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It was well after midmorning when Johan, son of Jondalrun, stood on the edge of the cliffs and looked out over the Strait of Balomar. He wiped damp blond curls from his forehead and shaded his eyes against the sunlight. Johan was tired; he had begun the climb in predawn darkness, carrying the Wing tenderly as he made his way across the bushy hills to the northern escarpment. Even with his care, the stretched leather surface and wooden frame of the Wing had been scratched by hookberry vines and sharp rocks. The last part of the climb had been the steepest, and the sea winds there had made the Wing jump and buck like a stallion. Yet Johan had persevered. He intended to fly this day, and he would settle for nothing less.

The boy now sat upon a huge rock, having carefully anchored the Wing behind it. He ate a nectarine from his father's garden, and gazed up at the foamy clouds as the breeze dried the juice on his cheeks.

He was a farmer's son, young but strong and limber. The friendly wind played with his hair, tickling strands against his face. Johan hugged himself, as much in delight at his daring as against the slight chill of the Fandoran spring. His father, Jondalrun, would be angry. Risking safety for pleasure was a silly, Simbalese thing to do, but Johan had seen Amsel one beautiful morning, drifting above these very clouds, soaring as free as a fabled dragon, and he knew that to fly was far more than pleasure and truly worth the risk.

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Taking the Wing had been easy. The giant tree that formed part of Amsel's house rose up next to Greenmeadow Mesa, and its massive upper branches grew flush with the cliff's edge. Johan had simply walked onto the tree, descended to the limb where the Wing was kept, and left with it by the same route. He cautioned himself against falling into the easy habit of thievery. Just this once, and never again. He would apologize to Amsel when he returned it later.

He was rested now, and the nectarines were all eaten, and there would be no better time for flying. He carried the Wing with him to the cliff's edge. A hawk sailed by far below him, close to the cliff's face, wings motionless. Wait for me, Johan thought. Hawk, I'll show you flying.

Standing at the edge, he carefully aimed the Wing into the wind. As the leather flapped and boomed in the updraft, he gripped the steering bar beneath the frame and slipped his feet into the thong loops, as Amsel had once shown him. That done, he stood facing the ocean, far below. For the first time he felt cold fear spreading under his heart. What if flying were not as easy as it looked? But it was too late now. The weight of the frame pulled him forward, and he could only push with his feet and turn a sudden descent into an awkward leap. Sea air slapped his cheeks, and he cried out in terror. He was falling! Amsel's invention had failed, and Johan prayed that he would not die. Eyes squeezed shut, he twisted his body desperately, this way and that, and after an eternity felt air catch beneath the leather sail. Suddenly he was not falling, but rising. He opened his eyes: a cloud of indignant gulls exploded about him, protesting his invasion. He was flying!

Held aloft by the laughing wind, Johan experimented with his body weight, learning the rules of flight. Mastery came swiftly as he flew over the water. The sheer beauty of it! Johan had known little more in his eight years of life than plowing and sowing, harrow and harvest. This was totally new, this was wonderful! Air burned sweetly in his lungs, then exploded from his lips in a shout of delight as he swooped and circled.

As the first euphoria faded, Johan began to study the scenery below. He was hovering in a steady updraft just over the vertical cliffs. The Strait of Balomar separated his



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land, Fandora, from the dim purple shoreline to the east. Through the mists above this shore was Simbala, home of the mysterious and distrusted Riders of the Wind.

On his rare days of play, Johan would often come to the cliffs with his friends Doley and Marl, and they would sit for hours, staring eastward, hoping to see the magnificent slow-moving windships of Simbala. It was well known that the Sim were magicians and sorcerers, and that even the smallest of them could shrivel cornstalks with a glance. Though Johan and his friends knew they should not be fascinated by the crafts of the sorcerers, still they came, hoping to glimpse the sails of the distant windships in the clouds.

No Fandoran had ever seen a windship at close range.



Until last week, none had ever crossed the Strait of Balomar. Johan remembered the wide-eyed accounts of the couriers who had brought news of a ship that had swooped out of the sky without warning, its sails flapping like Old Witch Winter's cloak as it crashed into a high town-house garret in Gordain. A shower of embers had been cast from the small boat beneath the sail, and the resulting fire had caused damage to a half-dozen homes. No rider was found in the ship, and its descent had been blamed on the sorcery of Simbala.

Johan sailed dizzily in a wide arc over the water. The Sim, the couriers had said, must be magicians. How else could they make boats fly? Yet, Johan thought, here I am,

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flying as swiftly as any Sim, and I am not a magician. He had seen Amsel build the Wing himself, without sorcery. What if the Sim had built their windships just as Amsel had built his Wing?

Many folk, his father included, were worried about the possibility of another attack by the magicians of Simbala. What if they were not magicians, but humans like Amsel and Johan himself? Perhaps the Sim were not people to be feared, after all. Perhaps Amsel was right when he said that the unknown should not be feared just because it was unknown.

Filled with the joy of flight, Johan was sure that he could convince his father, and everyone else, that Amsel was a man



of vision. Johan's dreams soared higher than the Wing he rode, and in them his friend Amsel, that shy and strange man, would teach the Fandorans marvelous things. And he, Johan, would become his apprentice, and be privy to all the wonderful secrets and inventions that filled Amsel's forest home. . . .

Johan flew through the bright day, happier than he had ever been. He flew, and dreamed, and, occupied by his dreams, was blind to the nightmare coming until far too late.

The sight and sound of terror came simultaneously: as Johan swooped over a white sickle of beach two hundred feet below, heading inland, he saw his small shadow over-