**title**

Cold spring air fills the capitol of Nithran in the morning. Steam and smoke from industry quickly crowds it out the moment the sun begins to shine. But in the deepest part of the smog lies the center. A tall citadel under construction. Buildings of steel and concrete rise around it, markedly different from the brick and wood apartments further out, and unrecognizable to the ramshackle huts in the slums beyond. The smog is absent here in the center, the eye of the storm. In one of these pristine buildings, a man looks out the window in dismay.

The sun has risen, and he’s just now getting to the good part of his work. He sighs in frustration, finishing up the sheaf of papers he’s currently on and stuffing the rest into his briefcase. Heading out of the empty office, he grabs a coffee to sip on. It’s far too hot, but it will at least warm his hands. Out into the morning, he turns and heads away from the citadel. He doesn’t get to see much of the blue sky before the air is filled with soot.

Tevik tries to count his blessings, being assigned housing so close to a factory. He’s one of the few living in this ring that have reliable electricity. If it just weren’t for the smoke. The man braces himself as he walks into the dark clouds. His shoulders stiffen as he forces himself to breathe. Every time he goes through this, it hardens his resolve. It won’t be long until these damned factories are obsolete. At certain times he needs to pull his shirt over his face to get a few breaths. He glances quickly away from the few people he passes on the street. They don’t seem nearly as bothered. Don’t they know this can’t be good for them to breathe all the time? Perhaps it’s why his hair turned gray, even though he’s not even thirty.

The apartment block comes into view. Dozens of people live here, all in nearly identical rooms. It’s really the only way to house as many people as Nithran has, Tevik reasons. Expansion outward isn’t really an option. The building’s outside walls were once a pleasant tan, but are now stained near-black. Thankfully air filtration was installed a few years ago. The interior is cramped, low ceilings and narrow hallways. At least there’s no smoke.

Tevik sighs as he enters his room. Shelves of books line the walls, interrupted here and there with file cabinets full of more condensed data. Tevik quickly sorts through the mail. There’s his pay. But that’s not what interests him. The report he left off catches the light where it lies on the desk. The researcher sits down and resumes his work. The coffee has finally cooled enough to fuel him.

The report goes over the weekly findings from an excavation of the ruins of Mistran. The old kingdom fell more than a century ago. Scraps of metal were found in old parts of Nithran, growing larger the further one dug down. Eventually basic electronics were found. From there, the operation became large-scale. The report is mostly more of the same. Valuable but inert metals. Some noteworthy markings and writings. Crushed remains of a bulb. Tevik slides his eyes down the page, narrowing them as he searches. He flips page after page.

There it is. A small capsule. Metal capped on both ends, glass surrounding a miniscule line of an unknown material within. Unknown purpose. Awaiting review. Tevik marks down the artifact’s number and gets to work on writing his request for review.

Tevik folds up the letter and places it in a scavenged envelope. With that done, the rest of the morning flies by with continued note-taking interrupted by bouts of cleaning. Still, before noon, Tevik retires to his bed. Sleep takes him quickly, and his alarm rings before he knows it. Dreamless once again. The white morning light has turned a burnished orange in the afternoon.

With breakfast in his stomach, Tevik heads back out. He curses the smog, the daily ritual. He breathes easier once he gets into the inner ring. The pleasant breeze from the citadel keeps the smog away here. The polished white exterior of his building shines brightly, and Tevik remembers that he may get his hands on that artifact today. With a pop in his step, he walks up to his office. His chipper mood and general rush draws the attention of a colleague, and he is quickly drawn to a stop.

“Hey there Tevik! Got a second?”

“Ah, Gef, good mor--Afternoon.” Tevik answers.

“Alright if I walk with ya?” Gef hops around his cubicle to join up.

“Fine with me, but I need to drop off a request for review, so it may be a ways before I get back to this area.”

The two set off to the east wing of the building. The friends chat idly about the weather and smog for a while, before getting into work discussions.

“I saw the news that we’re getting a load of excavation stuff! Anything catch your eye?” Gef asks.

“Yes actually, that capsule. Uhh, P-one-seven, something.”

“Ohh yeah! Really complete piece it seems. You expecting it to store Aura?”

"That's the hope." Tevik says.

The two round a corner, entering a large, open room. The floor here is wood instead of carpet, and white stone pillars rising to the ceiling reveal its age. Desks are arranged in a grid, with workers scribbling to process requests. At the heart lies a raised circle of stone with a handful of workers sitting within. Tevik takes a moment to survey the swathe of people. It’s always nerve-wracking, coming in here. But that artifact propels him. He approaches the central desk and submits his request. The clerk looks it over and shuffles through some papers.

“You’re quick. Uhh let’s see…It will be on floor 1. Here’s the key.” The clerk hands Tevik a key with a tag hanging from it.

Tevik and Gef walk to the other side of the massive room, entering an equally large room filled with shelves. They soar up dozens of feet, rolling ladders being the only way to access most of the boxes. Tevik reads the number engraved on the key and makes his way to that section.

“So what about you?” Tevik asks Gef. “Does anything from the report interest you?”

“Not much in this one. Last week though, they had some of the best preserved electronics! I haven’t been able to get my hands on it yet, but there’s one--You know how the computers work right?” Gef is clearly excited.

Tevik thinks. He’s only seen people in the office work on computers. Weirdly shaped things, he isn’t too familiar with them. He knows they make mathematical operations simple.

“Not the specifics, just the general.” He explains.

Gef begins to rattle off computational theory and the science behind the hardware. It interests Tevik, but he’s too distracted to listen too closely. It’s beyond him, anyway. He begins to climb a ladder in section 541, referring to the key for more numbers. He taps along the boxes until he finds the right one. Opening it, he sees the capsule. It’s smaller than he expected. He carefully takes it out and puts it in a basket hanging from a pulley on the ceiling. After climbing back down, he pulls a rope to make the basket descend.

“So, that’s the basics of a program.” Gef takes a breather. “But this thing wasn’t used like that.”

“Look at this, it’s tiny!” Tevik takes the artifact, wrapped in cloth, from the basket. He unwraps it and begins to examine it. Not regulation, but his excitement can’t be contained.

“This one, this bit of circuit board, was made to model a brain. I know it, Tevik. It was some sort of intelligence, built from a computer!” Gef nearly hops. This finally catches Tevik’s attention.

“Wait--What? How can you be sure?” He asks.

“It’s self-referential, it can change its own hardware! You wouldn’t need anything that could change on the fly like that unless you needed it to *learn*.”

Tevik furrows his brow. The ancients had advanced technology, but the thought that they built mechanical intelligences seems far-fetched.

“What would such a machine even be used for?” Tevik inquires.

“Have you heard of Mothership Theory? Desen was talking about it yesterday.”

“Oh, yeah I have. It’s bunk though, isn’t it? The ship would have to be so massive.” Tevik wraps his artifact back up, sure that he won’t have to examine it further now. Gef seems offended.

“What? No, it makes sense. Desen said it may have broken apart in orbit and landed in the ocean.” Gef explains. “He did some calculations, they could have used this material stronger than steel.”

“Let me know when there’s proof. It’s just a fantasy until we find a crater, or a record of, like, a massive flood.” Tevik waves Gef off.

“Ugh, whatever. My theory links up with that--Learning machines could have been used to manage the ship. You’d need far too many humans than a ship that size could support.”

The duo begin walking to the lab, through a door at the other end. Tevik looks at the time and frowns. He should get back to his office and do paperwork. But he *just* got his hands on the piece! The paperwork can wait, he decides.

“I think I’m gonna go ahead and do some tests on this.” Tevik says. “If you need to get back, don’t let me keep you.”

Gef also looks at the time, and raises his brows. “Ah, yep, I do need to get back.” He turns and starts walking back towards the large room. “Lemme know what you find! Good luck to ya.”

“Appreciated.” Tevik waves.

Testing begins immediately. Tevik unwraps the artifact and places it in a holder. He retrieves some crystals filled with Aura from a shelf and sets them to the side. Picking up a dark purple one, he records the Aura density within. Then, he places it against one side of the artifact. The crystal’s Aura density doesn’t seem to change. Tevik moves the purple crystal away and tries to read the Aura density of the capsule itself. He feels nothing. He places two fingers on the glass body and focuses. Nothing.

Bizarre. Even the table the capsule sits on has a latent Aura density. It’s low, but not zero. Tevik checks his ability by reading the crystal again. Two fingers on the object, slightly separated. Flow Aura into it with one finger, pull Aura out with the other. Feel the vibration, count the frequency, calculate, and figure the density. Tevik places one finger from each hand on the metal caps of the capsule, and tries to read it. There’s something.

It’s odd, but it’s something. The capsule is a perfect flow for Aura, quite like a crystal. It doesn’t seem to store any, though. Or, does it? Tevik furrows his brow, focusing. In the silence, he can feel the slightest pulse in energy. It must store a miniscule amount, smaller than Tevik has ever felt before. A thought occurs to him: Could this store a base unit of Aura? One particle, or whatever it may be?

When he opens his eyes, a headache slashes across his forehead. Tevik curses and gets to writing. He takes down numerous notes, filling multiple pages, before leaning back and stretching. His eyes drift to the clock. A quarter of his shift is gone. Damn. In a hurry, he stores the artifact in his lab locker and gathers his things. Speedily, he rushes back to his cubicle. A tall stack of paper denotes his delay. With a sigh he sits down and gets to his main work.

Verifying dates, amounts, keywords, identification numbers. As his eyes scroll through pages of text and data, his mind wanders to an old conversation with Gef. His friend told him that the Queen and her research team have this task automated with computers. Some sort of visual process and text identification, a standardized writing style, Tevik forgets the details. It was just a few years ago that Tevik greatly enjoyed this part of his job. But then, he had no access to the artifact storage facility. His research wouldn’t have been taken seriously if he had, anyway. Even now, he has yet to receive a compensation boost for findings. Aura storage may be a dead end.

Before Tevik’s wallowing grows too great, he catches himself and looks at the clock. Nearly time to go. He grabs one more sheaf of reports and quickly goes through them. Halfway through, an identification number catches his eye. A scrap of text on a wire--Still covered with rubber. The first part matches a different wire. He flips back through to make a note of it, finding the other artifact. This wire has a metal cap on one end. Tevik pauses mid-note. He peers closer at the sketch of the artifact. The cap is astonishingly similar to the one on the capsule.

Damn! These artifacts are all sequestered at the citadel, under review by Queen’s researchers. There’s no way he’ll be able to get his hands on them. He has no chance of writing a paper that will get reviewed by the big wigs either. Tevik packs his things up and heads out of the office, mind still spinning. Two or three artifacts that match his, in one haul. He wonders if there are more at the excavation site. Maybe he could request a change in shift to the excavation site itself. Last time, he was denied outright at the desk. A familiar frown crosses his face as the sky darkens with soot.

As he checks into his apartment, Tevik’s eye catches the calendar. He forgot--It’s his day off tomorrow. He gets to his room and checks the mail. More notices of infrastructure work going on. Electricity might go out tonight. Elemental attacks in the east are growing stronger, guards are moving that way. A letter? From Gef, apparently. Tevik sits at his desk and opens the envelope.

*Tevik,*

*I talked to a colleague, Piva, I think you know her from school. She works in the Elemental Aura division, in the western sector. She came by to look at some artifacts we had, and mentioned that she was looking at how Elemental Aura coalesces from latent to concentrated, and vice versa. Thought you might want to talk to her about that--Could help you figure out more about Aura transport. Told her you may swing by. She said come over on the weekend if you’re free.*

*Gef*

Intriguing. Worth a shot, Tevik thinks. Piva’s contact details are on the back of the letter. The researcher is about to retire for the day, but realizes it’s still early morning. His sense of time is often warped like this from his late shift. He chose it specifically because the early mornings made him so tired though. And--As bad as the smog around his apartment is--the factories were worse in the mornings. As they started up after a night of sitting, the air would be soaked with char.

He consults his calendar to cure his confusion, finding that the weekend has technically started. After some internal debate, Tevik decides to head over to Piva in the afternoon, after some rest. After a quick bit of cleaning, he flops onto his bed and passes out for a few hours. He awakens and gathers his things. No time for dreams. Some of his notes, a few writing utensils, a handful of tiny candies to sweeten the barrage of questions he’s planning to ask Piva. All set, he heads out.

Unfortunately, Tevik needs to head outward to get to the round-trip rail. More of his walk is inundated with smog. The buildings become noticeably more rundown out here. All color is shaded black by the smog, and trash fills the alleys. Some houses have brick second floors built on top of wooden first floors, and are starting to bend inwards. It was probably before the Queen had direct oversight, Tevik guesses. It was only a few years ago she returned.

The rail is relatively empty at this time of day, early afternoon. Tevik is surprised to see a new train running. It slides to a stop quietly, and doesn’t intensify the smog around the station. Maybe the Queen finally took notice of how bad the middle ring gets. The interior of the vehicle is spotless besides the entranceway, which is dappled with muddy, sooty footprints. Tevik happily takes a seat and enjoys the smooth ride eastward.

The eastern station Tevik disembarks at is just starting to fill up with people. He checks the local map and refers to the contact details. Piva’s apartment is far out from the center. Bordering on the slums, it is similarly rundown. There is no check-in desk, just doors that lead to hallways with more doors. Tevik takes a few wrong turns, but eventually finds Piva’s room. He knocks twice and waits.

“Who is it?” A flat voice asks from within. Not quite bored, but definitely unenthusiastic.

“Uh--This is Tevik. From the research division. My friend Gef referred me to you.”

Clicks emanate from the door and it swings open. Tevik didn’t recognize her name before, but seeing her now he does. She was fiery with ambition in early schooling. He gradually lost contact with her as the years went by. He remembers her flaming hair and striking green eyes. A real rarity nowadays, apparently more common in the past. The woman standing before him now seems like a shadow of that past self. Her short, tied back hair has lightened while her baggy eyes have dimmed. The realization that he must look similarly strikes Tevik.

“Glad ya showed up today. Come on in. Nice to meet you, or, I guess, see you again.” Piva turns and starts to brew some coffee. Apparently she remembers Tevik as well.

“Thank you, and it is nice to reforge old bonds.” Tevik walks in.

The apartment is unkempt, but definitely cleaner than his own. He takes a seat in the living room. A desk is in a familiar spot, covered with books and papers. There are a few bookshelves, but they’re not all filled. The persistent smell of smoke lingers in the air. Tevik is reminded of the years he spent without air filtration. He hopes the Queen has it installed out here soon. His shoulders instinctively tighten and he fidgets with his hands. Piva rounds a corner from the kitchen and sets some coffee down in front of Tevik. Tevik takes it and brings it to his face.

“Gef told me you were investigating Aura transfer, that right?” She asks.

“Mhm.” Tevik blows on his coffee and tastes it. It’s got a hint of cinnamon. He burns himself, as he usually does with hot drinks. “Ss! Ow, damn.”

Piva laughs.

“Well, I have a theory that Aura transfer could replace electricity. We need Aura all over the city, and long lines of crystals aren’t going to cut it.”

“Sounds like two pieces, there.” Piva sets her cup down. “You need to transfer Aura from storage, to travel medium, to storage. And then you need to transform Aura into work to produce electricity.”

Tevik nods. “That’s about right. On the last part, though, I’m wondering if the energy latent in Aura could power mechanisms itself. Ah--But we’ll get there. I haven’t made much progress on the first part yet.”

Tevik pulls his notes out of his travel bag and shuffles through them to find where he left off. Piva speaks up before him. She leans forward and flips around one of her papers strewn over the coffee table. Staring at it, she frowns.

“There’s one other thing. Have you thought about where the Aura will come from?”

“Uh, hm. Same place as now, I’d suppose. Donation from retired guards?” Tevik adds a quick note for the question in the margins.

“I suppose I could see that working. Going the opposite way, electricity into Aura, could be interesting too..” Piva has brightened considerably as the conversation has worn on. Her sleepy exterior has given way to an inquisitive and impassioned work attitude.

“Ah, I hadn’t thought about that!” Tevik takes down another note before flipping the page around to show Piva. “These artifacts here, I think they may be related to old technology that utilized Aura.”

He points to the capsule, then refers to the wires that the Queen’s research team have. He explains his findings, showing the minimal level of Aura he may have found in the capsule.

“A minimum amount of Aura in a space…Hm. I think you may be looking at it wrong.” Piva says.

“What do you mean?” Tevik hesitates, putting his guard up at the perceived attack.

“No one knows for sure, yet. But I believe that there may be a constant amount of Aura around us at all times. Each infinitesimal particle just has an energy level, and local groups coordinate to move and use that energy.” Piva explains.

“Ah…Well, so, I tested it a couple ways. It was able to absorb Aura from the test crystal I had. But when I’d take a reading with fingers on the caps I could just barely read anything.” Tevik is stumped.

Piva shifts papers around to look at the sketch of the artifact Tevik has been testing.

“Huh…What’s that line in the middle?” She points. The glass bulb has a thin line through it, connecting to the metal caps. Tevik squints.

“I’m not sure… When I tested it, I didn't see a wire.”

“I’m wondering why you’d just have two--What are they, steel?--Caps on the ends, connected by a thin wire. And then they sealed it in glass. What’s that space within it used for?” Piva inquires.

The thought hadn’t occurred to Tevik. Indeed, if this was just transference technology, it would probably have different materials or shapes on the caps. Tevik is silent, lost in thought as he stares at the sketches. Piva pulls him out of his stupor with a question.

“How much Aura did you put into it?”

“Oh! Uh, here.” Tevik shuffles through the papers and puts his notes from the prior workday on top. “Just a few pulses.”

“And you barely got a readable difference…” Piva narrows her brow. “I bet you could put a whole lot more into it. Maybe it condenses Aura? Be careful, though.”

“Mm, maybe it could build it up before transferring.” Tevik notes that down, giving it a big circle for emphasis. With a groan at the pain in his neck, he sits back, disengaging from the heavy mental load. It’s been a while since he’s thought about anything other than work. Piva sees the body language change and copies. The two share a moment of restful silence. Tevik takes a sip from his coffee, now thoroughly cooled. Bitter as all hell.

“Is that all ya needed to ask?” Piva questions.

“Ah, yeah. Should give me a good enough start. I appreciate the accommodations on such little notice.”

“Gef said you were prompt, but I didn’t expect you just a day after he and I talked.”

The two share a laugh. Piva begins organizing the papers sprawled over the table. The smell of smoke starts to affect Tevik again. His hands pull together and fidget. To busy himself, he picks up and holds the coffee mug. The aroma is comforting. Tevik takes the moment to think, what does he remember of Piva? Back in school he only saw her for a couple years. They were in some math class together. Back then she’d talk at a mile a minute, always finish assignments first, and showed little interest in anything besides study. She wasn’t the only one like that though, Tevik acknowledges. So many in the advanced classes were like that. Now she seems to have cooled down considerably. Tevik wonders if she’s burnt out. There’s only so long one can keep that kind of passion up, he supposes.

Seeing Piva’s tired face again, he realizes how much of her time he must have taken up. He stands up rather suddenly, and she looks up at him from her coffee.

“Well, um. I’ll be on my way.” Tevik says, somewhat awkwardly. Piva gives a smile.

“Keep me updated on this, I find it interesting. Good to talk to ya.” She says.

Tevik takes his leave with a wave that Piva returns. Night is falling soon, so he hurries back to his apartment. After organizing his notes from Piva, he crashes into his bed. Before he knows it, he’s at work again. The days he gets off always feel the shortest. It’s not until the middle of the workday that he’s able to catch a break from filing and get a glimpse of the artifact. Tevik tests it similarly to last time, touching a crystal to one end. The test crystal drains at a steady pace, slowing down as it nears empty.

This time, when Tevik measures the ends of the artifact, he feels something easily noticeable. It’s a small amount of Aura, but readable this time. When recording the pulses, he immediately notices--It’s a small fraction of the amount passed in. What if it’s a ratio? Quickly, he repeats the experiment. Again, the same ratio. He tests how much is output to a nearly empty crystal. It’s extremely close to the sum of the amount added. This isn’t a transference node, it’s a *battery*. Tevik controls his shaking hand as he records his findings. This will be massive. Based on its size, the interior could probably hold a decent amount of Aura. But based on the ratio, it must condense the amount…This could potentially hold dozens, a hundred times as much as a similarly sized crystal!

Tevik returns to his desk with his findings, sorting them out carefully. He’ll need to get to work on a paper about this. The towers of paper on his desk stand as monolithic walls, however. He could ignore it…And risk investigation and transfer. This comes first, he sadly supposes. The sun is already risen, but Tevik tears away at the piles of reports. As he nears the end, workers with more diurnal schedules begin to arrive. In droves they come and sit in their cubicles, doing much the same work as Tevik. The nocturnal man raises his shoulders and focuses harder as chatter grows around him. He packs the last report away and delivers the stack to be stored. After grabbing something to eat, he quickly returns to his desk. He attempts to look as busy as he truly is.

Tevik assesses himself. He feels awake and alert enough to continue. He isn’t sure how long he’s been working, but he isn’t tired yet. Might as well continue, then. After some paper shuffling and pen hunting, he prepares to outline his research. Raucous laughter erupts from across the office, then cheers follow. The chatter has grown into a monstrous cacophony to Tevik. It rises and falls in terribly random waves. He wants to cover his ears, steel his focus. But it feels like his mind is being pulled in all directions. It’s no use trying to write in these conditions.

More shuffling ensues. Tevik gathers his things to go home. Suddenly, he notices he’s slowing down. It’s harder to move with each second. His throat tightens up and he can barely swallow. Not good, he thinks. He sits back in his chair slowly, feeling his stomach churn with the large movement. Shallow breaths. His hands pick furiously at each other’s nails as his eyes dart around. Like they’re trying to catalog every little sound, every bit of speech that sneaks its way into his cubicle. Desperately, his hand darts out and grabs a sheaf of papers. They’re old notes, loosely bound. He focuses with all his might on them. One word at a time, read completely and enunciated in his mind.

It’s a general document about Aura. Slightly outdated, only a few months out, though. Going over what’s known so far. There’s Aura in all matter, composed of miniscule particles. Each one has an owner and an energy level. They can self-replicate. They conduct energy transfer and storage through unknown mechanisms. The energy source of Aura is unknown. Sentient beings can control Aura created from their bodies’ mass. It seems to respond most to strong emotions, but some can use it without a care. Aura can attach to matter and apply its energy to it, in the form of heat transfer or kinetic force.

Tevik looks up. His breathing has calmed, and the room has as well. Slower this time, he goes through the process of gathering his things. A heavy lethargy settles on his shoulders. Just how long has he been awake? When he gets outside, the sun tells him: Far too long. He has to squint as he walks right in its blinding direction. Eventually the smog darkens the sky enough that it’s not a problem. For once, Tevik is almost thankful for it. Back at his house, he immediately collapses into sleep. Only a scarce few hours later he’s forced to wake up and head back to work. The next day off can’t come soon enough. He walks to his cubicle in a haze. At least no one’s here, now.

The pile of reports on his desk is small tonight. Tevik is able to speed through them and return to his desired work: The research. The paper needs to be written first, and after some revisions he can submit it. Hopefully it will attract upper management’s attention, and he can get some funding. And, he can finally take a break from report review. The rest of the night goes quickly. Tevik gets a general outline done. That day he sleeps well, and has another light day.

The next week flies by as Tevik focuses most of his time on the paper. Gef comes by a few times, but Tevik is completely immersed in his writing.