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# **Storm Chasing**

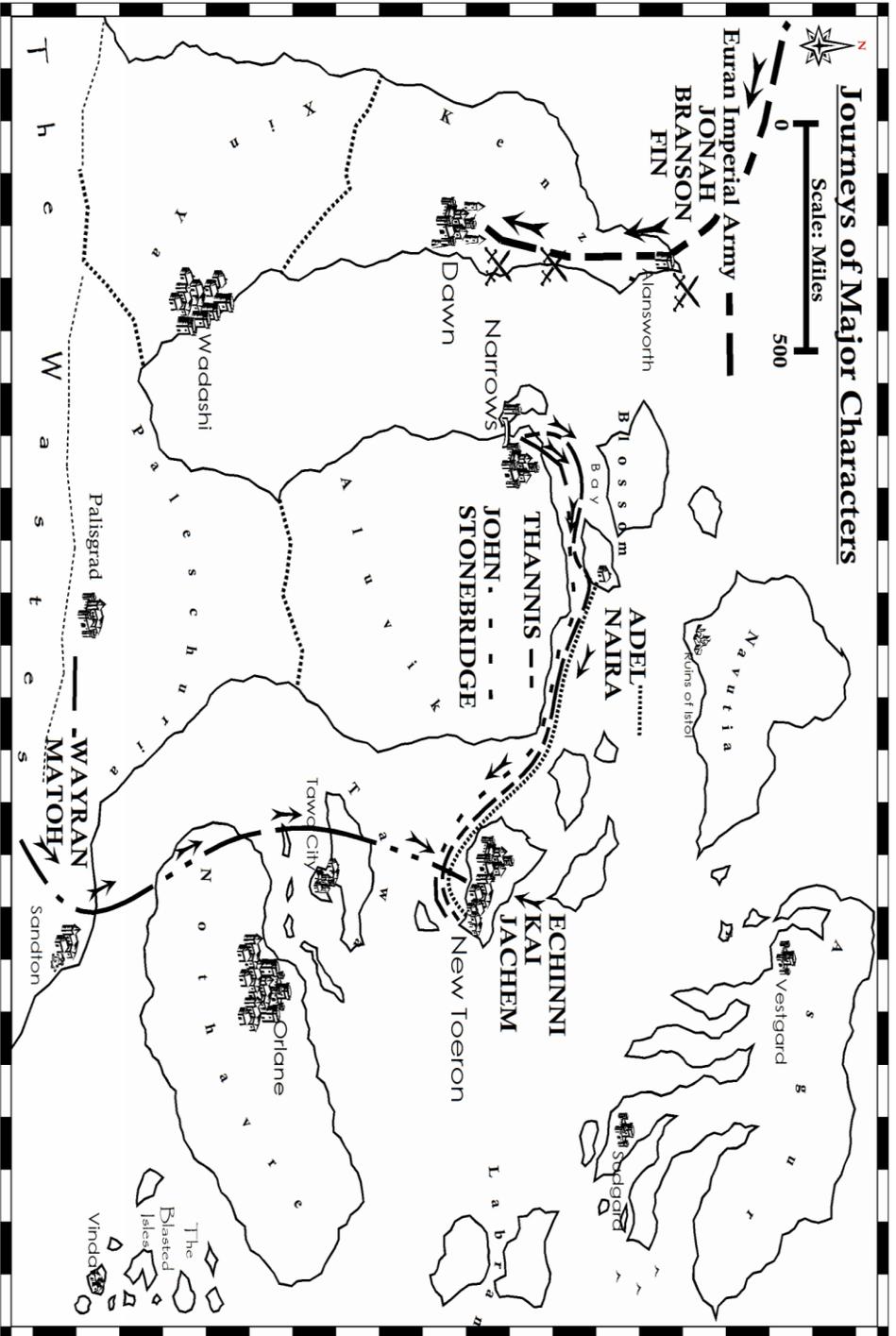
**First Chapters of Visions -  
Knights of Salucia – Book 1**

**C. D. Espeseth**

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## 1 - Storm Chasing

*My name is Robert Mannford, and I saved the world by killing it.*

*Now, I sit here, watching everything die around me, knowing I had to do it, knowing I am the monster who caused this.*

*If there is a heaven, I will not be in it for I am a murderer, an exterminator, but I may also be our world's saviour.*

*There is not but the hope of the future left to me, and that is what I must build.*

*First, however, I have to watch what I have wrought. I have to witness their end.*

*I owe them that at least.*

*And then, when the last fires go out, I will hope and rebuild.*

*- Journal of Robert Mannford, Day 000 Year 00*

## Wayran

### *The Wastes*

Wayran stood atop the dune, across from a hulking warrior, as sand rased across the wavy crest between them. In his hand Wayran held a spear, a silver one like his mother's.

The warrior across from him, however, had much more than a spear. His opponent was covered from head to toe in black chitin-like armour and carried a massive two-handed sword.

"Give me the key, Wayran," the monstrous warrior demanded.

The very air shook with its voice, and Wayran saw red eyes glaring at him from within the slits of its nightmarish helmet.

"You are going to destroy everything," the armoured monster said. "You've been chasing a lie."

“You’re wrong,” Wayran replied. The words made him sad, and he wondered how things had come to this. Where had it all gone wrong? The wind picked up and began to howl. Sand bit at his skin and Wayran tried to shield his eyes. “It’s not a lie, I have to do this. No, *we* have to do this. It’s the only way!” Wayran knew his words were a desperate attempt to sway the monster before him; he was almost assured to fail, but he had to try.

“Stop being so blind!” the armoured monster roared. “This is your last chance, Wayran. GIVE ME THE KEY!”

The very sky erupted around them in a show of power. Lightning flashed within the raging sandstorm, illuminating a giant tower atop the next dune to his right. He had to get to that tower and the door at its base. He had to use the keys. Wayran knew there was nothing else he could say. He looked into the red eyes of the steel monster and saw hatred and rage there. Wayran had lost. He couldn’t save this monster, but he could still use the keys. He threw his silver spear at the monster and ran towards the tower and the door.

The steel-clad warrior rushed forward, knocking the spear aside as if it were a toy. Its giant sword cleaved the air where Wayran had stood, and Wayran felt the sizzle of power against his skin as the strike missed.

Wayran rushed down the dune slope and glanced behind him. To his horror, the armoured monster began to change shape as it chased him. The black steel undulated and merged together into shining black skin from which glowing pustules of light burst forth. The giant blade the monster had held merged into dozens of golden teeth within a circular maw. The terrible worm-like creature hissed and shot down the sand dune after him.

The wind picked up, and Wayran lost sight of the monster behind him. He stumbled through the storm and pushed through the onslaught of wind and sand. Finally, he crashed into something solid.

It was the door.

Two metal rods shot up into the sky on either side of the tower, rising into the very centre of the storm. Lightning danced back and forth between

the two metal rods and down their lengths into the sand around Wayran. He saw spidery images of lightning trace odd symbols in the sand at his feet. He felt as if he should be able to understand them, but their meaning eluded him.

The worm monster hissed, and Wayran turned just in time to see the razor sharp teeth slashing towards him through the sandstorm.

He dived to his left and the monster crashed into one of the metal rods. Lightning snapped down into the creature and its pustules grew brighter, yet it remained still.

Wayran fumbled in his pocket and found the key. It was shining white with a rainbow sheen atop it like the inside of a clam shell. He found the keyhole in the door, framed by the same material, pushed his key inside and turned it. He threw his weight against the door. Nothing happened. Too late he realised the storm had also ceased around him, and the world was deadly silent.

Wayran turned and saw the worm change shape into a tall, well-groomed man. The man smiled with golden teeth as if at a joke, and then unsheathed two heavy-bladed knives.

“You should have stopped when you had the chance,” the tall man said with a shrug. He looked at Wayran, tilted his head in curiosity, and then thrust the heavy knives straight into Wayran’s chest. Wayran screamed as the air left his lungs, and the man smiled as he opened his mouth to reveal the rows of sharp teeth which then bit into Wayran’s neck.

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“Wayran!” A voice called.

He felt hands holding his shoulders. Someone was shaking him.

Wayran shot upright and sucked in a giant mouthful of air. His heart pounded, and he saw a tall, strong young man holding his shoulders and looking concerned.

“I’m here, it’s alright,” the young man said. “Which one was it this

time?”

Wayran had to breathe in and out twice more before he recognised that the young man holding him was Matoh, his brother.

“The monster and the tower,” Wayran said as he began to recognise his surroundings. He was in their shared bedroom aboard their uncle’s airship. Wayran heard the soft hum of the floating hull and the occasional creak of rope. The circular window to his right peered out onto a landscape just lighting up with the first rays of morning.

“Did you get inside this time?” Matoh asked.

“No,” Wayran said as he shook his head to try and clear the fuzziness he felt. Things were slowly coming back to him.

“Too bad,” Matoh sighed. “All these years of the same dream, and you never get inside that stupid tower. Where were you this time?”

“In the Wastes somewhere,” Wayran answered. His heart had finally begun to slow. His hand slipped under his shirt and felt his chest where the knives had pierced him, but he found no wound. It had been so real.

“Well, that figures,” Matoh chuckled as he cocked his head towards the window. “You’d think you would have had enough sand during the day. Dreaming about it now too? You’re completely obsessed aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Wayran tried to laugh. “I guess I am.” He paused as he remembered something odd about the dream. “There was something different this time,” he said as he stood and walked to the window. He looked out onto the vista of sweeping dunes rolling beneath the airship. “Two metal rods were attached to the tower. They were huge and stretched up into the sky. What do you think that means?”

Matoh grinned evilly. “It’s quite obviously repressed sexual desire.”

“What!” Wayran turned and punched his brother’s muscular arm.

Matoh just laughed and lay back in his hammock. “Come on, the signs are all there.”

“Oh, shut it.” Wayran rolled his eyes, and then rubbed his arms against the slight chill in the air. “You never take things seriously. Recurring

dreams are worrying.”

“Honestly, the dreams could mean anything,” Matoh snorted. “The tall man could be someone you're scared of, the weird worm monster could have been something you saw yesterday. The armoured man, I don't know, me going to the Academy, perhaps? Or some skewed vision of Mum? They're just dreams. Tell you what, though, I certainly haven't missed being woken up like that. Ever since you left home to come out to the Wastes, I've slept better than the dead.” Matoh laughed. “I'm seriously regretting my decision to come visit you.”

“Thank you – for snapping me out of it, I mean,” Wayran said. “And for coming to visit me. It must have been a long trip.”

“Yes, yes. Don't get all sentimental on me,” Matoh said with a smile, but then looked thoughtful. “Why would there be two giant metal rods sticking up out the sand in the middle of the desert?”

“I don't know. Why would there be a door I can't open, or a shape-shifting monster chasing me?” Wayran asked.

“Good point. I forgot to ask about the monster.” Matoh lay with his arms crossed behind his head. “What was it this time?”

“A knight, then a worm, and then the tall man.”

“Hmmm.” Matoh rubbed his chin in thought. “The tall guy's handsome, right? You've said that before.”

“Yes, so what?”

“So a tall, handsome man, a worm, and two long metal spikes?” Matoh's eyebrow rose. “*Suggestive* just isn't a strong enough word. You've got issues, brother.”

Wayran rolled his eyes and flopped back into his hammock. “Oh shut up. It was a nightmare. Why do I tell you anything?”

Matoh laughed, “You feel better, though, right?”

Wayran sighed. “Yes. I suppose there's that.”

“So we win, and nightmares lose,” Matoh said with a note of finality. “Come on, we might as well get up. The sun's rising, and it's

your big day today.”

Wayran didn't need reminding. He shook his head once more to clear any lingering elements of the nightmare, and then took a deep breath.

"Alright. I won't get back to sleep anyways."

They dressed quickly and crept through the small corridor into the kitchen. Aunt Sandra, who was also the ship's cook, was up and preparing breakfast for everyone.

"You two are up early," Aunt Sandra said as she sliced through a pineapple. "Nervous are we, Wayran?"

"Yes, though I don't know how I couldn't be." Wayran picked up a honey-glazed bun, an apple and a slice of ham before pouring himself some hot water from the big kettle on the stove for a cup of tea.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine. You haven't had any trouble on the smaller runs," Aunt Sandra said with a quick, reassuring smile.

"So, Uncle Aaron is pretty sure that today we'll find a big one?" Wayran asked. "How can he be so sure?"

"Well, when you've been out in the Wastes for as long as we've been out here, you get to know the rhythms of it all. Yesterday was very hot, and today is going to be a scorcher as well, you can already feel it in the air. Plus, your uncle's charted a lot of barometric pressure readings with that gizmo Chronicler Rutherford made for him. Aaron says the pressure's been getting lower each day, and since we're headed towards the coast, we should run into a dry cold front."

Wayran bobbed his head, putting together the pieces. It sounded like Uncle Aaron was right, which shouldn't really surprise him.

"You understood all that?" Match asked, raising an eyebrow at Wayran.

"Yes, you see the lower pressure indicates –"

"Stop." Match held up a hand. "I don't want to know. There is only so much room for understanding in a person's mind, and I don't want that nonsense pushing out anything useful."

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works.” Wayran squinted his eyes at his brother and knew Match was only pretending to be thick. Match could understand anything he set his mind to, he just wasn’t the slightest bit interested in science.

Match winked at him as if knowing what Wayran was thinking.

Wayran rolled his eyes and turned back to Aunt Sandra. “So it’s probably going to be a big one today?”

“Most likely.” Aunt Sandra pushed all the pineapple pieces into a large bowl. “Go on, get your plates full and then get up top. I’m sure there are a dozen things you need to check before you’re ready, and I’ve got meals to prepare.”

Wayran grabbed another honey-glazed bun and some of the pineapple while Match filled another plate completely before they made their way up to the top deck.

A hint of sunrise still coloured the horizon as they climbed the narrow ladder up to the main deck. Wayran once again found himself marvelling at the incredible vista. He didn’t know if he’d ever get used to seeing things from so high up in the air.

He followed Match across the main deck to the edge of the bespoke landing platform. Most sailing ships never entertained the idea of a glider landing platform, but then again, most ships were built to stay on the sea and never entertained the idea of being hoisted up hundreds of feet into the air by a floating Jendar hull.

Wayran looked up in wonder at the ancient and otherworldly Jendar hull above them. It looked like a giant grey egg, yet if you looked closer at the skin, you could see sparkling pebble-like bumps all the way around it. But the real marvels were inside this giant floating egg. Purple gaseous light danced within the hull, with lines of ghostly blue filaments floating through it.

No one really understood how it worked, but Uncle Aaron had figured out enough of the ancient Jendar controls to make the floating

hull go where he wanted it to. Thus, *Deliverance*, the only known airship in the entire world, came to be, after Uncle Aaron had tied his old caravel to the bottom of the floating hull.

Wonders like the hull overhead were the real reason Wayran had been working so hard to get a place on his Uncle's crew. No one could get as far into the Wastes as his uncle with this airship, and deep within the Wastes was where Wayran was going to find out what really happened to the Jendar. How had the ancient and vastly technologically superior civilisation simply ceased to exist? They had disappeared almost overnight leaving nothing but ruins and relics of their glorious past. So much had been lost, but all of that forgotten knowledge was waiting for him to find somewhere beneath the sands.

Wayran popped another piece of pineapple into his mouth hoping the sweet juice would help wake him up. He walked across the main deck to peer out at the horizon, seeking a glimpse of sunlight off glass somewhere in the distance. He had seen the flashes before. They were the tell-tale signs of Jendar ruins and their soaring glass towers.

He stared out past the horizontal masts of the airship, which extended like massive fingers into the sky beside them. Wide triangular sails billowed from the masts both above and below the landing deck. The sails on the bottom flowed out sideways like inverted bat-wings, while the sails above soared to the top of the bulging Jendar hull looming overhead like a giant wingless bee. Rigging crisscrossed between the sails in every direction, tying Uncle Aaron's very standard wooden caravel to the amazing floating hull in an intricate web of which even the most fastidious spider would be proud.

"I can see why you like this," Matoh said as he stared out towards the horizon. "Pretty spectacular, I have to admit. I'm glad I caught you all in Sandton. This is probably the last time we'll get to spend together for a long while."

Wayran was surprised at the sentiment, but Matoh was right. Once

Wayran passed his test, he would be travelling through the Wastes for most of the year with only the occasional trip back to any form of civilisation. Whereas Matoh would almost immediately start training at the Royal Military Academy once this run in the Wastes was completed.

“Yes,” Wayran agreed. “Sad, when you put it that way.”

They sat sipping their tea in contented silence, just watching the world wake up. Finally, Wayran shook himself out of his reverie and looked over at Matoh. “Try not to do anything stupid today if you have to fill in again, alright?”

“We were having a moment,” Matoh scoffed, but saw Wayran was serious. “Fine, I won’t do anything stupid, as long as you try not to be so patronising.” Matoh’s all too familiar crooked grin lit his face.

“I’m serious, Matoh. Just follow the plan,” Wayran said.

“I do follow the plan!” Matoh protested. “Well, the spirit of the plan anyways. There is always room for improvement once you get into the field.”

“That’s not your call. You’re just filling in because James broke his arm a few weeks ago. Uncle Aaron doesn’t need you messing things up just because you want to show off,” Wayran said. He knew his words were doing nothing but antagonising Matoh, yet he couldn’t stop himself. His nerves were already making him edgy.

“Wayran, stop freaking out,” Matoh said with more calm understanding than Wayran would have given him credit for. “Things will be fine. If Uncle Aaron needs me again today, I’ll go and do my job. You just focus on what you need to do.”

Wayran took a deep breath. Matoh was right, things would be fine. He’d complete this run and then Wayran would have a permanent place on the crew.

“Alright. I’m going to go check on my glider.” Wayran nodded to Matoh and set off to give his glider another inspection. He needed to

do something to take his mind off the impending run, and he could practically feel the electric charge in the air.

Uncle Aaron had predicted accurately. Today they were going to see a big one.

\* \* \*

Wayran felt the wind rushing past him as he let his bodyweight shift in the glider harness. The right wing tipped up, and Wayran turned to fly straight into the edge of the approaching sandstorm.

He smiled as lightning jumped through the massive cloud of churning sand particles, and just then he couldn't think of anywhere else he'd rather be.

"Wow! This is great!" Matoh said a few dozen feet to his left. "Uncle Aaron was right, it's huge!"

Wayran sighed inwardly. Matoh being this excited usually presaged them getting into some sort of misadventure. "Just stick to the plan, alright?!" Wayran called over to his brother.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Matoh give a sarcastic shake of his head. Wayran ground his teeth but said nothing. He didn't have time to worry about his brother's lack of commitment right now. Matoh already had a plan at the end of the summer, and it had nothing to do with flying gliders out over the Wastes.

Just before the sun was completely blocked out by the wall of oncoming dust and sand, Wayran saw something flash in the dunes below. He traced it and saw the buried edge of an enormous building, and felt a quick thrill.

The building was undoubtedly Jendar.

His mind wandered for a moment, wondering what treasures, or better yet, what answers might be hidden inside the enormous structure; but then all light faded as they flew under the edge of the storm and wind-whipped sand began biting into his face.

"Here we go!" Wayran yelled over at Matoh.

Matoh waved back at Wayran, signalling he was ready.

*Please don't let him be an idiot.* Wayran prayed to any god which might be listening as he secured his mask, adjusted his specially made goggles, and then attacked the storm.

Thunder boomed from somewhere within the dust cloud and jolted his mind into focus. He checked his position and could just make out Matoh's shadow on his left and the flight lead in front of him, as another blast of wind hit their group of gliders.

*Don't fight it,* Wayran reminded himself, feeling the force of the air and how it wanted to move the glider. *Use it instead.*

He shifted his weight and angled the wide triangular wing above him to catch part of the gust. It jerked the glider back and upwards, and Wayran gasped slightly at the sudden change in altitude, but he regained control quickly and steadied himself.

His skin tingled on his left, which told him which part of the cloud to head towards. He could just make out the shadowy outline of the lead glider, and saw their flight lead's hand drop low, which told the rest of the team to prepare themselves.

Wayran let himself smile. This next part was great.

The flight lead's hand rose and dropped twice in quick succession. They were in position; it was the signal to start harnessing the energy around them.

Wayran closed his eyes, concentrated, and began to siphon.

Siphoning was why he had been allowed to even entertain the idea of flying with his Uncle's crew. Few people could siphon in the latent energy of the environment around them, but both Wayran and Matoh had been born with the ability, inherited from their parents.

Chaotic energy in the air around Wayran's body began to order itself as he focused on pulling it into his skin. He felt the air temperature drop as all the energy immediately around him was pulled into his body. He blocked out all other thoughts, as holding the energy

for too long inside of him was dangerous. He focused on moving the numbing, tingling sensation into a cohesive ball in his chest. The tingling sensation built almost to the point of pain.

Wayran felt the thin metal wires woven into the bodysuit he wore, called a *trisk*, begin to warm. His trisk was specifically rigged for this job and had several large copper conduit discs sewn into the fabric down the length of his back.

Finally, he couldn't pull any more energy into himself, and the tingling pain intensified suddenly as a lightning strike flashed in a distant cloud.

*Now!* The energy numbed Wayran for the briefest of moments as he snapped it through the lines of his trisk and into the conduit points on his back. He felt the copper discs warm against his skin, telling him the push had been successful.

He sucked in a breath as his body recovered from the first round of siphoning.

He could see the faint glow of *santsi* globes atop each of the gliders flying in the storm around him. They looked like giant fireflies floating within a hazy sky.

The globes were a wonder of this age. Able to hold siphoned energy for long periods of time, *santsi* globes had become the most sought-after commodity in the Salucian Union. Out here in the Wastes, Uncle Aaron's crew were able to fill the biggest and best globes to full capacity.

Wayran grinned and swung forward in his harness, making its nose drop. He felt his stomach fill with butterflies as he experienced the moment of weightlessness and dived back into position behind the flight lead. Wayran opened himself up to the potent energy within the sandstorm and began collecting energy for his next push.

Each time he pushed more energy into the *santsi* globe, it would become increasingly difficult to push again. More and more energy was used up trying to force the next bit in, a bit like trying to pack more and more things into a rucksack. Each new item in the sack impeded the next

item you tried to stuff in. All this meant Wayran had to save a lot of his strength for those final siphoning pushes into the globes: the santsi globes on top of his glider were the biggest and best money could buy. He had to pace himself.

This was what it meant to be a Storm Chaser. Pushing yourself to your siphoning limit while literally chasing storms to collect the awesome amount of latent energy within those storms, and it was all to fill up the biggest santsi globes available to then sell the storm charged globes to the highest bidder.

It was possibly one of the stupidest ways to make money ever conceived, but what a rush!

Lightning lit the sky just in front of them, and Wayran saw the flight lead waving for them to swing left and get back to the edge of the storm. They were getting pulled too far in and were way too close to that last lightning strike.

As crazy as the Storm Chasers were, they still weren't stupid enough to try and take on the full power of a sandstorm. They had to stay right on the edge of the storm, or they risked being sucked in and killed. They exited the spitting sand cloud once again, and lightning struck once more as if trying to snap at their heels.

Wayran's head whipped to the side. In the sudden light of the flash he saw two enormous metal rods sticking out of the sand like the antennae of some great insect.

*No way!* They were just like the ones he had seen in his dream.

Heavier sand began to hit him and he lost sight of the metal rods, chastising himself for not paying attention to the storm. You always had to respect the storm. As soon as you lost that respect, the storm would kill you.

He circled his glider back and got behind two other gliders to ensure he was far enough out. He kept looking towards where the metal rods had been, but he couldn't see any hint they had been there.

Had he imagined them?

The flight lead signalled for them to wrap it up quickly. Wayran shook himself and focused on preparing to siphon again.

Wayran opened up to the energy once more and gasped as the magnitude of the force slammed into him like a fist. His entire body felt like it had been rung like a giant bell. Immediately the tingling pain set in and he forced the torrent of energy through the conduit point on his back. His body throbbed from the attack.

“Wow,” he managed to choke out as his body stopped buzzing. This storm was a big one! He had heard some of the other glider pilots talking about the big ones, but nothing could have prepared him for this.

“Lady take me!” Wayran heard Match’s curse from beside him. “You alright Wayran? That was something else!”

Match looked concerned but he wore a smile and Wayran could see the wild look in his brother’s eyes even behind the goggles. He was enjoying this even more than Wayran was.

Wayran gave Match a thumbs-up to show he was alright. “That was big! Won’t take long to fill our globes with a storm like this!” he called, although he didn’t know if Match could hear him.

Lightning flashed again, and Wayran felt the charge of its proximity slash through him, making his body freeze solid for a moment. Thank the gods he hadn’t been siphoning when that blast ripped through the air. He felt his heart pounding in his chest, and he was more than a little glad when he saw the flight lead’s signal to pull back another two hundred yards. The wind increased yet again.

“Did you see that?!” Match called over to him, pointing to something below them.

Wayran looked down and saw the two metal rods again.

“The metal rods!” Match yelled over the noise of the howling wind, “Just like you said! Look! The lightning keeps hitting them. They’re absorbing the lightning!”

Wayran saw the flight lead turn sharply to the left and saw the lead's outstretched arm rotating in a wide arc. It was the signal to get into a climbing circle formation: they were to finish filling their globes as they rode the thermal up, and then get the hells out of there.

"It's too dangerous!" Wayran yelled at Matoh, "We have to go!" Wayran's body tensed as his glider's wing bounced with a gust of wind. He moved into position and repeated the flight lead's arm signal for those behind him.

The metal rods would have to wait; the storm was growing too large. They had to get back to their grounded airship so they could ride out the rest of the storm as it blew over.

As his glider arced away from the storm, Wayran thankfully felt a slight drop in the energy field around him. There had been so much energy in the storm, it had been like having your entire body covered with pins and needles.

In his peripheral vision, he saw other gliders fly in behind him, mirroring his slow climb up and away from the storm.

Then someone veered out of position and flew away from the group.

Wayran's heart sank in dread; he knew who it was.

"I'm going to check it out!" Matoh yelled.

*No!* Wayran's eyes widened, and he screamed, "Matoh, get back here!"

Thunder boomed and drowned out any chance of Matoh hearing him.

Wayran lurched in his harness as he tried to look over his shoulder to where he had last seen Matoh.

Sand belted his face mask as a gust of wind slammed into the glider's wing and threw Wayran's craft about as if an angry god had decided to slap him. He tried to compensate and found himself rising sharply in the middle of the thermal. He tilted the glider's wings and

arced back around so he could see where Matoh had gone.

He turned just in time to see Matoh's glider sailing straight back into the churning cloud of sand and lightning.

Two bolts of lightning flashed directly in front of his brother's position, and Wayran saw the shadows of the giant metal rods in the lightning's afterimage.

"Damn it, Matoh," Wayran cursed. The other Storm Chasers hadn't seen Matoh veer off. It was up to Wayran to bail out his stupid brother.

"Get back here, Matoh!" Wayran yelled, and tipped the nose of his glider down, swooping towards the disappearing shadow of his brother and gaining speed. *He's going to get himself killed.*

Another bolt of lightning struck. In the flash, he saw Matoh's tiny glider silhouetted against the giant bolt.

Then Matoh was gone. Hidden behind a wall of billowing sand.

Wayran's heart pounded in his chest as he tipped his body up and dived forward, trying to catch up with Matoh.

A gust of wind smashed into him, and heavy sand pounded against his bodysuit. They delivered such force that even through the suit it felt like thousands of biting ants.

Another gust and Wayran lost his grip on the steering bar. He grabbed for it in panic as his glider's nose pitched upwards and he was thrown back. He fought for control and grabbed the bar just as the top of a dune came rushing towards him from out of the blowing sand.

He strained with everything he had to push the glider back up into the air. His feet clipped the top of the dune, and as the glider's wing cleared the other side, hot air shot him back up into the sky. His stomach lurched as the ropes on his harness groaned in protest.

A metal rod appeared in front of him, he veered to avoid it, and saw Matoh circling around the rod above him.

Lightning struck, hitting one of the metal rods, and the bolt of plasma jumped from one rod back to the other, rippling down into the sand

between them.

Thunder ripped through the air and knocked the breath from Wayran's lungs.

He rode the up thrust of warm air so he could get above Match. He couldn't ignore how spooked he was about seeing the metal rods from his dream, but he had no time to dwell on it as they were about to be vaporised at any moment. Wayran pushed the nose of his glider up as he felt the thermal push up against the glider's wing. He had to get Match out of here.

Their impending doom was apparently lost on his thrill-seeking brother as Wayran heard the words that had always made his heart jump.

"Watch this!" Match yelled.

It was then Wayran saw the three dark globes atop his brother's glider and Wayran knew what was going to happen.

"Don't!" He stretched his hand out.

An enormous lightning bolt split the sky as it slammed into Match's glider and the world went white.

Wayran was blind, and all he heard was a sharp whining in his ears.

After three long heartbeats, his vision cleared. Where Match had once been, now spun a smoking glider. Match's body hung limp in the harness, and Wayran watched in terror as his brother plummeted towards the dunes far below.

Wayran's guts twisted into knots and the blood in his veins seemed to freeze. Time slowed as he watched Match falling to his death.

It was then Wayran felt himself siphoning, almost unconsciously. The energy felt different and all at once events began to unfold before his eyes. A ghost image of Match hitting the dune made his mind snap back to reality. *I have to save him.*

Dozens of possibilities and choices began to play out in his mind.

He saw himself try to intercept and grab Matoh's glider wing, saw himself jump out of his harness and try to gain control of the caterwauling glider.

Then Wayran saw the possible future he wanted. He grabbed hold of that vision and executed what he had seen in his mind's eye.

Wind rushed up to meet his craft as he pointed his glider's nose straight down. He put all of his weight onto the palms of his hands and held himself straight up in the harness as if he were doing a handstand on the steering bar. The air began to hiss off the fabric of his glider's wings, but he kept his mind focused on what he had to do, on what he had seen happen.

Momentum was the issue, and the glider's frame would only take so much strain, especially from a sharp impact. The faster he went, the more stress on the frame when he needed to bank out of the speed and change direction. Yet Wayran had seen the solution.

Like an arrow fired straight down, he watched as he flew past Matoh's prone form spinning in the drunkenly listing glider. He was below Matoh's position now. He had to follow the dune and had to time this just right.

*Now.*

He pushed himself back in the harness, and his arms shook with the effort to stay in control.

The glider's wings flexed, and then Wayran felt it begin to turn.

The turn couldn't be too sharp, or else the wood of the frame would snap. Not enough and – well, he couldn't think about that.

The weight of his body pushed against the harness as he felt the wings begin to flex under his weight. The edge of the dune swept beneath him, and Wayran dived down just above its slope, his stomach brushing the sand. He clenched his body tight and pushed back to lift the nose ever so slightly.

His speed was incredible. Sand lifted from the air in his wake, hissing behind him.

Wayran inched the nose of the glider up again, and the wings groaned

but held.

It had to be now. He forced the nose back up towards the sky. Ropes creaked, wood flexed, and Wayran felt the full momentum of his speed pulling him into the face of the dune.

His feet touched the sand, and then the glider snapped back skywards. He saw Matoh as Wayran's glider shot straight up at him from below.

Wood splintered around him as finally the wings had taken too much. In a flash of clarity, his mind's eye blurred through various scenarios and he found the one to latch onto.

He siphoned with everything he had, but not from the air. He pulled everything he could from the charged santsi globes still connected to the conduit point on his back. Wayran had never been trained to siphon in this way, but somehow he had seen what to do. He pushed everything he had into the silver lines running through his trisk.

Flame flashed around him, and suddenly he was free of the broken glider. Pain crisscrossed his skin, but the harness burned away, freeing him to fly upwards with the speed of a falcon.

Wayran braced and slammed into the wing of Matoh's glider. Together they spun, but sideways, not down. Santsi atop Matoh's glider were flung away, exploding with the stored energy as they smashed against the sand around them.

The brothers skipped across a dune's crest, were airborne once again, and then slammed into the second dune in a tangle of bodies and broken glider wings.

Wayran tasted blood as the air left his body from the impact.

He tried to suck air in, but it wouldn't come to him. He lay gasping in the strange silence atop the dune. Thunder boomed in the distance, and finally he pulled in a breath.

*Don't be dead, don't be dead.* Wayran rolled and fought through

the fabric that was covering his brother, which had once been a glider wing.  
*Don't be dead.*

He sank to his knees beside his brother. Match wasn't moving; his whole body looked limp. Wayran dared not breathe as he tried to detect any sign at all that Match still lived.

In the stillness, he heard a sound like something slowly cracking. All around him, the sound repeated. It sounded like glass about to pop.

Above them, atop the crest of the dune, he saw the metal rods beginning to sink into the sand.

It was then Wayran felt a vibration in the sand beneath him, and a sound like giant cogs whirring together.

The cracking sound grew louder.

Wayran thought he heard a hissing, and he looked back to a spot of charred sand where a santsi globe had exploded. The blackened sand began to disappear as its centre was pulled down into a vortex, just like it did within an hourglass.

Another crack sounded, this time closer, and more sand began to slide towards the growing vortex.

"Match get up!" Wayran yelled. He grabbed his brother by the shoulders and tried to pull him up and away from the sliding sand. Yet Match was unconscious and his body a dead weight.

There was a great popping sound as all of the sudden the ground around Wayran gave way beneath him. He held onto Match as they fell into the giant vortex of sand and were sucked down below the dunes.

## 2 - Beneath the Sands

*How omnipotent the sands feel. The last remnants of grasslands have been overtaken, and now there is only sand. Sand and dust. Dust and Sand. In this isolation, I have nothing better to do than track the long protracted movements of the dunes, like giant cream waves upon a time-slowed ocean.*

*Always encroaching, always hissing in the wind, skittering across the surfaces of its brethren. Always moving. And it gets everywhere. Into every crack and crevice. Into every device and mechanism. Clogging things up, disrupting my contraptions with an unfathomably high order of entropy. Eventually, everything submits to its encroachment and is in turn claimed by the sand. Against its never tiring onslaught there is no victory, only delay. And the sands have limitless patience. They know I cannot last forever. And in the end, they will take me and this place, like they do everything else.*

*In the end, there is just sand.*

*Always, in the end, there is just sand.*

- *Journal of Robert Mannford, Day 075 Year 68*

### Matoh

#### *The Wastes*

Something was pushing him forward. Like a massive hand, impossible to resist, gently thrusting him forward.

Matoh turned his head to see what it was, but there was nothing. He turned back, still moving forward, towards some sort of threshold. It looked like a barrier of some sort, and suddenly his chest met

resistance.

Yet the invisible hand kept pushing. It was crushing him, slowly, yet unflinchingly.

Matoh put his hands up, trying to feel the barrier; his hands moved but were slow, dragging as if he were weighed down.

And the pressure kept increasing, forcing him into this resistive shield, which flexed but began to smother him as he ran out of space. He couldn't breathe. Match pushed against the invisible hand, trying to dig his heels into something, anything.

And still the pressure increased. He tried to scream, but more air left his lungs.

He had no options ... No! There was one. Forward.

He braced against the invisible hand and surged forward into the smothering barrier with everything he had left. His body shook with the effort; he was going to black out.

And suddenly there was light.

Bright sunlight shone down on his shoulders; he could feel its warmth. He stood in a golden field. Grass as tall as his waist waved in the wind and he could smell flowers.

He had a sword in his hand.

Match looked down at the weapon in his hand, puzzled. *How did that get there?*

The sword was impossibly large, nearly four feet long and half a foot wide, but it felt light as a feather. A blade of burnt gold ... but then it changed: first into a wicked black longsword, then into a brilliant white dagger, then back into the great golden two-hander. The weapons flickered back and forth. Yet they all felt the same somehow.

Match tightened his grip on the hilt and he felt strong, stronger than he ever had before. The weapon knew him, recognised him. He had the strange sensation it had been waiting for him.

He looked up across the waving grass to see a man standing in front of

him, silent and motionless. He wore an odd hat, wide and conical. It was made of woven grass, like one a farmer might wear. The wind rippled across the field and Matcho felt its chill, but the strange man was not touched by the wind, he waited, watching him. Somehow Matcho knew this man as well. This whole scene was ... familiar.

*He's here to kill me.* Matcho didn't know how he knew, but he did.

Another sword, this one long and slender, appeared in the strange man's hand as if it had been summoned. Its form changed as well; it seemed to be settling on the black longsword, where his own weapon seemed to be flickering more often to the golden blade.

The light itself shied away from the jet-black blade in the man's hand, as though there was a pool of darkness there which the sun couldn't touch. Matcho felt hunger from the black sword, and then he remembered his own golden blade. His sword began to glow, drinking in the sunlight, and blue runes emerged from the central fuller. This too was familiar.

The man tilted his head as if in curiosity, and the sun crept in under the wide hat. A face of polished silver surrounded a set of glowing red eyes. The man was impossibly thin, more like a skeleton, yet Matcho could see armour running the entire length of his body like a second skin.

And now Matcho wore his own armour. A full set of Syklan Knight's armour. He had huge santsi globes atop his pauldrons. This too felt right. He was meant to be a Syklan. Matcho had always known this. He was a greater warrior than even his mother, the Silver Lady, Natasha Spierling.

*I must win.* Matcho knew this battle was what would define him. It was everything. The fate of the Union rested on his shoulders. He had to win.

They stared at each other across the grassy field for an eternity. The metal man seemed to hesitate, waiting for him. *A mistake*, Matcho

thought. *'Hesitation kills as surely as a blade'*: they were his father's words.

"You are here to kill me," Matoh stated. His voice was powerful, surprisingly so, and was somehow not quite his own, as if he was hearing someone else speak with his lips.

"Yes." The word was spoken softly, almost sadly. The silver face had no mouth with which to speak, but Matoh heard the word as if it had been whispered in his ear.

Again Matoh felt he should know this man. But that didn't matter; what he did know was that the man was his enemy and he had to beat him. He had to win to save them all.

Matoh surged forward, and the heavens roared with him. He lifted his sword and blue fire blazed along its edge. A hum, like a swarm of giant bees, rushed through him as he swung the great blade. Nothing could stand in his way. He wielded the power of the gods. The metal man's black sword rose up to meet his, and the world shifted.

He was on a street.

Moonlight shone down upon the lifeless eyes of a hundred corpses in front of him. A tall man, dressed in rich black silks, laughed with delight as he licked the blood from his long hunting knife. A manic hunger lit the man's eyes as he turned to Matoh; then he smiled showing a mouth full of fangs and blood dripped down his chin.

Matoh tried to run, but couldn't.

The man laughed at his weakness. "I was hoping you'd find me." The dark man smiled and launched forward, diving straight into Matoh's chest. He felt a hole in his body. The monster was inside him.

The world shifted.

Matoh's heart pounded. Had he just died? What was happening?

Something touched his arm, making him jump. It was a young woman. As Matoh stared at her, her hair colour shifted from dark to light.

"Time to go," the woman said holding out her hand. Matoh reached for

it, but when he looked up it was no longer the young woman, but his mother.

Matoh was a child again, on the cliffs across from the Red Tower. It was the last place he had seen his mother.

“Don’t leave me,” he said, but his mother only smiled down at him, now dressed in her shining Syklan armour. She patted his head sadly.

A wave crashed below, and a fine mist rose up from the rocks below surrounding the clifftop. Matoh could smell the ocean.

“Be strong, my young prince,” his mother said to him.

“Don’t leave me!” Matoh wailed, trying to run, but his legs were so small.

“Goodbye, Matoh.” His mother waved and stepped into the mist.

He was alone.

\* \* \*

Matoh sat up. Cold sweat covered him. Sweat and something else ... sand?

He put a hand to his chest as he felt a tightness there. *In the place where the evil figure had dived into his body.* The memory of it made him shiver.

He lifted a hand to shield his eyes from a strange pale blue light above, but the motion made his head swim. “Where am ... ?”

“Matoh!” Wayran yelled – far too loudly for Matoh’s taste.

“Shhhh.” Matoh put a finger up, closing his eyes against the ringing pain between his ears. “Not so loud.”

“I thought you were dead!” Wayran’s voice had an edge of panic to it.

“I may have been,” Matoh groaned as he tried to stand up. He seemed to be half buried in the sand. “Do the dead have really weird dreams and feel terrible?”

“I doubt it,” Wayran said, and slid in under his arm, trying to steady him. “The dead don’t really feel much from what I gather. Do

you have pain anywhere else?”

“You mean other than everywhere?” Matoh squinted some more, and finally the room came into focus.

He saw Wayran’s concerned face. “No, really, Wayran. I’m fine. A little woozy and my chest hurts a bit, but it’s nothing really. Weren’t we meant to be flying?”

“Are you serious?” Wayran said in disbelief. “You pulled lightning, you idiot!”

“What?” Matoh scoffed. The memory of something flashing just before he blacked out did seem familiar, but that couldn’t have been what happened. “Come on,” he said, “that’s not possible.”

“What were you thinking?!” Wayran threw his hands up as he stepped back from Matoh. “Do you have some sort of death wish or something? That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen you do. Flying straight towards where lightning keeps striking! Yes, that’s a great idea. What could possibly happen?!”

Matoh ignored his brother’s comments as he began to see where they were standing. “Where are we, Wayran?”

“I can’t believe you’re not hurt.” Wayran shook his head, pacing back and forth and staring at him.

“Sorry to disappoint.” Matoh put his hands on Wayran’s shoulders to stop his pacing.

“We need to get you to Quirin. She’ll be the one to decide if you’re alright.” Wayran pointed his finger at him. “As soon as we get out, straight to a healer.”

“Ok, fine.” Matoh turned from Wayran slowly to look back at the wall across from them. “But first tell me where in the nine hells are we?”

Across from them stood a wall of interlocking metal panels and black glass, but the oddest part was above them. Light came from a rod in the ceiling which glowed with a pale white-blue light. The room was like nothing Matoh had ever seen before.

“It’s a Jendar building of some sort, as far as I can tell,” Wayran growled.

Matoh could see, however, that his brother’s concern was lessening with the mention of the Jendar.

“I had to wreck my glider to save you, and the practice one Uncle Aaron gave you is completely destroyed,” Wayran said as he shook his head in disgust, “not to mention the fortune of santsi globes we lost.”

Matoh grimaced at that. “Sorry,” he said, and he genuinely was. “I know how long you spent saving for that glider. I’ll help you get another one. But Wayran, how did we get here? I remember circling those strange pin-like spikes sticking up out of the sand. I wanted to see them catch a lightning bolt.”

Wayran quirked an eyebrow at him but then shook his head. “Well, if this place is Jendar, it could be possible, but flying towards them was still stupid.”

“Fine, I’ll admit that.” It was then Matoh remembered falling. “Wait, did you smash into me in mid-air?”

“Yes,” his brother said, and now it was Wayran who looked distant, as if he too were trying to piece together what exactly had happened.

“How are we both not dead? Alright, say I believe you about the lightning.” Matoh remembered the feeling of a massive amount of energy as he siphoned it. “But then I fell. How – what ...” He didn’t know where to start. “Just tell me what happened!”

“I don’t ...” Wayran looked at a loss for words. “I don’t quite understand it myself; but I saw you pull the lightning.” Wayran looked up at him. “And then you were falling and I just, sort of, saw how to save you. It was as if everything had slowed down, and I felt” – Wayran scratched his head – “I don’t know, it was something massive, something so big I can’t explain it.” Wayran shook his head in frustration.

“So how does this turn into you smashing into me in midair?”

Matoh quirked an eyebrow and flicked the small braid on his left side behind his ear.

“Well, I couldn’t stop you from hitting the ground, so I tried to stop you hitting it with so much momentum. I dived below and then flew up to hit you. I guess it was enough to make a difference.”

“Have I ever told you, you read too many books?” Matoh shook his head and brushed a hand through the stripe of hair on his head, dislodging some sand. The leather skullcap he had been wearing must have been lost, as were a large number of the crow’s feathers he had woven into his hair for luck.

*Bad luck that*, he thought to himself, *losing crow feathers*. The thought was a bit of an understatement, and he laughed aloud. He turned away from the metal wall with another chuckle and looked at the pile of sand sloping sharply up to what remained of a thick glass roof. “So we fell, but how did we get in here?”

“The santsi,” Wayran said, as if that explained everything.

“The santsi?” Matoh spread his hands, waiting for Wayran to continue. He had got used to this lack of explaining from his older and more scholarly brother. Discussions sometimes felt like pulling teeth.

“The santsi you had filled during the lightning strike flew off when I hit your glider. They must have been super-charged from the lightning and detonated on contact with the sand. It would have sent a shockwave through the sand, thus cracking the glass dome. We were sucked down as the sand poured into the open cavity beneath. Luckily there was enough room in here for most of the sand above, or else we’d be buried alive.” Wayran pointed up at the remnants of what must have been a rather magnificent glass dome. “Sad really. That dome would have been standing for nearly three thousand years.”

“Yes, poor dome.” Matoh rolled his eyes. “Can we climb back out?” But he thought he already knew the answer, looking at the mountain of sand behind him.

“No,” Wayran said. “The collapse of the dome would have caused the dunes above to shift as well. There must be at least another hundred feet of sand above the glass.”

“What about up those spikes, any chance with those?” Matoh pointed at the giant pin-like spikes they had seen from above.

“No, thought of that. Looks like these spikes are pushed up through the holes in the roof and through the dunes. We’d just get stuck in the sand, or fried by lightning.” Wayran pointed at one of the spikes.

“They’ve been hit twice since we fell in. You could feel the heat and crackle of energy coming off them after a strike. We’re stuck down here, unless you want to try and take the energy of another lightning bolt?”

“Once is enough for me.” Matoh stretched, looking around once again. “So ... we need to find a different way out.”

Wayran nodded.

“A part of you loves this, doesn’t it?” Matoh said. This was pretty much what his older brother had been dreaming about doing ever since they had visited the Chronicler Archives as kids.

“You mean apart from the fact that we are probably going to die a slow and agonising death down here?” Wayran asked, still studying the room around them.

“Yes, besides that.” Matoh twisted and felt a satisfying pop as the pressure in his neck released. He flexed his muscles and knew he would have several ugly bruises – if they ever got out of here.

Wayran finally began to smile as he looked around the room. “I know I should be scared to death, but ... I’m not. I mean, yes, I’m scared and worried, and I think we are probably going to starve before we suffocate. Marcus probably doesn’t have a chance of finding us down here, and –”

Matoh put up a hand. “Stop talking. You’re beginning to make me think we’re in trouble.” He smiled as he too studied the room around

them. "I have to admit. This *is* pretty amazing, other than the impending doom part of course."

Wayran looked at him seriously. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Ask me that again and I'll show you just how 'alright' I am," Matoh growled. "Come on, there has to be a door somewhere."

They set off to look around the room.

\* \* \*

"The Jendar did actually use doors, didn't they?" Matoh asked after they had spent what must have been hours searching for an exit. They had circled the room over a dozen times and found nothing that even resembled a door. "You know, an opening, usually framed, with a moving barrier in it, something which connects one room to another."

"I know what a damned door is, Matoh," Wayran cursed; they were both getting tired. Wayran looked to be favouring one leg more than the other, suggesting that he was hurt more than he let on. "Maybe we're missing something, but I'm tired of walking in circles," he said as he sat down.

"Would it be underneath the huge pile of sand?" Matoh grimaced, hoping Wayran would say no.

"I don't think so; some Chroniclers talk about amazing lifts or moving stairways in other ruins, but there were lots of references to doors as well. Doesn't seem to fit that the entrance would be directly in the centre of this huge room." Wayran lay back against the pile of sand. "And even if it were, we'd never be able to dig to it. More sand will just fill in whatever we move. I wish I could have found out what actually happened to the Jendar. To see some of the wondrous things the Chroniclers talk about in those archives." Wayran waved at the room around them. "To find something that would explain why the people who made all of this just suddenly disappeared." He took a deep breath in an attempt to calm himself. "But we're trapped, and probably going to die down here."

"Hey, don't talk like that. We'll get out of this, you'll see." Matoh sat

down beside his brother and patted his shoulder. "We're just getting tired. Let's sit and think for a minute."

"Bah!" Wayran stood up, angry now. He looked down at a large chunk of glass lying on the floor and picked it up. He positioned it on his finger and thumb like a skipping stone and hurled the glass shard across the room. Then he sighed. "I wish I could have at least seen more of this ruin." The glass caught the eerie blue light, glistening as it spun off into a dark corner of the room.

The glass hit the far wall with a sharp *ting*.

"Nice throw." Match nodded. "Useless gesture, but it was a nice throw."

Just then, the ground beneath them began to shake, and the entire room rumbled.

Sand began to fall from the dome above.

"Move!" Match yelled, and Wayran darted back just as more glass started falling.

"Get back to the edge of the room!" Wayran yelled, sprinting forward to get beyond the collapsing dome.

"What's happening?!" Match yelled over the rumbling noise.

"The spikes! Look!" Wayran pointed.

The giant metal spikes were descending into the floor, shaking the entire room.

Match felt his back hit the wall. Wayran's did the same, and they watched sand pouring down from above. The strange overhead lights flickered but stayed on, fully illuminating the sand pile creeping closer and closer to them.

"I thought you said we weren't going to get buried!" Match yelled.

"I said we were lucky not to have been!" his brother answered.

"Looks like we might have used up our luck." Match began to sweat. Buried alive was not a good way to go. The sand was nearly up to his knees, and he could feel the cool metal wall behind his back. He

closed his eyes.

And the rumbling stopped.

He opened his eyes and saw the sand's descent slowing to a halt in the faint light from the glowing rods in the ceiling. The pin-like ends of the spikes could just be seen poking out of the sand pile, which now dominated the room.

"Ha!" Wayran exclaimed, "Still a bit of luck left, it seems!"

A strange buzzing noise came alive within the wall at their backs, and suddenly the light from overhead brightened to a brilliant white as if someone had just turned on the sun. Lights began to flicker in the tiny gaps between the metal wall panels.

Match pulled himself out of the sand and scrambled up the slope, pulling Wayran with him. "Get back, we don't know what other surprises there are."

The entire wall now had lines of tiny lights running along it, as if the wall itself was waking up.

The buzzing in the wall stopped, replaced by a whooshing sound off to their right. The sand began to move from that direction.

"It's a door!" Wayran yelled, and scrambled towards the source of the noise.

"Where in Halom's name did that come from?" Match shook his head. He knew they had passed that spot nearly a dozen times and had inspected the wall thoroughly.

"Who cares, let's get out of here!" Wayran said as he shuffled through the sand towards the exit.

Match was right on his heels.

His brother was through the door already, and Match moved to follow, when something caught his eye. It was a piece of glass, and it looked almost identical to the one Wayran had thrown. In fact, he was sure it *was* the same piece of glass.

There was a sharp crack and then a ping from above. Match looked up

to see the snaking line in the remaining glass overhead grow longer.

“Come on, Match!” Wayran beckoned from the other side of the doorway.

“Just a second.” Match fought his way through the sand and grabbed the shard of glass Wayran had thrown.

Another crack boomed through the room. Sand began to fall like rain onto his shoulders. “What are you doing! Get in here *now!*” Wayran yelled.

Match ran for it, but his feet kept getting trapped by the falling sand. “Not yet, Lady Death,” he growled. “You can’t have me yet!” He pushed with everything he had, more swimming through the sand now than walking.

A deafening pop sounded from above as the rest of the glass dome gave way and the enormous dune above crashed into the room. Match dived forward with every ounce of strength he had but felt the weight of a mountain smash down around him.

Then there was silence. He couldn’t move, he couldn’t breathe.

Everything was dark.

Then something scratched his fingers, and then he felt his brother grab his hand.

“You stupid idiot,” Wayran growled as he alternated between pulling and digging Match out of the sand. “What could have been so important that it made you go back in there?”

Match spat the sand from his mouth as Wayran gave a final heave to pull him free.

“This.” Match opened his hand to show Wayran the shard of glass. It had cut his hand, but it was still intact.

“What?” Wayran frowned, looking exasperated.

Match stood up and brushed himself off. He held up the shard to see it better. “This is the piece of glass you threw.”

“So?!” Wayran held out his hands flabbergasted.

“Well, you made a wish, and it opened a door for us.” Matoh shrugged his shoulders. “I figured it might still be useful.”

Wayran rubbed his eyes in frustration and sighed, “Let’s just go.” He walked down the hall, not waiting for Matoh.

“What?” Matoh asked, shrugging his shoulders as he pocketed the shard. “It makes sense to me.” He took a few quick steps before catching up with his brother, and together they walked deeper into the Jendar ruin.

### 3 - Paradise Found

#### Lost Wandering

*Looking at the walls,  
Wondering if this is home.*

*Blurred memories of storied pasts,  
Tugging at heartstrings with pain and pleasure.  
Glistening in the back of the mind,  
Calling like a harpy's song.*

*Blurred arrows of raining misery,  
Tugging at back, sinew and bone.  
Glistening metal tips light the way,  
Beckoning like the fabled Lady's call.*

*Looking at the walls,  
Knowing home is forever gone.*

- *Jonah of Clan Shi*

### Jonah

*Alansworth, Kenz*

**M**ist swirled gently through the underbrush as pairs of tiny feet sprang from cover onto the lush green grasses. Long ears poked up out of the low-lying fog as the very air waited with bated breath and watched as they silently bounced through the white haze.

Jonah Shi crouched in the wet leaves beneath the great oak spreading its gnarled limbs above him. Autumn's kiss had only begun

to touch the thin green leaves, and in the twilight the vibrant colours bursting forth in the canopy above were dimmed in the silver moonlight. His hand found the coarse bark of the trunk and he let his fingers play across it for a moment as he watched the serene meadow with fascination. The enormous trees were everywhere in this land, great hulking things spread like stalwart forest guardians populating the rolling hills. He breathed in the night air and could not help the smile which spread upon his lips. *There is life here*, he told himself, *and it is all around us*.

“What are they?” a quiet voice whispered. The speaker seemed nervous that even his soft whisper might be enough to break the spell which encased the meadow.

Jonah wiped a hand through his coarse black hair before his hand went to rest on his longbow. The touch was enough to tell him he was not dreaming. *Ilene would have loved it here*. The familiar sadness made the breath catch in his chest. *One day, my love, I will show this to you*.

“Are they some sort of forest spirits, do you think?” Fin asked. His whispered voice was growing in volume and excitement, which made Jonah smile. Innocence must be what kept Fin so young at heart. He looked over at his big companion and envied him. Jonah had lost his innocence a long time ago.

Fin’s question needed to be answered, however, or Fin would continue generating stories, each one wilder than its predecessor.

Jonah could see Branson rolling his eyes. A leather hood hid most of Branson’s rugged features, but Jonah knew the veteran foot-bowman was fuming inside. Jonah didn’t have to see the expression on his old friend’s face to know he was scowling. Branson had told Fin several times he’d have to be quiet.

“I think, my superstitious friend, that these are in fact called *rabbits*,” Jonah whispered, making sure not to startle the creatures. *I am the wind in the leaves, my little friends*, he thought to the rabbits, *nothing to worry about*. He kept his eyes glued to the dozens of pairs of ears bobbing

through the mist, hoping he would not see any of them bolt.

Fin looked as if he was mulling over Jonah's answer. "Rabbits? Never heard of 'em. You sure they're not spirits, Jonah? There could be all sorts in a forest like this. Little furry spirits, I bet."

Branson shot Jonah a look that could have melted glass. The whites of his eyes shone with anger, making him look almost demonic. The moonlight brought out the contrast of Branson's white hair and beard against his midnight skin and dark leather cloak, which made the old man's anger all the more intimidating.

Jonah signalled for Branson to be patient, which only elicited a disgusted look in return. Jonah grimaced; he would have to appease the old badger with some of his good tobacco, no doubt.

"Well, I'm willing to risk it for a chance to have some meat," Jonah told Fin. "Quiet now and I might be able to show you what a rabbit is." Jonah kept his gaze on the small shapes grazing the meadow. *Branson must be ready to kill the both of us by now.*

The fog was thickening; soon the small creatures would disappear altogether beneath the thick white blanket. It was now or never.

Jonah drew an arrow from his quiver slowly and fitted it to his bowstring. He kept his eyes on the bouncing pairs of ears in the meadow while his finger played across the soft feathers of his fletching. He felt the thick but loose shield shape of the goose feather and knew it was one of his hunting arrows. The weight had confirmed its type, but he had checked the fletching just to make sure. The thick feathers and lighter weight were needed to compensate for the power of his war bow, which he had made himself. The Shi Clan were good at building, and he had modified his bow with some very unique counterweights and sights, which gave him what he considered a truer shot. Jonah's hand reflexively checked the fletching one more time as a horrific image of what an enormous black arrow would do to a rabbit flitted through his mind.

He lifted his hand to Branson, signalling he was ready. He raised the bow and pulled the bowstring back with his three leather-clad fingers; thousands of hours of training had made the motion so fluid it felt as natural as walking. In Jonah's mind, he held nothing but the target. It was this moment he loved: the clarity, the absolute perfection of that instant when everything was in alignment. His body would know when it was time, his muscles going through their familiar dance as they flexed and compensated for the almost imperceptible sway of his body. Jonah let his mind drift into an emptiness devoid of all emotion, of past wrongs, of pain, and, most importantly, devoid of memories.

The target was everything, consuming every part of Jonah's mind, until the moment when all the swaying converged into that perfect union and the target floated into position.

*Now.*

His fingers slipped off the bowstring.

The yellow dyed fletching spun through the mist and a pair of ears dropped.

His heart beat and he saw another pair of ears. *Notch, Draw, Release.* Another moment of nothing but a target. Peace. Clarity.

*Notch, Draw, Release.* And it was over.

Three spots of yellow stuck up in the mist. Jonah knew they had found their targets, but he felt a flash of regret. He would have to wait for another excuse to fire his bow, before he could once again float in the void of emptiness. *Tomorrow morning I'll get a chance.* He sighed as he watched dozens of ears disappear into the mist.

"Come on." Jonah stood up. "We need to be back soon."

"That was incredible, Jonah!" Fin crashed through the bush to clap him on the back. The big man had an enormous grin on his face. "Where in the blazes did you learn to shoot like that?"

*Every Shi knows how to do that,* he thought. "The Clan master taught me," he said. "Lots of rock lizards near Tin City." He caught Branson's

chastising look and could almost hear his old friend's condescending voice: *'For every lie you tell, you must invent a dozen more to make it true.'* Jonah didn't like lying to Fin, but he had some secrets which needed to stay hidden.

Branson knew most of those secrets, but the old badger would take them to his grave with him. Whatever his other faults, Branson was loyal through and through.

*Too many secrets*, Jonah thought as he stepped from the bush to recover his arrows; *so many in fact there are some I have forgotten*. He thought that should be funny, but he found it troubling instead.

Always his mind came back to this. The feeling that something were missing. There was something he should remember, it seemed important, but the thoughts wouldn't solidify. It felt like trying to focus on something out of the corner of your eye. He would catch phantom slivers of memory, and as soon as he noticed it, the memories would fade away, like smoke on the wind.

He clenched his jaw as a familiar headache began to throb behind his eyes. *I've been down this path before*. Jonah remembered the pain; it came every time he thought he was about to remember.

Branson was glaring at him, and shaking his head slightly. *He'll tell me to stop pushing it. To leave it*. And Branson was most likely right, but Jonah couldn't leave it. He should, though, it didn't really matter. All that mattered now was his duty as a bowman, his duty to the Empire, and finding a way to make Ilene happy again.

The Prince had led them across the Barrier Sea, something which hadn't been done for millennia. They had found a magical land hidden by the great storms, and Jonah knew he wasn't the only one in the army who had suddenly begun dreaming again. This land held answers for more than just himself.

Dozens of his fellow soldiers had begun talking about what they might do if they settled down on this side of the sea. Opportunities

were presenting themselves, and that hope was reinvigorating souls who had all but given up.

Jonah let his hand touch the grass as he started making his way to the rabbits. The mist felt good against his skin, and the sensation began to tickle memories once again. *We made love on a night like this*, he remembered. It was the grass, it reminded him of the gardens in Eura City, where he had his first night with Ilene. He remembered her shy smile when she slipped out of her white silken gown. Even now, the memory made his heart flutter. *She said the mist felt good*. She had laughed and danced naked through the grass. Ilene had been happy then. For a brief instant she had been happy, and on that night Jonah had known no other woman would ever compare. It was the night which changed his life in Court. Jonah had started neglecting his duties in the Fertility Circles and had found reasons to keep his Clan functions close to those of Ilene's. Their secret hadn't stayed a secret for long, and they had been labelled "rebellious", as if monogamy were some great sin. Some of the tribal clans in the far desert still practiced marriage vows, and Jonah and Ilene had found the idea inspirationally romantic. Romance, however, had no place in the Euran Empire, at least no place within the Fecund Blood. No, if you were fertile in their desolate empire, your duty was to further your line, expand your Clan, and ensure humanity's survival.

Yet this place beyond the storms, it was holy. Jonah could feel it all around him. Life teemed everywhere, and its discovery would change everything.

Fin's long stride carried him to the rabbits first and he stood over the little creatures with his hands on his hips. His face was a picture. It looked like he didn't know whether to be sad at the demise of the wondrous little things or happy at the prospect of fresh meat after the long months at sea. "Well, would you look at that." He peered down at the still form lying in the grass, making no attempt to hide his rapt fascination. "Craziest thing I ever did see! Look at the ears ... wow." His eyes still looked a bit sad, despite the

big man's excitement.

"Don't worry, Fin. We'll say a prayer for the little souls and give thanks for their sacrifice." Jonah patted him on the shoulder to try and alleviate his sadness. "Plus, you'll be much happier when you smell them cooking. Fresh game beats salt pork or herring any day." Jonah was thoroughly sick of herring. *Every day for the last month.*

Fin seemed happy at the mention of food. His close-cropped blond hair and slight baby-face made him look much younger and simpler than he actually was. It was a stark contrast to Jonah's own dark and rugged image and Branson's grizzled features.

Despite his often foppish appearance, Fin was an excellent warrior. He was a good foot-bowman, and in fact carried the biggest foot-bow in all the Black Rain; but what set him apart was the giant claymore sword he also took with him into battle. Jonah had seen Fin single-handedly defend a retreat by chopping down two charging horsemen with that long slender blade. When Fin drew that giant weapon, all sense of innocence evaporated from him and the northern barbarian heritage, so visible in his features, came out in full.

Jonah watched Fin reach down to check if the rabbits were dead, but he knew his shots had hit their mark. The rabbits hadn't suffered: two through the heart and the third in the head.

"It sort of looks like a big rat. But with no long tail ... and a shorter nose ... and longer ears. Oh, and the fur, Jonah! It's so soft!" Fin had hold of the rabbit's legs and held it suspended in the air while he gently stroked the velvety fur. Jonah's yellow-fletched arrow was still in the creature's side.

"So not really like a rat then," Jonah said quirking his eyebrow at Fin. "Here, let me see." He took the rabbit from Fin and studied the plump creature. It was twice the size of the chickens back home – *incredible*. These creatures were just another confirmation that the desolation that plagued the Empire was not everywhere. The rabbits

were healthy, robust even. The only things which survived in the wild in Eura were desperate and deadly beyond comparison.

Jonah said a quiet prayer to the Empress and the Fates for bringing him to this land. He looked at the meadow again and imagined what it would be like to live in a place so full of life. *I'd build us a farm.* He nodded to himself. *A farm with chickens, and pigs.* There would be enough grass even for cows here. Then he and Ilene could indeed live out their romantic dream of being man and wife like they had heard in the stories of old.

Jonah pulled his arrow free from the rabbit and examined the spade-shaped arrowhead for any damage. Seeing none he wiped off the blood with the cloth hanging from his belt and slipped the weapon back into his quiver. These arrows had rounded sides and pulled free easily, unlike his war arrows with their wicked barbs which punctured armour and ripped flesh. Jonah liked these arrows so much more than his war ones.

Jonah held the rabbit up. "I sure hope it tastes better than rat."

"Course it will, Jonah. Look at how healthy it is." Fin smiled sadly at the rabbit. "Thank you for your sacrifice, little rabbit."

Fin tied the rabbits together with a leather cord, slung them to the end of his bow, and hoisted them over his shoulder. "Now let's get back to camp before we get into trouble. Can't spend all night sightseeing can we?" Fin waded back to the brambles on the edge of the meadow. "We are required to attend a siege in the morning!"

Branson hadn't waited for them and was already through the brambles with his rabbit. *Branson will laugh about it later, once he has some meat in his old guts,* Jonah thought.

Jonah stopped to look around one last time. The mists were beginning to thicken and soon the rabbits would venture back out, as even the bowmen's sharp eyes would not be able to pick them out hopping through the long grass.

He took a deep breath and stared back towards the army campfires in the distance. *The fires of war,* he thought, *it's eerily beautiful.* Thousands

upon thousands of lights twinkled like stars upon the beach as rows of trebuchets, ballista and catapults launched burning projectiles at the walls of a castle atop the giant crag overlooking the sea.

It was only a matter of time now before the local lord capitulated.

The Eurans had lost only three ships to the storms, which was a drop in the ocean given the hundreds which had left Eura. The thousands of men and women who had landed from those ships were just as eager as Jonah to explore and discover the wonders this land held for them.

“Looks like they started without us,” Fin said from beside Jonah. “That’s just downright rude.”

“Yes, appears they did.” Jonah laughed quietly, watching the fiery objects arc through the night to crash into the castle. He drew his gaze away and looked out into the blackness behind the Euran ships, across the Barrier Sea and towards Eura.

They had sailed for months and months into what they thought was certain death, yet the Prince’s faith had never wavered. The Barrier Sea had been deathly quiet during those months, as if the very world was holding its breath. So many had thought the storms would return and drag them down into the icy depths of the aptly named sea. No one in the last millennium had dared try to cross its length and lived to tell the tale. Yet the ever raging seas had remained calm and allowed them to pass like favoured sons and daughters in some holy scripture. The Empress’s Blessing had proven true, and they had done what no one had done since the founding of the Empire.

Jonah shook himself out of his reverie. He was here now and he had a job to do. The Prince had known his soldiers needed a release after months of believing themselves doomed. The war machines had been offloaded first and been cranked into action before even the whole fleet had landed.

Commander Naseen had assured them that the Black Rain

wouldn't be needed until first light, but Jonah wondered if those walls would last even that long.

"Come on, Jonah." Fin clapped his big hand on his shoulder.

*Yes, I will have plenty of time to gawk at burning castles now that we're here,* Jonah thought.

He waded out of the tall grass, his leather breeches thoroughly soaked with the evening dew. They raced back towards their tents to start cooking what had only a day ago existed in fairy tales. Soon, after a fresh meal and a good sleep on the solid ground, it would be time to start building an empire on this side of the sea.

\* \* \*

The Black Rain had shot from dawn till dusk: thousands of huge black arrows flying over the castle walls. The walls had indeed held until morning, and the occupants of the besieged castle had even mounted a counter-attack which had spooked many of the commanders for some reason. He hadn't seen it, but apparently there were some very different warriors on this side of the Barrier Sea.

Jonah let the rumour slip from his mind as his aching muscles demanded his full attention. His entire body ached with the memory of a long day placing his feet against the thick yew foot-bow and using his full weight to haul back the bowstring. He would hold until an order to fire was bellowed by Commander Naseen, and then he'd let the giant war arrow fire up into the sky between his feet at a precisely ordered angle. *Nock, draw, hold, release.* Hour upon hour of the same motion had left him with few thoughts he could hold on to other than: get food, get a drink, then find somewhere to sit and pass out.

Nearly a full day had passed in blissful release from the ghostly fragments of memories floating through his mind, almost a whole day where the only thing had been the target. He had floated within that emptiness, within the stillness of his mind. No emotion, no pain, just the image of where he needed to send his arrow. He had lost track of how many

arrows he had fired, but he didn't care. The runners had kept placing arrows beside him, and so he shot, keeping pace with the drum. *Notch, draw, hold ... BOOM, release*, over and over again until the flag went up signalling for the Black Rain to stop. They had encountered no enemy fire, which wasn't entirely surprising. Even from the defenders' elevated position, the Euran foot-bowmen were still forty or fifty paces out of range of the enemy's arrows.

Individually, the giant foot-bows were cumbersome, yet if allowed to set up from a defensible position, the weapon became an advantage. Thousands of men would lie down to put the force of their entire body into the great bows and fire the massive spear-like arrows well over two hundred yards, while being shielded from cavalry charge by lines of pikemen around them. The strategy had served the Euran army for hundreds of years and appeared to be just as effective in these lush green lands, as the besieged town and fort had offered up little effective resistance.

Commander Naseen had come to the Black Rain after the siege to praise them for their efforts. "Find the red flag along the battlements. Prince El'Amin has deemed you worthy of a reward. A dozen kegs of ale!" A roar met her announcement, and a procession of bone-tired archers shuffled through the castle gates trying to find the red flag along the battlements. That was where Jonah was headed now. *Fin and Branson are probably already there, drinking my share.*

As he made his way through the streets, he saw the damage wrought by the trebuchets, catapults, arrows and sappers. The lower town was a smoking ruin covered in thousands of the massive black arrow shafts. They littered every surface, some even lodged into stone, like enormous cactus needles. The sappers had opened up a hole where the front gates had been, and the infantry had crept in behind the falling wall of black arrows to deal with any who survived the onslaught.

Jonah tried not to look at the dead. Carts loaded with corpses were being taken out of the castle in a steady stream. He knew what his arrows did, but it didn't mean he had to like it. He considered himself cowardly for actively ignoring how his moments of calm also resulted in the death of others. Firing the arrows felt good. Yet as he saw the wagonloads of dead, that very same thought made him sick.

*The Empire always wins, he thought, the sooner that lesson is learned, the better.*

He followed the carts with his gaze until they passed through a gate. It was then he saw the burst of white, as dozens of Logistics Officers scurried in and out of buildings, already conversing with the survivors of the siege and organising them into queues.

How long would it have taken the white-suited bureaucrats to break down the local language? Hours? Minutes? Jonah often wondered how it was possible for them to dissect the essence of a language so quickly and precisely.

Just as the Imperial Army honed the skills of its soldiers into specialised and elite troops, so too did the Office of Logistics with its personnel. The white-suited officials could remember hundreds of laws, speak dozens of languages, perform amazingly complex mental mathematics on the spot and sort out logistical nightmares in minutes. Yet the most important function of a Logistics Officer was the ability to sense who in the population carried the holy seed or cradle of fertility within them, with but a touch of their hand. Their order was a blend of cleric and clerk, and yet, as they so fondly reminded others, they were also the very bones upon which the empire survived, hence the white uniforms.

The Logistics Officers, in those clean uniforms, stood out like white roses amongst the brambles of the dirty, battle-worn people around them. And as Jonah watched the group, he could see the words of the officials cut through the fear and animosity of the conquered crowds just as surely as if they had been wielding swords. A group of local people dressed in very rich

clothes were herded together and seated at a table across from a white-suited officer. The Logistics Officer wore the badge of a magistrate, and was no doubt flushing out secrets, local politics, and an assortment of data of every kind.

Another Officer sat at a table outside a building now infested with white-suited officials. An orderly queue of people waited in line, looking sad and dejected. Each waited their turn to come to the table. It was most likely a census table. Jonah had seen this before.

The Logistics Officers would create records of the names, family trees, trade skills, current dwelling, sum of their holdings, and anecdotal notes on every person left in the town, for these people were now Eurans and expected to be productive citizens. The Empire's records and bureaucrats were as ruthlessly efficient as any of its armies.

Jonah walked by another group and caught a snippet of the conversation. Something about how to properly honour the dead. Made sense: these Logistics Officers were encountering a new culture for the first time in centuries. It almost seemed odd that the Officers hadn't already known the traditional burial rites as they would have for any town in the Empire. Part of the resilience of the empire, however, was how it incorporated so many local customs and tried to keep the status quo. As long as taxes, labour, and loyalty flowed the right way, which was always towards Eura city, the Empress would be happy. Some Imperial rules trumped local ones, but as long as those rules were adhered to, people could go about their business almost as if the Empire had never arrived.

Jonah's fingers felt raw, despite the leather gloves he had worn, but it was worth it. The castle had finally surrendered. If they had been in Eura, the castle would have opened their gates as soon as they had landed. The Imperial standards floating above the army would have been enough. Hard lessons had been taught to those who resisted the

Empire, and it looked like those lessons would have to be repeated to those who lived in these green lands.

Jonah's legs wobbled and he steadied himself against the wall of a quaint little house. *Thatch and plaster*. He looked up at the white walls and followed the dark lines of the thick oak beams. He smiled. Some of the mountain villagers in Northern Sandahar province built houses like this ... and with this thought a memory tried to work its way to the surface. There had been some big gathering of his clan, the Sandirs. He and Ilene had gone together. She had been angry with him for some reason. *What had we been fighting about?*

A headache blasted into him, and Jonah fell into the muck and mud of the street. It was all he could do to keep his head out of it. He closed his eyes and could do nothing but hold himself in this position until the wave of pain, vertigo and nausea subsided. When it did, he was left shaking.

“Over here, Jonah!” Fin waved down to him, but then his voice caught. “What are you doing down in the muck there?”

“I – uh ...” Jonah tried to answer, but it was all he could do to breathe steadily. A few moments more on his knees and he'd be alright.

“Here,” Fin said. He had come down the stairs and pulled Jonah to his feet as if he were a child. “Looks like you might literally need a helping hand, friend.” Fin was smiling, but there was concern in his eyes.

“I'm alright, Fin.” Jonah breathed easier as his vertigo and headache began to subside. However, the headache had sapped every last speck of energy from him. “Though I wouldn't mind some help up those stairs.”

Fin practically had to carry him up the last few steps as his legs began to wobble again. Thankfully the keg of ale was not far along the battlements, and before Jonah knew it he had a mug of dark ale in his hand and a spot at which to lean against the wall. Unsurprisingly, Branson was slouched beside him, also mug in hand.

“Another headache?” Branson whispered quietly to him.

“Yes, I don't know what brought it –” Jonah began.

“Best not to think about it.” Branson cut him off. “I’ll brew you the tea when we’re finished up here.”

“You’re good to me, Branson,” Jonah said.

“Probably too good,” Branson huffed back, but there was no anger in it. Jonah’s old friend hid his concern better than Fin, but Jonah could see it all the same.

They sat sipping their ale while they watched the Imperial messengers and arrow collectors running back and forth below. They moved with such speed it made Jonah exhausted just looking at them. Before his very eyes the buildings, which had just a moment before looked like pincushions, were being revealed in all their humble glory.

“Do you think they ever get mad at us?” he asked, pointing his mug down at some of the arrow collectors. “They bring us those tidy bundles of arrows, we fire them off into the air, and then they have to go and fetch them and bundle them back up, over and over again.” He took another sip of the dark ale. He didn’t know if he had ever tasted anything so good in his life. “That would get on my nerves I think, if I had to do their job.”

“Each piece of the great machine does its part,” Branson answered, his words already beginning to slur. “Discipline is the backbone of the Imperial Army.”

“Thanks, drill sergeant.” Jonah rolled his eyes. “I’d keep a bundle for myself so I would know that at least one bundle would stay tied.”

“You wouldn’t. That’s stealing from the Empire, technically. You’d get the skin flayed off your back for a measly bundle of foot-arrows.” Branson finished the last of his ale and let the wooden mug slap against the stone floor. “Them collectors, they have their own pride. They do a good job and do it fast, there’s satisfaction in that.”

“I suppose.” Jonah finished his own ale and looked sadly at the wooden bottom of his mug. But before he even thought of the poor ale’s demise, his mug was snatched out of his hand and replaced with a full

one. He grinned, already feeling the effects of his first mug.

Fin grinned over at him and Branson. “You couple of old farts will be snoring on each other’s shoulders in another five minutes I reckon.”

“Not all of us are built like bloody oxen,” Branson growled at Fin; but his heart wasn’t in it as he smiled when his own ale was replenished.

“Built like gnarled roots by the looks of you.” Fin winked down at them. “Good thing too, from some of the maps I’ve seen the Logistics officers recover it looks like we found a type of empire on this side of the sea. Salucia is what the locals call it. We landed in but one of nine nation states. The Prince’s gamble might end up making him Emperor.”

“How big did it look?” Branson asked.

“It’s at least half the size of the Euran Empire,” Fin replied.

“Empress save me; my feet won’t make it half that far.” Branson cringed as he rubbed a foot.

“Oh!” Fin stood up and pointed. “Here, stand up for a second, you’ve got to see this.”

Jonah clasped Fin’s outstretched hand and the big man hauled him and Branson to their feet. “What are we looking at?”

“Just there.” Fin pointed to an archway on the other side of the courtyard below them.

Jonah followed the line of Fin’s finger and saw a warrior walking with head held high down the street. She was clad from head to toe in metal and being escorted by no less than seven of the Eternal Hand.

“Their word for her is ‘*Syklan*,’” Fin said, “and I pray to the Empress I never meet one of them on the battlefield.”

The Syklan’s armour wrapped around her body like a dark grey second skin. The heads of snarling sea beasts were carved into her pauldrons, each one housing a strange globe in its maw. Jagged spikes lined her vambraces and adorned the knuckles of each gauntleted hand. The helm itself was almost skeletal.

Jonah felt the hairs rise on his skin as a shiver went down his spine.

She looked like a demon from children's fairy stories. Even under all that metal she walked with a deadly fluid grace, bespeaking her skill. Despite being all the way up on the battlements, Jonah didn't feel he was safe. It was like watching a leopard calmly walk amongst them. She made the Eternal Hand seem more like her honour guard than her captors.

"Seven of the Eternal Hand? That seems excessive." Jonah could see the seventh member of the elite royal guard trailing the other six. He was holding an engraved war hammer with a wicked spike on its back. Thin lines of gold ran along the hammer and converged in small circles of gold near the handle, head, and spike. The gold seemed too decorative to be utilitarian. Why put soft metal into a bludgeoning weapon? It didn't make much sense.

"Seven might not be enough." Fin said.

The calm in his voice unsettled Jonah somewhat. He heard the admiration in Fin's words.

Branson spat at the sight of her. "She's human, same as what we got up here. Put an arrow through a gap in that armour, she'll bleed and die just the same."

"I don't know," Fin said. "They say when that hammer of hers struck, lightning cracked out of its end. Men went flying as if they were toys. Those orbs on her shoulders glowed like magic."

"Hmm, that might explain the gold," Jonah said. "All the precious metals conduct energy, and gold is the best of them. Interesting. But how could she generate such a large charge in the first place? The armour must act as an enormous capacitor of some sort." Jonah was so enthralled by the woman and her story that he had postulated out loud without a second thought. The sudden silence around him, however, stopped his train of thought dead in its track. He turned and saw Fin and several of the other Black Rain staring at him. Branson's eyes were wide with panic.

The ale had loosened his tongue. Not many in Eura were as well schooled as the Fecund Blood, especially in the sciences. No commoner who trained as an archer their whole life would know such things. Jonah had just blundered terribly. He had to think of something quick.

“Oh!” Branson snapped his fingers as if remembering something, and then guffawed in laughter. “That’s from *The Wizard and the Metal Man*.” Branson rolled his eyes and then looked at his fellow bowmen. “You know the play? By Hindelion?!” Branson stepped up to Jonah and ruffled his hair. “Quick, this one is. It was a line by the Wizard, we saw the play a couple nights before we set sail from Port Barrier.”

A few feigned nods of recognition – most likely they didn’t want to appear thick. The lie spread just enough confusion to distract them.

“Sorry,” Jonah said, “I like Hindelion’s plays and thought that would be funny. Guess it only works for those of us who like the theatre.” He tried to look suitably embarrassed but wasn’t sure how many would buy their story.

“Strange sense of humour,” Fin said, shrugging it off, and looked back at the Syklan woman as she passed below them. “She killed five of the Hand before they got a hold of her.” Fin shook his head. “Dark magic I say.”

“Five of the Hand is it?” Branson laughed. “And who’d you hear that from? Come on, even you know better than to listen to them rumours. Next we’ll hear they can change into animals or sprout wings from their backs and fly. Give it a rest, Fin.” Branson went back to his place against the wall to nurse the last of his ale.

“Both of those things are also in Hindelion plays,” Jonah quipped, this time getting a few chuckles and head shakes from the bowmen around him. He hoped it was enough.

“You look at the Hand.” Fin pointed down. “They’re giving her a lot of space, as if they’re still wary of her. I ain’t never seen one of the Hand worried about anyone.”

Jonah saw what Fin was alluding to. Each of the Hand held twin-

bladed staves in guard position and looked ready for an attack at any moment. He thought there was a sliver of truth in Fin's idea, and wondered if this woman was the reason the Commanders had been spooked earlier this morning. He wouldn't blame them. A warrior clad all in metal wielding a flaming and sparking hammer would unsettle anyone.

*Head to toe in dark grey steel*, Jonah thought to himself. A person wouldn't last an hour in armour like that upon the Dissorian sands. They'd cook inside that steel like just as surely as a stew did in a pot above a fire.

The Syklan left the courtyard and was escorted to the church, which now flew the High Prince's flag.

"Can you get any closer to *'letting a sand lion into your tent'* without having an actual lion?" Jonah said as he watched the woman disappear into the church. He doubted he would have let that woman within a hundred yards of him if he were the Prince.

His thoughts had somehow led back to the beginnings of a headache, so he switched to more pleasant things. "Any more of that ale?" he asked, breaking the stunned silence which had settled over the tired archers around him.

"Another sip for all, I'd guess," the man pouring from the cask said.

"I'll have mine now then," Jonah said handing over his cup.

The archers sat down to rest their bodies and watched as the town returned to some semblance of order below them. They rested, for they knew tomorrow would mean marching to the next town.

A town which Jonah hoped was devoid of Syklans.

## 4 - Hunting in the Night

*The plan was executed perfectly; it was truly a work of collective genius. But now my mind has gone a bit numb from watching the devastation on my monitors. The raw power of nature is truly awesome to behold, and my colleagues would be amazed to know Kali is even more effective than anticipated.*

*Their loss was regrettable. They were loyal and committed members of our cause.*

*But there can be only one monster left alive to see this through, and I am he. The rest would not have made it to the end if I had not the force of will to lead them. In that, they were as guilty as everyone else, and therefore they had to die.*

*I've reset civilisation so we can try again. I've given us a chance for redemption, a chance to prove we should be allowed to continue as a species, and it only cost the lives of a few billion unworthy parasitic souls.*

*The world would tell you it was an easy price to pay, akin to cutting off a gangrenous limb to save the body.*

*Eventually, I know I will mourn, the shock of this will wear off, and I'll have to live with our decision; but for now I cheer as I watch Mother Nature wipe opulent city after opulent city right off the map.*

*I'll cry bitter tears later, but right now, I cry out in victory.*

- *Journal of Robert Mannford, Day 000 Year 00, 2nd Entry*

### Thannis

*Narrows, Aluvik*

**T**onight all Thannis's planning came to fruition. His most complicated trap would culminate in his sweetest kill. It would work. It had to.

Thannis had waited so long. Nearly two months of hiding, of playing a role, of instituting the right rumours and half-truths – but tonight's reward would be unique. *It will all be worth it.* The thought made Thannis's body quiver with anticipatory pleasure.

He caught himself daydreaming, and his sharp mind reprimanded his slip in character. He could give no outward sign of his real intentions. The guards would be looking for things out of place. *Only a few hours more of this charade,* he told himself. Everything was in place; the only thing left was to play his role to perfection. Any slip and it would all unravel, for his prey tonight was intelligent, wary, guarded and armoured against the very act Thannis was about to attempt.

Thannis smiled reservedly to the high-ranking nobles who had stepped ahead of him in the queue leading into the Aluvikan Grand Hall. He was to appear to be a very proper, dark, and brooding gentleman tonight. His alias was on the list and expected to attend, though was also of low enough rank to warrant very little notice. In reality, however, Thannis was in fact the Crown Prince of Nothavre, and there were dozens of people in attendance who knew him, would jump to appease him, and would ruin his trap and shatter the illusion he was weaving. Thus, he wore a disguise, which he was confident in, but still ... there was always that chance.

The risk only added to his pleasure.

Thannis climbed the stairs with perfectly measured steps, waiting his turn to be let in. He was nearly at the top and could now see through the arching doorways and into the Grand Hall. He felt a flutter of excitement at the entrance, but not from the splendour of the high vaulted white ceilings soaring overhead, the gold leaves and intricately painted vines on the carved marble columns, or tapestries hanging like silken ribbons. No, Thannis had grown up with riches and splendour. The excitement was instead because she was down there, walking through the throng of nobility just as a magnet moved through iron

filings.

Though outwardly Thannis's face showed the appropriate level of impression from the lavishness of the ball, his persona of a young brooding noble showed a flicker of spirit. Not enough to displace the stoic handsomeness he wanted to portray, but just enough for the doorman to notice it – and dismiss it as a typical reaction.

“Name, sir?” The man's Aluvikan accent was thick upon his words but Thannis had no problem understanding. Emulating accents was one of his greater accomplishments.

“Lord Michael de La Quan.” Thannis gave the name while continuing to display the proper level of boredom with this ritual. He knew his alias was on the list. He had seen to that detail weeks ago, even ensuring a small amount of drama about whether Lord Michael would go or not. In truth, this was an easy alias as there really was a Lord Michael, one who looked remarkably similar to him and had been planning to attend. The man would wake up a few nights from now in his bed, wondering just what had happened in the past few days. It would have been easy to kill Lord Michael, but a real life doppelganger was not something you discarded so easily.

Thannis smiled politely and waited as the doorman checked the list for his name. *Hurry up, you imbecile.* He squashed his impatience down. His cravings had reached an almost unbearable limit, and he could feel himself becoming edgy. He imagined his hunting knife ripping open the man's throat. The thought gave him some respite from his urges.

“Of course, my Lord, go right in if you please.” The doorman bowed, and Thannis was surprised to catch a hint of a downturned lip at the sound of his fake Nothavran name. *Even Michael de La Quan should have been shown more deference than that.* Could it be that the High King's imposed peace was already beginning to chafe? Typically, Thannis would revel in the chance to stir up the old hatreds between Aluvik and Nothavre, but tonight his other mischiefs took precedence.

He scanned the room as he entered, making himself see it slowly. He re-checked his exits, noting that a large display of flowers had been moved since yesterday and was now in front of what looked like a locked door. Thannis subtracted that exit from his plan and continued cataloguing the relevant details of the room: the positioning of the guards, any rotations, where they were scanning. He checked for blind spots should he need to use them, and quickly noted the best objects to use as distraction or weaponry. It was a routine Thannis had drummed into himself which helped him to remain focused and sharp. There would be time for glorifying excess and abandoning control later.

His height allowed him to see over most of the crowd, apart from the occasional spindle of long, vibrant feathers woven into several intricate hairstyles. He smiled appropriately at the pair of women whispering to themselves as he passed by. He gave them just enough to stroke their egos, but not enough for them to think about pursuing anything further. Tonight Thannis wanted to float through this crowd like a ghost, and then trap the attention of the most exotic prize here.

He was confident his looks and ability to flirt could entice one of these local belles into his trap instead, if things went wrong tonight; but it would be a hollow consolation.

All thoughts of a back-up plan vanished as the crowd broke in front of him, and then there she was, the beauty Thannis had been searching for.

Elise Syun, daughter of the Xinnish Queen, was a princess of exquisite beauty with no equal. Her long silky black hair hung down over bare shoulders. Soft pale skin ran down her plunging neckline, hinting at perfectly shaped breasts. Her dark red dress with silver embroidery hugged her exquisite figure. She drew the gaze of every man in the room – but seduction was not his game tonight. She would see through such an obvious trap. Elise Syun had probably been through dozens of kidnapping scenarios and would recognise one when

it appeared, so there was danger in his plan yet. She still might not take the bait. The uncertainty made his heart beat hard in his chest; he would have to play this just right.

Thannis noted the two fully armoured guards by her side. One was wearing santsi globes in his pauldrons and looked to be Asgurdian by his size. That would be Captain Ole Sigurn, a fully knighted Syklan, noted for being absolutely devastating with shield and sword. To Princess Elise's other side was the Hafaza, Henriette Gelding, noted for her almost artistic violence with the long-bladed spear she held and her devastating blasts of Presence. Thannis forced himself to keep his breathing even and his heart rate down.

Ole Sigurn or Henriette Gelding would each have been worthy and extremely challenging targets in their own right, but the danger they posed made his plans tonight all the more tantalising.

Thannis would hopefully have all three before the night was done.

He stalked the trio through the throng of tailored suits and elegant dresses as a tiger might a deer through tall grass. He found a spot along the line of those hoping to greet the princess, and waited for his turn. When Princess Elise let her hand be kissed by the person three places down from him, he subtly reached into his pocket and let the tiny glued ball of explosive powder roll onto the floor. From the corner of his eye, he saw it roll a few rows behind him. The slender line of incendiary thread was still attached to the copper thimble in his pocket. He placed his finger in the thimble and let his other fingers touch the small, expensive santsi globe in his other pocket. The stored energy within the globe flowed into his hand and he began to feel the energy within the globe.

Siphoning was a skill few could master, and fewer still could become strong and subtle enough to make it useful, yet Thannis had found he was abnormally gifted in this somewhat magical skill. He had found from a young age that he was sensitive to the energy fields around him and could siphon off huge amounts of the energy from the world around him. He

would channel and direct that flow of energy into objects for spectacular effect. The santsi globe he held in his pocket, made from specialised sands and glass, was akin to a type of capacitor, one which the person siphoning could draw stored energy from. Pushing the energy out of the body usually required a conductive metal of some sort for the best transference. Thus, as Thannis concentrated on pulling the energy into him and felt the familiar icy-hot tingle, he made sure to place his index finger into the copper thimble he would use to direct that energy back out. Soon he began to feel the copper heat to the point where it began to hurt.

The damned person beside him was taking longer than he had guessed. He held onto the pain, letting the tingle grow in his hand until his fingers began to numb. It was going to be close.

Princess Elise nodded to the person beside him, politely indicating that the conversation was over. Thannis forced himself to keep his relief hidden. He cleared his throat to cover up the slight hiss, and he pushed the remaining energy into the copper thimble. He felt the slight release of pressure as the incendiary string lit. No one noticed the tiny flick of flame leave his pocket, as his throat-clearing was as much of a social faux pas as spitting when meeting a princess. The crowd around him would be looking at the response of Princess Elise to such a crude man.

“Your Highness,” Thannis said, and bowed. He forced himself to keep from cheering as she extended her hand mechanically.

A loud snap exploded three rows behind him as the explosive ball went up. The crowd jumped, women and men gasped in surprise. Thannis took his opportunity and put the note into the princess’s outstretched hand. Their eyes met, and he deftly squeezed the note into her grip as he kissed the top of her hand. “A pleasure, Your Highness. Lord Michael De Le Quan at your service.” He motioned with his eyes to her guards. Ole and Henriette had weapons ready and were scanning

the crowd, who were all in turn quite bewildered, as any trace of what had made the noise had disappeared.

Princess Elise caught his look. Thannis shook his head almost imperceptibly and then politely stepped back into line, averting his eyes in an obvious move to draw no further attention to himself.

“Someone must have stepped on a glass ball perhaps,” Henriette said, her Hafaza robes shifted to display her scaled armour beneath.

Ole simply grunted, sounding much like the bear he resembled.

Princess Elise stared at Thannis for a heartbeat longer. Thannis flexed his jaw to show tension and a bit of anxiety.

“Princess?” Ole asked, and his hand drifted closer to his sword as he took a step towards Thannis.

Thannis held his ground, keeping in character, eyes down but displaying a slightly heightened measure of anxiety, as if he were about to be revealed. He let his eyes dart nervously up to Princess Syun. He let his crossed hands relax, and his fingers tapped out the hidden code he had saved for just this moment. Each finger of his right hand tapped his thumb and then reversed the procession.

Princess Elise’s eyes widened for the briefest of moments. “Ole,” her voice snapped, “I’m sure Henriette is right, nothing of consequence.” Princess Elise flicked her hand dismissively. “Let’s move on.”

The elation Thannis felt nearly rocked him, but he held his character: letting everyone see he was appropriately chastised and nervous from his encounter. Nothing out of the ordinary, just someone who had slightly embarrassed themselves. No need to pay attention.

He waited for another minute until it was polite to leave the line. He melted back into the crowd and found a spot where he could watch unobserved.

Princess Elise almost rushed through the rest of those who waited to introduce themselves, and her hands opened the note almost immediately after her last obligatory greeting.

*RJ is alive. He waits for you.* Thannis mouthed the words he knew Elise Syun was reading. He gave her credit, for Elise did not pop her head up right away to frantically scan the crowd for him. Instead, she folded the note carefully and placed it in the small handbag she carried. She composed herself and began walking towards another group before she began to search for him.

Yet Thannis remained hidden in his chosen blind spot. It was not yet time for the second part of the trap. He needed the Princess's mind to dwell on the message for a time yet. He needed her to work herself up into enough of a frenzy to do something stupid.

She had been so close to him that his anticipation had nearly overwhelmed him. His heart was pounding, but things were going well. This was what he lived for.

The next half hour was spent carefully navigating the crowd so Princess Elise did not catch even the remotest glimpse of him. He would turn his head at the right moment, or begin talking to someone in the right position to block the Princess's view of him. His height made the task more difficult, but his actions would add to the mystery surrounding his cryptic message.

Finally, the band began to play, and the nobility started to take their positions for part of the night's entertainment and the first dance of the evening. It was time to begin stage two of his plan.

\* \* \*

Thannis took a deep breath and filled his lungs with the intoxicating night air. Things were going very well so far.

He had waited until after the first dance so as to surprise Princess Elise when he appeared next to the dance floor with an air of urgency she could not ignore. She had taken the bait and sought him out. Thannis had made sure to make gestures to indicate that they were being watched and it was possible their words were being overheard. For who could be certain how many people here were in the employ of

her nefariously untrusting mother, Queen Marin Syun? He propositioned the Princess for a dance, indicating that it was the only way to talk more intimately. Captain Ole Sigurn had looked as if he wanted to snap Thannis in half right there, but he had truly hooked Princess Elise. She had seen the utmost seriousness in the look Thannis had given her.

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During the dance, Thannis had relayed details of how Princess Elise's secret love, Robert Jameson, had gone missing. He told his prepared story about Robert going into hiding because suspicions were getting too close to the truth concerning their affair.

"Robert told me to use the hand signal," Thannis had whispered in her ear. "What does it mean?"

"Nothing of consequence," Princess Elise had said. Yet Thannis knew it was anything but inconsequential. He knew the little rhythm of finger tapping was a nervous habit of Robert's, one which he only exhibited in the private company of Princess Elise. It seemed to indicate Robert's excitement when the two talked about their forbidden future, for Elise Syun was publicly known to be promised to Maric Uuliath, Prince of Asgur. The scandal of falling in love with Robert, a minor noble from Kenz, would unravel the political marriage and aggravate tensions between Xin Ya and the Salucian Union.

It was all very political, passionate, and best of all, secret. Thannis had exploited these facts, and it had led to Princess Elise coming to meet him tonight in the Forest Gardens, where he had assured her it was safe to relay the rest of the message from Robert.

Of course, Thannis had to allow her to be accompanied by her fearsome bodyguards. Otherwise the Princess would have been too suspicious of a trap. But he was still confident he had sufficient information to separate her far enough from the two guards to make his plan work.

Thannis forced himself to take another deep breath. He closed his eyes and calmed himself once more as a moment of doubt washed over him. *She*

*might not come. Was it enough? Does she still suspect a trap?* Then he quieted the questions in his head. Princess Elise was not yet very late, and the hunter did not give away his position because the deer was being cautious.

So he would wait. Things were not over yet, he had planted his bait well, and in his estimation Princess Elise had gobbled it up. It would still work. His nerves were on fire, jittery with excitement. The ending would be so sweet, so rich.

To calm himself, he went over the important details he had tortured out of Robert Jameson. The man had been particularly sensitive about losing fingers, and Thannis had revelled in the sweet energy that fear had released. After the first two fingers, Robert had given him everything Thannis needed, such as key phrases and peculiar habits. Robert had talked about their plans for the future as well, and with that information Thannis had drawn Elise that much closer. Everything he used were things which only she and Robert would know.

He growled inwardly thinking about how his father would actually approve of the removal of Robert Jameson, and even the death of Elise Syun. Anything to keep Kenz and Xin Ya at each other's throats and churning out opportunities for exploitation. It galled him to further any agenda of his father's, but this time he couldn't avoid it.

It was then Thannis heard the crunch of stones on the garden path. He listened – yes, three sets of feet. They were here.

His hands shook with excitement as he re-checked his knives.

This was it.

The forest was thick with night mist. Moonlight trickled through the bows of the giant cedar trees above him in the small clearing. Now he stepped out of the shadows into that moonlight so they could see him.

He said nothing and did not move as they approached, waiting for

Princess Elise to set the scene. It would allow her to feel some control over the situation. Which must, of course, be screaming at her as suspicious. Best to keep her guessing.

“How do you know Robert?” Princess Elise demanded; all pretence of propriety had disappeared. He could see her heartsick worry.

*Love is such weakness – disgusting really*, Thannis thought with a grimace, and he focused instead on the imminent kill and found himself almost trembling, this close to the end. Yet his face portrayed nothing but the gravity of the situation.

“Robert is a friend of mine. We met at court in Nothavre. As you know, Robert’s family has many ties to the canvas industry as well as several trade contracts within the Nothavran shipbuilding guild,” Thannis began. Every part of this story was true, in so far as the real Michael De Le Quan had known and dealt with Robert Jameson. “I owe Robert my life. I was on the *Heraldry* with him when it floundered off the coast of Tawa. Robert was the one who dragged me and several of my travelling companions from the water,” Thannis explained. All of it, amazingly, still true. “Robert knew he could trust me to get the message to you.”

He stopped talking and allowed Princess Elise to digest this new twist and connect his story to those she knew of Robert. The next part was the crux, the fulcrum upon which his night balanced.

“The message?” Princess Elise demanded with bated breath.

Thannis was about to speak when he stopped, noticing Henriette shift her stance to lean slightly closer, just as he had hoped – indeed known – she would. He let his eyes dart back and forth so only Princess Elise could see, and then he whispered, “Princess ... how well do you know and trust your bodyguards?” Then he let his eyes flick towards Henriette.

Recognition blossomed a split second later. Princess Elise had just had her suspicions confirmed about her Hafaza bodyguard’s loyalty. Henriette Gelding was selling information about Princess Elise to many outside the line of Syun while also relaying every move to Queen Marin Syun to keep

herself ingratiated with the Royal Family.

Princess Elise turned quickly and caught Henriette's heightened attention to their conversation. Ole was also now leaning in to hear what was happening. "You two will stay positioned there. Lord De Le Quan and I shall move to the bench over there."

Princess Elise pointed to the only furniture within the clearing. The guards would still see them, but the bench was definitely out of earshot, and it was that bench which was precisely the reason Thannis had chosen this part of the garden.

Ole grunted again, and Henriette looked slightly embarrassed and angry, but they both nodded curtly as they could easily see the bench.

Together they walked over, and Thannis's heart began to pound. This was it.

He offered his hand to Princess Elise as he indicated her to sit first. She put her hand on his wrist and he guided her to the right side of the bench.

"Ouch," Princess Elise quipped as she jerked slightly, as if she had just sat on something sharp, for indeed she had. Her hand went down to the side and touched the grey painted thorn which had blended in with the bench. "Odd," she said as she turned back to look at Thannis.

"Not really so odd, as I placed the thorn there," Thannis said with a quick smile. "No doubt your lips are beginning to feel numb. Most fascinating plant: it is a type of belladonna bramble which grows deep in the Vinda jungles. It has a very high level of atropine in the berries, but the interesting property of this particular strand is its ability to leave the unfortunate victim very conscious instead of incapacitating them."

Princess Elise tried to scream for help, judging by the look of desperation in her eyes and the way she tried to open her mouth. But the scream never came as her body inevitably started to go numb and rigid.

“Don’t worry, it won’t last very long, but you’ll have an excellent seat for the show.” Thannis’s heart was pounding, and he couldn’t help gloating, though he knew he shouldn’t yet, as things were about to become chaotic.

“Help!” Thannis cried stepping back from Princess Elise, waving his arms in frantic apprehension. “Something happened to her! Help!”

Both bodyguards sprang forward, Captain Ole Sigurd pulled free his thick sword and grabbed hold of his huge shield at full tilt. Henriette Gelding followed him ten steps, stopped to plant her bladed spear in the ground and pulled the bow from her back with practised fluidity. She turned to cover Ole’s back as both, no doubt, suspected an ambush. She had an arrow notched and ready, looking for any sign of movement behind them as Ole barrelled into Thannis, slamming him aside to reach Princess Elise.

“Princess! What has been done?!” Ole reached the Princess’s side and quickly surveyed the scene. Thannis counted ten heartbeats before Ole found the thorn beneath Elise’s bottom.

“What have you –” Ole rounded but Thannis had recovered quickly from the bodyguard’s shove. He rolled out of the push and bounded to his feet after retrieving the throwing daggers he had hidden beneath the leaves. Ole was just in time to see Thannis finish the throw and watch the dagger whip through the air to embed itself up to the hilt in the side of Henriette’s neck.

Ole bellowed like a giant bear and rose to his full height. Thannis had the fleeting thought that the man might actually be bigger than a bear. The thick sword carved the air with such force Thannis thought it could have cut right through a tree trunk.

He fell backwards, bending fluidly at the hips as he felt the wind from the heavy blade. Ole continued to charge as Thannis knew he would, for he had studied the man’s practice sessions for weeks under another alias. Thannis would have but one chance at this. He somersaulted backwards forcing Ole to continue; then he let three of his throwing knives fly at Ole’s

face, holding one back. The giant shield went up, already humming with electric shock energy from the glowing santsi on Ole's pauldrons. Ole meant to deflect the blows and smash Thannis like a bug against the giant cedar behind him.

But Thannis knew this particular cedar, had rolled to it for a reason.

The shield lifted to protect Ole's face as Thannis let the last knife fly. It was the move Thannis had needed.

He stopped backtracking and shot forward onto his stomach and rolled to the side. His hands found the hilts of his long hunting knives beneath yet another hiding spot. He swiped out from his position as he rolled to his feet beside Ole. He felt the knife dig deep through leather and skin as he found the gap in the armour around Ole's ankle. The great man's leg buckled and, instead of crushing Thannis, the huge man's helmeted skull crashed into the tree.

A stroke of luck, and Thannis capitalised on it. He ran over and started plunging his knives into the tiny gaps in the huge man's armour. Two, three times through the gaps near the shoulders. The joints were the key: anywhere that needed movement revealed small openings, and as Ole thrashed to get Thannis off of him, more gaps presented themselves.

Eventually his strikes were enough to stop the huge man's limbs from responding, and at last Ole Sigurd lay trapped in a metal case beneath him. Thannis kicked open the face guard of the helmet.

"You'll rot in –" Ole started, but Thannis didn't let him finish as he drove his hunting knife down into the Syklan's exposed face.

It was then he heard whimpering from the bench. Ah – the atropine was wearing off. A bit early, but it would do.

"I was worried about this one." Thannis breathed a sigh of relief as he pointed his retrieved knife from Ole. "Big brutes just need to catch you once and it's all over. Good thing I've killed a dozen like him

before. Father always did want me to train with the best.”

Princess Elise started making scared noises as he walked over to her.

“You’re going to run for me,” Thannis said as he walked over and let his finger slide along her full lips. He could see the terror in her eyes and felt his body quiver. “The atropine will wear off shortly, but this will help.”

He plunged another hollow thorn with a small bottle on its end into Elise Syun’s arm. It contained a lovely surprise for her. He watched as her eyes widened in shock. “Adrenalin,” he said with a smile, “should give you a bit of a head start.”

He turned and threw thorn and empty bottle into the ferns and walked into the trees, finding shadows to cover his tracks.

Now all he had to do was wait, like a wolf stalking a deer.

\* \* \*

A quail squawked in anger as it flew from its resting place off to Thannis’s right. He had waited a full count of sixty before beginning his hunt, but the frightened bird was the sign he needed to set himself moving. He glided through the soft ferns and beneath the giant cedar trees like a wraith.

The absolute terror Elise Syun must now be feeling would intensify his experience. This would be the pinnacle of all his kills. So far it had been a glorious night.

He could hear Elise’s footsteps, whereas his steps were light, deliberate, and perfectly balanced as he ran. He avoided fallen twigs and dry leaves on instinct. The night air was rich and sweet, it pumped through him, and he thought he could run forever on a night like this. He was able to loosen his tight control and live in the moment.

It was perfect.

Yet it was time to finish this, as Elise was getting too close to finding a way out.

Ferns parted, and he saw the red dress flash into the trees ahead of him. The moonlight shone off her long silky black hair; her pale skin

glowed radiantly.

Five strides, lightning quick and silent, before he was in the air.

Elise sensed him and turned, opening her mouth to scream.

Silver flashed in the moonlight.

The scream died on her lips with the kiss of Thannis's blade.

The dark brown pools of her eyes were wide with shock.

He felt her warm blood pumping through his fingers to the rhythm of his own pounding heart. Thannis wiped his blade on her dress and this time he did not try to calm himself. He stared into her eyes as he lowered her to the forest floor.

Her lips moved, but he had severed her windpipe. He smiled and stopped them moving with his finger.

"Don't try to speak, you will understand soon, my dear," he whispered into her ear.

He knelt and placed his hands on the sides of her head so he could better feel the life slowly ebbing away beneath him. He closed his eyes and began to siphon, pulling at the energy trying to escape the dying shell.

The enormous flow took shape and slammed into him. Elise's eyes shot open in horror.

Her energy surged through him and his skin was on fire, but inside was a pure icy rapture. Ecstasy overcame him, and his back convulsed under the torrent.

His world had become sweet euphoria, alive with the succulent blend of life and horror within the dying woman. Each time Thannis had done this, it was different; a revelation unmatched by anything else he had ever known.

There was nothing more worth living for than moments like these. Everything else paled in comparison.

Just as suddenly as it had begun, the energy began to ebb away, and his body shook with the effort of maintaining the siphoning link,

but he wanted more. *Not yet. Not yet.*

But it was no use, the energy was gone. She was dead.

He looked down at the twisted features between his hands. It was as if Elise Syun now wore a grotesque mask of pain, revulsion and horror. It was not her. He had felt who she had truly been.

Thannis stopped siphoning and pushed the empty shell away in disgust. That was not how she had felt. She had been beautiful, delicious, wild. Like a caged lioness.

Each experience had its own flavour, just as each person lived a unique set of circumstances. Each act within their life altered the taste of the energy somehow, as if events were recorded uniquely upon the very soul.

Thannis wiped the blood from his hands and fell to the mossy floor. His body twitched with the remembered ecstasy, the intoxicating blend of pain and bliss which merged into one experience at their extremes.

The world now seemed to be less. The feel of a woman, the thrill of a proper duel, the delight of a plot coming to fruition were nothing to him now. Not compared to touching the very essence of what a person was, to have it course through him as an overwhelming rhapsody.

Only the incubi and succubi of old legends had been able to do such things. They called this power evil, called it an abomination.

They were all fools.

Thannis knew that what he could do was glorious, that nothing so overwhelmingly beautiful could be wrong. But now it was over, and far too soon, to his mind. He had planned and executed the perfect murder, had got to someone considered untouchable. He'd bested a renowned Syklan and an impressive Hafaza guard. It was time to take this to the next level, to operate in a hunting ground large enough to experiment hundreds of times over. One in which he could find people from all walks of life. For Thannis now knew he could get to anyone, and there was only one place he knew of in the world that fit his new criteria.

He left the already forgotten body where it was. Whatever allure it had

once held had disappeared with Elise Syun's life. He didn't bother hiding the corpses; he knew it would take time for any pursuers to find out where Princess Elise had disappeared to. By then, he would be long gone.

Without a look back, Thannis disappeared from Aluvik like a whisper on the wind.

\* \* \*

The forest remained still long after Thannis had left and as the sun began to rise. The wrongness of what had happened had left its imprint upon the very air. The stillness tensed further as the giant cedars watched a shadow slither towards the scene, detaching itself from the trees to stand softly beside the dead woman.

A sigh of annoyance slithered from its purple and black stained lips. The King of Nothavre would be happy with this result, but more needed to be added to the scene to delay those who were far closer to Thannis than the young prince presumed. The shadow was named Esmerak, who was a witch in the employ of Thannis's father.

Esmerak moved to grab the delicate porcelain body. Left like this, the body would prompt too many questions from the Senior Prefect, who was far too close to discovering the truth about these murders.

A hound's deep bark tore through the choking silence and Esmerak hissed in anger. She could hear the sounds of people crashing through the brush calling the dead woman's name.

She would have no time to fix this! The Senior Prefect must have already been in the Narrows. He must have been watching the royal gala. She slipped back into the darkness between the trees and watched as the constables in their long brown cloaks began to surround the body of Elise Syun.

Esmerak watched the constables gasp in horror as they rolled Princess Elise over and saw her vacant dark brown eyes screaming silently up to the heavens. Everyone seemed shocked, except for one,

the Senior Prefect; he already had his pen out and was taking notes.

Esmerak would have to think of something else to distract this Senior Prefect. Her Prince had left too much of a mess this time.

The adventure continues in *Visions – Knights of Salucia – Book 1* available on Amazon.

## List of Characters and Maps

### Wayran and Matoh

**Wayran Spierling** - brother of Matoh. **Place of Origin:** New Toeron, Bauffin

**Matoh Spierling** –brother of Wayran. **Place of Origin:** New Toeron, Bauffin

**Sandra Koslov** – Aunt of Wayran and Matoh, cook for the stormchaser's and wife to Aaron Koslov.

**Aaron Koslov** – Captain of the Storm Chasers. Wayran and Matoh's uncle,

brother of Natasha Spierling. **Place of Origin:** Palisgrad, Paleschuria

**Natasha Spierling** – X - (maiden name **Kozlova**) -The Silver Lady. Mother of

Wayran and Matoh, wife of Harold. **Place of Origin:** Palisgrad, Paleschuria

**Ariel Laurent** – Healer, Storm Chaser. **Place of Origin:** Saint Miro, Nothavre

**Marcus Hanz** – Lead Storm Chaser. **Place of Origin:** Aspen Hills, Aluvik

**Harold Spierling** - Father of Wayran and Matoh. **Place of Origin:** New Toeron, Bauffin

**Chronicler Talbot** – Chronicler at New Toeron Artificium, specialises in codebreaking, mathematics and decrypting. **Place of Origin:** Narrows, Aluvik

**Bree Olmson** – Works at the Artificium. Apprentice to Chronicler Rutherford.

**Place of Origin:** Sudgard, Asgur

**Chronicler Rutherford** – Chronicler at the New Toeron Artificium, specialises in Physics and Chemistry. **Place of Origin:** Dawn, Kenz

**Kevin Bertoni** – Initiate in the Academy, **Place of Origin:** Tawa City, Tawa

**Jerome Dangstrom** – Former constable, Initiate in the Academy. **Place of Origin:** Narrows, Aluvik

**Bastion Thurson**– Initiate in the Academy, **Place of Origin:** Blainheim (village near Vestgard), Asgur

**Captain Miller** – Fellow of Military Tactics and Basic Training at the Academy.

Holds the rank of Captain in the Syklan Order. **Place of Origin:** Freeport, Bauffin

### Jonah

**Jonah Shi** – Foot bowmen in Imperial Army. **Place of Origin:**

**Fin Gunderson** – Foot bowmen in Imperial Army. **Place of Origin:**

**Branson Delagoth** – Foot bowmen in Imperial Army. **Place of Origin:**

**Commander Diya Naseen** – Commander of the Black Rain, Foot bowmen battalion of Euran landing force.

**Prince Samar El'Amin** – First son of Matron Dinesa of House Amin, leader of expedition across the Barrier Sea.

Note: \*In Eura, if you are part of a House it is Royal Bloodline, if you are a part of a Clan, it is not a royal bloodline.

Thannis

- Thannis Beau'Chant** – Prince of Nothavre. **Place of Origin:** Orlane, Nothavre
- Michael de La Quan** – Alias of Thannis. Looks very similar to Thannis. **Place of Origin:** Orlane, Nothavre
- Elise Syun** – X - Princess of Xin Ya. **Place of Origin:** Wadashi, Xin Ya
- Ole Sigurn** – X - Bodyguard to Princess Syun, Syklan Knight. **Place of Origin:** Vestgard, Asgur
- Henriette Gelding** – X – Bodyguard of Princess Syun, Hafaza Guard. **Place of Origin:** Dawn, Kenz.
- Esmerak** – Powerful priestess of the Vinda Sisterhood. **Place of Origin:** Vinda, The Blasted Isles
- Dennis Beau'Chant** – Royal in Nothavre. Cousin to Thannis. **Place of Origin:** Orlane, Nothavre
- Professor Attridge** – Researcher and Lecturer in the Research Wing of the Academy. Santsi specialist. Mentor of Dennis Beau'Chant. **Place of Origin:** Dawn, Kenz

John Stonebridge

- John Stonebridge** – Prefect in the Constabulary. **Place of Origin:** Alansworth, Kenz
- Miranda Holvstad** – Junior Prefect in the Constabulary. **Place of Origin:** Qi Gong (Border City to Kenz), Xin Ya
- Gary Hornwright** – Chief of Narrows Constabulary. **Place of Origin:** Narrows, Aluvik

Adel and Naira

- Adel Corbin** – daughter of Leonard Corbin. **Place of Origin:** Blossom Bay, Bauffin
- Leonard Corbin** – Adel's father. **Place of Origin:** Unknown
- Naira O'Bannon** – Adel's best friend **Place of Origin:** Blossom Bay, Bauffin
- Fellow Callahan** – Fellow at the Academy, syphoning expert. **Place of Origin:** Unknown

Echinni and Kai

- Kai Johnstone** – Orphan, Jachem's friend. **Place of Origin:** New Toeron, Bauffin
- Jachem Sanders** – Orphan, Kai's friend. **Place of Origin:** New Toeron, Bauffin
- Hanson Rivers** – Innkeeper of Broken Clock Inn, husband of Meriam. **Place of Origin:** New Toeron, Bauffin
- Meriam Rivers** – Innkeeper of Broken Clock Inn, wife of Hanson. **Place of Origin:** New Toeron, Bauffin
- Bella** – serving girl at the Broken Clock Inn.
- Harbour Master O'Brian** – Kai's boss at the docks.

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- Echinni Mihane** – High Princess, daughter of High King Ronaston. **Place of Origin:** Born in Sudgard, Asgur. Spent most of her life in New Toeron, Bauffin.
- Yuna Swiftriver** – Syklan and bodyguard of Echinni Mihane. **Place of Origin:** Istol, Navutia
- Ronaston Mihane** – High King of the Nine Nations of Salucia. Defender of the Singer Faith. First of the Syklan Order. Father of Echinni. **Place of Origin:** Sudgard, Asgur
- Sister Maria** – Sister who runs the orphanage which Kai and Jachem grew up in. **Place of Origin:** Two Ports, Labran
- Maestra Lascotti** – Maestra of the Singer Faith and Echinni's Singing trainer. **Place of Origin:** Dawn, Kenz