Haverson was a moderately tall man, starting to grey. His eyes betrayed a fair amount of intellegence but also a fiar 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, stading astride the two boulders. Beneith him, the ragin waters of the [1] 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 [1]? 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 [2] 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 [3] worshippers are frightening. And they hate it when Northerners venture this far close to [5].”

“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, thats 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.

Paso looked embarressed 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 agreee 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 [4] 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 signalled 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 agaist a tree, drawing out their route and what they had seen.

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

“Look,” Haverson shot back excacerbated, “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 congradulating himself for still being limber, Palo stoped 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.

Whenthey were presumably 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 alound.

“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 [4]. I think we should find out what he wants. Who knows, mabye this is actually what the captain sent us out here for.” Haverson suggested.

“Thats a trick I don't think the captain would play. Thats 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.

“Anywaym 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 ordbs 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 dissapating 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 [4]?” 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?” Plo 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 barksap then with magical fire.”

“Then they will be returning in force, and will bring with them at least two [6] 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 asive. 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?” Paso 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 ift 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 a adventurer's understanding be sufficient?” Haverson asked.

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

“So now thats 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 [4] 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 beneith 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 [4] 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 stoped periodically to examine one thing or another, but generally kept things quick. Still, by the timenight 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 forrested 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 [2] was high enough into the mountains tthat 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 possiblity 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 unfomfortable, 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 wound'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, chainging 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 aobut 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 thats 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 ther 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 [2] 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 [4]?”

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

“Our grandfather took the family over to [4] 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 [4] 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.