

Vulland 005 – The Spheres in the Knot

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Air Courier Vielle was not in a hurry. Now that there was a mutual support treaty between the kingdoms of Dellai and Katlange, the threat of the armies of both squeezing the borders of the kingdom linking them to the west was keeping Langia quiet and peaceful. For now, of course; Vee knew that such things only ever lasted so long. Politics were always about either someone stirring up trouble, or others attempting to quell it when it was stirred.

So while she was carrying a packet of missives from Katlange to Dellai, and did need to get the sealed letters hidden in her backpack to the Queen of Dellai in a reasonably short time, she was not under orders or some bonus incentive to get the papers delivered quickly. In fact, it was possible she would be taken off this particular route and assigned to another, where the strength of her Air-based thon would be an asset in speedy deliveries. *If* things continued to wind down the way they were, to the point where regular couriers could safely travel the land routes, rather than needing someone like her who could literally fly. Only time would tell, though.

By cutting across the Knot, she could spend a good four, maybe five days exploring the hidden ruins she had found. The more she explored the greenery-draped structures, the more Vee was convinced no one else had found the place. Her previous crossing of there-and-back, she had perused the mountains ringing this vast, hexisle-covered swale and determined that it would be virtually impossible to access it by ground, save for a single narrow ravine which had once stood open and accessible.

At some point in the past, however, a whole chunk of mountainside had slumped away, leaving a cliff of a good fifty feet or so, with a cascade of water carrying the runoff in the valley. Instead of splashing down a semi-steep slope, it cascaded into a thunderous fall onto the rubble of the previous bits of slope. From the very mature height and the girth of the trees growing among the bits of rock and mud on either side, the landslide had occurred centuries ago.

Today was her third day among the ruins on this particular trip, exploring a city that did indeed seem as vast as the whole of the hexisle itself. Vee walked cautiously, eyes and ears alert for any signs of predators, rocks about to fall, or other dangers.

No hints of any sort of vast ruins were whispered by the locals in the kingdoms surrounding the Knot, but she wasn't too surprised. The Knot was a thick, rugged, difficult-to-cross lump of mountains near the southern edge of Earthland. Shaped something like a teardrop with the "point" toward the southwest, the Knot was an average of three hundred seventy-five miles in width and over seven hundred fifty miles in length. And if this was the missing hexisle of Bellaria, then it had been missing for well over a thousand years.

The outer foothills of the Knot were inhabited, with the forests mined for semi-tropical and tropical hardwoods and the underlying stone mined for whatever precious ores and minerals could be found, but the heart of the Knot was left alone. It was big enough to have been a kingdom of its own. Maybe it could have had a loose affiliation of mountain clans and tribes, or maybe a shogunate protectorate, or one of those odd democracy things some lands had decided upon where everyone had some sort of say in their nation's governing...but aside from the outermost hills, the inner terrain was just too rough and remote to occupy.

That, and some of the fauna were a bit too dangerous. Teros weren't the worst; they were just the most populous. The leathery-winged predators loved high cliffs for roosting and nesting, and enjoyed scooping

up a diverse number of birds and beasts for their supper. The Knot was full of both. There were other beasts, too, hungry predators and their territorial prey, cerapts with their spiked tails and sharp horns, tough-hided basks with their gaping jaws and stinking bodies that were five times the length of a horse harnessed to a wagon.

Smaller beasts stalked the uneven streets, such as the rappas who weren't quite a danger to a watchful adult but which would chase down a child and eat if they thought they could get away with it, all tooth and talon. They kept the furbit population down. They had also startled her twice, and forced her to make camp on upper floors with broken staircases, up where there were no ground-based means for a rappa to climb up that high in search of easy prey.

Most she could avoid by simply flying up into the sky, but she had to be awake to do so. Being startled by a pack of teros was one of the few dangers she couldn't easily avoid if she didn't see them coming. But she could fly to escape most ground-based dangers; many others could not. It was no wonder why so many people petitioned the nearest township for residence once a century, if they were lucky to live within a kingdom or land with a hexisle about to achieve lift-off.

No wonder why this hexisle was so crowded with buildings on top of buildings, places for people to live and sleep, eat and work, teach and play. If this really was from the Belly Valley hexhole, then all those rumors of the Bellarian ancients working elemental miracles straight out of legends might have actually been true, in at least some part. The miracle is that they were able to keep it aloft with so much granite piled on top.

World and Weather, how big is this one building? Vee wondered, debating whether or not she should try to float above it to get a bird's eye view of its overall size or not. *No, I'd better stay on the ground.*

She picked her way down yet another sloping street, trying to circumnavigate a huge structure where the decorations were different from all the others around it. Most others had carvings of daily life, of plant-life in motifs of vines and trees, flowers and people in strange flowing robes, so that it was hard to tell the men from the women save where the former were bearded or flat-chested. This one was different.

If the Air Courier Academy in Bellaria hadn't been so thorough in its students' education, she wouldn't have recognized more than half of the symbols carved in bands of decoration along every crease, corner, and line. The four symbols for the Four Elements of Fire, Air, Water, and Earth were ones that any child could recognize: Fire was a sinuous, multi-lobed flame spiking upward. Wind was a streaked cloud. Water, a curling wave. Earth, a diamond shape.

Most also knew the Four Desirables: the triangle of Light, like a beam shining down from above; the circle bisected along its bottom edge by a vertical line, symbol for Life...the symbol for copulation, too, which had engendered a fair bit of snickering back at the Academy. A circle enclosing a four-lobed blossom for World; and a puffy cumulus cloud for Weather. But there were more symbols, esoteric ones not commonly used.

The Eight Powers of Lightning with its jagged bolt, Thunder with its central dot and two pairs of concentric arcs to either side. The ridged lines of the folding fan for Wind, and the droplet for Rain. The five-lobed symbol for Animals, with one lobe short and round like a head and the other four long like limbs. The bisected, blade-shaped leaf for Plants. The simple square for Stone, and the trapezoid for Metal, meant to represent cast ingots.

And the Eight Physics, *those* were truly esoteric, and the simplest symbols of all, so simple that anyone looking at them might not realize they actually meant anything. Arrows that pointed away from each

other, arrows that pointed toward each other; lines conjoined, lines separated. Engineers studied such things, for they represented subjects such as radiation and reaction, causality, convection and movement, corresponding forces, pressure and solvency, compelling forces, gravity and stability, complementary forces...

Vee only knew about them because she had been interested in what made the aetherometers work, and had enough of a head for mathematics to get into a few of the advanced classes meant for those Couriers who would wind up operating the complex machines. However, her Air-based thon was too strong to be wasted as an operator, so she hadn't been allowed to take the rest of the classes.

Reaching a junction with a stairwell leading down into the heart of the building, Vee paused, hand touching the band of weathered carvings at the corner. She had already probed some of the entrances to the building elsewhere, though every building so far had been deserted of all but a few moldering, age-broken remnants of things left behind. Such a dearth of belongings bespoke an orderly withdrawal once the hexisle had landed, though there were no legends of a great migration anywhere.

There was certainly a very large chunk of major history missing about this place. That much, she knew, simply from the sheer scale and size of the place. Just as there were chunks missing from the buildings around her, weathered away over the ages. Yet, just as clearly, many things *had* been retained from the ancient past to the present day. Those symbols, for instance.

Beneath her hand, she could feel two parallel horizontal lines, tucked between two parallel vertical lines, the symbol for the forces of causality. Mathematically, it looked like $1 = 1$; mystically, it represented the interconnectedness of everything in the world. It made her recall the dry, dusty scent of the chalkboards, and the equally dusty green tweed of her professor's coat, paired with a beige waistcoat and beige trousers. Sometimes he wore brown, but the coat was always the same green tweed, even when he'd bought a new one toward the end of her time at the Academy.

Professor Carriart, that was his name. When she had taken his class, his right sleeve cuff had been permanently tainted yellowish-white from dragging along the chalkboard, and his spectacles had always sat low on his nose, half-moon lenses designed to help him see close things better, since his vision was fine for the things placed far away. Curly, graying hair topped his head in a close-cropped, messy fluff, the original base color some indeterminate shade of mild-mannered brown. But with those lively blue eyes that flicked around the room, checking each student's face for signs of progress, and an enthusiastic way of explaining theories and ideas, Carriart had made his classes anything but tedious to sit through.

Peering into the shadowed depths framed by that $1 = 1$ marked doorway, Vielle cautiously descended. This section of the hexisle sat at a slight angle, so the steps were a little awkward to descend, particularly as the stairwell grew darker. They turned a corner to the left, then to the right, and opened up into a section with a reasonable amount of light. Here was where either part of the hexisle itself had broken and slumped into the valley, or just the building itself, for the structure had been cracked in two.

Plants lined the upper edges of the roof, lending a greenish light to the interior. Its vaulted dome of a ceiling had been so solidly built, it had merely cracked and not yet collapsed. A few bits of greenery lined the bottom of the central chamber, mostly things that wouldn't require a lot of sunlight or a lot of water, and they were all gathered under the crack in the roof and the lowest points in the room. She couldn't get down to them, though; the stairwell had broken, leaving only a few pillar-isolated lumps of stone showing where it had descended into the vast hall.

A balcony across from her had several greenish and brownish-beige lumps. Largish lumps, about the size of a large shepherd's dog. A colony of sleeping rappas, she realized. Muscles tensing all over to activate

her thon, she lifted up off the steps, hovering under the power of her thon. Silently, she floated downward. That balcony had no immediately visible access to the rest of the chamber, but to be sure, she flew. So as long as she moved quietly, they would not wake, and so long as she floated, they could not come after her even if they did rouse. Eventually, flying—particularly hovering—would exhaust her, but she had a great deal of stamina.

Some of the tunnels awaiting exploration down below the rappas' balcony, former doorways from the shape of them, looked intriguing. Flying carefully, she explored three of them, only to find dead ends in darkness. The fourth one, directly under the rappas' balcony, hinted at light. When she floated into it, following the twists and turns, she found herself emerging in a chasm cracked open by the forces of time.

This time, the crack in the ceiling—three broken ceilings up, actually—was quite wide, and the building section beyond it rested at a much steeper angle, though it could be walked upon, even climbed, if one took care. She stayed aloft, though, peering through the gaps in the walls, floating this way, then that way, up higher and down lower.

Finally, somewhere off to the right, she found something interesting. Vielle wouldn't have seen it if the sun hadn't been shining down through the faint golden membrane of the Vull overhead, unobstructed by cloud or mist. Or roof, since that had crumbled away long ago. In a block of stone with no discernible entrance, one of the walls had cracked away from the others, leaving a streak of darkness broken only by the gleam of something metallic.

It was so unlike the stone upon stone, the pottery tiled roofs, the mossy growths of this whole place, that she wasn't sure at first she had seen it correctly. Backing up a little, she found just the right spot where the light of the sun glinted again. Tensing her muscles, Vee floated up to the crack, trying not to block that ray of light. Face pressed up to the rift, which was just a little too small at that point to get her head inside, never mind the rest of her, she waited for her eyes to adjust.

When they finally did, she blinked. Spheres. She was looking at a jumbled pile of spheres. Metallic, ornamentally engraved, strange-looking spheres had been tossed into a heap from the broken, disintegrating shelves lining the modest-sized chamber. There was no easy way to get at them from down here, though. A glance upward showed the crack not quite wide enough for her body, up higher. The entire wall had originally been a solid slab of stone, so there was little chance of her pushing it wider, and her Earth-affinity was not the strongest by far. She could eat a chunk of thonite to strengthen it, maybe reshape the wall, but that would take hours.

However, one of those spheres looked like it was within reach down near the base of the crack. Twisting sideways, feet braced on the uneven, rubble-strewn slope, Vielle stuck her arm into the crack and strained to reach the metallic orb. Head turned to the side, cheek and skull mashed up against the weathered opening, she couldn't see what she was doing, but could feel the smooth, steel-like surface.

It took her three tries to get enough of a pressure-grip with just her fingertips to carefully tease it close enough to grab; the size of the thing didn't help, since it was roughly the size of her head. Not an easy object to grasp and manipulate. In fact, if her hand hadn't started to sweat a little with her efforts, she might not have been able to succeed. The slight amount of dampness helped her fingers stick to the smooth-polished sphere.

Once she had a firm grip on it, getting it out required tensing all her muscles so that she could float herself and the orb up to a level where she could pull it out of the gap, up near where the ceiling of the room had been. Looking up as soon as she got it free, Vee realized the beam of sunlight had been a true fluke; with

the arch of stone from the ceiling overhead, no rain could have gotten inside, which explained why the spheres had gleamed with cleanliness instead of being dulled by grit and dirt.

The beam had slanted in from the southeast, from early spring midmorning. In fact, if she had come across this crack in the world at any other point in the year, it was unlikely the ray of sunlight would have made it this far. She looked at the sphere, looked at the crack, then floated down to the uneven, sloped ground and set the orb on a pile of rocks so she could remove her backpack and dig into it.

Finding her bottle of ink, she carefully stained the edges crack, then flew up and stained the vertical edges of the ceiling crack, using the vertical-and-horizontal lines of causality, and the eight-armed asterisk of reaction-radiation. These were symbols that had nothing to do with finding a room of metal spheres, but they would be a mnemonic trigger of the events that had led her down here.

Lifting herself up over the edge of the crack in this second dome of a ceiling, she spotted a lone tree not much taller than she was, and corked the bottle. Drawing her knife, she approached the spreading boughs, and carefully cut away the bottom-most branches, and the undersides of three of its larger limbs. Finding this place from the air would be difficult without a more blatant mark, but she didn't want to mark it openly.

If there was another Courier or Air-blessed explorer who knew of this lost, abandoned city, Vielle didn't want to give away her unexpected prize: relics of an age long past in a city that had otherwise been picked clean. It was her city, her sphere, her find here in the heart of the foreboding, mountainous Knot. Taking the bits of branches with her, she swooped back down into the heart of the damaged structure.

Spotting the subtle ink-stains, she detoured off to the side, arranging the branches artistically by another crack in the wall, one which obviously led to an empty room, down where anyone flying in here would immediately see them and be decoyed away from the real crack. To add to the deceptions, she returned to her backpack, resting next to the sphere, and pulled out a sheet of paper. With a brush pen and the ink jar, she quickly drew up a sketchy map of the city, scribbled some hard to read notes in the margin, added a conspicuous set of symbols and an X to mark some randomly selected spot, then crumpled up the paper as soon as the ink dried to make it look older and weathered, smoothed it out again, rolled it back up, and tossed the "map" into the frond-marked room.

It rolled and skidded down the sloped floor to land against the base of a wall. It wouldn't be immediately visible, but it was visible, and the crack narrow enough that anyone wanting to get at it would have to work hard. Hoping that would be good enough for a distraction, Vee returned to her pack and the sphere...and heard a noise. It sounded like someone stepping on gravel.

Movement out of the corner of her eye warned her that she was not alone. Beige-dappled movement, accompanied by another *shuff* of grit shifting on stone. An angular body, resting on meaty, muscular hind legs, forelegs smaller but still dangerously claw-tipped, large head with toothy jaws and long, tapered tail, all covered in tough scales.

Unsure if it was just one rappa or a hunting pack, she moved slowly, picking up the sphere and the strap of her pack. Only when she was sure she had a firm grasp of both did she tense her whole body and lift off again. Slowly, so as not to startle the beast. They weren't dangerous to an armed, wary human, but she needed both hands for her belongings.

It snorted and lifted its head the moment it spotted her, but Vielle was already up above easy reach. The moment the beast looked her way, she lifted faster, aiming for the huge gap in the thick stone ceiling. Thwarted of a meal, the beast huffed and continued picking its way over the rubble-strewn slope that

passed for the floor. Sphere tucked under her arm, backpack slung over her other shoulder, Vee shifted her body and flew for a good, safe spot on which to have a picnic and examine her prize in open sunlight.

She found what she sought on yet another chunk of broken-off pillar. Like the first one, back on her very first trip through the Knot, weather and the settling of the hexisle had sheared off the column several yards from the nearest patch of ground. Unlike the first one, this platform was modest, big enough to have been called a luxuriously indulgent bed, but not as big as a fancy parlor or other large room. It was also not far from the dome with the carefully trimmed tree...and she just as carefully stained the side of the column facing that tree with the marks for causality and radiation. Small marks that could be found only with careful searching. Hopefully, they wouldn't weather away.

Once that was done, she opened her pack and pulled out bread, cheese, a couple chunks of carrot, and a pouch of smoked chicken meat. Nibbling on her meal, Vee eyed the sphere. It was definitely ornamented, with deep-grooved lines, raised curves, and strange symbols sculpted in relief. It also looked virtually brand-new, with no signs of rusting, no real scratches, and only the smears of her own fingerprints marring its polished shine. A mystery.

Cleaning her fingers on a kerchief at the end of her meal, she picked up the sphere. It was a little too lightweight to have been completely solid. In fact, it reminded her of the components for an aetherometer; the sort of slightly lopsided weight to the sphere drew to mind the comparison of a cabinet filled with all manner of little wires, glass tubes, and whatnot that went into their making. On the outside, the cabinets looked innocuous, carved wood set with dials and toggles. On the inside, strangeness upon strangeness which only a trained engineer could understand.

Except there were no dials or toggles or back panels meant to access the innards of this thing, she decided, turning it over so she could probe and press at the—a section popped out as she pressed on one end of an oblong oval groove. *Aha! So there is a way to get at the inside...no, wait, this is just some sort of crank*, Vee realized, peering at the indent revealed by the popped-out section. The tip of the handle had a free-rotating knob on it, not very big, but large enough to churn. It moved freely in one direction, and resisted a bit in the other.

Very much like the dynamo-wheels for the aetherometers. Crank the handle in the direction against the resistance, and your thon flows into the machinery to empower it to work, she knew. *But that's a relatively new invention, not more than a couple decades old! This thing is a millennia old, or older.*

There was just enough room in the indent to fold the crank back into place. Doing so, she pressed and prodded, opened and closed, until she figured out the hidden mechanism: some sort of clever spring-based catch. The groove, a deep indentation, led her to explore the rest of the sphere to look for more.

The next one she found popped out a large section which swung down and locked in place. That alarmed her for a few moments, until she determined there was a spring-loaded pin which could be pressed to unlock it again. The shape of the segment, she determined, formed a grasping lever, like the hilt of a pistol. Very much like the hilt of a pistol, for what she initially took for a decorative support strut of a not-quite-triangular shape, turned out to be a spring-loaded squeezable trigger.

Except when she tentatively squeezed it, nothing happened. Which made sense, since she hadn't yet found an opening at the far end. She did, however, find an even smaller crank on the side opposite the first one, to the left if one held the grip and pointed the bulk of the sphere away from the body.

Once she found that and turned it, *that* opened up the decorative spiral-swirl at the “front” of the sphere-thingy, revealing a cone-shaped depression marked by concentric rings pierced by the tiniest of holes, too

tiny to see what lay beyond the screen. The aperture ratcheted open, too, with subtle stop-points at different widths.

How increasingly curious, Vee marveled. Tentatively aiming the thing, she gripped the hilt poking down from the bottom of the sphere, and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. *Oh, right the crank!* Swapping it to her left hand, she popped out the charging crank, gave it a good two score of turns against the resistance, then aimed with her left hand.

Nothing. She closed the charging crank. Nothing. She closed the aperture crank. Nothing. She opened and closed the aperture itself to various settings. Nothing happened. Bewildered and not a little frustrated, Vielle finally turned the machine-sphere over and over in her hands, peering and prodding at everything. Some of the lines looked like archaic script, but she couldn't read it. And a rectangular blob which had looked too shallow to be a hidden crank finally moved when she pressed along the middle of one of the long edges, not a narrow end. It did so when she pressed down and pushed, sliding it like a pull-door into a little horizontal pocket just under the metallic skin of the machine.

That, she discovered, revealed the missing dials and levers. Or rather, buttons. Four steel dials, marked with little positioning notches, each one placed above four spring-backed pushing buttons. The metal of each button had been tinted a slightly different color. One was golden, one was mint greenish, one was a rose pink, and one was a lilac purple. The colors were faint; only the bright sunlight beaming down through the golden barrier of the Vull overhead allowed her to see their hues.

Frustratingly, no matter how she pushed or prodded at the buttons and dials, placed on the far side of the sphere from the handle-grip, nothing happened when she squeezed the trigger bit.

It did make her pause, though. Each crank was opposite the other. The little compartment with the dials and buttons sat across from the grip. The aperture...sat across from a squarish grooved bit which hadn't popped outward like the cranks, but now that she knew to press and slide, she pressed and slid, revealing...a square compartment, directly opposite the cone-shaped aperture, with a little tension-pad at the bottom. It bounced, depressing under a curious probe of her fingertip. Pressing it all the way down revealed the compartment was a full cube in shape...but with no clue what should go into it.

Frustrating, Vee decided after poking and prodding at the thing a bit more. *Each item has a corresponding purpose. The dials and buttons correspond to the handle because of the trigger; they undoubtedly affect what the trigger does. The one crank charges and the other controls the size of what is released. The aperture is the source for whatever effect the trigger releases, and this spring-levered cube thing...feeds that source?*

Frustrating, indeed. She ate a little bit more of the cheese, then wrapped up everything in its oilcloth pouch and tucked it into her backpack...where her fingers brushed against the wooden box also tucked in among her clothes, books, and toiletries. Inspiration struck. Pulling out the box, she opened it up and stared at the contents.

Thonite gas seeped from the bottoms of hexholes, the giant, pointed depressions left behind when a hexisle lifted up into the sky. During the lift-off year, technicians usually raced to get special cones placed over every single crack and crevice they could find before each hexhole started to fill with rain water. They would capture the gas as it bubbled up through the water, force it into a set of factories built to condense the gas, and when it crystallized, it formed grayish, translucent, meaty-sweet tasting cubes...which were about the right size to be stuffed into the back of the gizmo thingy.

Thonite cubes were used as an extra form of currency. They were not reliable as currency, because unlike copper, silver, and gold, thonite cubes were meant to be eaten. Once a chunk was consumed, within minutes the thonite strengthened a person's thon. It provided a boost to powers, extra stamina when weary, and even could be used for healing purposes; doctors and hospices would accept payment in thonite along with coins because they often fed it to their patients while they were recovering from some grave illness or injury.

In recent decades, someone had even discovered a way to dissolve the thonite back into a gas which could then be used to fill the lofts of the great airships now plying the skies in their slow but steady way, as sea ships were used to ply the waters of the coast encircling the giant continent of Earthland. Faced with the cube-shaped hole in the back of her gizmo-thingy, in a crumbling city filled with the symbols of thon-based science, Vee couldn't help but wonder if, yet again, her era was merely rediscovering something lost long, long ago to the mists of time and the deaths of the ancients who had created this place.

Well, sitting here won't solve a thing, she decided crisply. Selecting a cube which she hadn't nibbled upon, she slotted it into the square-shaped hole. It fit a bit loosely, but that wasn't a bad thing; the cube was average in size, and it was possible the largest of the ten remaining her box wouldn't fit without a bit of whittling. She had to press a bit with one thumb on the cube, too, while scraping the lid back into place with the other, pushing against the spring. But finally, the lid snapped up into place, hiding the cube.

Right. Power-source is in place, so the next step is to...close the aperture, she decided. *Safety first.* After doing that, she pulled out the cranking lever and turned it. This time, there was a faint humming noise, so very faint that if she'd been around the constant low-level noises created by other people, or had it been a particularly windy day, she wouldn't have heard a thing. The crank also resisted being turned. She gave it a good forty spins, the same as before, then cautiously opened the aperture.

Before touching the trigger, though, she investigated the buttons and dials. Each one, when turned counter-sunwise, clicked to a stop. That, according to the aetherometer dials, was the "off" position. So she carefully turned them all off, then turned the left-most one on to the halfway point, and—pointing the aperture away from herself—pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

Sighing roughly, the Air Courier frowned in thought, then pushed the golden button below the dial, depressing it so that it stayed down. This time, when she pulled the trigger, with the dial at the halfway point and the aperture halfway open...something actually happened. A golden mist shot out of the cone-shaped opening. It streamed forward, off the edge of the column by several feet...and drooped down, much like a hose spewing water shot forward, then arched down under the tug of gravity, oldest of all Earth-based forces, and the reason why Air was set opposite Earth in the great wheel of existence.

Releasing the trigger, Vee shifted forward to see if anything happened to the ground below the broken column. Something had. A very odd something. Somehow, that golden-hued shower had created a *bubble*. A small bubble, just a bit bigger than a pillow in diameter. It clung to the mossy grass lining the plaza surrounding the column.

Vee lifted her head, squinted at the sky, then lowered her gaze once more, bemused. It looked, she decided, exactly like the Vull. Only on a very, very small scale. She knew very well what the Vull looked like, because on many an occasion, she had flown right under the transparent, faintly golden membrane. Had even touched it, pressed against it, tried to push through it. Not an easy thing to do, when fighting the forces of gravity as well as the tough, slightly stretchy stuff.

Cranking the aperture closed for safety's sake, Vee floated down off the column. Landing next to the bubble, she touched it tentatively, then with more confidence. It *felt* like the Vull. It bowed beneath the force of her hand, cool and giving without letting her through. Like leather, in an almost entirely not-leather way. She had no other words to describe the sensation.

But as she stood there, leaning her weight on her arm with her hand on the membrane, she could feel her fingers starting to sink into the surface. Much as anyone, having approached the Vull from the Skylands side, would start to sink through the Vull while standing on its surface. Even rainwater would eventually seep through in a "spill" as the minutes ticked by, forming a puddle overhead that eventually became a localized torrent.

Not wanting her hand trapped, she pulled it out of the sticky substance, contemplating her find. It was mind-boggling. She glanced up at the sky, down at the gun, then at the miniature Vull-bubble on the grass, and back up again.

By the Light and the Life, what use could the Ancients have had for little miniature Vull-bubbles?

Curious, she walked a few paces away and re-aimed the gun, this time deliberately at the grass. This time, she watched the bubble form as the mist-like spray hit the grass in a ring shape. Adjusting the aperture, she did it again, forming a very small, thick-skinned bubble that was nearly rock hard on the narrowest setting, and a huge, house-sized ring—well, an oval, given the angle she was firing it at—that was so thin-skinned, it rippled like tissue-paper in the breeze, though it was still tough as stretchy not-leather. And the longer she held the spray on the bubble, the larger it grew, though the initial contact-point remained about the same size.

By the time she was done, she had a good seven miniature Vull-bubbles on the grass of the courtyard, some like shallow domes, others like bulging spheres. Vee had no idea what to do with them.

A furbit, showing a bit more curiosity than normal for its timid kind, hopped up to one of the bubbles several yards from Vielle, sniffed a bit at the barrier, even put a paw on the side of the bed-sized bubble while it investigated upward for a better sniff. Finally, the furbit lowered its head and prodded with its antler-like horns. From the size of them, either the hare-like creature was a young buck or a mature doe.

Vee didn't want to get close enough to frighten the creature away; instead, she remained where she was, half-hidden by the bulk of another sphere, and watched the furbit try to force its way inside. It took the human a few minutes of staring to realize why. The bubble contained a patch of tender, tasty dandelions, a favorite food for the furbits. Since the bubbles were the same transparent pale gold and no doubt allowed air to flow through from one side to the other like the real Vull did, it seemed the creature was seeing and smelling the equivalent of a rich, frosted cake for dessert.

Unable to help the critter, Vee turned back to her gizmo, walked to a fresh patch of grass away from the struggling furbit, and pressed the greenish button, adjusting its dial. Depressing it made the golden one snap up, but she turned off the golden button's corresponding dial to be sure. Aiming it at the grass, she pulled the trigger. Greenish mist spewed out of the inverted cone of the muzzle...and did nothing as it hit the grass, except glitter a bit before slowly evaporating.

Sighing, the Air Courier fiddled with the aperture, cranked the charging crank, and tried again. Again, nothing. It wasn't until she tried the widest setting for the opening that something did happen; the edge of the ring-shaped stream clipped the side of one of the mini-bubbles...and dissolved it. Vee almost forgot to release the trigger, the moment she realized something was happening. Quickly shifting her finger

free, she hurried over to the rather large, wobbling sphere, and stared at the arch-like spot that had dissolved.

Unlike a soap-bubble, these Vull-bubbles did not pop when pierced. The opening was low, and the edge smoothly rounded to the touch. She could duck inside, and stand within the mini-Vull, or step outside. Confused, she stared between the gun and the bubble, back and forth...until she realized something else was happening.

The house-sized bubble, or at least the opening, had started to shrink. One of the archway bases had been to the left of a little blue forget-me-not flower, leaving it unharmed in the opening. *Had* been. Now however, the edge was to the right of the flower, and slightly behind it. As she watched, dumbfounded, the archway and the edge of the bubble on the grass continued to shrink. It took a good quarter-hour to completely seal itself, but it did.

That sounds like the legends of how the Vull repairs itself after a turnover year, Vielle realized. *The torn edges of the Vull, ruptured by the rise and fall of the hexisles, slowly seal themselves back together, ending the terrible windstorms.* Curious, she narrowed the aperture to its tightest setting, then slashed a sinuous line of greenish mist across the now whole curve. Bits of the lower edge flopped over, no longer supported by the taut wholeness of the surface...but as she watched, the far ends slowly sealed themselves back together, lifting that curled-over bit of not-leathery stuff.

Giving the cranking handle several good turns, she set the opening to its widest, backed off to about the spot she had stood while creating it, and aimed. Within moments, green conquered gold, leaving nothing but a glittering dew that evaporated.

The implications were many, and staggering. The first and foremost was that the *Vull* had been created by the Ancients. Vielle wanted to dismiss the silly notion. The Vull was the Vull was the Vull. It had always existed, always kept the people on the hexisles up in the Skylands safe from the dangers found down here on the ground. Yet here was the proof, in a hand-held gizmo, that she could *create* bits of the Vull. Conversely, a hand-sized thingy could not possibly create a bubble so large, it covered the whole of a continent thousands of miles wide. And yet...!

The other major implication was that *she* could pierce the Vull, in a small and practical-sized hole. One that would not create huge tearing windstorms, because she wasn't tearing a huge hole. Unable to help herself, Vee tensed every muscle and shot straight up, heading for the real Vull. Swallowing when she reached it—as much from nerves as to clear the pressure in her ears—she cranked the handle a dozen times, twisted the dial just so, and aimed a modest-sized cone at the surface over her head.

She dissolved a hole in the Vull. An actual, smooth-edged hole. Air whooshed around her, escaping from Earthland into the Skylands with a hint of meaty thonite-gas smell. Quickly adjusting the dials and buttons, Vee sprayed the opening's edges with the golden mist...and sealed the hole. *Sealed* it.

That was another staggering realization. So staggering, she actually started to lose altitude from the shocked laxness of her muscles. Catching herself as she started to fall in earnest, Vee flew down under clenched control, back to the bubble-lined field. They were hard to see from a fair distance, but blatantly obvious from a middling one. They couldn't stay as such...but she did notice something odd.

Two of the bubbles, she had created one against the side of the other, a two-chambered bubble. But now, the wall between the two had apparently been absorbed, and the double-ended, single-chambered oblong was slowly spreading outward along its waistline, turning itself into a rounded sphere instead of an awkward hourglass. *Fascinating...but understandable. We all know the Vull can repair itself. I've also*

learned the mini-bubbles can do so, but they have to do so with the material on hand. So if two bubbles are conjoined, it will seep away unnecessary material and form a single, larger bubble, given enough time.

Unfortunately, I don't have the time to see how long it takes for a bubble to wear itself into nothingness. I'd rather keep the secrets of the Knot to myself for quite a bit longer. Adjusting the opening she started dissolving every one of them with the greenish mist, stalking from bubble to bubble with a few more turns of the crank whenever the mist started to peter out. Much to the relief of the furbit, whose antler-horns had gotten stuck in the membrane. It scampered off the moment it was free, alarmed by its experience and her proximity, but unharmed by the mist.

There were still two buttons left to go, and the dials that matched their intensity. She had learned from the golden button that the dials controlled how strong the mist spewed from the opening. And the green button made green mist, with the dial controlling the intensity of its dissolving abilities. Of course, when she tried the other two, the pink—or rather, red—button spewed a reddish mist, and the purple a purplish one. As she suspected they would.

But try though she might, applying them to the grass, to the side of the column, and even to a freshly-made Vull-bubble, *neither* the red nor the purple had any effect on the membrane, on the world...nothing whatsoever. She even flew up to the real Vull and tried it. All she got was a swell of hope when the reddish mist hit and splashed off the sky-membrane, and a sinking feeling of fatigue when the purple did the same.

Enthusiasm deflated, she drifted back down, landing on the original column by her pack. Settling on it to rest, she pulled out her food-pouch and nibbled on a bit of bread. That made her think of the thonite in the machine. She opened the cube-chamber and tipped out...a flat rectangle, not much thicker than a pencil-lead. Thin enough, she could have easily snapped it in half between two fingers and a thumb.

It looked and smelled like thonite, and even tasted normal when she dared to lick both sides experimentally. The meaty-sweet flavor made her mouth water. Popping the square into her mouth, she chewed a bit and let it dissolve on her tongue. The mineral revived her flagging energies while she thought.

That room had dozens of these things in it. Possibly hundreds, she recalled, visualizing the gleam from all those polished orbs. *But it would take far more than hundreds of thousands of these things to have created the Vull. Millions and more. And years, so many years, and so many volunteers—!*

No, these gun-gizmo thingies are too small, yet too important in their abilities. They were created for some other purpose. For what, however, I simply do not know. Eyeing the gizmo, she turned it over in her hands, then turned off all the dials and closed up every opening, crank, and grip, restoring it to a simple, if oddly decorated, silvery sphere.

Now that she could tell the six openings from the rest, Vee was more and more sure the other chased details were some fanciful version of archaic script. Unfortunately, ancient tongues were *not* her specialty. She could make out a few letters, and the word thon, because that was the same in any of Earthland's four languages, Gullite to the southeast, Curvite to the northeast, Valeite to the northwest, and the trade-tongue of Bellite, which covered the southwest. Local kingdoms had their own dialectic versions of each tongue, but for the most part those were the four primary languages used. Languages which Vielle, as a properly educated Air Courier, had learned to read, write, and speak fluently, as a requirement of her job.

This, however, escaped her. Everything changed over time; everyone knew that, as sure as they knew the hexisles would rise and fall. *So what I need is an expert in the Ancients. A scholar of long-forgotten legends and lore, a collector of old scrolls and tomes. Except I don't know any. The pursuit of the past is something for the rich to afford, since only they have the leisure time for it, or at least the ability to pay someone to look for it. I...*

Instinct warned her. Glancing up sharply, she spotted what the corner of her eye had warned her. A flock of teros, five or six of them, were using an afternoon thermal to spiral upward to hunting height. Up there, they would use their large eyes and their leathery wings to slowly glide over the landscape, looking for any hint of meat-based movement. As yet, they were too far off to be a real threat. Still, it was time for her to get out of range.

Packing up with discreet movements, she slipped off the column and headed for shelter, trying to keep bits of crumbling architecture between herself and that pack. The large, leathery avians would not follow her into buildings. Except the first doorway she came to had several tracks from the three-toed, claw-tipped feet of rappas, some of them relatively fresh.

Inevitable, that I should have days like this, she thought, sighing. Another hiding-hole would have to be found, at least until the teros selected something to swarm and kill for their afternoon meal. Once sated, they would not be interested in hunting down her.

Thus it always goes. An exciting discovery followed by a bit of danger. And it's not even related to the missives I carry, this time!