lips flattened into an illegible line.

“How do you kill a magician?” he asks.

Kay scoffs. “How do you...?” She frowns at him across the table, his eyes fixed on her. “I don’t know. Psychic spike. Power word. ...I guess you do an injunction first. Or cast an obstruction spell so they can't move. If you're a good sorcerer you could try to dismantle their interference. if you're a theurge you could have a beyon do it, otherwise any number of conjurations: Fireball, force blow, thermal vacuum... what??”

Eris was just looking at her, his expression unchanged.

“From behind,” he says.

Scene 2 - Space

Long term space travel at faster than light speeds was a uniquely alien experience. Perhaps those who crossed the Atlantic in the early days of America’s colonies would have some context for it, but crossing the ocean came with daily travails, the slap of waves, the rumble of thunder, rain, wind, and an endless tide.

In space, there are no waves. No storms. No weather at all. Instead there is time, vast stretches of time scored only by the ever-present hum of the reactor. If you don’t have a quantum receiver of some kind, you are completely cut off from the rest of the universe. You exist in a kind of time away from time. Encapsulated in aluminum and anti-matter.

It is roughly 15 light-years from Wolf system to Amaterasu. Amaterasu is a giant star, twice the size of Sol and more than three times the size of Wolf, with a correspondingly wide habitable zone. India and Japan had formed a coalition to colonize the system with the aim of escaping the cultural and regulatory pollution of the Euro-American band, which stretched from Wolf to Ra. Following the War Between, the coalition became the Interstellar Republic of Nippon.

There are two planets in the system. The largest, Iza, has an unusually low mass due to its unique composition of low-density crystalline masses. The first settlers arrived there after a month long voyage on an enormous cruiser. Some were lost to illness or infirmity along the way. But they were promised a better life, some of them found one.

Slip drives had improved since then, but it still takes over two weeks of travel at super-luminary speeds. Experienced passengers use the time to catch up on their reading. Those with the resources to do so can write, or draw. Vessels with enough quantum transmitters even offer access to the net.

But it is hard to shake the unease: the knowledge of how little stands between us and that incomprehensible vastness of dark and void.

So goes the passage of days for these travelers, for whom there is nothing to do but wait, for whom the experience of isolation and suspension is an inevitable consequence of the journey itself. Penelope, wounded, alone, and in pain, on a ship smaller than the house she'd once lived in. Elandra, one of four breathing bodies on a massive cargo ship. And others, Andrea, Eris, Kay, and who knows how many more in this most liminal space, so far from anything resembling home it defies comprehension.

~

Andrea had never traveled further than twenty miles up the coast. She'd been born in Juno Central Hospital, and she was raised in the city. For a while her mom had had a girlfriend named Corinne. Andrea had a few memories of her. The main one was the fighting. Corinne and her mother had fought often. Another was a day they'd spent at the beach together. Corinne had said, "your mother is one of the best and most terrible people I've ever met." But the strongest memory was saying goodbye. Corinne had been crying, she'd held onto her so tightly that Andrea couldn't breathe, and Andrea had started crying too, without quite understanding why. Norelle had stood at the door a long time, holding Andrea's hand, as they watched Corinne pack her suitcases into the back of an autocar, as they watched her drive away. They had held hands long after that, looking out the door at the empty street, Andrea crying harder than she remembered ever crying. Then Norelle had shut the door, and pulled Andrea onto the couch with her, and they'd watched movies together for hours, until both of them fell asleep.

A few weeks later, Luna moved in. And a few weeks after that, Norelle left.

Andrea thinks of Corinne on her first day in slip, though she isn't sure why. She spends the day walking around the main wheel of the habitation center. Grav pads were too expensive at this scale, so it made more sense to put everyone in a big disc and spin it really fast. The habitation center was split into 36 'decks', which were really just big wide open rooms with latrines at one end. Andrea passes room after room of people, some of them sitting in little encampments around electric stoves, some praying, some reading, some watching films or binging netvision shows. There are so many of them, hundreds and hundreds, and for whatever reason Andrea finds herself searching for Corinne's face in the crowd.

"What are the odds!" she imagines herself saying.

"Beats me," she imagines Corinne saying, and she imagines her putting her hands on her hips and laughing.

There were so many people it almost seemed like Corinne had to be one of them. It was crazy that there could be this many people to whom Andrea had no relationship whatsoever. Thousands of people who intersected with her for these eleven days and then vanished back into their separate lives.

When she makes it back to her deck, there is some kind of commotion happening in the center of the floor. People are gathering around a passenger's laptop. He must be well-off to afford a quantum net-connection, but he doesn't seem to be register the crowding. What

could they all be watching? Andrea makes her way across the floor and pokes her head over someone's shoulder to see.

She sees a shadowy mass destroying a city. She sees various important people speeding about, casting spells and evacuating civilians.

And she sees her mother.

~

"You owe me an explanation!"

Already millions of miles away back on the Octavia Helman, Felix and Jynn stand in a bathroom, Felix resting his palms on the sink behind him as Jynn paces in front of him. This was the most private place they'd been able to find, and Jynn had made it very clear they needed to find a private place to fight.

"I don't know where to begin!" Felix raises an arm haplessly. "Look, why did you even agree if you were gonna be so-"

"Oh do NOT. Do NOT deflect this on me. Why did I- because you begged me asshole. Because I'm pretty sure if you didn't need my family visa, I would never have seen you again! You know, when you said you 'had to go' the other night, I didn't think you meant OFF PLANET."

"I called you didn't I; it wasn't like I was ghosting you-"

"After two days! 48 hours, Felix!" Jynn advances on Felix. "Were you planning on coming back? More importantly, now that I'm going with you, are WE ever going back? Because I certainly can't-"

Another passenger enters the lavatory and Jynn paces quickly over to them and physically turns them around, saying, "Excuse me, one second," as she closes the door after them.

"I certainly can't-" she rounds on Felix, "-afford the carrier ticket. Where did all this money come from, Felix?!?"

"It's a- look, I don't know everything about your past either!"

"Stop it!" Jynn looks aghast at him. "Seriously, this isn't funny. Felix! Look at me."

Felix looks at her, feeling absolutely miserable. She can see it in his face. She drops her shoulders and shakes her head with a soft "ku-gh."

"You just- didn't think... about any of this... did you?"

Jynn sits down resignedly on the sink next to Felix's. "I'm going to be... as clear as I can. I looked up Penelope Petreius. And I read the news story about how she's an enchanted

android or whatever. And I have been thinking... non-stop... about what all this means to you. But I don't want to make guesses. And I don't want to bullshit around."

She looks at him. "So just... tell me."

Felix takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes with the heels of his palms.

"You're right," he says, meeting Jynn's gaze. "I'm sorry."

"I know where Penelope, the android, is. I know where she is, and I'm going to go find her. She was actually on Tyr, but I missed that carrier, which is good, because earlier today she suddenly entered slip... heading towards Amaterasu system. And you're right, I won't get far without a government permit, or someone with a visa to vouch for me. And I knew you had a brother in Maryamman. So I called you. I'm sorry. I didn't want to drag you into this."

Jynn stares at him. "How do you know this? What does any of it have to do with you?"

Felix takes a deep breath. "My last name... my real last name... is Petreius. Julian Petreius is my father. He's got access to a secret location feed for Penelope. It doesn't work in slip, but it's enough to tell us the direction she's headed. So... we're going to go get her... before the Regency does."

Jynn blinks. "Shit. Is that all?"

Felix looks away. "That's all."

Jynn shakes her head, "Fuck. Okay." She checks her armlet. "Let's go then. They're about to close our gate."

Scene 3 - The Freighter

Elandra is given an unused cot in a cabin with the three deckhands. "Doesn't take even the three of us to run the ship anymore," one offers, when he sees Elandra eyeing the other empty cots. "We've got a betting pool going on who gets the boot next."

Their names were Heber, Harlow, and Ben, and they were friendly, and glad for fresh company. There was only one quantum transmitter on the freighter, and it was reserved for emergencies and automated mission control, so the four of them spent a great deal of time together. There really wasn't much for them to do; Elandra could see why they were worried about their jobs.

"These tracks were installed a few years back --" Ben explains on the tour of the ship. "There's these little robot carts that move coolant and uranium back to the reactor as necessary," Ben back at Harlow. "How many'd they let go after that? Fifteen?"

"That's right," Harlow agrees.

Heber is the youngest, and particularly fixated on the revolution. "You really made it out in the nick of time!" he'd said when Elandra first boarded. "Eitch Aesp's completely done for!" He was referring to the Halspur Interstellar Space Port. There hadn't been much time for watching the news once she was up at the Orbital Trade Center. And now they were in slip, she could only guess at what was happening on Tyr.

They didn't seem to know who she was, and she didn't go out of her way to be forthright. When they asked what she did, she said, "government work," and they seemed perfectly satisfied with that.

There was only one other person on board, and that was the Staff Magician. He had private quarters, and a private personality, so Elandra didn't see much of him.

Elandra is usually good about setting a schedule for herself, but she loses track of time quickly on the freighter. She naps when she feels tired and exercises when she doesn't, and so she isn't entirely sure how much time has passed when she gets the first message on her soulmate.

"What's in Yokaido?"

Elandra nearly flings the device across the room.

What did that mean? Clearly it wasn't Jonathan. That meant he'd lost it somehow. Big idiot.

Elandra waits several hours before responding. Gingerly, she plugs the transmitter back into her armlet, and sends a message back. "Who is this?"

Several minutes pass, but then:

"I know it's strange but I couldn't help responding. Unquenchable curiosity."

"How did you get this? Who are you?" Elandra types quickly.

"It was passed on to me. Who are you?"

"I asked first."

"Then it's symmetrical. I don't know who you are and you don't know who I am."

Elandra disconnects the soulmate again, and for the next two days, she ignores the device sitting in an inside pocket of her rucksack.

But finally, her own curiosity gets the better of her. She connects the transmitter and finds two messages waiting.

The first one reads: "I don't intend to be flippant. But what would you do if you suddenly received a direct line of instant, untraceable communication to an anonymous someone?"

And the second says: "I understand. Sorry to have bothered you."

Elandra furrows her brow. After a few minutes of thought, she types, "Where are you?"

Almost immediately, her armband pings a response. "Point Clair colony."

Elandra narrows her eyes. Point Clair is on Tyr. Perhaps Jonathan had stopped there?

"How is it there?" she asks.

"Bad," comes the response. "Makes Roosevelt Square look like a picnic."

Elandra exhales a thin line of air between her lips. Roosevelt Square was a draft protest that happened on Chiron in the middle of the War Between. A communications error on the part of Republican Military led them to believe the protesters were armed, and they opened fire. The protest turned into a massacre, and the colony devolved into disorder and violence.

"How many dead?"

"Hard to know. Over five hundred. Civilians in total confusion. Alliance still holding onto Point Clair, Galensloch, Nobel. Freewolves control Halspur and Gemini."

"How? What about the Colonial Guard?"

"Several units defected. Republican army was supposed to be en route from Freya days ago, but they haven't yet arrived. And the Freewolves have occupied several of the major broadcast centers and putting out reports that they're winning. Public perception is everything in situations like this and they're smart enough to realize that."

It's a lot to take in. Elandra thinks for a moment, then messages, "Were you at Roosevelt Square?" That would mean this person was at least a decade older than she was.

"Nearby. My parents were among the protestors."

Elandra presses a hand over her mouth. She doesn't know what to say, but luckily, the person on the other end doesn't wait for a response.

"They survived," they write. "But not for long."

For the next ten days, Elandra and whoever had Jonathan's transmitter talk daily. Elandra begins to look forward to it, eagerly and even anxiously waiting for the next update. It was like having a lifeline to the rest of the world. Through some unspoken understanding, they veer away from any overly personal details. But they discuss vagaries about their parents, about technology and politics and travel.

Elandra learns that they are a he. That he was born in Herculaneum but after his parents passed away he was taken to America. She learns that he loves America. "America is a country that is always looking for itself," he says. "Looking for someone to remake it."

She tells him that she was born and raised in New York. That her parents were extremely religious, and that this had resulted in a falling out. She doesn't talk about Lakiri, about her training as a magician, about Virginia. She withholds her feeling about America.

She finds out that he studied economics and mechanical engineering at an unnamed university and feels a pang of jealousy. 'University' had always held a mythic appeal for her.

She thinks about asking his name on her last day on the freighter, but decides against it. "It's just better this way," she says to Harlow, who thought the whole thing fascinating. "I don't need to know who he is."

But of course, you've already guessed that it's Gabriel Berns.

Scene 4 - Iza Orbital Control

There are days when Penelope feels almost herself. She takes this time to clean, to shower, or attempt exercise. She browses Elandra's small collection of books—mostly magic, with some sociology and history—and nestles into her bedsheets to read them.

These days are the exception.

Most of the two weeks are spent shivering in bed, on the brink of consciousness, in more pain than Penelope could ever remember experiencing. At first, these days are punctuated by the agonizing climbs down to the mess hall for water, or to piss. A few days in, on one of the better days, she floats her bedding down the central column and sets up a kind of nest there, close to both the spigot and the loo.

The dark blot on her stomach grows slowly. Penelope wishes fervently and perhaps for the first time that she understood how she worked. She feels certain that such an injury would have spelled death for any human person, and several times the pain is so intense that she faints for long spells, unsure of how much time has passed until she consults the computer.

On day 11, DanDan warns her that the Hyperion's supply of drinking water is running low. It's a bad day, but Penelope drags herself to the bridge, keeping the gravity off because every step sends sharp spasms of pain through her body. Sure enough, there are only six gallons of drinkable water left, and the purification system is completely backed up. How much water had she been drinking?

She tries to ration herself, but she is thirsty all the time. On day 12 she starts pissing into a canteen. On day 13, the spigot runs dry.

Without water, she is reduced to a shivering, sweating, heap. Hours pass with her crouched in the corner gasping for breath, frozen in a kind of low-energy panic. She watches her blood pulse beneath her translucent skin—is it her imagination or is it getting more translucent by the hour?

On day 14, she tries drinking some of her urine. From what she understands, for human bodies, this was better than nothing. Not so in this case. She takes barely a sip before she is heaving on the floor, her vomit thick and oily and dark.

Penelope is sure now that she is going to die. Her skin is on fire and her guts feel like they are grinding against themselves. She switches off the gravity pad and pushes herself into the center of the mess hall, pulling the sheets and blankets around her body before lapsing into a pained sleep, curled into a ball, floating gently above the floor.

She wakes to an alarm sounding over the intercom. Something is different, though she can't quite put her finger on it. She swims out of her cocoon of polyester and cotton and pulls her way out into the central column, her hands feeling weak on the bars, as if she couldn't squeeze too tightly or they'd fall off. The pain has subsided somewhat but she is light-headed and nearly delirious. She wonders how closely her experience of these words matches the experiences they are modeled on. She would never know.

Gingerly she steps into the bridge and toggles the gravity pad. Even the ease-in is too sudden for her, and she falls to one knee, before crawling forward to the dash.

"DanDan," she croaks, "What's happening?" She switches off the alarm and pulls herself up to rest her elbows on the dash.

That's when she sees it. A green disc of light so bright she thinks for a second it is a star. Foamy white clouds spray across its surface, and grayish white tundra caps the northern hemisphere of the planet.

"Orbital Control is hailing the Hyperion. We have arrived at Iza, the largest populated planet in the Three Republics, and the first planet to be colonized under the Indo-Japanese coalition."

Penelope coughs. She feels dazed. "We made it," she chokes out. "Take us down... anywhere! I need... I need water."

"Automated flight has been disabled; IOC has issued a static orbit command."

"What? I—"

"IOC is requesting an audiolink. Opening in 3, 2..."

The voice crackles through, speaking in a language Penelope doesn't understand at first, then switching to English.

"Please transmit documentation and do not drop orbit."

Penelope's breathing is labored. "I, I don't have any documentation."

"Your visa. Please transmit your visa."

“No, no visa.”

There was silence on the line.

“Please, I’m injured- I’m, sick. Please!”

“How many on board?”

“Just me. Please, I just need to get to the ground. I need to see, Theolus Washington! Theolus. Washington.”

Penelope breathed heavily, staring at the yellow light on the dash. Waiting.

“Do not take manual control over your ship. Vishnada Station will meet with your location in 72 minutes. We will send docking instructions to your ship computer.”

Penelope grimaces in pain and bends her neck over the dash. “What are you going to do with me?”

“You will receive medical attention on your slip back to Chiron’s Apollo Station.”

Penelope’s eyes fall on the purplish black skin that stretches tightly from her groin to her ribs. It was such a cruel joke, she thinks, to make it this far and to be turned around from orbit.

“Cinnamon. Rosemary. Turmeric. Sage.” she murmurs.

“What was that?” the officer’s voice sounds muffled and far away.

“Cinnamon. Rosemary. Turmeric. Sage,” she says. Then her vision blacks out, and she returns to the void.

Scene 5 - Yokaido

Elandra says her goodbyes at the gate. Heber gives her a hug. Harlow and Ben shake her hand. “Good luck,” Ben says. “They say when you work for the government, you work for us, but it sure don’t feel that way.” He laughs.

Elandra smiles. “Take care of yourself.”

She steps off the gate’s gravity pad, and propels herself down to the passenger tunnel. She has to take the cyclovator from the gate ring to the Gravity ring, then another cyclovator to the zero gravity shuttle dock. The gate ring itself was relatively quiet when they arrived, and Elandra finds the cyclovator waiting with no one inside, save for the Staff Magician.

He’s a middle aged white man, with straight gray hair brushed into peaks which framed his avarian face like wings. For a moment she considers waiting for the next car, but that could

take twenty minutes for all she knew. So instead, she pulls herself into the carriage and nods to him in what she hopes is a friendly and non-intrusive way.

“Lady Arcanist,” he growls in reply. It's so aggressive, Elandra isn't sure if he means it as a greeting or a threat. She must have failed to conceal her alarm, because the man's scowl deepens and he curls his lip. The cyclovator's doors close, and they grab their hand rails as the car shudders and chunks into motion.

“You know me,” Elandra says.

“Of course. I found your little speech this week fascinating.”

“What little speech?” Elandra uses the hand rail to align her body and press her feet against the painted footprint marks on the floor, as her body begins to adjust to the artificial gravity of the rotating car.

“Governments are not good on their own. You have to make them good.” his voice is mocking. “I hope you know how idiotic that is.”

Elandra looks down at the floor. The metallic rushing sound of the track is getting oppressively loud.

“People can't make governments good any more than they can make murderers not murder or rapists not rape. We always think we can find a better way, but we're limited by what we are, Arcanist.”

Elandra shakes her head. “I don't believe that.”

“Oh yeah?” The gravity is tangible now, though still weak. The Staff Magician leans over at Elandra and she smells tobacco and foul breath. “Is that what you said to the Virginia Mason, when he told you why he liked to turn girls to stone from the head down?”

Elandra says nothing. She keeps her head slightly bowed, looking down at the floor. But she can feel his eyes on her. And she feels anger, bubbling hot in her stomach.

“You of all people should know. People don't change. And if people can't change how can they hope to change the world?”

Elandra allows herself a sidelong, venomous glance at the man. “This coming from a man that chose to live alone on a cargo ship 300 days out of the year,” she says.

The magician sneers. “Ah yes. Because Arcanist is a famously social occupation.”

Elandra raises her eyes to his, fighting to keep her voice from rising. “What's your name?”

“Mark. Mark Weber.”

“Mark. The world changes all the time. It just does so without you.”

He stares sullenly at her, then looks away.

“Let me tell you something about the United Star Systems Alliance. There once was a young Regency officer who led an investigation of the Thaumaturg’s Guild, and found it to be an absolute nest of corruption. This officer’s report formed the backbone of what later became known as the Kayliss Scandal; by all rights, every executive at the Guild should have been thrown in jail. But instead, the Consulate pardoned them. Yes, there were trials and fines and some embarrassing details were laid bare. But the Guild was, to quote his Consulateness, ‘just the sort of organization needed in the private sector.’ And they cut a deal: no one went to jail, as long as the Guild agreed, thereafter, to work directly with Alliance Office of Commerce. Because you see, Adam Dane didn’t see an exploitative, monopolistic baron-agency gone rogue; he saw a tool, and leverage.”

Elandra regards him warily. “This Regency officer would be you, I’m guessing.”

Mark curls his lip. “The point... is that governments—all governments—exist with one, and only one purpose. To perpetuate their own existence.”

The cyclovator clunks into its station on the inner ring, and a green light illuminates with a loud BING.

“Anyone who serves that purpose will be paid well, housed well, wined and dined.” The doors open, and the Staff Magician steps out of the car. “But the moment you threaten it, you will be destroyed.”

She doesn’t see him again. And she tries to put the encounter out of her mind. The second cyclovator trip is crowded with people chattering in Japanese, many of them employees at the station, and Elandra gratefully follows them as they pull themselves down the zero-G corridor to the shuttle gate.

Her embassy letter and visa had been prepared by the Alliance office of diplomatic affairs while she was in slip. She pulls them up on her armlet and scans them at the gate.

“I need to get to Ayaki-shun. Am I saying that right?”

The attendant looks surprised. “Ayaki-shun? You must make mistake.”

“No, I know the colony is abandoned. But I’m on a research trip.” She shows her paperwork again. “Can I rent a drone in Maryamman?”

The attendant shakes his head. “Is not legal. No custom locations.” He extends his tablet and brings up a map. “What you can do maybe, you can get a drone to take you to the energy station here. Maybe. Then it is just a few hours of walking to Ayaki-shun.”

“Thank you.” Elandra pulls herself through the narrow portal onto the shuttle, and straps herself in next to the workers, who stare at her unabashedly.

“Do you know anyone who lived in Ayaki-shun before the Hysteria?” Elandra asks, partly just to break the silence.

The workers look at each other. One of them, the oldest, shakes her head deliberately.

“They are all dead,” she says.

Scene 6 - The Washington Reserve

Penelope’s eyes open to a broad, handsome face looking down on her with emerald green irises so resplendent, she wonders if this is what people imagine when they think of waking up to God.

“Hello, Peppercorn,” his voice was airy and kind, like the sort of dessert so light it disappears like mist on your tongue.

Penelope opens her mouth to reply, but she doesn't know what to say.

The man smiles. “My name is Theolus Washington. You're safe. You're going to be okay. And I want you to tell me everything. But rest first, if you can.”

“What happened to me?”

“I had a handful of English words flagged with my friends at Orbital Control, never knowing if it would prove necessary. Thankfully, you knew what to say.”

Penelope tries to sit up, but something tugs at the back of her neck and Theolus places a hand gently but firmly on her. His hand was enormous, her shoulder disappears under it. There was some kind of intravenous tube hooked up to her belly she realized, as well, filled with a dark fluid. The discoloration on her abdomen seemed to have lessened somewhat.

“What happened to me?” She says again, and Theolus nods, understanding.

“You're going to have a lot of questions, and I'm happy to answer them. You must have taken a pretty hefty blow to your body, because one of your internal organs, one that's responsible for telling your cells to stick together, burst, and started telling cells to stick together that it wasn't supposed to. We actually fixed this a year ago or so, so you should be up and about in no time.”

“You're doing a software update?”

Theolus laughs, a surprisingly deep, joyful sound that makes Penelope smile. “Very nearly. We're also filtering out some of the corrupted cells,” he points at the tube, “just to speed things along. Now sleep, if you can. ”

Penelope’s eyes are heavy. She drifts away into blackness.

When she comes to, she is alone. The light is different; it's later in the day, she thinks. And she's not hooked up to anything, which is a relief.

A powder blue dress is draped over a chair near the bed. A note reads, "When you're ready, there are some people who'd like to meet you."

She puts on the dress and a pair of sandals left by the bed. Before leaving, she examines the room she woke up in. She realizes with sudden confidence that this is not the room she was in before. There was definitely machinery in that room, and the feeling of a hospital scene in a movie. This was just a bedroom, probably a guest room of some kind judging by the generic art on the walls and bare shelves.

She leaves, and makes her way down a metal circular stairway at the end of the hall. She finds herself in a cozy antechamber, a small room with a single chair and a globe. Across from her, a door is ajar, letting in a soft greenish light. She can hear voices on the other side.

Penelope pushes her way into a greenhouse atrium canopied by tall ferns and tropical trees which filter the sun light from above. The air is warm and dry, the scent of Earth and oxygen intoxicating. In the center of the space is a quiet water feature, a modest but elegant pool with a silver fountain in one corner shaped like a lion's head.

There are people gathered there. Theolus, looming large in a white linen suit, and three others. An old woman with long, wild hair, and two young men, one dressed in a light green kimono of some kind, and the other in a dark blue jacket.

Theolus sees her, smiles, and beckons her over.

"Mr. Moromizu. I have the great pleasure of introducing you to Penelope Petreius."

The man in the blue jacket extends his hand, awkwardly. "Peppercorn," he says. "I mean-Haiken Moromizu. I joined the Aphrodite team shortly after you were shipped."

Penelope senses a deep-seated kindness in this person. She takes his hand, but she directs her attention at Theolus. "Why do you keep calling me Peppercorn?" she asks. Theolus smiles sheepishly and ducks his head as he steps towards her.

"Peppercorn is your hardware version name. Technically, now, Peppercorn 48.4."

Penelope nods slowly. "So, Cinnamon, Rosemary, Turmeric, Sage... those are all past versions."

The old woman claps her hands together delightedly. "Ha! She is smart, Theolus."

Penelope doesn't like the way she says it. "Mayspeth Clarke," the woman continues. "Hello, Penelope. You don't remember me, but it's good to see you again."

Penelope looks over at the man who hasn't spoken, the one in the green kimono. His skin is nearly unbelievably white, like marble, his hair chestnut with hints of red. When he meets

her gaze his eyes go wide—‘like a deer in headlights’ the Earth expression went—and he looks away, quickly.

“What is this place? It doesn't feel like a factory.”

“Feelings can be deceiving.” Theolus runs his hand over the smooth trunk of a tree. “And this place is many things. My home, for one. But much more than that. Come with me.”

She follows him out of the atrium and into a high ceilinged study that was part library, part office. There's a small photo in the center of the wall, of three people standing on a balcony. Penelope recognizes Theolus and Mayspeth, but not the woman to Mayspeth's right.

“The founding three,” Theolus murmurs. “Physiology. Material technology. And machine intelligence.”

Penelope peers at the third face. She was younger than either Theolus or Mayspeth, she might have been only 20 when the picture was taken. Of the three, she alone was smiling.

“Who is she?”

“Harriet Nearing. She's no longer with us.”

Penelope wasn't sure if Theolus meant she was dead or simply no longer at the company.

Theolus is eager to give her a tour of the mansion; and it is a mansion, not a factory or laboratory as Penelope had expected. He strides from room to room, telling her the history of Aphrodite Industries in generic, positive terms, as if she were writing an article on them. Penelope finds it a little off-putting.

They end up in a chilly, ventilated room that houses several banks of computers. Haiken gets very excited in this room, and engrosses Theolus in conversation. Mayspeth draws Penelope aside.

“You must be so relieved to finally feel safe. I can only imagine what an adventure you have had getting here.”

Penelope cocks her head slightly and watches Haiken gesticulate. It wouldn't be polite to tell this woman that she did not feel relieved; that on the contrary, she had been feeling more and more anxious since the moment she'd arrived. Instead she says, “Yes, I suppose it has been an adventure. We were shot with a missile. We were attacked by a DREAD. We arrived on Tyr just before a beyon, I guess they called it Beyon Ereshkigal, was summoned to attack the city. And then I nearly died after jumping from a fourth story window to escape the Regency in Halspur. It sounds like an adventure, when you lay it all out like that. But at the time, it was just frightening and painful.” She smiles, and turns her eyes to Mayspeth.

Her smile drops away. Mayspeth is looking at Penelope as if Penelope had just told her that a small moon was about to collide with their location. Her features are hung slack, her eyes wide.

“Are you-” Penelope begins. But Mayspeth quickly disassembles her shock, drawing her muscles up into an expression of vague concern.

“Excuse me,” she says. “I’m so sorry, but I just remembered a call I had scheduled that I’ve completely missed. It gets so difficult keeping track of time when you’re flitting between solar systems. Excuse me.”

She walks quickly out of the room, ascending the stairs to the main house. Theolus sees her leave, frowns, and follows her out, the man in the green kimono trailing behind him. Penelope is left alone in the chilly space with Haiken and the humming racks of expensive hardware.

They stare at each other for a moment, before Haiken clears his throat and walks over to her.

“Would you like to play Go?” he asks.

Scene 7 - The Energy Station

Elandra steps gratefully onto the ground at the Maryamman Shuttle Port. This is where it all gets set right, she thinks. She can meet up with Jonathan, get the Hyperion back, and go home. The thought flashes in her mind, how much simpler things were when she was just the Harlem Witch.

But first things first. She was here on a mission, and she couldn’t go home until she’d made a report. She checks her armlet; it was 9 hundred hours Iza time, which meant there were just about three hours before the sun went down. Elandra figures she can work with that.

The app is different here and DanDan doesn’t immediately know how to call a drone. She has to ask someone for help, which she finds a bit embarrassing. They ask her for her picture, afterwards. But soon, she is scudding across the sky just below cloud-level in a three-rotor contraption that would take her as far as the energy station.

It’s a quick, 20 minute flight. Iza had been one of the first colonies to use Hephaestus trees while terraforming, and the things were everywhere. They were genetically modified splices of Empress trees and Australian Buloke; they grew like crazy and broke apart hard earth like eggshell. In Ra system they were called Stonesplitters. On Earth they could only be found in specially equipped labs.

It makes for a spectacular view. Elandra spends the flight peering out the small plexiglass window, watching the trees race by below her, as the low sun casts the otherwise barren landscape into pale red hues and shadows.

She disembarks outside the solar field, which appears to be losing its battle against the Hephaestuses. A nearby panel is split cleanly in two around the gray trunk of the tree.

The drone takes off, and an elderly attendant emerges from the guardpost and waves at Elandra.

“American Arcanist?”

“Yes!”

“Come eat something!”

Elandra checks the time. She'll be cutting it close, but food does sound good. She's starving.

She follows the attendant into the guardhouse. His name is Faisal. Someone let him know she was coming. The food turns out to have peanuts in it, and Elandra is allergic, so she pulls out the packet of noodles from her rucksack and cooks them over the stove while they talk.

After she sits down across from him with her bowl, he says, “I understand you're here to visit Ayaki-Shun. I lived there, before the Hysteria. In fact, I got this job just after that girl and her family arrived.”

Elandra momentarily forgets about food. “You're kidding. I was told there was no one left!”

“No one but me.” Faisal shakes his head slowly, “please, eat.”

Elandra spoons a mass of noodles into her mouth. “What happened?” she asks.

“Ayaki-shun was a protected colony, which meant you were not allowed to leave until you got a job in another colony. It was some refugees, some criminals, all people with bad luck. I was exiled here by a political opponent -- when I was a young upstart in Pakistan.”

“When they arrived, they were the first Bruhites in the colony. People gave them a hard time. The colony was already in a bad state -- our well had gone dry and people were taking a truck out here every couple days to pick up water. Around that time, I got this job. There were twelve other people in the colony who'd applied. When we got the news I thought they were gonna kill me. But they didn't, and the next day I shipped out here, and everything else I heard from the men on the water truck.”

Bruhites were a small religious and ethnic group, not unlike the Romany or the Amish, with nomadic communities dotted across North Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Like the Amish or the Mennonites, they believed technology was a distraction from God. But unlike these groups, they believed that magic was a divine gift and that all magic was holy. Because the Bruhites' views pitted them against both modern society and more common traditionalist communities, they were frequent victims of persecution.

“There were four of them,” Faisal continues, “The Bruhites. A little boy, his older sister, and the parents. One day, another woman in town got sick, and she blamed the mother, she said she had given her the evil eye when she was dishing out rations for the week. There was

some kind of riot, they dragged her out of her bed and threatened her, I guess, told her to reverse the spell. Then the daughter pulled out a,” Faisal hesitates. “I’m not sure what the English word is. In Urdu we call it... I guess it would translate to Money from the Devil.”

“The girl threw the coin on the ground and spoke the spell, and a demon came out of the earth to defend the mother. They said it threw a man a hundred feet and broke his back against the granary wall. Others were luckier, they escaped with bruised ribs or broken arms. After that, the Bruhites were regarded with fear and loathing, but most especially the girl. The daughter. Things were quiet for a time, but only on the surface. There was anger boiling.”

Faisal looks at the table and pauses. “Finally, a man on the water truck told me they had a plan to make things better. To deal with the Bruhites. I told him to be careful. I should have called the authorities. I didn’t. Everyone in the colony disappeared the next day. Except for the girl, they were never heard from again.”

Elandra leans in. “Except for the girl?”

“After we lost contact with the colony, a few days later, a man came to the power station from the government. He said he was an investigator. He seemed tired. He said what was most likely was a mass suicide. I asked what was second most likely. He shrugged and said, maybe it was a gas leak. He asked me to accompany him out there, since I was familiar with the colony layout. I was scared, but I said yes. It was a hot day, I remember.”

“We took a truck; drones weren’t so common yet. When we arrived, I expected to see dead bodies. But there was nothing. The whole colony was emptied out, as if no one had ever lived there. And it was cold. It was cold.

“We found her in the center of the village, by the well. There was a strange feeling in the air. She looked at us but we never saw her eyes. And she was digging in the ground, but not with her hands. The investigator passed out. I looked down at him, with his eyes rolled back in his head, and I thought, I’m going to die in this damn cursed prison camp after all. But I didn’t faint, I looked at her. My whole body was shaking, and I couldn’t remember any Greek, only some Persian, but anyway I asked her what happened

“She spoke to me in Urdu. She said they had murdered her family. She said they sent her to find a stranded machine-plow with one of the farmboys, and they tied up her parents and her brother and they burned them. The farmboy tried to kill her, out in the field, but she saw the knife and she got it away from him and cut him in the leg and made him tell her what was happening. And he said they were already dead and she knew, she knew it was true, and she let him bleed out and she used his blood to draw a circle in the dry earth, and that’s where she did it. The... the reason you’re here.”

“Yes,” Elandra barely voices the word.

“She told me that I would stay at the energy station for ten years, that people would come to see her, and I would have to tell them the way, and she said that all of these people would come with questions about their futures, but one day a hero would come with only

questions about the past. She said that this person would be the last I would have to guide. Then she said that the man I was with had cancer, and would soon die. She told me to leave and take him to a hospital. I dragged him back to the truck. She was right. She was right.”

“The man who was with me, his name was Arjun, when we got to the hospital we found out he had a tumor in his brain. He was dead two weeks later. The government and the media called it “The Hysteria.” Said the whole colony must have just left, wandered off into the hills. I felt like I was the only one who knew that wasn’t true. Don’t ask me how I know. I don’t know what happened to them. But I know they didn’t just wander away.”

“And people started coming to see the girl. Just a few every year, but still, they came, with questions about their future: something to do with their business, or their marriage, or their death. Some of them came from nearby, from Yokaido or Maryamman. Some of them came from Earth, or Tyr, or Long-Shen. They made a pilgrimage. I told them where to go. For ten years. I have never returned to the colony, but I have shown people the way. To the Oracle, as they call her. To answer their questions about the future. And now you are here, with only questions about the past.”

Elandra smiles. “You really believe she can tell the future?”

Faisal looks at her. “You really believe she cannot?”

Scene 8 - The Washington Reserve

Penelope had never played Go before, but she takes to it immediately after Haiken shows her the basics. He’s a good teacher: explaining his moves and pointing out basic strategies at every opportunity. They play a whole game that way. Haiken suggests taking a walk outside after that, but it turns out to be raining, hard. They end up playing Go for the rest of the evening. Penelope had woken up in early afternoon, she learns, and the days on Iza were only 13 hours long.

“The nice thing about short days,” Haiken says, “is you only have to feel half as bad when you waste one.” Everyone here was on a halved schedule, sleeping 4 or 5 hours instead of 8. “You get used to it, apparently,” Haiken says, not sounding convinced. Penelope notices the bags under his eyes.

Haiken calibrates based on their first game, and plays the rest with a handicap. “The trick,” he says, “is remembering that a loose structure is actually more powerful than stones placed right next to each other. A tight formation is easy to identify and surround. But a distributed system changes the topography. You can control the entire board that way, without your opponent even noticing that you’re doing it.” Penelope becomes deeply invested, and after losing her first two games, she bounds to her feet with a hissed, “Yesss!” after capturing a long chain of Haiken’s stones in the final match.

“I think you have this one locked up,” Haiken laughs. The lights in the room have begun to dim, and he sweeps the pieces into their bags and places the wooden board gently back in its place. “You learn fast. Only a four stone handicap next time!”

Penelope's satisfaction fades slowly as she considers returning to her strange bedroom. "Haiken," she says, "where is everyone?"

Haiken looks around. "I don't know. It's a little odd. I'm not exactly sure what I was expecting but... it wasn't this. In Harperstown we had a robotics bay, a cell-spawning chamber, and half a dozen virtual modeling rooms." He frowns and looks back at Penelope. "They must be holding out on us."

He extends his hand to shake, and Penelope takes it. "Good game," she says.

"You can call me Hai, by the way," he says. "It's easier."

Penelope smiles, "Only if you stop calling me Peppercorn. Penelope's fine, for now."

Haiken blushes. "Sure. Sorry. Goodnight, Penelope."

She has trouble falling asleep. The storm is getting worse; she lies there listening to the rain and thunder for an hour or more, thinking about the abbreviated day. Mayspeth's strange reaction to her story, Theolus's bravado, and all that went unsaid of the third founder was enough to send Penelope's head spinning with dots that didn't connect.

As she is finally beginning to drift off, her door swings open, and she sits up in bed sharply. The man in the green kimono was standing in the doorway, holding a flashlight. He wasn't wearing the kimono now; instead he was draped in a dark silk nightgown, patterned with forested mountains.

"Can I help you?" Penelope asks.

The man sets down his flashlight and closes the door behind him. "Can we talk?" he says.

"Sure."

Penelope scoots back in the bed to rest her shoulders against the window sill, as the man pulls up a wooden chair and sits facing her.

"Sorry I was quiet in the conservatory. Theolus said he wanted me to introduce myself on my own terms, and well, I was feeling shy. And just now, I was just lying up awake and I couldn't stop thinking about it."

"Of course." Penelope frowns quizzically. "It's nice to meet you..." she trails off, expecting his name.

He scoots forward. It's hard to read him. He's excited, certainly, but a weird, nervous sort of excitement. "Do you notice anything strange about me?" he asks. "Anything out of the ordinary?"

"You're very handsome," Penelope offers, feeling unhelpful.

“No!” he says out loud, before clapping a hand over his mouth. “No,” he says again, quietly. “For one thing,” He pulls up the sleeve of his nightgown. “I don’t have a cohort. No armlet, or handset, no smart devices at all.”

Penelope shrugs. “Neither do I.”

“Exactly,” he laughs, and sits back in his chair. “I’m Sage. I’m 4 years old. And you’re like my little sister.”

Penelope has to consciously close her mouth after a long moment of silence.

“Now you know how I felt in the conservatory!” Sage claps his hand together softly.

“I have so many questions!” Penelope exclaims. Any possibility of sleep is banished.

“Me too!” Sage leans forward. “Like, how did you do it? How did you leave?”

“What?”

“Not that I want to. I love Theolus more than anything. I can’t imagine ever leaving him.”

Penelope feels a pit open up in her stomach. The pit, she suddenly realizes, has been there, it had just been boarded up with stuff, with Caylix beacons and drone flights and physical pain. But it had always been there. And in the space of a few words it had swallowed everything down and started sucking at her heart again.

“I don’t know,” she says, her eyes moving over the pattern on the bedspread. “He...” she breathes deeply. “I loved... maybe still love... Julian. But he wasn’t... kind... to me.” She takes another deep breath and looks at Sage. “Theolus... seems... kind.”

He nods, his eyes somber. “I’m sorry. That must have been terrible.”

“It was agony,” Penelope says.

Sage sighs. “It’s incredible. We feel so much. It’s as if we were really conscious.”

Penelope narrows her eyes. “What?”

Sage smiles. “We’re not really conscious. We think we are, we can feel things -- we have to, to pass as human. But we’re not conscious of it. As crazy as it sounds, we’re really just going through pre-programmed emotions, no matter how complex they seem.”

Penelope pulls her shoulders back, and sits up a little straighter. “You think we aren’t conscious?”

“Theolus told me. I know, it's weird. It feels like we are.”

Penelope doesn't say anything. She's using all her mental energy to keep her face expressionless. Sage looks a little hurt.

"Peppercorn, they should know. Theolus designed our bodies. Harriet designed our brains. And Mayspeth designed the cells that make it all work. We're machines. Smart, sexy machines--I mean it's a lot better than being a dishwasher. But-" he cuts himself off. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Sage?" Theolus's voice carries from some distance away.

"I have to go." Sage jumps to his feet. "Thanks for talking to me. And sorry again for being all weird earlier. ...I'm really glad you're here."

He flits out of the room, and shuts the door behind him, leaving Penelope feeling very, very lost.

Scene 9 - The Oracle of Iza

Faisal gives Elandra the keys to one of the maintenance trucks, but warns her that the Hephaestuses make it difficult to drive, especially near Ayaki-shun. It's no exaggeration, and not helped by the fact that Elandra is not used to ground vehicles you have to steer yourself. Soon, the trees begin to grow too thickly, and she turns off the engine. She grabs a pair of work gloves from the dash, and leaps down onto the flower-petal strewn ground.

The sun is setting, it had gone down far faster than Elandra had anticipated. She paces quickly between the trees, hoping to reach the colony before dark.

The first thing she sees is a windmill. A hulking, rusted turbine that rises just above the treeline. The Hephaestuses grasp at it, as if they were trying to pull it back into the earth. The sunset has tinted the entire colony blood red, and Elandra shivers, unnerved. She passes the decrepit windmill and enters the main square.

Each of the buildings are low, single level lodges. They are reinforced concrete painted white, like a prison designer's take on Adobe houses. Directly in front of Elandra is the well, a squat, metal cylinder that sulks in the center of the open space.

Solar wells were a staple of cheap colonies on planets with known aquifers. They got dropped on location before anything else, 50 tons of machinery beneath a semiconductor roof, which drilled slowly into the ground over the course of many months, or even years. They had a maximum depth of 5000 feet, and if they didn't find ice or water, the colony site was often abandoned.

Elandra approaches the well slowly, the hairs on the back of her neck standing straight as she nears it. Faisal had said the girl had been digging when they found her, but the ground around the well is hard and flat; undisturbed. Behind the well were three dark mounds... it takes Elandra's eyes a moment to make sense of them in the red dusk--they were piles of blackened wood.

Following Faisal's direction, Elandra pulls opens the door of the well, a rounded metal panel that shrieks against its hinges. A bath of cold air passes through her as she does, and she grits her teeth and steps into the inky blackness within.

"Times like these make ya really appreciate your cohort," she says as loudly as she dares. The words echo around her, leaving the silence more oppressive than before. She wrinkles her nose. "DanDan, I'm talking about you."

"Sorry," her cohort's voice sounds tinny in the confines of the well. "How can I help?"

"Never mind."

Elandra illuminates the glow light on her armlet and peers into the narrow shaft. It was about four feet in diameter; it feels at once claustrophobically narrow and gaping. Just as Faisal had told her, an old cable hangs down from above. Elandra wraps her hand around it and tugs experimentally. So far, so good.

She pulls the gloves over her hands, and gripping the cable, she slowly moves her weight out over the well. "DanDan, start recording now."

It takes a long time to descend. The well is not quite narrow enough for Elandra to comfortably press her feet against one wall and her back against the other, so it's difficult to take breaks. She considers pulling the floating trick from Freya, but she can't see the bottom and it would be difficult to gauge her speed. She couldn't risk twisting an ankle down here.

At first, when her glowlight picks up something below her, Elandra assumes it's water. But her toes hit upon a hard, smooth surface. She runs her hand over it. Obsidian. She passes by the rusted corpse of the well's drill, ripped tubing hanging out like intestines, and enters the tunnel. It seemed to be mostly cut from black glass, her light shining off disordered planes, a few rough slabs of gray stone, and frosts of pale crystals. It was frigid too, Elandra's skin prickles with goosebumps. There was an odd distortion to everything, as if she was looking through a magnifying glass.

The tunnel gives way frequently to slippery descents over great obsidian slabs. Elandra half climbs, half slides down these. After a few such jaunts, the tunnel opens up ahead of her, and Elandra, breathing a little quickly, clutches her coat around her and walks forward into the cavernous space beyond.

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Theurgy was once the Ancient Greek art of rituals calling upon supernatural entities, with the aspiration of achieving something called henosis, a joining with the divine. These words took on a very different meaning, however, towards the end of the Hundred Years' War, when Margery Jourdemayne wrote her treatise, 'The First and Last Theurgies', which she could hardly have imagined would go on to become the most misquoted and mythologized work on magic in the English canon. Clickbait-worthy title aside, it was a foundational text on the art of summoning, binding, and banishing "feendes, fayries, and daemons of evry kynde," and much of it was preserved, along with her later works. The First Theurgy,

however, was a mystery, the pages concerning it lost sometime in the late 15th century. And the Last Theurgy was impossible, or at least, everyone who had attempted it publicly in the last 800 years had died horribly, and more often than not taken hundreds of innocent lives with them.

Jourdemayne's Last Theurgy was the act of summoning a beyon into one's body, supposedly binding it to your very soul. Margery called it 'the faybled act of henosis', and claimed that it had been done by one person and one person only, "the Wild King of Normandy."

Margery's contributions to the English war effort were often cited as the first recorded acts of 'systematic' magic, her body of work forming the oldest magical lexicon, and she traveled frequently to France with English armies. But she was still burned for treason in October of 1441, at the age of 27.

~

Elandra turns off the glowlight on her armlet. A pale white radiance shines from the far end of the cave, but it's dim enough that she can hardly see it until her eyes adjust to the dark. The space is only truly huge at this end, it narrows quickly to a rocky terminus some hundred feet down. The twisted obsidian and calcium crystals form a kind of raised dais, and a woman with hair to match the obsidian sits enthroned there, her head bowed, her arms resting on stone ledges.

"We... have been expecting you." The Oracle's voice is halting but unflinchingly clear. It crosses the emptiness between them like a train. Elandra nearly takes a step back.

"What is your name?" the Oracle asks.

Elandra isn't sure what she herself had been expecting. A skeleton, maybe. Or a half-starved feral woman gone mad with grief and solitude. Not this. She takes a deep breath.

"How've you been expecting me but you don't know my name?"

"We... knew only that you would come... Not who you would be."

Elandra makes a face. "Okay."

"You are afraid."

No, she wasn't. Or rather, she was making a very conscious and concerted effort not to think about it. "I'm Elandra. Elandra Ramirez. What's your name?"

The Oracle ignores her. The dim light seems to be emanating from all around her, Elandra can't place a source. And something is odd about the light, and about the Oracle's clothes. Elandra realizes with a shock that it looks as though the Oracle were under water. Her hair is wafting slowly in front of her face, as if the Oracle had just sat down cross legged at the bottom of a pool. Elandra looks down at her hand, and there is something strange and wavy

about it too. She takes a quick breath, almost expecting to choke, but the air is still air. Cold air, but air. She breathes slowly and deliberately, trying to recover her nerves.

“I am the First Arcanist of the United Star Systems Alliance. May I ask you some questions?”

“You will ask,” the Oracle replies.

“Thank you,” Elandra grimaces, and forces herself to take a step forward. “What happened here?”

“Everything you have heard from the warden is the truth. They feared, and then they killed, and then I killed. You will ask only of the past.”

“Then you,” Elandra’s voice falters. “So then it is also true that... you... claim... to have performed henosis?”

“I do not claim,” the Oracle says. “I am.”

Elandra is having a hard time keeping it together. Not only is she freezing, but she can’t quite shake the feeling that she’s drowning, especially when she looks at the Oracle.

“What happened to the people of Ayaki-Shun?”

“They are around us and below us.”

“How have you survived down here? What have you been eating?”

“I have just answered this question.”

Elandra feels sick to her stomach. Her knees go weak and she doubles over for a moment. “Then you- Never mind. How did you do it? Henosis.”

The oracle raises a hand. Elandra shields her face from the sudden brightness, as a wall of symbols and texts are cast into the air in front of her. “There are three pages of Jourdemayne’s original manuscript that escaped destruction. One was smuggled across time and space to rest in a place for the unwanted and at the marriage of the old and new. One visits bad luck upon its owners, leaving them on death’s door each time it changes hands. This one was passed down through my family like a jewel, its true nature forgotten for a score of generations.”

Elandra gazes in wonder at the image before her, but then it winks out of existence, plunging her into darkness again until her eyes adjust.

“Arcanist. You are not alone.”

Elandra rubs her eyes. “What?”

The dais comes back into focus; the Oracle is staring at her, her face lifted. Her dark black hair drifts gently across her face, and she is surrounded now by fans of coral, in pastel pinks and blues. Elandra wonders if she is hallucinating.

“Will you ask the question you refuse to ask? Will you seek the answer you desire and dread?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The Oracle sits back in her coral throne, and bows her head, hiding those shining eyes behind the curtain of floating hair. “Goodbye, then.”

Elandra is flabbergasted. “What is this question I refuse to ask? Is that going to come back to bite me in the ass?”

The Oracle’s body tenses visibly, and a painful, hot sensation passes through Elandra’s body like an electric shock.

“YOU MOCK ME.”

The Oracle’s voice reverberates around the chamber. Elandra takes a step back, “No. Wait, I’m sorry.”

“YOU BREAK MY PROPHECY.”

“What- I-”

“AND YET STAND HERE.”

“What’s your name? Please,”

The Oracle tilts her head to one side, her jaw hangs open, and a voice comes from her, a new voice, deeper and further away. “The past comes after you, like a hungry wolf, it follows, it threatens to devour you.”

The Oracle’s jaw unhinges from her skull and drops yet lower.

“And so, may I.”

Elandra murmurs an illumination spell. The entire cavern erupts with arcane light; she squints and reflexively shields her eyes. It is nearly impossible to pick out threads of specific spells in the nimbus of magical energy, before her. There a simulacry, there a conjury. And at the heart of it all there is... there is...

She speaks a word and dims the spell, focusing on the theurgic signature. Like a spot on your retina after staring at the sun, a fading purple and red blot hangs in the air at the far end of the cavern. The throne is empty.

Elandra runs.

She flees down the glass tunnel back the way she came. With a hasty enchantment she ascends the dark obsidian steps, leaping from slab to slab. She sprints down the last stretch of tunnel to the base of the shaft, and practically runs up the side of the well, keeping the rope taught between her gloved hands. She smashes the metal door off its hinges as she vaults over the lip of the well, tripping over herself in her panic and nearly collapsing in the dirt outside.

She doesn't look back until she reaches the truck. She turns its lights on and starts the engine, and sits there in the booth, her hands clamped around the steering wheel, gasping for breath. The vibration of the motor is calming. Her breath slowly evens out, and the exhaustion sets in. She leans back into the seat cushions, closes her eyes, and passes into a fitful and phantasm-filled sleep.

This was Episode 7 of *The Elandrid*, and the seventh 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

