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 part 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. He knew that craftsmanship. That was from a village not far from here. Could the man be a local? Turpin 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 grab 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!”

“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 dried his face on a handkerchief.

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.

Haverson trudged through the still soft mud as snowflakes started to fall around him. To his south, further down the collection of hills he could make out the procession of men and women fleeing the village.

Further south he could just make out the assembly of the Southern army, surrounding the capital.

That was not his fight. Not any more. Leave it to the men who didn't know the futility of their cause. How could any of them stand against a power like the one he had seen? The gods themselves would have trembled against such might. It must have been their arch mage. But knowing the source of the attack gave no mollification. That it was in fact a man who had undone the First and thrown the whole army into dispair simply added to the absurdity.

There was no more reason to fight.

The hill opened up ahead of him and he could see the crest of several taller wooded mounts, rising in stature until they reached the mountains themselves.

He had lived all his life in the north, with his back to the mountains, their white peaks an ever present firm and solid ground for a firm and solid life. But now he wasn't so sure. Looking closer, as he had never done before, did not his eyes make out the many mountain passes? Had they always seemed so short? They had lost their majesty somehow. They had diminished in his minds eye.

The wind howled cold and unrelenting, a herald of the storm that was about to come. The sound transferred into the same dull buzz that had dogged him since the catastrophe. No matter how he held his ears he could not get the sound to go away, clouding his thoughts and shattering his focus.

It was worse during the night. Although the sun had almost completely set, Haverson knew he would not sleep tonight, even if he tried. When the sun vanished, the buzzing became worse, shrieks, siren calls of his comrades in arms as the light washed over them, the terrible blinding emptiness that had struck at his soul.

Haverson shivered and pulled the cloak he had borrowed permanently closer to himself. The villagers had been kind to save him. But perhaps it all would have been easier if they hadn't. He was alive once more, but without a purpose.

He had listened to the other men considering his fate. Haverson supposed that others in his situation would simply reform with the elements of the army that had survived. However, this seemingly clear solution to his problems gave him no solace.

The concept of going up to Dor's Crag, of seeing all the gaunt and hopeless faces of the survivors as they prepared for what would almost certainly be a futile and useless attempt to break the seige, was inconceivable. The very thought of even wearing a uniform was somehow repugnant to him, and in a sudden fit, he stopped in mid stride and tore the damn purple sash from his body.

In a fury he clenched the dirtied purple fabric and seethed at the symbol. What a fool he had been. How stupid had they all been, enlisting as they had done. They were adventurers and opportunists, all of them, not soldiers. By definition, there were no poor adventurers. None of them knew what it was like to loose. They had always won. The ones that hadn't were already dead.

And so what a perfect way to destroy them all: something intangible, amorphous, something that neither attacked them physically or presented any recourse. For the first time they all would know defeat, yet stay alive, at least briefly. Those that stayed alive would always know what it was like to be defeated, crushed by a force infinitely more powerful than themselves. How could the North survive after such a display?

He flung the ribbon into the wind and watched it twist in the air for a moment before it was sucked into oblivion.

They couldn't. It was all over. A quick glance behind him at the fire lit capital confirmed his thoughts. It was all over. The wind picked up again, sending flakes directly into his face. Looking up at the night sky, he saw no stars, everything was covered with clouds, and from them the cold freeze rained.

He found himself crying again, and dropped to his knees, heedless of the mud beneath him. He understood the those who had taken an easier way out.

He had borrowed a sword as well, something old and ill used. Although the very act of strapping it to his waist had sickened him, he had done it anyway, perhaps only out of a force of habit. He had lived by the sword. Perhaps it would only be befitting for him to die by it as well.

A shaking hand reached for the hilt, ignoring the sickened feeling the metal brought to his stomach. He gritted his teeth, and in one movement tore the weapon from his side and into his hands. The cold metal burned his ungloved hand, but he clutched it tightly, feeling the searing pain dig into his palm.

It was old and pocked with rust. The handle was chipped, the edge was dull. It was likely it would break against new steel. How fitting.

He considered the best way to do it. He positioned the point towards where he knew his heart was, before remembering his armor. There was no sense taking chances. In fact, forget the armor, forget the tabard. He tore both of them off along with his cloak, throwing them into the mud beside him.

He knelt, shivering, holding the blade again to his heart and positioned himself.

“Hello there?” A voice called out.

His nerve ran out and he collapsed in the mud. The guilt was too strong: stronger than the despair.

A guttural groan escaped from his mouth as he choked on heaving breaths.

“Sir, are you injured?” The voice said, concerned.

Haverson heard the sound of foot steps coming from further up the hill.

“No.” He managed. “I… I just fell.” He said, hiding his feelings.

A figure appeared above him, in the darkness. He held a lantern, which he had gripped by the top, holding it close to his cloak against the wind.

“Did you escape the capital as well?” The man asked, “You'd best come up here. I have a fire. Its getting quite cold.” The man added, still holding the light.

He made no motion to help Haverson, and Haverson realized what a wreak he must look like. Self consciously he grabbed his things and hastily adorned himself with both the armor and the cloak. The tabard he left.

The man in fact made no move at all, which Haverson interpreted as impatience. He hastily grabbed the sword, wincing as the nausea hit him. Letting out a brief gasp, he threw it onto his belt and straightened himself.

“Thank you stranger.” He managed, rising to his feet.

The other man did not directly respond. “Its just up here.” He said, speaking clearly over the increasing storm.

The two men trudged up the hill, sometimes stopping when the wind threatened to foul their balance. Haverson noticed that the man moved strangely, but couldn't quite place what about his gait was off. He must be injured somehow. But the man did not look like either a guard or a soldier.

“Are you injured?” He asked as they approached a small tent and a much larger fire.

The man looked back in surprise.

“No. I am unharmed.” He responded. He regarded Haverson. “You said you were unharmed as well. I am glad people were able to make it out before the siege was started. I suppose there will be some who try to sneak across the lines, especially now that it is night time, but I wouldn't like their chances.”

“No, I agree. Its the end for the North.” Haverson said, glumly. “May I sit?” He asked out of force of habit as they reached the fire. It was strange that just a second ago he had been ready to end it all, yet now he still asked permission. These things were engrained into Northerners. Everything in its proper place, everything according to law, social or judicial.

He collapsed next to the fire. The man sat down somewhat next to him, and stared at Haverson.

“You look like a man who has lost a fair amount. Did you have family in the city? Did you lose them?”

Haverson regard the other man, this time in the light of the fire. He was not tall nor short, of middling weight, and wore plain clothes. His hair was brown and his face unremarkable. He could have been anyone, and when Haverson turned to reach for his waterskin, he came to the shocking conclusion that he had already forgotten what the man looked like.

Haverson undid the container and drank, despite the fact that it was bone chillingly cold.

“No. I suppose I have family around here, but I have not seen them in years.” He replied, putting the waterskin back in his pack.

Haverson realized they had no introduced one another. This told him two things. One, that he was still fairly shaken and two, that the other man was not a Northerner. Pleasantries were one thing to Southerners and the Shani, but the introduction of two unknown parties was core to the individualist nature of the north.

“Ah. I apologize, I am somewhat out of sorts, I have not introduced myself. I am Enton Haverson of the First. Or at least I was.” He added, as a bit of an after thought, mind wandering even after as he stretched out his hand to the other man.

“Well met Enton Haverson. Despite being in your lands for a long period now, I still forget the most simple things about your customs.” The other man said, grasping Haverson's hand.

“I don't have a proper name, or at least not one I can remember, but I understand that most around here call me Searcher.”

Despite everything, the exposure, the recovery, the horror of the catastrophe, the crushing depression, the lack of purpose, Haverson gaped wide, staring at the unassuming man before him, his face flickering in the firelight.

He didn't say anything out of shock.

“Its incredible how you all react to that.” The man said, looking into the fire.

“No. This is some trick.” Haverson looked around the hill, gazing into the forest, as if expecting to see the edges of some illusion spell. “You can't really be *The Searcher.*”

“Well, I can. And am. And its just Searcher I suppose, no 'the'. Of course I have no real proof.”

“It would be strange for someone to lie about such a thing in a position like this.” Haverson said. “But I know how to discern whether you tell the truth about your identity. Only the real Search would know this land like the back of his hand, if the stories are true. So. What lies to the east of these lands?”

“Good. Some never get past the first pronouncement.” The other man said with a sigh. “Its hills all the way past Dor's Crag and to the fields below with their grain towns.”

“And past that?” Haverson asked.

The other man looked up, expressionless.

“Forest, and the edge of the North. Some fort, whose name I do not recall, mountains blocking the north all the way.”

“And past that?” Haverson asked.

“The supposedly bottomless lake, with strange and empty mountains. Some say the Uzerai dwell beneath them, but I have never seen them, or at least don't remember it.”

“...And past that?” Haverson asked further.

The man got angry suddenly. “Have I not satiated your curiosity? The barren Cartaro, nameless mountains no other has ventured to. I have been beyond them. There is nothing on the other side, only more desert. No one knows these lands like me. I have walked them for years, like sands through the hourglass, for eternity, for all the way back until my memory is lost.” The man said, gesturing to the west.

“I didn't know there were mountains past the Cartaro.” Haverson admitted, “And I have seen the best maps at one point or another.”

“I am Searcher.” The man stated, looking back into the fire.

“Fine then. You are the semimythical Searcher. You're immortal. You have walked this land etcetera.”

He stopped for a moment, trying to remember the tale. “Oh Searcher, have you found what you seek?” He asked, completing the required call.

“No.” Searcher said. “I still search.” he said, completing the required response with a bit of a sigh.

“And do you know what you search for?” Haverson inquired. This part was not necessarily in the original, but it may as well have been.

“No. But I will know when I find it.” Searcher said, with a deeper sigh, looking again into the fire.

“So what does that even mean anyway? Are you actually looking for something? Do you really not know what it is?”

“Yes.” Searcher said. “I have no idea what it is but I will supposedly know when I find it.” He repeated.

“So have you gotten even close?” Haverson jested.

But the other man did not share the levity.

“Yes. I have.”

Haverson sat dumbly.

“Far north, farther than any road, past what you amusingly call the Far North is a shifting land of jagged ice, where every footstep must be calculated. Below lies only the bottomless fathoms of an empty ocean. The temperature is so cold that you must hide during the night or risk being frozen solid.”

At the center of the this bleak place there is a massive spire, created not by human hands, for it rises from the ice itself and is of one piece. It is there that I felt the call. It was so close. So close. Or something like it, closer than I have ever felt before.”

For one moment of awe, Haverson forgot his own situation.

“Then did you not investigate this spire? You said there was no humans that far north. Who would stop you?”

But the strange man shook his head.

“I said there were no men. And there are none. Likewise there are no Elves, nor Shan, nor Uzerai, nor any living creature. However, there is an emptiness that has a life all of its own. There is a black core to the ice. During the night strange and horrible shapes move amid and through the ice, and at the spire, the presence is overwhelming.”

Although this presence did not confront me directly, I could not proceed, and I soon ran low on supplies.

“I thought you were immortal.” Haverson said, pondering for a minute, prodding the fire with a stick. Something wet snapped in the flames at his provocation, and sparks erupted into the cold night air.

“I am, as far as I can tell. Yet how would you feel if you had not eaten in weeks?”

Haverson reflected on his recent near death experience and nodded. “Then you still feel hunger?”

“Do I? I have felt hunger the likes of which would drive a man insane, for they would have perished long, long before then.”

Haverson nodded again slowly, and without thinking, reached into his pack and withdrew some of the bread he had with him. Eating half of it, he realized what he was doing and offered Searcher some.

The other man accepted and they ate in silence for a while, the snow accelerating in pace.

A loud hollow report sounded from the south, and the two looked backward just in time to see the silhouette of a tower crumble far off in the capital.

“What has become of us?” Haverson said, angrily rising to his feet, his hand reaching for his sword. He had no idea what he was doing, but upon reaching for the weapon, another bout of nausea surged through his body, and he clutched his stomach to keep from doubling over or losing the bread he had just eaten.

He glanced quickly at Searcher, but the other man did not seem to notice.

Discomfort turned again to anger, this time at his own ineptitude, and he delivered a swift kick to a rock nearby, bruising his foot but sending the object flying off the hill into the darkness.

“Curses!” He hissed.

But there was nothing he could do but watch, as far away, the fate of a city he once had pledged to defend, fell. And so the anger, with nothing to rail against, seeped from him, leaving him with nothing.

And so he sat back down, slipping into depression. The wind swirled around him, stripping him of the warmth of the fire for a moment. The cold and emptiness was crushing. Cold tears found their way from his eyes, and he whipped them away with the back of his hand, this time not caring whether the other man watched him or not.

“You care about the city.” Searcher said, looking at him from the side.

Haverson took a breath of cold air and let it out slowly, scattering the red flakes, illuminated from the burning logs in front of him.

“I do.”

“When I left, the army was retreating to the outer walls. I'm sure they will be able to hold.” Searcher said.

“I suppose. But think of how many will die.” Haverson said, grimacing and shaking his head.

“You care about others?”

“I do.” Haverson replied.

“Other soldiers you know?” Searcher inquired.

“Possibly. I… I don't even know whether they are alive now or not.”

Searcher stayed silent for a second, then, passing gaze over Haverson, pointed at the city.

“It is not wrong to flee from danger.” He said, firmly. “It is in fact, the most logical reaction. Despite your laws, I do not believe anyone should be held to any other standard. I will certainly not tell anyone about you.” Searcher said.

“Oh, well...” Haverson started, drawing another breath which aborted and turned to a sigh instead.

“I am or was a soldier, but I didn't desert, or at least not conventionally.”

“Then why are you not down there with the rest of the army?” Searcher asked.

“I can't really explain the full thing.” Haverson said. “Are you familiar with the First?” He asked.

“Somewhat.” Searcher said.

“Well I joined a year ago, when the war looked better for us. The First is made solely of adventurers or former adventurers, about a hundred of us. They're tough you know...” He coughed back tears for a moment, pausing to catch his breath.

“...But something happened down there. Something horrible. Some spell I suppose, but no mage I've ever encountered could ever cast something like this. Not even a hundred mages. This was like an earthquake, it was unstoppable.”

Searcher leaned in towards Haverson. “Tell me.”

“It… We were waiting for orders, Meridia had grown impatient. It was clear they were going to attack: they had been massing on the hill opposite our position. And I suppose they did...”

“WE all saw it at once; a point of light from far off to to south growing brighter with every second. There was something oddly enticing about it. As we stared we found that we were unable to look away, although the light grew to a blinding incandescence. The world darkened, or rather, when staring at that light it seemed that way. Everything blurred around the edges, became gray and lifeless when compared to that light. It was so pure it burned, everything else was as dust in its presence.”

“Then it hit us. I can't describe the sensation well, but it was like... being caught in a river.”

“What do you mean? You felt… cold or pushed?” Searcher ventured.

“No. The opposite in fact, the spell burned all exposed skin. Rather, it was the powerlessness of the situation. I could not turn my head, or move my body for the duration, which felt like hours. Although the sensation was painful it was nothing compared to what it did mentally.” Haverson said, suddenly ashamed for some reason.

“Imagine yourself a rock in a stream, unable to move, the current ripping away at you bit by bit, for years. The very core of you… Oh gods.” He exclaimed, grasping his chest, breathing heavily as sweat ran down his face, even in the frigid cold. “The very core...” He repeated.

“I believe you should continue, regardless of how horrible the memory is.” Searcher said, not showing any emotion.

Haverson nodded slightly, regaining his composure. Telling this man about the event crushed him with one hand, and freed him with another, and him in the middle, spun between two inexorable forces.

And even so, Haverson forced himself to continue, if only to tell someone, even this stranger, what he had seen.

“Like I said, I couldn't move, but I could hear. It was horrible. Meridia screamed somewhere behind me, Germain I believe collapsed. Everyone crying out together in the same moment. But then I couldn't even notice, because the world was narrowing in. My sight shrank little by little, the edges turning black and swimming with strange geometric patterns. But always in the middle there was that hideous light.”

“At some point I couldn't even tell whether my eyes were open even more, I could see nothing, and I could not tell whether that light existed before my eyes or solely in my head. I felt my body give way but I don't remember hitting the ground.”

“And then I started screaming. That was the last bodily sensation I remember: my mouth opening, and me screaming, because at that moment, as the light narrowed to its pin point and the rest of the world went dark, I felt whatever presence turn its full attention to me. I hung there, falling, suspended in time as the light etched its way into my head, and unlike other trauma I remember every second of it. Even now. And when my mind is idle, and certain elements align, the moment replays itself over and over.”

“Pure horror. So visceral and indescribably powerful. What hope did any of us have? After that moment the light ceased. But the terror was not yet over, for the absence of the light was just as terrible. The world closed in… I realize that I probably wasn't conscious at this point, but that’s what I felt: the world closing in, the bottom dropping out and just emptiness below, everything becoming meaningless.” He shuttered and inched closer to the fire, wiping away fresh tears.

Searcher said nothing, but simply watched Haverson clutch his own shoulders, huddling, apparently revisited by his memories.

The wind moaned, the trees beside them creaked in the gale, snow swirled as it fell from the sky and started to cover the land. Haverson sat by the fire, watching the smoke from it get snatched away just as it started to rise from the flames and thought to himself what a fitting metaphor that was for how he felt.

He watched it whisk away, almost horizontally and disappear into the void of night that lay among the trees.

“I see.” Searcher said finally. Unbeknown, he reached forward and lay a hand on the other man's shoulder.

“I believe I know how you feel. Let me tell you my story as well.” He said.

But Haverson gritted his teeth and flung off the other man's hand. “This isn't some contest!” He yelled, suddenly. “I don't need your pity! I didn't walk amid their bodies, their eyes seared straight from their bodies, I didn't stagger from that place, watching others writhe in their thoughts, falling upon their blades, just to be pitied!” He yelled, rising forcefully from the fire.

“SIT DOWN!” Searcher said. His voice echoing over the wind. Haverson stopped in mid rise, struck dumb.

“You will SIT and LISTEN!” Searcher said, somehow never yelling, yet his voice held all the authority Haverson could comprehend. Haverson's knees shook and he collapsed, sobbing at his own weakness.

“I do apologize for that, but I will not give up the opportunity to talk to someone who so similarly shares my curse. I walk these lands, and always there are those such as you who find me, and tell me their stories. Some of them are joyous, and they are there beside their families or their children, but it seems to ones who find me most are the broken. And I listen to them. For what is there else to do?”

“So now for once, someone will listen to me!” Searcher said, rising himself. “Sit here. We have little time.” He said, pointing to a spot on the other side of the fire, as he strode towards his tent.

Haverson obeyed.

“I do not know the nature of this curse, but I have the feeling like this was not always my fate. No memories mind you.” he said, his voice rising as he went inside the tent.

He emerged with a strange collection of straps and cloth pouches, which he proceeded to strap to his body.

“No matter where I go, no matter where I am or who I am with or what I do, I constantly have a nagging feeling of something missing, like I should be elsewhere. The longer I stay in one place, the strong the feeling grows. There once was a time when I thought to fight it, and I had a family with an elf in the south east after the war… they don't tell that in the stories of me, do they?” He said, still connecting things to his legs and arms.

“And I successfully ignored the ripping sensation for a time: even at the end, when I felt hollow with nervousness, and my very being called for the unexplored lands to the East. But even elves, with their long lives… They die too, and I could not stay. I was compelled. My children, I didn't even say goodbye, the night she died I had to leave.” He said, now attending to something inside the tent.

“And so I did. And do you see Haverson? I didn't tell you her name, this person whom I loved, because I no longer remember it!” He said, reemerging gripping a tied up bed roll.

“Everything sucked into that void. How many lives have I lived, looking for something? So vague and pointless. And there will come a day when I awaken and I can no longer even remember that I loved that elf, just as I now can no longer even remember her face, or anything about my children. And on that day everything will be lost, my friend. And I will be just a body, one foot following another absence of intelligence.”

Haverson sat sprawled on the ground, the Searcher's story assaulting him almost physically.

“Or even worse, that I would feel nothing. That it would all be gone, and, not remembering any of it, that I would continue on my way without any emotion! What lives have I lived, that I remember nothing of? What lives have I interacted with, fates changed? Who have I known or loved or lost? The stones of barren lands, the very spirits beneath them call to me, addressing me in names I do not remember. I have been there before! Such thoughts threaten my resolve daily.” Searcher admitted.

“Then perhaps we are similar. The inevitability of some higher power crushes both of us.” Haverson said.

“Perhaps there is a shared solution as well.” He said, drawing his sword. “Let us both be done with this place, and its ties. Let us not be husks of men walking aimlessly through the world. Perhaps through one final act, we can regain our agency?” Haverson said, conspiratorially holding out his sword to Searcher, the familiar nausea rising inside him again.

But Searcher shook his head. “Were it only so easy.” He said. “Listen to these words, for I believe they may hold truth to you as well. Lets say you were to fall upon your blade, or me to do so, could you say with any conviction that our curses would not follow us!?” He said, slamming his hand against his chest.

“I have talked to the most powerful acolytes of Geremon and they have no such assurances. They admit they do not even know whether he would take me. And would that not be an even worse fate? To be truly deathless, drifting unnoticeable among this world unable to change anything, while the same feeling you have now tortures you constantly? No. I will stay here in the land of the living. And you should too, for your own sake.”

Haverson nodded somberly, the thought of become some sort of wraith, constantly reminded of that event far surpassed the current crushing feeling he felt.

“Then what is there to do? For either of us?” Haverson asked, somehow even more depressed, his one option seemingly taken away from him.

“For now? Should we both wish to escape the prison of death, we must both run. Soon.” Searcher warned. The tent collapsed, and Searcher rolled it up in one fluid motion. The dissonance of the two stories, wrenched from both of the two men with the now abrupt sense of fear struck Haverson, who simply sat in confusion.

Haverson saw now that Searcher had broken camp. All of the other man's belongings were attached to his person, held in place by the straps he had procured earlier. The tent and the bedroll were fastened on his back.

“What do you mean?” Haverson asked. “I… I wish to talk to you more.” He said.

“And me to you. But that is not meant to be. I suppose there are facts about my presence not in the legends. Quick. I sense them. Kick that fire out. I have tarried too long, finally able to share my story with someone. But we may be able to escape them yet.”

“Escape them? Escape who? The southerners? They should not have been able to make it this far so soon.” Haverson exclaimed, preparing his scant equipment as well.

“I don't know.” Searcher said. “They follow me wherever I go, and certainly wish me harm. Although they normally go for me, in the past they have also harmed the people near me as well. It certainly has kept me on my toes.”

“Then let us fight them!” Haverson cried out, spinning left then right, looking for any intruders.

“Oh. Haverson. I can't fight.” Searcher admitted. “And they come in groups of three. All of them silent killers in black. I simply run. They give up for some reason after a night of chasing.”

“This is crazy.” Haverson said, stomping at the fire.

“It is. Perhaps there needs to be more lines added to the stories. But quickly, before they come. There is something additional I must tell you. There is a man who lives alone in a strange building far to the north. I was surprised to see someone so alone in such a place, for it is on the edge of the earth, where the land itself drops away to the great ocean on one side and rises to imposing ice covered peaks on the other. But simply follow the coast and you cannot miss it.”

“What? Who is this person and why would they help?” Haverson asked.

“They were interesting. I forget their name, as I forget so many others, but I have the feeling his name is the least important thing about him. He is a man of some sort, who inside of him carries the same emptiness as that I found in the ice tower in the wastes. Perhaps different than the one inside you or I. But he has a philosophy that is intriguing as it is deadly. Seek him out.”

“I...” Haverson started. But the other man took one look down the hill and startled. “Too long! Forgive me Haverson. I hope that we will meet again. And I hope that I remember your name when we do. If not please remind me of the things we talked about…. And if you have to, please remind me of her...”

Haverson stuck out his hand. Searcher shook it leaving a satchel of food in Haverson's palm, but even as he did so, he was already turning to run.

Haverson shook his head as the other man sprinted off into the woods. He quickly remembered the man's warning and looked down the hill where Searcher had gazed moments ago. Sure enough, several black shapes were climbing up the hill. Although they stood out against the recent falling snow, they kept to the edges of the forest, where their black clothing did not betray their presence as much as it should have.

Haverson took one look at the very incriminating fire and started running north.

Branches tore at his face, and the snow was coming down in almost blizzard-like conditions, flying into his eyes, blinding him.

He felt like a hunted beast, crashing through the forest. One look backwards confirmed his feelings. Broken branches and too clear footsteps were like a massive arrow pointing out his direction. One part of him swore at Searcher. The other man had used him as bait!

Once or twice he had thought of holding his ground at some hill or another, but despite the talk they had, the emptiness and nausea that hit him when he reached, or even thought about reaching for his weapon was almost overwhelming. So he ran on.

The black figures also showed no sign of slowing. He even saw them once or twice, hidden within the twisting shadows of the now ascending full moon. By the way they moved, and the fact that Haverson could not even see them at most times meant that they were professionals.

Whatever Searcher had done to incur their wrath, Haverson had no intention of confronting them.

So the two parties ran over the frozen ground from hill to hill as the land grew more and more mountainous. Subconsciously, he had apparently taken Searcher's advice about the man on the coast since he found himself making towards the Wave King's Gap, the way through the mountains to the north west of the capitol rather than east towards Dor's Crag, or north to the Fartherners domain.

But he was in no shape to make such a journey, especially not after such shattering revelations, whose implications even now plagued his mind as he ran. There was no way he would outrun these men.

And so, the fact that they still remained the same distance off was somewhat disturbing, until Haverson realized that they were studying him, his movement, his weapons, his endurance. They were playing with him! They knew as well as he that there was nothing within miles of their position. There were no caravans, or merchants or outposts.

And so, finally, when his chest burned, and his breath came ragged, and the wind and its ice tore at his face ascending a particular hill, he finally came to a stop. This was as good a place as any. To his back were thick brambles and then forest. He stood on an outcropping covered with snow, almost two inches deep now. It would only become worse, and his boots were not well suited for such travel. This was as good a place as any to die.

He turned to face the shadows.

They were at the edge of his vision, keeping with their strategy of following near the forest whenever possible. Haverson counted four of them and cursed Searcher's name.

The closest of them eagerly sprinted for him, while the other three seemed to hang back and keep to the shadows. He could make out the first one's face, or at least the tiny bit of it that wasn't wrapped in back cloth. He thought he could make out either black or dark brown hair. He was armed with a slim blade which he now carried. He was wearing simple black cloth, unless he had mail on underneath.

“Searcher. We have you at last.” The man said approaching Haverson. Haverson could see to his surprise that the man was younger than him, maybe in his late teens. From his accent, the group or at least this young man was most likely Southerners.

“You fool. He has deceived us both.” Haverson said, a tiny part of him hoping he could talk his way out of the situation.

“It seems so. They said he never wore a weapon, but I was so sure… Ah. Well.” The man approached threateningly, and Haverson saw with a sinking feeling that the others had split and were closing in to his left and right on the ridge of the hill. The third was missing, no doubt doubling around to approach from behind him. Professionals indeed.

Readying himself, Haverson drew his weapon. He felt the same nausea slam into his stomach and he gritted his teeth to keep from calling out.

“Wounded? This will be easy then. Think of it as a mercy.” The other man said in a voice that dripped with hate and yet still communicated some sick kind of pleasure in what he was about to do.

The two meet blades, but Haverson could tell instantly that it was not even close to a fair match. He was tired from running, had not quite recovered from his experience and dogged with that damn nausea. Furthermore, he wasn't even using a good blade. The thing was poorly balanced and almost worthless.

They met once or twice, the other man flitting around Haverson's defenses, cutting his forearms and thighs with small attacks. The man was playing with him. He took a quick glance to either side. The other men were watching the fight. The third had approached from behind him, like he had guessed. However, they did not help the younger man.

“Is this some sick audition? I will not be trifled with!” Haverson swore, redoubling his attack. He couldn't even touch the man. Each attack was swiftly and effortlessly parried. The man made no effort to even dodge any of his attacks.

“Are you satisfied old man?” The opponent sneered. “First or not, this man is broken.”

The man behind him sighed. “I suppose you are right.” The voice came out distorted through some sort of spell.

As the other man spoke, Haverson saw his chance. He could not hope to actually hit his opponent, but if the other man were lazy enough…

He took a half step forward and swung the rusted sword with all the strength he had at the other man. Like Haverson expected, his blade was met with his opponents. However this was exactly what he had been expecting. The old rusted sword was so nicked and scarred that Haverson had felt its core give way two parries prior, now the sword finally snapped, the fragment continuing forward.

The other man's eyes widened in hate, and he ducked almost supernaturally fast. However, he couldn't keep the flying piece from nicking his uniform and drawing a tiny amount of blood as it went past.

The other man's eyes bulged and he stared down at the insignificant wound.

“You dare...” He spat.

Haverson almost instantly regretted his decision. He felt a foot connect with his stomach faster than he could react. And it was all too much, the nausea and the foot together. He collapsed, bent over and vomited violently, the heated contents melting the snow by the opponent's feet.

“And you would sully my boots as well? Cretinous wretch.” The man approached rapidly but there was nothing Haverson could do.

One of the other men took a step forward. Haverson could head the boot crunching against the ground.

“Stop old man. You said this was my night.” The young man said.

Haverson felt a searing flame appear in his shoulder and cried out. Only when he looked to the side at the blood covered snow did he realize he had been stabbed. Thin beads dropped into the pristine whiteness.

A cry escaped from Haverson's mouth and he collapsed to the ground in his own retching. The ignominy of this was not lost on Haverson and he regretted that it was probably the last thought that would go through his head.

“Uriah. Stop. We had orders not to kill any of the First.” One of the other men said.

“The impudence of this man!” The sadist apparently called Uriah replied. “I care not for pathetic orders or pathetic men.”

“And this is why I refuse to let you into our order.” The other man said.

“Ha. You fear my blade, as should everyone. You are an old man Declan, with similarly old and outdated concepts of how to run this cell. Should you have been on the Northern side, it would most likely been you lying in his own vomit, bleeding.”

There was a pause and then a strange noise like a swift exhale.

Suddenly there was a subtle cracking noise, and Haverson heard Uriah screaming in pain.

“You are scum Uriah. And were it not for my superiors I would have killed you long ago.”

Uriah stopped screaming but Haverson could almost feel the other man's rage.

“We will leave this man be. If he can survive what happened to the First and the wound you just gave him in this wilderness then he deserves his own life.”

Uriah made a nervous whimpering sound of agreement. “And if you speak my name near a mark ever again, I will run my blade so far through your black filthy heart that it will come out the other side. Do you understand me you pathetic shit?”

Uriah made another sound of agreement.

“Fine then. We've lost valuable time to your hunch. The night is no longer yours. But with any luck we can still find Searcher before sunrise. Lets go!” he yelled.

Their footsteps crunched swiftly down the hill.

Just as he was going to try to crawl to his feet, he heard someone move near him. One of them had apparently not left.

Haverson braced himself for the final strike.

“Here.” The man said. Because of the distortion, Haverson could not tell which one of them it was, but he guessed it was the one called Declan. Something hit the ground near Haverson.

“My hands are bound, and he'll likely be the death of me, but should you survive this, that boy's name is Uriah Morin and he lives in the Southern Capital. Presumably by the time you get there he will have made many enemies. I hope you survive long enough to face him again Northerner.”

Then this man too left at a swift pace.

Haverson chanced rising quickly as to try to catch a glimpse of what Declan looked like, but the man was already gone. Pain radiated through his shoulder, and Haverson slumped backward onto his back, supported by the outcropping.

Weakly he looked to his side. There was an additional pack that the man had dropped. Inside were some survival tools, likely taken from his own equipment: flint, bandages, some suture equipment, a small knife, some food and an additional waterskin.

Haverson looked to his shoulder and decided that he would probably live if he treated it tonight. After a few moments of excruciating pain and bone chilling cold, he managed to clean the wound and at least arrest the flow of blood. He would sew it shut before he went to sleep. But a fire was the second priority.

This he managed as well, but just barely. He closed up most of the wound and collapsed.

For the first time since the event, his dreams were devoid of what had happened and when he woke, he almost relished the biting pain of his half frozen limbs. At least feeling meant he was still alive.

He left the sword where it lay and walked slowly north along the coast.