

THE AUCLAIR FILES

Katlynn Hix

Dray sprinted down a long hallway at top speed, the *kupf kupf* of his boots echoing off the stone walls. This medieval castle was cold and stark, just about the same as the rest he'd come across on his many visits to this particular era. He looked back over his shoulder as he ran, a wide grin creeping to his lips – he's lost those damn Eon Knights somewhere back in the courtyard – he was home free. He rounded a corner quickly, almost running into a serving girl who had been standing near a door. He swerved around her just in time; the only tell of his presence was the push of displaced air that sent her hair billowing. She looked startled and froze mid-step for a moment but she hadn't seen him – his cloaking array was functioning perfectly.

He sprinted up a large flight of stairs that stopped at a heavy oaken door. Double-checking the holomap he had built in to his wristwatch he saw the red marker – his target – was just inside.

"Bingo," he said. The word hung in the cavernous space for a moment, fading slowly into what sounded like footsteps...and voices.

"He went this way, sir! I'm getting a reading from his tech!" A man's voice echoed up the hallway accompanied by the sound of footfalls on the weathered stone hallway.

"Better do this quick," Dray mumbled to himself, crouching down to get a better look at the door.

There was a primitive lock mechanism and Dray smiled as he extracted a tiny awl from his hip pocket, *Piece of cake.*

The lock popped open metallically, one

of his fastest picks to date. He opened the door slowly, hoping there was no one inside the room – that would make things a trifle more difficult. He peered inside, finding the large room blessedly empty – of people anyway. The large space was absolutely bursting with gold, silk and velvet tapestries, silver dining ware, suits of armor, boxes upon boxes of jewels and the like. Dray shut the door firmly behind him and propped a large golden scepter against it as he entered; his eyes tingled and seemed to glitter along with the mountains of treasure. He looked around slowly, marveling at the immense collection of wealth – the medieval nobility were really just petty hoarders after all.

Dray caught sight of a small, marble figure surrounded by a clutter of jewel-encrusted goblets, "There you are, little lady."

The statue of Venus, Roman goddess of love and beauty, stood about fifteen inches high, her arms outstretched as if waiting for an embrace. Disengaging his cloaking array, he snapped back into visibility, glad to be able to see his own hands again. Dray walked over and plucked the little statuette from amidst the dazzling clutter, smoothing his thumb over the flawless marble touse of her hair.

A sudden cacophony rose inside the room, snapping Dray roughly back to reality. The thudding of bodies against the oak door reminded him of his pursuers – the Eon Knights had caught up more quickly than he'd thought. A shriek of metal intertwined with the dull sound from the door as the golden scepter began to budge and slide. The men behind the door slammed into the barrier once more and the scepter slipped and repositioned itself on another flagstone, allowing the door to stand ajar. An arm reached through accompanied by an angry face Dray knew all too well: Alistair Miles, current commander of the Eon Knights;

self-titled Paladin of the Past, and major pain-in-the-ass.

"Thief! Unhand the artifact and put your hands in the air!" Alistair said in his deep, throaty tone, his face contorting with rage as he struggled to squeeze through the too-small opening and find what was holding the door all at once.

"Alistair, wonderful to see you again... unfortunately I can't stay and catch up. What a pity," Dray said with a smirk, pulling an arrowhead-shaped piece of tech from his shirt pocket.

"He's going to make a Jump, you idiots! Get this door open." Alistair was suddenly gone from the doorway and shouts of acquiescence filled the hallway as his men scrambled to obey.

Dray looked about the treasure-choked space for something – anything – reflective. He caught sight of a gilded mirror standing off the side of the room, stashing his prize in his leather satchel he strode quickly toward his salvation. Kneeling down, he caught sight of his face in the mirror and smiled back at his own thin-lipped grin and light blue eyes, ran a hand through his sandy mop of hair and began to ready his Jump. Dray dialed the year 2726 in to his Jump Drive and set the little machine gingerly on the surface of the glass so the arrowhead pointed into the face of the mirror, creating a figure-eight of sorts with its reflection. The tech began to spin rapidly and the room was filled with a whirring drone of noise. A beam of light shone out of the center of the mirror and widened toward the edges of the glass, then spilled over creating a portal 4 feet across – the Jump Hole was ready.

An eruption of smoke and shards of battered wood flooded the stone room as the heavy oak door was blasted to bits. Alistair and well over ten Eon Knights, looking perfectly suited for the medieval

era in chainmail and leather jerkins, stood in the smoke-filled doorway.

Alistair drew a longsword from his hip and ran awkwardly toward Dray, black hair flying wildly behind his armor-enhanced bulk, "Stop, put your hands up!"

Stretching out his hand, Dray tapped the Jump Drive and it went spinning out of sight into the Jump Hole where it would meet him when he emerged back in the future. The Hole started to shrink immediately and Dray leaned forward, saluted Alistair and threw the assembled men a smart-alec grin as he plunged into the steadily diminishing circle of light.

"See ya' round, Ali!" Dray said, his voice fading as the portal snapped shut behind him.

The Jump was always the same – taking much less time than one would think jumping about thirteen hundred years would take, hugely disorienting, and *always* ending in a jarring reentry. Dray tumbled out of the Jump Hole and landed on his back – and the Jump Drive – in the living room of his house. The Jump Hole sealed up again with a whine.

Dray coughed once from the impact, arching his back off of the sharp bit of machinery underneath him, "Ow."

He found himself once again in the twenty-eighth century, in his dreary, cluttered apartment in the polluted "Olde District" of Chicago, Illinois; a neighborhood of houses and apartment buildings left over from after the Neo Renaissance that weren't completely dilapidated – yet – which sat jammed between monolithic high-rises and gleaming architectural behemoths of chrome and reflective Teflon sheets. It was night, he had no clue exactly what time, the blinds in the little flat had been left open and the kitchen light was still on.

"Dray? Is that you?" A small, sleepy

Do not unhand the artifact and put your hands in the air!

voice said from somewhere past his head. Dray rolled onto his stomach and found his younger sister Serafina standing in the doorway to her bedroom. The little blonde scrubbed her knuckles against her pale eyelids; she hadn't changed into her pajamas and her wheaten hair was still bound in plaits down her back.

The young man rose, pocked the Jump Drive and walked over to his sister, placing a hand on her shoulder, "Sorry, Ser...did I startle you?" He petted her hair soothingly.

She looked up at him with doe eyes as blue as his own and he marveled at how fragile she seemed, she was only nine after all, "No, I was waiting for you" she said, "I just fell asleep, is all."

Dray smiled, turning the girl back toward her room, "Get back to bed, Ser, school tomorrow."

"Dray...tomorrow is Saturday."

"Shut up, Ser. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Dray."

Dray walked into the kitchen and turned off the light. He pulled open the fridge and began to rummage about for something to snack on. He came away from the fridge with a slice of cheese pizza in his mouth – his favorite Pre-Neo Renaissance junk food - and went to sit on the livingroom sofa to wait for the artifact smuggler to come to collect the statue.

He let the quiet of the apartment settle around him, allowing his thoughts to wander. He removed his satchel, breathing a sigh of relief to find the little marble woman undamaged by his rough entry. He turned the figure over and over in his hands, contemplating.

Ser, I'll get us out of here...soon. You'll be able to get away from all this noise and pollution...there's more to this world than just city streets and buildings.

Dray closed his eyes and rested his head back on the sofa. The Hermes Met-

ro train roared along its aero-track a few streets away, the sound echoing off the tightly packed concrete and steel buildings of the Olde District and penetrating the paper-thin Pre-Neo Renaissance building materials. The train noise faded into the darkness of the night, leaving Dray to doze peacefully in the remaining silence.

It seemed he had only just fallen asleep when there was a loud pounding on the door. Dray jerked awake, his hand flying to the statuette that lay on his chest. He stood abruptly, staring daggers at the front door across the room from him.

After a moment, his heartbeat slowed but the adrenaline in his system had left him jittery. He set the statue down carefully on the coffee table and walked to the door – the smuggler, Jaden, always seemed like he wanted to break the door down. Grasping the handle, he tried to shake the adrenaline buzz from his limbs.

Dray opened the door, eyes on the carpet, "Jaden, man, you can't scare me like th—"

"Hello, little rat" a deep voice said.

Alistair Miles stood in the doorway, smiling widely with over-white teeth in his dark-skinned face. The huge man looked ominous in his black coat and his black eyes sparkled with glee at the look of terror that had smashed itself across Dray's suddenly pale face.

"Miss me?"

Dray seemed to find his wits again and quickly slammed the door, snatching up the statuette and sprinting into the inner room of the apartment. *How did Alistair find the house? Did he get information on my name? Should I run? Where? What about Serafina?!*

The thought of his little sister – the only real family he still possessed – in the hands of a ruthless man like Alistair Miles made Dray's stomach turn. He had to get Alistair as far away from Serafina

Up, little rat" a deep voice said.

as he possibly could, that was the only thing he knew.

The front door of the apartment flew back open, slamming into the thin plaster wall with a harsh cracking noise, "You think you can run this time, you're dead wrong, thief."

The big man's footsteps crushed across the cheap, brittle carpeting as he stalked into the living room. Dray wheeled about wildly looking in all directions in rapid succession, unsure of which way to run next. The kitchen stood to his left, the hallway that led to the bedrooms to his right. He could jump...but that would leave Serafina alone and Dray had no idea if Alistair would follow him...the Jump Drive felt like it weighed a ton in his breast pocket. He pulled the tech out of his pocket and spun the dial, the golden digital readout spinning into a blur. A shadow darkened the doorway and Alistair's bulk loomed into view, effectively blockading Dray into the inner rooms of the apartment. Dray lowered his hand, hiding the Jump Drive in his palm.

"Thought I wouldn't find you, didn't you...Dray Percival Auclair" Alistair practically spat the name and his throaty voice held a note of undisguised disgust.

Dray stood frozen, swallowing the hard lump in his throat as Alistair stalked into the room. He gripped the marble Venus so tight it began to hurt his hand.

"Oh yes, we Knights have known your name for quite some time. It did take us regrettably longer than we'd hoped to find your little rat nest...but, here we are" Alistair said, his flat, blocky teeth splitting his face in a leer, "Better late than never, I always say."

"Do you, now?"

"I do."

Alistair pulled a nasty looking device from an inner pocket of his coat and pressed his thumb into the center. The

tech clicked to life; sharp, spindly metal appendages unfolded and were instantly charged with a smattering of electricity, Dray's eyes widened in recognition – an Inhibiter. Someone caught in one of those would be wishing for death – and might even get it.

"Now, Mr. Auclair, if you would kindly come quietly" Alistair said, walking forward slowly.

Serafina flashed into Dray's mind, *Damn if she isn't a heavy sleeper.*

Dray shifted into motion, feinting to the right and dashing back to the left. Alistair lunged for him with the Inhibitor

but Dray ducked under the big man's swinging arms as the charged metal arms whizzed over his messy hair. He sprinted into the kitchen and made a beeline for the window over the sink. Alistair was right behind him, foot-

steps thundering over the aged linoleum as he ran. Lifting his arm Dray threw the Jump Drive into the window as hard as he could and despite its delivery, the tiny machine landed gently against the glass and began to spin, the light of the Jump Hole suddenly brightening the darkened kitchen.

A hand caught hold of Dray's shirt mid-step and he was yanked backward – hard – into Alistair's stocky torso, the impact sent the Inhibitor and the marble statuette skittering across the floor. One of Venus's arms snapped off. The young man yelped as he collided with the Eon Knight and they both went sprawling onto the kitchen floor. Dray struggled against the death grip the big man held him with, trying all at once to get free and cause harm in any way possible. Landing an elbow into Alistair's diaphragm, the young man managed to break loose. He rolled across the kitchen floor, trying to gain his feet before Alistair did.

"Not on your life, boy" Alistair said,

**Thought I
didn't find you,
didn't you...Dray
Percival Auclair"**

reaching out with a meaty hand.

His ankle was pulled out from under him and Dray's chin connected with the floor. The big man began to drag Dray back toward him and the young man began to struggle desperately. Turning around, Dray aimed a kick at Alistair's face, trying not to cringe outwardly when he heard the Knight's already-flattened nose break with a disgusting *crunch*.

Alistair should have been in incredible pain, but instead he grinned widely, his over-bright teeth now smeared with gore. He laughed, "Nice, try." His words came out bubbly and garbled through the blood.

Standing with some difficulty while still holding tightly to the struggling Time Jumper, Alistair dragged Dray a few feet toward where the Inhibitor had come to rest. Snatching up the electrified tech in his huge hand, Alistair brandished it threateningly over the up-ended young man.

"But not nice enough, obviously" Alistair said and raised the tech over his head.

Alistair's movement never followed through. There was a pitter-patter of feet, a whoosh of displaced air and a sharp crack; Dray looked up at his attacker from the floor, utterly confused.

The big man's raised hand had frozen mid-swing and his eyes seemed to fix on some faraway object. Dray stared at his assailant with a look of askance on his face. Alistair seemed to sway minutely for a moment and Dray wondered briefly if he would fall. The Knight shook himself suddenly, coming back to his senses and dropped Dray's leg and whirled quickly around.

As the hulking Eon Knight turned, Dray caught sight of his younger sister standing timidly in her pajamas and bare feet, clutching a blocky-two-by-four like a club and looking terrified.

"Ser!! RUN!" Dray's shout echoed about the kitchen.

Alistair was upon the girl in an instant, wrenching the wooden beam out of her hands and grabbing her with his free arm, sufficiently trapping her body against his huge chest. Serafina shrieked as she was lifted off the floor, the sound making Dray's heart twist in his chest. She clawed at Alistair's burly arm to no avail.

"Don't toy with me child," Alistair growled, slamming the Inhibitor into the girl's chest.

Dr!! RUN!" Dray's shout echoed about the kitchen.

"SERAFINA!" Dray's voice sounded like it was traveling down a tunnel.

Dray's world plunged into slow motion. The spindly metal arms clasped around Serafina's thin torso and the blue flashes of electricity spread instantly over her small frame. Alistair dropped her quickly and she landed on the kitchen floor like a rag-doll. As Dray was struggling to regain his feet to help his sister – now convulsing violently on the dirty linoleum – Alistair swung a tree-like leg into his stomach, knocking the air from Dray's lungs. Serafina lay prone and twitching on the floor; 50,000 volts coursing through her body.

"You see, rat? This is what you bring upon yourself when you steal from the Past" Alistair said, turning away to pick up the broken marble statue lying near the oven.

Dray's chest heaved and his lungs burned from lack of oxygen, "How – how" he wheezed, "how - could – you do that?"

"Very easily, actually," Alistair said with a sneer on his lips, turning away from Dray.

The electric current had run out and Alistair prodded Serafina with his toe. She lay still.

Dray's hands clenched and his eyes filled with tears, "Don't touch her, bastard!"

The young man lurched off the floor and threw himself at Alistair's back. He knocked the big man off balance and they collided with the kitchen sink. The grappling men found themselves staring into the vortex of Dray's previously forgotten Jump Hole. Trying to catch himself, Alistair grabbed a hold of the rusted kitchen faucet. The weak metal groaned hugely and snapped off in the Knight's big hand. A jet of water shot out of the broken faucet – straight into the rapidly spinning Jump Drive. There was a loud crackle of discharging energy and the Jump Drive wobbled and fell with a clatter into the sink basin. Alistair was still flailing and the Jump Hole was beginning to shrink.

Dray wailed with rage and began to beat Alistair over the head with his fists. He hit the big man with wild abandon and with as much force as he was able to muster. The Jump Hole was shrinking all the while, the pull of the vortex exerting itself over the combatants in swift, short pulses.

"I – hope – you – never – come – BACK!" Dray said, punctuating his words with blows to the back of Alistair's shaggy head.

Dray ended his sentence by pushing forcefully off of Alistair's back, sending the Eon Knight lurching into the diminishing light of the Jump Hole. The gravity of the Hole caught hold of Alistair and yanked his great bulk up into the tear in the Time Stream.

The Hole closed softly with a slurping noise which, in the back of his mind, Dray found quite suiting of the situation. The jet of water from the broken sink petered out to a slight dribble as Dray sagged against the softly humming refrigerator. His eyes fell to the motionless body of his young sister and hot tears sprang forth once more.

"Ser, oh god, Ser...Please, no..." he said, voice trembling as much as his hands.

The Inhibitor's metal arms had loosened with the expenditure of its electric charge and Dray swatted the lifeless tech away and knelt, pressing his ear to Serafina's chest. He could hear nothing but the ringing in his own ears. His heart wrenched with anguish.

Dray let out a choked sob, "Serafina! Don't you dare give up on me!"

He knitted his fingers together, hand over hand and began CPR – primitive and yet the only thing that came to mind. His movements were frenzied and his rescue breaths could barely support his own lungs. It felt like too long since she had fallen and time was still dripping by.

How long had she been unconscious? Seconds? Minutes? Dray couldn't tell and he was beginning to get light headed.

How long had he been performing CPR?

Was he even doing it right?

He couldn't breathe.

Dray stopped his work and sagged once again, resting his forehead on Serafina's upper arm. He started to sob, picking up her hand and squeezing it tightly. Dray let go after a moment...but Serafina didn't.

He lifted his head slowly in amazement, his voice barely a whisper, "Ser?"

The young girl coughed a few times, opening her clear blue eyes and turning her head to look at her brother's tear-streaked face, "Your face is dirty, Dray."

Dray's face lit up and he hugged his sister tightly to him, "Shut up, Ser."

