

Northa the Hauflin
A Character Background
for Heroes of Feonora RPG Board Game
by Josh Graye

The blue glow of the gemstone bathed the darkened chamber in a light more dazzling than even Northa had imagined. It was as if the room was alive with thousands of distant stars, twinkling as they do on a clear, moonless night, and somehow she had come to be among them, suspended in time...weightless. Well, the harness and cord from which she hung were of expert craftsmanship, and she was rather light (even for a Hauflin) so, in a way, it almost felt as if she were floating in space. As her eyes came to rest once again on the small stone, shaped - naturally they claim - in the nearly unmistakable form of a butterfly, it was easy to understand how this had become one of the Royal Family's most prized possessions. It was simply enchanting, and now, finally, within her reach. There is not a thief this side of the Great Ocean (or perhaps beyond she thought proudly to herself) who could have gotten this close. Not only is this treasure one of the most well-guarded, but its location a carefully protected secret. And how hard indeed she had worked to get here. Taking a job as a lowly Kitchen's Apprentice nearly two years ago had been but a stepping point. Oh the long, hard hours she had slaved away in that time, the never-ending chores, mopping floors, fetching endless supplies & sundries from the storerooms, dirty dishes piled so high you'd think the entire kingdom had been invited for a banquet. But her efforts had finally paid off, and she was about to be rewarded for them. Of course, the true beginning of this adventure took place well before her arrival at the royal kitchens, in a wealthy manor deep in the heart of the City, and a meeting with one of the most important figures in the whole of Feonora's underworld...

"...and THAT is why no one has been able to pull off this job...they've been going about it all wrong, and tipped their hat to the those Royal Guardsmen. They're a clever lot and no mistake. We've given them far too many insights into our tradecraft, and wasted more than a few good Blackcaps on this little gem of theirs." Northa was beginning to get the feeling this had grown beyond just a quest for treasure, but rather something of a personal challenge for the Guild bosses. "Fortunately, time is on our side, and the highest bidder is in no hurry to gain possession of the prize." Just then Hercind exchanged a knowing glance with the Malornian who had been standing so still in the far corner of the room, uttering not a single word since she had arrived. Northa attempted to study his face, but found it difficult in the dimly lit room, not to mention the ragged hooded cloak, which mostly concealed all but the outline of his form. Just then his eyes met hers and she could sense that this was no common guild member. No, someone of rank she thought...or an outsider. "So you see my dear, this is why you are perfect for the task..." continued Hercind. You've proven a certain flair for this sort of assignment, you have the 'look' we need, the plan itself is a masterwork, and...some of us feel that you've got the gift." Northa wasn't sure if his words were sincere or mere flattery, but if they weren't he sure gave a convincing performance. "Plus" he added with a sly grin "You'll be set for life." For Life...the words echoed in her mind as Northa's thoughts drifted to an imaginary cottage, deep in the forest, far away from the dirty streets and alleyways she spent so much time creeping about in, forever following orders and never seeming to get ahead in this world of humans and men. "All you have to do is not bollocks it up." There was a long silence, and then, "Well, what say you?"

Thinking back to that day Northa probably didn't have much choice. Hercind was right, she was their best chance at pulling it off, especially after so many failed attempts. Besides, when you're summoned for a face-to-face meeting with one of the bosses, declining a job isn't exactly a wise

(or healthy) thing to do. And this one was indeed a masterwork, every minute detail and nuance considered from the bottom up. So secret had been her assignment that even her usual betters were led to believe that she had been expelled. Even that little matter required a brief adventure all its own. This was imperative, it was explained, for the Elite Royal Guard surely had managed to infiltrate the Guild at higher levels than most would openly admit. Even the bosses couldn't be sure precisely where they were vulnerable, only that these agents were a cunning lot, their methods and manner wholly unfamiliar to that of their high-nosed counterparts in the main Army. Northa had even heard tell that the Guild itself was merely an extension of the Royal Guard, being craftily manipulated at the highest level. Of course such nonsense was the talk of fools for that just wouldn't make sense. And Northa was no fool, for here she was, reaching out to take hold of the very thing so highly sought after, and slipping it neatly into a tiny burgundy pouch. From a second pouch, she carefully removed another, strikingly similar gemstone, gently placing the fake into its proper position. The forgery was convincing, but only at first glance. No matter, it only needed to serve its purpose long enough to carry this through. As Northa winced to the sound of footsteps echoing down the passageway, she could see that the glittering stars had disappeared entirely. It was time to go.

The footsteps drew near and Northa could make the outline of a guardsman's shadow surrounded by torchlight. She knew that this chamber was to be patrolled twice this night, once at the top and bottom of the hour. Whoever this was either didn't know how to tell time or wasn't following the schedule. No time to analyze. Quickly adjusting her accoutrements Northa began the ascent back up the rope, and slipped quietly through the small hole she had prepared these many months. Before replacing the stone bricks she paused for one final look into the dark chamber below, hoping to catch a glimpse of whoever was passing through. She heard no sound, and no footsteps. There was only a dim light somewhere near the entryway, still and silent. And then, without a sound, it flickered out. There was only darkness. Northa's heart quickened as she tried to decide whether she should replace the stone bricks, as planned, risking the noise it might make. *Maybe the guard had left? Maybe it wasn't a guard at all...* Northa turned, and quietly as a cat crawled through the narrow space, leaving the hole unsealed.

Five minutes later (though it seemed to her much longer) Northa emerged from another makeshift hole in an outer wall. The dreary rain was going to make her descent much more difficult than she had hoped. Climbing down a stone wall in the pouring rain was no small task, and for a brief moment a memory triggered, of a falling companion and the distant figures gathering round his broken body...There was no other choice, to leave behind even the smallest trace would be folly. And besides, she had no spare rope. Down she went as the cold wind and heavy rain sought to weigh her down (or send her to a most disagreeable fate). By now her mind was racing. *Who was it that entered the chamber back there?* If there were any suspicion of foul play the alarm should have gone up by now. To the best of her ability Northa could neither hear nor sense any commotion. There was only the sound of the rain beating against the wall, and her body rubbing up against the cold, wet stone. Almost there.

At last she dropped to the muddy ground. Looking back up one could only make out a thick growth of vine, but not the small hole it concealed, not that any man could fit through it anyway. Her path was set. She now need only make it to the shack, where a change of clothes and her travel pack awaited her, and a short journey to the boat. She crept along, pressed up against the wall, then readied herself. As the next thunderclap bellowed she leaped into a full sprint, and, coming into her stride stumbled headlong (and with great force) over something that gave out a

horrendous shriek. In a single, swift move she leapt to her feet and set to flee with all her might, only that's when the unmistakable whimper of an injured animal caught her ear. Turning around she could see the form of a wet and mangy dog sprawled out on the ground and it was looking at her with such a look of desperation she found herself in a full stop without even thinking. *What was this wretched animal doing out here!? Shouldn't it be inside curled up in front of a warm fire?* That's where she'd surely like to be. It was then, as she moved back toward the animal, that Northa could see this poor, floppy-eared mutt had been most cruelly mistreated. It was half-starved, with a soaking wet coat of unsightly fur and not a few scars on its paws and backside. And of course it too was shivering from the foul weather. The poor dumb animal must have been sleeping when she tripped over it. Though she surely must have given it a start the dog watched her, not with alarm, more like with a hopeful curiosity. "Oh bother" she said aloud to herself as she wrestled out the last of her homemade peanut butter cookies. "These were supposed to be my dinner for the night, but I suppose you could use this more than me." As the dog gently removed each one from her hand, savoring every morsel, she thought, *soon enough I'll have all the finest food I want.* And she realized now that the animal was licking her hand clean. "Well, I'm sorry about waking you up" she whispered, "But I really must be going." As Northa turned to leave another thunderclap filled the air, followed by the sound of rain, and another distant rumble...that unmistakable thunder of horses.

End of Part 1

The distant shouts and thundering hooves pierced through the wind and rain as Northa ran hard toward the edge of the woods. 'Maybe they weren't after *her*' she thought. *Could be a disturbance in the city, or a training drill.* But if they were chasing after the butterfly, her only hope lay in reaching the woods and finding proper concealment. As Northa made a turn her feet slipped out from under her and she must have slid a good twenty feet before crashing head-first into a thick bush, which now felt as if it were trying to keep her captive and helpless there in the open. Glancing back, and ignoring the pain of the fall, she could make out the blurry shapes of men on horseback, bearing torches and...heading in her direction. *They couldn't possibly see her from this distance.* She was right at the edge of the woods. Finally freeing herself from the tangle Northa sprang to her feet and bolted toward the safety of the wood, and darkness.

Well off the main path she at last found herself out of breath and scanned desperately for a place to hide. *Things were not going according to plan.* 'They never do' she thought, trying to lift her resolve and calm the pounding in her chest. There! A thick bramble of giant roots at the base of a twisted old oak. Quickly she clawed and squeezed herself into the deep depression, now half filled with mud and rainwater (and who knows what) and she tried her best to recede as far as she could into the deepest recess of her hiding place. The rain beat down as Northa listened, and waited. There was only the slogging rain, but no sign or sound of the horsemen. 'This is going to be a long night,' Northa thought to herself. As she began to contemplate the situation, weighing the odds of staying put or moving on, Northa felt something...as if a Wiggly Worm had somehow wriggled its way into her shoe. And now, it writhed and slithered between her toes. Her shoe! There it was, caught between two thick roots near the entry point where she had squeezed into the depression. It was barely visible, and so caked with mud, surely no one would notice it even if they were staring directly at it. Northa wasn't taking any chances. She slowly inched her way through the thickening muddy soup, carefully listening for any sound of movement out there in the cold and rain. Ever so slowly she reached out and grasped a hold of the shoe, and gently

began tugging it free. Almost there. *'I've just about got it.'* THUNK! The sound of a throwing axe embedding itself in the base of the tree (not but three inches from her head) signaled to the small Hauflin thief that the game was up.

When the guard pulled the indigo pouch from her custom made satchel he looked at her, almost as if to see her expression at having been caught. Northa did her best to remain stoic and expressionless, though she knew that things were about to go very badly for her. Gently untying the knot the soldier tweezed open the pouch, and without touching the stone, used his bottom hand to gently lift it halfway out. He inspected it closely, almost admiring the treasure for the beauty it possessed and then quickly sealed it up. By then most of the others had come into the wooded clearing, including the Captain in charge, who had just arrived. "We've got it sir," declared the guard, handing over the pouch. Without hesitation the Captain opened it up widely to inspect the butterfly for damage. Of course, other than being a little wet and muddy, there was none. Placing the treasure into his saddlebag the Captain approached, lifting a torch so that he could see Northa's face up close. For a brief moment he studied her, almost as if she were the very person they had been searching for. In a moment he turned to two of his men, ordering them to take the prisoner to the "cave" for questioning. "The rest of you will accompany me and the stone back to the keep." This was an organized and disciplined lot and not a moment later they were off.

Much to Northa's relief the "cave" of which the Captain spoke had only been a code word. For despite her blindfold Northa could sense and hear that they were entering some kind of small building, somewhere within the same wood. She felt her hands being unbound and instinctively lifted the blindfold from her eyes. It took a moment for her eyes to focus on the man sitting across the table. Hercind. "Hello dear," he smiled. "You've been busy, and productive." Her mind started to race and Northa, trying to maintain her composure quickly glanced around the room. The two soldiers were still there, one standing by the door, the other warming himself in front of the fireplace. They were in a small shack, which she now recognized as her first rendezvous point. "Don't worry little one, you are free. They're with us," Hercind gave a slight nod to the soldiers. "You didn't think you were alone all this time did you?" He paused to consider. "Of course not; you're too smart for that. Naturally you must have guessed there were more pieces to our little puzzle. But you kept to your part and stayed faithful, and you will be rewarded for it." Hercind was right of course, Northa had suspected for some time that there would likely be others involved in the plot. But of course they would have kept them from each other, lest anyone be tempted to devise their own little scheme - though only a fool would dare it. Hercind continued, "Soon the Captain will be handing the prize back over to us, thinking he has just performed a most noble duty. And you my lovely thing, are going to be rewarded." It all made sense, in the usual twisted sort of way, though that didn't alleviate the instinctive feeling of danger, or the many questions that began swirling around in her mind. *If only she had a little time to sort it all out...* Hercind must have sensed her anxiety, "I see that the events this evening have found you out of sorts, but let me assure you my dear things could not have played out more perfectly. And you, well, you were simply magnificent. Just as I suspected, no one could have done a better job of it." For the first time since her capture Northa began to feel a tiny hint of relief. "There's only one last thing we need to do. You're still to make for the boat. There's no time for a change of clothes I'm afraid, but we've prepared you a few supplies for the journey." One of the soldiers then handed her back her satchel. "Inside, there's a few meager things, but most importantly a sealed message. You must deliver it to our agent - you already know who that is." Northa began pulling herself together. "Your share of the payment is waiting for you

there..." and he emphasized this, "to be given upon delivery of the message." Taking a quick moment to confirm his words Northa peeked in the satchel and indeed spied the sealed envelope. She instantly recognized the seal as a counterfeit of the Merchant's Guild. "There's no time to waste," Hercind interrupted. "You must go now, and make haste." Northa could sense that her questions would not be answered. *At least, not here and now.* Without a word she grabbed her things, gave one final glance at the man across the table (whose expression revealed nothing) and made for the door. Once more she was off.

It was still the middle of the night, cold permeating the dreary darkness, though finally the rain had subsided just enough to ease her physical discomfort a bit. *Things had certainly taken an unexpected turn.* Northa sighed. At least she had her shoe back; they were kind enough to give her that, especially after prying her and the shoe from her hiding place. The dark rain clouds still dominated the sky and there was no moonlight to guide her path or offer a better sense of time, and in some way it felt like this terrible night would never end. Still, Northa had become familiar with these woods, and she knew her way to the relief that awaited her. She walked, and ran, got her bearings, and then walked some more, quietly chewing on a piece of stale bread the men had so kindly given her back at the shack, *never mind that the fruit she had stashed there was conspicuously absent.* The rushing stream down below assured Northa that she was on the right path. It was usually much lower and more calm, but the heavy rains had brought it to full life these past hours. She shuddered at the thought of how cold the water must be on a night like this. *What she wouldn't give for a warm fire, a fresh block of cheese, and some nice hot herbal tea.* What was that! Something in the distance...a snapping twig. Northa paused, and listened. But the sound of the rushing water below made it difficult to hear. She stood frozen, hoping that the darkness would conceal her, and now she was certain that she could hear footsteps. The sound of running. Something was after her! Northa turned to make flight just as the echoes of a barking dog resounded off the surrounding trees. She paused to look back just in time to see the floppy-eared mutt lunging toward her. Suddenly there was a loud *Swoosh!* and a piercing howl as the animal tumbled into her, a crossbow bolt protruding from its side and the two of them went tumbling down the shallow ravine. For the briefest moment as the two slid down the muddy embankment Northa thought she saw the shadow of a cloaked, hooded figure aiming, weapon raised. But in the next instant they were out of view and being carried away in the rushing current.

Panting and out of breath the two bedraggled companions slowly climbed out of the water, where they had luckily washed up onto a small sandbar. Her furry friend could barely move and had he lost all consciousness Northa was sure she could not have kept him above the water. The poor thing must have endured great suffering to be so calm and brave in these conditions. But it had lost blood and strength and the wound needed tending. Slowly, carefully, they inched across the ground, searching for a place to hide once again. A small outcropping of rocks provided some cover and concealment from the drizzling rain, and whoever it was that hunted them. Northa felt sure they must have lost him as they had traveled some distance downstream. Together they huddled, and Northa began dressing the wound. *After all that work had she finally been betrayed?* This bolt, as soon as she could free it from her new friend, would be her first clue. *What now? Did she dare meet her contact at the boat? What had really happened this night? What was Hercind (and company) really up to?* Northa promised herself she would find out. "But first," she whispered aloud to her barely conscious friend, "We've got to get back to that tree. They'll find out soon enough that there are two fakes at play, and then the Guard and the Guild will both be on the hunt for it." Northa's thoughts turned to the butterfly, still tucked away deep in the muddy depression beneath the tree. "We've got to get there first my friend. And I'll need your help in

finding it." The dog knowingly licked her hand and looked at her as if to say she was the very person he had been searching for all his life. He had finally found his home. And there they waited, together, for the approaching daylight.

And that is the tale of how Northa the Hauflin came to meet her most loyal friend in all the world, and also how she most unfortunately came out on the wrong side of two very powerful groups in Feonora's realm.

Posted to the blog at feonora.com, in two parts, on 30-Nov and 19-Dec 2010