For the tenth day, Haverson stumbled through the dense underbrush, wandering half purposefully, half unconsciously. The sun gleamed too bright overhead, even as the chill of winter was starting to set in. Even after such a short time, his clothes were already starting to wear, he had lost his cap and extra supplies somewhere along the way. One of his mail gauntlets was missing. He still wore the other. Thankfully he still had his pack somehow, although one of the straps was severed.

His once well looked after uniform was a paltry shadow of what it once had been, the purple sash stained in many places, his armor scuffed and buried under a tick layer of congealed mud, which, although dry now, refused to come completely off.

Scratches and rips were present all across his body, the scar of previous altercations with briar patches in the forest. Bruises can along his knees and his elbows. He could not remember how he had acquired these.

His memory was playing tricks with him it seemed, one second he was walking through the forest, the next he was transported back to the battlefield, crouching in their trenches, oblivion washing over him.

His hands shook uncontrollably as he tried to block the memory from his mind. One foot and then the next. That was all he needed to do. Make it back to the command post and tell them what had happened.

But that had been ten days ago. The command post had been an hour away, even by the slowest march. Where had he gone wrong? He could not concentrate, a ringing noise was present in his head, from some intangible source and it refused to go away. He felt nauseous and completely fatigued, yet some paort of him realized that if he stopped walking he would be lost forever.

After all, hadn't he started out with ten men? Twenty? Meridia held command. Where was she? Where had they all gone? He remembered the initial shock as the magic filled the sky; he remembered people around him seizing violently, some calling out in different languages, dropping their weapons in terror. And then it had hit him.

He came to the top of the rise he had been climbing for the past several minutes, and realized his legs could no longer carry him. After ten days of traveling, possibly with no sleep, his body was at its very limit. He saw the group rushing up to meet him, his arms feebly reaching out. It was interesting to notice how disconnected they were, as if they belonged to someone completely different.

He hit the wet cold leaves with barely a sound, and began to roll down the hill, his pack wrapping around him, its contents falling out as he fell. He couldn't even try to arrest his descent. He was stuck, frozen, watching things happen to him from afar, as if from the other side of a massive pane of glass. He couldn't even feel the pain as he came to a rough stop at the bottom.

He lay there for hours, long enough that he could feel the cold start to seep into his body as the sun started to set. At least he had stopped on his side. Through puffy unfocused eyes he could look out at the bleak, leafless forest where he would most likely die.

The cold air whipped around him, arrested only by the ditch he lay in and the ruined display armor he wore. It was probably going to snow. Ironically, he was probably going to die from lack of water first. He had emptied his waterskin at least two days ago and had not refilled it.

Well. This was it. This was how it ended. Haverson the adventurer. He had had a good run. Excitement, money, eventually a rank in the military. It was a shame about Meridia, part of him still wanted present his case again, in the vain hopes of convincing her.

He lay there through the night, perhaps sleeping, but if so, only for moments in between indescribable palpitations of terror which quivered through him from time to time.

There was frozen dew on him. The snow had not yet come. It was cold. And despite everything he had been through to get where he was, he was tired. His eyes closed.

“Uncle Turpin, look over there. There's something metal on that hill over there.” A boy shouted, pointing.

Silence for a moment.

“What was that, Yves?” The distracted older man said, looking up from his task. The Sap from the tree still flowed into his bucket. With the cold setting in, every one he could fill meant more food that he could buy, especially with the war…

“There's something on that hill. Something shiny!” The boy said, again, excitedly. “Can I go see what it is?”

Turpin looked up for a second at the hill the boy was describing. He didn't see anything, but it was close enough.

“Fine. You can go see what it is. Come right back though, and don't go out of sight.” Turpin said, rising, and moving to the next tree. A half glance downward told him that he would only fill one bucket today, if that.

Yves ran off.

But only a moment later, Turpin heard a yell from the child.

Alarmed, Turpin let the bucket fall, and ran towards the sound.

“What is it? Are you ok?” Turpin called, looking frantically for his nephew.

The boy was standing still at the bottom of the hill. He hadn't said anything after the intial yell.

When Turpin arrived he saw the body. Yves stood shocked, staring at it. The corpse stared back at them, eyes wide open, frozen in what seemed like fear.

It was covered with frost.

“Oh, child. I… I suppose you should… You're old enough...” Turpin sputtered.

The man was dressed strangely though, and when he got closer, he confirmed that he was dressed in display armor. That purple sash. It was undeniable.

Turpin knelt by the body. “Yves, I'm sorry you had to see this. But you were bound to learn eventually.”

Turpin reached out a hand to close the man's eyes and stopped for a moment. How had one of the First gotten all the way over here? News of the strange and horrible defeat was still on its way to Dor's Crag, spreading throughout the North, but here above the capital, there was no keeping it away.

Had this man walked all this way? It couldn't be. He must have deserted before the battle.

Turpin frowned and made a sucking noise in disgust. He went to rise when an item on the hill caught his eye. It was a pendent, probably of some base material, nothing fancy. Looting deserters was probably legal, but why take the chance? He was already going to have his hands full with explaining the whole situation to poor Yves.

But a sudden familiarity made him stop. The pendant was a particular shape. Yes. That was from a village not far from here. Could the man be a local? Trupin sighed.

He had nothing to do with the capital or any of the large cities of the North if he could help it, honestly he identified more with the Fartherners, with their rugged individuality, than the ill advised bloodbath going on in the south. They at least had the common sense to stay out of the war.

But a local was a local. And they had always looked after their own.

“This man may be from here.” Turpin said to Yves. “We should bring his body back.”

The boy nodded silently, and Turpin didn't miss the tears in his eyes.

Turpin reached out to grap the body, and stopped for a moment. It was not quite frozen through. Could it be that the man was still alive?

He felt for a pulse and thought he found one, if weak.

“Yves. Stop that crying. I need you to run back to the village and tell them what we found. This man might still be alive.” Turpin ordered.

Yves made some coughing sobs, running one hand past his eyes, the other past his nose.

“Now.” Turpin said, sternly. There would be time for explanation for the young lad later. Now they had to save one of their own.

“Thank you sister Mara. It seems your services are no longer required.” Turpin said, some days later.

The black shrouded woman said nothing, but nodded and disappeared from the room. Local or not, sister Mara always gave him the shivers, whether it was the woman herself or the god she worshipped, he could never really place.

But it looked like the man would live.

He had only gotten a name from the man, Enton Haverson, and fierce cries for some commander. The man didn't seem to understand him the first times he explained the situation to him. The First had fallen, the Northern line had apparently fell back all the way to the capital. Some even said that Supreme Commander Gerin had gone missing, although it was honestly hard to separate all the fact from fiction now a days. It was clear that a disaster had occurred.

The man, Haverson, arose again, suddenly.

“Where am I?” He demanded, looking around for something.

But his eyes were almost mad, and he seemed to not even notice Celine, who now jumped back in shock. The jar of water she held thankfully remained in her grasp.

“Celine. Thank you for your help, you are a saint. However, I do not know whether this man is dangerous or not. While he is awake I think it would be best if you left. And can you send in your father?”

The girl agreed, taking one confused, sad look at the man, who had stopped searching and was now holding himself and shaking as if though he was cold, even under the blankets on top of him.

“Haverson?” Turpin tried.

The other man jolted and then seemed to half respond.

Turpin held out the jug of water.

This time, the recognition in the other man's eyes was clear, and he gingerly reached out for the jug.

Turpin gave it to him, and watched as Haverson drained it.

“You're lucky to be alive. You were close to Geremon's Rest.”

The man finished the jug and set it aside, holding his head as if it ached.

“I'm not so sure I am lucky.” Haverson said. “I can't explain what happened. I am disgraced. You all should have left me dead.”

“I would not worry about that, soldier. You are no deserter. I heard it myself from the capital a day ago. They have granted clemency to all who were there that day.”

Haverson looked at him, speechless. “Are you truthful?”

“I am. I have never heard of such a thing myself. Whatever happened there must have been… monstrous for such an edict.”

“It was.” Haverson said, his eyes glazing over, like he was falling asleep. His head tossed to one side an then the other as if hearing far off sounds on both sides of him. Turpin could hear the other man's panting breath.

Any suspicion that this Haverson had deserted before the event were gone. They were just learning about the effects of whatever magic had been used. It did not look good for the survivors.

“Ah!” Haverson cried out, sweat pouring down his face. “Gods I see it even now! That light, sweeping across the plain towards us. Gods its so hollow and harsh!” He turned to Turpin.

“I hear it screaming!” He exclaimed, throwing his hands over his ears, crying uncontrollably.

Turpin stayed, partly out of morbid curiosity, partly because night had fallen and there was nothing more he could do today anyways. Barrande entered the room, but realized he couldn't help.

He frowned at the other man and his equipment, which lay now beside the bed on the floor. Barrande collected his words before speaking. His brother had always been the more convincing.

“Turpin. I realize the town and tradition mean a lot to you, but shouldn't we turn him over to the military? He's their problem right? Not ours. We can barely feed ourselves!”

Haverson had fallen back onto the bed and was silent. Turpin couldn't tell whether the other man was listening or not.

“Barrande, they don't know what they're doing. From what I've heard, these survivors are dying every day, some of them scratch their own eyes out, or fall on their own swords. They say there isn't even enough coffins for them.” He looked quickly over to Haverson, but the man made no moves that he had heard.

“All the more reason we shouldn't keep him here. You may be the older brother, but this is my house! I built it myself. If this man is dangerous, I don't want him anywhere near Lydia or Yves or Celine.”

“No. They are safe. I can assure that to you. And what would you have me do? Bring him to the military? What military? Everything is chaos around the capital. I wouldn't even know who to talk to. This man is from here and we can help him.”

“For what reason then? You must have heard as well, word is the Southerners are on the march. People think they might be to the capital by the end of the week. What can any of us do… ” He paused, knowing that the next thing he had to say would not go over well.

“The town is meeting Turpin. We're… there’s talk of going to the hills. If there is to be a siege, they'll come to us eventually. Better leave when we still can.”

Turpin's eyes widened. “No.” He said softly. “It can't be… Not after everything...”

“I'm sorry. But would you rather all of us be taken?” Barrande said.

Turpin looked down, hiding his gaze. “No of course not. I just thought...”

“Look brother. We are what's important. They can take the village, but as long as we stay together we can always rebuild. Like we did before with the fire.”

“When are we to leave, if the town decides it?” Turpin said, coughing.

“Next week at the latest. The Army might try to contest the crossing, but I wouldn't put any faith in that. Not any more.”

“Then that is enough time. I can help this man.”

“We need to prepare to leave!” Barrande. “I'm sorry, but I fail to see why this man is so important; more important than our family. You've already saved him Turpin. Its enough!”

“You can't… Its just...” Turpin collapsed into the chair behind him. Barrande laid a hand on his brother's shoulders and looked into his tear stained eyes. “If I could just save one person, maybe it would be enough.” He said.

Barrande grabbed his brother in a hug. “Alright. I understand. I understand. Its for Elaine, isn’t it?”

Turpin nodded, and continued to cry as he returned the hug.

The days matched swiftly past, as the family made to leave. Haverson seemed to have recovered, but past his previous outbreak, stayed silent.

When the day finally came for them to leave Turpin entered the room and was shocked to find it empty. The armor and all the equipment Haverson had were gone, as was Haverson himself. Turpin shook his head, and clenched his hands in fury.

An item on the bed caught his attention though, shining dully in the firelight. It was the pendent that Turpin had seen earlier. It had been placed in such a way as to make missing it impossible.

Haverson had apparently overheard their conversations after all. The pendant was originally for someone else. It had the name 'Meridia' carved into its front. When Turpin opened it, a stone, unmistakably a diamond, fell out. Turpin's rage subsided as he held the stone to the light.

They evacuated that night. In the distance, as they climbed the hills, they could see the outline of the capital silhouetted by fire.