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. He knew that craftmanship. 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.

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 soluation 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 infinitly 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 impatiance. He hastily grabbed the sword, wincing as the nasuea hit him. Letting out an breif 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 notived 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 of the line 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. Everthing in its propper 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 whther 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 pronuncement.” 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, expresionless.

“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 nessesarily 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 ”