

Jade Mountain
A Vulland Story by Jean Johnson

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Looking at the vast bulk floating ahead of them, Auguston Sharpe had no idea why he had agreed to meet in person with Her Highness, Princess Nanasma Tokanay of the Jade Mountain hexisle. Maybe it was the money, a generous traveling stipend for the hunter to pass through the airlocks of the nearest city with a Spire that pierced the pale golden membrane of the Vull. Maybe it was curiosity; only in the last fifty years or so had anyone been able to pierce the Vull in the peaceful decades between all those hexisles rising and falling.

It certainly wouldn't be for the animals found on a hexisle; they were almost invariably native to the local patch of land the hexisle had once been attached to, almost a hundred years ago. Somewhere far below was a giant, six-sided lake a hundred miles wide, capped along its bottom with voracious machinery built to absorb the thonite gas that seeped up from the former resting place of this hexisle, but he couldn't see it.

There was a rainstorm between him and the ground, the tops of its clouds brushing up against the underside of the local patch of Vull. All he could see were the golden rippling waves of the membrane, the clouds of the Skylands, the vast wedge of rock that was Jade Mountain, and the occasional other airship traveling to or from the hexisle, like the one carrying him.

From this far away, he could see why the hexisle had been given that name; its sloped peak was covered in abundant greenery. The underside looked a little strange, covered in roundish and boxy shapes with great lines running here and there, but he guessed it might have something to do with the way the hexisle was destined to drift back down to the ground soon. It seemed strange how, down below the Vull, the higher one went the colder it got, yet once a person was up here in the Skylands, there was heat equal to any found in the lower elevations of Earthland, leaving the semi-tropical hexisle still warm, lush, and green.

Sharpe had heard science philosophers muttering something about the heat conduction properties of the Vull, but since no one knew *what* caused the Vull to exist, no one could be absolutely sure. One of the things they did know was that the hexisles pierced the golden membrane roughly once every hundred years. They also knew that thonite gas, which escaped from the holes where the hexisles sat when they rested on Earthland, collected along the underside of the Vull before seeping through to the Skylands. Thonite gas made the hexisles rise and float, and fall when the last of it seeped away.

Something about the crystals it formed on certain metals also made the Spires possible, permitting these airships not only to travel from hexisle to hexisle, but to transport passengers and cargo from the Spire docking towers, permitting an unheard-of level of contact between the two realms, outside of the turbulent century mark.

That century mark was drawing near. Sharpe could count numbers as readily as any other man, but it was more than that. The animals of Earthland knew, and what the animals knew, he knew. He was familiar with more kinds of terrain across the vast, sprawling continent than anyone but an Air Courier, probably. And in the last two years, the beasts had started avoiding the boundaries of certain hexisles. No doubt they could smell the thonite gas starting to escape from tiny fractures in the ground along those boundaries.

A shrewd man, he had laid bets with gamblers in a couple cities as to which ones would rise this time—not when, since only World and Weather knew when the turnover would come, but which, yes. However, the bulk of his funds came from hunting, trapping, and preserving the hides of various beasts. Sometimes it was as a furrier; sometimes as a taxidermist, though there were others with more skill at the latter. Lately, there was an interest among the various rulers and wealthy families for collecting live animals, to cage them and display them to visitors far from the animals' native lands.

Sharpe wasn't entirely sure he approved. Some of these so called animal-lovers just wanted to put the beasts in a bare cage with maybe a bit of straw and feeding bowls; they had little to no *thon* in either Earth or Water, no affinity for plants or animals, no understanding or caring for the creatures they collected. Those who sought his services as a trapper knew that if they wanted him to catch and fetch a rare creature, he would insist on bringing some of the plants and terrain features that animal preferred and arrange them in a carefully prepared pen, to give it a semblance of home in its captivity.

He suspected that was why he was being summoned to Jade Mountain. Even though the hexisle would surely fall within the next two years, floating back down to the water-filled hole it had risen from, the royal family of Jade Mountain wanted the best trapper in Earthland for a reason. Or at least the man their contacts below the Vull swore was the best.

Sharpe wasn't going to call himself the best; that way lay hubris. A hunter who got full of himself stopped paying attention to the little signs that bespoke of warnings. He'd be more likely to ignore warning signs coming from his fellow humans. *So pay attention in this Jade Mountain court. You've been summoned by Her Royal Highness, not the King, so she's clearly spoiled and used to getting her own way.*

If he ever had a child of his own, he'd make damned sure she wouldn't grow up spoiled. Hard work, learning how to fend for oneself, these things made a woman or a man strong inside as well as outside. Being handed everything? That made a person weak inside. No real character where there was no real adversity to overcome. *Weak metal, and liable to break when stressed. I think. Don't know much about metal...but enough to know dross when I see it.*

He had a bit of Earth-flavored *thon*, but much more on the Water side, not the Fire. Animals were his affinity. He knew them, he could sense them, he could track them and tame them...and he could still them long enough for a swift, accurate kill. Politics was another matter. He didn't know of any flavor of *thon*, of the four elements, the eight powers, of anything between Light and Life, World and Wonder, that could aid a man in understanding the ebb and flow of politics, or the stuffy ways of court life.

Give him a clear-cut battle for life or death with a bear or a bison any day, or a tavern with real food, strong drink, and women who wouldn't hesitate to arm-wrestle a man. Not this protocol and politics nonsense. No, the only good thing about this visit to Jade Mountain was the promised pay.

Though the view was nice.

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The steward or butler or whatever's instructions on proper protocols had been explicit. No weapons were to be allowed in the royal presence either, which meant giving up three of his five knives—the visible ones, since he didn't bother to mention the two that were hidden—his rifle, and his pistol. At least didn't

take the ammunition. The parlour he was shown to appeared to be modest by the palace's standards, but the pastel-walled room with its big bay of glazed windows could have fit his entire childhood home inside, and maybe squeezed in the outhouse, too.

Three steps in, bow, sixteen or so steps forward to get him within polite conversation distance, a bow again, and then two more steps to get just outside of a body length from Her Royal Highness before he was expected to drop to one knee. At least his knee landed on a thick, plush carpet decorated in red and gold and blue squiggles on a pale white background, the kind that said no dirty boots had ever trod on the woolen strands.

He wished he hadn't agreed to let the valet-footman-fellow in the waiting room buff up his boots, just so he could've seen a bit of good, honest, dry Earthland soil powdering the Skyland carpets, but oh well. He didn't think pissing off his erstwhile employer would be a good thing if he tried to go out of his way for such things, though.

Her Royal Highness, Princess Nanasma Tokanay, was actually quite lovely. She had dark eyes, either gray or blue instead of the brown expected, thick, black, chest-length hair which had been brushed until it gleamed in the daylight coming through the parlor windows, delicate cheekbones, a small but attractive mouth, and the naturally golden-tan skin of the locals. Her clothes, however, took him by surprise.

From the moment he had been shown into this room, her tabard-like dress had caught his attention. Despite the heat of midday outside, the warmth of the palace itself, the outermost garment had been stitched together in a fanciful pattern of furs. Trimmed short and plush, but furs. Rabbit, fox, mink, even creamy white bits from the *pacas* of the islands far to the south and west.

He counted at least seven different species by the second bow, possibly eight, and wondered why she wasn't visibly sweating. He himself had been reduced to a sleeveless tunic and loose trousers of the desert style favored off to the east in order to endure the heat and humidity of this region.

When he knelt before her, however, he felt a cool breeze against his face. She was spending her personal energies, her *thon*, to keep herself comfortably cool. It was a display of Air-based power that impressed him all the more by its sheer wastefulness. He didn't hide the shocked widening of his eyes at that realization...and she didn't hide the slight smile that curved up the corners of her lovely rose lips.

"Greetings, Master Sharpe," she greeted him, her voice light and smooth. "Welcome to Jade Mountain, and to the Skylands."

She paused, no doubt expecting some sort of flowery speech. Sharpe just nodded, a dip of his head acknowledging her greeting. Her smile didn't falter, though she did wait an extra beat to see if he would speak. When he did not, she continued.

"We have been told by many of your kind, hunters and trappers, those with the Earth-*thon* and the Water-*thon* in their veins, that you are one of the best furriers in all of Earthland. As you can see," the princess stated, gesturing at her overgown, "I deeply enjoy wearing them. The softer and richer the fur, the better. But these, I am told, are not the softest furs in all of Earthland, though the other hunters I have hired have tried their best to find what I want."

He said nothing, just listened to her, and the silence as she paused. At least she was polite enough to give him an opportunity to speak, even if he didn't take it. He did like how she didn't use "we" royally. Having to put up with that level of pretentious manure shoveling in other wealthy employers grated on his

nerves. He could guess where she was about to go with her request, though, and wondered what she expected to wear if rabbit and mink and fox weren't on the list. Housecat, maybe?

"The furriers all swear that there is nothing softer than these," Princess Nanasma stated, gesturing at her gown. "And yet I am told by those who have visited the Greater Isles of Surshan and the Torrin Archipelago, far to the east, that there is a small creature dwelling on the isles with fur as soft as a sigh, and as light and fluffy as a cloud. It is, I am told, not much bigger than a housecat, or a lapdog."

He frowned in thought, trying to remember where he had heard of such creatures. This time when she paused and awaited a reaction, she got one. "That would be...the *chinch*?"

She smiled. "So you have heard of it. Excellent. I wish to wear a jacket of chinch fur, Master Huntsman. I am told that no one has ever worn their fur before, but if there are these chinchas, and their fur is that soft, then there should be a way to make and wear a jacket. You will do this for me...and if you do, you will be well-rewarded. Fifteen thousand glows."

Oh, Light and Life, he groaned silently. *She is a spoiled brat after all*. Rocking back on his boot heel, one knee still upraised, he folded his arms and rubbed one hand over his chin, rasping at the dark stubble that insisted on growing every day as soon as he shaved. *Still...fifteen thousand gold is nothing to sneeze at. A man could set himself up nicely for years on that much money...*

The part of him that had hoped otherwise hadn't been a large part, but it had been there. Letting it go, Sharpe considered her words, what he knew of the animal in question, and how he could handle her request. Finally, he shrugged. "A jacket, I cannot do. I'm not that good. But a vest, *that* I can do. Half up front."

Her brows lifted. "I beg your pardon? You do not dictate the terms of our business arrangement to me."

"I'm not haulin' the best fur in Earthland thousands of miles in a backpack or a saddlebag, lady. Princess," he amended when she narrowed her eyes. "You want it in perfect shape, you pay me to haul the *animals* back, still alive. Once I get 'em here and they're settled in a nice pen with turf they know and plants they'll eat, *then* I'll make you a chinch fur vest. You get a place ready for 'em, somethin' about as large as this room, with steep walls, open sky, and different levels, with room for a pool and a door for a caretaker t' come and go. Put some dirt in it and a place for water to circulate, and a wall of windows so you can look at th' critters. I'll bring back things to fill in the rest."

"Why should I accommodate animals which you'll just be slaughtering as soon as you arrive?" she asked.

"They gotta recover from the stress of the trip, Princess," he pointed out. "And you might want more than one vest, which means I gotta haul a breedin' population."

One of her fingers tapped the purple, fine-grained armrest of her fancy carved seat. The chair had scrolling arms and legs and looked downright spindly, like if a real man sat on it, he'd break it just from his weight. Except Sharpe knew enough about plants to know this was thon-shaped heartwood from the ironwood tree. His thon was just enough attuned toward plants to know which would be harmful or helpful to a particular animal, when he had that animal in his hands. He could pick up that chair and bash the pretty princess to death with it before that wood would break.

Not that he would, even if she was a spoiled idiot. She might be an idiot, but even an idiot had a right to spend her money as she pleased, once she was old enough. Might as well let her spend it on him.

“Five thousand up front, eight thousand glows when you finish, and you’ll travel on one of the royal zeppelins,” she bartered. “You’ll have a squadron of twelve guardsmen to escort you. They will also serve as your airship crew. You will take them to the Spire in... Torrinado City, if I recall correctly. It is a brand-new Spire, just a handful of years old, on the largest of the isles in the Torrin Archipelago. This way you will be able to travel directly there, and bring directly back whatever you claim you need. But you *will* bring it back, and you will make me at least one chinch fur vest...and show our royal furriers how to make more.”

He dipped his head in silent acknowledgment of her demands. She studied him warily at that, then shrugged in a subtle graceful movement.

“Retire to the tradesman’s hall. A steward will meet you with accommodations for the night while our men prepare the zeppelin. Torrinado City is roughly four thousand miles from here, so the journey by airship shouldn’t take more than seven or eight days, depending upon the weather. An interpreter who speaks the local language will be found to assist you, either here or in Torrinado. Beyond that, you will have three weeks at most to find and trap a sufficient number of chinchas.”

That lifted one of his brows.

“I expect you, Master Sharpe, to return within one month,” Princess Nanasma instructed him. “At the price I am willing to pay, I expect efficiency, and that includes speed.”

Her fingers flicked subtly in dismissal. Sharpe reminded himself that five thousand glows were enough to set up a man for a few years, that thirteen thousand was a very good price, and rose. Backing up two steps, he bowed, then turned and strode out.

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His Royal Highness, Kiereseth Tokanay of the Jade Mountain, was as prim and proper as his sister. Selected to be the expedition’s interpreter—and to carry out some further, unspecified business of his royal father’s—he dressed in similar layers of proper gentlemanly attire. Shirt, waistcoat vest, coat, trousers, knee-high boots, his black hair braided neatly in a long queue bound at nape and waist in black velvet. At least he did not wear furs like his sister, though the silks and linens were almost as fine.

Exceedingly proper, he did not curse, swear, smoke, or drink to excess. He did gamble during the nightly card games as the modest-sized airship sailed onward, its loft bag filled with thonite gas, its sails tilted to catch the winds this way and that as they headed eastward. But His Highness only gambled for sterling stakes. Silver which the guardsmen and Sharpe could afford to lose...which they did in nearly half the games played against the man.

Sharpe was pleased to see the man wasn’t quite as self-centered as his sister. He did talk a fair bit, expounding on subjects which the prince knew well—politics, economics, and other city-found things. But he also asked questions, and he listened. The hunter liked that. A prince who was willing to learn was a prince who might actually learn something useful. And learning, as Sharpe’s father had said, often led to doing. So maybe the prince would eventually do something useful.

Beyond that, neither man had much in common. An appreciation for liquor, an occasional sly jest over cards, and a boredom with shipboard life, though that was about it. Certainly they did not share similar

attitudes about the fairer gender. The one time one of the guards cracked a joke about women that was a bit raunchy—enough to have made Sharpe grin—His Highness had been rather offended, and had reprimanded the airman. That had ended all such ribaldry.

So when the airship *Jade Dawnings* was flagged into place at one of the docking gantries at the Torrinado Spire, Sharpe got stuck with an escort of His Highness and two guardsmen. Four were going to stay with the ship at all times while it was docked, since that was the bare minimum needed to work the rigging, and the other six exchanged significant looks and curvy little gestures with their hands behind His Highness' neatly jacketed back.

They were going to look for the local equivalent of a brothel, as well as supplies for the ship. Sharpe had to go first with His Highness to pay the docking fees, the import and export licenses, and then be directed to the local magistrate to discuss permissions for the exporting of roughly a dozen chinchas and sufficient plant life to sustain the herbivores.

The magistrate did speak a fair amount of Bellite, the trade language from the southwestern corner of the continent, and Sharpe could speak a smattering of Curvite, the language of the northeast and the outer isles. But neither spoke it fluently.

Having Prince Kiereseth supplement their conversation helped immensely. Within an hour, they had promises of papers being drawn up by the next day giving them hunting permissions up in the unclaimed mountains. For a fee, of course. That part of the exchange, Sharpe could have handled in his sleep, as he had done it many times before.

It wasn't until they were out on the brick-lined street again, walking back in the direction of the vast base of the Spire, that the prince spoke.

"I'm not completely sure, Mister Sharpe," he stated in that formal way of his, glancing at the hunter, "but I *think* the magistrate knows something about these chincha creatures that we do not. He kept giving me odd little looks whenever I said we were hunting them for their fur. Like he either wanted to speak sharply with me, or laugh. I think the only thing that saved the conversation was my explaining you wanted to take a breeding population back to the hexisle for display, but I have no idea why."

Sharpe shrugged. The two guards with them, who spoke only Bellite, shrugged and returned their attention to the painted wooden and metal signs hung outside the various buildings. It was the supper hour locally, and all four of them were hungry. They couldn't read the swirling characters of the local tongue, but the two airmen could see the pictures painted next to the lettering, of a mortar and pestle for an apothecary, a pair of spectacles for an eye doctor, a wheel of cheese for a cheese shop.

Hungry, Sharpe gestured toward it. His Highness shook his head, and pointed at a large, multi-storied building several blocks away. "There's an hotel up ahead; gauging from the symbols, they have a gentleman's parlour as well as a family parlour."

"Gentleman's parlour?" Sharpe asked. He hadn't heard of the term before.

The prince smirked, tucking his hands behind his back as he strolled along. "I know what the rest of you have been saying about me, Master Sharpe...though I would think our own guardsman would know better."

The two tanned, green-uniformed men quickly looked elsewhere as nonchalantly as they could. Prince Kiereseth continued

“I have no objections to anyone enjoying the intimate company of a willing lady for a short while, Mister Sharpe. What I objected to was the *disrespect* in which you were discussing such matters. Ladies who choose to make their living by plying such a trade...well, I sincerely hope it *was* their choice, and that they enjoy it. For myself, I am willing to help them try.”

How it is the man can make my opinion of him both rise and plummet at the same moment is a damned mystery, Sharpe decided, eyeing the younger man. *I'll admire him for wanting to treat even lightskirts with respect...but does he have to be so damned poncy about it?* Shaking his head, he avoided the cheese shop door. Provided the prince was willing to pay for an establishment with fancy stone-carved windows and doorways and bits of fiddly-works decorating the expanses between, he wasn't going to object. Cheese was good, but meat was better.

“Back to the other subject, Mister Sharpe. I do wonder at that little exchange the two of you made,” the prince stated. “Where he glanced at you with a pointed look, and you nodded, then shook your head ever so slightly?”

Sharpe quirked a brow, but otherwise didn't say anything.

“You don't speak much, do you?” Kiereseth observed dryly as the silence stretched between them.

That, he responded to, since he did respect the poncy pup somewhat. Much more than his sister. “My father said that if a body spends all its time talkin', it won't have enough time for thinkin', Highness. I choose to think.”

“A wise man, then. But then one doesn't always have to speak to communicate. You and the magistrate exchanged a set of looks when he repeated his question in Bellite, about hunting the chincha for fur.” Stopping, Prince Kiereseth faced him. His hands were still clasped behind his back, but his shoulders were square, his chin lifted slightly. The pose was arrogant and commanding. “What, exactly, is the jest about chinchas and their furs?”

Sharpe didn't know if it was wise to answer that question, or if he should prevaricate that he and the magistrate had been poking subtle fun at the prince.

A shrewd look narrowed the prince's blue eyes. “...Do they stink?”

“Beg pardon?” Sharpe asked.

“Do chinchas stink? Is that the jest?” he repeated. “Like that striped beast I've heard about from the northeast, the skunk? Is that what a chincha is, a sort of skunk?”

Again, he didn't know what to say. He wasn't about to lie outright to his employer's brother, but... The sly grin that creased the prince's face stopped him.

“Oh, this is rich! Whatever it is, you're clearly afraid of offending me, but you *also* clearly have some jest or jape in mind to play on my sister—whatever it is,” Prince Kiereseth stated, slashing his hand between them, “I want in.”

“What?” Sharpe asked, confused.

He received another grin, and a spread of both the prince's gloved hands. "I want in! Her Royal Highness has a painfully bad habit of thinking she knows everything about anything both above and beneath the Vull. Anything that can knock her off her pedestal for a moment will be healthy for her."

One of the two guards stiffened a little. He had stopped off to one side, his gaze more on the other pedestrians walking the city streets than on the hunter or his prince, but Sharpe had excellent peripheral vision. It was clear he did not like that idea.

So, in his limited Curvite vocabulary and using a somber, quelling tone, Sharpe merely said, "If there was one, that man would say it to her. That would stop it."

"Ah. Yes. You're right," His Highness stated in Bellite, affecting an equally sober attitude. He clasped his hands behind his back again. "I suppose that wouldn't be quite so funny. On to supper, then."

Not until they were in the gentleman's parlour and Sharpe had retired to the washroom to tidy up before their meal was served did the prince readdress the subject. With the guards still seated at their table and no others using the clever little cubicles with their indoor plumbing, the two men had a moment of privacy.

Lathering his hands at the sink, Prince Kiereseth asked under his breath, "So what *is* the jest about chinchas, with my sister's spy would report to her and spoil the joke in advance?"

Sharpe told him...and explained how he would handle the matter.

Eyes widening more and more with each little statement, His Royal Highness finally choked on his own spit. Coughing and laughing, he couldn't even turn the water off. Doing it for him, Sharpe handed him one of the little towels from the basket provided for the parlour's male guests. Blotting at his hands, then at his waistcoat, the princeling struggled to regain his composure. He finally had to wipe at his face, too, to remove the tears from the corners of his eyes.

"...Ohhh, that is *rich!* Oh, please, please, let me be on hand for when you present my sister her vest," Kiereseth stated. No longer a princeling in Sharpe's eyes, he grinned wickedly at the hunter. Then sobered a bit. "As much to ensure you remain protected from the backlash of her wrath as for the enjoyment of the jape, of course."

"She hired me to make her a vest of chincha fur," Sharpe stated blandly. "Not my fault if she doesn't like the way I'll have to tailor it."

Choking on another laugh, the younger man struggled to compose himself. It took a bit of effort, but finally he sighed, nodded, and gestured at the door. "For including me in the end-game, Mister Sharpe, if you are so inclined as to enjoy the company of one of the undoubtedly talented ladies of this establishment tonight...I will gladly pay for it out of my own pocket."

Sharpe dipped his head in thanks. Slightly poncy or not, he liked the young man. The contradiction made him speak up as they wended their way back to their table. "Piece of advice, princeling?"

Kiereseth raised his brows. "Yes?"

"Learn to drop th' high manners. You're better than all that stuffy formality." He paused, wincing a little because it wasn't coming out right. Trying again, Sharpe said, "You deserve a lot more friends than from just the upper ranks...but if you wanna make 'em, *Mister* Tokanay, you gotta learn how to adapt to

different environments better. Don't expect a fish to swim all that good through desert sands, however pretty its pond back home. You'll get eaten by th' lizards and such."

"Duly noted. I thank you for the advice," Kiereseth murmured, lowering his voice as they approached the other two men. "I don't get away from the upper ranks all that often, so I don't know when I'll have cause to use it. But I will stop talking and give it some thought, as your father said."

Sharpe nodded in approval. The prince could indeed learn.

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Prince Kiereseth did not accompany Sharpe up into the mountains where the chinchas lived. He had political business to transact with the island nation. It was just as well; in the temperate climate of the Torrin Archipelago, spring was cold at night, windy during the day, and more often wet than not. Sharpe didn't think a man as fastidious as the prince—sense of humor notwithstanding—would have fared well in muck that coated one to the knee or a drizzle that dampened everything not buried deep under the thickest parts of the forest canopies.

The three guardsmen selected to accompany him did not look happy on the third day of steady rain. The five locals Sharpe hired from a village nestled in one of the valleys, they didn't mind so much. With their oilskin coats and woolen clothes, they were quite comfortable. Explaining that they were trapping the chinchas for pets helped as well.

That was a phrase Sharpe had requested the prince to teach him so that he could explain himself better in the local tongue, and it worked. Within two weeks, he had a full dozen-and-one of the roly-poly, tan-furred creatures. The first one had been the hardest to find, track, and study, taking a good week.

But once Sharpe had spotted the beige fluffball, his thon-affinity for animals allowed him to read the creature's wary, exploratory searches for green shoots to eat and forgotten seeds to nibble, to sink into its mind and see the rock-and-bush strewn hillside around it with the needs of such a creature. That *this* was a good spot to look for predators before searching further for nibbles. That *there* was one of its hiding-holes for the last of the grass seeds it had stripped and stored last autumn. And a spot lower down the slope was where it had littered its kits, letting Sharpe know he was tracking a female.

Once he knew the creature's tastes and needs, Sharpe set the locals to gather the plants needed in buckets and bales, and worked to capture the girl. Then he exposed the chincha to a sampling of various grains raised by his fellow humans, to see if only mountain grasses and nuts would work. The chincha liked wheat somewhat, didn't like barley so much, but loved oats and rye. She didn't know what to do with scraps of bread, and when presented with a bit of dried green seaweed—the easiest way to carry leafy greens long distances—she sniffed and sniffed and sniffed before finally nibbling, then devouring the lot.

Unfortunately, that gave the little female a stomach ache, and Sharpe spent an awkward night with one hand on the creature in her cage, coaxing his thon to soothe the beast while the seaweed-induced flux worked its way messily out the other end. The thought of the princess feeding the creature the wrong thing and being shat upon amused Sharpe to no end, though he doubted she would actually handle their care herself.

Some vegetables, the chincha enjoyed. Others, she avoided. And she did nibble on a beetle that wandered through the wicker bars of the cage; a trail of barley-water for sweetness let him know that the

beasts would eat insects, too. Mostly she ate vegetation in the five days Sharpe spent observing her and writing down his conclusions in neatly penned, concise notes.

After those five days, when he was sure he knew how to care for one, Sharpe moved swiftly. Twelve more were caught and crated, five males and eight females, including a trio of pups that had been born at some point during the cold of winter when their mothers were curled up in their seed-and-grass stuffed dens. A few extra days were spent gathering foods and testing them on the remainder of the creatures, then he began sending crates of chinchas down the mountain to their base camp.

From there, hired wagons transported everything back to Torrinado. Word was sent up to the airship to flag it back into dock, as it had been moved off to weather a storm up in the Skylands. In fact, it was still raining up above the day Sharpe rode in the new-fangled lifting cage installed in the Spire, though the winds had eased considerably.

Through the glazed windows that passed, he could see the pale gold of the Vull rippling even more than usual, with rain sheeting down from the slope caused by the membrane being pushed up by the Spire tower. It seeped through, of course; water, like thonite gas, permeated the membrane more readily than other things, though anything else had to push hard to move up, or wait several long minutes to sink through. Or use a bronze blade of some sort to weaken the Vull.

But the rain puddled here and there on the rippling surface, then seeped through within a minute or so, forming “pours” of rain like downspouts from on high. These varied from place to place and could be quite painful from the force of their long drop. Thankfully, once they started to fall, they were easy enough to dodge. And in the deserts to the west and south, Sharpe knew they were highly prized; a nomadic clan that could catch up to a pour before the rains stopped way up in the Skylands was guaranteed fresh, clean drinking water.

Here, though, it was a nuisance at best, and it annoyed the chinchas, making them chitter and shift in their cages. Not only did the airmen hustle to get the cages and last few bags and baskets of feed on board, Prince Kiereseth himself helped haul some of the wicker crates. He winced at the driving rain lashing the docking tower, and they all grabbed at the safety railings of the ship’s deck more than once when their boots threatened to slip, though at least the docks themselves were iron grillworks.

Once the creatures were stored down in the hold, Sharpe found himself taking a turn at helping to turn the cranks for the great propellers at the rear of the craft. With the wind nearly still and the rain threatening to weigh down the sails if they were deployed, stirring the air via the great tin blades was their best means of maneuvering. It was exhausting work, though; within half an hour, Sharpe had stripped to his waist.

Part of him wondered when the prince would aid their efforts to move. Kiereseth did, but not as Sharpe expected; the princeling would not soil his hands with common labor, no, but he did consult with the guards, and ordered two sails deployed, one to either side. They were then tilted oddly; stead of angled right or left, they were tilted somewhat down. Then, standing with his head bowed and his hands out, His Highness did something. At first, Sharpe couldn’t tell what he was up to, but then it slowly dawned on him.

The sails at first hung slack, bowed belly-down toward the Vull. Then they rippled and fluttered, much like that transparent, water-soaked membrane. The top halves billowed upward, then the whole sails bowed up and forward. Like his sister, he was manipulating the air. Or rather, heat, since the prince had admitted during one of their card games weeks before that he had no affinity for Air, just for Fire and Earth.

He was heating the air itself into rising, which caused it to push against the sails as it did so. Angled as they were, the convection currents reflected off those sails drove the ship forward. He, too, eventually stripped off his jacket and his waistcoat, even spent a moment unbuttoning his shirt, though he didn't remove it as one hour became two. Still too much a gentleman in Sharpe's eyes, but the hunter didn't complain.

Not that he had time for it. The captain of the little ship kept Sharpe and the others at the propeller cranks, until they cleared the rainclouds overhead and caught a bit of a sideways breeze. With the sails quickly readjusted, they tacked along the wind, arcing more due west than west by southwest.

Kiereseth, Sharpe, and the others rested for a bit, then ate an easy supper of locally bought fruits, meats, and cheeses on crackers. Sharpe checked on his charges, making sure they had water and food, then hung his hammock in the same hold. It was up to him, after all, to get all thirteen animals safely back to Jade Mountain. That, and it would give him some privacy in the coming nights to work on the special framework underlying the vest he had been ordered to make. But not that night. Not with sore arms and back muscles in definite need of sleep.

...

Two steps inside, an awkward bow, and twenty-five brought him within the second bowing range. This time, Sharpe had to take smaller steps, as he was carrying a large wicker crate loaded with all thirteen chinchas, with the help of a palace footman. One was tethered to the basket on a leash. The other twelve were cinched together in little leather harnesses.

Setting the basket to one side, he bowed more gracefully, stepped forward twice on to that lovely thick carpet with the same colorful weave as before, and dropped to one knee. The green-uniformed servant did the same next to the basket.

"Highnesses," he murmured in greeting. He knelt before Princess Nanasma, who was dressed today in lace-trimmed clothes, a taupe velvet skirt and creamy silk blouse. Even her long black braid had been artfully coiled on her head with little jeweled pins.

She sat in the same ornate ironwood chair as before, though there wasn't as much of a cool breeze emanating from her this time. Off to the side, her brother lounged like a royal ponce, looking sleek and dark in tailored indigo coat and trews, as if he had nothing better to do than make himself ornamental, though unlike his sister, he didn't match the pastel-hued room.

Sharpe knew better. Kiereseth had a good mind and a good heart beneath the ponce's attire. *If he can ever shed the damned dignity, he'll be a good man, too.* His sister, on the other hand...

Princess Nanasma smiled benevolently at him, then quirked one brow, glancing past him; three of the chinchas had managed to poke their snouts up over the rim of the large basket. "Master Hunter, we are pleased you said you could have my vest ready so soon...but why, pray tell, are those chinchas still alive?"

"I've brought you your vest," he stated. "Would Your Highness please stand?"

“Oh do stand,” Prince Kiereseth drawled when she hesitated. “It’s taken the poor man three days to settle the beasts in place, and you’ve done nothing but talk my head off on how good you’ll look once you’ve put it on. You’ve petted the little puffballs, you know how soft they are, so why hesitate?”

Sighing in irritation, she gathered her skirts and rose. Brushing them off subtly, she arched a brow when her brother moved to join her. Or rather, Sharpe. They hadn’t had much time to plan, let alone practice, but Kiereseth stepped forward and helped Sharpe untangle the chinchas, lifting them out by the straps harnessing them all together. Six faced one way, six the other in columns of three apiece, and they chattered and squirmed, kicking a little as they dangled.

Her Highness blinked, eyes wide, and tried to back up. Knees bumping into the ironwood chair, she didn’t get far. Within moments, the two men had lifted the harness up over her head and onto her shoulders. Where the chinchas squirmed and sniffed, and the woman spluttered.

“What—I—you! How dare you! What sort of jape is this?” she snapped, cringing from the angles bumping against her elegantly clad curves.

“This is a chincha fur vest, Highness,” Sharpe stated blandly.

“I expected you to cut off their skins!” she hissed, furious. “Cut off their skins, and tan them, and make me a vest from their *fur*, you imbecile!”

He had expected this reaction. A disappointment, really, but she did seem to be one of those types who loved to talk more than she cared to think. Returning to the basket, Sharpe untied and lifted out the thirteenth chincha. It was one of the three female pups, young and innocent, and liable to have been eaten by a fox or a hawk in the wild. Facing the princess, he lifted the critter in his left hand...and pulled a knife from his boot with the right.

Using his thumb, he calmed the creature, until the little female stopped sniffing and straining in his grip. Once her head and neck were still, he slashed, cutting deep and fast. The chincha squeaked, blood gushed, the little limbs kicked...then the pup dangled limp, her death quick. The ones in the harness squeaked and stilled, scenting the blood.

Below the quiescent body in his hand, Sharpe noted with some satisfaction that the carpet was now stained. At the moment, those stains were red. Later, even with careful washing, some lingering traces of dried brown would remain.

He felt sorry for the little chincha, but didn’t pause more than a handful of seconds. While the princess was still staring at him in shock and her brother eyed him in remorse, Sharpe wiped the blade on the leather of his boot, sheathed it, and started rubbing at the dead pup’s fur. Within half a dozen strokes, the fluffy, light beige strands started coming loose. Within a minute or so, clumps the size of his littlest nail started to fall out, and the tangle of tufts wafted down to land in the creature’s blood.

“This, Princess, is why I cannot make you a vest from a dead chincha’s fur,” he stated, his tone still bland enough that the *lack* of emotion was pure chastisement. “Death shocks the hairs right out of the skin at the root.” Tilting the pup, he showed her the mangy balding patches his fingers were exposing. “There is no way to wear chincha fur when the critter is dead. You can only do it while it’s still alive.”

Tanned face mottled with flushed spots of anger and paled swaths of horror, she actually kept her mouth shut. Sharpe’s estimation of the spoiled woman rose half a notch. Dropping the body on the carpet—she flinched at the callous act, which was what he had intended her to do—he moved forward. With her

brother's help, he carefully lifted the sniffing, squirming net of living chinchas off her body and back into the basket. Only when the remainder of his charges were safe did he turn back to find Princess Nanasma slumped back into her chair, her gaze averted from the slain body on the carpet.

"I have done as you asked, Princess. I thank you for being so willing to care for the living ones; your servants made 'em a real nice home in your gardens," he added carefully. "But as I have done as you asked, and they have a good home...I'll take the rest of my hunter's fee, now. And maybe next time...maybe next time you might want to *ask* as to whether or not a thing can be done in the exact way *you* think it should be done, rather than just assume you can command the whole world to fall in with your plans."

From the sharp, narrow-eyed look she snapped his way, he guessed it wasn't the smartest thing to say, politically. Sharpe didn't care; he wasn't a political creature. He lived each day knowing that, like an ant being eaten by a chincha pup, or that pup being snatched up by a hawk, he could easily die at the hands of a bigger predator than him.

"I believe you do indeed owe him the full eight thousand glows, Sister dear," Prince Kiereseth drawled. Crouched by the basket, he petted the chinchas, enjoying their fluffy, finger-length fur, which was indeed as soft and silky as spun clouds. "If His Majesty were to ask, I would have to tell our Father in full honesty that Mister Sharpe, here, has fulfilled the exact letter of his contract. You asked him to make you a vest of chincha fur. You never once specified the chinchas had to be dead and their furry hides tanned. Only that the vest was to be made...which it has been."

Gritting her teeth, Her Highness pushed back to her feet. She thrust her arm out, not quite hitting Sharpe. Pointing at the door, she ordered, "Go! Collect your pay, and go! Take the nearest airship and just...go! You are banned from our royal presence, so go, and do not come back!"

He gave her a slight, mocking bow. "Now, that'll be a right pleasure, Princess. Highness," he added, giving Kiereseth a deeper one. "Look me up if you ever wanna learn how the real world lives."

Smirking, Kiereseth dipped his head in return. He then lifted his head at the servant kneeling unobtrusively to the side. "Gilesen, escort Mister Sharpe to the Exchequery, and make sure he receives his full pay. Request a travel stipend for the nearest Spire, and escort the Master Hunter to the city airship docks. Buy him passage on a decent ship headed off the hexisle, and wish him a good journey for us. It is the least we owe him for all his troubles on our behalf."

Sharpe approved of that. From the dark look his sister gave him, Kiereseth's statements were neatly knocking down any thoughts of possible retaliation she might have wanted to form. Stalking off angrily, she left the parlour. Kiereseth gave the hunter a sympathetic look, then lifted his chin at the dead pup on the floor.

"Don't forget to tell the housekeeping staff about the mess in here on your way to the Exchequery, Gilesen. I'll watch over the basket of chinchas until the groundskeepers can come help put them back in their pen—they will be looked after, Mister Sharpe," he promised. "They aren't the first pets my sister has discarded in a fit of pique. I regret they probably won't be the last, either."

Since there wasn't much else to say, Sharpe bowed once more, and turned to follow the servant. He didn't think Prince Kiereseth Tokanay would mind all that much if he didn't do that silly bit about backing up two steps, first.

The End