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.

“Shh” whispered Remi as he awakened Haverson. “The [4] 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 [4] 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 [6] 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 tourch. 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 repitoire of spells is surprisingly limited.”

“Great.” Haverson said, “then how about those [6]?”

“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 [4] 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 tatoos 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, turing 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 habdm 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 aove 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 torthlight.

“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 [9] 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 [4]'s toungue. 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 treetopped 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 addtiion 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 deffered to the brothers.

“Honestly we never personally came this north as we knew coming here would antagonize the [4]”. 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 beneith 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 sai, realizing how hard it would be to avoid it. “and whats that aweful smell?” he inquired.

“Thats sulfer” 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 couldrun 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 cosest of the strange steps, having seen their fill of the codrun.

“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 din'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 sudenly 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 supressed 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 gruesom 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 [6].

A massive bolt of lightening sliced its way through the air, catching the enemy mage directly in the chest. Spasming, the man toppledy 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 coincidense.

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 simmilar 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 managable. 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 knealt slowly to pick up his bow, only to see a native standing above him, the slub 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 [6], 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 headstart. 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 existance. The damn [6] 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 exploaded under the natives's feet. One was ablet o 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, aresolizing amid the steam. It caught the risigin 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 fhrom his arms and legs into his core.

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

Aster heard the explosion go off behind her as she ssprinted for the tree lin. 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 ome of theirs.

How many would they send? Two? Three??

She hoped for two. Two was managable. 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 crained 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 dimwitts” 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 naseous 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 peverse act of recognition, she took a look at the two bodies. About the same height and incredibly muscular. Both had extensive tatooing. 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 reavealing 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 frow 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 encounted 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 wan'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 eminating 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 postiion 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 whiped 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 appraoched 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 coincidense 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 viallage, hidden in the vapor.

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

There was no wall, mearly 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 underneith 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 meovement, 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 twnety 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 descrating 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 Hamarko, the chief. I didn't know if he was still around. When he became cheilf when he was young, he advocated for strict and frankly distrubing interpretation of the earth cult, our… [4]'s religion or way of living.” Palo drew quiet as Hamarko closed in.

Hamarko was a tall, slender man in his late ages. His hair was short and grey but he had a medium length beard. His face, arms and legs were all adorned with tatoos and his whole body had a dirtiness to it, as though he had just laid in soot. He peeried 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, Hamarko 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 Haramako”

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

“What are you doing?” Haverson hissed.

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

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

Hamarko 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.” Hamarko 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 difficutly 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 mixblood.” Hamarko 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 refferring 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.

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

“So it is you that I have to thnk for this mess. Almost a whole team dead, and many wounded. One [6] dead, our land tresspassed. The audacidty to descrate our sacred sites. Dispicable. 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.

Hamarko stayed him though.

“Leader indeed. We [4] 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 Hamarko, no second name as is our way. I am chief and spirit waker of the [4]. I will not shake your hand, killer of kinsmen.”

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

Haverson paused, perhaps to test Hamarko'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.