

## The Knot

### *A Vulland Story by Jean Johnson*

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Vee bowed deeply before the Queen of Dellai, discreetly wiping some of the sweat from her brow. Her Airpost Courier's outfit, composed mostly of carefully bleached, lamb's wool and swan's down lined leathers designed to keep a Courier warm in the winds stirred by flight, was ill-suited for the sweltering heat of the jungle kingdom. She had removed her wool-lined cap before entering the section of the palace where Her Majesty wished to converse, but the rest of the uniform had to remain in place, stitched as it was in the black outlines of the Airpost's badge, a winged slip of parchment.

"Courier Vielle at your service, Your Majesty," she stated as soon as she finished bowing. Shoulders straight, chin level, she kept her short self tall and her gaze focused on the nut-brown woman seated on a thick cushion at the low desk, though she did watch the two guards standing off to either side out of the corners of her eyes. A droplet of sweat tried to trickle down past her eyebrow. Vee resisted the urge to wipe at it again. "What's the message, and what's the destination?"

This assignment was her first full solo run as an official Courier...and Couriers were associated with Air, not Fire. If she used her thon to cool herself, the others would notice and no doubt try to question her about it. Couriers had to remain discreet and near-anonymous in their duties, particularly the younger ones whose reputation weren't yet known. If she could build up a reputation for reliability, she could find herself posted to an established messenger route, rather than randomly sent here and there for these odd and sometimes dangerous, irregular jobs.

"The message is in this scroll," Queen Hestanna stated, nodding at the partly unrolled, stick-wrapped parchment sitting on her desk. It sat to one side; most of her attention was on the sheet of paper angled in front of her, and the words she was penning on its surface. "The destination, the hands of His Majesty, King Rogan of Katlange, or the hands of the High General of Katlange, Nomei Toguson. Those two men alone, and no others.

"Furthermore, since you got here so fast...if you can get this into their hands within five days, it would be to your advantage, Courier," she added, signing a sheet of paper with a flourish. "I have just written a note instructing them to pay you your fee as well, should you arrive in five days or less. I think they'll find it worth their while, since this message means the difference between war and peace with Langia for both of us. *If* you can get there by the thirteenth of this month."

"I understand, Your Majesty," Vee stated. She had to lift her gloveless hand to her brow to get the sting of sweat out of her eyes, but resumed her alert pose as soon as she was done. The Courier repeated her instructions. "This scroll is to be placed into the hands of King Rogan of Katlange, or into the hands of High General Nomei Toguson, and no others, as soon as possible. Preferably by the thirteenth of Hibernial Tertius."

She did not repeat the comment about whether or not the message meant war or peace with the kingdom located to the southwest of Dellai. Such things, her instructors had repeated over and over, were not to be discussed with anyone outside of one's employer, or if called upon to do so by a member of the Postmaster's Council. In fact, they were often a test of discretion in a Courier.

Blowing delicately on the sheet of paper, the queen placed it on top of the flattened section of scroll, rolled both up together, tightened the parchment with a shift of her hand, and knotted a cord around it. On her desk was a little pot of sealing wax being kept warm by a candle. Dripping it over the knot, she pressed into it with a brass stamp, then held it out.

Vee moved forward, accepting the scroll with another bow, if a shorter one. She found herself bowing a third, slightly deeper time as Her Majesty handed the young woman a heavy pouch that clinked with the coins inside. The amount inside would correspond to the number of ground-miles it would take to send a message on foot, though ground messengers were paid by the distance in hours, not miles. Couriers were not cheap.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Is there anything else?” she asked out of politeness.

“There are five scrips for thonite in the pouch,” Queen Hestanna stated, nodding at the leather pouch in Vee’s palm. “You may see Chancellor Vedun to have them filled. If you need more than that, you will have to purchase it. Light and Life brighten your day, Courier. Dismissed.”

“World and Weather be kind to you,” Vee returned politely. She moved back to the backpack she had left by the door. Slipping the scroll into the scroll case inside, she tucked the money purse into the leather pouch slung at her waist, bowed deeply one last time toward the middle-aged woman, and exited the queen’s study.

The palace was a marvel. Vee had grown up in Thundering Spire City, the capital of Crescenda, which lay far to the east. There, the warm but somewhat temperate climate of the lower lands rose up to the cooler elevations of the mountain supporting the Crescenda Spire. Most everything was built out of stone from the Gullwing Mountains at their back, with wood and tile, glass and metal leavening the view. Thundering Spire had been built along more vertical lines than anything else, though.

Here, nearly everything was crafted from wood on a series of terraces that stretched far more horizontally than vertically. A thousand hues of tan and brown blended with the thousand shades of green from the lowlands jungle. There were other shades, too; reddish woods, greenish ones, even ones that were bright gold, rich purple, black and near-white. Though the overall impressions were of brown and green, there were plenty of colors to be found inside the sprawling balconies.

The same servant who had showed her to the queen’s study now bowed and guided her through the labyrinth of covered walkways, screen-walled salons, and more solidly built chambers until they reached yet another office. The man she bowed to in here sported several wrinkles, gray-salted black hair, and a genuine smile. She found herself smiling back as she dug into pouch and purse, fishing out the five ceramic coins mixed in among the silver and gold.

“Thonite scrip? Of course, of course... Have a seat, Courier,” the chancellor bid her, ringing a little bell to summon a servant.

He handed over the coins as Vee settled onto the low padded bench across from his desk. These Dellaites seemed to love low furniture, but she couldn’t blame them; the closer one was to the ground, the cooler the air felt. Cooler wasn’t the same as actually cool, though. She debated flexing some of her fire-based thon to cool herself down, but decided against it. As per Courtier regulations, she had arrived yesterday and spent the day in rest, eating, bathing, shopping, and had gotten a good night’s rest at the city’s Post Hall. But now that she had a package for delivery, her job was to leave as soon as she had received all the necessary supplies from her client.

She had also spent time pouring over the local maps, last night. The ones she had studied suggested the trip would be easy enough to complete in five days or less...but that was if she travelled to the west and south through Langia. It would take longer if she went around to the east, through Losira and Knotlandia

Given Her Majesty's comment, traveling the Langia route might not be wise. But Losira and Knotlandia would force her to burn thon. It would also require her to be twice as vigilant. Most nations respected the sanctity of the Airpost service—those who violated the Couriers were refused future services, *if* a report made it back to the Postmasters—but some believed the risks would be worth it, if the information gave them an edge. Such as with a potentially brewing war.

"I suppose Her Majesty's message is particularly important?" Chancellor Vedun asked her idly as they waited for the servant to return.

"All messages entrusted to the Airpost Service are to be treated as important," Vee responded politely, as she was taught. "Beyond that, I have no say."

"You seem a bit young for this level of responsibility," the elderly man observed, stroking his clean-shaven chin. He tapped his jaw, then pointed at her. "Sixteen?"

"Nineteen, Your Excellency," she replied, since it was a direct question with a non-secret answer. "They don't allow Couriers to fly any younger than eighteen at best, and most don't join the full service corps until they're twenty."

"Bit of a prodigy, then?" he asked, lifting his brows.

"Bit of a laggard, actually. I have the thon for Air—more than enough to fly—and a head for discretion," Vee admitted, "but I lagged behind in linguistics. My Bellite was rusty, and my knowledge of Curvite and Valeite were rudimentary at best when I began my training."

"Yet you speak Bellite with the ease of a native," Vedun praised her. "I take it you're from one of the southeastern lands, where they speak Gullite?"

"I was, yes." She didn't explain she had been born a Crescendan. This was one of those other things they weren't supposed to discuss. Once a person became a Courier, they dropped all formal ties to their former homeland. The neutrality of the Airpost had to be maintained. "Now I am merely an Earthlander."

The servant came back in with a small container. He opened it, displaying the gray crystals in the white-lined box. Five of them, each a cube not much bigger than an inch per side. Vee plucked one from the depths, feeling the energy thrumming against her skin, and seeing the rough spot where the crystal had been plucked from its condenser. She nodded and returned the chunk to the box. A quick touch of her fingertips to the other four proved they were also real thonite, and not some color-doctored crystal. "Those will do, thank you."

Nodding, the servant displayed the crystals toward the chancellor, then closed the lid and handed the dark wooden box to her. Bowing her head in thanks, Vielle accepted it, tucking the box into her backpack. She didn't need to eat the crystals to augment her powers, but she could and would sell them for a nice profit once she got to Katlange. The farther away one got from the cities which knew how to concentrate the vapors and grow the crystals, the more valuable such things were.

"Do you need any other provisions, Courier?" Chancellor Vedun asked her politely.

“No, Your Excellency,” Vee said. “I made sure to stock up before attending Her Majesty, as is our custom. I just need a few moments to study my maps, and permission to leave from the nearest balcony. Her Majesty did indicate speed was desirable, and a direct flight from here to the Post Hall would be fastest.”

He smiled wryly. “It usually is, when one pays for Airpost. One of the perks of my position is a private balcony overlooking one of the gardens. You may use the table out there,” Vedun told her, gesturing at a side door, “while my staff inform the palace guard they are not to shoot at you as you depart. Though you look nothing like an attacking tero, of course.”

“Your kindness is appreciated,” Vee told him, dipping her head. Backpack in hand, she followed the servant through the indicated door.

Thankfully, the balcony was both shaded by a tall roof and placed on the northern side of the pocket garden...but the air was still warm and humid. With its rounded, carved railings and the terraced pockets of plant life, the view was quite lovely. Free to relax a little, she pulled out a kerchief as well as her map case. Wiping her face, she unrolled the maps.

A brightly colored bird landed nearby. It chirruped at her. If her Thon had been more attuned toward Water and Earth, she might have been able to sense its simplistic thoughts, but Earth was the weakest of her four elements. Still, its bobbing head and red-and-gold plumes made her smile. Bending her attention to the map, Vee gauged her route.

One way or another, she had to get to her destination. To the east and south, a desert followed by grasslands. To the west, more jungle. Due south, a thick press of rugged mountains, spanning a stretch of land as large as any kingdom, lay between the river-jungle kingdom of Dellai and the coastal-jungle kingdom of Katlange. It was called the Knot, and it cut off Dellai from direct contact with Katlange.

As the Courier flew, the best route seemed to be due south, but that would run her into the Knot. The best way to avoid the turbulence of convection currents, wind shears and downdrafts would be to fly so high, she waded through the underclouds and skimmed the Vull. Unless she could see one of the hexiles overhead to help her navigate, it would be a very damp way to fly, and difficult to gauge proper direction.

*Still, she thought. If I could fly through the Knot, rather than around it...I'd avoid potential spies in the kingdoms along the routes to the east and west, and cut at least two days' travel off my assigned time. A second pouch fat with coins would be a coup.*

She wasn't unfamiliar with mountain-based flight. She had been exercising her thon among the peaks and ridges of the Gullwing Mountains since her powers had first lifted her body at the tender age of eight. But the Knot was reputed to be taller and tougher, as well as home to a host of teros. The winged lizards were one of the few direct threats to the Couriers; normally, fatigue was their greatest danger.

A quick count of the coins in the pouch proved it was based on the mileage if she went the shorter route to the west and south, through Langia. The slightly safer but distinctly longer route to the east and south would have required about two hundred more in silverweight coins, or ten in gold. Doubling her payment with the fastest delivery straight through the Knot would outstrip that difference by several times...and by traveling through the Knot, she wouldn't have to push herself faster than the average Courier could fly.

If she flew at her best speed around the Knot, balancing her velocity versus the thon-energy spent, she could reach her destination in Katlange in just two, maybe three days instead of five or more...but that

would reveal she *could* fly that fast. If she flew over the Knot and they questioned her, she'd be honest about her flightpath. Just not about her Air-mastery.

Vee rubbed at her nose, tickled by a rivulet of sweat. It had been set straight and healed long ago by a thon-healer strong in the realms of Water with a touch of Earth. The bone had been broken by several bullies back home in Thundering Spire, two mean boys and another girl who had decided to express their jealousy of her powers. That fight had broken not only her nose, but two cracked ribs, a blackened eye, and her arrogance in her belief that her abilities alone could save her younger self. Of course, she also hadn't known how to fight, back then. Now she did, but that early, painful lesson in caution and discretion had been learned well.

*Over the Knot, it is,* she decided, nodding to herself. *It'll be the easiest to gauge, too; it's almost due south of here, with a slight eastward drift. Let's see,* Vee thought, rolling up the maps with quick, practiced movements. She tucked them back into their case, and patted down the thigh-pockets of her uniform, then the front of her shirt. *Sextant, astrolabe, compass around my neck... Water bottle on my hip...I don't need to find a wasteroom...so I guess I'm free to fly. All I have to do is check in through the aetherometer, once I'm free to lift off from here.*

She had unbuttoned her white jacket for comfort, but now rebuttoned it, making sure the folds lay flat and smooth. The winged parchment stitched on her chest and sleeves, with its scroll-curved ends and detailed feathers, had been stitched in plain black thread, indicating she was one of the lower-ranked Couriers. It was echoed on the thighs of her trousers, and in small relief on the fitted cap and pair of gloves she pulled out of her bag. Even the white pack had been stitched with the badge of her office. Fastening each piece in place reminded her of who and what she was, an Airpost Courier, member of the best fliers and most trusted messengers on the continent.

Pulling out her last piece of equipment, fancy brass and glass goggles meant to keep dust and bugs out of her eyes, she settled them on her face, tied down the oilskin flap of her pack, buckled herself into it, and turned to check she had grabbed everything off the table. Chancellor Verdun stood a few yards away, smiling wistfully.

“...Days like these, I wish my thon was attuned to the Air instead of to Earth with a touch of Water.”

She smiled wryly at him. “Days like these, Your Excellency, I wish I had a bit more Fire in me, so I could cool myself off. I take it I can fly safely from here?”

“You may depart,” he agreed. “Don't let anyone stop you, until you reach your destination, young lady.

“I will uphold my duties to their fullest, Chancellor. Light and Life brighten your day,” she wished him.

“World and Weather be kind to you,” he replied.

Nodding, she looked up, tightened her mind and her muscles, and lifted up. Arms spreading a little for balance, Vee tilted herself forward and drifted over the heavily carved railing. A glance at the sky showed she had clouds to contend with, but the midmorning sky was distinctly brighter toward the southeast. Soaring up, she paused high over the palace and checked for several city features, looking for a particular, slender, whitewashed tower with its distinctive wings and windsock.

Spotting it, she swooped that way. Her last task before leaving the city was to report in her destination point at the Post Hall. Landing on the balcony at the base of that spire, she ducked through the Courier's door and descended the spiralling steps to the aether room. In the last sixty or so years, great strides had

been made in communication; rather than writing down where she was headed in a ledger book—which ran the risk of spies breaking in and finding out where she had gone—she was free to make her reports via the aetherometer.

She wasn't sure how it worked, other than that it required a bit of both Air and Fire thon to empower, and a bit of muscle power. The clerk on duty in the aether room nodded in greeting to her and reached for the crank-wheel.

"...Reporting in to Bellaria?" he asked her, eyeing her sweating, goggle-covered face.

"Yes, please."

Nodding, he flexed his muscles, spinning the wheel a good dozen times, then flicked on a few switches as soon as a trio of glow-bulbs lit up along the top of the boxy machine.

Vee picked up the aetherophone and flicked its switch. "This is Courier Vielle. I have received my package and am traveling from the capital of Dellai to the capital of Katlange. Over."

The tympani cones rattled from their shell-boxes above the aether clerk's desk. "...*This is Postmaster Pakkar. Message received. Courier Vielle en route to Katlange, over.*"

"That is correct, Postmaster. Courier Vielle out."

"*Good flight to you, Courier Vielle. Postmaster out,*" they heard the static-fuzzed male on the other end state.

Flicking off the aetherophone's switch, she nodded to the clerk and retreated back up the stairs. Once again, she tightened all her muscles, lifting herself up into the air. Turning slightly to orient herself, she checked her compass, checked the sunlight glowing through the clouds, and headed south.

Even if she hadn't decided to fly through the Knot, she would have headed more or less south anyway. Couriers were trained to fly by major landmarks as well as compass headings, which included major mountain chains.

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Relieved the pack of teros had finally given up, Vee slowed her flight and checked her compass. They had tried to ambush her from up out of the clouds dusting the mountain peaks below her. Escape from their long, fang-filled snouts had required a lot of dodging and course deviations to get out of their pincer-attack, and then a long flight on whatever direction she had been facing to get far enough ahead of the fast fliers to discourage them. It didn't help that close overhead was the shimmering, slowly rippling membrane of the Vull, nor that there were clouds up above that in the vast reaches of the Skylands.

Sure enough, she was pointed east, which meant she had flown at least a few miles off course. She was supposed to fly a few degrees east of due south, but only by a few. Hoping she hadn't flown too far to recognize landmarks, Vee cautiously relaxed a little bit, letting herself drift down through the thin haze of clouds.

Wiping at the lenses of her goggles, she cleared her vision three times of the mists of condensation before managing to duck below the underbelly of the clouds. From there, she turned north and west to double-check her backtrail. Though many of these mountains were high, requiring most Couriers and travelers to detour around them, only a few were dusted with snow on top. Their most prominent features were their teeth-like shape—not too dissimilar from the mouthfuls sported by the teros—and the coating of greenery down their slopes.

*So...there is the triple-peak I gauged the last time I dipped below the clouds...which is probably when that tero pack spotted me,* Vee decided. She turned a bit more south. *And...no, wait, is that the triple-peak?*

Uncertain, she turned around a bit more, looking all around her. *I might've flown a bit more southeast for some of the chase. It's hard to tell with some of the peaks obscured. Hibernial seems to be the season of heavy clouds, locally. But...there was a conical peak off to the east, if I recall correctly, or at least a conical slope.*

She turned that way, starting to look for it, then blinked. Hastily scrubbing at her goggles, she peered off to the east. *Horizontal and vertical lines...? Mountains don't have right-angles... Is that a structure?*

Since she obviously hadn't flown far enough to leave the Knot mountains, and knew the mountains were considered too rugged to be inhabitable, Vee wasn't sure what to make of the lines and shapes she could see in the hazy distance. Curiosity compelled her further eastward. If there was some sort of settlement up here...well, the sight of an Airpost Courier might be a welcome one, since the terrain was indeed rough.

It was hard to tell, tucked below two layers of clouds, what time of day it was. Her stomach wanted to claim it was midday, time for a rest and a meal. Her muscles, trembling from the tight tensions of flying so fast, agreed. But curiosity kept her flying eastward. If there *was* a settlement, buying a meal from someone would make for a nice treat.

*Of course, if I pause to explore and make friendly contacts in some remote mountain village, that'll end with me still well within the mountains by nightfall, rather than close to the southern edge, if not past it. But I am making good time, and...yes, yes it is a structure!*

Wiping again at her goggles to be sure, Vee peered past the saddle of two mountains at the lines of green and grayish white in the distance. Yes, those were the geometric lines of architecture she was seeing. Whatever it was, though, it had to be huge if she could see it at this distance.

*A secret Spire city that no one knows about? Or maybe just a partially completed one,* she decided, reasoning it through. *Because surely the hexisles floating up in the Skylands would have noticed an extra airlock platform and reported its location to their trade contacts down here in Earthland by now.*

The further she flew, however, the more odd that misty view became. The structures didn't seem to grow palpably larger, which they should have if someone was building a Spire city on the back sides of those two mountains. Not until she reached the saddleback and passed through it, the clouds a few lengths above her head, did she realize just how huge those structures really were.

As the minutes ticked by, as she continued soaring toward the structure, the scale of it dumbfounded the young Courier. Those buildings easily dwarfed anything Thundering Spire or Bell Tower City had erected around the bases of their Vull-piercing towers. And the more she flew, astonishment overriding

the hunger in her stomach, the more she realized just how the word “huge” was inadequate for what she was seeing...and that what she was seeing defied rational belief.

The structures had been built on chunks of a vast shelf of stone that more or less spanned the entire valley. It took her curious eyes a couple minutes to puzzle together the original shapes, since some of those structures sat at awkward angles. But eventually, as she flew onward and onward, her mind pieced it together..

The greenery-draped buildings sat on chunks of a vast, diamond-bottomed shelf kept upright here and there by the slopes of the mountains its edges crushed. Those chunks had formed a hexisle, one visibly displaced from its rightful spot, which should have been either in a hexhole in the ground or floating somewhere up in the Skylands, as all hexisles eventually did every so many centuries. There was no thonite gas pouring into the cracks lining this hexisle’s base base, giving the massive, hundred-mile-wide platforms their loft.

*Wait...Hex Lake in Bellaria doesn't have a hexisle...so is this the lost hexisle that should have displaced the water in the hole? But...this place is days of flight from the Belly Valley! Hexisles drift in the Skylands is usually no more than a hex or so in width...*

The vast, miles-long city seemed to have been built for giants, but the illusion was nothing more than grandeur on the part of the architects. Still, the scale awed her. The Bell Tower was the first spire to have successfully pierced the Vull. It had been built up over the last two centuries with several others gradually following suit, such as her own home city of Thundering Spire, built within the last handful of decades. This, though vast in scale, was no Spire City. It spanned both the vertical and the horizontal, but as far as she could tell there were no towers high enough and sharp enough to have pierced the membrane parting the two realms.

*Unless, of course, the tower had fallen. My classes on hexisle townships included lectures on how the buildings all had to have strong peaks to help the central mountain-peak pierce the Vull whenever the hexisle eventually rose, Between their points on tops and their points on bottom, the counterbalance forces are supposed to be strong enough to force each one through the barrier. But it makes no sense to put a tower spire on a hexisle when the hexisle will eventually rise and fall on its own. So this township was just...just a vast city on this edge of it.*

Now that she was nearing the downed island, she could see more details. Some of the buildings had collapsed off the edge of the hexisle shelf into the valley, leaving chunks identified mostly by their geometric edges beneath the plants coating most surfaces. Others stood more or less straight and proud, or canted at angles that made her eyes twitch. Still, the crumbling ruins reminded her of the queen’s palace, majestic in their own way, if vastly neglected.

Ve couldn’t remember hearing of hexisles that had crumbled so badly; when they lost their ability to float, they drifted down, pressed against the Vull until they pierced through, and were usually guided back into their nearby holes by the local thon-masters. That usually happened while everyone else was being evacuated from the surrounding lands to avoid the inevitable flooding; hexholes inevitably collected water over the century or so they were vacated, and that water had to go somewhere once displaced.

*Maybe it’s because they aren’t being bolstered by thonite gas? We know thonite affects all four Elements, so not only would it give the hexisles the loft to float, but maybe the stone gains strength from the permeating gas? That made sense to her. Hex Lake has been around for well over a thousand years, and Fire and Air are both ephemeral, whereas Water and Stone last far longer...so maybe it would have taken several centuries to lose not only the loft, but also the tensile strength of the stone...*

*The scale of this thing, she realized, is...is... Those tiny little dots, those are the doorways? She had thought the small archways were doors, but no, those were broad corridors. Dozens of pillars as thick as the tower of Thundering Spire supported whole layers of city. Cities, almost.*

It took her several more minutes to soar close enough to actually alight on top of a broken column on one midlevel ledge, where trees and bushes and even grass grew in profusion. Peering through vast archways as broad as many small towns, she could see the ruins stretching on and on. Much of it was designed around great squares that let in light all the way to the bottom-most layers, but the upper levels themselves were large enough for towns—large enough for farms and paddocks.

Rubble lay below her, cloaked in verdant growth. The support column she stood upon had broken at some point, bringing a part of the upper levels down. But only a part. The vast vaulted spans supporting the next level up looked like they had been formed from solid stone. Curious, Vee tensed her muscles and flew upward, all the way up until she could examine those stone ribs by hand.

*Light and Life! Solid stone... These aren't mortared blocks; these are thon-shaped rocks! I've seen a building or two grown that way. But those were mostly in the wild bordering kingdom edges, where the waystations are needed to protect the caravans from wild beasts, and the Earth-masters grew them over a matter of months. The scale of this place...*

*Why haven't we heard of thon-crafting on this scale? she wondered, dazed by the effort, the cooperation it must have taken to create such a place. This had to be thon-grown stone. The city was crafted from speckled white granite, not rough black hexrock. Was it grown from granite gravel crushed and transported to this hexisle for regrowth? Or...or was it grown up through the hexisle somehow from deep within the ground? Why aren't there legends of this place in...in Bellaria's lore, at the very least, if this hexisle came from Hex Lake.*

So many questions, so little answers...and not enough time or resources to figure out why. She might be able to spend the rest of the day exploring a little bit, but by morning she would have to leave, or risk losing double pay.

Stomach cramping with hunger, Vee looked around below her, finally settling on the same broken pillar stump as before for her picnic. It was broad enough to have hosted a small village market, and hosted little pockets of grasses and shrubs, the sort that grew with shallow roots in shallow soil. Digging out the oilskin wrapped sandwich she had asked the Post Hall cooks to make for her, she bit into the mix of bread, greens, scallions, and roasted beef. The sauce used was a bit more spicy than she normally ate, but water from the skin clipped to her belt washed it down well enough.

Off to her left, the collapse of the local upper section had bitten a chunk out of the midlevel, giving her a good view of the yards-thick stone of the midlevel platform. More solid stone, with no joint or mortar lines. Down below, far far below, lay the “ground level” of this place. She could see the wild gardens stretching off to the broken edges of hexstone in the distance.

The view would have been both magnificent and horrible for anyone afraid of heights. Vee had no such fears; she was afraid of being attacked by sky-borne predators, as most thon-fliers were, but not of falling. If she looked off ahead and to her right, however, it was hard to tell she wasn't simply on a pillar set on flat, stable land.

Abandoned ruin though it was, the plant-draped buildings of the midlevel looked normal. There were even a few furbits hopping across a patch of grass, though she wasn't quite sure how the horned hares had

managed to climb up here. *Although...some of these hexisle chunks had looked like they rested right up against the sides of the valley, and if the furbits had hopped across the isle long before it broke up...*

Again, too many questions. From the number of broad balconies above the midlevel floor, sub-divided floors as it were, she could guess that a number of the residents had been strong enough in Air-thon to have flown from place to place. There were also hints of broken stairs under the greenery occupying many flat surfaces, which would make sense if Earth-masters had lived here as well as worked to build the place. *And probably Water-masters and Fire-masters, too.*

Absently, she finished the last of her sandwich. Debating a long moment, Vee finally pulled out the box of thonite and bit off a corner of the crystal. It crumbled in her mouth, crunching and melting and spreading a meaty-sweet flavor that wasn't anything like candy. Southern kingdoms such as Katlange and Dellai were renowned for their sugar cane fields, but sugar didn't taste like this. Nor did honey crystals.

It took a few moments for the flavor to seep into her bloodstream. When it did, she inhaled sharply, re-energized despite the long hours of flight and rapid, dodging escape from the tero flock. *I'll spend the night, here. Find a safe place for shelter—which I would've had to do anyway—and do a bit of exploring for the rest of today. Then just head south in the morning.*

There was no question she would investigate the ruins. Couriers were instructed on the major landmarks and cultural features of every known kingdom, part and parcel of their diplomacy and geography lessons. None of those lessons had included a lecture on this place, and it was with an ongoing thrill over her discovery of this place that she tensed her body and took to the air once again, determined to see just how much of the original hexisle the city-scape spanned.

She didn't know yet if she would tell anyone about this place, though. If it had remained hidden for all these years, absent from any known lore, then it might only be accessible via the air. Steep mountain slopes, rocky cliffs, the threat of rockfalls or even avalanches might endanger the people who would come to see it for themselves. And with the mountain winds that gusted this way and that, those who weren't Courier-strong in their thon might not be able to fly here safely, either.

*Plus, it just feels special, extra special, knowing I'm the only one who knows of this place. Her mouth curved in a smile. I'd call it Veeland, except that's already the name of a large island kingdom far to the northwest. Vielland, maybe? Hex Vielle? Vee Hex? Hex City? I don't know. Probably Hex City. But I won't tell others about it.*

*I'll keep this secret to myself, for now. As a good Courier should, when it's a secret this huge...*

...

High General Nomei Toguson eyed the sweating Courier standing before him and quirked one brow, watching her bravely ignore the droplets trickling down her brow.

“You are permitted to remove your flight jacket in southern climes, you know,” the broad, muscular man rumbled, his voice as deep as his shoulders were wide.

“Thank you, General,” Vee said, and unbuttoned her white leather coat. Beneath it, she wore a sleeveless linen undershirt, but given the way the natives wore breast-bands and sarongs, she doubted anyone would be offended by it.

Unrolling the seal-broken scroll a little bit further, the High General of Katlange finished reading the inserted sheet. “...Well. As it is the twelfth of Hiberna Tertius...it seems our royal treasury owes you a bonus added to your fee. You must have flown as though a hundred teros were at your back to get here so swiftly.”

“I was chased by a few along the way, yes,” Vee admitted wryly, smiling at him. There had actually been a pack of the winged predators living among some of the ruins of Hex City, though either she hadn’t gone close enough to catch their attention, or they just hadn’t been hungry at that point.

“I haven’t seen a Courier as short as you before—are you new to the southlands?” Toguson asked her politely. “Did you see any interesting new sights?”

“Not really. Mostly just some lovely mountains, and a lot of clouds and jungle trees,” Vee hedged lightly. “It’s hard to imagine it’s still the tail end of winter elsewhere in Earthland, everything’s so warm and green down here.”

“Mm. Well, we like it. I cannot imagine having to deal with snow and ice for half the year... If you’ll take your leisure on the balcony outside, I’ll have staff bring you something cool to drink,” he directed her, gesturing at the double doors standing open off to the side. “There may be a return reply—you’re not a route courier, so you will be free to take one back, if there is?”

“Once I have been paid for this service, I will be free to contract with your kingdom for new services, yes, High General,” Vee replied, giving him a slight bow.

He nodded, then paused and eyed her short, slender form. “...They’re letting them fly younger and younger every year, it seems. Next, they’ll be letting raw children fly. Still, so long as you get the job done, I won’t object. Please have a seat on the balcony, Courier. I’ll bring you word within the hour if we need your services further.”

Vee nodded politely. She didn’t correct him as to her age, instead moving out onto the indicated terrace. Here, the palace was all whitewashed stone and tiled rooflines, though like the other one, it offered plenty of shaded balconies on various levels for visitors to enjoy. The view overlooked the great bay flanking the capital, with its mass of docks and tangle of ship masts and sails, from little fishing boats to great galleons laden with tradegoods from a hundred other ports. It also displayed a tangle of whitewashed, brown-tiled roofs sloping between the palace and the sea.

She could easily make out the white-winged spike marking the Post Hall, and the tall, stone watchtowers guarding against the rare pack of teros that might press this far into civilized lands. They knew what ballistas were, what they could fire and what their ammunition could do, and respected the weapons.

General Toguson could think whatever he liked of her, so long as he treated Vee with the respect due an authorized Courier. Her identity was meant to remain as facelessly efficient and discreet as the outer mountains of the Knot. So long as she herself knew she was a secret treasure inside, that was good enough for her. Being underestimated and overlooked could be quite useful.

*If these people want me to carry a report back to Queen Hestanna, I won't object. I can stop by the ruins and explore them a bit further again. It'll be a good stopping-point so that I don't exhaust myself too much in fighting the winds that play among the peaks.*

Wiping at the sweat beading on her cheeks, Vee smiled ruefully. She had been a bit awed by other capital cities, first on her trip to Bellaria for training, then on the trip south to Dellai. But now that she had seen Hex City, the view before her seemed almost provincial. Small, though it was easily five times the size of an average city.

Waiting quietly for her promised drink to arrive, she hugged the secret of her find in the Knot to herself. *And if I can explore the lost city a bit more, I'm sure to stumble across some scrolls or books or...or something that'll tell me who built it, and why they didn't return it to its hexhole. So many questions, with so little time...*

*I may not be allowed to review and learn the secrets of my patrons as a Courier, but there's nothing to stop me from learning the secrets hidden in the Knot. When I have a chance.*