The siege for the capitol was over. The south had retreated to emplacements the north had built the previous year. This irony was not lost on them. Most Northerners liked to believe the Southerners were driven back, but perhaps only a few admitted that the southerners had simply lost the will to fight.

It was now the counter strike. Under the command of the new Supreme Commander Durand, a new attack had commenced in the hinterlands. But for now the conflict was still far away.

For now, a wet wind blew through the pines, making them creak and groan. There were no animals around, and travelers walked briskly and avoided eye contact with one another, their foul weather cloaks drawn tightly around themselves. It was impossible to say that the conflict hadn't affected the north, even for those not close to the actual fighting.

And so, when others spied the pair sitting together by a large fire, tucked away on the side of the road, they walked straight by. And in doing so, they walked past an ageless immortal and a former First Sargent, arguably the finest blade master in the north.

Meridia lay back away from the fire, eyes running over Searcher.

The man looked uncomfortable for a moment but decided to return the gaze. Meridia was solidly built, and could never have been called beautiful, those who were forced to give a reason might point to her squarish jaw and snub nose, but there was an undeniable fierceness to her that one could not overlook.

Adding to this was a strange tattoo which snaked its way around her neck in the shape of a clenched fist, as if the tattoo itself were strangling her.

She currently wore heavy armor, a solid cast breast plate which gave way to overlapping plates around her torso, a strange and complicated affair seldom seen in the northern armory, as Searcher understood.

Her hair was white, and currently disheveled in the rain. She did not seem to be someone to care deeply about personal appearances, especially judging by some darker smudges on her armor, which Searcher supposed could have been blood. When she saw him looking at the spots, she casually wrapped her heavy cloak around her body, hiding them from view.

“Meridia you said your name was?” Searcher asked.

The female soldier took a swig from a canteen and wiped her mouth.

“Yes, and you're the legendary Searcher right?”

He nodded, expecting her to say more, but was taken aback when she neither instigated conversation nor looked like she expected Searcher to speak either.

The wind suddenly took up in a fierce blow, wiping the fire around.

Meridia scowled and crouched by it for a moment, blocking the wind. Then she added some dry wood she had been carrying in a skin.

“What are you doing?” Searcher asked.

She regarded him pointed south. “Orders. The attack on westfield is due.”

“This road doesn't head south. It heads west and east.” Searcher pointed out.

But Meridia shook her head. “Who said I was taking the road? I like to travel alone, and I can get there quicker by going through the hinterlands.”

“Do you know the way? A can draw a map. I've been back and forth through there many times. But I must admit, most stay to the road.”

“I'll take your map, just to be amiable, but I'm sure I have no need for it. There is nothing in those hills that can slow me.”

Her self assuredness surprised Searcher and he rocked back on his seat. He had been surprised when the woman had sat down by his fire uninvited, but now he was starting to understand the woman, he realized that brazen acts were probably common.

A part of his mind lit as he thought.

“Wait, you said Meridia right?”

She raised an eyebrow causing oilly sliver hair to tumble down from where it had been plastered. “For the second time, yes.”

Well then it all made sense. “Meridia of the First?”

“Formerly. Why do you ask?”

“I have met someone who knew your name. It was… Haverson maybe?”

For the first time, there was a moment of hesitation in her response, but Searcher could not tell which emotion ran through her at that time. The moment passed briefly, and her eyes focused back on him.

“Yes. I knew him.”

“And is that why you are here? Last I saw him, he headed to the far north.” Searcher said, pointing north west towards the distant coast. “But that must have been more than a year ago.”

“No, when I do not have orders, I simply go where I feel like going. I feel drawn sometimes to one place or another.”

It was Searcher's turn to raise his eyebrows. “I suppose I know the feeling.” He admitted.

“I'm sure you do. We are both here are we not, even as others walk blindly by?” She said, gesturing to a bedraggled traveler marching quickly past them, futility holding a cloak over their head. “The Lady of Secrets weaves her mysterious strands does she not?”

“You believe in her?” Searcher said, surprised. Most Northerners, especially as of late were becoming a cynical bunch, and the Lady of Secrets since time immemorial had never actually displayed any real proof of even existing. Needless to say she commanded very few follows as of late.

“I do.” Meridia said. “There is no other way to explain things. And what about you, immortal? Are you a follower?”

Searcher was again taken aback. Mostly people wanted to know about his journeys, his past lives and the people and places he'd seen, not his theological beliefs.

“I am not. Although I suppose its possible she exists. To be honest, if you were to forgive my heresy, I have been around long enough, even with my scattered memory, to not trust any of the gods. They don't exactly like me for some reason.”

“Perhaps its the immortality.”

“Perhaps.” Meridia responded.

“No, my only god is my feet, and my only prayers are to the future: when I will finally find what I am looking for.”

“How poetic.” Meridia said, sarcastically, crossing her feet. “And that has brought you here?” She asked.

“Yes,” he nodded, “I felt drawn, as I always do. This time the desert to the west...”

“But here first?” She said, leaning forward slightly. Her eyes periced, and she awaited his response.

What was she getting at? “Yes. But simply because this is the easiest way of getting there. Plus I can travel through the Old Elven to get there. I always enjoyed that land.”

“Well then, willing or not, you are a follower of the Mysterious One, for our paths have intersected. It is as it should be, you know. Immortal or not, we all have our place among the threads.”

“Are you implying this meeting was predestined? I have never encountered anything I can remember that substantiates that hypothesis. Even the most powerful mages are unable to see the future.” Searcher said, scratching his head.

“Not predestined. Just in its own place. It fits among the threads.”

“Err, so you say...” Searcher said, trying to think of a reason to go back to his tent. His last encounter with a devote believer had not gone well. He had been force to run, like so many times in the past. Did the Unknowable One exist? Probably not.

A figure caught his eye along the road. The man was significant for some reason, stirring a memory deeper in Searcher's head than he could recall clearly.

Meridia looked up when the man got close, but made no move to stop him, even as he approached their fire. Two uninvited strangers in one day? What were the chances? Well, it was raining…

Wait. That was no stranger.

Haverson sat down in one swift motion and stared blankly at the other two. “Meridia. Searcher. Very interesting.” He said in a dead pan.

Meridia's self assured demeanor slipped away. Searcher stammered. What were the chances?

“You're alive!” Meridia stated.

“I am.” Haverson replied, removing his pack and setting it down next to him.

“W...where have you been?” she stammered. “Last winter… the catastrophe. I just assumed...”

“No. I survived. But barely. And only with the help of some villagers. And perhaps Searcher here, whom I have been tracking these lack couple of days.” He said, studying Searcher.

Although the words he said implied praise, they came out flat, as if stating facts rather than displaying thanks.

“Me?” Searcher asked, touching his finger to his chest. The rain seemed to die down some, but the weather decided to make up for it with the wind, which, even accosted by the many trees around them, roared incessantly.

“Yes. You. You told me of the Master, and showed me a path for my future, when you ran off, leaving me with those assassins.”

“Ah… well… So the Master was still there?” Searcher asked, noting that Meridia ached to speak.

“He was. And he saved me from myself. Unfortunately, word of the military situation came to us, even in that solitude. I could not stand by and let the North fall. I have reenlisted.”

Meridia shook her head. “Master? This person somehow helped with the effects of that...” She half asked, turning in her armor to face Haverson fully. The last time Searcher had seen him, he had been broken and sobbing, about to do himself in: now it was like he was a completely different person. Haverson's eyes were narrowed, and his body bore several additional scars on his hands and face.

He had… compacted somehow, as if he had shrunk inside himself, yet at the same time becoming harder. Searcher looked to Haverson's waist and saw that the old useless sword the man had when they last parted had been replaced. Instead, there was a nondescript stright sword hanging from his belt.

But besides the physical differences, the part of Haverson that had seemed to change the most was his eyes. Even by the fire Searcher could stare into the unnaturally large irises and sense that something profound had happened…

The darkness in those eyes. It was familiar to him. Memories stirred. Rustled. Bit and pieces of forgotten experience whirled in his brain as he stared into those eyes, and he recalled his conversation with Haverson from the last time. He, Searcher had told Haverson of the lands past the far north.

And lo, he was there again. The wind slicing through his great cloak like blades, cutting at the skin underneath. The world was perpetually dusk, although the sun was supposed to have risen not two hours ago. Unnatural sounds issued from the ground below his feet, screams and groans of some alien force; the shifting ice breaking apart and reforming before his eyes.

In front of him, within a days journey lay the tower, stretching upward, surreal in its smoothness and in the way it simply rose from the ice around it. A bastion amid a sea of unstable ice, its featureless expanse rose far taller than any tower built by man.

And Searcher knew he could never reach it. For even as his feet moved, one right after another, even in the beginning of the day, the shadows were too dark, and cast at entirely the wrong angles. Shelves of frozen water groaned in front of him and suddenly jutted upwards, arresting his path. Although nothing substantial confronted him following this ascension, Searcher could feel a palpable sensation that he was not wanted here.

And yet he had to. His curse drove him forward. He could feel whatever it was before him; in that tower lay secrets not gazed upon by mortal eyes. And they called to him, a siren song which rose above the wind and the biting cold. And so, even as he stared into the shelves of ice, and to his horror saw that the pale light of day could not manage to pierce their dark and translucent depths, he prepared himself to climb the newly created obstacle.

It had continued like this for the better part of two days, the distance multiplying with every jagged ice wall and every gaping crevasse.

He came to dread the night more than anything physical in that whole land. Now he could sense shapes moving just outside his vision, always slipping back into the shadows when he turned his head. He could now longer even hope to make a fire, the wind was ever present and howled at him, screaming at him to turn around.

But it was a full two days later, when the night seeped his sanity and he saw things moving even during the day, when his clothing was in tatters and his food long gone, when he was able to stare at the Tower more closely, and perceive its true scale and meaning that he was forced to turn back.

It was featureless and seeming not carved, but existent, of ice as if it had always sat there, and would always do so into the infinity of the future. At its core, now perceptible to Searcher, even as far as he was, was the deepest darkness that he had ever felt in his life.

And yet, darkness did not describe it, for darkness lay *on* other things a two dimensional construct, draping around them, covering them, changing them. This was different. This was the lack of anything, a non dimensional concept more than an actual physical reality. It was a void. And paradoxically, it was the core of this tower. It lay in the ice, as a perversion of the very waters it sat on. It lay about him in the wind. It reached out without any indication of intelligence, but merely one of diffusion, and seeped into him.

Searcher had screamed into the wind at this point. And hoped, and wished, and pleaded that his curse deliver him from this existence. But as it became clear that even without food, without shelter, and even frozen solid, he still lived, at last he simply pleaded that he forget this moment.

And it seemed that his curse refused even that tiny favor, for the memory now came back fresh and raw, extruding itself from Haverson's eyes, now empty holes, the lack of anything. What lurked in there was truly the void he had seen.

If Haverson or Meridia saw anything change after Searcher's moment of realization, they did not react. However, Searcher suddenly became very nervous. The man in front of him was barely a man at all. He had to consciously keep himself from recoiling.

Meridia was asking something to Haverson.

“Haverson. Something seems different about you. Its hard to place, but I'm not sure I like it.”

“I'm sorry to hear that Meridia. There was a certain amount of sacrifice to the Master's process.”

“Sacrifice?” She asked suspicious. The wind died for a moment, leaving only the sound of their voices in the forest. There were no more people on the road, and the road itself had turned into a muddy mockery of what it once was.

“Sacrifice.” Haverson repeated. “In order to rid my mind of the curse the catastrophe afflicted on me, there was a certain amount of collateral. The Master does not deal in halves. His philosophy is an all or nothing thing. Complete submission is necessary in order to achieve enlightenment: the abandonment of the self, and through this process, the understanding of the Whole. That is the Truth I have gained Meridia.”

Meridia listened to what Haverson said, but when he finished, again in a completely flat voice, devoid of emotion, she spat at the ground. “That sounds like cultist talk. What have you gotten caught up in Haverson? And would you so easily submit to this mind destruction just to rid yourself of a few moments of pain?” She said, lashing out at him. “Let me tell you something.”

“It seems it *can* be endured, and I am living proof. It is a constant battle for me, against its vile force, but let me tell you, even now when night sets, and the darkness sets in, and invariably thoughts turn to oblivion, I have found my own Truth. And that Truth is in understanding, no, knowing, invariably the limits of human will. I have fought this damn thing for a year now, and I can tell you its power fades!”

At this point Searcher was having a bit of trouble understanding what was going on between the two, but he could at least surmise it had to do with the catastrophe Haverson had related to him first hand and its effects. However, it seemed that the two soldiers, former friends, had found completely different ways of dealing with its power.

“It fades...” Haverson repeated to himself, as if trying to understand the words.

“Yes. It fades. I can feel it. Perhaps not every day or every week, or even every month, but as the months turn to seasons and they in turn have turned to a year, I can feel the change. Its grip has lessened. It is a thing that can be fought! And thus I shall. It is the unquestionable rightness of each individual to understand their place in this world, each life and each decision an inter-meshing, seemingly chaotic conjunction of the threads that bind the world to its fate.”

And this time it was Haverson who betrayed a bit of emotion, just a small almost unnoticeable frown, but the argument was heated, and Meridia saw it, as did Searcher, who had nothing better to do than to watch the two argue.

“Fate? Is that what you truly believe? Was it fate that killed the First, our friends? Was it fate that I am standing here, that us three found one another?”

“Yes. The Lady understands and controls the world from beyond, the only true god in this world. It is everyone's duty to understand their function in that world, and in that fate.”

“I do not believe.” Haverson said. “There is, and to my knowledge there has never been any sign, or evidence or her existence.”

“It does not matter. If you do not believe, it is because it is not your fate to believe. And when you finally do, as all men will, that will be your fate as well.”

“Was that a threat?” Haverson asked.

“No.” Meridia responded, shrugging her shoulders, “Simply a Truth.”

“Now you are mocking me. I cannot understand how can believe in such a god, when no proof of her actually exists! Meridia, even the Sea King and Uzerai make their presences known. The explanation is simple. She does not exist.”

Meridia arched her head upwards into the damp night air and covered her mouth with her hand, seemingly to restrain her exasperation. Her tattoo and her hand clasped together.

“Haverson. That is the point.” She said, angrily. “Life is not about what is. This world is but a pale reflection of the true future that the Lady plans for each of us. Life is about faith! You talk about understanding: then understand this, if you have survived to this point it is because you believed in yourself, you had faith in that, in your ability to survive, you understood that such a death was below you, just as I have.”

But Haverson shook his head. “By your logic, I must admit, I understand nothing. I survived because of chance and nothing else. Meridia, things just happen. They follow their laws and rules of this universe, and it all just happens. There is nothing extra: no overarching plot, no benevolent force, just the actions of each man…. I… I must speak my mind.” He said clearly torn. “There is no reason not to. To withhold is to be selfish, to expunge is to be selfless...” He recited to himself.

“My speech must appear heretical, but Meridia, the gods: they are just as much children as us. They stumble blindly through the world, making their decisions on imperfect information as we all do. I can't believe anything other than that. I hope you don't think I don't respect you. Although I never agreed with your beliefs...”

“Haverson.” Meridia said, sadly, cutting him off. “I did not reject your advances because your didn't respect me. It was clear that you did. I did so because you did not respect *yourself*. And now you have gone and destroyed yourself.” She said, not in an accusatory manner, as her previous comments had been, but instead with a not insignificant amount of despair. Her head now bowed forward.

But then something turned over in her mind and she jerked upward suddenly. “Or have you? You are still here no? You have not killed yourself yet as part of this nihilistic cult.”

“The Master's philosophy does not require death, simply the death of earthly attachments.”

Meridia frowned. “Then why are you here? You said much earlier that you were tracking Searcher. Does that not imply you wanted something? Or needed something? Does that not imply that you still have earthly attachments?” Meridia said, accusatory again.

But Haverson shook his head. “It is true that I was looking for Searcher. It is true that I still have earthly attachments. I have destroyed my past. It has gone into the void. But it seems that I could not relinquish everything. Be hopeful then, Meridia. Part of me yet lives. I left my studies early.”

“And which part of you is that?” She said, in a tone of manner that implied that Haverson's melodrama had now exceeded the theological talk that they had engaged in.

“My future: Revenge. A flame among the void. Searcher is the link, I believe. Those men that follow him. They are undoubtedly part of the Southern spy organization. I must follow it to the top and I will find the man responsible for the catastrophe.”

“Well then.” Searcher interjected, “you be delighted to know that it is now night. They will be coming.”

Meridia nodded, and seemed to consider the armor she was wearing. The conversation was apparently over.

They waited in silence for a moment.

“I apologize. I did not mean for you two to be caught up in this.” He said, moving towards his tent.

“No.” Haverson said, turning towards Searcher. Even though he merely spoke the word, there was something in the way he did so that sent chills down Searcher's spine.

“I have to get moving.” He said, backing away from Haverson, almost apologetically.

“You have no need to be worried.” Meridia said, getting to her feet and checking her sword. “Haverson and I can stop them. You need not run this time Searcher.”

He nodded nervously but sat back down, glancing into the shadows of the trees.

“They will not come from that direction.” Meridia said.

Haverson looked at her for a moment, then agreed.

“What do you mean?” Searcher asked, somehow getting more nervous.

“Well, not the main group. Or at least that’s not what I would do. Downed branches? Unfamiliar with the terrain? No, it would actually be more silent to approach along the road, right along the edge near the underbrush, where you can't see them.”

“One of them will come from here though. Last time I saw them, they enveloped me quite effectively.” Haverson said, glancing at a pale white scar that ran an inch or two down his shoulder.

“They will not expect us.” Meridia said, quite assured of herself. “They don't understand the weaves of fate the same way I do. They will expect you to be alone Searcher, as you usually are.”

“That is probably correct, but I doubt it has anything to do with fate. After all, I am only here because I was asking about Searcher's whereabouts.”

Meridia shrugged. “Whatever you wish to believe. However, that gives me an idea. We can lie in wait. Let us give them exactly what they expect.”

It sounded like a good plan objectively to Searcher, although it would essentially leave him as bait. No matter, he mused, he somewhat trusted these people and he had outran the agents before.

But Haverson stood as well and shook his head. “Another life, I would have agreed with you. But time is short now. There is no need for such tactics. In fact, if they are approaching on the road, I believe we should simply take a walk.”

Meridia's eyebrows raised. “You trust your skills that much, to give up the element of surprise?” She asked.

“You shall see. Searcher. Will you come with us? I must determine that they are the same type of agents I saw before. They should react when they see you. If they suspect there are too many strangers about, I wouldn't be surprised if they were to vanish for a day.”

“I don't feel good about this.” Searcher said, looking back at his equipment. “Perhaps you can just...”

“Come on you spineless immortal.” Meridia laughed, rounding the fire and standing over him. “Come on. I want to see Haverson walk after he has talked so much.”

“But...” Searcher began.

Haverson turned to him, the emptiness in his eyes looming, no reflection of the fire shining from them, despite him standing near.

“You spoke of a tower.” He said simply.

Searcher jerked back, causing Meridia to look at the other two in interest.

“I saw it.” Haverson said. “Or felt it. I saw it in the mind's eye. It is hard to explain. Did you even try to follow the master's philosophy? I feel like you would have learned much.”

“You know I could not Haverson. All I am is memories. Were I to go down that route I would be nothing, less than nothing. It would be a worse fate than for my half recollections of her to be lost, for I would have done it to myself, and I suspect that I would not even care.” Searcher said.

Meridia scratched her nose.

“If you help me, I will go with you to that place, you shall see that the shadows will not touch us. We will both learn from that journey.”

Searcher looked up intently. “I suppose I agree. You know me well Haverson. There is no way I could say no to such an offer, assuming you are telling the truth about the shadows.”

“I have no reason to lie. Come. We have some agents to surprise.” He said, extending a hand to Searcher.

In another nauseous moment of realization, Searcher somehow got the feeling that the extended hand was a calculated movement in an effort to assuage his concerns. He shook his head, but accepted the hand. The curse called to him strongly, and he had to answer.