

Vulland Chronicles 007 – Mystery on the Mountain

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Finding out who the best decipherers of ancient writings were was easy. Getting to the nearest of them, a man technically nearby as the Light shone...was a little more difficult. Luckily for Vee, within two weeks of making sketches of the writings on her odd, metallic sphere and making inquiries over those scholars, one of her Air Courier assignments took her up into the Skylands, to a hexisle from the kingdom of Sarenon, which lay just west of the jungle realm of Dellai.

The name of that nearest scholar was Master Yulius Forrono, and the name of the hexisle township was Jade Mountain. Apparently it had taken on all the aspects of a kingdom, and with the advent of the Spires that could pierce the Vull membrane, had insisted upon being properly recognized as an extra political power in the Skylands, and not just a mere township. It wasn't the first land to develop airships for travel, but it was the first one to fully embrace the new technologies.

For the sake of discretion, Courier Vielle approached the Skylands via Jade Spire City to the north of the Hexisle. Far enough north that a small, swift airship awaited her with a crew clad in the jade-green uniforms of the floating kingdom. It was possible she could have flown that far on her own, but her energies would be exhausted, so the use of the airship was appreciated.

Whatever was in the rather thick, wax-sealed packet of papers she had been given to deliver, however, Vielle did not know. His Majesty received it with a thoughtful frown, and directed her to take her stay among them for a few days...which gave her ample time to seek out His Majesty's librarian, Master Forrono. She met him in the impressively large royal library, where she laid out her carefully made copies of the sphere.

The paper copies, she would show to everyone. The sphere itself would remain packed in her bag for now. The power it represented, the mysteries it held, were too fabulous and too dangerous to tell all and sundry. *If a Courier ever learns a powerful state secret by accident, one of her teachers had stressed, it is far more important to guard that information closely, and share it sparingly if at all, than it is to blab it all over the place. Discretion is paramount in our profession.*

So she sat across the table from the royal librarian, explained that she had found these markings within a set of ancient ruins—all technically true, but with the implication it had been found on just a few crumbling stones here and there, rather than a hexisle-sized city—and waited for Master Forrono to read whatever of it he could.

The bespectacled, gray-haired gentleman tapped his chin thoughtfully, studying the sketch Vee had made of the markings on her thon-gun gizmo. “Yes...yes, I think I can translate at least *some* of this. It's not a common set of words. I'm afraid my expertise lies more in the realm of political missives, not scientific schemata, Miss Courier. There were so many wonders of the Ancient World that we just don't know about,” he added, looking off into the distance for a moment. A graceful shrug and he continued. “Two thousand years is a lot of time for the language to slowly slip out of our grasp. Their culture, too.

“So much of it was done in metaphor, too! Serpents that could talk, cats that wore clothes and walked on two legs instead of four... We've lost an awful lot of knowledge.” He gave her a kindly smile. “Still, to a true scholar, even the smallest scraps are worthy of study, and of speculation. I have some books we both could study. You can take the more current ones, since you don't speak the ancient tongue, and I'll take the oldest ones, and we'll work our way toward the middle of this problem together, eh?”

She smiled at him in relief, and nodded. And found herself helping him select and carry—mostly carry—book after book from the palace library shelves to that same table at the back, where they settled in to read, and read, and read.

It was there, a good three hours later, that Prince Kiereseth and Princess Nasma finally found her. The prince was the first to speak, hurrying to be more diplomatic than his hot-tempered sister would be.

“Courier, you are...” Kiereseth stopped and frowned, puzzled by the opened and scattered stacks of books. “Whatever are you doing?”

“Oh! Your Highnesses.” Rising, the librarian bowed quickly, then reseated himself and pointed at the books. “It’s quite exciting. This young lady has found a bit of engineering language from somewhere—she hasn’t said—but it seems that it’s instructions for some sort of device that...if my translations are right...could actually *control* the Vull!”

It was too late to get the librarian to stay silent. Vee had no choice but to adopt a neutrally innocent expression as Forrono babbled on.

“Reshape it, dissolve it, strengthen it... Astonishing, isn’t it? If we could only find the actual machine, we could open up trade and commerce on a...a vast, unimaginable scale!” He flung up his hands, then stretched them out, no doubt meaning to encompass far more than the township kingdom of Jade Mountain.

Nasma paled, her eyes widening and her face tightening in what looked like shocked fury. “Guards. *Guards!* Arrest these two!”

“*What?*” Kiereseth gaped at his sister. A glance showed the royal librarian stunned by the demand, and the courier equally confused.

“What...what do you mean, arrest me?” the librarian stammered as the sound of armored bodies moved through the stacks of shelving. There had been two guards stationed at the front of the library, no doubt to help protect the wealth of information contained in its thousands of tomes. It was odd, very odd, that the princess would demand his imprisonment. “But...but...but I’ve done nothing wrong!”

“Neither have I,” Vee asserted quickly, rising from her seat. “I have done nothing illegal, and nothing wrongful. I am also an Air Courier, a trusted, truly neutral emissary, and am diplomatically immune due to my station and career. Jade Mountain has *agreed* to the immunity of the Air Courier service.”

“They’re quite right, Sister,” Kiers asserted, turning to face his scowling sibling. He quickly held up his hands, warding off the approaching soldiers. “Guards, hold! Nasma, there is *no* reason to arrest either of these two. All they’re doing is looking up a bit of ancient information. And *if* that information turns out to be true, the...the odds of finding a machine that *could* dissolve the Vull...why that’d be the most important discovery of the millennium! Free trade between Earthland and the hexisles in the sky.”

His sister bit her lip, still looking furious. She drew in a deep breath and spat out her argument. “And if the removal of the Vull plagues our peaceful skies with hundreds of flocks of teros, Brother? And what of the massive windstorms? This is a threat to all of Skyland! It would be like a hexisle turnover every single day, instead of once every hundred years!”

“Begging pardon, Your Highness,” Vee interjected firmly, “but it takes an entire hexisle to rip the Vull wide open, which is what creates the centennial windstorms. A single machine would have about as much effect on it as a...as the Spires themselves do. Yes, there’s a small tear and a bit of *local* wind when the Vull is first pierced by the spike and its breacher cone, but then the Vull reseals itself quickly around the neck of the tower. *Any* machine the ancients might’ve had for manipulating the Vull couldn’t possibly have been built on the scale of an entire hexisle, because we would’ve *seen* such miles-wide machinery by now. This was nothing more than a bit of writing found etched among a cluster of tumbled stones, and last I heard, not even a Master of Earth could make stone act like a machine.”

“There is nothing wrong with what they have done here, Sister,” Kiers repeated, flicking his hands at the guards. “Back to your posts, gentlemen. They will not be arrested for sating archaic curiosity, however important it may appear. Courier,” he asserted, addressing Vee, “your services are needed in the King’s office. Our sire has business for you to carry. I suggest you gather your things and be on your way.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” Since she always carried her bag with her, and was by habit a neat person, it was a matter of mere moments to collect all the notes they had made into it and shoulder pack. Vee didn’t forget her manners, though. She nodded to the librarian, carefully choosing her words. “Thank you for indulging me in my curiosity. I’m afraid I honestly don’t know where to find the rest of the information we’d need. As I said, the stones were so old and weathered, it was all I could do to make the notes that I did.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever learn more,” she added under her breath, adjusting the strap on her shoulder, “but if I do, I’ll let you know. As a thank-you for helping me translate what little I had to share with you.”

“You do that,” Princess Nanasma muttered in turn, glaring at the Courier “You just go and *do* that.”

It was an odd thing for Her Highness to say. Giving her a bemused look, Vee shook her head and left without a word.

Watching the white-clad woman leave, and seeing his sister’s look of unreasoning hatred aimed at her slender back, Kiers felt uncomfortable with the situation. Somehow, he didn’t think his sister would let it end there. He didn’t know what sort of bribe could possibly sway an Air Courier, but hurried off himself to the private wing of the palace in search of one.

If he could convince her to pass along Father’s message to another Courier to carry, and then to take herself off somewhere far, far away, that might be best. At least, until he could get to the bottom of why his sister had reacted that way. He did know the correspondences she had carried came from engineers down below the Vull, but it was some project which his father hadn’t seen fit to share with Kiereseth.

Come to think of it, there are many odd things happening around the palace of late, the prince decided. It’s almost the century-mark, when this hexisle is due to drift back down again. Those old thonite-gas pumps should have been disengaged from the underside so that the machinery won’t be in the way when the people of the township and the lands around the hexlake join their thons together in the effort to guide the mountain back into its lake. On my last trip out and back, from the deck of the airship, I thought I could see even more structures covering the underside.

And why would Nanasma feel threatened by the thought of machines that could open up small, controlled holes in the Vull? She keeps buying so many Earthland goods, you’d think she’d be happy to be able to get them to her more swiftly, directly, and thus cheaply. His sister, striding with swift, still angry steps, had outpaced him. Kiereseth slowed his own strides, deep in thought. What is going on here? I’m the

heir to the township, so why aren't I involved more in these intrigues of Father's? Why is there more construction on the underside of the hexisle when there should be less?

He didn't yet have answers, but he had numerous questions, which were at least a place to start.

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What he found, or rather, didn't find, troubled him. The entrance to the bore-tunnel that led down through the hexrock to the experimentation chambers built into the underside of Jade Mountain were guarded. More than that, the guards were under orders not to admit "unauthorized persons" into the tunnel lift for a trip down below...and *he*, Prince Kiereseth Tokanay, was *not* an "authorized person."

But there were others who *were* authorized, for a cluster of five men in the grimy overalls favored by engineers emerged from the doorway even as he had argued with the guard. Kiers would have pressed the matter, if it weren't for their appearance. He knew none of those five men. Having made a point of learning the names of every person he met, of high station or low—a valuable trait in a diplomat and a prince—Kiers couldn't recall ever having met those men.

He even knew the names of at least five of the cindergirls who tended the fires and scrubbed the floors of the trio of palace kitchens, one for the royal family's daily needs, one for royal banquets, and one for the palace staff. He almost never saw them, but he knew who they were out of courtesy, which he believed strongly should extend to even the lowliest floor-scrubber. Kiereseth knew everyone.

But not these men.

Retiring to his quarters, Kiereseth paced and thought for a bit. If he could not get down the bore tunnel...then he would simply have to commandeer one of the palace air sloops, a modest, two-man crewed airship. Given the resistance of that guard at the door to the building containing the bore-tunnel lifts, he detoured to his quarters to pick up a pouch and fill it with a handful of clippers, sterlings, and glows.

He didn't bother to count the coins, just made sure there were more of the latter two than of the copper discs, then left a note for his secretary that he would not be attending any meetings for the rest of the day. Kiers didn't bother to call for his valet, either; he simply changed into clothes more suited for traveling on an airship than strolling around the palace, used to it from his long business trips abroad. *I'll bet my sister couldn't go anywhere without at least three maids to help her dress every day. She hasn't even gone hunting in ages. Then again, why should she ever want to leave? She's a Princess of Jade Mountain, one of the rare elite of the Skylands. The palace is the seat of her power, and she knows this.*

Which might have something to do with her reluctance to allow just anyone to have access to the Skylands. Airships are seen every few days here because Father and Grandfather both encouraged the new technology to be crafted and exploited, but they're still a rare sight compared to their more common use down on Earthland, he reasoned, exiting through the servant's corridor, since that path led past his father's chambers and down to the palace gardens more directly than any other. Once in the gardens, it was only a short trip to the tower where the small pleasure airships were docked. *Travel below the Vull is therefore cheaper than up above. Most people can afford at least one or two trips in a year.*

Does she fear the experience of living in the Skylands will be cheapened? He stopped just outside the servant's door to his father's study. *That...yes, how will that affect the township wars that happen every*

century, as people scramble to cram themselves onto a hexisle they know is going to float up into the Skylands soon? Before the airships, before the Spires that could pierce the Vull and create contact between the two realms, there was a heavy urgency for people to get citizenship status on a hexisle. Plenty of people want to escape all those nasty predators on the ground.

But with the Spires, they can leave at any time...if they have the funds for cheap travel. And if large sections of the Vull can be opened at will with the whatsit in that Air Courier's archaic message, then even more people could go up to the hexisles at any time, and visit, and...and try to stay? The argument was valid to a point, though Kiereseth had read accounts of men and women so torn by leaving their friends and non-township families behind, they had flung themselves off the hexisles. The billowing membrane of the Vull usually caught them without too much damage, and gradually they would sink through...but the drop to the ground far below was often lethal, unless they had enough Air affinity to float themselves down to the ground.

But even now, they don't have to risk that anymore, he acknowledged. They can just book passage to a Spire and travel down safely. I honestly don't see why she's so upset by the idea of opening and closing the Vull at will.

Voices approached on his right. Kiereseth turned to eye the door that led to his father's study. It didn't open, but he did hear His Majesty's deep voice...and his sister's strident tones. Only a few words came through the panel, but they were alarming ones. *Courier, arrest her, and stupid immunity agreement.*

Worse, their father's reply sounded...conciliatory. Kiereseth had taken more after their mother, Queen Selunna, than after His Majesty, King Kastran. From an early age, however, His Majesty had coddled Her Highness. Kiereseth was technically the heir, as the first-born, but even he knew that if the hexisle weren't due to land for another fifty years, Nanasma was favored highly enough that he might have been set aside in favor of her.

The only problem was, the hexisle was due to drift down and land within the next few years, and it was therefore necessary for the township to be ruled by someone who had experience in dealing with the kingdom of Sarenon, their Earthland resting place. That someone was Kiereseth. His Majesty was hale and healthy, and would likely rule a good decade or two more before age would have him stepping down, but Kiereseth would become his closest companion, his right-hand man. Not Nanasma, who disdained all things Earthland.

His father's voice came closer to the door. Kiereseth started to move away, not wanting to be caught eavesdropping, but King Kastran's words grew clearer, and alarmed him.

"...wouldn't be able to do that until after she's finished delivering our messages. She's due to depart tomorrow on the next airship headed for Jade Spire. Before she leaves, I'll include a note to the project engineers to send her back up here again with a trivial packet. At *that* point, we can arrest her. But I will not have those steam pump plans delayed. You know as well as I do that we are running out of time. Only half the hexisle bottom is covered. That'll buy us some time as we drift down, but even that won't do us any good if..."

His Majesty had moved away again. Kiereseth moved up to the door and pressed his ear to it, but their father had stopped talking, and his sister was making annoyed but obedient noises of agreement. Annoyed as well, but more for having missed out on *what* all that extra construction was about, construction which his father and sister clearly knew about, Kiereseth hurried for the stairs down to the garden. He almost detoured toward the guest wing, but reasoned that he could fly out now, examine the

underside of the mountain by early afternoon, and be back by nightfall, in plenty of time to warn the Air Courier not to accept any return messages.

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The prince hadn't needed to bribe a servant to help him sail the air sloop out over the hexisle edge and down under the mountain. The person he'd found to help crew the two-man ship was his own airship instructor, Captain Mirek Moranay, a grizzled skyman who had been among the first to test the winds when the first of Jade Mountain's ships wafted aloft. What they saw disturbed both men, and they saw it within two miles of the tapered edge.

"Ain't been allowed to sail under this far in a long while, Kiers m'boy," Mirek stated as they drifted beneath the metal-and-pipe plastered underside of the hexisle. "Now I see why. Someone's been buildin' a might much under here."

"Bamboo pipes? Fitted cones?" Kiereseth shook his head. He didn't object to the captain's casualness; when crewing a two man airboat, the captain was the captain, and he was just a set of hands. Their ship was too small to have the new-fangled engines to power the maneuvering propellers, just some hand-cranks and gears to step up their speed, but he could *hear* the chugging of engines. That confused him.

"Some are intake cones, I think," Mirek stated after he stared and listened, too. He pointed with an age-gnarled finger. "Those're suckin' up thonite gas. I can smell it gathering on th' underside. But see that little cloud there?"

"From the broken pipe?" Kiereseth asked, peering up at one of the bamboo lines. It was spewing a fine white mist from one of the corner joints. Bamboo, he could understand being used as a pipe; it grew fast and didn't require expensive fuel to smelt the metal. "Are they trying to re-infuse thonite back into the hexrock?"

"That ain't thonite gas. Thonite's kinda gray, just like the cubes when crystallized. Looks more like the white of pure steam t' me," Mirek said. He scratched his head through his knitted airman's cap, then shrugged. "There's water involved in dissolving crystallized thonite. 'S how we get the lofts to fill and float the ships. Maybe...they're trying to get the hexisle to float a little longer?"

"That's an insane idea. It's a hundred miles across," Kiereseth protested. Except he could see miles and miles of bamboo already within view. He shook his head. The idea *was* insane. "No, they're probably just trying to assure that the Jade Mountain lands smoothly and slowly. A lot historical accounts mention townships suffering structural damage to all their buildings when the hexisle jolts back into its hole."

"Well, we'd better turn about," Captain Mirek told him. "The mountain points up an' the belly points down; if we don't turn back, we'll either collide or have to loose thonite from the lofts to drop lower, an' replacing it with fresh dissolved from the cans will cost me some explainin' when we get back up."

"Don't worry, I've seen enough, Captain," Kiereseth told him. "Any questions I have—and I now have plenty—will have to wait for my father."

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He found Miss Vielle, the Air Courier, seated in the garden at one of the stone-topped tables not more than a few yards from the door, eyeing some of the notes she had made with the help of the royal librarian. Some servant had placed a couple oil lamps on the table to light her work, and a set of guards waited discreetly in the distance.

The moment she realized someone was approaching in the slowly dimming light of sunset, the Courier quickly scooped the papers together and stuffed them into her pack, rising politely to her feet. Kiers couldn't fault her caution. He held up his hands in a placating gesture, then indicated the chair she had vacated.

"Please, Courier, have a seat," he urged her. "Miss Vielle, was it?"

She nodded, sinking back onto the wrought iron chair. Kiereseth's great-great grandfather, a mere Overlord of the Township at the time the hexisle had started to lift, had invested heavily in raw materials for the century-long isolation. Having enough to spare for crafting furniture meant such things were wealthy luxuries which other, less well-provisioned hexisles had been forced to do without over the decades.

Kiers felt pleasure that Jade Mountain was so well-managed, but annoyed that his father and sister were plotting something behind his back. Something which involved trying to pump thonite gas into the underside of the mountain, and something else which now included interfering with the sacred services of the Air Couriers, highly valued by nearly every nation down below the Vull.

"...Is there something you wished to discuss, Your Highness?" she asked him politely, as he struggled with trying to find a safe, discreet place to start. "A private message you wish me to carry, separate from His Majesty's? Depending upon the size of it and the distance, I have a list of Courier fees you can peruse, and I promise to give you the same discreet service I give to your father."

He shook his head. "No, but I do wish to discuss my father's messages with you."

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth lost its polite little smile. When she wore it, she was passably pretty and youngish-looking, but when she dropped it, she looked quite stern. The severe cut of her Courier's leathers, so different from the soft flowing lines of Jade Mountain dresses, didn't help. "I'm afraid I am not at liberty to discuss his missives with you, as he has not listed you among the intended recipients. No offense is meant, Your Highness, but I take my duties very seriously."

"And I would not interfere with them for the world," Kiers reassured her. "But I have just overheard some distressing news. While the packet he has already asked you to deliver is, well, legitimate, my father unfortunately intends to include a note this evening to have the recipients send you back up here on some trivial errand...and have you detained for questioning." Her eyes widened and unfocused for a moment. "On one of my sister's whims, no less. I would urge you, Courier, to depart as soon as—"

"*Treason!*" Princess Nanasma barked, making him jump and twist in his seat to look at her. "*Guards! Arrest both of them for treason!*"

Kiereseth pushed to his feet. "Oh come now, Nanasma," he snapped back. "I have done *nothing* treasonous. I'm simply trying to save you and Father from making a major diplomatic mistake!"

“—*Mistake?* The only mistake *I* have heard this day is *you* attempting to collude with an Earthlander against your King’s wishes!” Nasma snapped. She pointed imperiously as the two guard who had been discreetly following her at a distance hastened forward.

Two guards whom Kiereseth didn’t recognize. He could have sworn he knew *every* palace guardsman, but no, these two were another pair utterly unknown to him. Alarm pushed him to his feet and backed him around the edge of the round stone and wrought iron table.

Across the table from him, Vee rose as well. She wasn’t about to take chances. She had the King’s original packet already tucked into her backpack, along with everything else she owned. For the first time in a long time, she was glad she followed the Courier’s protocol of being ready to move on at any moment.

While she was obligated by contract to deliver King Kasten’s packet—and deliver it she would, because not even Her Highness had the right to interfere in its safe delivery—she wasn’t obligated to stick around under a baseless accusation of treason from a person who was *not* her client. She would prefer to be diplomatic, but if a princess started accusing her own royal brother of treason, purely on circumstantial eavesdropping, and clearly without wanting to listen to reason...

The guardsmen, seeing both of them stand and back up, reached for the rifles slung by decorative straps over their shoulders. Vee tensed, lifting up off the ground. Accusations were one thing; bullets were something else. From the sharp intake of His Highness’ breath, he was in agreement.

Hands tightening into fists, Kiereseth glared at his oddly smirking sister. “You go too far, Nasma! I have done *nothing* wrong.”

“Colluding with a Courier?” she mocked. “I think otherwise! Besides, it doesn’t matter what you may claim you were doing; interfering with a Courier’s duties on behalf of this kingdom is still treason, and I *heard* you telling her to leave His Majesty’s service with her contract unfulfilled!”

“I wasn’t telling her to—*gah!*” he cursed as both guards lifted the stocks of their weapons to their shoulders. Whirling, he leaped down the steps to the garden. Everything was going wrong, and at this point, his sister’s mad, rash actions were so strange, he could not count on her or those unfamiliar guards *not* to fire on him. All he could do was scramble for the nearest hedge wall and put as many obstacles between him and those guns as she could.

“Guards! Don’t let him get away!” Princess Nasma ordered.

Vee hesitated. Both guards took off on foot after the prince, which meant their attention was no longer on her. For herself, she could fly off and dodge any bullets in the deepening gloom of the night, though her white uniform would make her a bit of a target. For the prince, however, he was confined to the ground.

He could dodge around obstacles, but those guards would know every hiding place, and be hot on his heels. Mind made up, she swooped down into the maze and hooked her arms under his. “Hang on!” she grunted, and tensed every muscle as tight as she could. “Don’t resist; I don’t want to drop you!”

The jolt of her increase in speed and the wind it generated knocked their bodies together. Half-blind, she steered as best she could, swerving around sculpted bushes, up over low walls, down into flower-lined alleyways. Within moments, they skimmed over the outer palace walls and ducked down into the maze of buildings and alleyways in the city beyond. Staying low, Vielle swooped both of them into an awning-covered alley, thankfully empty.

This was the fancier part of town, where the homes of the wealthy and the powerful dwelled, ranking themselves by their close proximity to the royal grounds. That meant there weren't vagrants loitering in the alleys and there weren't random people roaming the streets. Arms aching from carrying his weight, Vee released him. She could not, however, release her confusion and indignation at what had just happened.

"Fine mess she's gotten us into," she panted, hearing the sound of horns in the distance, back in the direction of the palace. "What in the name of Light and Life is she so upset about? Is she crazy? Is that it? Some sort of...of mental deficiency borne from a hundred years of Skylands inbreeding? Begging pardon, Your Highness," Vee added under her breath.

He snorted, his own heart only now beginning to slow from its mad race. "I'm beginning to wonder, myself. Her outburst doesn't make sense!" Kiers flinched at another blare from the palace trumpets, and cursed under his breath. "We're going to be in serious trouble, here. They're calling out the guard in force.

"We can't leave by airship; they'll have each and every single one in the city stopped and searched, and every ship tethered to a docking tower grounded within the hour. Our best bet is to head into the wilderness, somewhere up the mountain." He started to tug her forward, then stopped as she resisted. He meant to turn them to the right, on a path that would take them further up the mountain, but she pulled to the left, further into the city.

"*First*, we have to lose them, and if we leave the city, they'll see us. They'll also find us if we try to hide on the hexisle. *I* don't know the terrain well enough, and *you* can't fly us to a hiding spot even if you could think of one which your family wouldn't know about. Hexisles may be large, but they're not *that* large. Our best bet is to fly out of here completely," she stated under her breath, pulling him along the street. Fancy neighborhoods meant they could land without being seen, but it also meant they had to get into an area where the pair of them wouldn't stand out.

"You winded yourself just carrying me this far," he pointed out, peering along the streets as she led them at a brisk pace toward the heart of town. "I sincerely doubt you could fly even just yourself all the way to Jade Spire City."

"Actually, I could. Mostly, I was just breathless from fear, just now. Besides, His Majesty gave me a good supply of thonite cubes," Vee admitted, tipping her head at her pack. "But we don't have to go that far—actually, we need this alley. We need to get away from the fancier parts of town."

He wanted to protest, but there were actual pedestrians about, up ahead. Kiereseth was glad he hadn't changed out of his traveling clothes. The velvet and leather flying coat and fine-spun trousers did look a little out of place out here, but not nearly as eye-catching as more princely clothes would have appeared. Waiting through three cross streets, he finally got his chance to protest once they were among a section with shops that had closed for the night.

"We can only blend in so much, Miss Vielle," he reminded her under his breath. "Your white leathers alone will cause people to remember us. And by the time we can get away, they'll have guards at every airship dock on existence. I certainly don't have enough gold on me to bribe both guards and airship crew to get us off the isle. Our best bet is to therefore hide up the mountain until they finally lose patience with lying in wait. *Then* we can find a way off."

“We don’t have to wait, Your Highness,” she corrected him. “All we have to do is drop straight down off the isle and escape down through the Vull. Then we’ll be safe, because it’ll take Her Highness hundreds of miles to send her men to the nearest Spire, and then bring them all the way back. By that time, we’ll be long gone, lost in the vast tracts of Earthland.”

He blinked at her. “Sink through the *Vull*?” he hissed, gesturing with an arm back in the vague direction of the palace. “Are you as mad as my sister? It takes an *hour* or more for a man to sink through the Vull—and then the fall would surely kill me if I sank through before you do. *I cannot fly*. An hour is plenty of time for Father’s Air Guard to come swooping down and shoot us while we’re still mired in the membrane!”

The horns had finally fallen silent, but Vee figured that was simply because all the guards were gathering for instructions. Within a few more minutes, they would be combing the city. She couldn’t in good conscience leave him behind. Not when the charge was treason via colluding with her, of all people. Pulling him into a tangle of alleys, she finally stopped him in a darkened spot where they could barely see each other, let alone the white of her leathers. “Look, do you want to get out of here alive, or not?”

“*Yes?*” he retorted, agreeing with her question, but questioning her reason.

She held up her hand. “Then please, Your Highness, trust me. I owe you for calling off the guards that first time in the library. And I can get both of us safely off the isle and out of sight before we can be shot, but you’ll have to *trust* me.”

Grimacing, he raked a hand over his braided hair. “Father’s always listened to her more than me, so I doubt I’d have a better choice if they caught me... Fine. You’ll have my trust. For *now*. But I still think sinking through the Vull is a suicidal idea. Not if we do it right away. Maybe if we do it later, after they’ve stopped searching for us, and I jog or something to keep from sinking into the membrane right away...”

“So cheerful,” she mocked, releasing his hand and unslinging her pack. Pulling out her off-duty clothes, she sorted out a blue skirt and a matching vest and tossed the vest at him. “Now hurry and get out of that fancy jacket. We haven’t much time. I am far too recognizable in my uniform, and you’re too fancy-looking to be wandering these outer streets.”

Pulling the skirt over her head, she reached under it, unhooked and slipped out of her boots, and pulled off her pants. Slipping her feet back into the boots, she hooked most of them up, and took his jacket from him. Pants and jacket went back into the bag, and out came a lighter blue shirt and a dark blue vest, the latter of which she tossed at him. He started to protest at the way she wadded up his things, then subsided. Turning her back on him, she removed her leather jacket, her white shirt, and pulled on the pale blue one.

“I can’t close the vest,” he protested while she was still buttoning the new shirt over her chemise. “I could barely get it over my shoulders! I feel like it’s going to rip if I shrug wrong...”

“It doesn’t matter if it fits perfectly or not; the point is, it’s the best we have for a disguise.” Abandoning the top two buttons, she turned back to face him. It did indeed fit him wrong, but her haste and his awkwardness gave her an idea. “Pull out your shirttails,” Vee told him, lifting her chin.. “Unbutton the top few buttons, then roll up your shirtsleeves. And pull your hair out of its braid. Muss it up so it’s in a tangle.”

Grimacing, he did as she requested, though it offended his senses as a gentleman to make himself so unruly-looking.

“Here, a bit of dirt on your jaw,” she added a few moments later, stooping and swiping her fingers through the alley dirt. A quick sniff proved it didn’t reek of manure, though it wasn’t the most pleasant-smelling dirt.

He flinched back from her fingers. “You can’t be serious!”

“Hold still! You need to look like you have some beard growth,” Vee countered, catching his chin with her other hand. She dusted his jaw line with her fingers, then streaked a little bit on her face, and wiped the rest on his forearms. Rolling up her own sleeves, she got her arms dirty as well, then pulled out the pins holding up her braid. In the distance, they could hear authoritative shouts, though not yet the tromping of armored feet.

“We need to go!” Kiers hissed at her, watching her tumble her surprisingly nice curls all over her shoulders. He started to say more, but she undid a button, hiked part of her skirt up to her waistband, took something out of a side pocket, and looped the strap of her backpack around her ankle, shoving it against the wall behind her. “What are you doing?”

“If we have to fly, I’m making sure we bring my bag with us. With the papers and such that started this mess in it, I suspect it’s worth more than your life.” Uncapping the flask, Vee sprinkled some of the contents over her bodice and arms, then tossed some of it at him, perfuming the air with the sting of alcohol. “First rule of being a Courier in dangerous country: Don’t *look* like a Courier, and don’t *act* like one, either. Now get over here and kiss me.”

He blinked at her. “I beg your pardon? You can’t just order m—”

Grabbing him by the front of his shirt, Vee hauled him close with a flex of her muscles. She shoved the flask in his hand, hissing harshly, “Kiss me like you’re a buggering drunkard of a laborer and I’m your cheap, Life-be-damned *whore* for the night, and make it look *good*.”

A second tug mashed their mouths together. It took him a few rapid heartbeats to recover from the double shock. The first, of course, was her highly unorthodox plan. The second...was that she tasted sweet and felt warm, with far more feminine curves than that all-white uniform had implied. Giving in, he wrapped his arms around her, though he didn’t hold her close. She was a Courier, sexless and inviolate—and she yanked on his hair, nipping at his ear.

“*Stop being stupid!*” she muttered fiercely. The shouts were getting louder, accompanied now by a babble of confused voices from the citizens of the township and the flickering of torchlight bobbing this way and that. “Grope me like a *brute* and start acting like you’re trying to pound me into the wall, because you’re too cheap to rent us a flea-riddled mattress—*stop* being a gracious prince and start being a greedy *pig!*”

“If the guards ask you anything,” she added in a whisper, dropping her volume even further as the sounds grew louder, “turn your head away, drink from the bottle, then mumble and slur your words like a drunken wretch—try to speak in a higher tone, too, and maybe through your nose. *Don’t* stop acting like a lewd bastard with me until we have to flee an attack, or they’re gone. With luck, we’ll embarrass them into leaving before they’ve gotten a good look at us. You can go back to being a gentleman then. And you *will*. But for now, be *someone else*.”

Now he understood what she meant. He'd seen the type of men she wanted him to be, and had even chided a few guards who spoke of such things. It wasn't the way he was raised...but he understood what she was trying to do. Prince Kiereseth would never accost a floozy in a dirty, dark alleyway. In fact, he had always prided himself on his high discretion in intimate matters. The regular palace guards—the ones he knew, and who all knew him—would never believe His Highness would ever be caught in a situation like this. Particularly in the middle of running from them.

It was brilliant, if highly unorthodox.

Pushing her back, he pinned her bodily to the stone wall of the building behind her, and grabbed her breast. Licking her earlobe, he breathed on it as the lights came closer, giving her one last moment of proper, gentlemanly behavior. “*Please* pardon the indelicateness of all this, Miss Vielle...but I'm going to have to be rather lewd, now. I'll apologize thoroughly afterwards, I promise.”

“*Understood,*” she breathed back.

Stooping a little, he hooked her knee up over his hip, then quickly tugged at his belt and trouser buttons, loosening them and letting his pants sag. He wouldn't be able to run out of here if they fell completely, but her plan was no doubt to lift both of them and fly if they did have to flee. The rumpling of the dark cloth as it dropped would hopefully further disguise the fine quality of the material.

Pressing her into the wall, he rubbed against her, the folds of her skirt and the remainder of his clothes only thing keeping this simulation of lewdness from becoming the real thing. With a sharp, indrawn breath, she stiffened for a moment, then wrapped her arms around him. Encouraged, he licked her ear, then nibbled on the side of her throat, putting the back of his head to the entrance of the alleyway.

He didn't pretend to be crude with her, though. He wasn't sure how he could do so convincingly. Instead, he focused all of his attention on teasing her with lips and hands and body. A soft moan escaped her as he kept up his slow, rubbing thrusts. It grew louder even as the lights grew brighter, dancing into view as guards hurried past.

For her part, Vee quickly found herself in two minds about demanding an apology for any excessive lewdness. He was throwing himself into the moment at her request, or rather, demand, but it felt embarrassingly good. She moaned louder, releasing her inhibitions as some of those lights came back, and quickly panted a name. “Oh Georgi, oh sweetie, oh Georgi! Light ‘n Life, Georg—*EEK!*”

She yelped as one of the guards came up to within just a few yards of them. Clutching at the rumped man in her arms, she stared at the guard in fright. Kiers continued to kiss his way down the upper curves of the flesh exposed by her loose neckline and underlying chemise; the movements only showed bits of his face through the shift and sway of his tangled dark hair

“...Er...Georgi?” she whimpered. “Think we gots comp'ny, here...”

On cue, he lifted his lips from her now damp collarbone, turned his head away, and drank from the flask of whiskey. “S'alright...they c'n wait their turn, Lissy. Paid f'r you first.”

His hips thrust against hers with a distinct, hard bump, making her gasp, and the guardsman blush. She rolled her eyes up and closed them. Moaning again, she rumped his hair and clung to him at shoulders and hips. For the final, crowning touch...his pants dropped, leaving his legs covered only by his shirrtails, which were just long enough to hide whether or not he wore undershorts.

The guard sniffed the air, then let out a disgusted sound as Kiers continued to bump bodies rhythmically with Vee. “Both of you are drunk as a water barrel. Weather take you,” he cursed under his breath. “I’d have you hauled in for public intoxication indecency if I had the time—this isn’t them!” he called out over his shoulder. “Just some drunkard and his doxy! ...The two of you had better get out of sight by the time we get back, or I *will* lock you up for indecency.”

Kiers mumbled something against her sagging neckline but otherwise ignored him. Vee moaned and panted, trying to look like she was too engaged in their display to care. With another curse, the guard hurried back up the alley and left the area. More footsteps passed, and another guard poked his head into the side passage, only to hurry off to join the rest of the manhunt at a shout in the distance.

Simulating a drunkard and his doxy was a little too close to actual stimulation for Kiers’ comfort. He slowed his nudges and licked his way back up to her ear. “How long do we have to stay like this, do you think?”

“Give it another minute or two, then we could put ourselves back to rights, I’d say,” Vee panted against his own ear. “After that...they’ll be so far ahead of us that we can skirt the backside of the area they’ve been patrolling, and get close to the city wall. If we strip off everything pale, we can be up and over the wall in a flash, then race low along the ground. You’ll have to ride on my back...and I guess I’ll have to wear my backpack reversed onto my front if I’m to be carrying you piggyback.”

“I could put it on my back,” he offered, gentling the squeezing his left hand was giving her.

She shook her head slightly. “There’s something in it I’ll need, and I am still under contractual obligation to deliver your father’s packet. I’ll be fine, but the township capitol is about twenty minutes’ flight from the hexisle edge. We may need to flee hard and fast, in case we’re spotted going over the city wall. That means not stopping, because by now, I’ve no doubt they have roused the guards with Air-affinities and getting them ready to give chase.”

He stopped moving against her, other than to wrap her in a gentle embrace, a silent apology for not being a full gentleman. Particularly down below, where all that rubbing had created an inevitable side effect. “You know a lot about how to evade pursuit, for a supposedly neutral, inviolate Courier.”

“Not everyone respects the neutrality of the Air Post,” she countered. “We learn in several different classes how to hide and evade pursuit, to disguise ourselves in the air and on the ground, and how to seem ordinary and ignorable—why do you think we wear such a blatant uniform all the time? Everyone *expects* a Courier to wear white when we’re on the job. But sometimes we don’t, when the message truly has to be discreet. Which is why I’m going to expect there to be someone still watching us, and why we’re going to *walk* toward the city walls. We won’t fly until the last moment possible. Just because I don’t see him doesn’t mean a spy’s not there, after all.”

“Clever girl,” he murmured, listening to the last signs and sounds of pursuit fading. “You heard th’ guard,” he rasped in a louder tone, in case there indeed was someone set to watch them. Tugging up his pants, he fastened them more or less in place, and attempted to sound uneducated. “Let’s get on home. I wanna do this onna bed, eh?”

“Right, right...that’ll be extra,” she told him, glad he was managing so far.

Lifting her bag as soon as she discreetly untangled it from her foot, Vee let it dangle seemingly carelessly from her fingertips. Kiers almost offered to carry it for her, but knew she would refuse. He focused

instead on not walking like a prince. It helped when he let the ungentlemanly ache in his body help turn his normal graceful stride into a more awkward and hopefully inebriated-looking shuffle.

...

They were seen going over the city wall, in spite of their precautions. Of course, every town had a wall. Below the Vull, the walls were designed to keep out hungry predators, and the occasional invading army. On the hexisles, they were there to protect the rightful residents of each about-to-rise township from being overrun by would-be refugees during the turnover years.

Once a hexisle rose up into the sky, there hadn't been much need for those walls to be manned anymore, at least not until the advent of airships, and with it, air pirates. Jade Mountain's walls were well-maintained, and with the sounding of those horns, the city watch had put extra guards on those walls to scan for an Air Courier and an escaping prince accused—baselessly—of treason.

However, having picked a point far from any gate, Vee and her back-clinging passenger had a dual advantage: The strength of her Air-attuned thon, which allowed her to move fast in spite of his extra mass, and the darkness of fully fallen night. She paused once at roughly the midpoint to the hexisle edge to change clothes again, handing him his jacket in exchange for her vest.

Taking advantage of a nearby bush, Vee then inverted her all-white leathers so that the medium gray, seam-lined insides showed instead, and swapped her white, knee-high Courier boots for plain brown shoes. As she repacked her bag, grateful for the patch of bushes giving her some screening cover, she repacked her bag so that the sphere was on the top. Wrapping her matching leather backpack in a thin, dark linen cover to further disguise it, she moved back to the exiled prince, helped get him onto her back and took off once more.

It was an awkward flight; he kept half-choking her, until she got the bright idea to have him cross his arms below her collarbone and grip the straps of her pack, rather than throttle her neck and shoulders. She also had to lean a bit more upright than near-horizontal, because the least little shift of his weight kept threatening to push her sense of flying level down toward the ground instead.

Flying in the dark, Vielle could see where the land ended and the sky started because it was a clear night and the stars were out; anything less would have made their escape hazardous. There were a few points of illumination along the ground, farmhouses with lit windows, a small village off to one side, and a docking tower for airships in the distance. But there were three lights following them. They tried to mask the lanterns, but there was no natural source of light that would bob and sway like that, when she curved to one side to look over her shoulder without dislodging her passenger.

Her deviation from straight-line flight caused two of those in pursuit to keep going straight forward. The third...veered as well. She wasn't the only one to see it. Craning his neck, the prince muttered something under his breath, and hissed at her.

"We're still being followed. They're close enough, he's not yelling to the others to increase pursuit."

Vee saved her breath, nodding instead. She *could* carry a heavy weight a good distance, but she was out of practice. Not because her Air-thon was weak, but because it required a different set of tensions in her muscles, a different set of balancing acts than when it was just her own body and baggage that had to be carried. She did, however, increase her speed—and the land dropped out from beneath them.

That didn't affect her altitude; her affinity for flying had nothing to do with pushing against a surface like a person running. It was more like swimming just a little bit under the surface, when perfectly balanced between floating and sinking. Tension in her muscles, twists of her limbs and her frame, those steered and moved her through the air.

"Hang on," she whispered, and let them drop. Prince Kiereseth bit back a yelp and clutched hard at her upper body, not quite choking her, but coming close. She didn't protest the hard grip, though. As soon as he felt secure enough, she turned falling speed into flying speed and zoomed downward, curving back under the shelf of the hexisle's edge. To his credit, he didn't actually yelp, but she could hear him breathing hard to control his very reasonable fear of falling. If he'd had enough Air-affinity to fly himself, he would have been doing so, after all.

The starlight was blocked out by the huge bulk of the flattened, diamond-shaped landmass, but those tiny pinpricks of bluish-white light did illuminate some of the faintly rippling surface of the Vull, and the golden-toned pinpricks of light of a small town off to one side. She didn't aim for the town, though. She just aimed straight down under the mountain, where the light from the stars was fainter than elsewhere—not quite a shadow, but not entirely lit-up, either.

A glance up showed one of the lantern lights from their pursuers circling in a spiraling pattern. The other two were still going straight forward off to the side. Leaning close, the prince whispered, "That one probably has some sort of tracking-thon, some sort of Earth-Water affinity. I think one of the city guards can do that, to track down fleeing criminals."

"He came after us fairly quickly," Vee whispered back, half her attention on the approaching membrane, half on the ties to her chest-slung pack. "Our biggest concern right now is whether he'll be as well-prepared to sink down through the Vull and travel as we are. If he is...we'll have an hour or so on him. If he isn't, he'll have to go back up to the hexisle for funds and supplies."

Fishing the sphere out by feel, she carefully pulled out the hand-grip, then the crank, and...almost forgot the thonite cube. Luckily, the box for that was in an outer pocket at the moment. Fumbling one of the inch-square chunks out of the little chest, she pushed open the door at the back. The membrane was now close enough that she had to spare a few moments to slow down and gently touch her feet to the slightly sticky, flexible surface.

"Forgive me, Miss Vielle," the man clinging to her back muttered tersely, "but I cannot grasp how he could be an *hour* behind us if we sink down through the membrane!"

"I asked you to trust me, Your Highness. This is where you do so." She almost dropped the cube when he shifted, and a second time at his start of alarm.

"*He's coming our way!*" He didn't shout it, but Kiereseth did hiss it urgently. He squeezed her shoulders. "Fly—fly!"

"Please, *Mister* Kiereseth!" Vee snapped, barely able to get the lid of the fuel compartment shut on the sphere-gizmo thingy. "Stop wiggling and hold still!"

The lack of his proper title shocked him into doing as she bid. Taking advantage of it, Vee quickly opened up the aperture, cranked the main handle, and pushed the green button by touch, second from the left. Aiming at the membrane below her hovering feet, she sprayed in a circle. The mist glowed faintly,

which made her rider start and clutch at her shoulders. A quick glance up showed the light-bearer zooming straight for them.

Vee relaxed her muscles. They dropped, wind rushing up from below, and the prince clinging to her back yelped. Catching herself on the other side of the hole, she pushed the gold button and aimed up, filling in the gap. The pinpoint of light grew, becoming a hooded lamp carried by an armed guard.

“Halt, you!” he shouted...but his voice was already muffled. In the light of his approaching lantern, Vee could see the hole was now closed, and quickly tucked her sphere-gun-thingy into her pack, hiding it from sight. He drifted to a stop a short distance away, at enough of an angle that they could both examine each other. His gaze fastened on the prince’s face. “You have been declared an outlaw, ‘Prince’ Kiereseth,” the uniformed guard sneered. “I don’t know how you got on the other side of the Vull so fast, but I doubt you can get away from *this*.”

He drew a gun. Vee braced herself, thickening the air to deflect it. The spark from the flint flashed yellow-orange, and the gun banged bright yellow-white...and the Vull bounced, stretching but containing the pellet. Relieved it was a plain lead ball, she mock-saluted the Jade Mountain guard, and dropped down toward the distant trees.

Only when the lantern was a pinpoint did she swoop sideways, carrying her tightly clinging passenger away from the site of their escape. Not toward the village a few miles away, but with a check of the stars, due east toward Dellai. They wouldn’t reach it in a single day, but there was a city large enough in the local kingdom to have an Air Courier station along the way. A city where she could discharge her obligation to the sealed bundle of papers in the bottom of her backpack.

The man on her back shifted awkwardly. A few minutes later, he squirmed again. Vee grunted, rebalancing her flight. “Are you uncomfortable?”

A long moment of silence was followed by a muttered, “Yes. I, ah, need to...uh...you know...”

He let the words trail out, and it didn’t take much to guess what he needed. She was feeling both that and a bit of hunger. Neither of them had gotten their supper at the palace. Neither of them would be getting any sort of supper, other than the travel bars tucked into a side pocket of her Courier’s satchel, tonight.

Air was not her only thon-affinity. Sensing a clean, if small, lake sitting slightly to their left up ahead, Vielle veered that way. The water reflected the Vull-rippled stars overhead, and by their light, she found a patch of grassy shoreline. Landing gently, she helped him uncurl the legs and arms that had clenched around her for well over half an hour of tense flight. “Go off to the left side of the shoreline, Mister Tokanay. I’ll find some bushes off to the right.”

“*Mister Tokanay?*” Kiereseth questioned her. “I *am* still a prince, you know.”

“You are a prince in exile, accused of treason by a sister who apparently rules the palace guard thoroughly enough that they didn’t stop to question her orders,” Vee pointed out. Neither could see each other well, but she had the sense his hands were clenching into fists. Not to attack her, but out of pain at the truth of her words. “I’m sorry to put it so bluntly, but one of the things we Air Couriers are taught is to look *beneath* the surfaces of the people and the circumstances we meet in the course of our duties.

“You are now a hunted man, and only time will tell exactly how much your family wishes to continue that hunt, and whether they intend to keep the hunt merely a case of chase-and-capture...or shift to a case of find-and-kill. Not pretty words, no, but your best bet at *surviving*, Highness, is to pretend to be a *normal*

man,” she told him. “There may be more kingdoms under the Vull than hexisles that float above it in any given century, but there are not that many *princes* down here. Not compared to normal men, *Mister* Tokanay. You will stand out, until you learn to blend in.”

He stood there, tense and quiet, contemplating her words. Finally, he spoke. “You are right. I should damn you for it, but this is my sister’s madness. Hers, and some scheme of our father’s. You seem to know many things about...disguises, and escapes, and who knows what else that can be found under the Vull, Miss Vielle. While I may know the sides of Earthland life that revolve around politics, prestige, and diplomatic power, I don’t know much about more common sorts of lives. It is clear that you do. But of what I do know, I know I shouldn’t be called by my family name anymore.”

At least he was willing to bend. Vee bent a little as well. “You should be safe enough with the name ‘Kiereseth’ or perhaps ‘Kiers.’ They’re not too uncommon in these southern lands. You’ll want to pick out a family name for yourself that isn’t Tokanay...and I’ll do you the favor of addressing you as *Mister* Kiereseth, so that you’ll get used to the lesser levels of formality normal people use in their normal lives. I owe you for your warning about what your father was going to do with that return trip.”

“And I owe you, for getting me under the Vull in one piece. Though *how* you did it...” he started to ask. The silhouette of his rescuer, a vaguely humanoid shape of darkness against the faintly star-lit lake at her back, shifted as she lifted a hand in warning.

“The writing I was asking your royal librarian to transcribe came from the gizmo itself, not from any archaic collection of stones or Ancients’ writings,” she confessed. “I think, if your sister knew I’d had a *thing* on me which could dissolve and renew the Vull, and not just descriptions of it, she would have tried to kill me, not merely arrest me.”

“Given the mad event of the night, I find I cannot allay your fears,” he muttered. “At this point, I don’t know *what* she and Father intend to do...and I suspect you won’t let me break into that packet he hired you to carry.”

“Definitely *not*. The integrity of its seal is the only thing that will keep *me* from being arrested by my superiors, Mister Kiereseth,” Vee snorted. She lifted her chin slightly. “I have committed no crime, forsaken no oaths, and—most importantly—broken no contracts. My contract to carry that packet is strictly with King Kastran. *Not* with Princess Nanasma, *or* with Prince Kiereseth.”

He gave her a slight bow, more felt than seen in the gloom of the night. “And I will respect that...since what I was asking you was not treason, either. As much as I dearly wish to know what he has been up to, I doubt my father will overturn my sister’s mad orders. There are too many points of strangeness and mystery up on Jade Mountain of late, and I fear—in the ultimate of ironies—that I am now safer *under* the Vull...when, for the last five generations, my family was considered safer living *above* it.”

“Attend to your needs, Mister Kiereseth,” Vee instructed him. “We’ll meet back here when we’re through. I have a little travel food in my bag, and my Water-thon says the lake is safe to drink—I believe Master Forrone, the librarian, said you have an affinity for Fire, yes?”

“I do.” Tipping his head back, he stared up at the large patch of darkness off to one side, a patch which mostly blotted out the stars in that section...or rather, blocked out the stars, but which showed a few lights along its underside. “We’re still too close for me to light a fire. It might be seen. And our pursuers might be trying to sink through the Vull even as we speak.”

“I was about to suggest refraining from that. I’m glad you thought of it yourself. We won’t stop for anything but short breaks until we reach the nearest Air Courier post, so do what you need to do now, and I’ll get something ready for us to eat,” she directed him. “Keep thinking like that, and you just might survive long enough to figure out how to stop your kin from going completely mad.”

“One can only hope, Miss Vielle,” he muttered, giving her a slight bow before turning to march toward the darkness of the bushes off to the side. “One can only hope.”