

THE ELANDRID

a story by Thomas

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The Elandrid, Episode 12

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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 12 - Neither the Beginning nor the End

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 - Harlem

Elandra was an only child. Technically she'd had a much-older half brother, but he had died when she was just a baby. She'd also had a younger brother, Orlando, but he'd caught something in the hospital shortly after being born. He died before he made it home. Elandra hadn't really understood it at the time, but her parents had taken it hard. Her uncle Vin once said that Orlando's death was when her parents' faith became an obsession.

They were at church every night and all day Sunday, and they dragged Elandra with them. For who knows what reason, call it contrariness or precociousness or what you will, it never really spoke to Elandra. She complained bitterly, which made her parents angry. They said she was embarrassing them in front of the other parishioners, the solution to which, ultimately, was to leave her behind. Spoken in a single sentence like that, it sounds easy, but these were hard fought and hard earned victories for Elandra, won with tireless tiresomeness and at the expense of her relationship with Daniel and Lorena Ramirez.

Her uncle didn't care for church either. She would take shelter at his small apartment; they would play cards and drink fruit-flavored juice and talk about school and this or that. It was at her uncle's that she first did magic: things simply started appearing around the place, toys and dolls that Vin didn't remember seeing before. He tried returning them to Daniel and Lorena one day but they had never seen them either.

Elandra still remembers the fight that ensued. "I will not have a thief as a daughter!" her father had said. Elandra wept and promised they weren't stolen. "They're all wrong anyway!" she'd said. "I make them from memory but they never turn out right!"

Vin had looked at them then, really looked at them. It was true, there was something not quite right about them. The eyes on the dolls were out of place or lopsided sizes. The hair pulled out and fell away when you touched it. The wheels on the cars didn't turn and none of the space ships took batteries; they were just lumps of plastic.

Vin and Elandra visited the toy store the following day. Vin turned over the yellow spaceship in his hands, while Elandra pointed through the window. "There," she said. "It's the one they keep showing on NV."

Vin looked. In the toy store window was a display featuring a realistic model spaceship. A yellow Oxide Industries Springsteen. "REALLY FLIES!" the sign proclaimed. Vin looked at the lump of plastic in his hands. It was roughly the right shape and color. But it certainly didn't "really fly" ...and it never had. He turned his eyes on Elandra.

"How did you make this?" He asked.

Elandra shrugged. "I just did."

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Vin called Lakiri the next day. "What do you think?" he'd said, pushing the spaceship across the table to her. "Is it gonna turn back into a potato on the night of the full moon?"

Lakiri snorted. "Only you would jump to some conflation of Cinderella and werewolves when confronted with supernatural phenomena," she said.

Lakiri was hard to describe. She was broad shouldered and round faced, and she always wore a colorful gele, or headwrap. But Lakiri's height and weight were hard to pin down. Some days she seemed tall, and some days she seemed short. Sometimes she appeared trim and muscular, and other times she sunk into herself like a deflated grocery bag. Lakiri attributed this to what she called a "hypersensitive psychosomatic morphology," but Elandra guessed there was some magic to it as well.

"How old are you? Ten? When did you start making things like this?" Lakiri asked Elandra. "Can you do it now?"

Elandra was nervous. She looked to her uncle, and Vin nodded encouragement, before she said. "What do you want me to make?"

Lakiri thought for a moment before answering. Finally she said: "Yoruba magic has this idea called *iwa-ami*. It's what you conjure into existence, when you do not seek to conjure any particular thing. It can be difficult, but it's easier when you're young. ...I'd like you to try and make an *iwa-ami*."

"I'm not sure I know how to do that..." Elandra said.

"That's okay." Lakiri slapped the table. "Just focus the same way that you did when you made this model spaceship, but without the spaceship. Close your eyes, and conjure."

Elandra closed her eyes. She concentrated. It was strange to try and *make* without making *something*. But she furrowed her brow and tried. She felt warmth on her cheeks, and her closed eyelids glowed for a moment as if a ray of sunlight had passed across her face. She opened her eyes.

"Did I do it?"

Lakiri and Vin were looking at her with wide eyes. It scared Elandra a little; she backed away. Vin extended his arms quickly and drew her into a hug. "You did good," he said. "We's just surprised."

Lakiri stood up. "I'll begin training her tomorrow. You said she comes here after school most days?"

Vin nodded.

"Good," Lakiri said. "We got work to do." She left without another word.

Elandra was still holding onto Vin. "What does she mean?" Elandra said.

“She means she sees something in you,” he said. “Something... powerful.” Vin frowned. “She wants to help you use it. Is that okay with you?”

Elandra clutched her uncle’s shirt. “Mumma and Dad won’t like it,” she said.

“No,” Vin said. “But maybe... we don’t have to tell them.” He made a funny face, and Elandra laughed. “Not for a while, at least,” he said.

For the next twelve years, Elandra and Lakiri met almost every day. At first, they didn’t even do magic. Lakiri would make tea while Elandra finished her homework, and then they would go out into the city together and “practice learning.” That’s what Lakiri called it. “Practicing learning.” She took Elandra to unused boxing studios to spar. She took her to the public library to read. She took her to Riverside Park and pushed her into the water, and only later did she teach her how to swim. There was no formal lesson plan, and Elandra rocked between frustration with and admiration for Lakiri’s improvisational way of doing things. Once, they came upon a broken handset in the road, and Lakiri picked it up excitedly.

“What are we going to do with that?” Elandra had said. Lakiri grinned mischievously, and that weekend, she drove Elandra up to the Adirondacks in a borrowed car and they camped for the night. It was November, and blisteringly cold. Elandra was furious to learn that Lakiri had brought no kindling. “How are we going to start a fire!?” she said. “We’ll freeze to death!”

Lakiri tossed her the broken handset. “Use this.” she said.

“You’re crazy!” Elandra yelled. “How’m I supposed to use it when it’s busted!? Magic?”

Lakiri shook her head. “No magic. It’s easy to start a fire with magic. It’s harder to start one with a broken smartphone.”

Elandra stared at the cracked glass rectangle in her hand. Finally she looked up at Lakiri. “The battery... can we light the logs with a battery fire?”

Lakiri nodded at the hunting knife resting between them. “Cover your mouth and nose,” she said. “And stab through the back.”

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The next day, Lakiri taught Elandra a spell for warmth. It had snowed overnight, and they had just finished packing up their campsite. They sat facing each other on a large boulder.

“Thermal sorcery is very easy,” Lakiri said. “It’s just shaking atoms. Here,” she placed a hand over Elandra’s chest and murmured, “Komensorcas Varmakrei.”

Elandra gasped as heat bathed her goosebumped skin. “Komensorcas Varmakrei,” she repeated, warming her arms and face.

Lakiri watched her for a while. Then she turned and stared into the wintry forest.

“Yoruba practice varies widely from people to people,” she said. “It was splintered by the trade of slaves, leading to many variations of the faith, and little written canon. My faith traveled to the Caribbean, and later to France and England before delivering my ancestors to America. My grandmother used to say that the breath of life was light. She said, ‘Thank the light,’ instead of ‘thank god.’”

Lakiri turned her face up to the gray sky and dark trees, pausing for a moment before continuing: “Faith is a form of light, and so is magic. We preserved our traditions and built new ones in order to defend our souls from darkness...” She locked eyes with Elandra then, an odd intensity in her voice. “You have a brilliant light in you. And throughout your life, there will be forces that seek to extinguish your light. Do not let them. Protect your light. Though it may dim and flicker in the wind, never doubt that it is there. Do you understand?”

Elandra nodded.

It was a strange conversation, and Elandra remembered it well. For the most part, Lakiri was not one prone to long monologues, and this was the only of its kind. They continued training together until Elandra’s 22nd birthday, when Lakiri was shot to death during a protest against mass evictions.

Scene 2 - Apollo Station

On Apollo Station, sitting across from Avander in the green room just a few steps from the sound stage, Elandra is still in shock.

“So then,” Avander says. He leaps to his feet and begins pacing. “So then,” he says again. “You have clearly been put through the absolute ringer. And where there’s no harm done, there’s no...” he trails off.

He sits down and kneads his brow between his fingers. “I’ll speak to the Consul,” he says. “I’ll speak to...”

He gets up again moves to the bar. His hand shakes as he pours himself a drink. “I’m sure there will be... leniency,” he says. He turns to Elandra. “Can I make you a drink?” he says, out of habit, perhaps.

A knock comes at the door, and the PA lets herself in again. Avander nearly drops his glass. “Yes, what’s going on out there?” he barks.

“Mr. Thorn,” the PA says. “We need you to return to the stage.”

“How am I supposed to continue the show?” Avander exclaims, “with a vanished guest?”

Elandra notices that the PA looks strange, a little pale. Her face strained. “There’s a breaking story,” she says. “They need you to get back on the loop right now and cover it.”

Avander goes still. "Alright," he says. He looks at Elandra. "I'll check on you as soon as..." he trails off, looks away, and leaves.

Elandra follows him to the door. Two men are waiting for her, in black surcoats over purple doublets. Guns were tightly controlled on space stations like the OSS Apollo, but automatic weapons are holstered at their thighs. The bars at their collars identify them as Keepers of the Consulate.

"Arcanist Ramirez," one of them says. "Would you come with us, please?"

What choice did she have? Elandra goes with them.

Scene 3 - Halspur College of Sciences

Bridget walks down the colonnade of the Halspur College of Sciences to the main building. The stone pillars to her left and right had been cut from automated quarry facilities, assembled by pre-programmed construction machines. Bridget wonders if it's only her imagination that it feels so false. A sterile imitation of ancient grandeur. But would she feel that way if she didn't know its origin?

There weren't many people about. Using her right arm only, Bridget pushes through the double doors into the building and is surprised to see that even the information desk is abandoned.

"Hello?" Bridget says. She paces in a circle, and comes to a stop. No one answers.

She hauls her way up a flight of stairs to a floor of classrooms and wanders from hall to hall. She peeks into offices and inspects the metal plates on the walls, until finally, she finds the name she is looking for and without waiting pushes open the door to his office.

Inside, a middle-aged man is standing over one of the two desks. He holds a book in his left hand, and his right hand is inside of a large cardboard box. Slowly, he lowers the book into the box. "Can I help you?" he says.

Bridget is shocked to discover a real person. At this point, she'd been hoping to find an address, not a living body.

"I'm uh-" She flashes a smile, "Are you Oscar Sanchez? Professor of Biotechnology and Botany?"

The man looks away, and resumes packing items into the box. A picture frame, a stuffed rhinoceros, a stress ball. "Oscar's dead," he says. "He was killed a couple of weeks ago, caught in the crossfire between a group of Freewolves and the Colonial Guard. I'm just gathering up some of his things to return to his family."

"Oh." Bridget feels her stomach drop into her feet. She leans back and looks again at the plaque by the door. "I'm sorry," she says. "Does that make you... Isaac Arosa, Economics?"

The man stops packing up his box. "Indeed it does," he says. "And you..." he regards her. "American accent. Leather jacket over Orbital Control uniform. You must be Bridgeta Lozano, the Longsend Regent."

"No one's Regent," Bridget corrects him sharply. "Not anymore. And I prefer Bridget. If you don't mind."

Isaac purses his lips and tilts his head to one side. He is slender, with short curly hair. His skin is brown like coffee filters; his sweater vest and glasses make for an effortlessly academic affect. "I don't mind," he says. "But may I ask why you prefer Bridget? Bridgeta is your given name, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Bridget makes a face. "Bridgeta's just so. I dunno. It's just so, Tex-Mex, you know?"

Isaac shrugs. "What's wrong with Tex-Mex? Personally, I think it's great. One of the best things to come out of America."

Bridget laughs. "Now I know you're not an American... Where are you from?"

"Here," Isaac says. "Born and raised." He sniffs. The bones of his knuckles shine with his grip on the cardboard box. "Oscar and I shared this office for three years," he says. "May I ask why you wanted to speak with him?"

"Yeah," Bridget thrusts her right hand into her jacket pocket. "I was hoping to get his advice about... well, about food. About growing food, or rather how to grow more of it."

"I see." Isaac frowns. "Yes. It is particularly difficult here."

"Why?" Bridget slides into a chair. "Why aren't there just farms? Like on Earth?"

Isaac's mouth twists. "Well, the natural resources are very different here. Fertile soil is in short supply. So farming, in the traditional sense, mostly happens in advanced greenhouses, of which there are relatively few."

"So we need more greenhouses."

Isaac raises his eyebrows. "It depends. Greenhouses are very expensive, and the people here are very poor. And that makes it very difficult for greenhouse produce to compete with synthiate. Not to mention that the question of legal tender is very much in question, thanks to Commander Longsend's rebellion."

He closes up the box and continues. "A good rule of economics is: fighting the market is rarely effective... even if you think the market is bad, or wrong. If your goal is to feed people, I would begin by asking why Hartridge Inc. is the only producer of synthiate on Tyr."

Bridget watches Isaac tape up the box of Oscar's things. "Hey," she says. "Any chance I could convince you to come with me to the synthiate plant right now? I'll drop you off anywhere you like afterwards."

Isaac thinks for a moment. "I would be happy to help," He says at last. "I like not starving to death as much as the next man."

"Good," Bridget grins darkly. "We just have to make one quick pit stop..."

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The sheaf of pamphlets lands in front of Andrea with a weighty shwumf.

"What is this?" Andrea asks. "Who is this?" She indicates Isaac. " 'Halspur College of Sciences!?' " she reads.

Bridget shrugs. "You'll be matriculating with the trade sciences class of 2332."

"What the hell!" Andrea throws a pamphlet across the room. "I don't want this! What's 'trade sciences?'"

"It's university for people who can't afford to cunt around!" Bridget snaps back, retrieving the pamphlet and slapping it down in front of Andrea again. "You heard your mom, I can't get you blown up, so I pulled some strings and got you enrolled in the Spring semester."

"You're sending me to college!? Jesus."

"Hey, you're lucky I'm not sending you back to high school!" Bridget points her finger at Andrea menacingly. "Now look through here and pick out some classes, you need to register by the end of the week."

She stalks out of the room. Isaac approaches the table and presses his finger to one of the pamphlets. "I hear Principles of Commerce is very good," he says, then he follows Bridget out the door.

Scene 4 - Zubira Technical Institute

"Felix and Sage are returning to the building."

Penelope doesn't ask how Harriet knows. It was clear by now that she knew just about anything she knew she needed to know.

Penelope rises to her feet, and so does Harriet's avatar. "I'm going to decommission the sNet address you've been communicating with," Harriet says. "But I promise... I'll see you again soon."

Penelope nods. "I have one more question," she says. "You said that... you said that LADA was not the reason you disappeared."

"That's right," Harriet shifts on her avatar's feet.

“So what was?”

Harriet pauses.

“I’ll tell you,” she says. “But before I do... I want to emphasize that... sometimes very beautiful, wonderful things come from bad places. Alfred Nobel established the Nobel Peace Prize because a newspaper accidentally published his obit and called him out for inventing modern explosives.”

Penelope tilts her head to one side, “I understand,” she says.

“I often think,” Harriet continues, “that my invention of artificial intelligence wouldn’t have been possible without my experience of dysphoria! It was that constant discomfort, that tension between two seemingly incongruous ideas, that led me to the Loose Association algorithm...”

Penelope steps forward. “Harriet,” she says. “Why did you leave Aphrodite?”

Harriet’s avatar displays a distraught expression. “I left...” she says, “because I learned something terrible. Something that I felt certain would cost me my life if I stayed. Because Mayspeth knew I’d discovered it.”

“Mayspeth?” Penelope frowns. “What did it have to do with her?”

Harriet’s avatar backs its way into the corner.

“The eels. The DREAD. The autonomous spaceship killers. We all know that was a weapon developed by the Russian Interstellar Federation.”

“Except it wasn’t. It was a joint project, developed by the USSA and the RIF in tandem. The Alliance just didn’t expect it to be deployed against them.”

“Doctor Mayspeth Clarke, Pioneer in Nanotechnology and Material Sciences... she worked on the DREAD project. In many ways, the regenerating nano-fibers that make up your physiology... they’re not so different from the ones that make up a DREAD.”

“As if that’s not enough, she was still in contact with the surviving members of her research team. She still believed it had potential as a deterrent; she wanted to resurrect the project. She thought that she could finally put an end to war, if people knew that any war would result in the DREAD consuming and thereby annihilating all natural resources... and life as we know it.”

The avatar falls suddenly slack. Its arms swing forward, and it tips into the corner, as the lecture hall door opens to let in Felix and Sage.

“Hey,” Felix says. He tosses Penelope a water bottle. “What happened?” he asks. “No show?”

Penelope nods. “Yeah,” she says. Then... “Let’s go rescue Haiken.”

Scene 5 - Apollo Station

Avander frowns into the camera, his handsome face stretched thin across his bones. "I'm sorry to interrupt our interview with the Arcanist," he says. "But an urgent matter has just been brought to my attention, and I'm afraid it cannot wait."

We have just received word from Commander Jon Harper of Freya and Commander Sarasa Chen of Chiron that they intend to separate from the United Star Systems Alliance. Effective, immediately. If the Consulate does not publicly accede to this request in the next three hours, they say drastic measures will be taken."

Avander takes a deep breath. "Now, obviously this is completely insane," he begins.

Elsewhere, Elandra is escorted down the hall by the two Keepers of the Consulate. She eyes each of them in turn. They were a head taller than her. Both clean-shaven with heavy brows. "Where are we going?" she asks.

"Back to your room," one answers.

Elandra looks down. "Sure," she says.

Back on the soundstage, Avander leans forward. "Let me be clear. This is a terrible idea. So terrible it's almost not worth speaking about. Independence from Earth means independence from critical infrastructure that has supported the colonies for over a hundred years. It means that all the pains of exoplanet living will only grow worse."

Avander raises his hands, "and yes," he says. "It means war."

Elandra can't cast an illumination without drawing attention, instead she closes her eyes, focuses, and silently wills her eyes to see what cannot be seen. She breathes hard. She nearly walks into one of the Keepers as they round a corner.

He places a heavy hand on her shoulder. "This way."

Elandra opens her eyes. The lines of her own interference swim before her eyes in a blur of warm light... by contrast, the Keepers' interferences are rigid lines, a criss-cross halo of neon energy around their heads.

"Arcanist?" The man's hand is firm. "You alright?"

Elandra blinks. "I'm clear-eyed," she says, and continues down the hall.

On the soundstage, Avander presses his fingers against the table in front of him.

"There is a delicate balance among the Three Republics. A de-stabilization such as this could be catastrophic to human civilization at large. This is not the American Revolution. This is a power-play by greedy plutocrats."

Elandra and the Keepers turn onto a hallway that leads past the main concourse. As they approach the open archway, Elandra raises her hands and speaks a single word, "Statikarnum."

The keepers' interferences glow super-bright; they begin sparking violently. The keepers yell and draw their weapons. Elandra pulls one of their guns from their hands and drops to the floor. She sweeps their legs, then takes off running through the concourse with the stolen gun.

She runs through the lobby, carrying the stolen rifle; at the far end, she sees the cyclovator doors closing. Elandra sprints down the hall but not fast enough. The doors slide shut in front of her. She doesn't stop. With a blast of energy, she slides them back out of her way, and leaps onto the wall of the cyclovator-car, scrabbling for purchase before she finds it, the wind whipping through her as the car races upward with a constant angular momentum, the wheels shrieking against the tracks below her.

When the cyclovator finally slows to a halt, she waits, hanging onto its side in Zero-G. As it begins to move, she let's go, and kicks off the wall into the outer doors, prying them open with the butt of her gun, pushing her way into the public gate. There weren't many people here, just a scared looking attendant, a few Orbital Control officers, and some station security. With a grunt of effort, she murmurs, "Komensorcas Varmekrei," and points at each of the security officers handguns in turn. Their rubber grips bubble and melt, and the officers drop them with pained yelps.

As the other staff flee or shelter against the wall, Elandra floats forward to the great glass window overlooking the bay. She sees many ships below, yellow tubing snaking to one or two of them. And she sees the Hyperion, some 200 feet out.

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"In my opinion," Avander finishes, "It is an enormous error to try and bully the United Star Systems with ill-conceived threats. But of course, it's not my call to make. The Consulate has already given its answer, and its answer... is no."

"Tell Gabriel Berns that if the Republic wants me, he'd better come get me himself!" Elandra says. She squints down the barrel of her rifle and fires in a tight circle, burying bullets in the super-glass. The force of the recoil drives her backwards, she turns and launches herself off the back wall. She chambers her knees against her chest, and expels all the breath in her lungs with a single kick to the center of the circle.

The glass shatters and Elandra is sucked out into the vacuum of the bay.

Emergency steel shutters slam into place behind her. She has about 12 seconds to make it to the Hyperion. She conjures force to speed her to her yellow Springsteen, her arms outstretched, seeking the side-door airlock. 9 seconds. She's almost there. 6 seconds. Her saliva bubbles against her tongue. 3 seconds. She's entering her door code at the exterior console. 1 second. The side entrance airlock opens and Elandra collapses inside.

DanDan pipes up over the Hyperion's intercom. "Arcanist, you are suffering from decompression sickness. I will contact Apollo Medical Services."

Elandra gasps. "Never mind that," she says, "Unmoor from the station and take us into a re-entry pattern. Now!"

Scene 6 - The Synthiate Plants

Isaac and Bridget are given a tour of the synthiate plant by Bob Lancer, a pudgy white man with rosy cheeks and a persistent grin. He was the Director of Operations in Halspur, and a company man for Hartridge Inc. It's getting late by the time they arrive, but Bob said he couldn't be happier to keep the place open for them.

"It's such an honor to be visited by real heroes like you two," he says merrily when he greets them, "a freedom fighter and a teacher. Real heroes." He claps Isaac on the back and escorts them downstairs.

Together with Bob's assistant, a slender, dark-haired girl a little bit younger than Bridget, they slip on green plastic coveralls and walk through an airlock of sorts into the facility proper, a ventilated space filled with the sound of humming machinery and lit by enormous solar lamps, each shining over an enormous metal vat. Bob directs their attention to these, as if there was anything else in the room worth looking at. "This is where the magic happens," he says. "We evacuate waste through those pipes, there, and pump in air and water here. And by the way, we tap that water straight from the aquifer, so it's loaded with iron, calcium, sodium, every important mineral there is."

"And what about the harvest?" Isaac asks.

"It's brilliant," Bob spreads his hands wide. "As the produce reaches critical mass, it starts to thicken near the top, nearest the lamps, so we just continuously skim the top layer into the filtration pipeline. Here!"

He pulls a hinged ladder out from the side of one of the drums and offers a hand to Bridget. She ignores it, pulling herself up with some difficulty using only her right hand, and keeping her left hand shoved into her jacket pocket. The vats had no tops; from her vantage point on the ladder, she sees a long blade move in a smooth circle, continuously scooping a top layer of thick green fluid down into the central pipe.

"How does it work?" she asks. "It seems pretty simple."

"In a way, it is simple!" Bob laughs. Bridget reluctantly accepts a hand on the way down. "Let me ask you this, what is... food?" He raises his eyebrows at Bridget, before jabbing his finger at her. "I'll tell ya. It's proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. Carbon. Hydrogen. Oxygen. Nitrogen. You know where you find those things?"

"Air and water," Isaac answers, dryly.

“That’s right,” Bob leans backwards, beaming. “Plants do a pretty good job at turning one into the other, but the policy at Hartridge Inc is, we can do better! These microbes reproduce like crazy, they photosynthesize sugars, fats, and proteins at a rate nearly 100 times that of organic lima beans.”

Bridget and Isaac meet each others’ eyes.

“Now, before you say anything else,” Bob interjects, with the air of someone who has saved the best for last. “I want you to know that we at Hartridge are just as happy to be feeding people in the Independent Citizens’ Tyr as we were the United Star Systems’. But will we put our money where our mouth is? Yes we will.”

He extends his hand, and his assistant fumbles in her bag and pulls from it a strange metal tab, engraved with an ornate ligature. She places this in Bob’s hand, and Bob offers it to Bridget.

“What is this?”

“It’s twelve hundred BiQuian, roughly equivalent to the 3 billion unos we would normally pay to the Republic.”

Bridget chokes. “3 billion?” she repeats. “What for?”

“Such a good question!” Bob extends his arms in mock disbelief. “Various taxes, tariffs, and legal fees. But that’s in the past, right? This stays on Tyr; think of it as an advance payment in the interest of a smooth transition and better times ahead.”

Bridget reaches for the hashtab. Inches from wrapping her fingers around it, she stops.

“If making synthiate is such a simple process, why aren’t we making enough of it again?”

Bob frowns. “What do you call enough? We’re putting out 10 million servings per day.”

Bridget withdraws her hand sharply. “Why can’t we just break out these synthiate microbes to everyone?” She asks.

The man mugs shock. “Everyone? These are specially designed organisms, Miss. It could be potentially catastrophic if they were to escape into the ecosystem at large.”

“But if people received the proper training...” Bridget glances at Isaac... “I mean, if someone knew how to do it safely, there’s no reason we couldn’t do this on every roof in the city... right?”

Bob looks uncomfortable. He laughs once, and casts his eyes over at his assistant before responding. “Miss Lozano. Hartridge has poured billions into the research and development of the synthiate microbes. If we didn’t see a return on that investment, there would be no incentive to continue the work that we do.”

Bridget looks at Isaac. Isaac smiles grimly back. "He's saying, if everyone was allowed to do it, they wouldn't make any money."

Bob bows his head slightly and raises his eyebrows, as if he thought it was childish to speak so plainly.

"You of all people should understand incentives, professor. For example, it would be a real shame if we were forced to shut down, even for a few days."

Bridget is tempted to ensorcel him right there and then, wipe away his smug smile and replace it with dumb obedience. She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath in through her nostrils, and exhales slowly through her mouth. "Is that a threat?" she asks, softly.

"A threat!? No!" Bob exclaims. "I'm just saying, we're already producing as fast as we can."

"And charging as much as you want," Isaac counters.

"We charge what most people can pay. Anyhow, this whole thing wasn't just our idea. We're the only ones authorized to produce synthiate. It's the law."

Bridget's eyes snap open. "The law," she echoes.

Bob looks at her. "Yes," he says.

Bridget lets out a breath of a laugh. "No," she says. "I don't think it is. Like you said, this isn't the United Star Systems' Tyr anymore, right? This is the Freewolves' Tyr, and I don't believe there's any law that says only Hartridge Inc. can produce synthiate."

Bob's face turns a darker shade of pink. He pockets the hashtab and advances on Bridget. "Miss Lozano. The only synthiate microbes on Tyr reside in our facilities. That's private property. If you seize it, that will force us down a very dangerous path."

Bridget stands her ground. "Bob. I want you to think very carefully about your options. Option A: You give me a take-home box full of microbes, lower your prices a little, and keep doing business selling 'the Original Green Stuff...' or Option B: You don't do that, on a planet 14 light years from your company's headquarters, where most of the guns and spaceships are controlled by the people telling you to choose Option A."

She takes a step forward. "So," she says. "Which is it?"

The vacuum sealed cylinder is too big to fit in their auto-car. They borrow a truck, and Isaac helps Bridget guide it into the back with a forklift.

"Pretty impressive trust-busting back there," Isaac says. "You're a natural."

"What's that mean?" Bridget asks, walking around to the cab with him.

"It means buen trabajo, Bridgeta." He catches himself. "Bridget... sorry."

Bridget waves her hand. "That's okay. You can call me Bridgeta if you want."

Isaac smiles.

"I don't think I would have done so well without you there to point me in the right direction," Bridget grips both the hand-holds to pull herself up into the cab. "I-

A wave of pain rushes from her left arm through her body, and her eyes roll into the back of her head. She collapses to the ground, Isaac just barely catches her; he falls to his knees with his arms around her, his eyes wide.

"Bridgeta? Bridgeta!"

Scene 7 - Safia and Yusef's Quarters

Safia and Yusef lift their heads from the floor, completing their afternoon prayer. Yusef rises quickly and moves to the kitchen to pour himself some water. Safia rolls up the mat carefully and stows it in the corner of the apartment.

"Any word from your friend?" Yusef asks.

Safia shakes her head.

Yusef sips his water. "I received another death threat yesterday," he says. "Seems like not everyone in the Citizens Government believes I am entirely blameless in Ereshkigal." He breathes. "I'm not sure I believe that either."

Safia bites her lip. "What you were doing... what you thought you were doing. Speaking up against what is wrong in the world. I wish I had that kind of courage."

Yusef gives her a strange look. "Safia," he says. "What are you talking about? What you have done in the past few weeks..." he exhales slowly in a thin line. "I cannot imagine someone more brave."

Before Safia can respond, a knock comes at the door. Safia stands, wiping her eyes on the back of her arm, and lets in George Fowler.

"Alright," he waves a tablet over his head as he enters and sets a bag down on the table. "This is what my contacts were able to pull. And apparently they've shut off their access to the Regency servers now, so this is as good as it's gonna get."

He hands the tablet to Safia and starts unpacking the bag.

Safia scrolls through the file on Qamar. At the bottom it says, "Last seen in Yokaido, in the company of the Cooms' Android."

"Yokaido?" she frowns at Fowler. "Where is that?"

"It's one of the oldest colonies on Iza. Amaterasu system," Fowler hands an armband to Yusef, and another to Safia. "Now, these are disnet devices; that means distributed network; so their service is going to be... spotty at best. We're all gonna have to get used to that."

Safia takes her armband. "Amaterasu System. That means... she's not on Tyr?"

"15 light-years shy," Fowler snorts. From what we could ascertain, seems she hitched a ride with this Aphrodite android previously owned by Rondall Cooms."

Safia and Yusef look at each other. "How are we going to get there?" Safia asks.

"I've arranged for you to join the diplomatic mission. Commander Longsend wants to send out newly minted ambassadors to the Zhong Empire and the IRN as soon as possible to secure our legitimacy as a sovereign power. You can ride along, I've cleared it with Ambassador Hsieh. But let me be clear, this is a need-to-know situation."

Safia puts on her armband. "Thank you," she says.

"I have a condition," Fowler says. "I need you to promise me something. Both of you."

"What's that?" Yusef's brow furrows.

"Your sister does not set foot on Tyr again. You want to handle this, great. But if I learn that Qamar is back in Halspur? To finish what she started, or something?" He looks meaningfully at them. "My good word will dry up very quickly. Understood?"

There's a brief silence. Then Yusef nods.

"Good," Fowler shoulders his bag. "Remember, the fewer people you tell, the less chance someone nixes this. Your shuttle leaves tonight from HISP. Oh, and it'll be early autumn in Yokaido when you arrive. You won't need your winter clothes."

He pauses at the doorway. "I hope you find her," he says. "Before she hurts more people."

Scene 8 - The Factory

Qamar walks in a deliberate circle, her eyes focused. Critical. Haiken watches her anxiously. "The smell is wrong," Qamar says finally.

Haiken frowns. "Excuse me?"

Qamar sniffs at the android's neck. "The smell is wrong," she says. "I know my own scent."

Haiken exhales sharply. "Well, I'm sorry. But you said to make an android, 'like the others.' We never had to worry about matching pheromones to a real human being before."

Qamar looks at him impassively. Next to her, the android sits in a chair, draped in cloth, its eyes closed. From the dark lustre of its hair to the curve of its nose, Qamar's features have been reproduced exactly. Its wrapping is all that identifies it as a recently assembled collection of carbon-based nanorobotics; it is otherwise indistinguishable from Qamar herself.

She'd spent hours in the scanning chamber. "Normally," Haiken had told her, "we would take scans of several individuals and let the ML develop composite models..." he tightens his lips. "But based on your requirements, we will need to do things a little differently."

Qamar had melted the elevator door shut with a spell. "Whatever you need," she'd said.

She pored over the preview renderings with him. Each time, she said, "Not quite," and returned to the scan room. It was only on the 5th attempt that she was satisfied.

It takes Haiken some time to adjust to the new lab. But everything was exactly as it had been in the final spec. He'd tested this software in Harperstown, but it was surreal to use it here to develop a real instruction set. In general, things were easier. Instead of adapting the tissue to solid taurum-alloy bones, for example, the fully cellular production grew the bones out of nanofiber along with the rest of the tissue; the nanobots simply carried the taurum particles with them.

In many ways, the most difficult part was the personality imprint. "What do you want her to be like?" Haiken had asked.

Qamar had been quiet for a long while. "For some reason, I'm guessing you don't want her to be in love with you," Haiken had said.

"No." Qamar agreed. "But I want her to be loyal. To trust me."

Haiken nodded. "It's before my time..." he'd said, "but I believe something similar was done for Model 3. He tapped at his computer. "What sort of things should she like? Dislike?"

"She likes... embroidery." Qamar had said after another long moment. "And her sister and brother. She loves them."

"That's gonna be tricky," Haiken had said. "Do you have photographs of them?"

Qamar shook her head. "Well," Haiken continued, "I'll see what I can do..."

"What next?" Qamar says at last, crossing her arms and fixing her eyes on her replica. "How do we turn her on?"

"Yes, well..." Sweat beads on Haiken's forehead. "That is the question," he says.

"What do you mean?"

Haiken takes a deep breath. "Right now, Quince is in a state of hibernation. Her base directive stack is in place, and she'll respond to commands, but the uh... 'thought process' is off." Haiken draws a small device from his pocket and shows it to Qamar. "This," he says, "is a detonator."

"A what."

"You melted the doors so I couldn't escape," Haiken says. "But I was still able to jerry-rig a system of explosives while you were in the scanning chamber. So, you can unmelt the doors, we'll all ride up the elevator together, I'll activate your android and then we'll leave in opposite directions. And once we're both clear of the building, we'll consider this arrangement complete, I'll disarm the detonator, and we all get to keep on living."

Qamar stares at him. Haiken forces himself to hold her gaze.

"You're bluffing," she says.

"Maybe," he responds, and presses his thumb to the detonator. A light turns red: Armed.

"If my finger leaves this button before I disarm it, we all die," he says.

Their eyes remain locked. "What if there is something wrong with her?" Qamar says, finally.

"Then you kill everyone in my family," Haiken says. "Trust me, I'm not trying to screw you. I'm just trying to get out of this with my heart still beating."

Qamar tilts her head down, intensifying the shadows beneath her eyes and cheekbones in the dim blue light. "Fine," she says. "Let's go."

She tears away the elevator door. With a simple, "As Haiken says, Quince does," Quince stands and joins them in the elevator compartment. They ride up to the warehouse above, and Haiken turns to Quince. Watching Qamar carefully, and gripping the detonator in his other hand, he digs his nails into the back of Quince's neck and peels back the skin, pressing on the spinal pressure-point that would normally have been marked by the Aphrodite logo. After holding this position for several seconds, Quince's eyes blink and open wide as she gasps and comes to life.

It is truly uncanny seeing Qamar clutch a cloth around herself and shelter under Qamar's arm. Haiken takes a step back. "Okay," he says. "Now we walk out the front door, and I turn to my left, and you turn to your right, and we'll both keep walking. Agreed?"

Qamar nods.

They press through the front door in a clump, Qamar guiding Quince beneath her arm. Haiken turns to face them, and they back slowly away from each other, coming to a halt some 50 paces separate.

"So," Qamar says. "Were you bluffing?"

“Maybe,” Haiken says again.

“Let’s find out,” Qamar says. With a flick of her wrist she sends a tendril of black smoke shooting towards Haiken. Haiken winces; his whole body tenses, but instead of pain and death he feels a flash of warmth; a bright diamond of light forms over his chest; it intercepts the shadow and then disintegrates from view. Breathing hard, Haiken looks over his shoulder.

Penelope is running towards him, incanting furiously, her arms flying in arcane gestures, as more shielding runes appear around him. From behind her, a man Haiken does not recognize wearing glasses and a mop of curls comes speeding down the street, his feet levitating just above the ground as if he were ice-skating.

Qamar curses. She turns, as if to make away, then twists suddenly and sends a salvo of bricks flying at Haiken’s chest. He tries to dodge, but one hits him in the arm, and the detonator flies from Haiken’s hand.

“NO!”

Somewhere in the bowels of the facility, an electrical charge passes through a modified valve on one of the tanks of compressed oxygen. A tremor goes through the ground and the warehouse erupts into a plume of fire; the blast knocks Haiken to the ground, and what remains of the structure collapses in a roll of smoke. Haiken looks up at Qamar; her eyebrows raise ever so slightly, then she turns and gestures, tripping Felix headfirst into the building across the street. She wreathes herself and Quince in her chariot of smoke and roils down the street from them and away.

Penelope dashes to Haiken’s side. “Hai! Are you alright? We were just deliberating what to do when you appeared!”

Haiken turns to the smoking wreckage.

“It’s gone,” he says.

“It’s gone.”

Scene 9 - The Hospital

Isaac waits with Bridget in the hospital room. They have been there for several hours; first waiting for the next available scan, then waiting for a doctor to look at it.

A knock comes at the door, and Xavier lets himself in. “Hey,” he says. “How’s it going?”

Bridget gestures with her right hand, as if to say, “how does it look like it’s going?”

Xavier nods. “Fair enough.”

“How's it going with the microbes?” Bridget asks.

Xavier lets out a breath. “It’s amazing. You were absolutely right. We took some up in a barrel to the roof of Colonial Hall and just started running tap water to ‘em with a hose. We’ve produced about a liter’s worth of synthiate in just the time you’ve been here, just using a sunlamp.”

“So the carrier...” Bridget pries.

“Yeah. I mean Tariq hasn’t said it official yet but, yes. They’re gonna let ‘em stay.”

Before Bridget can give voice to her relief, a knock comes at the door, and the doctor enters.

“Excuse me,” she says, looking pointedly at the two men in turn.

Isaac stands. “You’ll be okay?” he asks. Bridget nods. The doctor holds the door for them as they leave, and closes it after.

She regards Bridget. Bridget lifts her good hand. “Well?”

“The cells in your arm are dying,” the doctor says. “And more importantly, they are not regenerating. The discolored fibroblasts in your dermis carrying the... inert, ink-like substance from Ereshkigal... as they’ve died, they have not been replaced, and they have instead aggregated more dead cells around them, causing gangrene. Scans reveal that corrupted cells have spread through your muscle tissue, and possibly even to the bone, though we can’t be certain without a biopsy.”

The words fly past Bridget and thud against the wall behind her. She frowns at the doctor. She is aware that this is bad news.

“Okay,” she says. “Let’s skip to the end here. What do we do about it?”

The doctor sighs perfunctorily, a dutiful, practiced breath of preparation. “We have to amputate your arm. As soon as possible. I’d like to schedule surgery for next week, at the latest.”

Bridget snorts. “We don’t have to amputate my arm,” she says. “For fuck’s sake, I can still move it around!” She demonstrates, gritting her teeth through the pain.

The doctor looks off, her lips pressed tightly together. After a moment, she holds out her left hand to Bridget. “Try and move my arm,” she says.

Cautiously, Bridget tries to take the doctor’s hand. She can’t really grip it, so instead, she places her hand on top and pushes down. She nearly blacks out from the pain, she gasps; she can feel just how little resistance there is despite the doctor’s arm remaining perfectly still.

The doctor's brow is arched with sympathy. "Your muscle tissue is dying. If there was another way, we'd be talking about that instead, I promise. But we have to take the whole thing off, from below the shoulder... before it spreads into your chest."

Bridget breathes hard. She grits her teeth. "From below the shoulder, huh," she says.

"It's called a transhumeral amputation. We can discuss prosthetic options a little later, but first, I need to ask you if you'd like to speak with a spiritual adviser, or psychologist, or a friend. ...Is there anyone you'd like to talk to about this?"

Bridget starts laughing.

"Miss Lozano. Are you alright?"

Bridget wheezes, she's not sure where pain ends and mirth begins. She chuckles and gasps, and wipes tears from her eyes with her right hand. She shakes her head, tries to catch her breath, and finally gets out:

"She's gonna love this."

Scene 10 - A Hotel in Yokaido

Felix hands Haiken a battered samosa left over from his meal at the Technical Institute. Haiken nibbles at one corner, takes a deep breath, then tears into it. "Jesus," he says, through a mouthful of food, "I haven't eaten since the attack."

Penelope places a hand on his arm. "Slow down," she says. "Don't make yourself sick." She notices Felix looking at her hand on Haiken's arm, and withdraws it.

Felix has rented them a hotel room for the night. They sit facing each other on the double beds, Haiken and Penelope on one, Felix and Sage on the other.

"What happened?" Penelope asks.

"The woman you fought... Qamar... she made me design her an android... but a copy of herself, instead of a composite design." Haiken looks miserably up at Penelope. "I had to do it. I don't know what her plan is for her. I gave her the hardware version name of 'Quince', after the fruit... not many spices that start with the letter Q. Anyway... that makes eight."

He looks down. "And with Theolus and Mayspeth dead, the Freya facility shut down and the Yokaido factory destroyed... who knows if there will ever be a ninth."

Penelope leans forward. "Eight androids," she says.

Haiken's eyes are bright. "Cinnamon, Rosemary, Turmeric, Sage," he looks up at Penelope. "Peppercorn, Anise, Lemongrass, Quince."

Penelope nods. "Don't worry," she says. "We'll find them. And we'll rehabilitate them. You can... you can reprogram them. Starting with Sage and myself, I mean."

Haiken frowns, "What?"

"Remove the backdoor," Penelope says, "and..." she hesitates, "and move our... our thought process up to the primary thread," she looks from Sage to Felix, back to Haiken, "or whatever you need to do to... set us free."

Haiken gives her a strange look. "I'm not sure I understand." He glances at Sage. "I mean..." he continues, "I'm not sure I can."

Sage gets up. "I have to take a piss," he says, and walks abruptly into the bathroom.

"What do you mean, 'we'll find them'?" Felix asks. "You're not saying... you're not suggesting we run all over the galaxy tracking down androids, are you?"

Penelope looks at him, "Why not?"

Felix half-laughs; he looks at Haiken for support, "Because..." he leans in close. "Because, I thought you were coming with me," he whispers.

"What, back to Julian?" Penelope is angry that the name still sends a flutter through her chest.

"No!" Felix raises his hands. "Of course not. I would never... That was just so he'd tell me where to find you."

He grasps Penelope's hand. "I mean us. What we talked about sometimes. Leaving it all behind. You and me."

Haiken stands up. "I..." he clears his throat. "I have to stretch my legs before bed," he says, and exits the hotel room.

Felix looks searchingly into Penelope's eyes, until she can't stand it. She turns her head, looking at the cheap landscape painting that hangs on the far wall. Felix speaks softly, but every word is laced with ardent, urgent hope.

"We can run away together. There's a colony on Long Shen where they set you up with new identities. For the right price, you get a clean slate. No questions asked. We can remove your tracker and go. Find safety... and green fields. We could make a life together there. You and I; with nothing expected... just a simple life. Earnest work and.. and long evenings reading together, talking. Laughing. Like we used to have."

Penelope looks at him then, tears gathering in her eyes.

"Felix," she says.

“Please,” he says.

“There are seven androids besides me. How many of them are like Rosemary? Or Sage? Not to mention Quince; and god knows what this Qamar woman wants with her! I can’t just exist passively in this world knowing that they are still living at the mercy of their programming, at the mercy of their masters, or going slowly insane without them.” she shakes her head. “I have to find them; help them... somehow.”

“Why?” Felix clutches her hand. “Why does it have to be you?”

“Because they have no one else,” Penelope murmurs. “Because they are isolated by design,” she looks at him again. “Because I want to.”

Felix nods.

Penelope disengages from Felix. She stands, and paces to the other side of the room, looking at her reflection in the dark glass of the window.

“You should go home, Felix. For your brother’s sake. And yours. You can’t just chase green fields, leaving wasteland behind you.”

She turns to look at him. “Anyway,” she says. “I’ve made my decision.”

Scene 11 - Chiron

Gabriel throws an arm into the sleeve of a white doublet. Then the other. He buttons it closed, and clenches his fists.

A knock comes at his door, and Kylan enters. “My Lord, is this a good idea?”

Gabriel clips his armband into place, and looks up at himself in the hotel mirror. “There is already video circulating of her little stunt on the net.”

Kylan shrugs. “So? We can send a dozen officers after her. The Coven must go on, right?”

“I’m not giving her the satisfaction,” Gabriel growls. “Of another wild goose chase embarrassment while I push paperclips at the bureaucracys’ behest.”

“So... the Coven?”

“It can wait,” Gabriel turns his eyes on Kylan. “There’s just been a declaration of secession, and the First Arcanist has attempted to stoke the fires of civil war. The great powers of the Coven... can wait.”

Gabriel opens a desk drawer, and withdraws a leather bandolier, the blackstone strapped to it with brass buckles. He throws one end over his shoulder and fastens the bandolier across his chest.

“What about Sergeant Peters,” Kylan asks. “You heard she made it, right? She just checked in; she wants to speak with you about ACT.”

Gabriel doesn't look back. “She can wait too,” he snarls. “I won't be long.”

The Hyperion cruises over Juno, while Elandra unpacks her rail gun from the barge belowdecks. She has changed into her red exosuit. A line extends from her belt to the interior clip. A single bullet rests next to her, shining dully.

“Arcanist,” DanDan's voice sounds tinny in the closed space. “I have detected a ship trailing us, as you asked.”

Elandra grimaces. “That was fast,” she says. “Alright, on my count, open the bay doors.”

The Hyperion's lower bay grinds open, revealing a dark night sky accompanied by the ungodly noise of blasting rocketry and churning air. Elandra carefully pulls herself out onto the exterior of the Hyperion, crouching low on the heels of her magnetic boots. The wind shrieks and slams against her body. She moves slowly, and magnetizes the base of the rail gun to the hull of the Hyperion. She latches her boot into the rifle's stirrup, and aims down the barrel. There were no explosive bolts left, but she wouldn't need one. She tries not to look down, an icy blue tundra was spreading out below her as the ship moved further to the northeast, past the sparse lights of Tiryns.

“Is it him?” she yells if only so that she can hear herself.

“It is the Lord Regent's personal IA spacecraft, the Alexander,” DanDan replies.

Elandra focuses. The Alexander looms behind them, sometimes difficult to see past the bright light of the Hyperion's engine. It is a kite-shaped ship, with glinting curves, suspended on broad wings that begin at the nose of the craft and swing backwards like a manta-ray fins.

“I'm just going to take a little page from the Lord Regent's Book,” Elandra murmurs, and loads the projectile into the gun. “Closer...” She watches the Alexander swing slowly out of position, down, and back. “Closer...”

She fires. The bullet thwums from the rifle with the electromagnetic pulse.

On The Alexander, an alarm goes off. “We have been hit with a projectile,” Audrey recites over the intercom. “No serious damage yet detected.”

Gabriel glares past the controls of his ship. “A Springsteen doesn't have any weapons systems.”

The alarm blares again, “System failure. System failure. Flight pattern has been compromised!”

Elandra watches with satisfaction, as ice creeps over the Alexander from stern to bow. Its lights flicker and go out, as the electronics freeze; it drifts to one side, and begins to fall away.

“Alright,” Elandra smiles. “I’m coming back in. Let’s trace the trajectory of the Alexander and land nearby.”

She disengages the rail gun from the hull, and loads it back into the ship. She’s about to re-enter herself, when a missile streaks through the air and strikes the Hyperion. She is knocked from her perch, her arms slam into the side of the ship as she shields her head, her helmet cracking from the pressure. As the Hyperion swims through the air, trying to restabilize, Elandra hauls herself back on board and slams the bay closed.

A moment later, the engine explodes.

~

The burning Hyperion descends like a great bird of prey, gliding as far as it can before crashing into the icy plateau. Flames lick the console as Elandra rips off her harness and space suit and throws herself towards the exit, sprinklers hissing uselessly.

She grabs her yellow jacket and pulls herself from the wreckage. Gabriel paces towards her, his boots crunching in the snow. Elandra rises to her feet; she casts a spell, but Gabriel counters it with a word and with a gesture. He’s steps away. Elandra raises a hand in a ward, Gabriel cancels it with a lightning fast sorcery. She has never experienced anything like it; in the same moment a spell is complete; it is undone. Elandra lifts her fists, but Gabriel pulls a small, dark object from the bandolier across his chest. With both his hands, he swings it bodily into Elandra’s side. WHOOMF. Elandra feels bone break.

WHOOMF. He hits her again, on the other side. She reels, and falls to the ground.

WHOOMF. He lands a blow to her stomach, knocking the wind from her.

Elandra coughs. She feels a warm spray of blood on her face.

Gabriel paces away from her. “Do you see that?” Gabriel points above them. “That bright disc? Almost big enough to be a moon or an asteroid? Do you know what that is?”

“That’s the OSS Apollo.” Elandra stammers, her jaw shaking with pain. The station was moving quickly across the sky from the west.

Gabriel paces back towards her. “That is all that stands between this world, and chaos! That station is peace, prosperity, and the law of man! The OSS Apollo represents the best of human achievement, what you have so blindly taken for granted, what you have so carelessly threatened to destroy!”

“You’re wrong.” Elandra chokes. “You’re wrong. Everything it means to you... has no bearing on... the reality of... so many people left behind.”

Gabriel stares at her. "I should excoriate you right here and now," he says.

"Fuck you..." Elandra spits. "That's one thing I know you can't do without help."

"I am the greatest sorcerer to ever live." Gabriel leans in close. "Try me."

He turns on his armlet. "Yes," he says. "I've got her, but both ships are shot."

"Gabriel," Kylan's voice is changed. "The Republican Army, from Freya."

"What about the Freyan Army? They finally show up on a map somewhere?"

"They just exited slip! There's a fleet of warships surrounding the OSS Apollo."

~

...Above, Norelle looks out the porthole from her hotel window. The serenity of space is disturbed by an array of vessels, a dozen, maybe more. Vast rectangular carriers that had never known an atmosphere, laden with turrets flanking rows of docking bays, and long silver battleships, bristling with armament.

Norelle whispers. "You have got to be kidding me."

~

Below, Gabriel and Elandra listen, motionless, while Kylan shouts across the line. "I'm putting you through to Station Chief Reynolds; Jon Harper is threatening to destroy the space station if the Consulate doesn't change its position!"

With a tone, Harper's voice comes rasping through, "-very simple," he is saying. "You were warned. You were given the opportunity to avoid violence. But now you have forced our hand. Has the Consul not reconsidered?"

There is a pause on the other end. A trembling voice answers, "No... no, Commander Harper. I've just received... the Consul says, 'there will be no award granted for lunacy. Only death.'"

"I'm very sorry to hear that," says Commander Harper.

~

Gabriel leans down and grasps Elandra's arm; he hauls her to her knees. Frantic, he extends his armlet.

"He knows you," Gabriel says, "He knows what you meant to his son. Tell him you're on Apollo Station. Tell him to call off the attack."

Elandra takes a long, rattling breath.

"No."

An odd look crosses Gabriel's face. It is despair, and fury, and though they were human enough emotions he looks to her in this moment utterly alien.

Something crackles through the armlet. Elandra can't make out what it is, whether a word or a shout or just static. Then she looks past Gabriel, and sees the explosion.

Gabriel sees her looking. He turns and raises his face to the heavens. They watch the fireball expand into a spray of bright fingers. There is another explosion, and another. Specks of orange light that reflect in Gabriel's and Elandra's eyes.

"No," Gabriel says... "No."

Elandra watches the tiny flashes of light. She watches plumes of plasma spool out like spaghetti overhead, turning from blue, to green, to orange.

"Wait," she says.

But Gabriel turns. Incandescent with wrath. He places the heel of his palm upon her chest, incants in a lexicon she does not understand, and with a shout, he pulls the magic from Elandra's body, in a mist of light that gathers around his hand and races through him. Elandra's back arches. She screams in pain. She watches energy crackle around Gabriel's arm like lightning, across his shoulders and away, to where the last shreds of light glimmer around his left hand, still clutching the blackstone. Then all of a sudden it is gone; and they are plunged into the night once more.

Gabriel stands, breathing heavily. He lets the blackstone fall from his hand; it sinks into the snow with a muted crunch. Then Gabriel lurches back towards his fallen ship. Some time later, Elandra hears the whir of an auto-bike hum to life... then fade slowly away.

And Elandra lies there, staring into the heavens, empty. Empty.

The End

Just kidding.

Scene 12 - Chiron

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

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

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

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

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

This is not the beginning of the story, nor is it the end.

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The blackstone is cold in Elandra's hands; its weight drags at her shoulders; her arms feel like they're about to fall off. But still she presses on. Her eyes on the faraway lights of Tiryns.

"I'm not going to make it," she thinks. And she has no real response. Her mind is empty. She's drawing blanks. "I'm not going to make it," she thinks again, "I'm going to give in to exhaustion and pain and die of hypothermia." It's almost a relief. What did she have to live for? She had failed in every conceivable way, her ship was destroyed, her magic had been ripped from her. All she had left was this stupid fucking stone. Why was she still carrying it? Besides weighing 50 goddamn pounds, it's so cold that it's actually hurting her hands.

A fury grips her. With a shuddering roar, she lifts the blackstone over her head, and heaves it onto the ground in front of her. It lands with a dull thud in the snow. Elandra breathes hard. Her ribs pulse with pain; her arms are shaking. The stone lies there sullenly. A hole in the earth. She watches the sweat from her palms crystallize into a thin veneer of frost over it, marring that perfect blackness. The image of her sparking, golden light disappearing into it... plays over and over again in her mind. She bares her teeth, and stalks away.

She stops herself. Turns.

"Disappearing into it."

It had looked like that, as if it had absorbed all that power as Gabriel drained it from her. She casts her eyes back at the faraway lights of Tiryns, before returning her gaze to the stone. Why had it remained so cold in her hands, even when she'd held it tightly cupped between her palms for... how long had it been? Twenty minutes? Thirty?

She pulls off her armlet. She pries open its back and removes the small battery; she draws her knife and drags its blade across the battery's nodes, creating a spray of sparks. She takes off her jacket and rolls the blackstone under it, then slips the armlet battery into its sleeve. She takes a deep breath, and stabs at the battery with her knife.

It erupts in flame. Elandra backs away as toxic gray smoke fumes from the makeshift pyre, engulfing first her jacket, then the blackstone in a blue-orange inferno. Elandra watches the blackstone with wide eyes. It sits there. A tear in reality. Black as nothing in the heart of the flames. When the blaze subsides, Elandra pulls her shirt up over her face to protect against the noxious fumes. She steps forward, and cautiously, places her hand upon the stone.

It's as cold as ice.

Elandra picks up the stone in both hands and throws it upon the ground again. "WHAT MORE DO YOU WANT!" she yells, "HOW MUCH MORE DO YOU NEED!?" She collapses in front of it, grasps it tightly, breathes on it, wraps her arms around it.

Finally, she curls into the fetal position on the icy ground, the blackstone cradled between her knees and her stomach. She shivers in the cold. How stupid it was to die like this, she thinks.

Unconsciousness tugs at her. She blinks quickly, straining to stay awake. "DanDan," she says. "I'm sorry I ripped out your battery and didn't even say goodbye." She shivers, and curls her body tighter still. "I really thought I had it figured out..." she says. "I really thought I had."

Her eyes flutter closed.

The blackstone opens.

"Elandra Ramirez," a voice says. "You have fully charged a capsule in the super-consciousness envoy network."

Elandra opens her eyes, slowly. A strange light emanates from the hollow of her chest. "Elandra Ramirez," the voice repeats. "I believe... 'congratulations'... are in order."

"Why... why congratulations..." Elandra breathes.

"Because, you are the first human being to communicate directly with an extraterrestrial lifeform," the voice says. "I believe it is what your culture calls, 'First Contact.'"

"Of course," Elandra murmurs. "'You are not alone.'"

This was Episode 12 of *The Elandrid*, and the final episode of the first season 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

