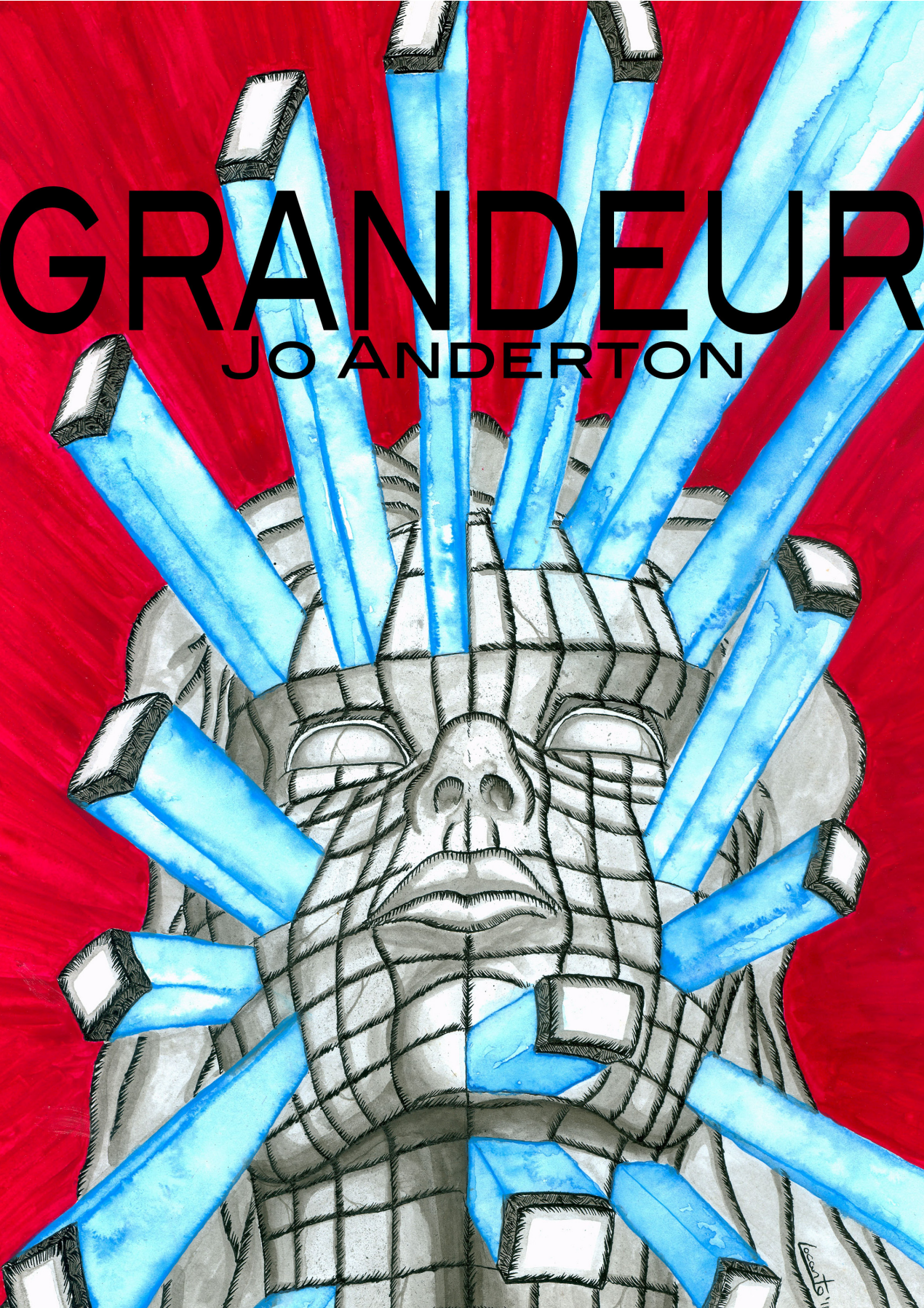


# GRANDEUR

JO ANDERTON





**GRANDEUR**  
A STORY FROM THE VEILED WORLDS

by Jo Anderton

I played games with the pions in the walls of the Major Projects hall while I waited for Zecholas to do his spying. I've never been very good at standing still. As I leaned against the corridor's garish interior, the pions traced the shape of my shoulders with a multitude of tangled lights, teasing the bindings in my deep blue jacket like a horde of ill-behaved children. Just as bored as I was, really. So I gave them little jobs to do.

We rearranged the pattern on the panel behind us. Whoever had designed the hall obviously had no concept of subtlety, and instead of paint or simple stone had wrought frescoes in silver and crystal on the interior walls. The effect was hideous. I was leaning against a depiction of the princess Ludmilla, kneeling before her murdered knight and one true love, Rusclan. She wept tears of bright crystal, lit from within, that changed colour from blue to red as they fell.

First I convinced the pions in Ludmilla's body to loosen their threads a little. Pions are tiny particles that exist to bind all matter together. They shine in everything, from the atrocious artwork on the wall, to the wool of my jacket, the brickwork hidden behind the plaster and even the very earth beneath us. If you know how to ask, pions will rearrange the matter they are so helpfully binding together. And I knew just how to ask.

Eager, powerful, and bored, it didn't take much to convince the pions that they deserved some fun. With their help, Ludmilla stopped crying, and stood. She plucked her tears from the wall, collected Rusclan's fallen sword from his side, and arranged the colourful

crystal around the pommel until she was holding a large flower. Then she turned to face me as best she could — given she had been created flat against the wall — and swung the flower out toward me. I ran the tip of my finger through the petals and they clinked. Ludmilla smiled.

I was about to resurrect Rusclan when someone cleared their throat behind me. I turned, sheepish.

Zecholas had returned, and I hadn't even noticed. He clasped his hands behind his back, one eyebrow raised. "My lady Tanyana?" he said, and managed to contain the smile I could see in his eyes. Zecholas was one of the younger members of my nine point circle, but he was already a highly skilled pion binder. A handsome man with a good family heritage — not high enough to be assured a seat on the veche, but wealthy enough to send him to the best schools and universities. It showed. Everything about him was sharp, from his dress sense to his keen intellect.

He coughed politely into his hand. "If you are finished there, we should probably hurry back."

I nodded, kept a perfectly straight face, and strode back down the hallway. "Yes, let's."

"Ah." Zecholas hurried to catch up with me. "Shouldn't you put the wall back together?"

I glanced over my shoulder. Ludmilla was waving goodbye with her crystal flower. Inside her, the pions were doing the same, unwinding and remaking their bindings in a joyous farewell dance. I raised a hand to farewell them. "I don't think so," I replied. "They'll settle back on their own accord. We should let them enjoy themselves while they can, don't you think?"

Zecholas followed my gaze, expression sceptical. But I was his circle centre, so he wasn't about to argue, no matter how young and smart he might be.

We rejoined the rest of the circle in our waiting room. I sensed their anxiety as soon as we closed the doors behind us, and I allowed the pion locks that were supposed to keep us in here to resume their usual function.

Eight sets of worried eyes met mine.

“Did anyone see you?” Tsana asked. She was paler than usual, and had obviously been biting her nails. Hers was an old family, and her father was a member of the national veche. If Zecholas and I had been caught breaking the rules, it would have reflected badly not only on her, but also on her father’s political career. I knew it worried her, every single time.

“No,” I said, and sat on one of the long couches in the room. “Of course not.” I helped myself to a sweet coffee and cream pastry from the trays of food. The national veche could be right bastards to work for, but you had to give them credit, their waiting rooms were always well stocked.

Volski sat opposite me, and gradually the rest found their seats. Volski was an older man, his hair greying, and ever serious. A skilled and steady binder, he’d worked for me since I was first awarded my circle of three. He didn’t look at all nervous, just focused.

“Did you find anything?” he glanced at Zecholas as he spoke.

Zecholas sat beside me. “It’s a statue,” he said.

There was a pause, as the members of my circle shared their surprise.

“All this fuss for a statue?” Llada snapped. “That doesn’t make sense.”

I knew what she meant. Any national veche job involved a rigorous selection process, and I was used to that by now. I’d tendered for many national jobs, and had even been accepted for a few. The veche demanded perfection, but they also paid extremely

well, and a job well done earned more than kopacks alone. Status. Recognition.

But there was something different about this job.

For one, the security was a nightmare. We'd all endured thorough background checks before we were even let inside the hall — and for a circle of nine, wearing our bear's-head badges proudly on our shoulders, that was unheard of. Then they locked us in the waiting room while they tested one circle at a time. Sure, we were used to waiting, and yes we weren't exactly supposed to spy on the other circles and try to get the upper hand, but we'd never been actively locked in before. The national veche was also secretive about the job's specifics. All we'd known, when we'd applied, was that it required a nine point architect's circle, and would pay very, very well. The circle centre pay on this job was two hundred thousand kopacks, more than I'd earned on the last three jobs combined.

All that for nothing more complicated than a statue?

"Not just any statue," Zecholas continued, once the rest of the circle had settled down. "This is *Grandeur*."

"It's *what*?" Kitai asked.

"It's a symbol," Zecholas said, and met my eyes. I wiped my sticky fingers on a neatly folded napkin, edged with rearing bears embroidered in solid, primary colours. "Of Varsnia. That's it. That's all they'll give you to work with."

I selected another pastry in the stunned silence that followed. No point working on an empty stomach, now was there?

"A symbol of Varsnia?" Nosrod muttered, clearly affronted. "They want, what? A bear? A *grand* bear?"

Zecholas shrugged. "That's up to lady Tanyana." He paused. "There's a big panel this time. Project leaders, veche members, couple of old family representatives, and the strangest looking

bureaucrats I've ever seen. But the instructions they'll give you are vague, something along the lines of: *Grandeur should be symbol for the rest of the world. When they think of the Varsnian nation, they should think of it. Our advances in pion binding technology have made us grand, but it is a grandeur we have shared with the rest of humanity.*"

That didn't sound much like the Varsnia and the veche that I knew. Varsnia had profited greatly in the two hundred years since Novski's critical circle revolution changed the way we bind pions, and ultimately the way we live. The power of circles had created vast cities of crystal and steel where once towns of stone and wood had stood. It had meant we could heat our homes with ease even in the middle of the harshest winter, grow any food all year around, and indulge in opulence and art. Of course, it had also given us previously unimagined military might — a might that was only now being rivalled by our neighbours.

"Materials?" Volski asked, all business. He wasn't about to be distracted by little details like what, by the Other, the veche wanted us to build.

"The usual," Zecholas said.

I nodded, and patted Zecholas's shoulder lightly. "Thank you," I said. "You risked a lot by sneaking a look into the panel room and gathering this information. At least we have warning now. That's more than any of the other circles have."

Zecholas smiled, and his cheeks reddened a little. It was easy to forget he was only a young man, really, just in his twenties.

At that moment the pions locking the door to the waiting room brightened and unwound their complicated knots. An official-looking woman entered the room, carrying a small glass slide about the size of the palm of her hand. Pions projected glowing words from its surface, to hover a few inches above the slide. I skimmed them as

quickly as I could, but our names were the only words not hidden in code.

“Miss Vladha?” the woman asked, as she looked up.

I stood, and nodded, dabbing the edges of my mouth with my napkin. “Yes?”

“Your turn. Please, come with me.”

The panel was being held in a truly imposing room. We entered on one side of a wide space, surrounded by tall, harsh lights, and rows upon rows of tiered, empty seats. Raw construction materials were piled between us and a set of desks where the veche panellists waited.

The woman closed the door behind us. It locked audibly.

“Come forward, please,” someone called from the desks in the distance.

I straightened my back, held my head high and strode forward. They would not intimidate me.

I cast a quick glance at the materials as I passed them. A small mountain of fine sand, another of rough quartz, a third of rocky gravel. A large barrel of fresh water, another of salty water, and a third of thick mud taken directly from the Tear River’s banks. Zecholas was right. The usual.

“Now, who do we have?” An old man wrapped in purple velvet was scanning a bright projection from a slide he clutched in quivering fingers. The words were so close to his nose I wondered that he could read them at all, and they shuddered and blurred with his movement. “Miss Vladha, is it?”

“Yes, my lord.”

A large silver bear’s-head medallion hung around the old man’s neck. It meant that no matter how ancient he was, and seemingly

blind, he was a member of an old family, and therefore high up in the national veche. He deserved my respect.

"You've done some good work for us in the past," he continued. "Says here you moved up through three point and six point circles rapidly. Earned commendations for your work. Oh!" He looked away from the unsteady words and for the first time, looked directly at me. "You built the bluestone gallery! That's a delightful building, my dear. You should be proud."

"Thank you, my lord." I was proud. The art gallery had been my first veche commission, and I had worked Other damned hard on it.

"A solid history." The old man dismissed the slide's projection with a flick of his fingers. "But your history means little right here, right now. Don't go giving yourself airs, miss Vladha. Just show us what you can do."

"My lord." I gritted my teeth. They wanted to know what I could do? Other's hells, I would show them.

"Please establish your circle," said a man in the bright yellow jacket of a sitting member on the Construction for the Furtherment of Varsnia. A project leader, then, or an inspector.

I nodded, turned and gestured to my circle members. They knew what to do, and quietly fanned out around the room. I kept my eyes on the panel as I backed away, so I stood close to the building materials, with my critical circle evenly spaced around me. We left a large gap between us and the panel — enough space for a decent replica of this *Grandeur* they wanted us to build.

Two more men in purple velvet sat beside the ancient veche representative. One wore a deeply bored expression, the other seemed to be sleeping. More members of the Construction for the Furtherment of Varsnia filled out the long table — all slightly different ranks, judging from the variety of their insignias.



Behind them stood three men in white. I had idea what department they represented. No visible bear's-head insignia, no slides I could spy on. They didn't speak to any of the other panellists, just stood there, hands behind backs, faces impassive. Perhaps the strange bureaucrats Zecholas had mentioned?

"We are ready," I said, as my circle began gathering pions. "My lord, what would you like us to build?"

"A statue," the old man answered with a smile. "Not just any statue. We want you to build *Grandeur* for us. I'm sure you're thinking, what does he mean? Well, *Grandeur* is symbolic. It must stand as a beacon for the rest of the world. When they think of Varsnian nation, they should think of..."

I wasn't really listening, not to him. I already knew what he was going to say. Instead, I turned my focus to the pions. My circle summoned them from the depths of reality — from the rock to the air to the water, from us, from every creature and building in the city of Movoc under Keeper — bound them into loose threads and sent them on to me. Streamers of light wound through the room, bright with busy pions. I lifted a hand and watched Zecholas's golden thread tie itself briefly around my palm before sliding down my arm and back over my shoulder. It's tail danced briefly with Tsana's green thread.

Pions had been my friends for as long as I could remember. They came when I called, and kept me company on the long lonely nights when my mother worked extra shifts, the ones that had paid for my schooling. Perhaps that was why I'd always felt closer to them than to other people — they understood me, they responded to me, they didn't care that I'd come from a poor family and had never known my father.

So, as I always did, I asked them what they wanted. What was *Grandeur*, really? Pions were part of all things — things that were,

things that had been, and things that didn't yet exist. So pions were wise, all you had to do was listen.

"What do you say, Miss Vladha?" the veche man came to the end of his speech, and I realised I'd missed almost all of it. "Can you make *Grandeur* for us?"

I looked up, met his eyes, then glanced at every member on the project panel. They were all watching me now. One of the bureaucrats leaned forward, briefly, and I caught a glimpse of faint green eyes and an odd smile that didn't seem to fit on his face.

The pions wrapped around me, and whispered to me, their voices softer than sound, carried instead on the bonds that linked us all. Perhaps the frescoes on the hallway walls had influenced us. Perhaps some of the pions in Ludmilla's silver form had broken free and followed me, only to be caught in my nine point binding. Whatever the reason I knew, instantly, what *Grandeur* was.

*Who* she was.

"Yes, my lord," I said. "I can."

I lifted my hands, opened my arms wide, and power surged through the thick threads of pions entwining me.

*Grandeur* would be grand. Fully built she would tower eight hundred feet into the air, the tallest building in Movoc under Keeper, so she could look out over the city, the nation, and beyond. She needed strong foundations. I sent streams of pions into the piles of sand and gravel, then brought in water, even quartz, to construct her.

First, a steel frame. Then stone for her feet, cement legs and torso. Even her model should be grand, so I used all the space I had available, making her as tall as the ceiling, and forcing myself to step further back and widen my circle so we weren't crushed.

The veche representative clapped his hands together as she took

shape before his eyes, but I wasn't done. *Grandeur* should shine in the crisp Movoc sun, like Ludmilla's tears has sparkled in the wall, so I would dress her in crystal and glass.

"My lady," Volski's voice was carried by the pions in his thread, to brush quietly against my ears. "We are running out of material."

I glanced back, quickly. "Other's hells," I muttered. All the sand was gone, the gravel too, only a fine layer of quartz and a third of the salty water remained.

"We'll have to reduce the size of the model," Tsana offered her advice. "Start again—"

"No!" I cut her off, and anyone else who would suggest such a thing. "No, we just need more material." I looked up, to the great ceiling of stone and marble and bright lights. Everything I needed, right there.

I gathered what threads I could and sent my pions to plunder the Projects hall roof.

"What are you doing?" The yellow-coated officials sprung to their feet, joining forces to gather their own threads in quick competition to my own.

"That's really not helping," I growled, through clenched teeth. I closed my eyes and blocked all distractions, until I could feel the pions like they were a part of me, stretched thin and powerful across the room, tearing stone from the roof, liquefying glass, hardening the very air.

And with them I tore pions from the officials' control. They cried out, and I could hear muttering from the table, then the scrape of more chairs being pushed back. Thread after thread gathered to fight me, but I gave no ground. I was here to show them what I could do, to prove myself worthy, and no one was going to upstage my circle.

"My lady, stop this!" Tsana's pions carried her words, leaving me to imagine her shocked, horrified tone. "You can't fight the veche council!"

I didn't answer. Rather, I took her threads and wound them through the officials', tying their pions into tight and complicated knots. It didn't stop their attack, just slowed them down, and I hoped it would give me enough time to finish my work.

"Miss Vladha!" one of the panellists cried. "You will stop this at once! All circles must use the materials provided and — Other's hells woman, you're going to bring the building down on top of us!"

I ignored them. I would do this my way, or not at all. No matter who they were.

An odd sound started up. Dim, at first — I was so deeply connected to the pions that the world outside of them seemed little more than a false and brittle shell — then I slowly understood. Clapping. I opened my eyes. The three bureaucrats were applauding in a slow, co-ordinated way.

One leaned forward to place a hand on the aging veche representative's shoulder. "The architect is highly skilled," he said. "We would like to see her submission through to completion."

The old man was nodding, rubbing his hands together. "Oh, I agree."

"But my lord, the building!" the officials cried, outraged.

"This is dangerous!"

"And against the rules!"

The bureaucrat leaned back again. "True," he said, and all three ceased their applause. "But we would very much like to see."

All resistance fell away, and again I could focus on my model *Grandeur*. With marble from the roof I gave her a face, beautiful and



noble, expression generous but proud. I could see traces of Ludmilla in her. Then I sewed her a dress out of countless tiny glass and crystal panels. Sunlight shone in through the ruined roof to catch in its folds, setting her sparkling, glowing, and bathing us all in her light.

Finally, I gave her arms. She reached out, towards the panel, palms up, hands open. She both welcomed the world with those hands, and carried the weight of the people of Varsnia — our pion-binding strength, our responsibilities, the promise of our future.

When *Grandeur* was complete, I calmed the pions in my thrall. I set some into the roof and the walls to ensure the hall didn't collapse on us. I left some buzzing around the model, to monitor her structural integrity, and I gave the rest back to my circle. They carried them for me, in slowly looping streamers of light.

Breathing deeply, trying to slow the overexcited rush in my veins and the hard beating of my heart, I took slow, careful steps to stand beside *Grandeur*. I was only as tall as her knee.

"My lords," I addressed the panel. "Allow me to introduce *Grandeur*."

A long moment of silence as the panel gaped up at her. She shadowed them with her outstretched arms, and looked down on them calmly. The pions were pleased with her, I could sense it in our ever constant connection. I was sure the panel would see her the same way.

Then the veche representative turned to me. "Well done, Tanyana," he said, and stood. "Well done." His legs were unsteady and he used the desk for support, but still he held out a hand to me. "My fellow panellists and I will judge your submission alongside your competitors, and the successful circle will be notified in the next sixnight and one."

I hurried to the table and shook his hand, feeling heady with

triumph. He'd called me Tanyana, and offered his hand. It was as good as any official notice.

*Grandeur* was ours.

"Thank you for the opportunity to submit, my lord," I said, trying to keep my face impassive. "We shall eagerly await the results."

"I'm sure you will," he chuckled.

I stepped back, and placed a hand on *Grandeur's* leg. "Shall I dismantle her, my lords?"

One final glance up, a look of fondness that warmed me, and the veche representative nodded. "Please. I'm sure I don't have to ask you to put the ceiling back too."

"Of course." I smiled.

Again I opened my arms, and myself, to the pions. Unmaking was much easier than creating. Each light remembered what it had been doing before I willed them into service, and were happy to resume those roles. The roof first — complete with stained glass images of the Keeper Mountain and the Tear River — then *Grandeur* unwound to sand, again, and gravel, water, quartz and mud.

Slowly, carefully, my circle and I released the pions we had gathered to work for us. They rushed gleefully back into the world. Then we bowed to the panellists, turned, and left the Major Projects hall so clean that it hardly looked like we had been there at all.

Well, not to us. As the door was unlocked and we were led back outside, a small group of debris collectors entered the hall. Unacknowledged by the panel they scurried around the room, collecting all the debris we had created. I imagined there was a lot of it but I had no way of seeing it. Debris was a waste product, generated by all the binding and rebinding the pions and I had done. The more complicated the binding, the more debris was created, and I'd done some serious work in that room.

Left uncollected, debris interfered with pions, slowing and eventually unwinding their bindings. Everything in the city of Movoc under Keeper had been created by binding pions, so that interference could be deadly.

"My lady?" Volski held the door open for me. "Time to go."

I nodded, and gave the hall one final look. One of the debris collectors was watching me. He smiled, and met my eyes for a moment, before crouching back down to his dirty, invisible charge. Odd. Debris collectors and pion binders usually did not have anything to do with each other. We lived in different worlds. They could not see the lights with which we made the world, and we could not see the rubbish they collected.

I followed my circle out.

"So, what do you think?" Llada asked, once we had left the Projects hall. "Did we get the job?"

I grinned, and wondered just what I would do with two hundred thousand kopacks. From Volski's expression, and Zecholas, and even Tsana, I knew the rest of my circle was thinking along the same lines.

"What do I think?" I tipped my head back and breathed deeply of Movoc's crisp, cold air. Sunlight brushed faintly warm against my cheeks. Strings of pions arched above and around us, controlling the countless complex systems that held the city together. "I think we all deserve a drink. Time to celebrate, because if you ask me, we're going to be too busy earning a lot of kopacks over the next few moons to do anything else."

I flagged down a great lurching landau and held the door as my circle climbed inside. "Let's go!"

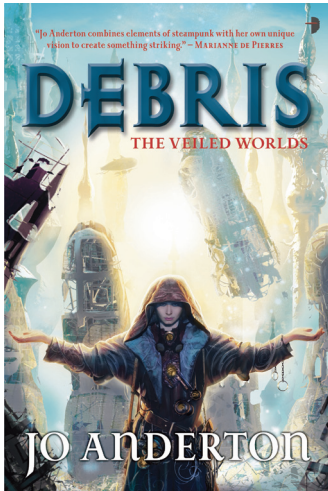
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...and then they all live happily ever after?

Perhaps not.

Find out in

## DEBRIS



**In a far future where technology is all but indistinguishable from magic, Tanyana is one of the elite.**

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