Haverson was a moderately tall man, starting to gray. His eyes betrayed a fair amount of intelligence but also a fair amount of weariness, as if they had seen everything and grown tired of it all.

With him was Aster LaRouche, of the great house. She was mid height for a woman but was barely much older than a teenager. Perhaps some would say she was more suited for a bridal dress than the leather armor she wore. She attempted to combat this by cutting her sandy hair short. From previous experience, Haverson knew she had the skills and bravery of any true adventurer.

“Master Haverson, Lady LaRouche, watch your step. The rocks are quite slippery here.” Palo called, standing astride the two boulders. Beneath him, the raging waters of the river rushed through the gap.

“Thank you Palo, although, as I said, Haverson is quite enough, even Enton if you wish.” Haverson said.

“Aster as well please” Aster said, scrambling up the rocks behind Haverson.

“I suppose this is the river? If so, then we're making good time. Only a day and a half so far. If we cn keep it up, we will be there and back within a week or so. Not the worst job we're taken, eh Aster?”

“No, not at all.” Aster Replied. “Although I am a bit hesitant about what the fort captain said about the natives. They don't sound like pleasant company. No offense Palo.”

“None taken. There was a reason my grandfather decided to take his family to the fort. Those earth god worshipers are frightening. And they hate it when Northerners venture this far close to the mountain.”

“Too bad. If we are going to 'survey' the mountain, we have to go there. Speaking of those natives, where is your brother?” Haverson said, peering from side to side into the thick pines.

“He's probably up ahead. He likes to image himself some sort of scout. He's not half bad honestly. Don't worry about him though, that’s my problem.” Palo said, helping Haverson across the gap.

“We certainly got two for the price of one with you two!” Aster said as she shooed Palo's assistance away and leaped across the gap herself.

Palo looked embarrassed somewhat. “Well, visitors to the fort are rare now and people haven't needed guides in a while.”

“Do you know what you're looking for, Lady LaR… I mean Aster?” Palo changed the subject. The river retreated behind them as they walked further into the forest.

“Well, to be honest, we're not exactly sure what exactly the captain had in mind. I agree that he was probably thinking of something when he asked us to survey the mountain but your guess is as good as mine as to what it is.” Aster said.

“I think its just a military precaution. He doesn't have the men because of the war, so he hired us. Wants to know whats out here so he doesn't get caught with his pants down.” Haverson said. “When is the last time anyone got out this way, with the Whenua about?”

“Actually, when we were younger, Remi and I used to sneak out of the fort to look at the mountain, Remi especially knows this area well.” Palo said.

“Snuck out? Your parents must have been worried.” Haverson said as the group started to ascend a small rise.

“Actually,” Palo said, not looking back as he lead the group, “mother died giving birth to Remi and I's younger brother. He didn't make it. Pa looked after us until his lung problem got him. Ah, but you probably don't want to hear about that.” Palo said, growing silent.

Haverson looked like he was going to say something but a look from Aster silenced him.

They walked quietly up the rest of the rise.

When they got to the top Haverson signaled them to stop.

“Just one second. We have to record this.” He pulled out a piece of parchment from an oil wrap in his bag and leaned up against a tree, drawing out their route and what they had seen.

“Nice river you've drawn there. Looks exactly like it.” Aster goaded.

“Look,” Haverson shot back exacerbated, “If the captain wanted a real survey e would have sent a team of engineers or a geologist, or a mage or two. But he didn't. He sent us. You want to draw and record?” He threatened, holding the parchment and quill towards Aster.

She laughed it off. “Fine, fine, you grump. One would hardly believe you were just a year short of...”

“Ah, all finished” Haverson interjected, dangled the completed section in front of Aster's face.

Palo looked on at their antics with a bemused expression.

A sudden sound alerted Haverson. Instantly, his hand dropped to the sword by his waist and it exited the sheath. He tensed, ready to spring into action.

Just as he was congratulating himself for still being limber, Palo stopped him.

“Don't worry Master Haverson. Its just Remi” He said. Haverson sheathed his sword, somewhat embarrassed.

Remi emerged from the underbrush.

“Ah well…” He sputtered, looking away from Palo but got no help from Aster who raised her eyebrows mockingly.

“Hey Remi, what did you see?” Palo asked, turning to greet his brother. But Remi didn't answer. He motioned for them to be quiet and directed them a bit back the way they came.

When they were in a safer area Haverson turned to Remi. “What was that all about? Whats going on?”

“Sorry to startle you.” Remi said. “But there's a very peculiar person two hills over. And he looked alert.”

“A native?” Aster asked.

“No,” Remi replied, “actually, it looked like it might be an elf.”

“An elf? Whats an elf doing here?” She wondered aloud.

“Well lets ask him and find out.” Haverson suggested.

The brothers were suspicious though. “Not that I disagree with you, but shouldn't we be a bit more cautious?” Palo asked.

Haverson shook his head. “He's directly in our path ad out here among the Whenua. I think we should find out what he wants. Who knows, maybe this is actually what the captain sent us out here for.” Haverson suggested.

“That's a trick I don't think the captain would play. That’s more of a merchant-family-esque plot: meet a mysterious individual in the woods. You don't even know what you are looking for. Then later you find out it was all to steal the opposing family's wife's curtains or some nonsense.” Aster chuckled.

Remi laughed as well but looked away when Aster looked at him.

“Anyway he's right over the next ridge. I believe he is some sort of mage. He has a small tent and a folding table but no pack animals or partners.”

“Well, we will be careful then.” Haverson said.

The group snuck over the next two hills. As they were making their way up the last one, the must have been caught.

“Who goes there?” A voice asked from above.

They got a vision of a tall man atop the hill wearing only brown robes. But in his hands pulsed small orbs of fire.

Remi's bow came out, an arrow drawn. Palo reached back to unhook his sword. Aster had drawn her own shorter weapon. But Haverson stood still, not having reached for his own.

“Hello friend.” he shouted. “I am Enton Haverson, adventurer. This is Aster LaRouche, co-adventurer, and these are Remi and Palo, our guides.”

“Co-adventurer?” Aster asked under her breath.

“Come up I suppose?” The man said, fire dissipating at once.

The group locked eyes and shrugged at one another and made their way up the hillock.

When they reached the top, the found a rather tall man, now sitting beside a small table. His long brown robes extended right down to his boots and showed significant signs of travel.

The small table had two small chairs, both worn as well. They admittedly looked quite out of place with their pale wood amid the dark pines.

On the table was a large array of glass phials and tubes, mortars and pestles.

Aster was surprised. The lot would have been massively expensive. Only a fool would dare to travel with such an investment. Or a mage.

“Adventurers? Grand. I seem to have lost my way and require some directional assistance. I would pay of course. I had hoped to attract some of the peculiar people I have seen milling about, but they seem quite shy.”

“You have seen Whenua?” Palo inquired, suddenly looking into the underbrush which thickened as he gazed northward.

“I'm unfamiliar with that word but I am assuming you are referring to the men who furtively spied on me yesterday?”

“How many were there?” Palo pressed, Remi's smile fading.

“Oh perhaps two or three, certainly not more than that” the man replied.

“A scouting group” Remi stated. “Yes” Palo agreed.

“Did they see anything magical?” Palo asked, waving his hand at the assembly on the table.

“Perhaps” The man said. “On second thought, I believe I was distilling this bark-sap then with magical fire.”

“Then they will be returning in force, and will bring with them at least two Whenua-Ki with them to scour the area. We had best be off if we want to avoid confrontation.” He said to Haverson.

“Splendid!” The man said. “Just give me one second to store my equipment. I will go faster if someone hep me with the tent.” He said, drawing out a rune inscribed leather sack which Haverson identified as a bottomless bag, another impossibly expensive item.

“Hold on one moment.” Haverson stopped Remi who had made towards the tent. “We don't know anything about you, or what you're up to out here. Plus we have our own errands. Plus, we don't even know your name!” Haverson added with a flourish of his hand.

“We have no reason to trust you, let alone travel with you.” Haverson finished.

“I forgot what part of the world I was in I suppose,” the man said, ”I am Tzuras-Ra. As you can see from my implements, I am what you might call a...naturalist. I had been traveling far to the north when I felt the earth tremble. Curious, the people who I was staying with blamed a volcano to the south and unless I am mistaken, it is close.”

Haverson drew himself up to the tall man. “There's something strange about you that I can't place. And its not just being a mage. I've spent time with that lot enough to understand them… And a naturalist you said? I've not heard that term.”

“That is not surprising as have not met many other like myself and the term is somewhat of my own design. Like what you might call a druid, our realm is nature. However, whereas a druid approaches nature from a religious or spiritual vantage, a naturalist approaches nature quite analytically.”

Tzuras continued, “I mean to study and collect as many volcanic specimens as I can.”

“I see” said Haverson, betraying nothing of his thought process.

“So you're here to collect rocks and twigs?” Aster asked.

“...and insects and the like.” Tzuras added.

“One moment while I consult with the rest of my group” Haverson said.

“Your group?” inquired Aster, jokingly nudging him.

“Not now. So what so you think?” he asked, sneaking a glance over at Tzuras, who was carefully slipping hundreds of gold worth of glassware into that bag.

“Seems alright.” Aster said, looking over Tzuras as well.

“Although you can never tell with mages. One instant calm, the next burning down your house… even if they call themselves naturalists.” She added.

“I don't know about naturalists, or mages, but Tzuras-Ra is an elven name if I ever heard one.” Palo commented.

“I picked up on that as well. Although its curious, he is tall but certainly doesn't look like an elf. Not that that implies anything. I've met some wonderful elves.” Haverson said.

“Elves aside. I'm not sure we can stop him from following us without things getting nasty.” Remi said. “If we don't want him along, we should have crept by” he added, looking at Haverson.

“So that seems to decide that. So its just the terms then.” Aster said.

“It looks like he could afford to pay quite a lot, going by his equipment. Two hundred gold? We would have to split it among Palo and Remi as well somehow, adventurer's agreement and all...”

Haverson nodded as Aster figured things out, but suddenly cut her off. “I,” he said, elongating the word, “have a much better idea!” He finished, motioning the others inward and whispering to them.

“Do you think he will agree?” Palo asked.

“I think he was going to do it anyway, to be honest.” Haverson said. “Is the original agreement still ok with you two?” He asked the brothers.

They conversed a bit and came to agreement.

“The original agreement is fine, but keep in mind a larger group will invariably attract more attention and more...agitation if we are attacked, especially with a mage.” Palo said.

Haverson signaled he understood but added, “He looks like he can handle himself in a fight. As a rule of thumb, the rich mages are usually the most accomplished.” he said, walking towards Tzuras.

“What are the least accomplished mages like?” Aster asked.

“Dead” he responded simply.

“So we have decided to allow you to journey with us. On our side we will provide direction, safety local knowledge and if needed, food and water.”

“Although it won't be very good” Aster added. Haverson ignored the comment.

“In return you will provide us a copy of what ever surveying you do, generally accepted to be at least some sort of topological map with major features noted. It doesn't need to be construction worthy, just an idea of the area.” Haverson said.

“Is that acceptable?”

Tzuras thought for a moment.

“I believe I can hold my own in a fight, although I would rather now… and food is not a problem, but surveying the area? That seems positively enlightening. I accept your terms.”

“Good to hear. Will you require a written agreement or will an adventurer's understanding be sufficient?” Haverson asked.

“Ah, you Northerners and your legal documents...No, an understanding is fine.” Tzuras outstretched his arm and all parties shook his hand.

“So now that’s all sorted out, we'd best be on our way I would think”, Haverson said. “We will certainly want to be far away when the next part of Whenua shows up.”

The negotiations and greetings had taken the better part of an hour. Packing however was quick due to Tzuras's fantastic bag, which simplified the logistics substantially.

As the sun started to descend beneath the mountains, the group set off.

“We had hoped to follow the river all the way” Haverson explained to Tzuras. “However, that seems ill-advised with people looking for us. It is perhaps where they would guess where we would go.”

Tzuras agreed.

“So what I suggested is taking a corner off the river. It makes a large bend here around the smaller peak and the hillocks in between should allow for concealment,” Palo added. “All this is complicated by the fact that Remi and I believe that Whenua have a base or lookout of some sort on the lower peak. So cutting off the bend actually puts us closer to them. We will have to remain unseen.”

The group agreed to the deviation, admitting that finding them following the river would be childishly easy, and that walking through the outside of the bend would take much longer and venture into unexplored tracks.

Palo and Remi now took the group skillfully around dense underbrush, careful not to break to many branches. The group moved in silence.

Tzuras stopped periodically to examine one thing or another, but generally kept things quick. Still, by the time night was beginning to fall, Palo and Remi suspected they were a bit behind where they wanted to be.

They had decided to make camp between two densely forested hillocks. Barely five or six people tall, these mounds of earth provided great cover, even from the lookout, if there was one.

Unfortunately, this concealment meant that they could not make a fire this night.

“I want to check the area once more,” Remi said. This time Aster volunteered to go with him. The rest started pitching their tents. It was theoretically summer but the fort was high enough into the mountains that it almost didn't matter. The pale warmth of the day chilled into the cool winds of the evening. They suspected that it would be cold tonight.

Haverson and Palo helped Tzuras pitch his tent as well, the naturalist struggling with the wrappings as it emerged from the bag.

“Quite a useful bag you've got there.” Palo said to the mage. Laughing, he added, “any possibility of me hitching a ride in there when I'm tired? Save us some walking.”

The mage looked up with a hint of a smile. “Lots of room, but you wouldn't want to be in it. The bad handles tents and chairs well enough but not anything alive. If you tried to get into it, you would most likely be turned into a caustic purple ooze. I was most discourages when I tried to store live specimens in there.”

“Purple ooze?” Palo asked, clearly uncomfortable, with a sickened expression on his face.

“A caustic purple ooze.” Tzuras corrected. “There are bags which handle anything, actually just mobile portals, but they are artifacts. The skill has been lost.”

“Uh, interesting” Palo said, imagining Tzuras accidentally putting a frog into the bag. The mental image was none too pleasing.

Once the tents were up, Palo and Haverson did their best to conceal their camp with sticks and leaves.

Meanwhile, Aster and Remi were several hillocks away, lying prone, peering towards the small peak.

“Palo and I were right. There's a lookout up there.” Remi said, motioning to the small peak. Their eyes ascended up the rise past the treeline to the peak, which featured a bleak rock outcropping. On top of this, there was a small wooden structure.

As the light continued to fall, Remi and Aster spied a single beacon fire on the peak.

“Somewhere north of here they have their main village or villages, but up there half a dozen to a dozen of them might be looking for us. It wouldn’t surprise me if they send down a team tonight. We might want to keep a watch.” Remi said. Aster nodded.

By the time they got back, the main group had already set everything up and were talking in hushed tones.

“The pines here are the same, but I have acquired some more sap. A brew can be made from it that cures cough.”

Tzuras said, idly scraping some bark off the nearest tree.

“So you know something about us” Remi said, changing the topic, “how about you two? You seem an unlikely duo. And Aster, a La Rouche? You probably don't need to be adventuring!”

“Not all La Rouche own whole mines and towns. Some of us actually work for our food.” Aster said defensively. “I decided that the coddled life was not for me. I would rather bloody noses than powder them.”

“Fine then, how about you Haverson? You certainly seem like an adventurous type if a bit...experienced for the line of work.” Remi said.

“I'm from the North, never really dallied much in the South. I'm at home in dirty inns, mountain passes and the open. I had no family after my first brother went down South and my second married some lass. They fancied the life by the water and left me with the farm.”

“That life wasn't for me though. I sold it one day and never looked back.”

Haverson said. Aster detected a hint of sadness in the glib response. She'd never been too sure about Haverson's family. Perhaps he missed them more than he let on.

“What I'm interested in is your history Tzuras.” Haverson said. “And what an interesting name. Do you hail from the North or the South?”

Tzuras paused collecting bark and looked up. For a moment, something passed subtly and indescribably across his expression. Aster suddenly felt a brief coldness in his face. But is passed instantaneously, and when he replied, Aster could hardly remember if it was real or imagined.

“I'm not from one place or another. I move around with the migrations, following the animals, and sometimes the people. However, recently I was traveling to the Far North.”

“The Far North? But that’s just snow and ice! What would draw you there?” Remi exclaimed.

Tzuras chuckled. “The people. Although my profession is plants and animals, there is something to admire about the Fartherners. Their basic life and struggle against the elements is admirable. There is something raw and primal to it.” Tzuras said, finishing with the bark. With a slip of his hand, the sample vanished into his coat.

“But you have me at a disadvantage. I assume you are a Northerner?” He asked Remi.

“Born and raised.” Remi replied. “Palo and I grew up in the fort helping out the men stationed there and the farmers. Until some years ago we used to hunt in these woods as well. Palo told you that our family was originally Whenua?”

Palo shook his head and looked unsure at Tzuras's response.

“Our grandfather took the family over to Whenua and we've been there ever since.”

“Fascinating.” Tzuras said. “If you don't mind me asking, what compelled your grandfather to move?”

Remi looked like he was going to respond, but Palo interjected.

“We don't know to be honest. But the point is we know the Whenua lands, customs and some or their language. Father always wanted better relationships between the two sides.”

The conversation seemed to end there so Haverson broke the silence. “I will take the first watch. Then Aster, then you two.” He pointed to Remi and Palo. The group agreed and went to their tents.

“Shh” whispered Remi as he awakened Haverson. “The Whenua are about, grab your weapons!”

Haverson's hand reached for his sword as he sprung to his feet.

“We need to wake the others.” He said in a hiss.

“How close are they? The Whenua I mean” He asked.

“Only two hills over. Perhaps sweeping the river. If we're lucky they'll double back before they see us.” Remi said, before waking Palo.

Haverson went back to get Aster. Tzuras was awake already somehow and came out of his tent swiftly.

“They are here?” he asked. Remi nodded.

“Then quick, just shove everything into my bag. We can work it out later.”

Palo and Remi went to go break down camp, but Haverson stopped Remi.

“Aster, you help Palo. Remi we need to know numbers.”

“I counted half a dozen, but I'm sure there are more, perhaps even double that. They have two Whenua-Ki with them, just as we had feared.” Remi said quietly.

“Ah. How was it that you didn't see them coming off the mountain?” Haverson asked.

“They must have left before it got night or carried no torch. I didn't see anyone coming down. I suppose they could have also come down the far side.”

“Fine.” Haverson said, helping Aster and Palo stuff a tent into Tzuras's bag.

“You can't cast invisibility spell can you?” Haverson asked Tzuras.

The mage shook his head. “Nothing that would help in this circumstance unless you wanted me to light the forest on fire. I'm afraid my repertoire of spells is surprisingly limited.”

“Great.” Haverson said, “then how about those Whenua-Ki?”

“Mostly fire and earth like spells. I believe they have one that can bind your feet to the earth. But no invisibility either, thank gods. The Whenua can be stealthy, but subtle? Never.”

They finished stuffing their things away.

“Everyone down!” Remi hissed. Everyone went prone.

On a nearby hill, a torch light illuminated a squat muscular man. He was bald and had tattoos decorating his face. In one hand he held a torch. In the other was some sort of exotic sling. He was dressed in furs.

“Chana!” He yelled, turning behind him. “Hitu hidee”, he waved in front of him. “Tua Grom!” he exclaimed.

“he thinks we retreated down the river for some reason.” Palo translated softly.

“Wait until we think they are gone and then go north. Stay low.” Haverson said, clutching his sword with one hand the other bracing against a tree.

The group waited with anticipation as the shadows danced around them.

“I could take one of them out with my bow…” Remi suggested.

“No, I don't want to force a conflict if we can avoid it. Wait until you are sure they have seen us.”

Remi nodded but kept an arrow in one hand.

The golden flickering light flashed here and there as the searches ran amid the trees.

However, the dark gully they had camped in concealed them, and soon the torchlight and cries got further away.

“Ok, lets go” Haverson said, rising quickly and half running, half crouching to another tree.

“Tzuras. Tell me you have a light spell at least?”

Tzuras nodded and quickly drew some shape with his fingers int eh air, saying something under his breath.

“Make it dim if you can!” Haverson warned.

A ball of light appeared above Haverson. It illuminated the ground several feet before and after him but no more.

“Ok. That will work.” Haverson said.

“Everyone follow me, and remember, stay close and low.”

The group stealthily sprinted from tree to tree, every step bringing them further away from the torchlight.

“If everyone feels able, I suggest pressing on.” Haverson said finally, after the woods were quiet again.

“The more distance we have between them and us, the better.” he said. They were all exhausted, but agreed.

“We should be coming up on the river shortly. Then I suppose we make a quick loop around the main peak and come back the other side. Would this be satisfactory for creating the survey Tzuras?” Haverson asked.

“Quite so.” Tzuras said. “Ordinarily, I would love to climb the summit, but I fear that would leave us dreadfully exposed. A ground survey will have to do. I can infer some of the rest from observation alone I suppose.”

“Speaking of inference, is the source of the river known?” he asked, taking some measurements by eye of the closest hillock.

“No” Palo replied.

“But that wasn't included in our job description” Haverson added with somewhat of a grin.

“Fine, fine. To the river we go.” Tzuras said sighing.

It took the party the better part of a hour to reach the river and by now the sun was starting to rise above the ice capped mountains to the north, casting pale light across the land.

“We will be more visible now but I'm not sure we can do anything about that.” Haverson admitted.

Remi suddenly appeared and cut him off. “Everyone, you need to see this.” Remi exclaimed.

The part followed him on the bank of the river for several minutes. The gurgling of the glacier fed stream was the only sound. The trees and hills were surprisingly silent. The soft needles silenced the group's passing.

Finally they broke out of the forest onto some sort of plain. Rising up to the base of the peak itself, the treeless expanse was dotted with only a few hearty bushes. All around, strange multicolored pigmets stained the ground, and steam billowed from the earth itself.

“What kind of place is this?” Aster wondered aloud.

“We know of this place. It loosely translates to hot rock shelf in Whenua's tongue. This is a sacred place for them and would anger them if we were to set foot on it.” Palo said.

“Although I barely see any other reasonable choice. The river and the area surrounding it is a no go and it makes another loop here. We would have to go several miles out of our way to circumvent this plain.” He dded, pointing to the river, which cut the land. Far to the west the tree-topped hills started again, and even further to the west and north, transitioned into full blown mountains.

“This is a volcanic area.” Tzuras said. “There are specimen here that must be quite exotic. Plus, no survey of the area would be complete lacking a feature like this.”Tzuras argued.

Haverson mulled it over a bit. “In addition to what you two said, I have to add I've never seen anything like this, the steam coming from the ground or the colors. I'm not one to let anything come in the way of my curiosity.” He declared.

“Hear, Hear!” Agreed Aster. Palo and Remi urged caution but agreed that the survey would not be complete without the strange area.

“So if we are going to travel in this strange land, do you, Remi and Palo, or Tzuras, know of its challenges?” Haverson asked.

Tzuras differed to the brothers.

“Honestly we never personally came this north as we knew coming here would antagonize the Whenua”. However, we do know that the area is treacherous under foot. Gaps open up and water is as hot as in any kettle. Watch your step!” The brothers said.

Tzuras agreed. “To that I will add what I know. I have heard of areas like this near volcanoes or where the earth is thin. There are strange and toxic substances here, so we should not stay for long. The druids say that land like this is thin due to earth spirits exiting their underground holds. I can't lend any credence o this but these same druids also talk of holes in the ground and hot water. I too urge caution.”

Aster noticed though as he said this, he grew eager, his voice getting faster and a small smile appearing. This was his element.

“I see. Everyone watch your step then. Aster, you're the lightest. I suggest you go first.” Haverson said.

“I could never allow that” Palo exclaimed. “What if something were to happen? We are supposed to be guides. Let us go first.”

Aster dismissed the notion. “If something happens, I will be ready. At the very least I will warn you. Don't worry Palo. I appreciate the sentiment but my boots have wandered stranger places and emerged unscathed.”

Palo backed down but looked uncomfortable. They started out on the strange land.

The first thing they noticed about the land was its strange topography. All vegetation was gone, and the ground beneath their feet transitioned to dry gravel. It rose slowly to the peak, which loomed above them thousands of feet high. Strangely enough, the rise was divided by hundreds of small step like structures. They were clearly natural, but there was something foreign about them. They would have to get closer to investigate.

Their feet splashed through one shallow pool before realizing what they had done.

“There's water almost everywhere.” Remi said, realizing how hard it would be to avoid it. “and whats that awful smell?” he inquired.

“That’s sulfur” Tzuras said. “I have heard that it seeps from the depths.”

“Wait, everyone stop. There is some hole here!” Aster said, cautioning the group.

Despite the circumstances, they couldn't help but to take a quick look.

They crouched around the iron orange stained rim to peer into the deep blue water filled chasm. Steam poured out from its bubbling center.

“This is amazing!” Tzuras exclaimed. “I've never seen anything like this.”

“I can't even see the bottom!” Aster said.

“Careful” cautioned Palo, “its loose around the edges.” Haverson simply stared and watched the bubbles.

“Whoops!” cried Remi as he tossed a rock into the center. Disturbing whatever natural state it had been in, the cauldron started roiling spastically causing the group to jump away. Palo glared at Remi.

“Tzuras, are you taking notes about this somehow?” Haverson asked as they journeyed toward the closest of the strange steps, having seen their fill of the cauldron.

“Rough sketches and descriptions. Also a map location.”

Dodging other strange boiling holes, they soon arrived at the step.

“It feels like rock,” Aster said, running her hands over the construct.

“I believe it is.” Tzuras said, peering closer at the terrace.” The stark white step was higher than any of them and cascaded down the mountain with an appearance of dangling moss, actualized in stone. He chipped some away with a chisel and stored it in a small container.

“I wish we could look at this longer.” Haverson admitted, “but we're right in the open here” he said looking around, “Tzuras has his things and its written down. I'm afraid we will have to satisfy our curiosity some other time when we aren't in danger of being spotted by murderous natives.”

The group saw the wisdom in what he said, but because of the dangerous footing of the area, they were barely halfway across the plain when Remi alerted them to movement behind them.

“Curses, they've spotted us. This is no place for a fight. Lets run for it!” Haverson urged.

The dark green of the forest north to them sat temptingly close. And so they ran. Weaving around blisteringly hot pits and seething flows.

“They're gaining on us!” Remi cried. “If we have to, split up. Recombine to the north on the river.”

Behind them they could make out the natives dashing after them. Suddenly they had to stop. In front of them was a massive bowl made out of the same rock, the whole of it was filled with churning water and steam poured from its center.

“Half go left, half go right!” Haverson cried out.

“No!” yelled Aster, “we can't outrun them, not here, they know the area too well. I think we can take them.” The party hesitantly scanned the oncoming group.

“There's eight of them.” Remi said.

“Hold on, they've made no violent moves against us yet. ” Haverson said. However, his actions betrayed his nervousness; his hand went to his sword.

“So we're just going to wait?” Remi cried.

“Fine, Remi, see if you can put a warning shot past them.” Haverson asked. The two groups were almost within range. Amid the furs, Haverson could make out fearsome expressions. They certainly didn’t look happy.

Remi let the arrow fly. It struck a rock near the feet of one of the natives. The native let out a guttural cry and suddenly fire appeared in the hands of two of the tribesmen. They opened fire on the party, long plumes of scorching red arced towards them, like a thrown liquid.

“Watch out!” Haverson cried.

Tzuras attempted some sort of counter spell. Aster dodged in anticipation. Haverson and Palo started to run forward while dodging the projectiles.

The counter spell half worked. The plumes exploded in mid-air, showering the ground with fire, which instantly quenched in the pools, adding to the steam already in the air.

Through this steam, Haverson and Palo charged.

Aster felt a sharp sensation and looked down to see a lucky shot with a throwing knife had sliced her leg.

She was about to ignore it when a crippling pain shot through her body. She had just enough time to realize that it was poisoned before the excruciating sensation caused her to collapse.

Remi shot one with his bow, the arrow protruding from the man's thigh before he crumbled. Three natives also dashed from the mist to meet Palo and Haverson.

They wielded strange club like objects. Haverson suppressed a grin. It would be easy to out reach their simple weapons. However, he didn't anticipate their ferociousness.

Haverson's sword slashed one in the shoulder as the man charged at him, but the native kept on coming, crashing forward, spraying water with his heavy footfalls.

Haverson barely dodged a gruesome swipe at his midriff and attempted to close distance when another swing almost took his head off. Haverson felt the club go by as it narrowly missed his face.

He lashed out and his sword caught the native in the hand, but the other man kept ahold of his weapon somehow.

Behind him, Remi was trying to pick a target, but the two natives grappling with his brother and Haverson were not giving him the opportunity. Suddenly a bolt of light arced out of the side of his vision.

He contorted his body, trying to avoid it, but the bulk of it caught him in the side. A searing pain lanced through the affected flesh and he fell to his knees, clutching the wound.

Tzuras saw the bolt land on Remi and decided payback was in order. Reaching deep into the almost forgotten lessons, his mind remembered the most powerful spell he had ever learned.

Speaking the words that flew now from his mind, he concentrated his will to his hand and held it outstretched towards the Whenua-Ki.

A massive bolt of lightening sliced its way through the air, catching the enemy mage directly in the chest. Spasming, the man toppled over backwards into the pit behind him. Tzuras didn't see him climb back out.

Palo was having better luck with the native facing him. The native's fight ing style and weapon were known to him, and Palo had managed to land half a dozen non-fatal wounds on the man. Soon, Palo knew, he would tire from lack of blood and it would all be over.

But the final blow was harder to land than he expected. The native dodged and lept before his blows, always slightly out of reach. Palo had a chance to look to one side to see that Haverson was having the same problem.

That can't be a coincidence.

Then it hit him. The slingers had been suspiciously absent from the fight so far.

“Watch out for...” he began.

The flechette stuck out of his torso and fire suddenly ruptured from it throughout his body. Pain so intense he felt his weapon dropping from his grasp and the ground rushing up to meet him. The last thing he saw was Haverson meeting a similar fate.

Aster looked down at her leg. It was barely bleeding. Although it still hurt out of proportion with its size, the pain was now manageable. She struggled to get to her feet.

Remi also started to regain composure. Unlike Aster, his wound was real. The spell had burned half of his shirt off and the flesh underneath hurt badly. He looked down and saw blisters starting to form.

Despite the pain, he knelt slowly to pick up his bow, only to see a native standing above him, the club held high.

“Kinga tawe tumlo” He said, asking for mercy. The native's arm descended, smashing into Remi's head. He collapsed.

Tzuras surveyed the situation. Things looked grim. Three of the natives were out, permanently, two probably dead and one writhing on the ground, bleeding out from Remi's arrow. However, that still left a Whenua-Ki, the warriors that Palo and Haverson had tangled with and the slingers, who had yet to show themselves. One of the warriors had seen him and was running his way.

He took a quick look backward to see Aster. She was on her feet signaling him to run. She wouldn't be able to escape, not without a distraction or head start. He shook his head and waved her away. She needed no second urging.

Flames lit his hands and he reached out towards the first native. However, as his spell drew close, they winked out from existence. The damn Whenua-Ki had counted spelled him back!

Panting, he realized that this was probably it for him. Spells were never his strong point, not destructive ones anyway. The lightening had drained him. He felt the numbness start to seep from his extremities inward.

The remaining natives were emerging from the mist. Cautiously surrounding him.

He needed something big to allow Aster to get away but he simply didn't have it. He wracked his brain, thinking through the contents of his bag and his robes.

Then he felt it.

A small reminder in his head like a thought just on the edge of recollection. He looked around, awareness starting to form. Steam poured from the ground. Natives walking, bubbling water. Something coming from below. No words now, no gestures or symbols, just feeling.

A ball on a hill. The closing of a button. The precarious balance. He could feel it.

He reached out with his mind and gave it a slight push.

The ground exploded under the native’s feet. One was able to leap out of the way, but two more were caught in the initial eruption.

Superheated water shot into the air, several people's length high, aerosolizing amid the steam. It caught the rising sun, reflecting tiny rainbows.

The two natives were screaming as the water burnt them. They clawed at their clothing frantically, but he held on to what he had pushed. The water continued and the two dropped.

Tzuras had very little time to admire his handiwork. Off to his right and left, the ranged natives had flanked him. But he had done their job for them. The numbness shot through his body, branching out from his arms and legs into his core.

His legs suddenly couldn't support his weight, and he fell as well.

Aster heard the explosion go off behind her as she sprinted for the tree line. She managed not to trip or fall into the many sinkholes and pits, but it was a close thing.

She darted beneath the first tree which she could have hugged. No time to waste.

She ventured far enough in, where the light had still not ventured and lodged her shortsword in the ground, catching what light there was. Then despite the protests of her leg, she clambered into a tree and drew her dagger and waited, surrounded by foliage.

She couldn't see the natives but she had the feeling that they were never going to let her go this easily. Especially not after killing one of theirs.

How many would they send? Two? Three??

She hoped for two. Two was manageable. Three was suicide. And not the mage either. She had no counter spells to stop the flames.

She crouched and waited, ignoring the pain in her leg. She waited and listened. There were birds, she noticed. Song birds. Some sort of rat like thing as well. But what she wanted to hear were the foot steps.

She craned her head. They would be more silent than the boot on cobblestone she was more used to. Bubbling water; the wind.

Then there it was. Possibly the snap of a twig or branch.. She wasn't sure what told her, but she knew it was foot steps and they were growing closer.

Not much further now. She peered from her hiding spot The head of one native was visible. They had seen her sword. She thought there were only two of them. Thank gods.

Closer, just a bit closer. “Look at the sword you dimwits” she said to her self. One more step…

She dropped for her hiding place, dagger out.

Using the force of the fall and all her weight, she plunged the knife into the native's head. He died instantly, and the body dropped.

His partner heard the commotion and turned but it was too late. She had already freed her weapon from the skull and threw it at him.

This close she couldn't miss. The weathered metal pommel of the knife stuck out of his throat. He managed a few staggered steps before he clumsily tore the weapon out of himself.

Big mistake. Blood spurted from the wound. Amazingly he was able to staunch the bleeding with one hand while the other picked up his club.

Feeling a bit nauseous at the sight of so much blood and a little sickened from her own actions, Aster vowed to make his end quick. She picked up her shortsword.

Already unsteady, she knocked him from his feet and before he had a chance to react, sprung on him with her weapon and finished the job.

Panting, she cleaned off her sword and regained her dagger. In a perverse act of recognition, she took a look at the two bodies. About the same height and incredibly muscular. Both had extensive tattooing. Nether had any money in the sense she was used to. She found some tribal totems but neither desired them nor knew what they represented.

Her eyes lingered on her handiwork with the first native a bit too long. A thin liquid had followed the blood, but when she peered closer the bone and raw brain presented themselves to her.

She turned away violently and vomited several times.

If only my brothers were here to see me, or my parents. What would they say?

She pushed the thought from her head and recomposed herself. It wasn't yet midday and the woods were still dark and cool. Expecting the worst but hoping the best, Aster decided it was her responsibility to see what had befallen her group, especially Haverson. She owed the old man much more than that.

Crouching low to the ground behind the brush, she peered out. The steam had mostly blown away by now Figures stooped low revealing that the natives were still there.

The mage seemed to be giving orders. Two other scouts seemed to have joined up with the rest of the group. Aster counted four able bodied natives, and two who were limping. She also counted four bodies, either unconscious or dead.

The able bodied natives had the rest of the party on their shoulders, unconscious she hoped. She watched the group start to move out towards the north east around the mountain.

She followed them as close as she could, sneaking from bush to bush. Luckily they stopped several times, moving her friends around.

She followed them for the better part of the day, her stomach loudly admonishing her for sweeping all their travel food into Tzuras's pack. It reminded her of the hard days from when she had initially run away. She had learned many lessons about food then, none of them pleasant.

She saw the landscape to the north grow more and more rugged and she at times had to summit sizable mounts in order to stay hidden among the trees. The natives followed the river somewhat which hugged the large peak for at least a quarter of the way around it seemed.

It was there, where the river departed from the mountain side, that the natives started toward the mountain.

She started to sweat a bit at this. Following them had been easy up to this point, staying in the forest along the river. Now she would have to truly follow them without being seen, and there was much less vegetation on the mountain and almost none on its heights.

She began by making sure that none of them were looking her way.

None were. A good start.

She took a tentative step towards the edge of the forest.

The land sloped upward.

Although there were no large trees, she could see and smell that the pits they had encountered earlier were present here as well. She could use them if she were careful. Spying the closest one she half crouched , half sprinted for it.

Silently hoping it wasn’t full of water, she was happy to see that it merely had some mud and the bottom. She slid into the pit, glad that the damp soil threw up no dust.

Her feet his mushy dirt and she could feel the heat through her boots. Aster gave a quick thanks to whoever that she hadn't gone straight into the mud, as she watched it literally bubble right in front of her eyes. She carefully edged around the center and peered out.

The group had advanced faster than she had expected. In front of them lay another blanket of steam emanating from the mountainside. She would have to get close to not lose them in it.

Scrambling out, she ran for the next pit. As she did, some precognition warned her.

A native turned around just as she dove face first, lying flat against the land.

She doubly thanked that the ground she had chosen to go to ground against wasn't sandy. The dust would have betrayed her position instantly. She looked upward, half expecting a yell or other challenge, but the other party kept walking. The native turned around and rejoined the group.

She sighed softly and realized how tense she had been. Beads of sweat were condensing on her forehead, coalescing from disheveled hair. She wiped them away with a leather clad hand.

Another day, another agonizing second spent hiding or bluffing or living barely off the land. Adventuring was sure exciting she thought as she crept to the edge of the pit.

She continued her crazy dashes and hiding, zigzagging from pit to pit until the natives approached the steam. The steam meant water, which meant she wasn't going to be diving into any more pits anytime soon.

She couldn't lie down either. The water covering the ground, flowing lazily blanketing the area was hot as well. As she began to creep forward though, she saw a sign that her task might be easier than she thought. Just by coincidence she spied a small trail of blood on the rock near her.

If it wasn't from one of her friends, and if the unburdened natives were the wounded ones, two assumptions which she would have to keep in mind, then all of the other party would have strong reasons to return to their camp and not, for instance, look behind them our scout for her.

For the unnumbered time that day her guess remained correct. They did not look behind them all through the steam. Careful not to splash, she saw that they had arrived at some sort of village, hidden in the vapor.

Fresh eyes meant fresh problems she knew and backed off into the steam a bit.

There was no wall, merely a dirt escarpment but there were a fair number of men making rounds. A surprisingly organized group of natives. She stayed in the cloud and planned how she would get in.

Haverson groggily cam to. He half remembered the fight and bit and pieces of getting force fed some sort of extract. He also very quickly realized that he was tied up. Both hands and feet, and unfortunately, they had done a good job.

At least with the tying. They hadn't stripped them of their belongings, only their weapons. Haverson looked over at Remi and Palo. Remi looked somewhat injured, part of his shirt was gone burned away, probably by some fire spell. The skin underneath was burned but not badly so. It would certainly hurt when the lad came to though. Palo was in better shape. Both he and Haverson had just gotten darts.

They were in an earthen square trench dug into the ground. The top was covered half way with wood, allowing for a skylight in the middle. The pit was rather deep. Even if he hadn't been tied up Haverson wouldn't have been able to climb out easily. Off to one side there was a wooden door and frame, presumably stairs or some sort of ramp.

Tzuras and Aster were nowhere to be seen. After a moment of panic, he realized that they couldn't have gone very far; he could still feel the heat of the earth through the ground he was lying on.

It hadn't been the first time he had been captured: bandits, enemy soldiers, pirates once… Haverson looked down at his boots. There was a small file in one and a small knife in the other, be he wasn't sure how to reach them.

He was currently slumped against the wall with his back to it and his legs out in front of him. He could never touch his toes, too tall for that and never flexible enough. So he would have to kneel and grab them from behind. That meant movement, which meant attention.

He looked upwards slowly, trying not to move his head too much. It was much easier if they didn't know you were conscious.

No one was watching them. Strike two. Three strikes meant he would be out of here by at most the end of the day.

He was just about to free the knife when a head appeared over the skylight. He froze, hoping the person hadn't seen him move.

The native yelled something to another, and he heard footsteps to the door.

All hopes of escape were temporarily lost as Haverson and the other two were dragged upward through the doorway and into the light. Although he remained limp in the hope that his captors thought him unconscious, he managed to catch a glimpse of Remi and Palo coming to.

The village was of simple wood and mud construction but the simple design was used effectively. It looked almost half as large as the fort itself and would doubtlessly support many warriors. This would be hairy.

They were brought into the center of the village where there was a large bubbling pool, bigger than any city fountain Haverson had seen. Across the pool was a crane, presumably used for drawing water from it safely.

From one side Haverson saw a group of mages dragging an unconscious Tzuras. But Aster was no where to be seen. Despite their adventurer's agreement stating that they were partners, Haverson obviously felt responsible for her. If anything happened to her…

He pushed the thought out of his head. The natives were assembling.

At least twenty warriors presented themselves with a handful of mages.

Haverson nudged Palo's shoulder. Giving up his attempt to appear unconscious.

“Everyone is here except for Aster. Have you seen her? Did you see what happened to her during the fight?”

Palo shook his head. “I went out same as you. I didn't see anything.”

“How about Remi?” Haverson inquired.

Palo looked at his brother who had lapsed back into unconsciousness.

“I haven't gotten him to say anything since we woke. It looks like he's hurt. I tried to take a look but I'm no doctor.”

“Perhaps Tzuras can do something for him if they allow him.” Haverson said then nodded towards the natives who had just risen.

“Any guess as to what they're going to do with us?”

Palo shook his head. “They have the numbers for a oongi or a grand meeting but your guess is as good as mine. The punishment for desecrating the hot fields is death. By the way they were holding Tzuras, I think they might be impressed with him… But it looks like we will know for sure pretty soon.” He gestured his head towards an important looking native coming towards them.

“That is Hamarako, the chief. I didn't know if he was still around. When he became chief when he was young, he advocated for strict and frankly disturbing interpretation of the earth cult, our… Whenua's religion or way of living.” Palo drew quiet as Hamarako closed in.

Hamarako was a tall, slender man in his late ages. His hair was short and gray but he had a medium length beard. His face, arms and legs were all adorned with tattoos and his whole body had a dirtiness to it, as though he had just laid in soot. He peered at the party with piercing brown eyes, and a creased frown that looked like it was used often and at all occasions.

He sat down surrounded on both sides with natives and bid them to sit as well. The guards to either side of the captured group pushed them down. They sat in the gravel with the pool directly behind them.

Addressing the group, Hamarako placed his knees to the ground and leaned forward scooping up the stones in front of him.

“Agrapo oongi hartheth ono” He said with a deep voice, scattering the stones he had collected. “Ono Hamarako”

Palo shifted forward on his knees, drawing the attention of Hamarako.

“What are you doing?” Haverson hissed.

“This is a formal introduction or confrontation. One of us needs to respond.”

“Ono Hamarako” Palo replied, leaning forward, “oongi hartheth...”

Hamarako nodded to one of the guards who brought his club down on Palo.

Haverson struggled to retaliate but the binds were too tight.

“Raka?” Cried Palo, blinking back tears.

“That is not how we open the oongi, and it hasn't been for quite a long time.” Hamarako stated flawlessly and coldly. His accent was northern.

“Although I am somewhat glad your turncoat heretic grandfather taught you something.” He added.

“As you can hear, I have no difficulty conversing with these gentlemen without any help. I intend to only address the part leader from now on. You'd best not open your mouth, mixedblood.” Hamarako said, waving the guard to pull Palo back into line.

“Anamo mako tho” He ordered, pointing at Remi and Tzuras.

The guards brought water, presumably cold and drenched the two unlucky part members awake. They became alert but said nothing, perhaps collecting themselves.

“Now lets see. Ah, your brother is here as well.” He said, referring to Remi.

“Now,” he said referring to the party as a whole, “who is the leader among you? Is it you?” he asked, gesturing towards Haverson, “or you mage?” he said looking Tzuras.

Well, here goes nothing. “I am” Haverson replied.

Hamarako's eyes narrowed. For a moment Haverson might have seen something like disappointment in them.

“So it is you that I have to think for this mess. Almost a whole team dead, and many wounded. One Whenua-Ki dead, our land trespassed. The audacity to desecrate our sacred sites. Despicable. What causes your adventurers to venture from that vile fort this time? Spying on us perhaps?” He said, eyes widening.

“I am not sure I want to tell the man who sent killers after us, who hasn't introduced himself properly. You may know our language, but you are no civilized man.” Haverson said boldly, spitting on the ground in front of them.

“Ay!” the guard cried, raising his club.

Hamarako stayed him though.

“Leader indeed. We Whenua admire strength, both in show of arms and of will. I will introduce myself as you Northerners do, but don't push your luck” He said icily. Haverson remained expressionless.

“I am one named Hamarako, no second name as is our way. I am chief and spirit waker of the Whenua. I will not shake your hand, killer of kinsmen.”

“There. Now, who are you?” Hamarako demanded.

Haverson paused, perhaps to test Hamarako's patience before replying.

“I am Enton Haverson: wanderer, mercenary and adventurer for hire. I am required to tell you that I am hired at the moment, not that I would accept any task from you anyways.” He said.

“Ah, yes, you Northerners and your formalities. That reminds me of another of your formalities: your adventuring agreement.”

“I do not have to show you anything. Our orders are...”

The next words died on his tongue. He had been about to say 'military' but realized that this would not help his cause.

“I simply don't care what you say regarding your… orders. I will read them myself.”

He signaled to the guards, gesturing out Haverson's pocket.

Haverson struggled again at his bonds, one guard rummaging through the pockets of his coat until the native found the oilskin pouch. The guard held it up for Hamarako, who nodded.

Accepting the oil skin, he opened it and withdrew the parchment. As the other man was reading it over, Haverson realized that Hamarako seemed to no be able to read as well as speak. He took a long time to analyze the short document and murmured to himself as he did.

“Survey?” Hamarako finally said. “What utter nonsense. What does the captain need of a survey.” He exclaimed, waving the agreement in disgust.

“Careful with that!” Haverson yelled, before he realized what he had done.

Haverson stopped and a slick smile played across his face. He looked at the agreement and took it in two hands.

“Don't you dare!” Haverson threatened.

If they lost the agreement, the captain was one forgetful rip away from not having to pay them. The military was usually trustworthy, but there were bad ones among its ranks.

“I can be a cruel man….” Hamarako said, rising, “or so I have been told. But never without reason. Haverson, you seem like a decent man, but a Northerner none the less.”

He slipped the agreement back into the case. “I will keep this safe for you,” he said, giving it to a native next to him.

“But now for what to do with you. I have consulted with the spirits of the earth and they have reminded me of a story which I will now relate to you.”

The man's voice changed somehow, becoming richer, deeper.

*The gods had just made creation, sculpted and brought into being from the primordial chaos that was before. The earth father saw that what they had made was good. But the gods were undecided on their next creation: man.*

Haverson listened despite himself. The gaunt native had a truly enthralling voice.

*Some thought it unneeded. Others were fearful of the possibilities, other enthusiastically championed for their creation.*

*Disgusted of eons of argument, the earth father took things into his own hands. He took the Ur mold of men and breathed life into it, making Ur-man of his own power. Thus the first feet on the virgin soil were ours, for the Ur-man became us, the Whenua*

*Yet the earth father yearned for perfection in all things. He sent an envoy to the other gods and waited 20 days for their response. After the allotted time had elapsed, he realized the other gods had grown foolish and lessened themselves through the making of creation. Therefore he again took matters into his own hands and created his master piece, the dwarves, may the caverns know their presence.*

*Once his true creation was known, he set upon his first creation, destroying them, for they were impure.*

Hamarako creased his oration and gestured to the party. “I have interpreted this ancient tale that the spirits have reminded me. I will send envoys to the fort for your captain, inquiring of your true nature as spies. If he lies, as you northerners often do, you will all be killed. If he confirms you as spies, you will be tortured until you cannot remember your own name. That is all.” Hamarako said simply.

“You barbarian!” Palo spat. “We are not spies! And your stories are full of lies. The all father waited as he does. Make men himself? Ridiculous. He worked with the other gods!” Then, realizing that the natives wouldn't be able to understand him, switched languages.

“Grama wago!” He shouted.

The natives reacted for the first time, clearly shocked, either by what he had said, or by his disrespect, and whispered among themselves.

“Grama no wago!” Hamarako shouted, “Kiro!” he admonished them into silence. Turning to Palo, seething he yelled.

“I don't know what you meant to accomplish with that, but I warned you about opening your mouth. Now you have. Spreading your heresy, just like your grandfather!”

“Well, I will be much more strict than the elders then! Exile? No. Such evil cannot find root among the pure hearts of our people. You shall go through our most purifying ritual!”

Palo blanched. “No...You can't be serious! Its been centuries since that was used!”

“Not anymore. All boys undergo the ritual now. I myself underwent it as well.”

Palo was now struggling with all his might against his binds. Sweat was starting to cross his brow.

“No wonder the village is smaller. You've killed them all!”

Haverson thought now might be a good time to intervene, slipping through the ropes he had cut, he caught the closest warrior off guard. However, the man sprang to action surprisingly quickly, soon the two were grappling.

Tzuras was doing something as well. His bonds burst into flames and he sprung to his feet, incinerating the bonds holding Remi. As he outstretched his hand though, to burn through Palo's, the guard by his side smashed his in the stomach with his club, ruining his concentration.

The natives rushed them.

The group yelled, punched and in Palo's case, even bit, but it was futile. There were more than four natives per person and the party was unarmed.

Soon Haverson, Remi and Tzuras watched in horror as Palo was dragged towards the pool in the center of the village.

Haverson had a sudden sickening moment of realization that the crane like structure may not be there to take things out of the pool, but perhaps the opposite.

Struggling, Palo was strapped to the descending platform. They could only watch as the gantry lowered closer and closer to the water.

“Palo, No!” Remi screamed, before the natives beat him quiet.

Hamarako was chanting now, those natives not preoccupied holding the party joining him.

Palo thrashed as he hit the water, sending white spray flying in every direction. However, soon only Palo's flailing arms broke the surface. After a few moments, all struggling creased.

Remi started screaming.

Aster heard Remi's cries as she let the guard fall to the ground. Sprinting up to the closest hut, she nervously peered around the corner. A massive number of Whenua were swarming the prisoners, dragging them all back to their pit.

Aster noted the location, but realized she would have to come back later after the sun settled.

They were dumped unceremoniously back into their pit.

“Remi, get off him. You don't know what you're doing.” Haverson said gruffly, kneeling before Palo's body. He checked the pulse. “I think he might have water in his lungs.” He started pushing on Palo's chest.

Tzuras stepped forward, rubbing his head.

“I think I may of some use here.” He leaned close and listen to Palo's chest.

With a swift motion, he smashed his palm down.

Palo sprang up coughing. Tzuras slapped him a few times on the back.

Haverson raised an eyebrow.

“Did you just punch him? That shouldn't have helped.”

“Its a trick I learned. There is a small bit of magic involved.” Tzuras admitted.

“Are you ok?” Remi asked Palo. The other young man drew a few haggered breaths.

“I think so,” he replied.

Remi embraced him. “I thought they had drowned you!” He said.

“They kind of did.” Palo pointed out. “I'm just glad the pool wasn't burning.

“I think its time we got out of here. Tzuras, do you mind burning down the door?” Haverson asked.

“I would love to, but I'm not sure I'm up for it. I've used all my spells. Maybe I could set a small fire...”

“Forget it. We need you for the escape I suppose. So its up to us,” he said to Remi, pointing to the door.

“I don't suppose that can take much punishment”

Several hours later, the door had proved them wrong.

“This is literally impossible” Remi said breathlessly, after attempting one more half hearted kick. He winced and grabbed his side.

Tzuras strode forward and ran his hands over the door.

“Its subtle, but I think they used some sort of pervasive stone type spell on it. Nothing I know.”

“Perhaps it might be easier to get the pit side next to it” Palo suggested, slunching against the wall.

Haverson didn't look overjoyed, but started scratching at it with a small stone he found on the floor. After seeing how little progress he had made, Remi and Tzuras tried as well.

“Is anyone awake in there?” Aster hissed through the door.

Haverson awoke with a start.

“Aster!” He cried overjoyed.

“Shh” She hissed. “There are still some guards about. We have maybe two minutes. We need to move now!”

Haverson woke the rest of the group.

“Aster, you made it!” Remi said. Aster shushed him as well.

“I have your weapons. They were just around in a pile. Nor the best system.” Aster said.

“Well this is all well and good, bt how are you going to get us out?” Haverson asked.

A rope appeared though the skylight.

“Hurry you fools!” She urged.

They did not need more urging.

The party edged out of the camp passing two unconscious natives.

“How did you get so far into the camp?” Haverson asked.

“Well, I had help from a distraction.” Aster pointed towards a flickering at the end of the camp.

“What is that?” Haverson asked, although he could already guess.

“I think it was the chief’s house. I just found the largest building and set fire to it. Worked pretty well.”

The group sprung quietly over the no mans land to the forest.

“Aster” Palo said suddenly once they got to the safety of the forest. “I want to thank you”

“Its no problem. You would have done the same.”

“...But there’s something I need to tell you.” Palo added.

Aster turned, her blond hair swept aside by an impatient hand. Her brow formed a slight crease.

“That wasn't the chief’s hut. That was the food storehouse.”

Aster looked like she had been punched.

“There's no way you could have known. Perhaps its for the better in some way. Hamarako has them all brainwashed with his lies.”

That didn't seem to help much. Aster remained quiet for the rest of the day.

The group managed ok, even with Palo recovering from the ritual, Remi occasionally having to take a break, massaging his side or Tzuras complaining about his head.

Haverson had the idea of continuing clockwise around the mountain. Although it would be longer, it was forested the entire way and the Whenua wouldn't expect them to take the long way.

In addition, regardless of what had occurred, the survey needed to be completed unless they wanted all their efforts to be in vain.

They camped ina another ravine. The weather had been accommodating. That was good, since otherwise the whole area would have been awash, if the erosion in the gully was any indication.

Tzuras was happy to have his bag back and so was the party, especially considering that it had all the food in it.

They sat down to a lovely meal of stale bread and salted meat.

“Gods this tastes horrid” Palo said, holding a strip of meat arms length away.

“Ha, whats wrong? Don't you like salted pork?” Remi said, snatching the strip from Palo's hand and devouring it. “Tastes fine to me!”

Over to the side, Haverson and Aster were talking quietly.

“Did you make it ok?” Haverson asked.

Aster took a moment to respond, putting down the biscuit into her lap.

“Yes… and no… Enton, I… killed a lot of people today. I think I'm just starting to realize that.”

Haverson's face darkened. “I'm sorry I put you in that position. If I had known...”

“No, don't apologize” Aster said, shaking her head, “this wasn't you forcing my hand. Everything was clear, everything was necessary. But I suppose that doesn't make it feel any better, does it?”

Haverson's mind wandered to his own first days as an adventurer. “No, it doesn't” he admitted.

“Lie down, both of you. Remi, that burn is magical is it not?” Tzuras asked, bringing out his bag.

“You saw it yourself,” Remi said. “Sucker got me with some sort of flame spell.”

“Does the affected area feel any different than you might expect?” Tzuras asked, rummaging through the bag.

“Actually, yeah, it almost feels like needles. Not very comfortable.” Remi said, wincing.

“Fascinating.” Tzuras said, finally producing a light blue jar.

“Try rubbing this on the affected area. But careful not to use too much. That stuff is made from a lake eel far to the north. I don't know when I'll be heading back there again.”

Remi took the jar, wincing as he applied the strange blue tinted oil

“As for you, I guess that hot spring wasn't boiling, or else I wouldn't be talking to you.” Tzuras said to Palo. “How do you feel?”

Palo looked himself over. “I feel fine, all things considered. Got a nasty headache though.” Tzuras closed his bag.

“You're telling me. You can't beat the spells out of a mage, though I doubt they will be the last ones to try.” Tzuras said with a sigh. Palo laughed.

The party enjoyed some well deserved rest.

The nest two days passed without much incident. The team marched through the forests around the peak, crossing one minor stream.

“I guess we're going to make it out ok.” Aster said, mounting the last of the gradual hills that surrounded the lower peak on the east side.

“Hey guys” palo said from somewhere at the back of the group. “Wait up one second. I don't feel so good,” he admitted.

Remi looked back with concern. “Whats up?”

“I just feel...” A pained expression shot across Palo's face and he deposited the contents of breakfast in a nearby bush. “That sucks.” Remi noted.

Tzuras took things a bit more seriously. He ordered Palo to lie down and ran his hands across Palo's forehead.

“Slight fever.” He said. “But nothing to worry about as long as you get some rest after this...” Something made him pause.

“But I suppose it wouldn't hurt to be careful.” Tzuras said. The rest of the group now surrounded the two. Remi and Aster looked curious. Haverson looked concerned.

“Open your mouth.” He commanded. “Looks fine.” He inspected Palo's eyes.

“Do you feel any chills or have you had any muscle spasms?” he asked. Palo shook his head. Tzuras checked his arms, torso and legs.

“I see no out signs of injury. But these things can progress quickly. Not that we weren't doing so already, but I suggest that we make for the fort as fast as we can, just to be on the safe side. Being sick is one thing. Being ill outside in a storm is death.” He finished, glancing, a bit concerned, at the impending storm, still a ways off.

Haverson nodded. And hurry they did, but by the time they were in sight of the fort two days later, Palo's sickness, whatever it was, had gotten worse.

He couldn't keep down any food and his fever had gotten stronger. Outwardly he looked fine, if a bit pale, but neither Aster nor Remi were cracking any more jokes and Haverson was scowling again, the old worry lines Aster thought she had seen the last of were back.

Entering the fort was a blur. Aster remembered a flurry of excitement as they returned, only to have Haverson wave the well meaning farmers away.

“Yes we are back. Now does anyone have a spare bed?” he said, pushing through the throng.

Aster remembered being shunted through the main road and then sucked into a small wooden house, owned by Elder Brand, who had apparently looked after the brothers. The fort medic and the elder accompanied Tzuras as he lay Palo down on the straw cot. Remi was shooed away but refused to leave the room.

“The whole fort raised us after our parents passed. I'm sure the medic and Elder Brand can help him.” Remi said confidently as Aster left.

Haverson was waiting outside. The two said nothing for a while. She accompanied him up the walls and looked out over the northern forests.

“A storm is coming.” Haverson commented, looking northward.

“Looks like it might hit tonight or tomorrow.” He said, still looking out.

There was a pause as Aster stared out over the great forested expanse and then towards the mountain and the on coming clouds. She nodded.

“This is crazy, why is everyone worried? I got fevers all the time.” Aster said.

Haverson didn't reply. Aster turned to look out again at the view but got nervous for some reason. Turning to Haverson she got his attention.

“He...He'll be ok right?” Aster said, somewhat confidently as if she was assured everything would be fine, but was just checking anyway.

“We will see.” Haverson replied, no longer leaning on the wall.

“Come, we have a job of our own to do.”

The only stone building in the fort, the keep doubled as an armory, barracks and administrative building. No one was quite sure when it was built, but certainly far before the fort grew to its current size, or so Aster was told.

She followed Haverson in. The entrance was supposed to be imposing and it worked. Despite only being two stories, and made of simple stone and mortar, the entrance way took up both of those stories briefly which fostered some sort of vertical illusion. True to tradition, the captain's desks were front and center, the old aristocratic throne relegated to a dusty corner, though, perhaps not completely forgotten; the relic of a more uncivilized time for the Northern Federation.

Haverson didn't let those things affect him, or at least didn't show it as he strode purposefully to the captain's desk.

The stern military commander looked up from the pile of papers he was attending to.

“Here is your survey captain.” Haverson said a bit coldly as he slid the ream across to the other man.

The captain put on a pair of glasses and inspected the document.

“Why, this is top notch quality. I must say I am very impressed. Did you do this?” he asked, looking up at Haverson with some surprise.

At another time, Aster would have been offended at not being part of the conversation, and concerned that the captain didn't see her as Haverson's equal, but right now she just wanted him to deal with all of this.

“No,” Haverson replied, “it was the mage. Found him along the way,” he added, anticipating the captain's next question.

“I must add, although I will abide by the adventurer's agreement, this was no walk in the forest captain. We were waylaid by the Whenua and they are both a scary and organized bunch. It was only through force of arms and luck that we stand here right now.”

The captain looked at the survey more carefully.

“Yes, I see you've detailed their camp location here, and even an insert with the positions of some buildings. Splendid.”

Haverson shook his head in anger and eyed the guards around the room.

“By the gods, you did send us to spy on them! You knew this would happen!”

The other man rose and turned away from the two for a moment as if collecting his thoughts.

“I had enumerated it as a possibility. I did not honestly expect you to come into… full contact with them. I merely wanted to know the terrain between here and there, but yes, I can't deny that this is useful.”

“I hope you know what you've stirred up there...” Haverson warned.

“Yes their chief is particularly gruesome, or so I've heard.” The captain said.

“His name is Hamarako, and I'd suggest you deal with him carefully. He has mages there, and all of them are fanatics.”

“I understand.” The captain said. “I am fully aware of the situation. If they want to attack this fort, I will be happy to adorn the gully with their bodies, just as I did their messengers.”

Haverson's eyes narrowed. “So he did send them… and you killed them?”

“I had to. When I started laughing at that madman's demands, they became quite aggressive. And fortunately, since they don't seem to understand our guards warnings, they had to be dealt with.”

“I see.” Haverson said, shaking his head. “Well then...our pay?” He asked bluntly.

“But of course.” The captain said, waving to a secondary table. He counted out the silver and gold pieces in front of Haverson to count.

“Will you and your party be staying here long?” The captain asked as Haverson turned to leave.

“No. I think we will head out once this storm blows over.” Haverson said.

The captain merely nodded and went back to his bean counting.

The two strode out of the building. From the color of the sky and the wind and humidity, even Aster could tell a storm was coming. Needles from the two great evergreens by the building dervished in the wind.

“How can you stand people like that?” Aster asked as the two crossed the street to check up on Palo.

“I can't.” Haverson admitted. “But its not my goal to change them. Its not my purpose to make them see how wrong they are.”

“It doesn't feel right. Hamarako is still out there, the captain manipulated us, Palo is sick. Almost everything seems worse now than when we took the contract. How can you just ignore that? How does fulfilling the contract change anything?” Aster asked.

Haverson looked at the young woman and sighed.

“It doesn't really. It really doesn’t. But a line has to be drawn somewhere between idealism and pragmatism when you adventure. Or you end up a dead hero.” Haverson said.

The two walked through the increasing wind towards the rest of the party.

They entered Palo's room. Tzuras was simultaneously making a tonic of some sort while trying to help the Elder. The medic had apparently left claiming insufficient knowledge of disease.

Aster and Haverson stood to one side and watched the chaos helplessly. They were not the only ones either.

“How is he?” Haverson asked Remi, partially to distract him.

“Its not looking too well to be honest. They're trying something herbal now but the fever just won't go away. In fact its getting worse. And… I'm not sure if he can um… see us.” Remi said nervously.

Haverson frowned and stepped closer.

“What do you mean? Like he is unconscious?” He looked at Palo. The boy was drenched in sweat. He was staring upward at the ceiling with look of awe.

“No.” Remi said, and waved his hand in front of Palo's face. Palo didn't notice it.

“Did you hear that Elder Brand?” Haverson said, catching the old man.

Elder Brand inspected Palo, but it didn't look like the Elder recognized the problem specifically. He changed the soaking cloth and felt Palo's head.

“My this fever is a nasty one.” He said in a raspy voice. Looking closer at Palo he noticed his pupils darting this was and that. He tried to close Palo's eyes to allow him to rest.

With a shock, Palo straightened and swatted the old man away.

“Remi?” he called, “are you there?”

Remi rushed to the bed side. “Yes, I'm here.” he grabbed Palo's hands and held them.

“Can you see me?” He asked Palo.

Palo shook his head wildly, holding on to his brother's hand firmly as if he might be swept away if he didn't.

“Remi, I don't know what I'm seeing. It doesn't make any sense. Its all colors. Bright colors. After images but shifting constantly. Patterns I've never seen before appearing and disappearing. I think I'm seeing the earth spirits. The ones father and grandpa talked about. I think I can see them Remi!” Be then he grew silent.

Remi didn't respond, but looked worryingly at the assembled people.

“The drought is done.” Tzuras said quietly. “This should reduce his fever.” He said, handing the vial to Elder Brand.

Elder Brand approached Palo.

“Palo, here is something that should help the fever.” He said, holding the glass to him.

But Palo didn't respond, although he turned his head from side to side as if looking for something.

“Here...” Elder Brand said, trying to guild Palo to the potion.

Palo didn't clasp it though. It was as if he was unaware of anything. Elder Brand shot a quick but worried look at Tzuras and tiled the vial to Palo's lips himself.

Remi shook his head and rushed from the room. Haverson and Aster followed him. Elder Brand drew up a chair and observed Palo while Tzuras ran furiously through his notes looking for something that would help.

“Remi” Haverson said calmly, as Remi planted himself in a wooden chair in the main room and poured himself a glass of something that certainly wasn't water.

Haverson and Aster sat opposite him. Haverson sat quietly watching Remi pour another glass of something after downing the first one. His hands were shaking.

Aster, clearly uncomfortable with the situation, avoided eye contact and watched the front door, listening to the wind steadily worsen.

“Will you pour me one as well?” Haverson said, finally shattering the silence. Without replying, Remi stood and walked to the cabinet and produced another tin mug.

Aster head the soft but insistent patter of raindrops begin against the door.

“Its just… Palo's always been there for me. When I was in trouble. Now its my turn but there's nothing I can do.”

“I understand.” Haverson commiserated.

“Things were pretty good for us growing up. Mother had passed but neither I nor Palo were old enough to remember her much. Father had his lung problems which kept him indoors and later in bed. He used to tell us stories about the forest, the land; things passed down from his father. He would make us study the Whenua language until we were fluent.” Remi paused taking a long swig from his cup.

“...and even when the money got worse and we had to sell our house, move in with Elder Brand, we were happy. I think the town knew Father was getting worse; everyone was very nice to us. We didn't know any better, we just liked the attention. When he finally passed, well, we were torn up but the town was there fore us and… uh...”

Aster saw him blink back a tear.

“We had each other...you know?”

Haverson just listened, slowly sipping his drink. The rain was now coming down for real.

“We used to get into the worst kinds of trouble, disappearing after dark into the forests to play make believe among the pines. It was always my idea and Palo always tried to talk me out of it, but he always had fun in the end. How could something like this happen? He was always the strong one. I would often get sick from playing in the rain, but he almost never did.”

A sudden crease came over Remi's face.

He set down the cup abruptly.

“Do you think it could have been the ritual? Did that bastard curse him? I know such things are possible!” Remi exclaimed, half excited, half furious.

“I honestly didn't consider that. I suppose it is possible. They were chanting when he was lowered and it might explain why Tzuras and Bran's cure isn't helping.”

Remi shot up. “Then we have to ask. Perhaps Tzuras hasn't thought of it either!” he said excited. He dashed from the table to the other room, and Haverson and Aster followed. Aster caught a sad look on Haverson's face though.

“Tzuras!” Remai called as he entered. The tall man looked up from his reading. He had spread books all over the table he was at, so much so that he had to place many of his glass apparatus on the floor.

“Careful!” he urged, placing aside the notebook when he saw how excited Remi was. “What is it?” He asked.

“Tzuras, can you tell if someone has been cursed?” Remi said laying his hands on the table and looking directly at the man. “What if the ritual was a curse or some other spell? Could you tell?” He elaborated.

Tzuras slipped a note into the book he was reading. Not quite as bombastic or energetic as Remi, but he nodded slowly.

“It is possible. Spells are not my strong suit, but I should have been able to feel something powerful, especially and earth affiliated one.”

Remi's smile slipped a bit before a new idea hit him.

“Fine but what if it was spirit magic? Whenua culture has many occurrences of that kind of thing.”

Tzuras nodded slowly. “Now that sounds possible. From what I know, spirit magic is at its nature subtle. Spirits are very hard to understand, or even find. In fact, I'm beginning to think that in our encounter with the Whenua, I might have enlisted one's help at the end. For sure, a place where the earth is so active is likely to have spirits.”

“Ok, lets say it was spirit magic.” Remi said, excited again. “Could you counter act it?”

“I could certainly try, although I 'm not sure if I would know what I was doing. It might be dangerous...” He cautioned, “there are stories of spirit magic...” He trailed off seeing Remi's face. He shot a glance towards Palo.

“Well, perhaps I can check? I refuse to believe that there wouldn't be some sign...” He said, rising to his feet.

“Elder Bran, do you mind?” Tzuras asked, pointing at Palo.

“No, of course.” He said, sliding the chair aside. “My knowledge of such things is perhaps worse than yours. I have no magic to speak of and I only know the stories.”

Tzuras nodded and extended a hand towards Palo.

“This might be easier if everyone took a step back. Again, I'm not really sure what I'm looking for, which is always a bit risky.”

He started speaking under his breath in a language Aster didn't recognize, one had still extended towards Palo, the other tracing strange curves in the air. He frowned after a moment.

“Can someone pass me the broadleaf sample on the desk? I might need a focus.”

Haverson looked over the ingredients and nabbed a particularly verdant looking one. He held it out towards Tzuras who took it.

Trying again, the naturalist continued his soft chanting and signing, this time with the plant in the signaling hand.

Aster swore she smelled something like pine seep into the room, but it has hard to detect. The whole process took at least ten minutes, with Tzuras's from increasing after every attempt.

“Last try. Can you pass me the quartz crystal in the small black wood box there?” Tzuras said.

Haverson again bent and retrieved the item and again Tzuras attempted the detection.

Haverson stood, watching. Bran continued to tend to Palo. Aster sat with a glum expression, occasionally looking at the shuttered window and the assembled glass devices. Remi paced back and forth nervously.

This time it took longer but ended much the same way.

Tzuras's face was wet with sweat when he finished. He motioned for a chair and collapsed in it.

“There...” he began, panting, “is no chance of magical involvement that I can tell and only a small chance of spiritual magic. I detected something for a moment, but nothing like anything I've detected before. Usually there is absolutely no ambiguity, beginner mages are taught this spell in fact because it is so easy. So no. I do not think it is a curse. Whatever it is, its likely to be natural, just a horrible freak occurrence. Thank the gods it doesn't seem like we have caught it.” He said, collapsing further into the chair, still breathing heavily.

Remi listened but as Tzuras stopped he almost yelled.

“No!” Quieter, he continued, “but it makes too much sense. Palo never gets sick. The Whenua have a spiritual background. It was ritual. There was chanting. Hamarako was a mage. You said yourself there land was spiritually active...” He spilled out all at once.

“I said it was likely to be so. Damn it, how to explain… they are not an easy thing, spirits, they're creatures or rather beings of emotion, not logic, wrought from the pure twisted raw energy of the world itself. If we had a druid or a priest, perhaps they could help. This is simply far beyond my abilities.”

“I can't believe that!” Remi siad forcefully.

Suddenly, movement distracted the group.

“Gods, he's gone into seizure!” Elder Bran cried, jumping to restrain him. The rest of the group stood, shocked.

“Don't just stand there! He's too strong for me! Remi, Haverson, help me with the legs. Aster, Tzuras, grab his arms. Quick! Before he hurts himself!”

Everyone dashed forward while Palo trashed and contorted on the bed, kicking and flailing his arms.

Tzuras and Aster struggled with his legs, Tzuras receiving a swift kick to the stomach which caused an audible wince before he was able to grab hold of Palo's arm.

Remi and Elder Brand grabbed his arms while Haverson did one better and pinned Palo by the shoulders.

“Damn it!” Tzuras cried. “I'm missing two ingredients for a paralyzation potion; you can't even find them in these mountains!”

Palo let loose a guttural moan, arching his back and struggling violently against them.

Horrifyingly the scene stayed that for minutes upon minutes, sweat broke out on everyone, and Tzuras and the Elder looked especially fatigued.

The window crashed open, letting in freezing air and splattering everyone with wind whipped rain.

“Gods, close the window!” Elder Brand said. “I can't let go. He's struggling too much.”

“Aster, can you hold his arms?” Tzuras yelled over the squall.

“I think so” she yelled in response, grabbing the two trashing appendages.

Tzuras dashed to the window and struggled against the gale outside for a moment before shoving the hatch closed. He made sure to lock it and ran back to Aster who by now had resorted to half holding, half sitting on Palo's arm.

This continued for almost a quarter of an hour before finally the thrashing quieted.

The group fell back in exhaustion, as the adrenaline left them. But the Elder shook his head. This wasn't a good thing.

“He's gone unconscious.” He said, checking Palo's pulse.

“I suggest the rest of you get some sleep after what you've been through. I will wake you if I need any help.”

Remi refused but brought in a chair to watch his brother. Tzuras refused as well, offering to continue his research on the disease.

Aster slept in Elder Brand's bed and Haverson arranged his sleeping mat on the floor. Despite their worries, exhaustion from the previous week overtook them and they fell asleep almost instantly.

They awoke to horrible news.

“Palo died in his sleep.” Elder Brand said. “After midnight, perhaps, an hour to two from dawn.”

The Elder's eyes were heavy and Aster could tell he had wept.

Tzuras who had also set up his sleeping roll in the bedroom also awoke.

Aster stood in her travel clothes, in disbelief and then numbness. Tzuras was grim. Haverson looked crushed. He hid his face as he turned, scowling.

“Where is Remi?” Haverson asked, looking around the room. Aster stared wide eyed at Palo's body.

Elder Bran shook his head in sorrow. “When he realized what had happened, he ran. I suspect he is in the forest at the edge of the fort by now.”

“Gods,” Haverson swore, “should I go talk to him?”

Elder Bran shook his head. “He's still coming to grips with it. Let him be alone for now. If I know Remi, he will come back in an hour or two.” Haverson agreed.

He and Aster went up on the ramparts and watched the forest for his return. As they watched Haverson shot a quick look sideways. Aster didn't notice, she stared straight ahead at some particular tree intensely.

Haverson knew that meant she was deep in thought. He also knew that Palo's death would affect her greatly. He decided to let Elder Bran's advice hold here as well. She would say when she wanted to talk; with one addition.

“I'm going to see if any merchants have arrived since we left. Are you ok up here?” He asked as he went to leave.

Aster turned her head, brushing aside the blond hair which had somehow already grown to cover her eyes, but without taking them off the tree.

“Yeah, I will find you.” She said.

“If there is anything you want to talk about, let me know.” He added as he left.

He descended to find Tzuras standing in front of him.

“Will you walk with me? I have some matters of business to discuss with you.” He said.

“Some wouldn't talk business so soon after a death.” Haverson said, not because he was particularly offended, but because he was starting to realize that Tzuras didn't always socialize well.

“I apologize. I didn't mean any disrespect. But I wanted to talk with you, especially now that our contract is fulfilled.” Tzuras started, the two of them strolling slowly towards the center of the fort.

“Yes. I almost forgot. Here is your share.” Haverson said somewhat gruffly, drawing out a small puch and holding it to Tzuras a little too forcefully.

If Tzuras noticed, he did not let it show. “Thank you, but that was not at all what I was referring to.”

They veered around a large puddle in the now mostly mud street.

“When I learned of Palo's death, and before that as well, I was thinking about my own adventuring. I have always wandered by myself, and the biggest threats I face are, or were the environment, the far northerners were in fact quite receptive of my presence.” Tzuras expounded, dodging another puddle. People were about now, mostly military men, but also a few women and children and one or two farmers.

“I have come to realize tough, that if I want to travel in these northern lands, I will need some sort of...protection.”

“ok...” Haverson said, realizing where this was going.

“I have no contracts in this area and would find it hard to trust a hired hand. Contrastingly, I have already traveled, however briefly with you and Aster and found your presence most… um….adequate.” Tzuras said, coughing awkwardly.

“You want to come with us?” Haverson asked, seeing that the toher man had some trouble communicating his thoughts.

“Well yes, sort of. We could draw up an adventurers agreement, but I was thinking more like a escort.”

“I see. Do you know where you want to go?” Haverson asked, now spying the few market stalls that dotted the green next to the muster field.

“Not a particular place per se, but I am ill acquainted with the north and would want to see more of it. However the goal would be to be able to collect samples and specimen as we did on our prior journey.”

“That makes sense. I'm not sure what Aster had in mind, but I hadn't given much thought to where we would go after this. Most contracts lie with the military these days in the capital, which, coincidentally is where the military crop of engineers is stationed. I'm sure you would want to interact with them in some way. Some are of the same mind as you.”

“Indeed. The capitol. And decide the rest later then?” Tzuras suggested.

“That sounds doable. I will have to talk it over with Aster of course.” Haverson said.

“Of course.” Tzuras responded. “I will let you shop then. I believe I must write up about Palo's illness. Perhaps on our travels we can find something, herb or potion so that no one else falls prey to that horrible malady, whatever it was.”

Perhaps there was some compassion in the mage after all. Haverson nodded, turning to inspect the goods.

Remi came back right before nightfall. Aster spotted him, having stayed up on the parapet most of the day. When he passed through the gate, Haverson noticed a sternness about him which had not been their earlier.

“Remi, are you ok?” Aster asked as he passed.

He shrugged it off. “I'm fine. I just had to think about some things.” Turning to Haverson, “Haverson, Hamarako essentially killed Palo. I realize that now. Its too much of a coincidence. He ran out my family, brainwashed my people and now he has killed my brother. I'm not going to let him live another year.” Remi said, gritting his teeth.

Haverson shook his head, downcast, reaching a hand towards the young man. But Remi withdrew.

“Will you help me? There must be no love lost between you and Hamarako...”

Haverson looked at Aster. She shied away from his gaze.

“Remi, I understand this is a hard time for you, but I'm not sure you're thinking rationally.”

“Rationally? I'm thinking more rationally than I ever have. I was just skimming along before, the good, the bad? No real influence.” Remi said, dismissing imaginary concerns with a sweep of his hand.

“But things are different now. I finally have the choice, the realization to **do** something. I'm going to bury Palo and then I'm going to bury Hamarako.” He said, staring straight at Haverson, eyes focused.

Haverson watched him, looking without the same glare, searching for something in the young man's gaze. He found it and drew grim. Aster stood behind, observing the two. She looked fairly unhappy, almost grimacing at the interaction.

“So I ask again. Will you help me?” Remi asked.

“Remi...” Haverson began, “this is literally suicide. They overwhelmed all of us easily once and that was just a scouting party. Consider another path. I've learned that we are always in control of our won lives. If you feel trapped, you are the one trapping yourself.”

He paused, trying to think of how to phrase the next part.

“Tzuras and us were talking about heading west towards the capital. We could use you for sure. Why don't you come with us? There is nothing for you here. You have your entire life ahead of you. Don't throw it away.” Haverson said.

But Remi scowled with every word.

His face had grown overcast and by the time Haverson was done, he was glaring.

“Nothing here? I have everything here! The fort, Elder Bran… I would be leaving the only people who know me, who I grew up with. And my tribe, brainwashed as they are. I refuse to believe they are beyond reason. I...I will finish what my grandfather and father were not able to. Whenua and northerners together!” He said clenching a fist.

“And I disagree that we are free to make our own decisions. I didn't ask to be Whenua; I didn't ask for these things to happen to me. But I will rise to them!” But with that crescendo, he suddenly looked down as if ashamed.

More softly he spoke, “I… I pledged myself to the god of justice. The Unyielding Vow… There is no turning back. Not for me. My path is fixed.”

A sad expression took Haverson as he stared at Remi.

“I see.” He said quietly. “Then I shall try no more to dissuade you from your goal. Here is your portion of the gold, and Palo's; per the succussion law. And… here's some extra. I suppose you will need a decent blade at least.” He said, giving Remi a large pouch.

“Thank you Haverson. May our paths cross again.” Remi intoned.

“Likewise. Consider talking to the captain. Perhaps he will help you somehow.” The two shook hands.

“Aster, It was a pleasure to be in your company. It is a shame it was so short a time.” He said.

“Yes...” Aster said awkwardly. “Good luck Remi. We are headed out tomorrow and will likely not see you again.”

They left.

They spent the night with Tzuras in the inn and left early the following morning.

The two were in Haverson's small room re-packing their things with the provisions they had acquired. Tzuras had pointed out he could just carry it all easily but Aster had disagreed, arguing that if they got separated, it would be hard on Aster and Haverson, as it had on her earlier.

As they packed their things, Aster caught Haverson's attention.

“Is what we're doing right?” she asked, stuffing her satchel.

“Right? What do you mean?” Haverson said, frowning.

“Leaving. Leaving Remi. Leaving the fort and the Whenua like they are. The whole mess...”

“It depends. It is up to you to make your own decision. You could always stay if that’s what you wish, but I would much rather you didn't.” Haverson said.

The idea of Haverson leaving without her clearly distressed Aster. “No, I wouldn't stay. But I can't help feeling… empty. I'm not sure whether I'm upset or what. I killed many people this mission. I haven't since… since the early days when you found me.”

“Do you regret it?” Haverson asked, looking up.

“Well, I suppose I had to do it. They would have taken me and gods knows we'd all be sitting in that pit, waiting for that ritual to be preformed on all of us… So it was necessary. But I regret their deaths. I regret I had to do it. I'm disgusted… or horrified, either from what I did or the fact that it came so easily and that I *didn't* fell bad about it at the time.” She sat on the wooden frame of the bed.

“You've been in the military. You've been nearly everywhere. How do you handle the emotions? How can you separate yourself from what you do?” She asked, looking up at the older man. The creases in his face were back but he looked neither sad nor happy.

He shouldered his pack and stood up.

“I don't separate it. The emotions you feel are as part of you as your skills or your expertise or the things you've seen of the people you know. To deny them could be to deny yourself. You can't ignore them.” he said, as if from experience.

“But even with righteous fury or darkest sadness, I have found it helps to take a single step. And the another. And continue. Some fights are not yours. There are undoubtedly those paladins, but I am not among them. It is up to you to decide what path you follow. As I realize I have said many times now.” He said with a sad smiling, as the two met Tzuras outside the Inn.

“But I will help you any way I can, if you wish it.” He said. Aster signaled that she understood.

“All ready?” Haverson asked. Tzuras nodded.

As so they set out, the three of them, with heavy hearts and heavy pockets.