

# FAVOR

## **VOLUME ONE**

By Ethan Long

## Part 1

The night was darker than usual. Clouds had moved in above the mighty towers of the City, blocking out most of the light from the moon, stars, and the ever-present Paladin Cloud. Now was the perfect time for Leo. Just the way he wanted it. He smiled at his cunning, putting one hand in front of the other. Carefully, with practiced strength, Leo Thayer used the stout blades extending from the backs of his hands to climb one length higher, then another, then another.

He scaled the side of the Museum d'Argent, already several stories high. The blades easily dug into the old mortar of the wall, getting him closer and closer to his destination. He pulled one blade out of the brick when he caught sight of its dusty, scuffed surface.

“I just polished these. Really, Thayer...”

The balcony loomed ahead. The Museum d'Argent specialized in the findings of the Depths, showcasing any remarkable treasures dug up from the layered ruins of the past Cities below. It was one of Leo's usual targets, one of his favorites, because they never upgraded the security. He had read in the paper about their newest acquisition found just that week. It was something right up his alley. The balcony's edge finally came into reach and he pulled himself over with the grace of a cat.

He rewarded himself with a second's rest and a deep breath of the cool night air. Though overcast, the Paladin Cloud still emitted a hazy radiance, casting the evening skyline into an array of shadow and shine. The towers of the City never ceased to amaze him, no matter how many times he scaled their heights. They seemed to touch the sky while still burying their roots deep below the surface.

With a flick of his wrists, the stout blades shot back into the recesses of his hands. He crept across the narrow balcony, more decorative than functional, to a spot he had discovered the year before. It had given him an easy-in for the last few endeavors he'd had at the d'Argent, and still, no one had found the weak point.

Until tonight. The little metal door leading into the attics of the museum had a new lock. It made him chuckle. It was just a padlock, probably from a maintenance person who noticed the door was only sitting on its latch.

“Adorable, really.”

It would keep rats out but it would take a lot more than that to bar him. Grasping the lock, he tightened his grip and began to use his *favor*. It was a silly *favor* at first glance, one of those powers people ended up using only at parties, but Leo had found a good use for it. It had taken a lot of practice to understand its value, but now he wouldn't trade it even for flight.

His hand shook, speeding up to a hazy blur, its edges undefinable. After only a moment there was a sharp click and the padlock pulled away from the latch. He smiled at the broken lock, its shackle snapped apart as if it were made of glass. Metal can only take so much stress.

Inside, Leo crept down his familiar thoroughfare in the sloped attic pathways toward the top floor of the museum. He knew exactly where the alarms were, precisely where each of the rare cameras was positioned, and more importantly, where their blind spots lay. He slipped like a shadow down hallways and stairways. It wasn't a minute before he had reached the fourth floor and was standing outside his destination: the Armory Room.

Only one camera watched this floor and it was over by the ancient Tildrake longship on the other side of the building. He snuck past the display of short swords, jumped over the alarm

trigger beside the bow display, and around a cannon that was set up near the center of the room. He was especially careful to make no noise as he neared his prize, for the room was set up with sound alarms on each corner.

There it sat in a shaft of light under a small glass cube. His prize. The newness of it had earned it a spot of high honor all by itself. He made the last silent strides over to the case.

Inside was a spearhead; a beautiful piece made of green metal and tarnished with age. The thing was at least as long as Leo's hand, gracefully curving up to a still-sharp point. Its center was empty, and every inch of the weapon head was covered in ancient twisting designs and stick language.

Setting down his bag, he quickly retrieved the glass cutting tool he'd use to pry the beauty from its sealed prison. He was careful to cut slowly so the high-pitched scraping wouldn't trigger the alarms. With a plunk, the round glass chunk fell into his hand, leaving the treasure wide open. He reached in proudly and grabbed the spearhead.

A small click sounded. Leo's eyes went wide when he realized what had happened. Looking closer it was easy to see the little mechanism underneath the weapon, a weight-sensitive pad that would sound the alarms if the spearhead was removed. He cursed his haste and the cleverness of the museum to add a new security feature. He let out a long sigh.

"Stuck?"

Leo's head snapped upward in surprise to find a person hanging inverted above the spearhead's case. He rolled his eyes when he recognized who it was. "Jaina."

"Leo," she acknowledged. Her green eyes surveyed the predicament with obvious pleasure. She crossed her arms, holding onto her rope with just her curly tail. Jaina Cooper was

an Anthro, somewhere between man and animal. Her reptilian skin blended in seamlessly with her dark clothing, making it very difficult to see her in the gloomy Armory. She tapped the glass case with her strange, two-pronged chameleon hands.

"I see you've gotten yourself into a bit of a predicament," she whispered.

"No, not really. Just working on my next move, don't want to make any mistakes," he whispered back.

"Looks like you already have. You can't move your hand without setting off the trigger pad, and your little hole is only big enough to get one arm in. I would call that ... stuck," she grinned.

He nodded, "I can see how a layman, such as yourself, would see this as a problem, but to a professional, like myself, it's only a minor inconvenience."

"Mm-hmm. Enlighten me, please."

Leo shrugged and clucked, stalling, "It's simple, really. Not but a moment to fix. Just a ... just ..."

"You don't have any idea, do you?"

"No."

"As usual. You always assume things are exactly as they were when you last left them."

"I do not."

"Did you come in through the attic door? With the new lock?"

He stared at her, "How did you know about that?"

"That way is too slow. I gave up on it years ago."

She crawled down the rope with her strong chameleon hands until her head could almost touch the case. "Can I share a simple trick with the Professional?"

"I really don't need your help."

"Oh, I'm not helping you. I'm stealing that spearhead for myself."

"Over my dead body."

"Where would the fun be in that?"

He rolled his eyes and looked away. "You really bake my potato, you know that?"

She smiled and pointed at the spear, "Now, if you had just made a quick check for any security updates you would have easily seen the trigger pad."

"The d'Argent never upgrades their security. It's what I love about them," he retorted.

"You also would have noticed," she continued, "that they didn't seal the glass back down onto the pedestal after they finished installing the new trigger." She grabbed the glass cube and lifted it off the pedestal. "Ta-da."

"Careful!" Leo chided, maneuvering his arm further into the hole so his hand didn't come off the base. "You're a genius. You'll forgive me if I don't applaud. Now let me get something heavy to replace it."

"Ah, ah, ah," Jaina tutted, "I want half the payoff."

"What!?" Leo jeered, remembering to keep his voice down for the sound alarms. "Are you mad? I'm not giving you anything."

"It seems I was fairly instrumental in finishing this job."

"I would have figured something out!"

"But you didn't, and I did. And ..." she added tugging up on the case, pulling Leo's hand slightly off the trigger pad.

"Stop! Fine, fine! I'll give you 30%."

"Oh, please. I want at least half. You probably won't get much for that little bauble anyway."

"You must be joking."

"I could just trigger the alarm and take it from you. Get 100% all for myself."

"Like you could get it from me." He brandished one of his hand blades.

She giggled, "Those didn't help you when I stole the Crown of Rafik from you."

He sneered in disdain. "Lucky play. And I recall these blades being very handy when I stole the Treasure of Amond right out from under your nose."

She huffed at that, "I had a cold that day. My reflexes were slow."

"Anyway, there's no way I'm going half with you on this when you didn't even put any work into-"

She yanked at the case again and Leo's hand slipped a little more. "Alright! Alright, half! Half!" he surrendered, "Let's just get out of here."

"Now you sound like a professional."

Leo rummaged in his bag for a wooden card and paperweight. Very carefully, he slid the wooden card underneath the spearhead until it lay flat over the pressure trigger. Then with minute movements, he slipped the paperweight in place of the treasure. He let out a sigh as he drew the spearhead out of the hole in the glass case, mission accomplished.

“Not bad,” Jaina commented, replacing the glass case.

“Alright, let’s bounce before we find any more security upgrades.”

But at that very moment, someone else joined them in the Armory Room. Like a silent black bat swooping through the air, a mysterious figure swung down between them, swiped the spearhead from Leo’s hand, and kicked the glass case from its perch sending it crashing against the floor.

The two thieves only had a moment to witness the third thief as they landed on the ground. The figure glanced back at them from behind an old Renaissance mask split in half with two different colors and then sped away into the shadows as the alarms began to blare.

“Blast it!” Leo fumed.

“Time to go.”

“And let someone steal our loot? Not a chance.” He sped after the culprit, Jaina jumping down from her rope and following.

The thief was surprisingly fast and they both had trouble keeping up. When they reached the third floor, the shouting started. Flashlights started flitting around on the walls in a corridor behind them.

“We should just take the air shaft in the Natural History wing and get out of here!” Jaina called.

“It’s just guards. The last payroll I saw said the museum still only has a few Greys and a weak Telekinetic.”

“That’s an old payroll! They just hired an Infrared last month!”



“What!?” He glanced around searching for some way to mask their body heats from the *favored* guard. They flew down the stairs to the second floor.

At the bottom of the steps, an option presented itself. Extending one of his blades, he cracked open a fire extinguisher, spreading its cold contents into the air.

Jaina commented, “Alright, alright, nice play.”

The thief was almost to the last staircase. It looked out over the grand first-floor foyer. Jaina quickly pulled something out of a pocket, grabbed it with her tail, and whipped it down the corridor. A smoke bomb exploded right behind the thief’s feet sending them stumbling. Instead of curving towards the stairs, the figure faltered forward at the railing, tipping over the edge.

Jaina and Leo reached the ledge in time to see the culprit below. The figure had drawn a midnight blue katana, the blade easily sliding through the stone like mud. They were riding it down the wall like a descending rock climber.

When the third thief reached the bottom, they retrieved their sword, nodded to the two on the balcony, and headed for the door.

“Really? The front door?” Jaina clucked.

More shouts behind them. Leo and Jaina turned expecting to see guards heading their way. But through the lingering smoke, they instead found the growing silhouette of another figure. It barreled into them before they could even react.

The three tipped over the railing just like the thief and went airborne. Leo extended his blades hoping he could mimic the thief’s escape, but it wasn’t necessary. Jaina’s incredibly strong chameleon hands grabbed the scruff of his jacket, and with her tail, snagged a large banner hanging from the ceiling. It ripped in two, slowly depositing them onto the first floor.

Jaina had nabbed the buffoon who had knocked them over as well, giving them a good look at him. He was an islander, muscular with tribal tattoos, unlike anyone in the City. And instead of a left arm, he had a metal one, with all the intricate innards showing through the forearm.

“Where are they?” he demanded.

“I beg your pardon?” Leo asked nonchalantly.

“The person in the mask! Where did they go? They stole from me!”

“We have that in common,” Jaina replied.

He scrambled to his feet, taller than them. “Which way?”

“Listen, it sounds like we have a mutual interest here. Maybe we could help each other out?” Jaina offered.

“You and your deals...” Leo scoffed.

“I need to find them,” the islander demanded.

The guards had reached the balcony and were spotlighting them with flashlights.

“We’ll figure this out later. Time to go!” Leo barked. They bolted out the front door, Leo grabbing a small statue from a display as they made their exit.

“I guess this is better than nothing.”

## Part 2

Up in the Guildford Spire, one of the highest towers of the City, a high-society woman sat primly at her desk. She took a delicate sip of her morning tea.

A secretary rushed through the door, panting. “Ms. Gandy. I’m afraid there’s been another theft at the d’Argent.”

She gave a great heaving sigh and replaced her tea to its saucer. “I thought the new updates were going to put a stop to this. What was the point of hiring an Infrared if he can’t see thieves milling about the museum?”

The secretary just nodded, devoid of any further information.

“Tell the councilman I’ll meet him for our meeting after lunch, and send a pneumatic to the d’Argent letting them know I’m on my way over, if you would, please.”

“Absolutely, ma’am,” the secretary answered, disappearing in a flash.

Biola Gandy shook her head. “After all the financial requests. Useless.”

She grabbed her purse on her way out the door heading for the nearest tram. There was only a two-minute wait before a monorail glass tram eased into the sky platform. She made her way onto it when the doors slid open.

She found a seat by the window and admired the City as the tram pulled away. It sped along its rail high above the ground, connecting the lofty towers of the Heights. The museum was on the edge of the Heights and Mid-City. It was the lowest she ever traveled. There was no reason to ever go to Sub-City, or god forbid Ground Level. The tram flew by one of her favorite statues on the Copper Leaf building. She watched the giant man with gleaming wings rush by,

his art deco style sharp and beautiful. Flyers soared through the air, either *favor-powered* or Anthros with wings. She envied their freedom a little.

Two stops later, the tram reached the museum. She quickly made her way to the fourth floor. She didn't even need to be told what had been stolen.

Sure enough, a small crowd was gathered around the smashed case of the new spearhead.

"Ah, Ms. Gandy. I'm glad you've come."

"Hector, how is this possible? I thought we instituted the new security to prevent this?"

"We certainly did."

"And yet three nights after its placement, the Gae Bulga Spearhead is stolen. A priceless artifact from a newly discovered era of the Depths. Do you remember how much hassle we went through to secure funding from Foxboro?"

"I do remember, very well, ma'am," Hector mumbled.

"And the new guard? Why didn't he notice the intruders?"

Another man spoke up, "It seems he was on break at the time. He had been, um, napping. Since it was so late."

Biola cringed at the thought. "Useless."

"Gentlemen, I am tired of this glorious museum losing its artifacts. I'm tired of spending funds to only line the pockets of thieves. This museum hardly gets patrons any more to see our relics, but only to ogle the crime scenes."

"We all are, ma'am," Hector agreed.

“Well, then it needs to stop. The archeologists are going to continue delving into the Arianhod Era of the Depths. I have already procured the placement of five of their next findings for this museum. We won’t lose any more.”

They all mumbled their agreement.

Hector waved her over to the broken glass, “Would you find out who the culprits are this time?”

“Absolutely.”

She walked over to the empty case and gave a quick glance over the scene. Then she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Before her eyes, everything began to move. Biola Gandy’s *favor* was very special and one that endeared her to a love of history. As she stood in the museum room, the past flew by her. She watched as the museum men first arrived, watched the sunlight fade back down and return to night. She waited as time went by backwards until finally she saw the guards looking over the scene, all appearing very anxious as to what would come for their failure.

The perpetrators came into view then. Time sped back before her eyes to the moment when the thieves had made their move. Her brow wrinkled in confusion. There were ... one, two, three ... four thieves? She couldn’t think of any guild or faction in the City with that many thieves who would be willing to work together. She slowed the vision down and watched it play out.

First, a man showed, Thayer. “Of course,” she muttered. Then a minute later a female descended from above. “And Cooper. I should have known.”

She watched curiously as the masked thief swooped in and smashed the glass, swiping the spearhead from Thayer. They all disappeared. A minute later a large brute padded into view, staring at the empty case. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. "Is that an islander?"

"An islander, ma'am?" Hector asked.

She blinked and the present returned to her eyes. She replied shaking her head, "I wouldn't be able to describe him as anything else. Tribal tattoos, tunic, black curly hair."

"Is that the thief?"

"I'm not sure. There were several. But two I recognize. It seems Mr. Thayer and Miss Cooper has paid us another visit."

"Oh, but that's the fifth time we've identified them, isn't it?" another gentleman asked.

"I believe so." She turned to them all and nodded. "Hector, I would like you to contact the Chief of Police. Have him issue a warrant for Jaina Cooper and Leo Thayer."

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"Where are we going?" the islander asked.

"Not a bad question," Leo agreed, "We're not going to my hideout."

"Why not?" Jaina scoffed, "Are we supposed to go to mine?"

"Depends. Is it even secure?"

"You haven't been able to find it, have you?" she retorted.

"I guess I didn't have to since you're going to take me there now."

"Please."

They traveled one of the many tunnel alleys of Sub-City, skirting the marketplaces and industry entrances.

“We can’t go to my hideout. I’m part of a guild. It’s not only my hideout. I’d be compromising the integrity of all my fellow thieves.”

“Oh yes, the sacred Order of the Spyglass. We wouldn’t want to upset the powerful wrath of ... how many members are there now? Five?” Jaina mocked.

“Five members who would gladly kill me for giving up the ancient guild hall, yes.”

Jaina shrugged. “Consequences of aligning yourself with miscreants. The reason I work alone.”

“And yet, here we are together. Exactly why are we still together? I should just ditch you two and head home.”

“You were the one who wanted to get the spearhead back.”

“I can do that on my own.”

“You couldn’t even get it from the museum on your own.”

He glared at her. “There’s no reason to continue on in each other’s company. Especially with this oddball following us around.”

The islander spoke up, “I am only following you because you are thieves as well. You will lead me to the thief I am chasing. Birds of a feather...”

Jaina and Leo stopped and stared at him. “What?”

“Birds of a feather,” he repeated, “They flock together.”

“I’ve never heard that before,” Jaina replied.

“Neither have I,” Leo agreed.

It was the islander’s turn to look confused. “Regardless, you will lead me to that thief. Just being near you will lead me to her. You probably have seedy taverns you all enjoy spending time at.”

They both took in his full visage for the first time. Not only was he as out of place as a person could be in the City, but next to his dark skin and swirling tattoos was the mechanical arm and a metal plate running up his neck. The metal melded seamless with his skin, almost as if he had a patch of metallic skin instead of a plate attached.

“Listen, maybe we should make introductions. I’m Jaina, this is Leo. We hate each other and steal things for fun. And I’m assuming you’re not a thief based on your apparent disgust of them?”

He huffed, “I am Brock Saxton of the Jade Tribe. I am a torchbearer of my island.”

They all stared at each other, sinking deeper into confusion.

“What do you mean the Jade Tribe?” Jaina asked.

“Or your island?” Leo added.

“It is where I am from. The island of Eddystone. In the Northern Archipelago.”

The thieves stood dumbfounded. “Are you saying you’re from... outside the City?”

“Of course I am!” he barked.

“That’s impossible!” Leo scoffed, “The City has been closed for two generations. Don’t you see those giant walls surrounding the place? What about that energy dome above us?”

“He’s right, Brock. No one comes and goes from the City.”



“But I did. There was an opening in the wall. It is how I followed that thief in here. She stole my island’s ceremonial staff. I have followed after her for leagues trying to get it back.”

“This is ridiculous, mate. Nobody comes from the outside.”

“I did! I can show you the very spot,” Brock insisted.

There was a pause. Jaina cocked her head, “This I have to see.”

Leo relented with a sigh. “Yeah, I might as well too. Got nothing else to do except avoid the police. It’s absolutely mental to believe though.”

The trio set off through the Sub-City to the Northern Wall on what the thieves guaranteed was a waste of time.

Without the public trams, it took the rest of the night and the better part of the morning before they finally reached the massive metal wall that ringed the perimeter of the City. Brock led them up several staircases to a spot secluded in the shadow of a tower.

It was there that the thieves were proven right. It was a waste of time.

“What?” Brock gasped as he reached their destination. There in the giant, solid wall was ... nothing. No opening, no gap. Just a full and complete boundary wall.

He rushed over and felt the metal, searching for his exit. “It was here. It was how I got through.”

“Uh-huh. Listen, mate, whatever this game is you’re playing, it’s not very funny. I better not have you messing up any more of my future heists, understand?” He began to walk away.

“It was here, I swear to you! Look, there is a seam where the opening used to be.” He ran his hands along the bumpy line in the metal.

“That’s just a welding seam from when they built the wall,” Leo explained.

But Brock wasn’t listening. He was frantically searching for any sign of his fabled entrance.

“No!” he muttered, “I have to get back!”

“Leo... I think he *thinks* he’s telling the truth,” Jaina whispered.

“Who cares, Jaina? He’s not our problem. If we keep him around he is a problem.”

She walked over to the islander. “Brock? I don’t think there’s anything here. Maybe we should head back. Maybe get some lunch?”

He whirled around, completely jumbled. “It was here. I swear. There is no way else I could have gotten in.”

Something in his face compelled the Anthro, and she touched his arm. “Ok. Ok, I don’t think you’re lying. But there’s nothing here now. We should just ... head back. You can come to my hideout and ... try to figure out a new plan.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “Listen, the second we get back to the streets, I’m ditching you two. And you better not follow me.” He headed back down the metal stairs toward the street. The other two followed behind.

Once they were back on Bleaker Street, they headed for one of the alleys. As they passed a marketplace entrance, Leo made a quick salute and started to head off. “It’s been fun, kids. Let’s not do it again.”

But Jaina was staring at a billboard plastered next to the marketplace gate. Her chameleon skin subconsciously changed from its normal light green to a sickly pale yellow.

“What?” Leo came back over to read the bulletin.

Wanted

Thieves:

Leo Thayer

and Jaina Cooper

For Grand Burglary

Wanted Dead or Alive

A Nose Has Been Issued for the Hunt

Jaina stared at him in shock. “A Nose, Leo. They have a Nose looking for us.”

In equal shock, he choked out, “At least I got top billing.”

### Part 3

“What is a Nose?” Brock asked.

“The end of our luck. Not that we had much to begin with,” Leo answered.

“A Nose is someone *favored* with being able to track people. They can sniff them out, find the tiniest trail left by a person,” Jaina really answered.

“And they look for you?” Brock asked.

“Apparently. We’re really in for it now. A Nose will be able to sniff back to our hideouts,” Leo huffed.

“They are that good?” Brock asked.

“I’ve never seen one in action,” Jaina reported, “but any time one of the few Noses in the City has been dispatched, the criminal was caught inside a week.”

“Where do we go?”

“I dunno,” Leo answered, “Our homes will be their first stop, if they can even find mine ... but then they’ll just wander the streets. Start from the museum and work their way out.”

They thought in silence for a few moments.

“There is one place they wouldn’t go,” Jaina offered.

Leo looked at her. Gaped at her, actually. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“A Nose wouldn’t follow us there. There’s too much interference.”

“Not to mention deadly things that can kill them. And us.”

“Where are you talking about?” Brock asked.

“Jaina, that’s crazy, even for you. I won’t go down there. It’s not going to keep us safe; it’s going to get us killed.”

“It’s the only place they won’t go. Like you said, it’s too dangerous. They’ll probably think we’ll die anyway and won’t bother hunting us anymore.”

“You’re not selling this very well,” Leo spat.

“Where are you talking about!” Brock yelled.

The thieves stared at each in silent struggle.

“The Depths,” Leo said.

“The what?” Brock asked.

“Under the City. Where the ruins of past Cities are buried,” Jaina explained

“As well as home to the worst criminals and murderers, AND vicious monsters that lurk in the shadows.”

“It’s our best shot.”

“It’s suicide,” Leo corrected.

“It’s a Nose, Leo,” she urged, “They won’t stop hunting us.”

“We will not be in harm’s way. I can keep us safe,” the islander stated.

“I beg your pardon?” Leo scoffed.

“Brock, this is much more dangerous than you think it is.”

“I am much stronger than you think I am,” he retorted.

“And who are you exactly?” Leo asked. “Why are you even here? The Nose isn’t after you. We’re not going to help you find your stolen stick. You don’t need to keep following us around.”

“I told you, I am a torchbearer of my island.”

“We don’t know what that is,” Jaina said.

“And what are you supposed to keep us safe with? Your utility arm? If you’re an islander, why do you even have a mechanical arm? Why do I even believe that you are an islander? It’s ludicrous!”

Brock put his machine hand on Leo’s shoulder. The weight seemed to calm him down a smidge. “You are my only lead to that thief. I have nowhere else to go now that the wall is sealed shut. If the rulers of this City are hunting you down to kill you, then you have a strong motivation to find a way out of this City as well –“

“There’s no way ou-” Leo began.

“And so I will stay with you. I can match the challenges of these Depths. You will help me get back out again.”

He said it with so much confidence and authority it was hard not to be swayed. Leo did his best though.

“Pass.”

Down the lane, a group of people stepped around the corner. They wore the unmistakable white of the police.

Jaina quickly pushed the two into an alley. It was too late. Whistles began to blow a second later.

“Blast! They saw us! Do you still want to debate this or should we head for Ground Level?” Jaina barked.

“This is insane,” Leo sang, “You’re both insane. What did I do to deserve an end like this?”

“You have stolen many things from many people over a long period of time,” Brock answered.

“But I didn’t hurt anyone,” Leo countered.

Jaina found a manhole leading to the lower parts of Sub-City. Her strong *favored* hands wrenched it off like it was rotten wood. “Stop being stupid! Hurry!” she yelled as she descended.

The two men begrudgingly followed after, slipping through the hole, with Brock replacing the cover before a police officer could turn the corner.

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High in the tallest tower of the City, the Morning Star, rested the chambers of the Lord Prime, leader of the City. Foxboro, dressed in his business jacket, padded along the fine carpet of his high office, deep in thought. He was using his *favor* to recall something he had read 18 years ago on the influences of the Presotian War from 500 years before. After a moment he remembered.

“Farmland disputes. That was the tipping point.”

He walked over to a pneumatic port and scratched out a note. *David, you were wrong about diamond trading being the main influence in the war between Presotia and Conflung. Refer to Bobichelli's The Rise and Fall of the Southlands.* Slipping it into a wall-mounted tube, he shoved up the container where it vanished with a slurping sound. He relished the win of the intellectual debate with a satisfied smile.

There was a knock on the door. In walked one of the City's councilmen, Burbank.

"Your lordship."

"Good morning, Alfred," Foxboro greeted.

"It seems we have thieves again at the d'Argent."

"Ah, yes. I saw the memo this morning. A Nose and a death warrant. Exciting times, no?" the Lord Prime said.

"Less exciting would be preferable," Burbank droned.

"I gather that's not why you wanted an audience with me though."

"No, m'lord. I wanted to update you on the expedition to the Depths."

"Yes, yes. I'm all ears. Eager for news."

Lord Prime Foxboro was truly all ears. He was also mane, whiskers, and claws. Anthony Foxboro was an Anthro, one that resembled a golden-haired lion. He extended a razor-sharp claw to reach an itch behind his twitching ear.

"They've reached the Arianhod Layer without loss of life yet. Only one lot of cargo was lost to a centipedal creature reported to be 150 lengths long and," he consulted a paper, "spitting acidic venom."



“Going much better than last time,” the Lord Prime chimed.

They should be making camp soon and starting the dig. I will get the next update by tomorrow afternoon.”

“This is grand news, Burbank! First, the Gae Bulga Spearhead found along the way, such luck, and now actual entrance into the deepest layer of the Depths archeologists have ever been able to go. I have a good feeling about this. Something’s down there. Something good.”

“If you believe so, m’lord. As you know, I’m not much of a supporter of these Depths expeditions. I still think our research funds would be better spent on addressing the problems here on the surface, instead of digging for treasure in ancient tombs.”

“Burbank, we’ve had this discussion. The dome’s shield is an obvious and high priority to me and this City. But we haven’t had any success developing a solution with the resources here in the City. There’s untold wealth and technology buried below, just waiting to be utilized. Our goal is the same, my friend. Our-”

“- methods are just different. Yes, so you say.”

Foxboro said, “You don’t have to listen to my thoughts to know it’s true.”

He sighed, “You know I can’t help but hear them, m’lord. I’m sorry to intrude.”

The Lord Prime waved his unnecessary apologies away. He understood some *favours* were difficult to control. “The shield is holding as of yet,” Foxboro assured him.

“At 27%. That is below the safe zone. A lightning strike could short it out and then this City would be completely exposed to the dangers of the outside world.”

“You know I won’t let that happen, Alfred. Our great-grandfathers didn’t seal this City on a whim. I know the untold threats of the outside world could bring about the 18<sup>th</sup> destruction of this City, and I will not, by any means, allow that to happen while I am Lord Prime.”

Burbank looked at him with tired eyes. “I know you believe that. I assure you, I am trying to believe it as well.”

He picked up his papers and headed for the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow for the latest update.”

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Far below the surface, past the twisting make-shift pirate villages of the Kensington Layer, through the dark and damp recesses of the Enlightened Layer, all the way to the mysterious depths of the Arianhod Layer, a camp was indeed erected.

The small band of weary and battered archeologists was hard at work searching the rubble and debris of ruins that had not been touched by a live hand for 700 years.

A junior archeologist dug in a corner by himself. He had volunteered for the mission, in a way. His volunteering was mostly due to his superiors heavily coercing him to join. The wonders of the deep! Untold treasures! Or you can find another job! He knew they only wanted him for his *favor*, but there was still a bit of pride inside of him for a place on the historic expedition.

He used his *favor* to move the dirt in front of him. He could feel it, the earth, even without making contact. The cave walls surrounding him were comforting, their earthen mass an immense blanket to him. He continued to wave his hand back and forth, levitating dirt out of the spot he had chosen away from camp. Something had led him this way. A pull. He often felt the pull towards earth, there being so little in the City towers. A potted plant would coax him down a

hallway. A rooftop garden would navigate him through streets and alleys he'd never walked before.

This pull felt different. It felt like how tangy tasted. It zinged a little. He moved the earth with no effort, searching for the tang that resonated in his chest. And then all of a sudden, it laid there in the dirt at his feet.

There was a metal container, incredibly old, but fantastically intact. It was simple and slightly cylindrical. He reached down and retrieved it. He could feel the zing emanating from the container and quickly pried it open. Inside rested a simple rectangle of gray metal, much like a giant stick of metallic butter. To anyone else it would have been unremarkable, but to this junior archeologist with an earthen *favor*, it was like looking at a radiating sunset.

He ripped his gaze away enough to turn back to camp and yell, "Sir! I think I've found something!"

## Part 4

The City was a gleaming pinnacle of civilization. Its towers rose high into the sky, even accumulating clouds despite the dome shield covering them above. The towers contained hundreds of floors of apartments, offices, shops, and maintenance ports. Throughout the entire conglomeration of sleek, stylish buildings ran a complex interconnected series of trams and elevators allowing quick and easy access to any portion of the City.

But Jaina, Leo, and Brock weren't able to take any of these transports. Along with wanted posters, City police had issued intermittent announcements over the speaker system. Apparently, their latest heist had been the last straw.

"And we didn't even get the prize," Leo lamented. They were walking a maintenance duct that would lead to the lowest section of Sub-City.

"Didn't I see you grab a statue on the way out?" Jaina offered.

He pulled it out of his bag. "It's just a mid-range Dio piece. Not even from his popular period. Maybe a month's worth of food?"

"I'd say three weeks," she agreed.

"Disappointing," he sighed. "That blasted masked bandit! They screwed up everything!"

He whirled around on the islander. "What do you know about them? Now that my life is on the line, I'm warming up to the idea of chasing after them with you."

Brock uselessly scratched the metal plate on his neck. "I do not know much. They do not work alone. There was a group of them. They showed up on a neighboring island a week before ours. We only had warning from the Garnet Tribe a day before they struck."

“Did they steal something from them as well?” Jaina asked.

He nodded, “Their sacred text. It held accounts of their greatest heroes. Blurock, wielder of the Scabbard of Excalibur. Benedictan, the Keeper of the Flame. Gavan, Retriever of the Mead...”

“Yes, wonderful,” Leo stopped him, “Did you see any of the others?”

“Me? No. The chief’s palace was robbed and his staff stolen in the night. I started my pursuit that very next morning.”

“How did you keep track of them?” Jaina wondered.

“They are not stealthy. Their boat was easy to see and they traveled in wagons with horses on the mainland. Once I reached shore, it was easy to keep them in sight. One night they split up. I followed the masked one. My people said it was a masked invader who had stolen the staff.”

He shook his head, “I had heard stories of the Forbidden City, but once I laid eyes on it...”

Jaina and Leo exchanged looks.

“We’ve always been taught that the outside world is full of incredible perils,” Jaina told Brock, “There are heartless bandits, dragons, forest monsters, disease. Our leaders sealed off the City ages ago to make sure we would be safe from it all.”

“The City does have a history of being destroyed,” Leo added, “Over and over again. I think this is the 18<sup>th</sup> iteration of the City, yeah?” Jaina nodded. “We’re going to go see some of the old versions right now. In the Depths.”

“Why rebuild so many times? It sounds like this land is cursed to be destroyed.”

“That’s one mindset, yes,” Leo offered, “But the Citizens have always been a very proud people. Determined. Possibly stubborn. We don’t like people telling us what to do.”

“We’ve been able to focus on our people in a way the City never has before by blocking out the interference of the outside world,” Jaina continued, “Most disease has been wiped away, and there’s been incredible advancements in technology and vertical farming.”

“Truly, this place is a wonder of technology,” Brock agreed, “I’ve never seen such things before. The ‘trams’ as you call them? Nothing like it exists in the world.” He patted his arm.

“This is the most advanced thing in all the Northern Archipelago.”

“How *do* you have a mechanical arm if you’re from an island tribe?” Leo questioned.

“It is part of my *favor*. I can build things. I see machines in my head and then my hands know how to put them together. When I lost my arm, I knew exactly how to make a new one.”

They walked along in silence, finally finding the ladder that would take them to Ground Level.

“Most of my tribe shuns me for this. They call it sorcery,” he said before they descended.

“Don’t they have *favor* in the rest of the world?” Leo asked.

“This is different. They do not see it as *favor*. But I see it as so useful.” His fingers flipped away revealing an array of tools; a screwdriver, a knife, scissors, a measuring tool, and a crank where his thumb used to be.

“Wow,” Jaina said.

Leo nodded, impressed despite himself. “I don’t think we have anything like that in the City, do you, Jaina?”

“Not that I have seen. Or I would have stolen it by now.”

“Why do you steal?” Brock asked as they moved down the ladder, “It is dishonorable. The masked thief has disrupted everything on my island; the weekly ceremonies, my life. You must see it interferes with people’s lives to take their possessions.”

“Oh, they get over it. It’s just stuff,” Leo guffawed.

“Leo and I mostly steal from museums, libraries, and the such. It’s not very often we’ll take from a private collection.”

“Private collections come with private security. And their retrieval experts do not care about following the law.” Leo rolled up his sleeve to reveal a nasty scar.

“Anyway, the things we steal are just stolen by the City. They dig them up from the Depths and put them on display. I’m sure the dead of bygone eras wouldn’t like having their personal things stolen from their tombs.”

Brock shook his head, “Your argument is logical but still unethical.”

“That’s you to a T, Jaina.”

“And it’s nothing like you, Leo. I’d never call you logical.”

“I agree. I’m just having fun. Trying to be the best thief in my guild.”

“There is a group of thieves? Like the ones that raided my island?”

“We’re a little more sophisticated than a roving band of misfits, there, Brock. The Order of the Spyglass is one of the oldest and most prestigious thief guilds in City history.”

“Yeah, hundreds of years ago.” She patted Brock’s shoulder, “Don’t listen to him. The Order is a washed-up relic of wannabes pretending they are thief royalty. There are only a few members left and they live in hidden ruins.”

“I won’t deny most of that, Jaina, but it’s better than being a solo Anthro who has no connections to move the stolen items.” He turned to her, “How many pieces that you’ve stolen are still in your hideout, gathering dust?”

She looked away pompously.

“Uh-huh. I thought so. I can offload a steal within a week. The whole underbelly of the Heights knows that you come to the Order of the Spyglass for high-quality stolen merchandise.”

“So would you or your guild know where the masked thief would go after stealing the spearhead?” Brock asked.

“There are only a few choices. If she came from the outside, then she doesn’t want to stay inside, so I doubt she sold it to a Citizen,” Leo worked out, “And there’s always the option that the thief was the one who found, or even made, the way into the City. So she could have left that way as well, sealing it up behind her.”

“But how!? The wall was solid metal several lengths thick!” Brock exclaimed.

“Her sword did cut through the d’Argent wall like butter. Maybe that’s how she did it,” Jaina offered.

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Leo shrugged.

“That would be disastrous!” Brock lamented, “There’s no way I could find her trail by the time we escape.”



“*If* we escape,” Leo countered.

“And I suppose the Depths would be the only other option,” Jaina offered, “The police wouldn’t chase her there, but it is dodgy the first layer down, and downright deadly any farther.”

“Aren’t we lucky that that’s where we’re going...” Leo mumbled.

The ladder came to an end and they were presented with a door. When they opened it they set foot on the only dirt in the entire City.

“Ground Level,” Jaina said in awe.

“Yeah,” Leo whispered, “When’s the last time you were down here, Jaina?”

“Never.”

“Me too.”

“How do we get to the Depths?” Brock asked. The two thieves didn’t answer. “Do you even know?”

“Well...”

“No.”

“We should just ask someone,” the islander offered.

“Listen ... pal,” Leo said putting a hand on his shoulder, “This isn’t exactly the best place in the City. The Depths are the worst, sure, but this is just a step up. And there’s one group that runs this place, and runs it in a way that the police usually turn a blind eye. The Ground Floor Gang.”

“They could be anyone,” Jaina said, “Everyone here could secretly be a gang member, and if they see a couple of lost tourists they can take advantage of...”

“So we need to be careful who we talk to. Or even who sees us. The Ground Floor Gang would love to turn us in for a reward.”

“No honor among thieves,” Brock stated.

They looked at him, impressed. “Wow, that’s really poetic,” Leo commented.

“And true,” Jaina agreed, sneaking the Dio statue out of Leo’s bag.

“It was not me who made it up. It is an old saying,” Brock informed them.

“Regardless, I think I know where a Depths entrance might be. I remember a story about one being near the water intake system on the southeast part of the City,” Jaina recalled.

Leo shrugged, “Good enough.”

They started slinking through the streets, trying to blend in. The sunlight barely made its way to the surface level, creating a dim atmosphere only aided by rundown electric lights. Slowly, they began the trek to a destination they didn’t want to go.

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Down in that destination, in the permadark of the Arianhod Layer, the junior archeologist’s discovery was the center of attention.

“Look at the markings on the casing,” one expedition member admired, “They’re unlike any I’ve seen before. Obviously writing, but a completely alien script.”

“Even the material seems foreign. It doesn’t feel like iron or steel. It has a light solidity to it,” commented another.

“Forget the casing,” chimed in the leader, “Look at what it contains.”

Mr. Creedy, head archeologist, sat over the gray brick with a large magnifying glass contraption attached to his head.

“This material is the alien one. Its consistency is unlike anything I’ve seen. Look,” he took a surgical knife and very carefully sliced a small portion off the end, “It’s most definitely metal, but cuts like wet clay.”

“Mr. Creedy, should you be tampering with it like that? Shouldn’t we wait until it can be examined topside?”

“Please. I’m not going to risk dying on the way home and never getting to examine this piece myself.”

The first expedition member came over and leaned down. “With a consistency like that, what purpose could the metal serve? It wouldn’t be able to house anything, or be used in construction.”

“Softness like that would make it useless in any scientific research or development,” another one commented.

“Perhaps it is merely a useless alloy the Arianhod people discovered and decided to bury their failure. We don’t know as of yet. But one thing I do know,” Mr. Creedy pointed out, “is that the junior archeologist with the earthen *favor* said it was unlike any earth or metal he had ever come in contact with. If that is true, it could be of some worth.”

He placed the tiny slice of metal on a dish and stared at it. “Its usefulness may not be in the material alone. Maybe its true potential comes when it is mixed with another substance.”

He looked around the camp, a few of the members huddled around a measly fire, the others out on the dig. Mr. Creedy grabbed a water canteen. Deftly, he dropped a single bead of water onto the metal slice. Nothing happened.

He continued to introduce the metal to different food items they had packed, leather from a bag, the gold on his ring, and even the dirt from the ground. The tiny sliver of metallic clay sat unimpressively on the dish.

The hours of trial and error had exhausted everyone else in the expedition, sending them back to studying the container, leaving Mr. Creedy alone. He pondered over the discovery, staring into the campfire. A spark crackled from the flames.

It was a crazy idea but he jumped on it. Gathering a small burning twig, he brought the fire over to the sample. Carefully, with just one quick touch, the flame met the metal.

“Ooh ah!” Mr. Creedy yelled. The metal ignited into a hot, pure pulse of cold blue flame. The flame was constant and at least a finger long. He continued to stare at it, the pulsing fire never wavering. He experimented a little, placing the stick back into the new blue flame, where it sizzled and ignited within a second.

“My goodness, that’s strong!” he laughed.

The other members quickly noticed the discovery. A small group gathered to ogle the flame. Many ideas were offered as to how and what and why, but in the end, they all just stared at it. Their awe of the fire would grow and grow as the tiny sliver of mystery metal would continue to produce a steady pyre of flame all through the night.

## Part 5

It took a lot longer to reach the southeast section of the City than they had imagined.

“I guess we’re too used to public transport,” Jaina guessed, “I don’t think I’ve walked this much in a year.”

“I saw a sign for the water plant back there. It should be just up ahead,” Leo told them.

They came to a courtyard of sorts, dingy and old, that seemed to be the last stop before the water intake system. They tried to be casual as they strolled through the open area, but there weren’t enough bystanders for them to mix in with. Sure enough, the man with the Chameleon Anthro and a wildly out of place islander caught someone’s attention.

“Hey! You three!” a man yelled.

They ignored him, trying to not pick up the pace and give themselves away.

“I said, you three!” he yelled again. The trio did stop, but not by choice. Leo looked over and saw the man’s hand outstretched as he sauntered over to them.

“A Telekinetic. Superb luck,” Leo muttered.

“I think I know a way out of their grip,” Jaina whispered.

Once the man had reached them Leo said, “Something we can do for you, sir?”

“I believe you are familiar to me despite never having seen you before,” he answered, “I feel like I’ve seen your faces.” He looked at Brock. “Definitely not yours though.”

“I get that a lot,” Jaina laughed, “Chameleons, you know? Always blending in, reminding someone of a friend. Happens all the time.”

“I’ve never seen an Anthro like you, darling.”

“I guess that settles it then! You must have mistaken us for someone else,” Leo concluded.

“No, I’ve definitely seen you before. Not in person...”

“Perhaps in a painting?” Brock offered.

The thieves looked at him with disappointed faces. He shrugged, just trying to help.

“Ain’t no painting. But it was a picture...” He snapped his fingers, “That’s it! You were in those new wanted posters! Ho, ho, I’m gonna collect tonight!”

“Well done, Brock. You’ve been an immense help since we met,” Leo said, dryly.

“Listen...?” Jaina prompted.

The man obliged, “Name’s Bing.”

“Bing, lovely. You wouldn’t happen to be a member of the Ground Floor Gang, would you?”

He broke into a wide smile, “Hahaha, who isn’t?”

“That’s what I figured. I just thought, you know, if you turned us in for the reward, what would your boss do?”

Bing’s smile faded.

“Would he be pleased you got all that money without cutting him in? I mean, I’m not part of a guild or anything so I don’t know how those groups work, but I’d be pretty upset if one of my men didn’t include me in a major find.”

“You’re spot on, Jaina,” Leo agreed, “There’s a cost to being a part of a guild, or a gang in your case. That kind of community means giving back. You might want to pull your boss in on this one.”

Bing was visibly torn. “But he didn’t do anything to help me catch you. I get paid giblets compared to him on jobs.” He started whispering to himself. “I could do it quietly. Maybe O’Brian won’t seem me pass by the police station. But man, if he did find out...”

Leo felt the hold on him weaken. He looked over at Jaina who nodded smugly.

“Fair’s fair, mate. It’s just a cut, right? But I’d do at least, what Jaina, half?”

“Definitely half. Why not 60%?”

“Half!?” he cried, “Are you mad? I’ve got a family to feed! You’ll put food on the table for at least a month!”

“That’s insulting. We’re worth more than that,” Leo scoffed.

“I stole the Rings of Cagliostro, buddy,” Jaina barked, “No one had done that in the history of the Nautica Library.”

“Yeah! Who was it that peeled the Rising Red Mural off the wall of Mid-City Courthouse? Me. A month of food...” Leo shook his head.

The mental grip began to get weaker and weaker as they confused the gang member. Brock had been quietly pulling his mechanical arm up to point at Bing. A finger flipped back to reveal a barrel. With expert skill, Brock shot a dart into Bing’s leg.

The psychic hold dropped as he screamed in pain. Jaina took the advantage to knock him out cold with one spin and a heavy smack from her tail. They all took off.

Someone near a pub heard the scream and saw the commotion, yelling out after them.

“That was pretty clever, Jaina, I’ll admit it. I guess dim Telekinetics are pretty easy to confuse.”

“You have to get kind of sultry with the smart ones. Just got to distract them. Nice shot, by the way!” she called out to Brock.

“Thank you!”

They sped down an alley, the chug of machinery ahead of them and angry shouts behind. Jaina glanced back to see a small group of people chasing them. “They have to be more Ground Floor Gang.”

“Probably. Another part of being in a guild. Avenging disrespect.”

Jaina scanned the alley for anything they could use. Up ahead was a tall streetlamp with a heavy light. She called out to Leo, “I have another idea! Use your *favor* on that streetlight.”

Leo curved over and stopped at the light, grabbing on and shaking the metal until it began to sing in intense vibration. Jaina crawled up and got a good grip with her hands. Using the immense strength in her hands on the weakened metal, she bent the streetlamp over until it finally gave way, snapping in two. The heavy top came crashing down into the street, crushing two of the gang members and blocking the others.

“That was very creative! You two work well together!” Brock admired.

“She’s a peach. Let’s get going,” Leo said, darting away.

They made it to another intersection; signs for the water plant just up ahead. Another group of Ground Floors skidded into the street with them, swinging bats and crowbars. A



*favored* gang member pulled water up from a nearby barrel and sent it crashing over them.

Another clapped their hands together with such force it sent Brock to the ground.

Jaina made quick work of it all. She grabbed weapons out of people's hands with her tail, punching others with expert strikes. She stole the knife from one attacker and looked him in the eyes as she folded his knife between her *favored* fingers like it was paper. The man took off running.

Leo's blades were out and flashing, turning clubs to kindling and delivering surgical slices to wound without maiming. The *water-favored* gang member froze his blades in ice, but Leo just used them to bludgeon his attackers. After a few seconds, he'd freed them from the ice with a brick wall.

All of it happened in the time it took Brock to get back up. He stood in awe of the thieves' proficiency, nimble and fast. He was a little confused as to why they hated each other so much when they were so complimentary.

The *favored* member sent another thundering clap into the huddled mass in an effort to stop Jaina, sending several of her fellow gang to the ground. At the sight of Jaina hitting the brick street, Brock acted. The barrel in his finger returned sending a debilitating arrow into the Clapper. Then his whole forearm flipped around, replaced with a shaft that shot out a long metal whip. He easily cracked and snapped the whip like a painter would use a brush. He sent several attackers to the ground with pinpoint accuracy and grabbed a particularly large thug round the neck, sending him face-first to the pavement. It wasn't long before the three sent the Ground Floor Gang running. Those still conscious, at least.

They spared a second to stare at each other with immense wonder and astonishment. Then a yell behind them sent them darting toward the plant again.

After a few minutes, they passed the entrance to the water plant, searching frantically. Down the street a little further led them to the City wall. It was there they found a large cave entrance with nothing else around it save for signs warning of death.

Without a word, the trio sped down into the Depths, away from trouble and towards even more.

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The archeologist group far beneath them were packing up. Although it had been a treacherous journey to the Arianhod Layer and they had not been there very long, Mr. Creedy had decided that the new metal was discovery enough. Not just because the little sample had yet to extinguish its strong jet of blue fire, but also because the team had found a stash of nine more containers.

“This trip is a complete success. I can’t wait to get this to the research facility and find out what it can really do.”

Once the team had completely struck camp, they prepared to leave. Mr. Creedy stared at the blue flame with such hope and happiness that he hated to douse it. But he had a strong feeling it could be reignited. He glanced at one of his scientists, one whose *favor* allowed him to manipulate water.

“Would you extinguish the sample so we may return home?”

The scientist smiled and opened a canteen. He moved his hands in a way like he was trying to draw the water out. But nothing happened. His brow knit in confusion as he tried again.

He shot a quick, embarrassed glance at Mr. Creedy and then tried again. Still, the water remained in the canteen. Frustrated, he poured some water out onto his hand and began to make gestures in the air. The water remained where it was, undisturbed.

Slightly panicky, the scientist admitted to Mr. Creedy, “My *favor* isn’t working. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

Mr. Creedy had been watching the entire display with increasing interest. He looked around the group until he found the junior archeologist on the fringe. “You, boy, come here.”

The junior archeologist quickly made his way to the front beside the fire. “I want you to move that stone there, with your *favor*.”

“Of course, sir.” He looked down at the rock and swiped his hand in the air like he usually would to move earth. The rock sat there, motionless. He glanced from Mr. Creedy to the *water-favored* scientist and then tried again. Nothing happened.

“I ... don’t understand.”

But Mr. Creedy had a theory. There was only one thing different from when they arrived to now. He grabbed the canteen from the scientist and poured some water on the burning sample. It puffed out with a heavy cloud of steam.

After a few moments, he looked back at his scientist. Without warning, he splashed water from the canteen onto the scientist. The man flinched expecting to be drenched, but nothing happened. When he realized what had happened, he gasped. The water was frozen mid-air, spread out in sparkling tendrils as if time had stopped. The scientist twisted his hand and the water gracefully returned to the canteen.

Mr. Creedy looked at the junior archeologist. He understood immediately, looking back to the rock and easily lifting it out of the dirt with his *favor*.

“My, my. That is very interesting...” Mr. Creedy whispered as he gathered up the speck of strange metal, completely unconsumed despite its hours of use. “This changes things immensely.”

## Part 6

Biola Gandy made her way to one of the many reading rooms of the Heights. Lunch had been a delightful affair at the Kensington Veranda, and she meandered over for a short spell to read the paper before heading back to business.

The reading room wasn't far from the Veranda and lay very close to the Council Chambers. These towers were full of City Councilmen and women and their offices and staff. The inner workings of the political gears of the City churned in this district, and Biola liked to revel in it sometimes.

"Afternoon, Ms. Gandy," a councilman called, dipping his hat.

"Hello, Mr. Crenshaw. How is the budget legislation going?"

"The way it always goes, miss. Nowhere." He smiled and headed for his office.

Finally, she reached the reading room and took up a spot near one of the windows. The view was a pleasant one of the Halula Gardens and Morgan Town Cinema. Two men in the corner were in a heated discussion of hissing whispers and grumbles. She tried to ignore them as she browsed the headlines. There was a large picture of the sliced wall at the d'Argent and a juicy story of the robbery. She rolled her eyes and flipped the page.

Paying attention to the news proved fruitless as the men continued to fail at keeping the conversation private. Finally, one darted a look over at Biola. He quickly gathered up his companion and took the conversation somewhere else.

Biola went into an internal battle. She had had this debate before. Her *favor* had been able to provide her with many things in life. It was a huge benefit in the museum industry. She could take an artifact and after long and arduous concentration, confirm its time period, location, use,

and even owner. It had allowed her to make the Museum d'Argent the most credible museum in the entire City, as well as provide a high-status and steadfast position for herself.

But there was also the temptation. Part of her had always been weak in the realm of gossip. She enjoyed knowing things, both for knowledge and for leverage. There were many times a quick look at a past conversation had spared Biola of getting wrapped up in terrible relationships. One look at the past had even gotten her out of an investment that would have turned into a monumental loss from fraud.

There was also just the satisfaction of knowing something that others didn't. She didn't always need to use the information she gathered. Sometimes it was nice just to know. Like she was part of an elite group. The war inside her began again as the curiosity began to burn. It wouldn't take long to find out what the men had been talking about. Probably something to do with the budget. That issue was on the table right now in the Council.

She reluctantly caved and quietly sauntered over to the table where the men had been sitting. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and spun the world back in her mind. It didn't take long to come upon the meat of the conversation. Letting the past play out, she discovered why they were so upset.

“It is a big deal, Bob. If the rumors are true it could lead to riots.”

“Michael, settle down. We don't know that it's true. It's just a preliminary examination. Nothing in the world has ever been able to do this before, why should we believe this stuff can?”

“It's Mr. Creedy's report. He's rarely mistaken.”

“Listen, I know that being on the Archeological Committee allows us access to the latest missives on expeditions and research, but think about it, Michael ... remember the influenza scare a couple of years ago? From the mummy they found?”

“That’s different.”

“It’s not. It was just a small cold that was going around. The cold is so rare nowadays that everyone thought they were getting some deadly disease from ancient times! If we hadn’t kept the rumors from spreading the City would have gone into a panic.”

Michael seemed unconvinced. “This is much bigger than a sickness scare. The medical division of the City can cure anything at this point. We are talking about a substance that takes away people’s *favor!*” he hissed.

Biola gasped at the idea.

“Would you keep your voice down? That’s exactly the kind of drivel that needs to stay confidential until Mr. Creedy and the team have returned and done real research in a real laboratory on the substance. A blue campfire is not enough evidence.”

He looked over in the corner. It was the moment he saw Biola glancing their way. “Let’s move somewhere more private before you start having an anxiety attack.”

“You watch, Bob. At the meeting tomorrow with Foxboro and the expedition, you’ll see. This is serious stuff!”

Biola let the vision fade from view and returned to the present. She sat dumbfounded at the very idea of what she had heard. It couldn’t be true. But her curiosity burned even hotter. She didn’t sit and debate whether she would investigate anymore. Her *favor* was the foundation of her whole life, her position. It was the pillar of her pride. She couldn’t imagine life without it.

Heading to the pneumatic station in the back of the reading room she scribbled a quick message to her secretary.

*I need you to quickly and discreetly ascertain the location of tomorrow's meeting with Foxboro and the Archeological Committee. Find out when the meeting is being held and schedule time for me to be undisturbed the hour following it.*

\*~\*~\*~\*

“Down here!” Jaina yelled.

They slipped and darted down the cavernous tunnel further into the dark and unknown.

“Will they follow us?” Brock huffed.

“They may be a gang, but they won't come down here,” Leo yelled back. He already had his hand blades out, just in case. “No one wants to come down here.”

It wasn't a few minutes later that they skidded into the underworld of the City. The first layer of the Depths had received the title, the Kensington Layer. It was named after Queen Diana Kensington who had ruled over the City destroyed prior to the present one. Despite its high-class name though, the Kensington Layer was anything but.

The 'village' that spread out through the massive cavern before them was dark, ramshackle, and incredibly filthy. Many people lived in Kensington, but only a few desired to. Those few would be the violent pirate kings who led makeshift guilds. The pirate guilds were too busy to pillage the citizens of the Ground Floor above because of the non-stop infighting below. Each pirate king demanded there only be one leader of Kensington, and they all wanted it to be themselves.

One of those guild fights was the first thing the trio was greeted with.



An arrow flew towards them, knocked away at the last second by Brock's metal arm. Torches, swords, and *favor* all ran rampant through the dismal foray.

"What are we supposed to do? We can't stay in Kensington. We'll get ourselves killed," Jaina asked.

"That was my exact objection to coming here in the first place," Leo reminded her.

"But we cannot go back. The City is too dangerous," Brock said.

"This is too dangerous!" Leo countered.

"Can we go deeper?" Jaina asked.

"Deeper?" Leo asked. "You want to go deeper, into the Enlightened Layer? The place where carnivorous monsters hunt and prowl? You're telling me that the solution to avoiding a pirate war is to put ourselves into a pit of beasts?"

"Yes. That's why I asked it," Jaina answered.

"Unbelievable. This is how I die..." Leo muttered.

"Do you know a way down to the next layer?" Brock asked, flipping through tools in his arm.

"How would I know that? I've never even been *here* before!"

A bottle of flaming liquor came very close, smashing on the rock and spreading flames.

"We'll figure it out. We just need to get around this skirmish," Jaina declared. She worked her way around the fire and down further into the cave.

Brock immediately went after her. Leo threw up his hands, unable to offer a better idea, but entirely disgusted in the plan.

The three made their way carefully down the sloping path. The battle was raging hard, but seemed to be centered in a large village square of sorts. A pair of rival pirates locked in a death grip tumbled in front of them, not sparing them a second.

“Maybe they’ll be too busy to notice us,” Jaina offered, skirting a rock wall.

“Do not worry,” Brock consoled them, “If things get too dangerous, I can protect us.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” Leo hissed, “You’re just a guy! There’s like fifty of them!”

“Fifty I can handle.”

Leo rolled his eyes, but Jaina glanced at him, wondering if he was serious.

They made their way to a shack in a damp corner. “All of this is pointless if we don’t know where we’re going,” Leo said.

“Listen, an entrance to the next layer down probably isn’t going to be anywhere close to the district. The pirates are sure to keep a fair distance from a cave of monsters.”

“So we go past the village,” Brock surmised.

“Exactly. Just keep sneaking around the buildings.”

They worked the plan, narrowly missing an explosion from *favor* that reduced someone’s home to a pile of scrap wood. The pirates continued to ignore them and slay each other. They had made it most of the way with only a few more buildings between them and a dark cavern beyond. And then the skirmish got too close.

Several pirates battled ferociously toward them when one suddenly knocked another out of the foray and straight into Brock. All of them crumpled into a tangle of limbs.

Jaina pulled Brock up as fast as she could but the pirate was looking them over from his back. He grumbled, “Who are you?”

Brock didn’t give him a chance to ask another question, delivering a solid punch with his mechanical arm and knocking the criminal out.

“Hurry! Before they see!” Leo urged. But it was not fast enough.

“Maaaaaaatteeeyyyyyss!” a voice echoed out from the fight. Even the trio turned to look.

A man stood staring at them in pure pleasure. The battle had simmered down as heads swiveled around to see what the noise was about. The man took a step forward, lifting a sword with jewels in the hilt.

“Oh no. A pirate king...” Leo lamented.

“We have outsiders,” the king said. He pointed his sword straight at them and yelled, “GET EM!”

“Run!” Jaina screamed, using her tail to corral the other two into a sprint.

The entire pirate village thundered out a roaring cheer as the hunt began. They quickly forgot their feud with the promise of new prey in the territory. It felt like the stone beneath the trio’s feet shook with the stampede behind them. They weaved their way out of the village and into a series of tunnels and caves. Torchlight pursued them with every turn.

“We can’t outrun them! They know these caves better than we do!” Jaina yelled.

“Just keep going!” Leo yelled back.

They took a perilous turn that skimmed the edge of a very deep drop, following a tunnel until it opened up into a fairly vast cavern. A few seconds later the crowd entered in behind.

They lit up the space with their torches. *Fire-favored* pirates shot balls of flame at them like mortars. Leo felt an *air-favored* whip out a tendril of wind to trip their feet. The mob got closer.

Brock glanced behind at the probable doom lurking. He knew what he had to do. Reaching into the black sack on his hip, he pulled out his secret weapon. It was the most deadly thing he had ever come upon, and he knew that the only way they were going to survive the onslaught behind them was if he used it now.

He skidded to a halt in front of the bloodthirsty pirates and held the weapon out. Jaina and Leo realized he had stopped and turned to see what insanity he was pursuing.

Even the pirates slowed to a stop at the sight of his terrible instrument of war.

And then they began to laugh.

In Brock's hand lay a bunny. A little tan one with a white chest and tail. The pirates continued to guffaw at the sight of the cute animal, mixed with the intense determination on the islander's face. Then the little bunny began to stir from its sleep.

Brock heaved the rabbit back as far as he could and lobbed it deep into the mix of pirates. Jaina gasped at the sight of the little bunny soaring through the air. It was so sudden and strange a moment that even the pirates quieted down to watch its flight.

Brock turned to the thieves, wide-eyed, and urged them, "Hurry! Run!"

"But..."

“But...” they stammered.

“NOW!”

They quickly made their way along the length of the cavern heading for a large wall on the far side. Then the screams began.

The thieves turned to see what was going on but Brock urged them even harder. “Do not look! Just run!”

More screeching and wails rang out from the pirate mob. Panic had been set loose and they fought and scrambled away from Brock’s terrible weapon. Brock’s heart thumped hard in his chest, not just from the running but from what he knew would come next.

With a glance behind, he saw it. The bunny was after them.

“Hurry!” he screamed.

The little creature was like a bounding tan blur, zigzagging through the rocks and stone on a vicious mission. It gained on them by the second. If the screams had been any inclination, they were surely hopeless.

Right before it reached them, Brock stopped again. Jaina and Leo watched in complete dumbfounded confusion as the islander braced himself and bared his metal neck to the monster. The bunny made three more bounds and then went in for the kill.

It struck the metal plate of Brock’s neck with a resounding clang that echoed through the cavern walls. It landed on the ground at his feet with a pathetic thud.

They all just stared at it for a second. Brock reached down and gingerly retrieved the now unconscious bunny and replaced him in the black sack on his hip.

He turned to the other two flustered but pleased with himself.

“What ... in hades ... was that?” Leo breathed.

“It is a nightmare that has followed me for most of my life. A demon of a creature that wants only one thing in this world, to kill me. I tried to evade it for many years until I realized, I couldn't. It is another reason my tribe shuns me...”

“So ... you keep it with you!?” Jaina asked.

“The Bunny of Doom will destroy anything in its path to find me. I discovered it could be useful in dire situations.” He patted the bag. “It doesn't eat or drink, and darkness puts it to sleep.”

“Why don't you just kill it and be done with the whole thing?” Leo suggested, still incredulous.

“It can't die. I've tried. And,” he began to continue their trek to find the entrance to the next layer, “nothing has been able to stop it yet. So I will use that to my advantage.”

The thieves could do nothing more than stare after him as he walked away.

“I guess we keep moving,” Jaina said, dumbstruck.

“I guess...”

## Part 7

She checked her watch. The meeting should be over at any time. The Morning Star tower was traditionally only for the Lord Prime, his family and staff, and the Council, but it did house one of the finest terrariums in the City so normal Citizens were able to visit from time to time. The last thing Biola wanted was to look out of place.

She made her way to the terrarium, centralized in the tower. It was fifty lengths tall and just as much wide. A few others had come to look through its glass at the preserved natureworks inside. Her eyes did linger over the beauty despite her secret mission. Although other gardens and parks were spread through the Heights, this terrarium featured wild nature, without sculpting or interference. She paused, studying the scene. A small rodent was scampering over a fallen log. The sunlight from the tower windows filtered through the untrimmed trees.

Was this what it was like outside the City walls?

A door slammed behind, startling her from her reverie. She turned to see the conference hall emptying itself of a fairly disgruntled crowd. Many councilmen and women were among the group, including the two Biola had seen the day before, and at the tail end, the Lord Prime himself.

Biola had only seen him twice before, and never this close. He was a magnificent looking Anthro, with an expensive and perfectly-cut suit that fit his mane and tail. He went in a different direction than the rest of the group along with a few assistants. She watched until he reached an exclusive elevator that led to his tower suites.

Once everyone had dispersed, Biola took up a place on a bench near the terrarium. She took in the scenery for another ten minutes before making any moves. She didn't want to look suspicious. Then casually she got up and entered the conference hall.

It was a lovely space, perfect for the office of Lord Prime. She took up a place near the center and pulled a book from her bag. If anyone walked in while she was peering at the past she could say she was just looking for a quiet place to read.

Once positioned, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The familiar pull of time flashed around her whisking the events of the space backwards in her mind.

Suddenly, the room was full again, and Foxboro sat up at the front with some officials at his side. A person she didn't recognize was sitting close by him.

"It is good to see you all returned from the Depths, Mr. Creedy," the Lord Prime addressed the unknown man. "I am especially pleased to hear that there was no loss of life along with your discovery."

"I as well, m'lord," Mr. Creedy agreed. "I am hopeful that we can start into the details of the discovery as soon as possible and forego a full retelling of the expedition."

"Indeed. We are all eager to hear of this new substance."

Mr. Creedy stood and with the assistance of a couple of other researchers, unloaded some items in the center of the room. One of which was a small gray container with etchings on it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the substance to which the Lord Prime and my previous preliminary missives referred is this." He opened the container so that everyone could see the unremarkable brick of metal.



“As of right now, since it was discovered in the Arianhod Layer of the City, we are calling it Arianum. Although inconspicuous to look at, this alloy seems to be something that could be of great value to the City.”

“What of the complications you discovered while in the Depths?” a councilman asked. It was the one Biola had seen in the reading room the day before.

“I will get to that,” Mr. Creedy answered politely.

“It seems the metal’s most important aspect, in my opinion,” a councilwoman chimed in.

“Please allow Mr. Creedy to complete his full presentation,” Foxboro called out.

Mr. Creedy nodded his thanks and continued. “This substance is entirely unknown to us. There is no record of it in the archives, both historically and scientifically. It has a strange consistency for a metal and seemed to be useless under the first examination. But,” he motioned his assistants, “after a few tests, its purpose was found.”

They had samples set up on a table. Mr. Creedy lit a lighter and ignited a tiny portion. It shot out a long plume of steady blue flame. There were some murmurs from the crowd. Foxboro looked very pleased.

“The Arianum, for reasons we have not completely worked out yet, accelerates the production of energy. We have not figured out if it is transferring potential energy into kinetic or whether it is being consumed at an incredibly slow rate while producing a high amount of output. When we first started this experiment in the Depths, the fire continued without degradation until we manually put it out a day later.”

“Amazing.”

“It didn’t even flicker?”

He went on, “My amazement mirrored your own. When we returned to the City we were able to start a few more experiments, including the introduction of a stronger energy source. It was believed that if fire could cause such a reaction, perhaps electricity would produce more.”

His assistants activated a contraption consisting of two small metal towers with a sample of Arianum poised between. An electric spark danced from the machine to the alloy and a flash of light burst out. Everyone shielded their eyes at the explosion of light but grew wide-eyed when the reaction had settled.

“The introduction of an electrical impulse increased the Arianum’s energy output by a hundredfold. There is so much power being generated that we are having trouble making use of it all.”

The electric that danced between the two towers was like solid lightning. It crackled and shifted a little but mostly waved like a solid blue-white ribbon.

“After a few preliminary calculations, it is believed that this substance could fully power the shield dome to maximum capacity using only one of these bricks.”

“You have more than one?” someone asked, incredulous.

“We returned with ten total,” Mr. Creedy answered, “And it was also calculated that that single brick of Arianum could power the shield dome, indefinitely.”

More murmurs and gasps echoed through the chamber.

“This is the single most valuable discovery in the history of the City and all its iterations!” the Lord Prime exclaimed. Several joined his praise.

“But it was a part of one of the past iterations of the City,” an archeologist corrected, “And they were lost despite having access to it.”

A rumble of comments and questions rippled through the group.

“What of the *favor* issues, Mr. Creedy? We should have all the facts before deeming something so ... revolutionary.” It was the same councilman who had earlier voiced his concerns.

“Yes. Indeed,” Mr. Creedy continued, “There was a discovery of a side effect while in the Depths. That side effect also occurred in our experiments here in the City.”

“Does it wipe out *favor*?” the councilwoman asked.

Mr. Creedy cleared his throat. “There is a form of radiation that we have not encountered before that ... nullifies a person’s *favor*, yes.”

The room broke into an uproar. The shouts mixed from shock and indignation to urges for Mr. Creedy to finish his presentation. Surely there was something to counteract the side effect.

“My *favor* isn’t working!” someone exclaimed.

Others with *favor* tried their abilities with no success. “Did you take away our *favor* for a demonstration!?”

Mr. Creedy raised his hands to explain but the incredulity wouldn’t die down. Finally, Foxboro stood and gave an impressive roar. The room went silent.

“Thank you, m’lord,” Mr. Creedy said, “The effect of the radiation is not permanent. Your *favor* will return in a couple of hours. Outside of the nulling of *favor*, there seems to be no other dangerous or unwanted effects of the radiation.” That seemed to calm the room. “We have also discovered that the exposure zone of the radiation is completely dependent upon the amount of Arianum in use, as well as the distance the energy output has traveled. Those outside of this

room will not see any impact. And Arianum is completely inert without the introduction of energy. That's how an *earth-favored* archeologist found it in the Depths."

"So what would the consequences of using the Arianum to power the shield dome be on the City?" someone asked.

Mr. Creedy glanced from Foxboro back to the Council. "That kind of output spread over the entire dome would ... encapsulate the entire City in radiation."

"What!?"

"That's insanity!"

"The nerve to even suggest!"

"Please! Let's not make rash decisions!" Mr. Creedy tried to gain control again.

Foxboro stood again but didn't need to raise his voice to quiet the room. They instinctively silenced themselves. "Mr. Creedy, what is the current status of the shield dome?"

"It sits at 26% today."

"That is well within the danger zone, isn't it?"

"Yes, m'lord. It is critically unstable at this point."

The Lord Prime looked at the committee. "I am not inclined to see the people of this City stripped of what makes them unique. Nor am I willing to completely upheave the way this City works to stay protected. That being said, our protection is failing. The outside world is but a breath away. We are in no shape to defend ourselves against the dangerous unknown out there." He looked down at the ribbon of blue electricity undulating in the apparatus. "This is the most

viable, most practical solution to our energy problem in the last few decades. We've never had a better chance to power the City than this."

"My lord! You would think of sacrificing *favor* for security!" the opposing councilman yelled, "Think of your own *favor*! You were chosen for office because of your vast wisdom. Should you lose your *favor* how would you recall all the knowledge you've acquired over your lifetime!"

"Think of the emergency services!" the councilwoman continued, "Without Cryokinetics how would we put out fires? Without Healers how would our hospitals work? Our police force is full of Telekinetics. How would order be maintained without their *favor*?"

"I am not condoning the use of this substance, councilwoman. I am merely stating it is a miracle. Perhaps there is a way of utilizing it while shielding the City from the radiation. You must allow Mr. Creedy and his team to further experiment."

"But, m'lord. This is insanity. The citizens of the City would never agree to such a thing."

Another councilman spoke up, "The Greys would."

"Excuse me?" Foxboro questioned.

"I believe the Greys of the City, who do not possess *favor*, would not object to the use of Arianum for the City's protection."

"You're just saying that because you're a Grey," one of them barked.

"I resent that statement."

Another councilwoman stood up, “I disagree with my fellow Grey’s comment. As a Grey I would never ask people to give up a part of themselves that I wouldn’t be willing to give up myself. I’ve never resented the fact I don’t have *favor*. None of us get to choose to have it or what we will have. I would sooner hate people who have blond hair just because I don’t.”

“Here, here!”

“Everyone!” the Lord Prime called. He waited until every eye was on him. “As you can see this debate needs further discussion, and by a wider group of people than just this committee. This meeting was for Mr. Creedy to present his findings from the expedition and I believe he has. And so we will close for today. I will be scheduling a closed session with the entire Council soon so we can continue the conversation. Until then, the use of Arianum will be limited to small experimentation in sanctioned labs under Mr. Creedy’s supervision. This will not be used on a large scale whatsoever.”

Mr. Creedy nodded.

“As for everyone in this room, you are under strict orders of confidence regarding the matter. No one, and I mean no one, is allowed to know about this until the Council has come to a decision. If this information leaks, I hereby order the imprisonment of everyone present in this room. Understand?”

There was a murmur of understanding.

Foxboro took a deep breath and fixed his jacket. “Dismissed.”

The crowd began to disperse in the grumpy way Biola had seen them leave not long ago. She was about to let the vision fade when she saw Foxboro and Mr. Creedy talking together. She paused what she was seeing until she had joined them.

“Mr. Creedy I want every scrap of that metal taken into secure holding right away.”

“Yes, m’lord. I can move it to the Pilfery Labs right now.”

“No, Mr. Creedy, I believe this requires a more secure workspace. I want you to take your experiments to Warehouse 107.”

Mr. Creedy looked shocked, and Biola joined him. “My lord? There ... there is such a place?”

“Yes. I’m upgrading your security clearance. The place not only exists, you are now privy to it. See Shellington for your access papers.” He walked out with his entourage leaving the archeologist stunned.

“Warehouse 107... I can’t believe it,” Mr. Creedy whispered.

“Neither can I...” Biola said to the empty room.

## Part 8

The trio spent most of the travel in silence from the Kensington Layer to the Enlightened Layer below. Leo kept eyeing the black sack on Brock's hip warily, now aware of what lay inside.

In an anticlimactic moment, they passed a plain tunnel threshold and were suddenly in the cavernous hold of the Enlightened Layer. They stared at it in wonder. While the Kensington Layer was the most recent ruins of the City, the pirates had all but destroyed any sign of its distinct era's remains. The Enlightened Layer, though, had stayed practically untouched since its abandonment, save for the occasional archeological dig.

And the Enlightened Era was all about grandeur.

"Wow..." Brock whispered.

Jaina nodded equally impressed. "They say there was never a more magnificent City than that of the Enlightened."

"A balance of art, culture, wealth, science, and knowledge all sitting upon strong pillars of marble," Leo added.

The area in front of them housed an orchard of heavy stone pillars, each as wide as a tram car and virtually unscathed from its destruction. It felt like an enormous hall of ancient heroes.

"What could have happened to destroy such a City?" Brock asked.

Jaina answered, "They say a tidal wave from the ocean swept in one day and drug the City back out to sea with it. Very little survived."



He looked at her, confused. Leo explained, "It was before the walls and shield dome." He nodded.

"The problem now is that terrible monsters that were living in the Depths were drawn up after the tsunami and have remained in the Enlightened Layer ever since. It cost a lot of archeologists' lives to retrieve from here," Jaina said.

"And now we're here to join them in our futile attempt to find a way outside the City. Outside. The reason there are so many destroyed layers of this place," Leo huffed, "Why are we doing this again?"

"Because City officials want to kill us," Jaina reminded him.

"But now we have the monsters for that," he retorted.

"I am sure the Bunny can handle them," Brock reassured the thieves. To make his point, he started deeper into the ruins.

"I don't know if I want to put my trust in that manic thing. What if it does kill you, what then? What if we get between you and it? It's like carrying around a bomb."

Jaina shook her head, "He's survived this long. I don't think we need to worry about it."

He sighed, "I suppose you're right. We should probably be more focused on finding the imaginary doorway out of here."

"There has to be an exit. A stray tunnel. We have to find a way to that thief. I cannot fail my island."

Leo rolled his eyes. "Well, I once stole the remnant maps of the Enlightened Era City. You know, for fun."

Jaina wheeled around on him, “That was you?”

He couldn’t help smiling, “You were after them too? Oh, that’s delightful.”

She slapped him, “Leo! Those are part of the Archives! I thought you didn’t mess with the historical documents. It was one of your very few admirable qualities.”

“Oh, c’mon! I didn’t steal them. I mean, I *stole* them, but I put them back.” She simmered a little. “After about a month or two.”

She slapped him again. “Ingrate. I’m sure you don’t care, but I made it a personal mission to stop thieves from nicking from the Archives. That’s our history, our City’s story. It shouldn’t be in one person’s hands.”

Leo looked at her with just the slightest trace of admiration. “Huh. I didn’t know you felt that way, Jaina.” She nodded, satisfied a smidge. “Of course, you failed your mission cause you didn’t stop me.” He broke into a devilish grin and trotted away gleefully as she tried to swat him with her tail.

Brock watched the whole exchange in confusion. “Your ethics are ... complicated.”

“Listen, those maps are back in their trays at the Archives and I am the only thief to successfully pilfer the great institution.” He bowed. “And more importantly, I can recall a good portion of what they showed of this dump. I thought I might delve down here for treats myself, skip the middle man.”

“I thought you were scared of the monsters?” Jaina asked, one eyebrow raised.

“This being my first time here shows that I changed my mind.”

“So do you recall which way to go?” Brock asked.

He turned slowly on the spot, finding landmarks. “I don’t know. But there was a section near the north that was a banking district...”

Jaina scoffed, “We don’t need money, Leo. We need a way out. Was there anything that talked of outlets like ... rivers or bridges? City gates?”

He scrunched his eyes tight for full effect, thinking. After a minute he offered, “There was a river, I think. A little port for trade routes too. Further west, I think it was. There was a ... library? No, a big guild hall near there.”

“West it is.”

They began the trek through the forest of pillars, vaguely heading in what they hoped was the right direction.

It was much later when they decided to stop for a break.

“I think I’m starving,” Leo lamented, “Probably would have been smart to grab some food before we started this quest.”

“I am also hungry,” Brock agreed.

“Well, I have a few things in my bag. Not enough for a meal, but it might take the edge off,” Jaina offered.

She presented a handful of vegetables and a block of cheese.

“Raw vegetables? That’s it?” Leo said.

“What were you expecting? A roast?”

“Don’t say delicious things,” he whispered.

“I could sauté those up on a campfire.” Brock reached into another hip sack and pulled out a small bottle of oil. “I carry spices to cook with. To use as I hunt as I travel.”

The thieves exchanged a look and Jaina handed over the food. After finding some old wood remnants, Brock flipped a finger around to produce a firestarter, quickly lighting an inviting blaze. He took a flat stone and used a little water to clean it. Then with another flick, a knife appeared from his mechanical hand, making quick work of the veggies. Soon they were sizzling on the stone and with a flourish of grated cheese, the three had an improvised dinner to remember.

Brock removed an eating utensil from his forearm and began to dig in, the other two eagerly using their hands. It disappeared before they were all satisfied. A quiet moment joined them as they stared into the fire.

The reverie was broken by a guttural growl.

Their three heads snapped toward the sound. Unbeknownst to them, a massive creature had slowly been creeping its way toward the rare bit of flame in the dead layer. It was close enough to reveal the features of a grotesque centipedal face in the flicker of the firelight.

After a second’s recognition, Brock grabbed a flaming log with his metal hand and chucked it at the creature’s face, “RUN!”

They bolted from the scene as the monster let out another grating growl.

Leo yelled, “Brock! Bunny! Bunny!”

The islander ran ahead of them, sparing a second to yell over his shoulder, “No! It is too big! The Bunny will just ignore it and come for me!”

“I thought you said it could handle it!”

A stampede of giant insectoid legs charged them from behind, easily crawling over boulders and felled pillars.

“What do we do?” Jaina screamed.

Leo huffed in disgust and turned back towards the creature.

“LEO!”

He ran, determined and annoyed at the need for him to be ‘heroic’. The beast came into view around a pillar and Leo darted underneath its snapping jaws, making his way along its long underbody. His hand blades snapped out.

He went to work on the legs, slashing as hard and fast as he could. Its dense exoskeleton did little to give way to his blades, but it was enough to annoy the thing. He ran further along, slashing all the way.

It began to make its long turn back toward him. Brock and Jaina were following behind it, Brock retrieving his firestarter again. Before he knew it, Leo was back at the campfire. “Well, that was a waste,” he muttered.

The Centipede towered over him. He grabbed a lit branch and waved it, as useful as a match against a waterfall. The beast snapped down at him, missing by just a few lengths.

It stopped suddenly, looking curiously at what could be described as its shoulder. Something was moving there, murky and indistinct. Without warning, a blurry appendage snapped out and crushed a small part of the beast’s eye. It growled again, hurt and confused. Jaina briefly appeared on the thing’s shoulder before blending back into its body color.

“Over here!” Brock called, waving to Leo, “Bring it over here!” He was motioning to a recess in what was once a building.

Leo waved his pathetic stick at the bug, hollering for its attention. It quickly made after him, toward whatever trap the islander had set. When Leo reached Brock all he found was a pile of long-crumbled timbers that had once framed a building.

“Give it some space,” he told Leo, pointing his firestarter at the debris. From his bicep popped a hidden compartment. Out shot a little pellet of something that crashed on the wood with a splash. He sparked the firestarter.

The ancient wood, doused in whatever fluid Brock had fed it, exploded in a plume of heat and light. The Centipede reached them just in time to be blinded by the blast. Jaina dropped down and joined them.

“Do you think that will hold it back?” she asked.

“Maybe,” Leo guessed.

After a few seconds, the beast regained its composure and stared at their fiery blockade. It dove down and grabbed one of the ancient timbers all aflame in its giant mandibles and easily tossed it a hundred lengths to the side.

“Well, shoot,” Leo sighed.

They backed away as it advanced. Right when it was about to reach down and brush past the fire, a sudden change in the atmosphere sent the monster rearing on its back fifty legs screaming in pain. The trio looked at each in utter bewilderment. The flames before them hadn’t changed in intensity, size, or area. They roared exactly the way they had been a second before, but now they churned a violent, lime green.

The Centipede continued to scream, backing away in pain. Finally, it fled into the familiar darkness. Still mystified, the three could only stare past the green flames to where the beast had just been threatening their lives.

“Hello,” a voice echoed behind them.

They whipped around, Leo’s blades out, Brock’s whip extended, and Jaina’s tail poised for attack. A lone man stood on a pile of rubble smiling at them. He was fairly short but muscular, not yet middle-age. He wore worn-out clothes that looked like they had been fairly stylish when new, and on his face rested a magnificent beard.

“Who are you?” barked Jaina.

In a calm movement, he swiped a hand sideways. The fire behind them melded back to its natural orange, turning the cavern from evil grotto to comfortable hollow.

The man answered, “My name is Hans. Hans Coventry.”

## Part 9

“Why ... why are you down here?” Leo asked.

Hans Coventry tilted his head, “I could ask you the same thing.”

“We are looking for a way out of the City. Officials are trying to capture and execute these thieves,” Brock informed the stranger. Leo punched him the arm.

“What is wrong with you?” Leo asked the brute as he cradled his sore hand.

“He saved our lives. I do not fear him.”

“Nor should you. I’m just an archeologist.”

“Oh, I see,” Jaina breathed, “Are you on a dig?”

“No.” He began to walk away. After a few lengths, he called back, “This way. The Peadil can’t stand green light, but Horophrims don’t care one way or another.”

The three didn’t wait around to figure out what a Horophrim was. They quickly caught up to the man.

“So, what are you doing down here, Hans? Fancy some zoology in your spare time?” Leo asked.

He chuckled, “No, I live down here.”

“Live!? Whatever for?” Jaina asked.

“Suppose I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“How have you not died yet with those things running around?” Leo inquired, his hand blades still extended.



“Luck mostly. But I have some skill and a little knowledge. Good climber too. It’s a *favor* of mine.”

The other three continued to trail behind him, unsure why they were following.

“Are you taking us to where you live?” Brock asked.

“Yup. Safest place down here. Could use the company too.”

Leo scuttled over to Jaina as they resumed their trek. “Should we be following this guy? We’re being led to some gory trap that he uses on poor saps that wander down here, right?”

She shook her head, “I don’t know about that. He did save us from that beast. But how could live down here? Why would he want to?”

“What are you talking about?” Brock asked, suddenly appearing at their side.

“How much we could get for that arm of yours,” Leo responded. He trotted up closer to Hans. “Hans, may I call you Hans?”

“It’s my name.”

“Wonderful, what exactly would possess you to stay down here in the realm of monsters? Did you find something ... interesting?”

The archeologist smiled, “Extremely.”

“Uh huh. I see. But why would you *stay* though? As a procurer and discreet distributor of rare and exotic historical pieces, I always like to move my findings to an interested party as soon as I can.”

“Haven’t been able to move what I found.”

“Sure, sure, that makes sense. So why not enlist some help to get it out of this nightmare?”

Hans stopped and stared into his eyes. “I may just have.”

The statement sent Leo back a few slow steps.

Jaina spoke up, “Why do you say that?”

He smiled at them. “Because I’m trying to leave the City as well.”

\*~\*~\*~\*

Mr. Creedy made his way to the labs he had been assigned to. They were on a Mid-City section of research towers that tended to study environmental sciences. He never came here since they worked with water filtration and vertical farming. On the correct floor, he followed the hallway down a series of labs until it ended in an unassuming desk. There, an older man sat with a stack of papers that he was slowly cycling through.

“Clearance,” he droned.

Mr. Creedy retrieved his new ID card that looked remarkably like his old one. The old man took the card and inserted it into a slot hidden on his side of the desk. No one had ever done that with his old ID. There was a click and the ordinary door behind him unlatched.

“Have a good day, sir,” he remarked as he resumed his paper shuffle.

Mr. Creedy nodded and headed through the door. On the other side was a camera mounted to the ceiling and a plain potted plant on the floor. Otherwise, the small room was empty.

The door shut behind him. He waited but nothing happened. Finally, there was a shudder and the room began to descend. The entire floor rumbled downward, the walls and door disappearing out of sight but the ceiling following after him. After a short ride, it came to a smooth stop revealing a set of metal elevator doors on the opposite wall. They slid open.

He tentatively peeked through and found himself in an area of polished black floors and walls supported by heavy metal trusses. No one was there to meet him in the long hallway. He slowly made his way into the space. It wasn't fifty lengths down the path before he came upon a window on the right that opened up to a vast testing range. Inside, scientists were crowded around an individual who looked like a military member.

"I didn't know the military still existed..." he whispered. The scientists began to move away from the man and start up nearby machines. They were clearly conducting tests. The military man used his *favor* to raise two fairly large towers of water. He signaled to a scientist with a nod and the scientist responding by activating a switch. A device on the military member's chest illuminated yellow. He then grew the water towers to ten times their original size and sent them blasting into the ceiling. The spray rained down on man and equipment like a hurricane. It was like something Mr. Creedy had read about long ago.

The scientists all clapped at the apparently successful test.

"*Favor* amplification ... that's supposed to be illegal..."

"Mr. Creedy?"

He whipped around in surprise. "Yes? Yes, I'm him. That's me." He grabbed the man's hand and shook it roughly, "Mr. Creedy."

The scientist retrieved his hand with an amused smile. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Creedy. We’ve heard much about you. I can show you to your new laboratory. This way.”

Mr. Creedy breathed a sigh of relief and followed the gentleman through a maze of halls each with a window to another incredible experiment.

“This is a bewildering place. These tests seem to be of an ... stimulating nature.”

The man turned to him as they reached the door. “We do things differently down here, Mr. Creedy. There are things in this world that can be used to the City’s benefit, and this is a place where we are free to discover and harness them. Much like your new alloy, no?”

Mr. Creedy could only nod.

“You’re not in the Archeology Guild anymore, sir. This will be your lab, Room L. Welcome to Warehouse 107.”

\*~\*~\*~\*

It wasn’t long before Hans had led the three outcasts into the area he called his home. It just so happened to be the very spot that Leo had been leading them to from what he could remember of the ancient maps. A guild hall rose up before them, a shadow of its former self. That was due in part to decay but also from the sharp devices ringing the front to blockade unwanted visitors. Hans weaved them through his makeshift defenses and to the hall’s mighty gate.

“I don’t belong in the City anymore. Haven’t for a while. No family left, no money. There’s no point in me sticking around in this stack of ruins. I’ve seen enough of the dust of the City. I need to get out beyond these walls and see the world. It’s big and full of wonder and ... not here.”

Inside was more dilapidated than out, but it was solid enough. Down they went, past pillars and pedestals that all surely held items of glory ages ago. The hall ended in an ancient stone gate. He positioned himself between the others and an intricate keyhole on the wall, blocking their view. The lock acquiesced to his key and swung open.

It wasn't a question of why this was behind a locked door. The square room was intricately carved and decorated with columns. The three could tell it had once conveyed the utmost luxury. Now, unfortunately, it conveyed none of that. Dilapidated, worn, run-down. These were its present credits.

"Here we are. Home sweet home." Hans had turned the place into a dwelling of sorts, with leftover crates and furniture from the ruins.

"I love what you've done with the place..." Leo muttered.

"And you've lived down here ... how long?" Jaina asked.

He motioned them into an area with crates stacked high. "Couple years, I think. Hard to tell with no sun." There was a makeshift tent with just a tarp tied between debris. A decrepit generator came clunking to life at Hans' insistence providing light from a string of beat-up bulbs.

He passed by a few makeshift tables with artifacts and pieces of machinery scattered across the top.

"Are any of you hungry?"

Brock raised his hand. "I have spices."

Hans smiled and retrieved some cans of meat and vegetables. He prodded a dying fire and threw on some extra wood to bring it to life again.

Jaina picked up one of the cans. “This is pretty new. Where’d you get it?”

“Oh, there are lots of little tunnels between here and the surface. I pop up and grab some vittles every so often.”

“Vittles, eh?” Leo said, inspecting one of the cans. “Oh, I like this brand.”

They were silent as Hans prepared them an even better meal than they had had not long before. Brock was pleased the archeologist requested the use of his spices.

After they were satisfied, the islander asked him, “So this discovery you made? Is it a way out of the City?”

Hans dipped his head back and forth, “It could be.”

“Could be? That seems to be the extent of any possibility we have of leaving this place,” Leo commented.

“It has a lot of potential, let’s put it that way. But I haven’t been able to make it work yet.”

“How did you find it?” Jaina asked.

“I had a hint from a long time ago. There was said to be an invention by a fairly controversial guild, the Order of the Infinite Horizon.”

“Never heard of em,” Leo said.

“The device was rumored to be hidden within a secret chamber in the guild hall, but never used. It honestly didn’t take me very long to find. The Infinite Horizon wasn’t real clever with hiding their secrets despite their love of them. Come, I’ll show you.”

Hans got up and lit a torch. As they headed out, Brock flipped open a tab on his forearm to reveal a flashlight.

“You’ve had a flashlight this whole time?” Leo gaped.

“The battery does not last long; I do not like to use it very much. But since Hans has a generator I can charge it back up.”

Leo rolled his eyes.

The archeologist led them further into the chamber. A door, a stairwell, and two hallways ended them at the remnants of a statue. He reached up and pulled the ear on its left side. A door appeared, grinding on the stone floor.

“That is a bit cliché,” Leo commented.

“Well, it was hundreds of years ago, so a hidden switch on a statue probably wasn’t cliché back then,” Jaina retorted.

The first thing they noticed was the sound. It was steady, like static on a radio. The further they walked into the cavernous room the louder the sound got. Finally, its source presented itself. A hefty waterfall fell from some unseen place down into the dark abyss of an underground canyon. They gazed at it opposite of their side of the chasm, toeing the edge of the cliff. But Hans’ impressive discovery quickly stole their attention away from the subterranean waterfall.

The thing ran almost 200 lengths and still had a shine despite its obvious age. The metal gleamed at them as if it were excited to see visitors. Brock and Hans lifted their lights to show it off.

It was a train. Not like the spiffy trams up in the City, but an old train with a bullet-like engine and four cars behind. Each car was covered in a different metal finish; one silver, one bronze, one gold, and the last a tungsten sheen. The engine gleamed of copper.

The three had no idea how to react. It was beautiful and strange. It looked so high-tech compared to the old cave and yet felt as ancient as the stone.

“It is ... magnificent...” Brock breathed, reaching up and feeling the side of the silver car.

“It’s a train ... on the edge of a cliff...” Leo wondered.

“Yes, but ... but...” Jaina stammered.

“What good is a train without tracks?” Hans finished.

“Well, yeah,” Leo said.

The archeologist patted her side and explained, “This is no ordinary train. She doesn’t run on tracks. She’s one-of-a-kind. I’d like you to meet the Iron Appaloosa.”



## Part 10

“This machine can get us out of the City?” Brock asked in wonder.

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Hans answered.

“But ... how?” Jaina walked over to the cliff’s edge and peered into the dark. “Is there an exit down there? How would we even survive?”

“That’s not the way we’d go.” He pointed to the waterfall across from them, separated by the gaping chasm. “There’s an old tunnel behind the waterfall. It’s been lost for centuries, City officials have no idea it even exists anymore.”

“I don’t remember a tunnel on the Enlightened Maps. How can you be sure?” Leo scoffed.

“Well, hundreds of years ago it wouldn’t be a tunnel. Maybe some outlet or river,” Hans answered.

They were looking for an ancient river. Somewhere near an old guild hall. The three of them eyed each other.

“Anyway, that doesn’t explain anything. What good is an unreachable exit? What good is a trackless train?” Leo asked.

The archeologist walked over to the engine and took a step up to the door. He motioned them to follow, “This train can float.”

It was a ridiculous statement. So much so they just stared at the dense metal machine wondering if it could even slide along tracks like a normal train.

Brock was first to follow Hans into the engine, the other two drifting behind.

Inside was nothing of the mechanisms of the ancient steam trains they'd seen in museums or the streamlined gears of the City trams. Instead was a magnificent range of contraptions and intricate instruments that would confuse even the most studied scholar in the Heights. Most fascinating was the large apparatus in the center of the forward compartment. It sat on the floor with its top bolted to the ceiling. In between was an array of circular hoops perfectly housing one inside the other creating a sort of deconstructed metal globe. Brock rushed over to it.

“That is what makes the Appaloosa so special. It's an ancient experimental engine the Infinite Horizon invented. They called it a Perpetual Motion engine.”

“Perpetual?” Brock gasped, “As in it would never stop? Never need fuel?”

“Exactly. You see the rings? Look at them closely.”

They all leaned in closer, none closer than the islander.

“This one shines like copper,” Jaina commented.

“And this one feels like iron,” Leo said.

“There are strange gemstones fused to this one,” Brock exclaimed.

Hans nodded, “It's incredibly complicated but the inventor discovered a pattern of materials that attract and repel each other so that...” he spun the outer ring and the others marveled at the instant motion of the device. The ring immediately inside the outer began to twist away from its neighbor which then by unseen force moved the next ring in and so on. The effect dominoed down the layers, one pushing and another pulling, until they all began a weaving dance.

“Incredible...” Brock whispered, “The opposing materials push and pull each other in a never-ending ebb and flow that creates a nonstop supply of energy.”

Hans peered at him, “This seems to be right up your alley, islander. I should have guessed by the arm but I didn’t want to assume.”

The archeologist pointed down to a shaft that ran the length of the car. “The power flows down into the flight panels which lift the Appaloosa off the ground. No need for tracks. She can go wherever she wants. The guild originally built it so they could reach the furthest corners of the world to discover its secrets.”

“You sure know a lot about this machine and the people who made it. And some secret tunnel there’s no way you could reach. And how to stop nightmarish monsters in a layer of the Depths even the best of the City fear to tread,” Leo stated, eyeing him.

“Studying is usually what archeologists do, isn’t it? I’ve been researching this for a while,” he replied.

“It doesn’t make sense. How can you be so sure that the design works? Or that there’s a tunnel over there? Why should we believe you?”

“Are you saying you don’t trust me, Leo? May I call you Leo?” Hans asked.

“That’s my name,” he snarked, “And of course I don’t.”

“Neither do I,” Jaina said, plainly.

“I do!” Brock said, watching as the rings slowly stopped turning. “Wait, why is this stopping? I thought it was supposed to be ongoing?”

Hans smiled at the thieves and their honesty, “It needs to go faster. The old journals I found talk about the elusive “Interminable State”. The rings have to be moving at an incredible rate to be able to snap into a state of matter that goes beyond friction. Once in the Interminable State, the rings wouldn’t be able to stop from moving in and out of each other.”

“That’s why it’s still here,” Jaina surmised.

He nodded, “The inventors didn’t have a power source strong enough for the initial push to get the rings moving fast enough. From everything that I’ve read, the design should work. I’ve played with the rings plenty myself and watched the interplay of materials. Every ring moves perfectly towards and against their paired partners. I got them to move without stopping for about four hours. Even the flight panels on the bottom glowed. But it didn’t generate enough energy to power the train.”

“So what are we supposed to do about it?” Leo asked. “None of us have energy *favor* or anything that could kick start this thing. I shake things, she has a crushing grip, and this guy’s good with machines.”

Hans raised an eyebrow at Brock, “A mechanical *favor*? That’s pretty rare.” Brock smiled at the compliment.

“But he can’t fix a machine that doesn’t need fixing,” the thief continued, “It’s missing fuel.”

Hans leaned up against an instrument panel. He gazed at the torch in his hand and made the flames switch from pink to blue to white and then back to orange. “I understand you don’t trust me. I can respect that. Why should you? I’m a haggard bum with no guild in the Depths who steals cans of corn to stay alive. But I wouldn’t show you this machine unless I trusted you at least somewhat.”

“This machine has never run but I am confident it can. We all need to get out of this City and there is only one way. Plus,” he smiled at them with a very knowing smile, “I followed some

archeologists who made it down to the Arianhod Layer not long ago. They found something that might just do the trick. I could use your help in getting it.”

## Part 11

Biola sat in her office thinking and thinking. There had to be a way she could get into the Council Hall. But that end of the Council Chamber towers was strictly off-limits to anyone outside of government. There had to be a clever way to sneak in after the big discussion.

She still couldn't believe what she'd heard. A power source that would wipe the *favor* from the City. In exchange, the dome shield would be powered. She understood the conundrum. She didn't want the perils of the outside world to destroy what they had all worked so hard to build inside the safety of the City, but the cost of the new alloy was far too great. She reeled at the idea that they would even discuss it.

And Warehouse 107!

“Warehouse 107... how can it be real? It was just an urban myth.”

“What was that, miss?” her secretary asked, walking in on her thoughts and office.

“Nothing! Nothing, of course, just thinking...”

“Should I put together another staff meeting with the d'Argent to decide on what to replace the stolen spearhead with, miss?”

“Hm? Oh yes, I suppose.” She turned to her suddenly with an idea. “I need a meeting with a certain archeologist. Would you be able to find out where Mr. Creedy works? I mean, specifically, the route he takes to get there? I don't want to bother him with a formal meeting. I'd rather catch him on his way and have a quick word. About a relic we recently found, of course.”

Her secretary began to scribble into her notebook, “Whatever you need, miss. I'll send Travis out tonight.”

“Thank you.” A thought came to her, “Another thing, can you get hold of the Lord Prime’s schedule? I was interested in having a word with him and want to find the open spots in his schedule.”

She raised her eyebrows at the request, “The Lord Prime? I guess I could get a friend in the Morning Star to get me his schedule. But I doubt you’ll be able to secure an audience.”

“It’s worth a try, at least.” She smiled innocently.

“I will do my best, miss.” And she turned on her heel and left.

Biola stared out the window wondering if she should really go to the effort to listen in on the Council Meeting. It could be dangerous if she was caught. But trying to find where Mr. Creedy entered Warehouse 107...

“...that is much more dangerous.”

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“A power source? From an alloy?” Brock asked.

“That’s what it looked like. There was a Mr. Creedy who was studying it. A fragment of it burned steady and hot for hours and hours. It might be the very thing to get us out of here.”

“Why didn’t you just steal some from them?” Leo asked.

“That would have been easy. A quick grab and you could have had your fuel,” Jaina agreed.

“I’m not a thief, I’m an archeologist. And the importance they were putting on it stopped me from even considering it. I think they would have killed me on the spot.”

“Ah yes, stealing something that could lead to your death is the best kind of job,” Leo revealed.

“I disagree,” Jaina said.

“C’mon, Jaina. Isn’t it serendipitous that the only way out of the City is for us to steal something? And the irony of us having to work together to get it done? Priceless.”

“I could steal it without your help. I am the better thief,” she retorted.

“Manguinian Bracers from the Alosian Museum,” he stated.

“Ohhh! You would bring that up!” she exclaimed, slapping him with her tail, “You always default to that stupid job.”

“It was one of my finest moments,” he said with a large smile.

She glared at him, brandishing her two-pronged hands. “I could squash your head like a grape.”

He shrugged, “You would have already.”

“Anyway, this is different. We have to steal from the Council, possibly the Lord Prime himself, depending on who has the stuff. I am completely able to out-thieve you on this.”

“Only one way to prove it.”

“Children, if I could interrupt,” Hans said. They broke from their feud. “Does this mean you are interested in helping get the alloy?”

Jaina and Leo stared at each other for a moment. They both turned at the same time and said, “Yes.”



He raised his brow in surprise at the certainty. “Alright then. I wasn’t expecting such a quick turnaround from people who said they didn’t trust me a few minutes ago.”

“We still don’t trust you, Hans. No offense,” Jaina said.

“We don’t even trust each other,” Leo added.

“I thought you were friends,” he said, confused.

They burst out laughing at the thought, made quick eye contact through the tears and burst into even heartier guffaws.

“They are ... complicated,” Brock muttered to the archeologist.

“Aren’t we all?” he said back. “Well, we need to get topside and figure out where the alloy is being held. It might be a good chance for you to gather up any of your personal belongings before we head out from here. This is a one-way trip. I’m never coming back here.”

“If we do come back, we’ll die so I guess we’re in the same boat,” Leo said.

“How will you reach the surface? The pirate village is too dangerous,” Brock asked.

“Like I said, I know all the little tunnels that snake through the City. We can get in and out with very little chance of being seen.”

“But what about the Nose? They’ll be able to track our scent once we’re on the surface. They could find one of the tunnels and follow us here,” Jaina explained.

“You have a *Nose* following you?” Hans exclaimed.

“Apparently, we stole one too many items for the Police Guilds’ taste,” Leo droned.

“Well ... that will make things more difficult. But we should be able to get in and out if we’re smart. We won’t be able to linger at your homes. You’ll only be able to take what you can carry.”

“Not a problem, “Leo waved at him, “The trouble will be getting into my guild hall. It’s not easy to reach.”

“Which guild?” Hans asked.

Jaina intoned, “The mighty Order of the Spyglass.”

The archeologist snapped his head up in surprise, “The Spyglass? No kidding?”

Leo bolstered at the recognition of his guild. “The one and only.” He walked over to Hans, unsheathing his hand blades. He pointed to the emblem of his guild, a spyglass at an angle, etched into the very metal.

“Serendipitous, indeed. I find thieves at the moment the City discovers a lost power source that we all need to get out of this place. And these old ruins,” he looked up at the roof, “just so happen to lie directly beneath the hidden guild hall of the Order of the Spyglass.”

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On the Ground Floor, a Grey girl meandered along a dingy drive toward a depressing job. She hated working in the Reconstitution Market. It only reminded her of how far above the Heights soared and how very far below she stood. She finally shuffled into the market area, a transport arriving as she walked in.

“Kira! You’re late! Get over here and help unload!” her supervisor yelled.

She grabbed a wool apron and strung it on. The transport opened and the crew of workers began grabbing crates. It took around an hour before everything was out and the transport headed back up. Kira grabbed a crowbar and wrenched open one of the crates.

Leftovers.

That's what Sub-City ate. The best food was reserved for the very highest, literally. And anything they didn't want or was about to go bad was shipped to the bottom-dwellers. It was supposed to be cost-effective, but she had a stubborn feeling the Heights didn't want Sub-City to get first dibs on anything. Kira began stocking a stall with fairly rubbery carrots.

Her supervisor waddled over. "That's twice this week. You come here late one more time and you go find a job in the sewage tunnels."

"Sorry, Mel."

"I don't believe you're sorry for a second. Why can't you just get here when I tell you to? You have some important business to take care of over in the Bootstraps?"

She rolled her eyes, "Yeah, Mel. I was in deep consideration on why I should go to work at all."

He smacked her. "Just for that, you can take yesterday's rot to the dump."

She closed her eyes in regret. Without another word, she shuffled over to the cart laden with a heap of rotting vegetables and fuzzy bread.

She saw Mel reconstituting the shabby vegetables to something more eat-able. Unfortunately, his *favor* wasn't good enough to bring them back completely. Or make them taste good.

Tying a scarf over her nose to poorly block the smell, she made the long trip to the local dump. It was just a hole into the Depths where everyone threw their garbage.

That's how the system worked. The less value, the farther down the refuse goes. Kira would have loved to visit one of the museums in Mid-City just once, much less any of the grandeur of the Heights. It didn't seem fair that she had been born to poor parents with weak constitutions that couldn't even live till she was 17 years old. The Bootstraps was more than just the poor residential block she ended up living in. It was a literal motto of how to survive; you had to pull yourself up.

The dump came quicker than she realized, what with her dismal internal complaining. She wrenched open the moldy wooden lid and began spilling the nasty contents down into the bowels of the old City.

What she wouldn't give to live some other life. Anywhere but here, that was the idea. She finished up and continued back along the alleys to the market, shuffling her feet so as to miss as much work as she could.

Around the bend, a few police officers appeared. They were Heights division, their white uniforms bright against the dark of the City's foundations. There was another person with them, some sorts of law enforcement but unlike any she'd seen before. He didn't wear the white of his partners but instead donned a long yellow trench coat. The strangest part about him was the way he sniffed the air.

Kira's gaze drifted over to a poster newly slapped onto a brick wall. It was a wanted poster for two thieves from the Heights. At the bottom it read, *A Nose Has Been Issued for the Hunt.*

She glanced back to the police, the man's sniffing less strange.

"A Nose..." she whispered, "I've never seen one before."

The trio was making their way down the street toward her. She wondered if she could look inconspicuous hanging about besides an empty cart. She loved the idea of seeing a rare *favor* up close.

A bottle smashed on the ground nearby. She spun around to see what made the noise when she laid eyes on the last thing she could have expected.

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"It is utterly unbelievable that you could know where my guild is hidden. No one knows. That's the whole mystique of the place!"

Leo was climbing up a dilapidated ladder through a long-forgotten tube. He complained to the archeologist in front of him while Jaina brought up the rear. Brock had elected to remain behind.

"The Order of the Spyglass is old," Hans replied, completely un-winded by the climb, "but it's not that old. The deep layers of the Depths, those are the hidden places with mystique. Your guild hall is just forgotten. Lost under the development of vertical farms."

"That hardly pays it the respect it's due. It's a prestigious organization with historical significance."

"With only five members left," Jaina added.

"And whose grand hall lies in ruins," Hans finished.

Leo drew the blades from his right hand. “They do not give marvels like these to forgotten, ruined members. No one in all the City has technology as sophisticated this.”

Hans stopped and looked down at the shining silver. “No, they don’t. You’ve got me there.”

“Thank you.”

“Can we just keep moving? Or do you need your ego inflated more, Leo? It might help you up this ladder faster,” Jaina giggled.

They finally made it to the end where a hefty trap door met them. Hans heaved it up and into a dark, dusty, cathedral-like chamber.

“Not possible...” Leo whispered as he hauled himself out. “This *is* the guild hall.” He looked down at the door in the floor that had been invisible to him for so many years, “I had no idea...”

“You’ve surprised him, Coventry. I’m impressed.”

“I’m sure it won’t be the last time. Especially if we get that train going.”

They began to walk down the hall, its architecture blatantly harkening back to a time when honored guild members were truly one of prestige.

“I have to admit ... it really is wonderful,” Jaina said as she peered at the gilded arches.

“I wasn’t lying, Jaina. I just do that sometimes about anything. But not this. The Order of the Spyglass was a real gem in its time. I would have loved to see it at its peak.”

When they got nearer to the end of the hall, Leo turned on them. “That’s as far as you can go.”

“Oh, c’mon, Leo,” Jaina attempted.

“No, I know you just want to see where I live and probably pilfer a few of my favorites from my chambers, but you can’t come in. The only reason I’m even partially alright with you knowing where this is located is that we’re going to leave the City forever.”

“I promise I won’t take anything,” she replied.

“I wouldn’t believe that for a second if you were handing me gold at the same time. And you,” he pointed at Hans, “... you’ve been snooping around here already, haven’t you?”

Hans smiled, boyishly.

“That’s what I thought.” He unsheathed both his hand blades, the snap echoing through the cavernous hall. “Every member of the Spyglass has these and they aren’t as nice about them as I am. If any of them knew you were here, they wouldn’t hesitate to exercise their skills with them. You have to go.”

Hans and Jaina spared a glance at each other and nodded. “I should head to my own place and grab what I can,” she said.

“And I’ll grab some food along the way,” Hans conceded.

“Good. Good, I’ll meet you back in the Depths before sundown. There’s an exit over there. It’ll take you out into a fertilizer depository.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What? Who would look behind that for a secret guild hall?”

## Part 12

“Ugh, he wasn’t kidding.”

Jaina and Hans gingerly climbed out from the huge piles of manure used in the nearby vertical farms.

Hans brushed himself off, “So, where are you located?”

She pointed over the tops of a few buildings, “Surprisingly, not far from here. It’s just below the Theatre District. Leo would have a conniption to know we’ve been neighbors all these years.”

It took less than fifteen minutes to reach the area, mainly from the pair’s incredible climbing abilities.

They plopped down onto an abandoned balcony. “You are quite the climber, Mr. Coventry. You’re right, only *favor* could make you that good.”

“I haven’t had a good climb outside in a long time,” he breathed, “Not that we’re actually outside,” eyeing the dome above, “This is just a roomier inside.”

They quickly snuck through the door and down a derelict hallway. Jaina led them into an empty room. She kicked a wall and from the ceiling dropped a heavy rope. They both easily ascended it.

Her home could only be described in one word:

“Lovely...” the archeologist deemed.

“Thank you,” she blushed, “It took me most of my life to procure these beauties.”



The chamber felt like a boudoir of some long-ago diva. Heavy curtains draped from the ceiling which was painted with dainty stars. The floor was covered in thick carpets and all the seating looked like it would be perfect for fainting. But the art...

“This is practically a museum,” Hans declared as he peered at a statue of a cat goddess.

“That is where most of it came from,” Jaina agreed, “This will only take a few minutes. I’m assuming clothes on the outside don’t have holes for a tail...”

He gazed at the paintings and statues, tapestries and maps, sculptures and trophies all perfectly displayed in the comfortable hidey-hole. Jaina was already packing some of them up into a chest about the size of an ottoman. “It’s sad to see so many things left behind. I suppose I could send a pneumatic to a museum director so they could investigate here. Oh, I could leave one for that nice Heights woman ... what’s her name; she’s always trying to have us arrested? Oh, I’ll remember at some point.”

“Do you think Leo will have the same problem?” the archeologist asked, picking a splendid painting off the wall and bringing it to her.

“You have good taste, that’s one of my favorites. I suppose Leo will have a few trinkets he’ll want to bring along. Not as much as this, but...”

“You two are quite the rivals,” he laughed, “Has it always been that way?”

“No, there was a glorious time when I was free to steal unencumbered before Leo showed up.”

“You have an interesting dynamic. Is there anything ... between you two?”

She mock blanched, “Spare me the romance novel, professor. There is nothing ‘between’ us except animosity. But we both enjoy the fight, I think. He’s kind of like a little brother that I never wanted and secretly resented my parents for having.”

Hans laughed, choosing a delicate statue of two swans. “A Monray. This has to come.”

“Good choice again. You really are an archeologist, I suppose.”

“And an art lover. I wasn’t lying, despite how much you don’t trust me.”

“Well, mine is a business where trust hurts your profits. But it looks like those days are over...” She eyed the place she had called home. He could see the sentimentality pass over her eyes.

“Almost over,” Hans reminded her, “One last job.”

She nodded, “One last job.” She finished throwing some clothes in and snapped the chest shut. It took hardly any effort for her to heave it up under her arm.

“Alright, let’s go get some provisions.”

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“Thayer! There you are! I saw the poster, you devil. Got yourself a Nose! What an honor.”

Leo tried not to blush as he walked in on two of his guild members. Chancy and Spor came over to congratulate him. Chancy gripped his hand tight, “You didn’t lead them here did you?”

“No, not the way I came,” Leo answered truthfully.

“Good! Good! So tell us, what was this score that tipped you over the edge?” Chancy asked.

“A new spearhead in the d’Argent. Complete waste of time. Cooper showed up-”

“That lizard,” Spor interrupted, “Always getting in the way.”

“Well, that wasn’t the half of it. Some other thief I’ve never seen shows up in a mask and swipes it from right between us. Sets off the alarms, we’re all running, it was embarrassing.”

Spor laughed, “Finally got a death sentence and you didn’t even get the goods?”

“Don’t rub it in, Spor-t,” he said, emphasizing the “T”.

Chancy continued, “So you got a Nose on you now. Gonna make things sticky from here on out. Gonna lay low for a couple of weeks?”

Leo shook his head and made his way to his chambers, “Afraid not, ol’ pal. This here is a goodbye. I’m leaving.” They looked at him with dumbstruck faces. “For good.”

“What do you mean, goodbye? You can’t leave! The Order only has five members.”

“Well, it’s going to have four if I leave and four if I stay cause I’ll be dead at some point if I hang around.”

“Leo, old boy, think about what you’re saying. Where will you go? The Depths?”

He hesitated, “Sort of.” The other two looked at him quizzically. “Look, I’ve got it covered, in a way, and I’ll be fine, possibly. But ... I have to be gone for good. So ... I’m going to go pack.”

He left them standing stupidly, the tiniest twinge of sentiment tugging at his heart.

It didn't take him long before he had a satchel full of his favorite scores and a few clothes and his blade sharpeners. He swept back into the room with the others who were sitting in grumpy silence.

“Well fellas, I guess this is it. It's been a ride.”

“You aren't even going to wait for Sasha and Tepid?” Spor asked.

“I'll let you convey my farewells. Time's a-ticking and that Nose isn't going to sleep. Probably don't want me hanging around here just waiting to be discovered.”

The two looked at each other. That was exactly what they didn't want.

After another awkward moment of silence, Leo said, “Take care, guys. I'll miss ... all this.” Then he was out the door and back into the empty guild hall. He didn't even give them time to say goodbye themselves.

When he reached the trap door he stopped with sudden realization.

“Ohh no... Grubbers...” His satchel dropped. He stood thinking. He couldn't go without them. But it was too dangerous. The debate writhed within him like a civil war.

He had to make one more stop.

“Just a quick stop. In and out. No one will even know.”

Past the manure gate, he made his way quietly down a well-traveled path back into the City. He kept a sharp eye on the trams and busy squares. It wasn't a few minutes before he was scaling down a wall to a shop that looked more like a dent in the bricks.

He peered into the shop windows. The vendor was at his counter reading a magazine. No one else was shopping. With a tried-and-true method he had used for years, Leo snuck up to a

small wire he had installed long ago. A few sharp tugs produced the sound of a bell. He quickly scampered back to the window in time to watch the vendor make his way to the back.

As light as a feather, he dropped down and slipped inside. The contraption to ring the back doorbell had won him many a prize over the years when his stomach rumbled. He reached the snacks and pulled out a folded sack. In it he piled as many bags of Grubbers as he could. There was no way the outside world would have zesty corn wafers that had a way of touching his soul, so he tried to pack a lifelong stash.

He finished quickly and made his way towards the front door, but stopped. He was surprised at the uncharacteristically generous feeling welling up in. He silently snuck over to the counter and laid a small pile of coins for the trouble. Then he was out the door before he could change his mind.

He nonchalantly strolled the street acting like an everyday Citizen. He was lost in the thought of tearing into a bag of Grubbers the second he made it back to the Depths. Someone shouted. He turned and saw a lady pointing at him. She pointed at a poster pasted to the wall. His wanted poster.

“Oh, darn.”

Someone else shouted, probably for the police, and nonchalant was no longer an option. He sped back the way he came heading for the shop. If he could sneak down the alley he might be able to scale the walls again.

The commotion was drawing attention. Bystanders were getting involved. One guy reached out and tried to stop him. Then a whistle came.

The police. Jaina was going to have a heyday.

He was close to the alley when he felt the distinct pull of Telekinesis. He had to keep his distance to keep the connection weak or the police would be able to pin him to the ground.

Scaling the walls wasn't an option anymore.

He struggled to run, zipping past the shop, the vendor peering out in surprise as one of his bags of Grubbers slipped out of Leo's sack. Leo quickly ran down a side staircase and made for a small square. The whistles continued. It wouldn't be long before they would radio in his location. This was going to be tricky.

He had made it to a square when more police showed up cutting him off. That was faster than usual. He spun around but the crowd was huge and he wouldn't be able to push his way through. The Telekinetics would get too close.

Glancing around, he saw the square opened up to a wide ledge that led down to the Ground Floor far below. More than likely there were less police and no Nose down there, so he made up his mind. Staying was certain death. Jumping was only probable death.

He ran over to the ledge and drew his blades. With a few swipes, he cut through some lampposts, sending them crashing down in the street and blocking off the police. He was about to cut down one more when he felt a tug of Telekinesis again. It was now or never. He leapt off the ledge and into open space.

Screams rang out behind him as he fell, a sound that bolstered the dramatic side of him. With a twist, he spun to face the wall and drove his blades into the wall flying by. They scraped and sparked but slowed him enough that he could get purchase with his feet. In this way, he rode the wall down several stories until he came to a skidding halt a few lengths from Ground Floor.

“Whew...” he breathed, and quickly checked his stash of snacks. “Only two lost, not bad.”

He dropped to the ground and tried to quietly take in his surroundings. He was in an alcove of some sort, the street just in view. The bulky bag of Grubbers on his back bumped a bottle and it careened to the ground with a piercing crash. He glanced around to see if the sound had alerted someone.

It had.

Leo locked eyes with a Grey girl staring at him from behind an empty cart. She glanced at something on the wall by her and back again. A wanted poster, no doubt. Leo smiled with all the charm he could muster and put his finger to his lips.

The Grey girl looked behind her and then back to him again.

“They’re coming this way!” she whispered.

## Part 13

Biola's secretary was a wonder. She didn't know how she had been so lucky to receive her. Biola made her way down an elevator to a research center. Thanks to Travis, the path Mr. Creedy had been taking to work lately was within this R&D tower. The man could be a detective.

And she had plenty of time to check out the route before the Council meeting. It was to start within the hour. She had no idea how long it would go on but with such a controversial topic it had to be a long one. It wouldn't be possible to sneak into the council chamber shortly after they convened either, seeming too suspicious. She had to take her time.

The elevator dinged and out she strolled as casually as possible. The offices of research on the floor seemed very bland. One looked like it had something to do with water treatment and a door of another room read "Infrastructure Management". Not the area you would find a renowned archeologist who had recently discovered a world-changing element.

"But maybe that's the point," she muttered to herself.

The long hall ended with a fairly anticlimactic secretary desk and an old man. She tried her best to look interested in one of the labs for the tram division. Taking a deep breath she sped the past before her eyes, searching through the throng of scientists as they flowed through the hall. It wasn't long before she spotted Mr. Creedy passing by. He made his way to the end desk where the old man received an identity card from him. Then he passed through the door and out of sight.



She snapped back to the present with only half a minute's effort. Hopefully, it didn't raise any suspicions. To add to the charade she pulled out a slip of paper and read it looking confused and did one more sweep of the offices. Then she made her way to the old man.

"Excuse me, sir, I think I'm lost. Would you be able to help me find a certain office?"

He stared at her, a twinge of skepticism on his wrinkled face, but nodded. "What can I do for you, miss?"

"I'm Biola Gandy, one of the museum moguls. I was hoping to have a meeting with one of the archeologists, a Mr. Creedy. My secretary told me I could find him here but I'm not seeing any archeology offices." She batted her eyes to give it a little charm.

His glare didn't soften as he pulled out a large directory. "There's no archeology on this floor. You're in municipal development. Mr. Creedy is located in ... the Thola Tower over in the..." he looked up at her with tired eyes, "...archeology division."

"Oh, that secretary of mine! Has me chasing my tail. Thank you, sir, for your assistance. Have a wonderful day!"

She smiled as she made to leave, noticing him pull out a slip of paper and begin writing on it. She assured herself that it was nothing, just a personal note to remind himself of something later. When she reached the elevator and entered, the old man at the desk had inserted the slip of paper into a pneumatic port. He squinted at her with increasing suspicion as he shoved it up the tube.

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“Alright, that was partially successful. If Mr. Creedy is going down that mundane floor every day in a division completely outside his wheelhouse then it’s possible, even plausible, that it leads to Warehouse 107. Biola, you sound like a lunatic.”

It didn’t help that she was muttering to herself on the tram.

The council meeting had been going on for at least an hour and a half. She made her way to the Morning Star tower under the pretense of meeting with a law enforcement director to discuss ways to safeguard the d’Argent against future thefts. That’s what she would tell anyone who asked, at least.

The tram came to a smooth stop at her destination and she stepped out with as much regality as she could muster. The people of Morning Star worked with the highest in the City. It would take a little extra acting for her to blend in.

The Council Hall lay at the center of the tower while her pretend destination lay on the far side. If she timed things correctly it would look completely normal.

She reached the central hall in no time, its giant façade a work of art. In the truest Art Deco style, it depicted the inherent determination of the City to survive no matter what peril rent it asunder. She was staring up at the intricate truss work when someone stepped out of the Council Hall’s mighty doors. She made to look away disinterestedly but was surprised to see it was a custodian pulling his trolley and looking routinely bored. He sauntered away.

“They’re done already?” Biola whispered. She calmly made her way towards the doors under the guise of getting a better look at the scrollwork around the entry. A glance right and left provided no onlookers, so she threw caution to the wind and snuck in.

It was empty.

She had never been inside the Council Hall before, only seen it in pictures. It was utterly massive. A half-circle amphitheater construction, the councilmembers ringed different levels that smoothly shrunk down to the Lord Prime's platform. If the façade outside had amazed her, the designs and murals of the Hall made her gasp.

She tried to pull her eyes away and get down to business. There was no telling how long she would have the room to herself. She couldn't believe there was no one there. It had to be only minutes before that this grand chamber had been filled with every councilmember in the City.

Stepping down several levels to somewhere in the middle she found a place in the center with the best view. A quick breath and she activated her *favor*, needing very little effort to flash back a couple of hours.

The hall was instantly full, every seat filled with a talkative and antsy government official. She could feel the tension in the room despite the time difference. Even the Lord Prime looked anxious down in his central seat.

“Order! The Council will now begin this closed-door session on the topic of Mr. Creedy's newest discovery. A reminder that private sessions like these are held in strict confidence under penalty of imprisonment.”

The speaker bowed out and gave the floor to Foxboro.

“My fellow Citizens, you have been debriefed of the situation, both in the discovery made in the Depths and the results of the experiments made on that discovery. We have before us an enigma. Mr. Creedy has delivered a substance that is capable of meeting a great need for the

City, at a time when we need it most. But the side effects of using this new substance, called Arianum, have immense consequences.”

“That’s an understatement!” yelled someone.

“Not today, not today!” Foxboro headed them off, “I refuse to have this turn into a shouting match. We will use the utmost decorum during this discussion because the decision that we make here is crucial. Are we understood?”

The hall remained silent in agreement.

“Good. Now, first the facts. The shield’s integrity is currently at 24%. Our methods to power the shield are not only becoming less reliable but we are also running low on resources. Our energy division has been unable to find a suitable replacement that can do the job well. And lastly, with the shield so low it is overworking the generators, causing new maintenance needs every day.”

“Our situation is not ideal. We are safe for the moment and the scientists have assured me that at least another month of protection is probable barring any extreme outside influences, such as lightning or very low temperatures.”

“That being said, Mr. Creedy has run a series of experiments on the Arianum alloy with ... mixed results. It is absolutely and irrevocably capable of not only maintaining the protective shield but powering it at 100% capacity, indefinitely.”

A murmur slithered through the crowd, somewhat positive in sound.

“This is a huge benefit to us as Citizens to continue to keep the dangers of the outside away from the prosperity of this grand City. But, as many of you have been told, the Arianum produces a previously unknown radiation. An extensive array of tests with now hundreds of

*avored* subjects have revealed no discovery to block that radiation from ... nullifying a person's *favor*."

Immediately, a councilmember stood. "M'lord, this is unacceptable! It is mindboggling to me that we are even having this discussion. To take away the *favor* of a person is unforgivable."

An opposing voice stood as well, "I challenge that statement. To leave this City unprotected, open to another ruination, is the real unforgivable act. How are we to celebrate a person's *favor* if the outside has decimated the City? There would be no one left!"

The first countered. "Councilmember, think about the consequences here. This goes far beyond the shield and the outside world. Our police will have no Telekinetics, fires will go unchecked without Cryokinetics, hospitals will be without healers--"

"What about Grey nurses?"

"It's not the same as someone healing a broken bone by merely touching them!" he refuted. "What about Growers at the vertical farms? What about Flyers? They are a staple of society!"

"They'll all be dead from some hideous virus out there or overrun by a neighboring nation!"

Another stood in the first member's defense. "M'lord, the City is great for many reasons. Our technology and architecture surely rival the globe, and our culture and art must be preserved at all costs. But to use this alloy to protect ourselves while stripping us of the very thing that makes us truly great is ludicrous. We would be sacrificing our soul to save our body."

A resounding agreement rang throughout. Foxboro looked slightly relieved.

“What are we supposed to do when the shield collapses? That is a definite outcome we must prepare for.”

“We could raise an army to protect us from any outside forces.”

“The military was disbanded decades ago for a reason!”

“This seems a viable reason to resurrect it!”

The opposing voices began to break the Lord Prime’s rule for order to which he slammed a gavel for silence.

“Do not make me do that again.” He cleared his throat. “The history of this City is, for whatever reason, doomed to a cycle of destruction and rebirth. But the Citizens have boldly rebuilt here in defiance of whatever curse or fate the universe has placed on us. The additions of the shield and outer walls to our current City have provided this iteration the longest period of peace ever. Never has an era lasted as long and it is in no question due to the enhanced defenses. To open ourselves up to the disasters outside would most likely bring about a catastrophe much quicker and an end to our glorious society.”

“Be that as it may,” he continued, “It is my opinion that the current state of the Arianum would bring about such disruption to our City that we may implode, bringing about the end of our society as well.”

The Pro-Arianum members made their dissent known. Foxboro raised his hand. “I do not believe that science has had its full exercise in working out this brand new substance. There may still be a way to utilize it without the *favor-nulling*.”

“The people of the Arianhod Era were the ones who created it,” said the first speaker, “and they ended up burying the substance. They knew what we should heed now; the substance

is too dangerous to use at all. Who's to say that this Arianum wasn't what brought their City down?"

"I have taken that into consideration," Foxboro said.

"But, m'lord, we Greys of the City should have a say in this as well. It would be unfair to deprive us the protection of the shield to preserve the abilities that we have never been granted."

"I have also taken that into consideration," Foxboro assured her, "Francis Dublin, chair of the research division, has compiled an option that he would like to offer. It may toe the line between both views."

The councilmember stood, near the floor seats, and said, "Thank you, m'lord. The shield system is quite old at this point. Although the Arianum would do well to power it, we may be able to make use of the alloy by upgrading the system."

"What are you saying? You've found a way to counteract the radiation?" someone shouted.

"No, not at all. Our idea involves creating a separate power station deep within the City, possibly even in the Depths, to use the Arianum as fuel. Those machines would power large batteries that could be delivered to the shield generator. In theory, the use of the alloy underground would leave the radiation there. We could integrate the batteries into the shield array, providing power to the dome without disseminating radiation across the City."

"Is this a possibility? If it is we should start immediately!"

"If I might?" Mr. Creedy stood, looking to the Lord Prime for permission. He nodded.

"While Dublin's idea is a feasible route we could take, my experiments show this may be a fruitless path. The radiation doesn't seem to be embedded in the alloy itself. If that were the

case, the *earth-favored* expedition member who discovered it would not have been able to use his *favor* to dig it up. The radiation is emitted from the energy it produces. To power a battery with Arianum would only charge it with radiated energy. The same amount of radiated energy as if we were burning straight Arianum.”

Someone stood and called, “Would the batteries at least contain a smaller amount of radiation? We could try minimizing the impact. Or at least use a small amount of power to bolster the shields to a more stable state, say 50%?”

Mr. Creedy shook his head, “Our research doesn’t support that. The radiation area is as big as how much energy the Arianum is outputting. That is why no one outside the labs has been affected yet. Unfortunately, it will take a significant amount of radiation production to stabilize the dome, even to 50% capacity. Using that energy to power the shield makes containment impossible. Because the shield encases the whole City, the second we integrate energy from Arianum into the dome, the radiation area would spread throughout the entire shield, covering the City down to the Ground Floor.”

“Then we can’t use it!” someone called. A confused murmur of agreement followed them.

“Do you have any suggestions, Mr. Creedy?” the Lord Prime asked.

He sighed, “As of this moment ... no.”

Many began to stand and make their points and offer half-cocked ideas. Biola tired quickly of the repetition in the statements but she dared not stop listening. It was after a particularly adamant “For” testimonial by a Grey that Foxboro dropped the gavel again.



“I hate to rush a decision of this magnitude but we need to make headway before the shield integrity falls critical. From our discussions today I get the impression that this is a divided topic, equally divided it feels. That is troublesome to me. A decision one way or the other is going to upset half of this council. And probably half of the City.”

He stared out at the crowd, an uneasy burden in his shoulders. “To remain in debate will be our undoing. To use the alloy will strip us bare. To ignore it will assimilate us back into the world and whatever unknowns it stores.”

“Please stand with me and remove your keys.”

The assembly obeyed and every councilmember retrieved a small key from their person. Biola had no idea what was going on. She had never heard of this private part of the Council’s inner workings.

“A decision will be made,” Foxboro announced. Railing ran in front of the councilmembers’ seats on every level. Everyone inserted their key into a small hole in the railing before them.

“A turn to the left is a vote for exploring the use of the Arianum, despite its disadvantages. And a turn to the right is a vote for abandoning the alloy altogether. Please make your decisions now.”

The councilmembers started clicking keys left and right, Biola swiveling her head all around trying to see how many were choosing left. The Council was too grand and too full for her to get a good idea.

The Lord Prime watched a panel in front of him as tallies were counted. She held her breath waiting to see what the fate of the City would be.

“Hey!”

She looked around, confused. Who would yell out at such a critical moment?

“You there! I’m talking to you.”

All of a sudden an arm was grabbing her and the council members disappeared. A Morning Star Guard, dressed in their blue uniform, hauled her to her feet with an angry look.

“What are you doing here all alone? This area is for the Council only.”

“I-I’m sorry, I…” she was having trouble regaining the time period, “I was just … looking at the architecture! It’s so beautiful!”

He glared at her. “There are plenty of photos of the Council Hall in the libraries. This is an exclusive area, you know that, miss.”

“I do apologize. I just … I’m in the museum division and have always wanted to see it with my own eyes. The history of it…”

He seemed to relax a bit but pulled her towards the door all the same. “Be that as it may, you are not allowed in here. Come with me. What did you say your name was?”

“I’m Miss Gandy. Biola.” She regretted saying it the second it left her lips.

“Miss Gandy, it would be a good idea for you to return to your tower. The Council is very busy today.”

“Yes, of course! I’m sorry I troubled you. You won’t need to worry about seeing me again. Once was definitely enough! My heart is satisfied.”

He walked her toward the trams. “What area are you traveling to?”

“The museum district. I’ll be taking tram 12 for the d’Argent.”

He deposited her at the correct terminal and nodded. "Have a pleasant day, miss. And don't ever come to this tower unless you have official business."

"Absolutely, sir. You have my word."

He was about to turn and walk away when a spacey look came over him. His eyes glazed for a moment as if he heard someone speaking. A few seconds later, he snapped back to reality and squinted down at her.

"Did you say your name was Gandy?"

"Uh ... yes, sir."

"That's interesting. I just got a psychic missive from security to be on the lookout for a Biola Gandy from the Museum d'Argent. Apparently she has been acting suspiciously in sensitive government areas."

Biola stared at him with no composure whatsoever. "You don't say?"

Part 14

“We’ve been waiting for a half an hour,” Jaina muttered.

“He’ll be back,” Hans replied.

“We could just leave him.”

“That is a plan. He said meet back in the Depths,” he agreed.

“Or we could look around while we wait...”

“I wouldn’t advise that.”

“Why not? Leo’s not here.”

He sighed, “You heard what Leo said. The other Order members aren’t nice people.”

“But he also inferred that you’ve been poking around,” she persisted.

He smiled, “I may have peeked a few times.”

“Then you know how to get around them! Plus, you know how to get around without being seen.”

“Trust me, there’s not much to see,” he said a little forlornly, “It really is ramshackle in there.”

She pouted, “I knew it. Says he’s the best thief, really...”

“Anyway, it wouldn’t be worth the anger he’d have if we went in there. He seems the ... opinionated sort.”

“That’s one word for it.”

A few moments passed. “Shall we go without him?”

“I daresay he knows the way. Let’s go.”

Stealthily, they returned to the trap door and down the ladder to Hans’ hideout.

When they reached the square room again, it was clear Brock had been busy.

“My goodness...” the archeologist whispered.

“Oh, hello! Hope it does not bother you. I did a little upgrading while you were away.”

Upgrading was an understatement.

“But the ... the generator’s running so smoothly,” Hans declared.

“Fixed the injector and upped the output. Should run on a can of fuel a week,” the islander explained.

“And the lights?”

“Found a few dead ones around and fixed them. Plus, used some of the parts on your table to make more lights. A lot brighter down here, yes?”

“Is the sleeping area bigger?” Jaina asked.

“Oh, that was just something I did with the free time. Made stronger walls, divided it into four so we could all stay there. You know, away from monsters.”

The two stared at him in disbelief.

“What?”

“You did all this in the short time we were away?” Jaina wondered.

“Yes. Did I overstep?”

Hans laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. “Where have you been all my life?”

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The Nose and guards stopped at the very spot where Leo and the Grey girl had met. There was nothing there, but he still stopped. The Nose took a long draught of air, searching. He went into the alcove where Leo had descended. He prodded the wall marks where his hand blades had left gouges.

“He was here.”

The guards immediately started looking around.

Leo and Kira watched silently from their corner hidden around the bend. Leo knew being out of sight wouldn't matter in a few minutes.

“It won't take him long to follow where we went. We have to think of something to lead him away.”

Kira looked around. They were wedged between two Ground Floor shops. One was a rundown clothes shop and the other was a two-bit printing shop. The print shop mostly did wanted posters for the City in this area. Leo could see a stack featuring his name laying on a counter. Thankfully, no one was there.

“Over here,” she told him, forming a plan.

The back of the shop had a huge lock on the door.

“Do you think you can get us in here?”

Leo just smirked and grabbed the lock. A few moments later with his shaking *favor* there was nothing but spare parts. Kira raised her eyebrows, impressed.

They snuck in and Leo closed the door, trying to make as little sound as possible. He saw through the dirty window that the Nose was making his way down the alley where they were.

“If you’re thinking of something you’d better do it now. He’s coming this way.”

“A printing shop has chemicals.”

“And?” he whispered.

“And they’re crude down here. Probably second-hand from above. That means-” she opened a barrel. It smelled to high heaven. “-it’s rancid.”

“Wow,” Leo said holding his nose, “that is both terrible and great. Quick.”

He and Kira set up the barrel of ink above the door. They positioned it just right for the Nose’s eventual entrance. And then they ran for the front door.

Just as Leo unlatched the door and the two snuck through, the backdoor busted open. Just as they planned, the chemicals came crashing down as the assailants entered. The rancid ink poured all over the two guards and most especially on the Nose.

He screeched with pain as Kira and Leo raced down the street.

“That smell should occupy him for a while!” Kira laughed.

“Good plan! Are you part of the Ground Floor Gang?”

“I’m no criminal! Besides, they wouldn’t let me in. That was fun!”

Leo smiled. “Well, it’s been a pleasure, but I have to get back ... to my own thing. Thanks!”

He made to run away but Kira yelled, “Wait! Can’t I come with you?”

“What? No.”

“But there’s nothing for me here! And that was the most alive I’ve felt in years.”

“Listen,” he said moving away, “It’s crowded as it is. And they’re probably waiting for me. I’ve got to get back to…” He thought for a second. “I can’t go back that way. The police are probably swarming.”

“Let me help you.”

“No, thanks. Got it under control.”

“Where are you going? There’s most likely a way around to it. What about through the Depths?”

“Well, that’s where I’m ultimately going, but”- He whirled on her, “The Depths!? You would go through the Depths?”

“Down here is only a step above that place. I’ve been there before.”

“That’s insane.”

She shrugged, “The Nose is probably on the way. What do you say?”

He thought about it, conflicted.

“I know a shortcut. All you have to do is take me…”

He rolled his eyes, knowing time was short. The others weren’t going to like that he brought someone else into the fold. “For a loner, I’m making a lot of friends.”

“This way!”



They ran back the way she had come with the cart. Upon reaching the covered hole, Kira whipped it open like a treasure.

“Ta-da!”

“A garbage chute? That’s your grand plan?”

“Oh, I think I see the Nose coming,” she said.

“Geez, ok! Let’s go!”

She smiled. Freedom for the first time. Even though she was going down into the Depths to get it. With a squeal, she launched herself down the hole and into its darkness.

Leo shook his head. “Absolutely insane.” Then he followed after her.

## Part 15

It'd been hours. She had waited for the inevitable interrogation, but nothing. Maybe this was the interrogation method, making her stew. She had passed the time seeing what they had done with past detainees. It wasn't pretty.

Finally, the door to the small room opened.

Biola shielded her eyes to the onslaught of light. "Miss Gandy? You're free to go."

She sat for a second, dumbfounded by the words. "I beg your pardon?"

The guard droned again, "There was nothing criminal to be found in your actions. You were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. You can go now."

She considered the 'interrogations' she had seen in the past and leapt at the positive turnout. "Well, then. That's glad to hear!"

She followed him down the hall of the police station. "You'll do well to stay out of government offices from now on." He handed back her purse at the door. "Stick to your own towers, miss."

"Absolutely. Last time I wander off to see architecture. The museum is where I'll stay."

She walked out the door and quickly made her way to the nearest elevator. She didn't want to run to the tram station to increase suspicion but her rattled nerves could have allowed her to beat the elevator to its floor.

The bell chimed and the doors swooped open. Thankfully, she had the elevator to herself. Punching the number, she laid back as the doors closed.

A sigh of relief escaped her lips. "How in the world...?"

It was beyond her. She had heard stories of people sniffing in the government's business and never being heard from again. Of course, she didn't do anything. It was like the guard said, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sneaking into the exclusive Council Hall wasn't punishable by law, was it?

She was grateful that her adventures had led her here. It was a close call, for sure, maybe even a little exciting, but she wouldn't test fate. She may know a closely guarded City secret, but the temptation to figure out the Council's final vote did not sway her. She was getting out while the getting out was good.

The elevator was coming up on her floor. She waited for it to slow down. But it didn't.

It kept going. She looked down to see if she had pressed the wrong button, but her floor was still illuminated. A floor that they were readily speeding past.

She pressed it again. Nothing. She pressed the stop button. It didn't work. The elevator was plummeting undaunted far into the tower. They were probably at Sub-City now. She pressed all the buttons to make it stop.

Helplessly, she watched as the numbers quickly grew smaller. They did not stop until they reached a floor that she would never have gone to in her life.

1.

The doors slid open with a happy ding and presented the lowest level of the City. She pressed the buttons again frantically but nothing worked. Slowly, she crept onto the exposed street, hoping that stairs were nearby. Maybe she could run to them and find another elevator.

It didn't take long to arouse the locals, though. A pack of Citizens detached from the shadows and met her in the street. A man with purple hair, probably the leader, smiled at her.

“Hello, Miss Gandy. We’ve been expecting you.”

He couldn’t have scared her more than if he had threatened her with a knife.

“Welcome to the Ground Floor.”

~\*~\*~\*~

Jaina was deep in the twist and turns of the derelict hallways. She did a little exploring while they waited for Leo.

“Just to see what there is,” she had told Hans. He assured her there was nothing to left to find in the remains.

So far he was right. She had found a maze of halls, walkways, empty rooms, rubble and nothing else. Her mind wandered as much as her feet. The City had just been a place for her, an area where she could work her craft. There were probably countless other places they could go in the outside world where she could pilfer goods.

If she survived the outside world.

And though she didn’t have real ties to the City, it still felt a little ... odd to be leaving. And for good. It was just a place.

It may have been where she was abandoned as a child and had to take up thieving just to survive, but it still felt like she was leaving ... home. This was all she had known. Saying they were going to go out and actually entering the grander world were two different things.

Was her little hideout to go decrepit and neglected as this place? Were all the artifacts that she had loved but couldn’t take with her to be lost in the shuffle?

Her morose thoughts were as dismal as her surroundings.

“A fresh start.”

She was about to turn back, determined for a new and better life when a piece of debris caught her eye. It was in a little room, placed strangely against the wall. She resolved to check it out before leaving.

It looked like a piece of the ceiling. It had fallen from whatever catastrophe destroyed the place and ended up vertically next to the wall. She easily climbed debris over to it and pried it away from the wall. Something dark was behind.

It was heavy, so she used her tail to push against the wall while her legs scooted the ceiling debris away. When it finally fell, a cloud of smoke erupted around her. Waving it away, the dark something came into view.

She smiled.

It wasn't long before Jaina had retraced her steps to the room Hans had claimed, Brock having installed a few more lights to chase away the dreariness.

“Miss Copper. I was wondering if you'd got lost,” Hans said.

“It's a good thing I went. Maybe this pile of ruin still has a few things to offer.”

Brock and Hans watched as she flipped a framed painting in her hands so the picture faced them.

“Well I'll be,” Hans said.

It may not have been the best painting or rivaled the masterpieces that were up in the City museums, but it was still a work of art. A river scene was depicted, with some rocks in the

stream and fluffy clouds in the blue sky. The trees were the green of summer while the water was a rushing blue.

“A little reminder of what we’re going to,” Jaina explained, “Not that I’ve seen such things.”

“Reminds me of home,” Brock commented, lost in the simple landscape.

Jaina grabbed a hammer with her tail from Hans’s worktable and gently hung it up on the wall nearest them. They admired it for a few minutes in silence.

Finally, Jaina turned back to the other two and noticed a distinct lack of sarcasm.

“Is Leo not back yet?”

“Not yet,” Hans answered.

“Should someone check on him?” Brock asked.

“Mmm,” Jaina considered, “He’d probably hate that.”

There was a moment of quiet.

“So you want to do it, don’t you?” Hans asked with a smile on his face.

“More than anything,” she smiled back, “And he’d loath someone coming to his rescue if things were bad.”

The archeologist laughed a little. “So,” Brock asked, “Are you friends or…”

“Not in the least.”

“But you are willing to help him if in trouble?”

“To spite him, yes. You want to go up?”

Brock shrugged. “The sooner we can get the alloy, the sooner we can find my thief.”

Jaina looked back to Hans who was studying the upgraded generator. “You hold down the fort till we’re back.”

“I’ve been here this long...” he said, waving at them as they headed for the ladder to Leo’s guild hall.

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Mr. Creedy leaned back from his desk. Nothing so far. Nothing that they could figure out. Not a smidge of progress. He rubbed his temples in frustration.

Although the Council had voted to go ahead with research, for the life of him he could not find a way to block the radiation. Foxboro had reassigned Warehouse scientists to his lab to help, but even they couldn’t do anything. They were working double-time. The shield dome had fallen another two percent.

What really steamed his yam was that his constant exposure to the radiation from the Arianum made him unable to use his own *favor*. True, it wasn’t very helpful comparatively, but it definitely helped him.

He went over to the small coffee stand and grabbed a cup. He found a bag of tea among the fixings and sighed. This would be the time he could use his *favor* to heat the water. It was the only thing he could heat, water. But he had grown so accustomed to having his tea boiled at a specific temperature that the provided drinks were just ... terrible to him.

He poured the lukewarm water into his cup and added the teabag. Maybe if he had a decent cup of tea the solution would come to him.

He toyed with the idea of the shield falling. What if he failed to produce a working power source fast enough? What if they went ahead and used the Arianum as-is in a desperate scramble to get the dome back up? He would never have a perfect cup of tea again, that's for sure.

The thought of losing his *favor* forever equated to an inconvenience in his life. He could make do without it like he was now. But there were so many in the City who couldn't. Plus, there was the elimination of any future *favours*.

*Favor* was as old as time and just as mysterious. Random people had random *favor*. Coming from *favored* parents didn't guarantee anything. Skill, knowledge, or looks had nothing to do with it. It was purely chance. He knew of someone who could capture a person's spoken words into glass vials to be heard over and over again. He also had an aunt who could cause bread to rise without yeast. It just depended.

But what's more than that, at any time, for any reason, a person could get a new *favor*. Some were born with them, but others received theirs, or many, later on in life. It could be from an encounter with someone, or hearing certain words, touching certain materials, or acting out a specific event. There was no rhyme or reason to it. You could be as Grey as could be one day and then touch corn for the first time and wield lightning.

And although he had been content with the small water-boiling *favor* that he had, he'd always wished that touching some relic from a bygone era would arouse a new *favor* in him. Maybe something more useful.

He looked at the Arianum that he'd been working on. If they used it they would be taking away that hope. Not to mention the spirit of the City. He couldn't imagine what kind of chaos there would be without...



“Mr. Creedy?” an assistant asked.

He broke out of the spell. “Yes?”

“We’re ready to try the infusion now.”

“Of course. I’ll be there in a minute.”

He grimaced as he took a sip of the disgusting tea. If they couldn’t stop the radiation from affecting people, maybe they could make people immune to the radiation.

He got up and headed for the next experiment.

## Part 16

“And that’s what I do. That’s why the Depths are an even a better option than my old life,” Kira explained.

“Uh-huh,” Leo muttered, picking trash remnants out of his clothes. He’d only been half-listening, if that, to the girl’s story.

“So a Nose is after you? And you’re a thief. Is that why you’re hiding out in the Depths?”

“Listen ... what was your name again?”

“It’s Kira. Kira Delgado.”

“Kira,” he said, picking a limp celery carcass out of his hair, “I’m not staying in the Depths long. This is just temporary. Full disclosure, I’m fixing to leave the City. For good.”

He thought this would sound so impossible that it would deter the girl, but it had the opposite effect. Her eyes lit up.

“You’re leaving the City!? Can I go with you? I hate this place. I’ll do whatever you need. Pick up food, crawl up the outer walls, take out that Nose. Do you want me to take that Nose out? Cause I can!”

“Ok, wait a minute! Just ... stop. No, I don’t want you to ‘take out’ a police official. I’m a renowned thief, not a thug.” He looked at her incredulously. “What kind of vagabond are you?”

He started walking without a response. “Also, I don’t usually work in teams and I kind of am already, which I’m very uncomfortable with. But there’s a...” he dipped his head back and forth, “...semi-solid plan afoot to get us on the outside, and frankly, it doesn’t involve other players.”

“Oh, please? I won’t be any trouble. I won’t even stay with you once we’re on the outside. I’ll make my own way.”

“That’s tempting, but I don’t think I have the authority to just bring whoever I want. Like I said, there are a few people, not just me.”

“Let me ask the whole group, then! I could state my case, prove my value.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I appreciate your quick thinking back there, but what else can you offer?”

“I don’t eat much, I’ll take up no space since I have no possessions,” she listed, ticking off her fingers, “I know how to read and write and cook-”

“Ok, ok, just ... save it for the others...”

“Yes! Oh, thank you! I won’t let you down!”

“Great. Let’s see,” he pondered their location, “I think we’re still on the Kensington Layer. We’ll have to go down one more.”

“To the Enlightened Layer? I’ve never been there! This is going to be great!” She took off, laughing at the adventure.

He shook his head in a mixture of disbelief and disgust. “Absolutely insane.”

~\*~\*~\*~

Brock and Jaina were almost up the ladder to Leo’s guild hall. It had been a mostly silent trip along the way.

“So...” Brock started. He paused in an obvious attempt to think through his next words. “You’re a chameleon.”

Jaina shook her head at the slyness, “Whatever gave you that idea?”

He blanched. “I mean, I think you are. I thought I heard you saying that earlier. It is – I think that – it was just...”

She stopped and smiled back at him.

“I have never met an Anthro before.”

“Hm. Interesting. Don’t they have Anthros on your island?”

“No. I know of them, on the mainland. But the Northern Archipelago is lacking them.”

She considered this for a moment. “Should be fascinating when we get outside, I suppose.” She used her tail to bat his cheek affectionately. “Did you know the City is run by a lion Anthro?” she said, ascending again.

“Is it? I would love to see that.”

“You just might,” she whispered.

“Is being Anthro a *favor*?” he asked.

She chuckled and shook her head. “Nope, it was just how I was born. My only *favor* is the strength in my hands.” She demonstrated by squishing the metal ladder rungs together.

“Remarkable,” he breathed. “Were your parents, I mean, did you come from chameleon parents?”

“I can’t remember my parents. Earliest thing I can remember was working for a theatre to pay for some food and a crummy bed.”

“Oh.”

“What about you? Did you come from islander parents?”

“Yes. They were killed a few years ago.”

She stopped again. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“I was grown at that point so I could take care of myself. Not like you.”

They kept going in silence. Brock’s metal arm clanking against the metal ladder the only sound of progress.

“Maybe you could show me your island. When we get out.”

He looked up to her. “You want to see it?”

“Yeah, possibly. I mean we have to get your village staff back from that thief and then maybe, you could show me around when we put it back.”

He stared. “You are ... coming to find the thief with me?”

She shrugged, “Don’t have anything better to do. The train will be my only home for a while. Might as well help if I’m taking up space there.”

They slowly ascended again. “You really want to see Eddystone?”

She laughed at his incredulous tone. “Yes. Why? Is it terrible?”

“No, no. It is paradise. At least to me. It is – people from the mainland ... they never want to come to the islands.”

She couldn’t help looking back again. “I thought you said it was paradise. Why wouldn’t they want to visit that?”

“The people. We are thought of as the brutes across the water. It has been a large endeavor to follow after the thief. Islanders do not travel to the mainland. It has been this way for as long as I can remember.”

“Did your people make a fuss that you were coming here?”

“Oh, no,” he chuckled, “I was shunned long ago for this mechanical arm. It did not bother them that I was leaving Eddystone.”

“What? That’s terrible! Are you sure you want to get the staff back for them? Why would you put yourself in harm’s way to help people who don’t like you?”

“Well,” he thought for a moment, not on his answer, but whether his answer was right or not, “This might be the deed that allows them to see me differently. Perhaps returning the staff will stop the shunning.”

She was quiet the rest of the way up. She hadn’t met his tribe, but she could clearly see that his feats would not be enough to sway the hearts of people cruel enough to reject him just because of an arm. Still, she was captivated at the idea that he thought it might work. He was doing something good for the people who had wronged him. The math didn’t work out, but maybe it made Brock a better person thinking that it would.

They finally reached the trap door and she wrenched it open. Brock took in the huge ruins with awe.

“So this is his guild hall. It is magnificent.”

“Or it was,” Jaina countered. She spotted something near the door. “Is that his bag?”

She went over and opened it to find a few clothes, personal effects, and trinkets. She pulled out some long metal bracelets, heavily adorned with jewels.

She shook her head, “The Manguinian Bracers. He stole them right out from beneath me a couple of years ago,” she explained to Brock. “These are going with me.” She slipped them into her pocket with a smile.

“This is definitely his bag then,” she said holding up his blade sharpeners, “And he left it here.” She pondered, “Which he wouldn’t do with his favorite pieces inside.”

“Do you think he is in trouble? Or the Nose got to him?”

“But how would the police find this place? It is seriously well-hidden with those manure holds out there. No way could a Nose could follow that scent.”

“Then where did he go?” Brock asked.

A rummaging sound turned them towards the guild door. It swung open, two guys exiting with no idea that someone was with them. They stopped. The two at the door stared at the weird chameleon Anthro and a strangely dressed man with a metal arm.

There was a second’s pause and then both Spyglass members unsheathed matching blades from their hands. “Stop right there!”

“Time to go!” Jaina quipped, grabbing Leo’s bag off the floor. They ran toward the manure holds as fast as they could, the Order members quickly catching up to them. They were almost there when Leo’s bag on Jaina’s shoulder grew to a staggering size. She halted like a dog at the end of their rope, the sudden enlarging catching her off guard.

“Must be a *favor...*” she deduced from the floor.

Brock quickly released the whip in his arm and swung it at the on-comers. The one called Chancy caught the rope in his blades and thrust Brock toward him, and off-balance. The other, Spor, reached the giant bag to finish off the caught islander.

Jaina suddenly appeared from the floor, knocking the attacker away with the brute force of her tail. She quickly grabbed something from Leo's enlarged bag and threw it at the one holding Brock's whip. It turned out to be one of Leo's blade sharpeners, which was normally harmless but was now a sink-sized razor heading straight towards the assailant's head.

Chancy yelled and let the whip go. In the few seconds it took to distract his concentration, the *favor-enlarged* bag returned to its normal size. Jaina grabbed it and pushed Brock towards the door. He again popped a small vial from his mechanical bicep and threw a spark from his firestarter. The liquid erupted in flames, giving something more important for the two Spyglass members to deal with and enough time for them to slip away.

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"I can't believe we made it without running into any monsters," Leo claimed as they weaved their way through Hans' makeshift defense array outside the old guild hall.

"I can't believe this is all still intact!" Kira wondered. "Do you think the lower layers are this whole?"

"Why don't you go see for yourself?" Leo said walking up the stairs.

She oohed at the inside foyer, of the decadence it must have shown one day. They reached the door that would lead them to the square room where Hans was holed up.

"Hmm. I don't have the key. Maybe I can pick it."

He looked at the strange keyhole on the right side. It comprised a circular pad with two holes in it.

"Two, huh? Making it difficult for me." He cracked his fingers, "No worries!"



He set to work on the lock, using some picks he always carried. He used his *favor* on another attempt. It was nearly fifteen minutes later and he was still clunking away.

“Do you need help?” Kira asked.

“No, I need quiet.”

He worked for a few more minutes before there was a clicking sound. The heavy door began to swing away.

“Aha! You see? It just took some finagling.”

The door opened wider and Hans appeared. “I thought I heard something. Glad you’re back.”

“Did you open the door?” Kira asked, smiling.

“Of course. Why?” He looked at the picks around the lock. With a chortle, he told Leo, “I’m afraid that won’t do. Back in the day, they made this lock very secure.”

“So I see,” Leo muttered, “Anyway, here I am. And this girl, Kira, she helped a little. Wanted to ask if she could join us, I already told her we were full up. Maybe she can find another part of the City to live in? She already mentioned going deeper into the Depths, find out what’s there. Alright, well farewell, Kira! Thank you and good luck.”

He said all this in one breath and began walking inside.

“Wait! Let me state my case! I’m good at-”

“You don’t have to state your case, young lady. You can come with us. There’s plenty of room.”

“Really? Thank you!”

“No problem,” Hans said with a gleam, “The more the merrier.”

“Huh,” Leo huffed, “What kind of saying is that?”

They all three made their way into the living space, Hans closing the big door behind them.

“Nice painting,” Leo remarked, pointing to the new addition on the wall. “Where are Jaina and the islander?”

Hans stopped. “They went looking for you.”

Leo turned, “What, up there? We just barely escaped the Nose! That’s why I was late. And to, um, get these.” He held up the bag of Grubbers snacks. “She shouldn’t have gone.”

“Well, they have. Up the ladder to your guild hall. Maybe they’ll be back soon.”

“Or maybe they’ll be caught and during the interrogation they fess up to where this spot is. Or my guild hall.”

He shrugged. “I guess we’ll see.”

“I’m going to go get them.”

“Wait! You can’t leave! That’s the whole reason they left because none of you would stay put. I have confidence in them. Just, wait it out, alright?”

Leo folded his arms skeptically. “You don’t even know them, how do you have confidence? I don’t know Saxton. He’s probably going to get them both killed.”

Hans peered at him. “What’s this? Do you care about them?”

“No. I care about them leading disaster to me.”

“I think you’ll be surprised when they get back.”

“Surprised that they survived...” Leo mumbled.

“So! Kira, was it?” he outstretched an arm to the new girl, “Let me show you how we’re going to get out of the City.”

## Part 17

Foxboro was in his office in the tallest tower, staring out a window at the City glittering below. The trams moved back and forth in the weave of traffic. Flying Citizens could be seen dotting the skies as they moved to and fro. The vibrancy of the towers and their magnificent architecture expanded with the fact that they were filled with wondrous beings. *Favor* of all types could be found in them. Not just the earth-shattering *favor* of wind and fire manipulation. Not just the puzzling *favours* of the mind like Telekinesis or Telepathy.

He knew of someone with the ability to manipulate wood. There was someone on the Council who could use their dreams as a study, so they could work while they were dozing. And he recalled a history textbook that spoke of someone who was able to summon past and future versions of themselves.

He himself could remember anything that he read. He remembered, word for word, the text to a children's book he had read at the age of six. He looked up to the shield dome that covered the whole City. In all his readings, he could not recall a time when such a dilemma had befallen the City.

There was a time when City officials had to decide between having the citizens escape an oncoming army they were unmatched for. The other option was to stand and fight. That led to their doom. He remembered a past City had to pick either a leader who everyone loved or one that was boring in his logical facts. The charismatic choice had led to disaster. There was even a time when a history book talked of a person with comfort manipulation as their *favor*. The people loved having that person use their *favor* to make their lives easier and more relaxed. It had caused great chaos when the person had died and the City was left in an uncomfortable reality.

But he could not remember a decision such as this. The dome seemed to flicker, the power visibly failing.

Now it was up to this City, with him as the leader, to make another decision that would decide their fate. But never before had a City had the protection of the shield dome that they now had. And even though the alloy had come from the Arianhod Layer of a past City, no book ever mentioned its power or the dilemma that it certainly put those City officials in.

It was either die from what was outside or die inside from the chaos the Arianum would ensue.

A knock sounded from the door. "Enter."

Alfred Burbank, the councilman, peaked his head in. "Ah, Alfred. Please tell me you have good news."

"I have ... inconclusive news as of yet, m'lord."

"Does that mean the radiation immunization didn't work?"

He shook his head, "Not as of yet. Mr. Creedy insists that they've only scratched the surface of the experiments, but he's yet to produce positive results."

The old lion Anthro sighed. "Alfred, we need this now. I don't know what's out there. But the bedlam that would occur if we tried to 'protect' the City with the alloy as it is now..."

"M'lord. We have the best and the brightest working on it. There were enough votes to continue the alloy research so you know the Council is behind you. Just give it time."

“Time,” he rose with a tremendous burden in his shoulders, “is a resource we’re running out of. And unfortunately, there are no Citizens currently who have time *favours*. There’s nothing left to do except ... see what happens.”

Burbank could see that the Lord Prime wanted to be alone. “I’ll see you in the morning, m’lord. Maybe I’ll have better news then.”

“Thank you, Alfred,” Foxboro said, while still staring at his City.

Burbank closed the door behind him and walked the gilded halls of the Morning Star tower. He said hello to passing staff and councilmembers as he walked to a room on the other side of the floor. There he quietly entered, eyeing the hall to see if anyone was watching.

“Burbank, there you are.”

Alfred turned to see a small group of councilmembers gathered. “The dome is fast falling.”

“I know,” he said, “What are the updates?”

“Well,” a female goose Anthro said, “The voting altering worked. We got a majority of votes to keep using the Arianum. And thankfully, no one has detected the deception as of yet.”

“A five-vote lead. That was cutting it kind of close,” Burbank commented.

“You said you wanted it real.”

“Speaking of people finding out, we took care of that Heights woman,” another said.

“The one that was snooping about?” Burbank asked, “What did you do with her?”

“We sent her down to the-”

“- Ground Floor,” Burbank finished, hearing his thoughts. “Sorry, continue.”

“Pierre in the Gang assured us that we wouldn’t hear from her again. Now our hands are clean.”

“Good. If anyone finds out what’s going on then they’ll throw the Arianum out for good.”

“And we wouldn’t want that,” one quipped with a smile.

“Are the *favored* among us sure they want to go through with this?” a man asked the group.

“I can just talk to goldfish. It doesn’t bother me.”

“What about you, Alfred? You have the most useful *favor* here.”

He scoffed, “Useful. If I was worried about losing it, I wouldn’t be here.”

~\*~\*~\*~

It was night again. Jaina and Brock snuck around the corners of buildings trying to avoid attention. It was the opposite of the night from the heist that had caused all this and introduced her to the islander next to her. Gone now were the clouds, allowing the Paladin Cloud to shine in full force.

It dominated the sky above the dome. Even the stars had a hard time glimmering next to it. Jaina had read that it was what astronomers called a nebula. Like a slice against the sky, the Paladin Cloud was bright white at the center and moved to purple and orange on the edges. Although she had seen it her whole life, she still loved an opportunity to gaze at it. And tonight it was in spectacular array.

“We call that the Paladin Cloud in the islands,” Brock whispered, noticing her staring at it.

She turned, “That’s what it’s called here. Huh,” she kept moving, “I guess some things are universal everywhere.”

They moved a little farther with the Cloud creating gaunt shadows of them on the ground. “Where are we going?” Cooper asked.

“When I was speaking to Hans while you were looking around, he said there were many spots to enter the City. The closest one I can remember came out at a tram station in Sub-City.”

“Sub-City is just down there.” She pointed to a rickety stairway that led to a street ten stories below. “And the tram station is around that corner.”

They quickly made their way down, entering the street with cautious steps.

“I can blend in with the walls but you,” she eyed him, “you couldn’t stand out more.”

He looked down at his hulking body with strange tribal tattoos and foreign garb. “I did not know it would be a problem.”

She looked around, thinking. “Maybe if we skirt the edges of that alley we won’t be noticed.”

They did as she said with no witnesses. The tram station still laid a block down and they had to go through an indoor public square to get there.

“We’ll just have to run. I don’t think there’s any way to get there subtly.”

They waited until the crowd had thinned a little and a running pair would be inconspicuous. With a last glance to see if police were in the area, they made their move. Her



speed and his size quickly covered the open space in no time, with little attention. She sighed a breath of relief as they crossed into the station.

“Hey!”

They both turned to see the white coat of an officer in the station. “Stop there!”

“Blast!”

Obviously, they didn’t obey him, abandoning all pretext of stealth and high-tailing it to the location Hans had told Brock.

“It is next to an air vent. Down the tunnel. An old sewage line.”

They ran to the platform, empty of trams and passengers. A slight pull of Telekinesis met them.

“Hurry! He’s getting closer!” Jaina yelled.

They jumped down into the lonely tracks, heading for the tunnel. The darkness helped hide them as they searched for the exit.

“Air vent, air vent, air vent,” Jaina recited, probing the walls for anything that stood out.

“There it is!” Brock announced, pointing to a small panel next to a protruding air vent. They raced to it, Brock ready to use his mechanical arm to break it open. He heaved back ... where his arm stuck.

Jaina glanced behind, spotting the police officer with his hand outstretched. “He’s getting a hold!” She was about to knock the door open herself when her arms became sluggish and her movements halted. “He’s nailing us down!”

“Got you!” the Telekinetic announced, “You’re under arrest for the theft at the Museum d’Argent. And you ... big fella ... are an accessory.”

“There’s got to be some way out.” She could feel this was a stronger hold than the weak Telekinetic they’d met on the Ground Floor. Distraction wouldn’t be easy. “Hey. Do you like gold?” she asked.

“You can’t bribe me.” He spoke into his radio brick. “Captured the wanted thief and an accessory at the Sub-City North Balton station. Request immediate evacuation to the nearest police department.”

“What about bigger criminals? Huh? Cause I could snitch,” Jaina offered.

“Nothing you say will get you out of this, chameleon.”

A whistle chimed. They all looked down the dark corridor that was slowly getting brighter. The tunnel was just big enough for a tram to move through and definitely not big enough for all three of them.

“What are you going to do, policeman?” Jaina asked.

“Let’s move.” He started pulling them towards the platform, but they moved slowly. “Stop fighting me! We’re all in danger!”

The tram pulled around the corner, whistling as it went.

“C’mon! We’re almost there!” He had pulled them most of the way, but they were still exposed to the oncoming transportation.

“Let go! You’ll kill yourselves!”

“I think we’ll be killed either way.”

At the last minute, the officer gave up and jumped onto the platform. The few seconds of broken concentration was all they needed. Jaina deftly jumped onto the side of the tram while Brock easily mounted it with his metal arm. Thankfully, the tram kept going, speeding through the station for its destination and away from the Telekinetic's influence.

"That was a close one!" Brock exclaimed.

"Don't celebrate yet!"

The dark tunnel was quickly disappearing, shooting them out into the open City. Brock screamed as the tram ran down the bare rails that lined the towers. They were hundreds of lengths up, the Ground Floor easy to see from their height.

"We have to jump!" Jaina yelled.

"What!? Are you crazy? We should just ride this tram to the next station and get off there!" he yelled back.

She shook her head, the wind rushing by them. "That officer will have called in our destination. No question we'll meet a lot more Telekinetics at the next station, waiting for us."

He looked down again. "We cannot just jump! We will die from this height!"

She searched around. The tram rails were headed around the tower, but they came back again going the other direction. She could see that the oncoming rails rested above a factory roof of some sort. The glass ceiling was only a couple of stories from where the tram would be.

"When I say, let go!"

"No! This is certain death!"

"Trust me!"

He looked at her stalwart face. He considered all her exploits that had gotten her here. He remembered finding her hanging upside down on the first encounter. In the breath of a few seconds to contemplate all this, he nodded.

It was then the tram turned its corner and sped down the straightaway that would lead them to the other station, and their definite capture.

“Ready?” she yelled as the glass ceilings came closer.

“Ready!”

“Now!”

They let go and fell. The speeding tram was gone in a flash and they were left with a terrifying descent. Just a few lengths to the left and they would have fallen all the way to the Ground Floor.

The glass crashed as the two met it. They fell another two stories to the factory floor below, getting tangled up in chains and ropes that were hanging from the roof.

The impact was enough to knock the wind out of them, but the chains had gotten in their way enough to just injure them.

“We are alive,” muttered the islander, rolling over heavily.

Jaina coughed at the forming bruises, “For now...”

It took a few minutes for them to regain their composure and untangle themselves from the web of ropes and chains that had broken their fall. Brock flipped out a small blade that made quick work of the mess.

Jaina took in her surroundings. Nothing looked familiar. She had never been this low before.

“Where are we?” Brock asked.

She looked out the window. “It looks like it’s pretty close to the Ground Floor. And this place,” she eyed the dirt and dust, “looks abandoned.” She glanced at the islander, “Did Hans mention any more of those passageways to the Depths?”

He thought for a moment. “Something about a grocery venue he visits sometimes. It was somewhere in Sub-City. Next to a ... an arena, I think?”

A clanking sound alerted them. They slipped behind some pallets as quiet as shadows. Someone was coming. Probably curious at the sound of breaking glass. One set of footsteps became many.

And then a man with purple hair came into view.

## Part 18

The hooligans escorted Biola through the streets to a shady support pillar. One of them could manipulate metal and had made a ramshackle pair of cuffs to restrain her. Not that she would do much. She didn't have a defensive *favor*, and she was of the Heights. Struggling would be undignified.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

The man with purple hair smiled, "Just somewhere, that's all."

"I demand to know what's going on! I haven't done anything wrong. The elevator just malfunctioned. You have no right to obtain me!"

"We're just going to another elevator, nothing to worry about, love."

She thought for a moment. "Then what are these restraints for?"

"Your protection, of course," he answered without looking at her.

"MY protection? From what? You?"

"From the Ground Floor Gang."

The words caught in her throat at the name. She had heard stories about the group, the only bit of authority at the feet of the City.

They reached the support pillar and went around its rusted façade. Behind was an old door that they snuck through. It hid a long-forgotten entrance to a dilapidated elevator.

“I’m not going on that. It’s likely to fall.”

“Oh c’mon, love, don’t you want to leave the Ground Floor?”

She didn’t believe his smile but relented to the push from behind. They tentatively entered the rickety chamber and the purple-haired man hit a button. The thing shuddered to life and slowly they began to rise.

It was a bumpy ride that Biola was sure would end in a sudden plummet, but the group around her looked unfazed like they had made the trip many times. After a few minutes, it rocked back and forth to a shaky stop and the doors slid open.

“This isn’t the Heights,” Biola informed them. They laughed.

“But this is your stop, Miss Gandy,” the purple-haired man remarked.

Whatever the space had been, it was abandoned now. The dust on the equipment and boxes was thick with time. They led her to a box in an open space and sat her down.

“Look, I demand to know what your intentions are. I have been brought here for no reason and I want to know why.”

“Because you know things. Things you shouldn’t,” he answered.

She grew cold inside, the idea that her release from the police department was just a ruse.

“We were engaged to pick you up at the elevator where we found you and then quietly get rid of you.” He smiled, “And yet you’re still here.”

She found some words in her dry throat, “I am. If you were to... get rid of me, why am I still here?”

“Well, I’m thinking we flip the script here a little, yeah? We’ve been asked several times now to take out certain individuals that the Council didn’t like. But we were never told why. Sure, the police were more lenient on the Ground Floor so we could work, but for what? Some lackey work? I think that time is over.”

Her stomach fell a little at the thought of the Council making deals with shady characters such as this. It sunk even more when she realized they wanted her dead for her snooping. She watched the others around the purple-haired man stare intently at her. Rapt with attention.

“So you’re going to tell us what you learned. What’s so important that the Council doesn’t want you gossiping about?”

She stayed silent for a bit. She weighed whether she should keep the Lord Prime’s secret. But she also wondered if a plan to remove people’s *favor* should stay a secret. The Council even wanted her removed for knowing about it.

“C’mon, love. Spill it. We don’t want to use force on such a lovely face.”

She considered the predicament a little more. One of them moved towards her, taking up a spot behind. With just a touch, the metal restraints tightened causing her to gasp.

“Alright, alright,” she stalled for the right words, “maybe you should know.”

They leaned in a little as if her next sentences were sweet music.

She cleared her throat. “Do you have a *favor*?”



He was silent for a second, staring, then started to laugh. It rippled through the group. “Of course, love! Why does that matter?”

“What is it, may I ask?”

He stretched his shoulders in pride, “I jump high.”

“Do you like it?”

“What do you mean? Of course, I like it! Bruno likes his metal manipulation, Sandra likes her *favor* with crystals. I know of very few people who don’t like having a *favor*. What’s your point?”

She didn’t know how to explain it. “Then say goodbye to it.”

That was enough to deflate whatever joy they had.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“The Council, they’re experimenting with an alloy to power the shield dome. That alloy can remove a person’s *favor*, indefinitely. If used to power the City’s dome ... everyone will lose their *favor* as a result.”

There were a few seconds for them to take it in. She imagined the weight of the information, how it would take time to process it.

The purple-haired man just laughed.

“Ok, you’ve had your fun. Spinning stories. Just tell us what you’re really down here for.”

“What? That’s the reason!”

“What was it? A romance scandal? Maybe a council member is skimming some money off the books? What did you see?”

“I told you! That was the truth! The alloy is called Arianum! Mr. Creedy found it during an expedition in the Depths! I saw him talking about it!”

They cackled at her earnestness, the look of desperation in her eyes. “Nothing can take away a person’s *favor*, love, everyone knows that. Especially not something that can take away the whole City’s *favor*!”

“Can you imagine the pandemonium?” one said.

“Hospitals wouldn’t work! They’d lose their precious police force! Why would they do that?” guffawed another.

“I’m telling the truth! Why don’t you believe me?” she yelled.

The purple-haired man wiped a tear from his face, “Oh, that’s a lark. Ok, tell us the real reason. It must be something good for you to make up stories.”

“I’m not lying. Why would I lie in this situation?”

He cocked his head adoringly, “People say crazy things when their life is on the line.” He nodded to the girl named Sandra. She smiled as she came near.

“Please! What more do you want to know?”

Sandra pulled out a crystal from her pocket. It was short and pink, with the typical flat sides and pointed end. She raised it in front of Biola's eyes. It snapped, growing longer in the span of a millisecond. She let out an involuntary yelp that brought a smile to Sandra's lips.

"Tell us what you found out, Miss Gandy, the real reason. Maybe we can use it against those Council dogs."

Sandra put the crystal's point to Biola's temple, staring deeply into her frightened eyes.

"I've already told you. The alloy... they're thinking of using it--"

"No more stories. Just tell us what you saw. Perhaps we'll let you live, to spite them."

"It isn't stories! I saw them use it!" She gasped. The crystal had dug deeper into her skin. "Please!"

"Was it something Foxboro did? Maybe a Tower Governor?"

"Arianum!" she screeched, "We'll all lose our *favor!*" The crystal dug in even farther, prying a drop of blood from Biola's head.

"HHHAAPPP!" she interrupted. They stared at her. It wasn't a call for help. It was more like something between a hiccup and a scream. Even Biola gawked wide-eyed at the sudden noise.

"I don't ... I don't know what that was ..." she tried to explain.

A sudden crash of glass interjected the stunned scene. It came from some other part of the abandoned structure.

The purple-haired man nodded to Sandra and another grunt, “Let’s check it out. Bruno, stay with her.”

Biola watched them fade into the dark wondering what in the world noise had just come from her mouth.

~\*~\*~\*~

Jaina and Brock hid in the shade created by the Paladin Cloud from the broken roof. They could see three people sidle into the area. They investigated the broken glass and the open ceiling.

“It’s too big for vermin to make.”

“Someone’s here, I can feel them.”

They looked around more intently, getting nearer to Jaina and Brock’s spot.

“I can’t see a way out that doesn’t involve going through them,” Jaina whispered.

“Do we have to fight? What if the police are alerted to the scene?” Brock asked.

“This looks like Ground Floor Gang members. They’ll probably kill us just for being here. Who cares about the police?”

He sighed, “So what do we do?”

She peered around. “Maybe there’s something good where they came from.”

“Or maybe there are more gang members...”

“Get your whip ready. We’ll make a break for that area.”

“If you say so,” he relented.

She slinked over to the edge of the boxes they were behind, changing her skin color to match the surrounding gloom. He could only make out her eyes. When the female gang member got close enough, Jaina nodded to him.

She swung out, still camouflaged, and swiped the lady off her feet. Her loud falling thud got the attention of the other two. Brock rose up and used his arm whip against the purple-headed one, but he neatly leapt away, soaring up the ceiling. The last gang member came at Brock swinging a club, diving over the boxes to him.

Sandra had regained her feet, quicker than Jaina was expecting, and turned a pink crystal into a long fighting staff. The two went about exchanging blows, Jaina using her tail and strong hands to deflect the oncoming parries from Sandra’s staff.

Brock was making headway with the Grey gang member, using expert whip cracks to throw him off balance. Right when he was going to get an advantage, the purple-haired leaper appeared on Brock’s shoulders, knocking him to the ground.

At the same time, Jaina cried out. Sandra had quickly extended her crystal to pierce Jaina’s shoulder, sizing it back down to a fighting length. Jaina jumped up a metal strut and rushed to climb to the ceiling. The leaper saw her and abandoned Brock to join her near the roof in one single bound. They fought near the rafters.

Brock was holding off the Grey when Sandra entered. With her and the Grey combined, the islander was being pushed back.

“HHHAAPPP!” a sound reverberated from the distance. The group only gave it a second of thought before delving back into the fight. It seemed the three gang members would overtake the two as they fought for their life. Brock reached for the black sack at his hip.

The Grey man was about to deliver a decisive blow with his club when something streaked across his face. He rubbed his face in shock, a small scratch forming. Sandra thrust her crystal at Brock but he dodged at the last second. Something blurry in the dark rushed up her staff and battered her face. She fought at the thing, neglecting her crystal, it snapping back into its tiny form as it hit the floor.

Brock was unsure what was going on. He quickly checked his hip sack but the Bunny of Doom hadn't escaped. Another black shape attacked the Grey man, now taking his focus off of the islander. He looked up to Jaina where something similar was happening to the leaper. He jumped away from her, landing in the middle of the factory. Suddenly, a host of dark shapes swarmed, scratching and clawing him.

“Brock!”

He looked up as Jaina made her way across the ceiling towards the spot where the gang members had appeared. He dodged the now busy three as they batted off the oncoming onslaught. Jaina dropped to the floor as Brock reached her and the exit.

“What are those?”

“How should I know?” Jaina exclaimed, “But let’s not stick around!”

They rushed down the hallway and found another open space. They screeched to a halt when they found a woman standing there. Her hands were bound in metal and there was a man lying unconscious at her feet. Dark shapes were bounding away from the man and heading back toward the sound of the scuffle in the other room. One stayed and stared at them all.

It was a squirrel. It flicked its tail and rapidly looked at all of them. Then it ran towards the others and the fight.

Jaina looked at the woman. Clearly, she was from the Heights. Clearly, the Ground Floor Gang had her. But she couldn’t guess why or why there were squirrels involved.

“Are you with them?” the Heights woman asked, warily sizing up the Anthro and giant man.

“No,” Jaina answered, “but they wanted you, didn’t they?”

“Yes! Can you get us out of here?”

“That is just what we were doing,” Brock said.

“Did you bring the squirrels?” she asked.

“I have no idea why they’re here,” Jaina explained quickly, “There’s a tram just down the road. We’ll lead you to it and then you can get back to the Heights.”

She blanched, “But I can’t go back! They want me dead! The Council has eyes everywhere! I need to go with you!”

Jaina didn't like the sound of that. "Well, our destination isn't one you'll like," she clarified, using her strong chameleon hands to sever the metal restraints binding the Heights woman.

"I can take the Sub-City. I can even go to the Ground Floor if it means we're safer than here."

"We are going to the Depths," Brock said, flatly. They quickly made their way out of the factory.

She blanched even more hurrying behind them, "The Depths! Why in the world are you going there? We'll be killed!"

"You sound like Leo," Jaina said.

"Who's Leo? Wait!" she stopped them and pointed at the Anthro. "Wait a minute ... a chameleon ... with a Leo?" She turned her whitest, all blood draining from her face. "You're Jaina Cooper, the wanted thief! And you mean Leo Thayer!"

She mock-curtseyed, "At your service. Do you want out of this mess or not? We're going to the Depths with or without you."

The cogs turning in her head were almost visible. Go with the criminals that had made her life a stress, or continue interrogation with the gang that wanted to use or murder her. Or there was always taking her chances back in the Heights.

"Fine. Lead the way," she relented.



## Part 19

Leo was looking at the new painting in the dismal ruins. Its tranquil river scene seemed to lighten up the place. A little outside on the inside. He smiled a smidge at the welcome scene, a bit of the art lover in him getting inspired.

Hans returned from the supposedly flying train with the new girl. They were happily discussing what they would do once they were past the City walls.

“Took you long enough. I thought you got the thing working and left without us.”

Hans shook his head, “If it was that easy to turn on the Iron Appaloosa I would have been gone long ago. Besides, I said I would take you with me. A promise is a promise.”

“It’s beautiful!” Kira said, “One of the cars is like a dining car on a tram. You know I’m somewhat of a chef myself. Have worked with food for years.”

“You don’t need to sell yourself anymore, kid, you’re already coming along,” Leo droned. He pointed a thumb back at the painting while taking a seat, “I like that. You find it?”

“Jaina did.”

“Of course ...”

A knocking sound stopped them. “That must be her. I’m glad she didn’t get caught like you did,” Hans said.

“I didn’t get ‘caught’. I’m here, aren’t I?”

Hans returned with Jaina and Brock in tow and a third person.

Leo sat up, “Oh c’mon, you didn’t pick up a stray too?”

Jaina cocked her head, “What do you mean ‘too’?” She saw Kira. Pointing to her she asked, “Who’s that?”

“That’s the stray puppy that followed me home.”

The Grey girl ignored him and thrust out her hand, “Name’s Kira, Kira Delgado.”

“Jaina Cooper. This big man’s Brock Saxton.”

“Whoa!” she remarked, “Where are you from?”

“I am an islander of Eddystone Island,” he explained with pride.

“Wow, that’s a thing!? How’d you get in? Is it beautiful outside?”

“Who’s that?” Leo interrupted.

Jaina cleared her throat and said, “Allow me to introduce you to Miss Biola Gandy. Of the Heights.”

She watched the puzzle pieces fall into place in her fellow thief’s brain. “You mean *the* Biola Gandy? Of the Museum d’Argent?” He laughed with big howls. “Here with us? You must be kidding!”

“Yes, I’ve already figured out who you are and believe me the irony is not lost on me,” Biola explained, “But I was in a dire situation and it was either follow Miss Cooper here or be killed back there.”

“The Ground Floor Gang was going to eliminate her, Leo,” Jaina said.

“Wow, such low-lives to mingle with. I thought better of a woman of the Heights,” Leo remarked.

“They were going to kill me because of something I shouldn’t know. Something the Council and Lord Foxboro are doing,” she said with a smidge of smugness.

Leo sat up. “Oh, this is getting more interesting. If there’s one thing I like better than stealing priceless artifacts it’s learning priceless information.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” Biola droned.

“It’s public knowledge, dear. Wanted posters and everything. That was your doing, right?”

“I saved him!” Kira interjected, “A Nose was after him and I helped him get away.”

“You were followed by the Nose!?” Jaina cried out. “How could you be so careless? He’s probably on his way here!”

Leo just waved her away. Kira explained, “Oh no, ma’am! We used a nasty smelling ink to gum up his sniffer. That was my idea.”

“Anyway, he won’t follow us here, Jaina. We already know the City won’t go this far into the Depths,” Leo said. “So what’s this juicy bit of info you stumbled upon, Miss Gandy?”

She smoothed out her wrinkled skirt. “Well ... I was in the vicinity when I heard ... an archeologist team found a rare alloy here in the Depths. It can be used to power the dome shield to prevent it failing.”

She waited while they soaked in the information. “Yeah, we know,” Leo said with his arms behind his head.

“You know?”

“We were thinking of using it ourselves,” Hans said.

“Actually, we were going to steal it,” Jaina clarified.

Biola blinked at the rag-tag group. It boggled her mind to have them understand the situation. Of all the things to know about. Especially in this cave of ruins. But something else hit her. All her life she had fought against ruffians taking what wasn't theirs when those items should be for the whole City. Looking at them, something clicked. Maybe it was the only way.

“Good! You should steal it!”

Jaina and Leo looked at each other with surprise. “That's not the reaction I was expecting.”

“Listen! The alloy, the Arianum, isn't just going to power the dome. It has a radiation. An adverse effect. It nullifies *favor*.” She waited, expecting the confused looks on their faces.

Hans spoke first. “I beg your pardon?”

“People exposed to it when it is working lose their *favor*. To run the shield dome will take a lot a power, which will douse the whole City in the radiation. Everyone will lose their *favor*.”

Silence reigned over them at such a bleak announcement. There was a part of Biola that assumed the group wouldn't believe the outlandish statement.

But she was wrong.

“Why would Foxboro do something so reckless?” Jaina questioned.

“It was approved by the Council, not just him,” Biola expounded.

“Think of what that will do to the infrastructure of the City. It runs on *favor*.”

“That was what they were debating. But apparently, the Council doesn't have the City in their best interests. They ... ordered me to be killed.”

The thieves nodded, “Yeah, sounds about right...”

“That explains why the Arianhod-era City buried the alloy and didn't use them,” Hans pieced together.

“How do you know that?” Biola asked.

“I saw the expedition find it.”

She shook her head, “How long have you been down here?”

“More importantly, when is the Council going to use the alloy?” Brock asked.

“Soon, I think. The dome is failing and it sounds like the Council is going to keep it up no matter the cost.”

“That’s insane,” Jaina commented.

Leo was drumming his fingers on his lips. “That means we’ll have to work quickly.”

“Leo?” Jaina asked.

He stood up and went to Hans’s workbench. “We have a limited amount of time to get the Arianum before it’s used and our *favor* is nullified. And we have even less time to make it work on that hunk of junk out there.”

“Hunk of junk?” Biola asked.

“Leave that up to me,” Brock said.

Jaina came over to him, “But we don’t know where they’re keeping it. We can steal anything, or at least I can, but we have to know where it is first.”

“I think I do,” Biola suggested, “It’s in Warehouse 107.”

Everyone but Brock stared at her like she had mentioned she was made of cheese.

“Well, you’re just a treasure trove of information. No wonder they wanted you killed,” Leo said.

“There’s no way that’s real,” Kira said with wide eyes.

“It is. And I think I know where it is. But they know my face now. I can’t go anywhere near it.”

Leo and Jaina looked at each other with glee. “Can you imagine all the goodies in Warehouse 107?”

“I thought it was just a myth!”

“We could say we stole from a place that the City calls an urban legend! Imagine!”

“Ok, calm your enthusiasm, you two. How do we get in there?” Hans asked.

“Oh, *we* don’t get in there,” Jaina said with a smile.

“Oh, no?” Brock asked.

“No,” Leo explained, “Us three are already on the police’s list, and apparently they don’t like Miss Gandy here.”

He turned to the two left. “That’s why Hans and Kira are going to get in for us.”

## Part 20

They were on a tram ride upward. It rushed through a tower, flashing the ornate style of the atrium around them. Daylight came again as they darted out of the building towards the Heights. A delivery person levitated themselves and a huge parcel through the air. Kira pressed her face against the glass to watch him every second until the tram moved around a corner.

Their destination was a building at the divide between Mid-City and the soaring Heights. Only a few minutes more and their station appeared. The doors opened and they exited nonchalantly with the crowd. Hans and Kira tried their best to act as if they made this trip every day. But it had been years since Hans had been this high and never for the Ground Floor girl.

Kira fought the urge to wonder at the surrounding arches. She wanted to run up to the statues she saw and gasp loudly. It took all that she had not to sprint to the street vendor that was selling ice cream on one of the upper balconies.

But thankfully, Hans was there to keep her in check. She never left his side as they beelined for their location. It was not where Biola had been snooping with the suspicious man behind the desk.

Instead, they entered a different building in a different part of town. Here laid a portion of the City's archives. This was an area unlike the vaulted Archives that Leo had broken into and Jaina protected. This was just an annex that housed blueprints. But blueprints were what Leo and Jaina were looking for.

They arrived at the front desk and Hans smiled at the receptionist.



“Hello. I was wondering if you do me a favor.”

“Let’s find out,” she said, “What are you looking for?”

“Well, my niece is working on a project for school and she’s doing a study on City architecture.” Kira nodded excitedly, playing the part. “Do you think we could get plans of a certain tower?”

The receptionist smiled at them, “That depends on which tower.”

Hans faked a laugh, “Well, we know we couldn’t get the Morning Star plans where the Lord Prime works!” Kira joined in. “No, we were just going to use an R&D tower. On the east side. One that her daddy used to work in.”

Brushing off the most high-security tower in the City was just the dismissal the receptionist needed. She laughed too. Leo said she would.

“Well, that’s no problem. I’ll get them up to you in a few minutes.”

As promised, she returned a little while later with the full blueprints. She spread them out in front on Hans and Kira on a table.

“Unfortunately, they can’t leave this building, but stay as long as you want to study them.”

“Thank you, ma’am!” Kira cheered.

The lady smiled again as she left them alone.

Hans quickly drew the papers back so he could see them more clearly.

Kira reminded him, “Miss Gandy said it was on the 216<sup>th</sup> floor. Near the Water Treatment office and Infrastructure Management.”

They searched through the prints until he finally spotted the offices. “And there’s the hallway that she was talking about.”

“It says it ends in another office. ‘Quotidian Nihilism Affairs’.” She looked at him quizzically.

He chuckled a little. “It means ‘ordinary nothing’.”

“That seems like a perfect name for something you’re trying to hide.”

“Ok, Leo and Jaina wanted us to find that spot and then see what’s around it. There might be a way in.”

They searched the plans thoroughly, but nothing seemed to connect with the offices. There was no way to punch in through a wall or travel through air ducts to get there. In fact, it looked like the entire area was completely closed off.

“Then we go under,” Hans said.

Flipping a page, they found the same spot in the tower. Normal R&D offices seemed to take up the space. It looked like any floorplan, but something was off.

“Look at that square,” Kira pointed. She overlaid the upper floor over top of what they were looking at, and the little square lined up perfectly with the door at the end of the hall.

“Ah, I think I see.” Hans quickly went to the next floor and the next and the next, with the little square never moving. “An elevator.”

“A secret elevator!” Kira whispered, happily. She glanced around to see if anybody was eavesdropping on their scheme.

Following the square down the floors, it suddenly stopped. “Floor 188.” Around the bottom square were just the normal tower utilities. A water station, some power relays, the garbage network, some heating arrays. “That would be a good cover. These are normal every 50 floors or so. So if they’re using the utility spots as space for Warehouse 107 ... then what can we use to get in? The front door is obviously off-limits.”

“And it looks like the utilities are like the Quixtody Nilly office; nothing seems to connect to them.”

Hans smiled at her pronunciation, “You’re right. It doesn’t seem there is any way...” he skimmed through the upper floors around the utilities, “to sneak into the warehouse.”

“Is there a way on the outside of the tower?” Kira asked.

Hans dipped his head and searched the outside of the building. Windows, gargoyles, rain chutes. It was all very normal.

“What’s that?” Kira pointed. There seemed to be a little trough that ran alongside the utility rooms on the south side. It opened to a small area that read ‘trash compactor’.

“But what’s the use of a trash compactor if a garbage nodule is on this floor?” Hans mused. “That might mean it’s a real trash compactor. Maybe even the legendary Warehouse 107 has some waste to get rid of.”

Kira smiled at him, knowing what was coming next.

“Let’s go check it out,” he said.

~\*~\*~\*~

The wind in the City was picking up a little. Obviously, being completely blocked off from the outside world and the wind currents it possessed, the wind they were now feeling wasn't real. It was from moving trams, flyers, and ventilation ducts. Combined they created a sort of pattern amid the towers. Windy feelings just meant there was more activity in the City.

It still made their mission difficult seeing as how their goal was to hang on the outside of a tower almost 200 floors up. But Hans wasn't scared of a little wind.

He and Kira had waited for the sunlight to die down so people on the trams wouldn't detect them.

"I think that's good enough," he surmised. Leaving his coat with the girl, he stretched from their hiding spot on a ledge near the 200<sup>th</sup> floor. There was a little groove in the architecture that let them sit without anyone seeing.

"Be careful," she called.

"It's old hat!" he called, as he found his footing on the corner of the tower. To anyone else, except maybe the thieves, being that high up with no safety line on a windy day would amount to doom. But not for Hans Coventry.

He scaled down the stone façade with the ease borne of his *favor*. He was down ten floors in about a minute without slipping or breaking a sweat. Then the 188<sup>th</sup> floor came upon him. This was the corner the plans had said the little trough started. He searched around like a spider on a wall for it. It took a few minutes but finally, he recognized it. It wasn't a trough. It was a sewer line. He crawled across looking for its end and the 'trash compactor'.

Its end did appear, but not how he imagined. The sewer line went into the building with no door or entry. It was just a pipe that went straight through the stone. A little way down was a very small metal door about the size of the painting that Jaina had found in the ruins. Hans made his way to it. It was plain except for a small keyhole in its housing.

He wouldn't be dismayed. Reaching into his pocket, he found the little device that Brock had built. It was in case of emergencies and basically consisted of a small metal piston and a one-time-use power source. It was for whatever arose. Knock someone out, break a padlock, get through a window...

“Or dismantle a keyhole,” Hans mused.

He held the little device up to the spot and pressed a button. A flash of light and a jarring thud ran out. Hans shook his stunned hand and searched the metal door. It had done precisely what it was designed to do, deliver a concussive force.

Hans pried open the remnants of the metal door and swung it open. Sucking in his gut, he squirmed inside the small entry. It was much more difficult with the inside wall just a few lengths from the opening. Finally, he was off the outside stone and found himself inside a cramped little utility crawlspace just big enough for someone to squat in.

“There must be some way for people to access it from the inside...” he said.

It was a gloomy search but in a few minutes revealed exactly what he was looking for. There was a hatch down on the wall that led out to another room. It was dark but he could spy a door at one end.

On the other side of it was pure wonder. From just a crack of the doorway, Hans saw a large chamber filled with machines. Each one was a puzzle in itself. Something like a turbine

spun fire to make metal sheets. There was a mess of machines and wires that seemed to grow with a tree. One even was encased in ice for some reason. Hans looked at them in awe.

“I think a place this strange would house an alloy that nullifies *favor*.” He smiled to himself. “Welcome to Warehouse 107.”

## Part 21

“That was clever of you,” Jaina said to Hans back in the Depths.

“Yeah, using a small panel from a sewer line on the outside of a tower?” Leo summed up, “Are you sure you’re not a thief?”

“I’m an archeologist. We’re trained to see the details,” Hans explained, “But thanks,” he said with a smile.

“Can you guys climb down the tower to the door we found?” Kira asked.

“Pssh. No problem. She’s a chameleon and I have these,” he extended his hand blades with a flourish. Kira mouthed a ‘wow’, their shiny metal reflecting in her wide eyes. “I think we’ll be fine.”

“The problem will be finding the alloy once you are in the warehouse. If the utility rooms on the blueprints were as big as Hans said, then it is a lot of warehouse to search,” Brock guessed.

“That’s true,” Biola added, “The Museum d’Argent is the fifth biggest museum in the City and it would take a full day to see every exhibit. This warehouse sounds bigger. And if it’s as advanced as what he was describing, they’ll be a lot of cameras watching your every move.”

“Can you blend in? Like Hans and I did?” Kira asked.

“That’s an option,” Jaina thought, “but I don’t know how. We can scout the warehouse and see what scientists and guards are wearing and then maybe sneak in.”

“But we’re on a time crunch,” Leo interjected, “There’s no long-term planning here. We have to get that alloy out and fast.”

“Maybe we can take the security systems down,” Brock suggested.

“But how? Was that panel you found integrated into the security, Mr. Coventry?” Biola asked.

He shook his head. “It looked like it was connected to the garbage system. That’s probably why it was out of the way and not guarded.” He shrugged, “But it was dark...”

“And there could be something worse than guards down there,” Leo said.

They stood over the workbench in the ruins thinking. It seemed the second they got close to an idea, complications arose.

“Wait a second...” Hans whispered. He bolted out of the room and down a hallway.

They looked at each other. “Where’s he going?”

Biola filled the silent void. “So, where are you planning on going once this ... escape happens?” You could hear the disbelief in her voice.

Brock answered, “We are going to find the thief who stole my island’s ceremonial staff.”

“A thief? From the outside?” she asked.

“The same stupid thief who took the Gae Bulga Spearhead from us,” Leo explained.

“You mean from me,” Biola corrected him. “Wait,” she pieced it all together, “then it wasn’t you that took it? Or one of your cohorts?” She gasped. “The one in the mask!”

“That’s the one,” Jaina said.

“But they... you were ...” She blushed pink. “I guess a death warrant wasn’t necessary.”

“Now she says it. A little late, don’t you think, Miss Gandy?” Leo smirked.



“Well, you did steal a lot of other things! It was just a matter of time before your charges increased.”

Jaina squinted at the Heights woman. “Biola, there were no cameras in that area of the museum. We should know,” Jaina said with a skeptical look. “How did you know there was a masked thief there?”

Leo looked at her, understanding. “That’s true. I hate to admit it, but that masked thief was stealthy. In fact, how did you know we were even there?”

She had the look of a trapped rabbit. “I, um...”

“You had to know some other way,” Jaina guessed, “Maybe some way that didn’t involve cameras or guards. Maybe something to do with ... a *favor*?”

Biola sighed. She tried to keep her life a secret. Only a few people at the museum knew her *favor*. Her historical findings were from what the papers called ‘extreme research’. She liked it that way. Something hidden. It let her get a heads up on artifacts and relics where other museums just had to guess.

“Fine. I do have a *favor*.”

“I knew it!” Leo clapped his hands.

“I figured it out,” Jaina reprimanded.

“That’s how you’ve been figuring us out over the years! What it is? Something like a Nose?”

She grimaced, “Nothing that boorish. I have an ability to ... see the past of a place. If I concentrate, previous events flash before my eyes.”

They gaped at her.

“That would be amazing...” Kira said.

“So it’s like your own personal security tape?” Leo shook his head. “That explains everything. That’s why she put security improvements in the very places we were. To prevent the very things we did!” Leo said to Jaina.

“How far back can you go?” Jaina asked.

She cocked her head, to hide her growing pride in mock modesty. “It takes a lot of energy and concentration but ... centuries.”

Jaina’s chameleon eyes widen. “Wow. You could see Rembrar paint one of his masterpieces.”

Biola perked up, “I have!”

“No way!”

“It was his *Blue Gording*. I sat for about an hour before I could see him work. It was magnificent!”

“Oh, that must have been magical...” Jaina dreamed.

“Here it is!” Hans exclaimed, entering the chamber again. All eyes turned to him as he held up an odd little contraption roughly the shape of a number 8. “I remembered that this guild used to delve into experimental technology. It wasn’t their forte. They were much more interested in archeology, but some of the guild members tried to build devices to aid them in finding lost treasures around the world.”

“Like the Iron Appoloosa?” Brock said.

“Exactly. The first year or so that I spent in these ruins was just searching for anything that survived. And I remembered finding this.” He put the contraption on the workbench. It was coiled with some copper wire and strewn with cables.

“And it is?” Leo asked.

“Thankfully, some notes survived with it. This was their attempt at a pulse device using electromagnets.”

They stared at him for more explanation. “And that means...” Leo said.

“Electromagnets ... creating a pulse...” Brock thought, “That would create a field that would disrupt regular electrical activity.”

“Right again!” Hans cheered, “So with this device-”

“You could knock out the electrical security systems in the warehouse,” Jaina finished. He nodded happily.

“That’s perfect! I mean, we’ll still have to deal with the guards, but when haven’t we done that? Good thinking, Coventry! Why didn’t you bring this up earlier?”

“Well, the thing is, the inventor never got it to work.”

Everyone could feel the deflation of the room.

“You mean like the Iron Appoloosa?” Jaina guessed.

“I said this wasn’t their field of study. But,” he turned to Brock, “maybe you could do something about it?” he said with a smile.

Brock took the device in his hands. A noticeable grin crept onto his lips.

“Maybe I can.”

“Great! Here, I’ll show you the notes I found. They’ll help. I have a few bonding guns that you can use.”

He led the islander out of the room, the two talking excitedly the whole way.

“I guess that takes care of the cameras,” Leo said.

“And whatever else is in there waiting for us,” Jaina said.

“And you two can easily slip past the people in there. I’ve seen you do it many times,” Biola said.

Leo waved her away, “Aw, shucks.”

“So that means,” Jaina thought, “That we’ll just have to come up with an escape plan. If we can’t get the alloy back down here, then it’s all for nothing.”

## Part 22

Leo and Jaina hung on the outside of the R&D building just outside their inconspicuous entrance.

“Why’s it always a small metal panel? I mean, maybe in the museum attic, but a super top-secret government base? It should be more locked down than this.”

“Let’s just be grateful it isn’t or we couldn’t get in,” Jaina said.

He sighed. “God bless faulty planners...”

They swung the broken door open and squeezed through the small opening. The two snuck through the cramped space to the crawlspace Hans had found. Then they found the dark room like he had described with a door leading out into the warehouse.

“You ready?” Jaina asked.

“Oh, you know I am.”

He couldn’t see her roll her eyes.

She cracked the door to let them see the chamber beyond. It was as amazing as Hans had depicted. The room was about as big as an arena, with a grid of machines taking up almost the entire space. Jaina gasped at one that was sculpting a statue with an automated drill on a solid piece of limestone, while Leo sat slack-jawed at another that was churning out gold bricks on a conveyor belt.

They could hardly hold back their glee. Jaina took a breath. “Calm down. We have a mission here.”

“How did we not know this was here? Everything I stole looks like cereal box prizes compared to this!”

She shifted her skin to a gloomy gray to match her clothes. Leo readied himself by releasing his hand blades.

“Ok. Remember what we agreed to,” Jaina said, “Once the power is down, we split up to cover more ground. If you find the alloy, press these little ... things, that Brock made and it will buzz to let the other know to get out. Do not try to pocket other things! We don’t have the time.”

He shook his head in dismay, “Think of all the treats in there. And they’ll lock it up tight when they know thieves have found it.”

He took out the 8-shaped device that Brock had guaranteed would work. Obviously, he couldn’t test it or it would blow their little generator apart. But he promised it would work.

He looked at his rival thief. “Here goes.”

He flipped on the machine. It made a growing whirring sound and the copper coils around the two rings started to get hot. Then it squealed loudly, ending in a tremendous bang. The two flinched expecting it to explode and the whole plot to unravel. But instead, the lights of the big chamber flickered. In a second, they all went off along with every machine they could see.

The silence was deafening.

They darted out into the dark space. It only took half a minute for them to cross the room and find the doors. There was a hallway beyond and they sprinted down to the end where it broke into two paths.

“Here’s where we part,” Leo said taking the right path. The chameleon darted down the left.

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Biola had stayed in the Depths to help Brock. He was too big to fit into the small panel that led into the warehouse and her life was still on the line. Although she was ‘helping’ him, the work was too complicated for any of them to understand. Mostly, she was handing him tools.

“You’re sure this is going to work?” she asked.

“Probably. This little compartment I am building to house the alloy is hooked directly to the rings. It should give the push that the engine needs to get spinning. But I do not know until I see it work.” He shrugged. “It is like the electromagnetic device I gave to Leo and Jaina.”

She furrowed her brow, “But I thought you said it would work. Didn’t you promise them it would?”

He kept working, “They needed that reassurance. So I gave it to them.”

“But you don’t know if it will work?”

“Probably.”

He asked for a screwdriver and she searched for one. “So it could be over before it even starts.”

He took the tool and began to work on the connections. “I would not say that. I am very good at machinery.”

He worked in silence for a while. When he propped himself up from the ground to ask for some other tool, he stopped. Biola’s face was concerned. Downcast. She looked far away.

“Are you using your *favor*?”

She snapped out of her reverie and looked at him, “Sorry, no. I was just...”

“Just...”

She sighed a sigh that said she didn’t really want to speak about it. But the islander’s eyes implored her.

“I guess it was made real to me. Just now. We’re leaving the City, forever. I never thought it was possible. But I didn’t think the Council would want me dead either.” She absentmindedly handed him a wrench. “I can never go back. All my things, my home, my friends. I didn’t even get to say goodbye. I have nothing with me except for the clothes I wear. I worked so hard to climb the ladder and get where I am today. Now it’s all gone.” She sniffed. “And we’re headed out into the dangerous world with no clue as to what we’re getting into.”

He found the tool he needed and leaned back down. “It is not that dangerous. No more than in here.”

She looked at him. “That’s right, you’re from the outside. An islander.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What’s it like outside? Although I’ve appreciated the comfort of the City, I daresay I’ve daydreamed of going beyond the walls. As a historian.”

“The outside is ... it is hard to describe. Nothing like the City. Nothing so advanced. Or cramped. But beautiful. Mountains, forests, villages with farms and fishing boats. And the sea...” He stopped to remember it with a smile.

“Sounds wonderful.”



He looked at her from the floor. “I understand leaving everything you know to go to a strange place. My goal is to bring the staff back to my people and my island, but I resolved when I left its shore ... that I might never go back.” She watched him with desperate eyes. “It can be a scary journey. But remember, we are together. We found some people to travel the road with. So it will be alright.”

She smiled, wiping a tear from her cheek. She found a strange sprocket and handed it to him.

“Actually, that is what I need. Thank you!” He leaned back and continued his work.

“Me too,” she said.

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Jaina raced down the hallways looking through the windows of each lab. One was full of artifacts on shelves. One had a multitude of waterfalls in it. One was packed with scientists trying to move about in the sudden dark.

She didn't know what she was looking for but she assumed it would stand out to her.

Leo sped down his halls searching for the right room. There was a place filled with what looked like a circle of old towering stones, one filled with bubbling beakers, and another with books.

A few guards were coming down the hall. He quickly jumped up the wall and used his blades to climb onto the ceiling. They passed by unaware of him. A few halls later he found a room that looked promising. He slipped in the door without a sound.

Back near Jaina, someone was yelling. She tried to blend in with the wall when they suddenly ran down the hallway towards her. She identified two guards and a scientist. She

thought they were going to continue on when one man stopped. He looked back just as she pressed against the wall again. Slowly, he walked over to the blob he had seen, peering with squinted eyes.

“What the-”

But Jaina had knocked him to the floor and out cold before he could finish.

“There’s something there! Intruder!” one man yelled.

She quickly knocked him unconscious as well with her mighty tail. The scientist was racing down the hall away from her yelling about burglars. She scuttled down as fast as she could go and gripped him around the neck as he was turning a corner. She pulled him back into the shadows and quickly shut him up. Putting his unconscious body with the other two, she found a lab close by that would be a good place to hide them.

Once inside, a voice rang out, “Who’s there?”

She climbed like a spider up the wall, leaving the bodies there. A person rummaged around searching for the sound. Jaina could just make out some scientist with his arms outstretched. She climbed down the opposite wall ready to knock him out with the others.

Then she saw what he had been working on. There was some sort of microscope and open notebooks. On the table rested a small container, almost cylinder in shape. She pried back the lid quietly and looked inside. An unremarkable blob like a dark stick of butter lay in the container; the same thing Hans had described seeing the expedition haul away in the Depths.

About a tenth of it had been cut away to be studied. She guessed that some of it lay beneath the microscope. She pocketed the container and crept closer to the scientist who had now discovered the other men in a heap on the floor.

“My word! It is a break-in!” he said.

He spun around and saw Jaina’s shape as she changed her skin to a more noticeable color. “You’re right, professor. Better lock up the valuables!”

She knocked him out with the surprise still on his face. Quickly tying up their hands and legs and gagging their mouth she placed them in a corner. Then she pressed the small device to notify Leo that she had found the alloy.

Leo was in the middle of inspecting a strange relic in the room he had entered when his device buzzed.

“Shoot. She found it first. She’ll never let me hear the end of this.”

He was about to put the relic back when he thought better of it and took it with him. The hallway was still dark when he entered it again, and only a few people milled about at one end. He slipped down towards the big chamber. They planned to go out the way they came. They could make a quick descent from the panel on the side of the building to a lower balcony. Hans was waiting for them at the bottom to lead them to a hidden tunnel that led to a forgotten ladder that led to the Depths.

He turned a corner and in the gloom could see the silhouette of Jaina standing there.

“Where have you been?” she rasped.

“Just looking around. Are you sure you got the right thing? This is our only chance.”

She produced the container, flipped it open, and peeled off a smidge of the soft metal with a finger. She threw it down on the floor and lit a match. It ignited into a big blue blaze once the flame touched it. With a stamp, she put it out with her foot.

“I would say that’s the stuff we’re looking for,” Leo stated.

“C’mon, let’s head back quickly.”

Just as she finished the sentence, the lights came back on.

“Shoot!”

“I guess the pulse doesn’t last very long!”

“Plan B!” Leo said.

They raced down the hall to the big chamber with the machines. Once they plowed through the doors, they found almost a dozen scientists and guards looking over the devices. They cried out when they saw the two thieves there. Leo and Jaina rushed out and slammed the doors tight. Jaina used her crushing hands to mangle the doorknobs. Leo went to a keypad nearby and used his shaking *favor* to overload the circuits until they sparked. There was a clunk as the locks fell into place. And none too soon. The next second, people banged on the doors trying to get them to open.

Suddenly, Jaina and Leo were upended and fell to the ceiling with a large smack. They both got to their feet facing the floor upside down.

Leo grunted. “I hate gravity *favours*.”

“You had to guess they would have impressive *favours* in a place like this,” Jaina said.

“Plan C.”

They dashed on the ceiling back down into the heart of the warehouse, trying to slink along out of view of everyone. Just as suddenly, they fell to the floor when gravity righted. Jaina landed with the precision of a lizard while Leo landed with a thud. She stifled a giggle.

An alarm started screaming then. The cameras were now very obvious in the light. Leo jumped with every one he saw and used his blades to disconnect them from the wall.

Scientists were barricading themselves in the labs as they flew past, while there were shouts down the hall from more guards. Jaina stopped at a junction with a perpendicular hallway and placed something on the wall. She unrolled a spool of wire and then hid in the other hallway around the corner. The two waited as the voices got louder. Right when the guards started to pass their hiding spot, she lifted the tripwire sending them all sprawling. Leo and Jaina jumped over the writhing bodies and sped down the hallway again. A pull of Telekinesis almost got them. They turned out of sight right when the guards were regaining their feet and starting to scream.

The two made another turn to find a dead end. There they discovered elevator doors blocking their path.

“Perfect! This will take us up,” Jaina announced.

“But the power wasn’t supposed to be on if we took this way. There’s likely to be guards at the top.”

“Plan D, then.”

She pulled out her notifying device that she had used to alert Leo when she had found the alloy. This time, she hit it two times. He was already using his blades to pry open the elevator doors through the crack. It didn’t take long until they were inside. A whip of water ricocheted off the wall. Another sent Leo to the floor holding his arm. Jaina quickly pushed the doors closed before the oncoming guards could shoot again.

It was just a room. There was a potted plant in the corner and a camera on the ceiling which Leo swiftly disconnected.

“This isn’t like any elevator I’ve been in,” Leo said.

Jaina quickly climbed to the ceiling and broke open a panel there. Leo joined her on the roof revealing the dark elevator shaft.

“I guess it is an elevator,” he mused.

“So secret,” she said with a smile.

“Nothing personal,” he said, pulling her to him.

“Trust me, it never will be,” she said back, wrapping her tail around him.

He looked at the wires connecting the elevator. When he found the right one, he hung on and cut it apart. The sudden lurch as the counterweight fell to the ground rocketed them up into the dark and towards the exit.

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Kira waited on a bench. She eyed the desk at the end of the hall again. She endeavored not to be suspicious but it took all that she had in her to not glance incessantly at the door or bounce her knee like a madwoman.

The device Brock had given her had buzzed twice. That was her signal. This was her moment. She fingered the canister in her pocket, getting ready. She eyed the door again. The man at the desk in front of it was glaring at her.

Then there was a thud behind him. He turned around in alarm and Kira took it as her chance. She withdrew the canister, pulled a pin, and rolled it down the hallway. It skidded for a few seconds and then exploded in a massive array of smoke. Kira could just barely see the man

at the desk through the smoke, whirling around at the new noise. The door behind him opened and two people exited.

Kira ran across to the opposite wall and used the tiny mallet to break the emergency glass. Behind was a lever for the fire alarm which she pulled down in haste. A droning siren started to wail through the floor causing all the citizens to exit the nearby offices. Through the flood of people, two quickly grabbed Kira and hurried toward the elevator.

“Did you get it?” she asked. Leo winked at her. She laughed, “Incredible!”

“The fire alarm won’t allow them to lock the elevators down. We can get to the next floor without a problem,” Jaina said. She changed her skin color to something closer to a tannish brown to blend in while Leo took the coat that Kira offered him. They were in disguise and in the elevator with a crowd of people within a few seconds.

The elevator automatically went up in the emergency to deposit everyone on an open floor that led to balconies.

“It was supposed to go down,” Kira said.

The two looked at each other. “I guess we’re taking the laundry chutes to the abandoned dye factory.”

Leo nodded. “Plan E.”

## Part 23

“And when did this happen?”

“Just about a half an hour ago, Mr. Burbank,” an assistant answered. They walked at a brisk pace as she debriefed him on the go.

“And you’re sure they got away with the Arianum?”

“Very sure, sir. The scientist working on it heard the thief say, ‘lock up the valuables’ before he was knocked out. The alloy in his possession was missing. Only nine containers are accounted for.”

He harrumphed. “Can you imagine what someone will do with that alloy? And they broke into the warehouse! I thought that was impenetrable.”

“It was, sir, until it wasn’t.”

“What about the security systems? I was told they were state-of-the-art!”

“The thieves used some sort of device that knocked all the electrical devices out. We don’t know what it was.”

“But the power came back on before they left!” another assistant piped in.

“Then why didn’t the security systems go into effect then?” he asked, a little strained.

“Um, well. They couldn’t boot up that fast. It took a few minutes before they were ready and the, um, thieves were gone by then.”

He stopped. The small group hovering around him halted too. He stood thinking in the elaborate halls of the Council chambers. It would seem his timetable had to move up.

“Are we going after the thieves? Any idea where they went?”



“Actually, yes. Two Noses were dispatched to the upstairs entrance to Warehouse 107, that’s where the thieves made their escape amid a smoke bomb and the fire alarm. They’re on the trail now. It led them to an old chute in an abandoned factory. The police think it leads straight to the Depths.”

“The Depths?” He thought. “That would make sense. The police don’t go that far, and the stench would throw off the Noses. It’s a little brilliant.” He looked at the police liaison. “You’re pursuing, I assume?”

“I mean, it’s the Depths. That’s a dangerous area.”

“And this is a dangerous alloy in the hands of terrorists. Get down there and bring it back, do I make myself clear?”

He stuttered, “Yes, sir. Right away.” He scampered off as Burbank pointed to another assistant.

“I want to talk to Mr. Creedy this very minute. Get him to me now.”

“Yes, sir.” They raced off. He pointed to another.

“And I would like an audience with the Lord Prime. Make sure he is in his chambers.”

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They were waiting in a ruined room between the Kensington Layer and the Enlightened.

“Where is he?” Leo muttered.

“He’ll be here. He picked this rendezvous spot himself,” Jaina said.

Kira was looking at the metal alloy inside its little, ancient container. “Doesn’t look like much.”

“That’s what they said about gunpowder,” Leo said.

“And this little putty is supposed to get that big engine running?” she asked.

“That’s what Brock and Hans believe,” Jaina answered, looking up the old laundry chute they had used to get there.

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Leo said. He was rummaging in his jacket. Jaina spied him messing with something that gave off a shine.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“What’s what?”

“That thing in your pocket. What could possibly be important in your coat right now? Did you get injured from that *water-favored* attack?” she asked, mockingly.

“Uh, yeah! Ohh, that’s it. Very painful. Trying to be brave about it.”

She squinted at him, suspicion growing. She spun around and swung her tail in front of his face. It was just enough of a distraction that allowed her to pilfer whatever was in his jacket pocket.

“Hey!”

“What’s this?” she asked, cradling the relic, “What did you take?”

He sighed in defeat. “It’s just a little something-”

“-that you took from the warehouse!?” she yelled, a little hurt. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“Well, we are rivals and I was going to keep it for myself, so…”

“What does it do?” Kira asked, looking at the strange piece.

The three studied the small gold contraption. It was made up of a circular guide of some sort with a needle that pointed toward the cardinal directions. It also had an outer ring with small engravings on it, a brick, a river, a deer.

“It looks like a fancy compass. But it doesn’t point north,” Leo explained.

“Mhm. No wonder you took it. It’s beautiful, a mystery, and probably extremely valuable,” Jaina surmised.

“See? You get it.”

A noise rattled down the chute behind them. Out popped a disheveled Hans looking about in fright.

“There you are. We thought you got lost,” Leo said.

“No time! They’re on our trail.”

“The police?” Jaina asked.

He nodded heading toward the ladder down to the Enlighted Layer. “They have two Noses now who are bound to follow no matter what. And they have Sleeper!”

The thieves paled at the name, while Kira looked confused. “What’s a Sleeper?”

“Someone who has a *favor* that can make people unconscious. Immediately,” Jaina explained.

“They’ll stop us in our tracks if they get eye contact,” Leo said.

“C’mon!” Hans yelled, “What are you waiting for?”

~\*~\*~\*~

There was a knock on the door. “Come in.”

Alfred Burbank entered the Lord Prime’s private chamber. “Ah, Alfred. I heard you wanted to see me. What’s this all about?”

“M’lord, I’m afraid there’s been a break-in.”

“What now? Another museum heist?”

“It’s bigger than that, m’lord. I’m afraid this heist was focused on ... Warehouse 107.”

The lion Anthro shot his head up so quickly his mane swished in delay. “What!?”

“It’s true. I’ve heard the reports. They broke in through a little known access panel.”

He stared at the councilman in disbelief. “Surely they were stopped by security? I was told nothing could get past it.”

He cleared his throat, “That’s just it. We couldn’t foresee them using some technology that rendered the whole warehouse inert. It knocked all the security systems out in one blow.”

The Lord Prime sat in his chair in a heap. “Everything in that warehouse is powerful, dangerous, or valuable. What went missing? Did they get away?”

“They did, unfortunately, but so far as we can tell they only took one thing. It looks it was their main goal.”

Foxboro stared at him in horror. “Not the alloy,” he whispered.

Burbank dipped his head in mock sadness. “I’m afraid so.”

“The Arianum, it’s ... unsafe. We have to get it back before they do something terrible with it!”

“We are, m’lord. The finest in the police guild with the most powerful *favours* are on their trail. It looks like they’re heading for the Depths.”

“The Depths! A hazardous place to go. I never would have thought of it. If they’re that crazy to go there then they’re crazy enough to use the alloy. Let me know the second you catch them, won’t you Alfred?”

“Of course, m’lord.” He stood waiting.

Foxboro cocked his head. “There’s something else, Alfred?”

He cleared his throat again. “You see, m’lord, no one could have known where Warehouse 107 was. Much less how to get in it through an access panel that no one knew about hanging 200 floors up on the side of the building. Furthermore, there’s absolutely no way that thieves, of all people, could have learned about the Arianum and where it was located. This whole affair is suspicious.”

“You think it leaked? Or there’s a mole in the Council?” he asked seriously.

“I’m reluctant to say so, but it seems that way.”

Foxboro stood, agitated. “But that can’t be! Everyone knows the stakes! This is too dangerous. Who would put the City in jeopardy?”

“Actually, m’lord, I have an idea.”

The doors burst open and white-coated policemen entered the office.

“What is this? You don’t have the authority to enter here!” Foxboro yelled.

“And you don’t have authority to go against the Council’s vote,” Burbank said.

“What do you mean?”

“Secretly hiring thieves? Stealing the alloy away so we won’t use it? It has all the subterfuge of a politician.”

The Lord Prime growled. His yellow eyes narrowed. “Are you accusing me of theft? Of tyranny? Of treason?”

“If the accusations are true,” the councilman said calmly.

The lion Anthro leaped from behind his desk with amazing reflexes. He was mid-jump to lunge onto Burbank when he stopped like a frozen leaf on the wind. The two Telekinetics had their hands raised, holding the Lord Prime in an invisible bonds. They pinned him to the ground. He growled up at the councilman.

“Traitor!”

“I think everyone will believe me when I say you are the traitor. It was obvious you didn’t want the Arianum in use; the Council’s vote that you disagreed with swayed you to action. So you put together this scheme to prevent its implementation.”

“That’s a lie and you know it! There are those in the police guild whose *favor* can detect lies! You’ll be found out!”

Burbank leaned down to him so only the Lord Prime could hear. “Maybe. But they can’t detect anything if they don’t have their *favor*.”

He stood up straight again. “I have ordered Mr. Creedy to integrate the alloy into the dome shield at once.”

Foxboro glared at him wide-eyed, “You can’t! It’s not legal! It’ll ruin the City!”

“I think the Council will find your actions more illegal. You’re under house arrest, Lord Prime. These policemen will be with you at every moment.”

“Liar! You can’t do this! What about your own *favor*? You lose it forever!”

Burbank scowled down at him. “You think I like being bombarded by all these voices in my head? You think I enjoy hearing people’s nasty inner thoughts every second of the day?” He sneered, “I’ll be glad when it’s gone.”

Foxboro stared at the man he thought he had known.

“Your duties will fall to the next in line, the Lord Governor Ridge.”

“Burbank! BURBANK!”

“You are hereby stripped of your title.”

## Part 24

They could hear shouts from up above. The group was scrambling down a long-abandoned air vent with the voices getting louder behind. It sounded like the Council had sent the whole City police guild after them.

“There it is!” Hans called. He led them to a hidden tunnel that would end up at the ruined guild hall.

“What are the chances that big centipede monster will find them before they find us?” Leo asked.

“It would take a miracle,” he said ducking down the dark path.

The four of them moved as quickly as they could. Leo and Jaina wracked their brains as to what they could use nearby that would disrupt the Noses’ trail. Hans searched for anything they could use to destabilize the tunnel and bar the way. But nothing presented itself.

“There!” a voice rang out. The group twirled around at the sound. They could just make out a white coat in the gloom.

“Don’t look at them directly!” Jaina yelled, “That’s how the Sleeper will get you!”

The tunnel ended and the dismal guild hall finally came into view.

“I never thought I’d be so excited to see that pile of stones,” Hans said.

They rushed through the makeshift defenses for the big door. Kira yelled, “Oh! Help!” They turned and saw her fighting against an invisible force. Jaina and Hans ran back and pushed her onwards like she weighed as much as a boulder.



Leo ran ahead and reached the hall entrance first. Immediately, he grasped the pillar that made up the right side of the door and began shaking it with his *favor*. The adrenaline in his veins pumped rapidly, increasing the stress on the pillar. Soon, his hands were just a blur, the solid stone beginning to shake like it was a flimsy sapling.

The other three made their way under the doorframe right when it had breathed its last. The entrance was collapsing. Leo was about to dash out of the way but a pull of Telekinesis froze him in his tracks.

“No...” he muttered as the first stones dislodged around him. He fought with everything in him but he didn’t even gain a length.

“Leo!” Kira called.

The doorway gave way in a deluge of debris. As he was about to be buried, the hold on him lifted. He lunged out of the way of the heavy keystone as it thudded on the ground right where he had been standing. Kira ran to him. Her invisible bonds had also lifted.

“Seems they have to keep sight of us,” Leo said, “I thought it was just a distance thing.”

Hans was over unlocking the big door to their dwelling. The other three joined him, wiping the settling dust off themselves. Kira looked back at the rubble heap.

“That was a close one, you know. You could have been-” She suddenly fell to the floor like a cloth.

“Kira!” Jaina yelled. She checked the girl for any injuries. Instantly, she shot an arm out. “Don’t look at the entrance!” Leo swung his face back from doing that very thing. “She’s unconscious. The Sleeper must see through a gap.”

Hans opened the door and ushered them in, Jaina carrying Kira's sleeping body. He closed it again with a resounding thump. Going to the wall and opening a small cubbyhole there, he reached in and pulled a lever. The door made a cracking sound like something breaking.

"That's a failsafe I found. It disengages the door lock and hinges in case of an emergency. That door will never open again."

"Good thing we're never going back," Leo said.

\*~\*~\*~\*

"Did you hear something?" Biola asked.

"Not really," Brock answered from the floor where he was still messing with the canister contraption.

Biola waited a minute, listening. She got up and crept slowly to the doorway of the engine. Right when she was going to stick her head out, someone appeared.

"Hurry!"

She screamed and fell back on her bottom. Hans was making his way into the compartment. "We got the alloy. Did you finish making an adaptor?"

"Almost ... there..." he muttered.

He helped the Heights woman up. "The others are putting supplies in the back cars. Can you help them? We don't know how much time we have. There's police at the door."

"Police!? Here?" she asked.

"Yes, just help the others."

He moved toward Brock as Biola made her way out. "Talk to me."

“This canister is hooked directly into the Perpetual Motion engine. I have lined the inside of this canister with receivers that will retrieve any energy given off and send it to the rings. The power will then move them. If we put enough alloy in this canister, it should relay enough power to get the engine moving indefinitely.”

“That sounds like it will work,” Hans said.

“In principle.” He got up and wiped his hands. “We will know if it does when it does.”

“That’s cheerful. Here’s the alloy. Let’s get started.”

\*~\*~\*~\*

Biola entered the silver car that acted as a living area just as Jaina was laying Kira down on a couch. “What happened to her?”

“There’s police right behind us. We slowed them down, but if they have a Sleeper than they probably have someone who can cut through a door,” she said.

“A Sleeper! That’s a rare *favor*.”

Leo pulled out the strange compass and threw it onto a chair. “Ooh, what’s that?” Biola asked.

“Don’t know. Will care when this is over. Don’t touch. C’mon. Help us grab some supplies from the main room. We don’t know how long we’ll be away from a store.”

The three left Kira napping and rushed back to the room Hans had called home for so many years. Biola set to work on the canned foods, popping them into a crate. Leo was gathering up some tools on the workbench. Jaina was just about to grab her affects that she had retrieved from her hideout when there was a noise. They all stopped and looked at the broken door.

Something smacked against it. Silence. Then another scrape. They all flinched when a spark flew out of the stone. It slowly rose up, leaving a trail of burnt stone behind.

“They have a *fire-favored!* We have to hurry!”

Leo grabbed his bag along with the tools and a box of spare parts. They ran with their burdens back to the Iron Appaloosa and deposited the goods into one of the cars.

When they joined Hans and Brock in the engine, they found the two knelt over Brock’s newest addition. They could see that he had dropped a lump of alloy into the canister about the size of a watch.

“You sure that’s enough?” Leo asked.

“I am not sure of anything. This is an experimental train and a recently discovered element.”

“Cheery,” Leo said.

“That’s what I said!” Hans agreed.

“So now what do we do?” Biola asked.

“I guess we ... activate it,” Hans said.

Brock nodded and flipped out his firestarter. The others instinctively moved back. He warily leaned down, covering his face. They all held their breath. Then he flicked a spark.

The car erupted in blue light. They all screamed and fell back. The canister poured out cobalt flames reaching to the ceiling. Brock gingerly got up, shielding his eyes, reaching out with his metal arm. He closed the door to the canister suddenly bringing back the gloom of the cave.

He turned to face the others, breathing hard. “Apparently that was too much.”

The rings on the engine began to stir. They slowly swung around, the smaller central ones quicker than the lazy outer ones. As they started to pick up speed, a roar began to emanate from the machine. The consoles began to flicker with light, the buttons and levers coming to life.

Brock rushed over to the door and looked down at the ground. The panels where wheels would go were glowing with a white light. As the sound grew, the whole train began to rock. Slowly, like a great dragon awakening, the Iron Appaloosa lifted off the ground.

“It works!”

“It works...” Hans whispered in awe.

“Well, I’ll be darned,” Leo said.

“How long until we can go?” Jaina asked. “They’re cutting down the door. We don’t have much time.”

“Cutting down the door?” Hans cried.

“Hey, look,” Leo said. He stuck out his hands, quite unremarkable and ordinary. They all stared at them as they did nothing. “My *favor* isn’t working.”

Jaina quickly squeezed her arm with one hand. “Me neither.”

“Or me,” Biola said with a glazed look on her eyes. “They were right.”

“And they’re gonna use this on the whole City?” Leo cried. “It’s madness!”

“Wait a second...” Jaina muttered. She thought for a moment. Stomping her foot she said, “I know how we can stall the police!”

She ran over and deftly scraped out some alloy from its container, a lot less than what was in the engine canister. She rushed out into the cave and back into the guild hall. The pursuers

were close to finishing off the door. Maybe a length or two remained of the semicircle they were cutting out. She ran over to the sparks and in one motion threw the alloy down into the fire.

All of a sudden, the chamber illuminated with a blue light as the alloy ignited. Its blue flame immediately doused the red flames cutting through the door.

“Ah-ha!” she cried. “That’s exactly what you’ll get!”

She made to run back to the train but stopped. The bright light had shone on a piece hanging on the wall. She smiled as she ran over to the painting of the river that she had found.

“You’re coming with us.”

It wasn’t long before she was back at the Iron Appaloosa putting the painting in its new home aboard the lounge car. Kira drowsily rose from the couch, rubbing her eyes.

“What happened?”

“Good! You’re awake! That must be because I used the alloy to nullify the police’s *favor.*”

“What?” she asked, not understanding.

“Quick! We’re about to leave the cave. Brock got it working!”

She took her hand as the Grey girl muttered, “Got what working?”

Brock and Hans were at the controls. “I’ve been studying these for a while. I’m pretty sure this engages the forward movement. And these are the brakes.”

“That makes sense,” Brock said.

“But how are we going to cross that canyon?” Biola asked.

“We will have to build up enough thrust to push us over. And speed,” he said.

Brock pushed a lever and the train rocked. It slowly moved backwards giving them more space to charge the drop at the cliff.

“We can’t leave yet until the Perpetual Motion engine reaches an interminable state. Then it will have enough power to make the jump. I think...” Hans said.

The rings were spinning fast now, fast enough to be dangerous. But still the train whined.

“How will we know when it’s ready?” Leo asked.

To answer his question, there was a bass thrum and the rings flashed. Everyone stopped as the machine changed appearance. Instead of spinning rings, it looked more like a shining globe now. Gone were the distinct rings in motion and what remained was a solid, yet transparent, sphere of churning light.

“I guess it’s ready now,” Kira said.

“I guess so. Brock, I’m turning up the output on the flight panels to max.”

“And I am setting the engine to its highest speed,” he replied.

The train hummed even louder, making it difficult to hear. The Iron Appaloosa rose higher as the panels below the train began to glow even brighter. The needles on the gauges swung to their peak setting, rattling the whole compartment.

“I hope this works...” Jaina said.

“NOW!” Hans yelled.

Brock released the brakes and the train sped forward. It was like riding a bolt of lightning and pushed them back against the wall. Hans hung onto the control console with just his fingers

as they neared the cliff at full speed. As they were just about to cross and plummet to their doom, he hit a button. Everyone was pinned to the floor as the train made a sudden lurch upwards, sending the whole machine flying.

It felt like they were moving in slow motion. Nothing could be farther from the truth. They bulleted across the gorge to the waterfall on the other side. As they started to make their downward approach, the group started to lift into the air.

“Here we go!” Leo yelled. They were about to discover if there really was an opening on the other side of the waterfall. The engine blew through the wall of water with a resounding splash and exited onto dry ground.

The Iron Appaloosa reeled back and forth as they regained footing in a hidden tunnel. Brock did his best to keep to his feet. He tried desperately to straighten their path as they weaved from the landing. Leo and Biola tipped over backwards as the tunnel rose sharply, tilting severely.

“Less speed! Less speed!” He yelled at Hans as the tunnel curved left and the right, him steering wildly so they wouldn’t crash.

There was a weird light at the end of a bend coming upon them quickly. “Look out!” Jaina screamed.

But it was too late. They crashed into its surface with a decisive slam. Dirt and wood went everywhere, exploding in front of them like a log in water. The sudden light blinded them, causing Brock and Hans to steer without knowing where they were going. Hans did his best to slow the beast down while Brock squinted behind the controls.



As their eyes adjusted to the light, they could see they were in no danger. The land they traveled was plains as far as they could see, hardly a tree in sight. Everyone except Brock stared at the scenery in dumbstruck awe. The sky was so big without the frame of the City walls around them. It shone a different color too than they were used to, usually diffused behind the energy shield. There was so much grass everywhere, leagues and leagues of it. But the horizon was what made them catch their breath. It seemed to stretch on forever, a glimpse into infinity. The sun was just rising on its borders, sending pink rays up between purple clouds.

“I never thought...” Biola whispered.

“It’s beautiful,” Kira said in awe.

“Less speed, Hans,” Brock said, breaking them from the world’s spell. The archeologist quickly set upon the controls and the train began to slow down. In a few minutes, they were stopped, free of the City.

They descended the steps and set foot onto the bare ground for the very first time. Jaina touched the earth reverently, almost caressing it. She smiled at the silky feeling of a blade of grass. Leo looked to the south where silhouettes of mountains rested.

“It’s bigger than I thought,” he said.

A small explosion came from the engine, smoke pouring out.

“The engine!” Hans cried.

“It is alright!” Brock yelled from inside. He coughed, waving away the growing smoke cloud. “No need to worry.” He brought out a lump of gray alloy, cool in his hand. “I was just extinguishing the flames.”

“And the Perpetual Motion engine?” Hans asked.

The islander looked back at the floating orb. “Working perfectly.”

“Amazing,” Hans said.

“I honestly thought it wasn’t possible,” Leo said.

“I think you’ll find,” Jaina said, looking at the hulk of the City, “that a lot of things are possible.”

The towers rose like knives against the sky. They blinked with the movement of trams around them. Lights twinkled on their grand surfaces. And the great bulwarks that ringed the whole space loomed up as a dark barrier to the outside. They were all watching it when the top flashed.

The shield grew more distinct and less hazy. The dome of the City solidified into a protective barricade, obstructing the inside like the glass of a fishbowl.

The group stood in stunned wonder. “They actually did it,” Biola gasped.

The City was locked down. Safe from the perils of the outside, but stripped of its greatness inside.

\*~\*~\*~\*

The small group of mismatched refugees spent a little time getting acquainted with their new home. Bedrooms were picked in the gold and bronze cars. Tools and supplies were stored in the Tungsten dining car. But they were all drawn back to the silver lounge car. In the light of the sun and the newly powered compartment lights, they could admire the superior craftsmanship that the old guild members had put into it. The ceiling was a beautiful mural of clouds and stars. The couches and chairs were a royal green with overstuffed cushions. There was even a bookcase that stored a few ancient tomes.

“So...” Biola broke the silence, “What now?”

They looked at each other. Brock spoke up, “I am going after the thief to return my island’s staff. I would very much like to take the train to find them. They have a lead of several days on me.”

“I’ll go with you,” Hans said, slapping the giant islander on his tattooed shoulder. “I’ve wanted to get out for years. I’ll go wherever the wind takes us!”

“You can count me in!” Kira announced with glee.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go, it would seem,” Biola said. She shrugged with a smile, “Plus, there has to be a myriad of relics and histories out there. All I’ve ever seen is what past Cities could produce. Seeing what the rest of the world offers...” she sighed, “That will be a real wonder.”

Hans looked at the two thieves. They were eyeing each other. “Leo? Jaina? Are you coming along too? I mean, you can go your separate ways. No one is stopping you.”

The man with the blades and the chameleon stared at each other in silence. The others waited tentatively.

Jaina was the first to speak. “What do you say, Leo? Want to see what the rest of the world has to offer?”

He bit his lip. “I’m just deciding...” They waited. “if I want to keep hanging around you or not.”

She rolled her eyes and smacked him with her tail. To everyone else she said, “That means ‘yes’.”

“Wonderful!” Hans cheered.

“This is going to be amazing!” Kira said.

“But before we go,” Jaina stopped them, “one thing.” She reached down between the chairs and produced the painting with the river scene. The others smiled and nodded.

“Something to remember where we’ve been, yes?” she said. It was hung in a place of honor at the end of the car. They admired it for a minute, a picture of the outside from the past of the City. And now they could see it in real life, through fresh eyes and eager hearts.

“Alright!” Leo smacked his hands together. “Where to?”