Theron's eyes opened slowly, his first thoughts docile, and his breathing and pulse relaxed. It was a welcome respite not to be shaken back to consciousness by his nightmare for once. Light flooded all around him to cast a golden veil over the world, and for a moment he simply lay where he was, trying to savour the moment.

It was no use. Serenity had escaped him long since, left behind in times past, before he had been forced to grow harder and forget such contentment existed.

He rose onto one elbow, taking in his surroundings. The fire from the previous night had burned out completely, leaving only charred remains of the wood he'd thrown into the brazier, stained sooty black. The remnants lent a soft and strangely homely scent of charcoal to the room, permeating even through the damp mould and his own sorry stench. He was alone, the only sign of Athena the broken dust over the floor where she had bedded down next to him, her blankets now absent.

Theron rolled over, and pushed himself up to his knees. Where the pair had hung their clothes to dry last night he could see only his own coat and threadbare trousers. Rubbing the mist from his eyes with one hand, the other pulling his hair into a ponytail and away from his face, he shook off the last vestiges of slumber before rising to his feet to go in search of his companion.

It was quiet outside, the only sound the faint rustling of the nearby trees as an early springtime wind tickled their leaves. The sun was even brighter, richly bathing the scene and warm on his skin. During the bleak times of the Century Wars he might have considered this peace a paradise, as far from the misery and bloodshed as could be.

Athena was still nowhere to be seen, her absence unusual and disconcerting. Throughout their time together on the roads, Theron had rarely awoken after her, his nightmares tearing him from a tormented slumber most nights. In his experience, she had never gone to forage or scout the land in the early morning.

Walking around the perimeter of the dilapidated building, eyes scanning the horizon in all directions, Theron could feel his heart sinking. Placing his hands around his mouth like a funnel, he tilted his head back and called her name, turning to face a different direction each time he repeated it. The name was elongated by his elevated voice, turning the final syllable into a drawn-out note which cut through the silence.

No answer came.

Theron continued his path, still shouting. By the time he had made his way back to the door, it was the voice of a man keening for a loved one, body wracked with grief.

Just as he had been betrayed before, so he had been again.

His first reaction was to give in to anger, seizing a rusty axe he saw half buried in the dirt, and taking it to a nearby tree. He fiercely hammered the iron blade over and over into the bark until his arms ached and sweat drenched his clothes, the aged tool's blunt edge denting and splintering the wood instead of cutting cleanly.

Eventually, even the mighty oak could sustain his assault no longer, and it mercifully toppled away from him, not crushing the shack by luck more than any judgement. As he stood next to the stump, breath ragged from screaming and exertion both, ears ringing from the sound of the dull metal cutting into the tree, Theron felt hopelessly impotent. He had run out of the yard, and attacked the tree like a child venting its anger for a broken toy, not a grown man.

The realisation stole his fury and reduced him to his knees, crying at the unjustness of the world and what might have been.

In days that followed, Theron worked through his sorrow in isolation, choosing to remain at the shack rather than returning to the road. Initially, he was content to lie to himself and ignore the dread feeling in his gut, hoping against all odds Athena would return and by staying he was simply waiting for her. Yet, as time wore on, even that voice was silenced by cold, hard, reality.

Athena was gone, and with her the final chance for some kind of acceptance in the new world.

She had been the only other soul he had encountered who had experienced the horrors of the wars, and had somehow avoided being turned into a heartless monster, the same as all of the others. The men and women in his regiment, the Skaldic cavalryman, a score of other faces he had seen on the roads, even Mugger. All of them had been changed by the wars, made harder, and dispassionate. Some even worse, turned hateful and callous, like Ferro.

Each of them had left Theron cold. He wasn't like them, his humanity drained to the point of being lost altogether. He couldn't be. It was all keeping him going, and meeting Athena had given him hope he had at last found a kindred spirit.

Yet, he realised Athena's revelation of her past had broken her. Some trauma a person buried so deep as never to be seen, because even speaking of it was gouging a bloody hole in the world, reopening an old wound which should be left well alone.

That had been why she left.

Facing Theron after he had learned her past would have been too hard, knowing he would look at her with sympathy, or even worse, pity. Pity at what she had experienced and understanding, when in reality, Athena likely bore the burden of survivor's guilt and a destructive self-loathing born from it. Why had she survived, when so many of her comrades had succumbed to the Rat Catcher's vile gasses? Had she fled from the walls and left them behind too soon, or just been lucky enough to trap enough clean air in her bolt hole, whilst the others choked on poisonous fumes?

Having someone look at you kindly was an insult to the memory of the dead, and hopelessly infuriating both. Athena left because she didn't want to lash out at Theron, and come to despise him for trying to reach her, nor have to try and articulate her frustration or grief.

As much as her leaving had broken his heart, Theron found that he could respect that. He had his own memories, his own horrors to contend with.

It was always easier to run than it was face them.

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A sudden noise outside woke Theron up, dragging him back to alertness. He sprang to his feet, already reaching for his belt where it lay on the floor next to his trousers. He had a moment in the near darkness to find his bearings, before the wood around the latch on the aged front door splintered as it was kicked in. A tall man burst through, followed by a bulkier figure, their faces difficult to make out now the fire had burnt close to embers. Behind them, Theron could see there was at least one more bandit, waiting.

'Well, what do we have here then, eh? An old soldier?' The taller man spoke, his reedy voice spiteful and mocking.

There was a sharp metallic slither as Theron drew his blade from its sheath, a long knife with a serrated edge on one side. Its size was masked by the gloom, giving him at least one advantage against three assailants. He could see that both of the men inside the shack were armed, their shadows unable to hide the silhouette of their weapons, the third man still a mystery. Theron stepped a pace backwards as the first man advanced, increasing the distance to the figures blocking the light from the doorway.

Suddenly the tall man shrieked a battle cry and launched himself at Theron, both hands holding the hilt of his sword over his head. His raised blade caught the moonlight as he passed a window, reflecting the light and showing its surface to be lousy with spots of rust. Knowing that he couldn't possibly parry the weapon with his own, Theron reacted quickly and threw his body forward, underneath the bandits raised arms so that he was too close to be hit.

He collided with his attacker, the point of his knife easily piercing the man's woollen shirt, and into the flesh beneath. Unlike his opponent, Theron had been diligent in the upkeep of his weapon, keeping it clean and well oiled, and the blade sharp and deadly. As it punctured the skin, warm blood began to flood out over Theron's hand and the floor, the veteran snarling as he twisted the knife and wrenched upwards, cutting an even larger wound. The tall man let loose a bloodcurdling scream, and his sword clattered to the ground. Attack forgotten, he dropped to his knees as Theron tore the knife from his body, hands clasped together over his belly but unable to stop blood welling up between them all the same.

With their accomplice sprawled out on the ground and whimpering pathetically, the other two men eyed Theron cautiously.

'Poor old Patches. Never liked him much anyways. About time we had to stop sharing loot with the bastard.' The sturdy man spoke in crude Valentian, his cruel tone matching his words and the long dagger in his hand. 'You might have saved me a job, soldier.'

Now the final man had stepped into the shack, the moonlight from the doorway lit the scene slightly brighter, revealing him at last. Slight of stature, his face was covered in a wrap which obscured his jawline and hair and lent him a similar appearance to a Sult bandit. He held a short hatchet in his right hand, and stood with a lazy arrogance which betrayed a lack of fighting experience.

Theron knew he might need to exploit that inexperience if he were to survive the night. A tool more suited to cutting wood than fighting could still be deadly, even in the hands of fool.

Slowly the pair advanced on him, their steps moving them as far apart as the small space would allow until they flanked Theron either side, and he couldn't keep his eye on both.

He didn't wait for them to press their advantage, pouncing towards the shorter brigand. His boot went low, aiming a savage kick to the groin which took the inexperienced man by surprise and dropped him on contact, before Theron whirled turned to face his other assailant. His attention returned just in time, the larger man's blade slashing sideways towards Theron. Diving away and in the same direction as the attack, Theron crashed in a heap as he tripped over his first opponent, the man now still and unmoving on the floor.

He made his feet back in time to see the large man stepping over his ally, lips locked into a spiteful grin and eyes full of malice. The bandit kicked at a shape by his foot, and Theron realised he had dropped his knife when he tripped, the weapon now scattering across the floor and into a wall.

Theron could sense the tide turning against him, and changed tact. 'Why are you doing this? I don't have anything for you to steal, look around you!'

'Who said I was a thief, come to steal your precious coppers, soldier? Maybe I just don't like your type. I don't care for heroes.'

'I'm no hero. All I want is to be left alone.'

'Too bad for you then. No state funeral.'

'You want me to leave? So you can have this place for yourself? Is that all scum like you want?' Theron could hear the groaning sounds of the shorter man from behind his assailant. If the brigand intended to attack again, Theron knew he had to goad him into it now, before it became two against one again.

The man laughed. 'All I want is to gut you, soldier.'

He lunged forward, the dagger's point glinting pale silver. Theron stepped out of its path and to the left, fingers on his right hand grasping the man's wrist and twisting violently, whilst his free hand struck upwards with as much force as he could manage. As his open palm hit the larger man's extended elbow, there was a loud snapping sound and the thug yelped, his voice surprisingly high pitched.

Staggering away from Theron on uncertain feet, all resistance fled the bandit, his face pale as he clutched his ruined limb. 'You broke my arm, you bastard!'

His answer was a boot to the chest, driving him backwards into a corner and over the open stairwell leading to the cellar. Arms flailing, the thug overbalanced and disappeared from view, his descent accompanied by splintering sounds as he broke through the steps, and then a sickening and final thud.

Theron barely turned to face the shorter man before the flat head of the hatchet struck him across the jaw, and knocked him sprawling. Face numb, Theron didn't have time to be thankful his opponent had missed with the sharp edge, before he was kicked in the ribs with enough force to be driven backwards across the floor.

Theron rolled with the momentum, avoiding a second kick which sailed through empty air, and allowing him to grab his attacker's leg and drag him to the ground. Before his opponent could retaliate, Theron raised a fist into the air and brought it down into the man's concealed face, striking him across the nose. He was rewarded by seeing his opponent momentarily dazed, and Theron risked scrambling away, reaching for his knife. He didn't know where the hatchet had gone in the darkness, and the close proximity made it poorly suited for the fight regardless.

As his fingers tightened around the soft leather grip, he felt the air driven from his lungs as the man crashed into him with a roar, sending them both down onto the dusty floor once more.

Dirty fingers with broken nails pushed painfully into Theron's swollen jaw, whilst the other hand pinned down his knife hand. Looking up, he saw the lower half of the wrap around his assailant's head had fallen away, revealing his face. A light stubble did little to hide an animalistic sneer stretched over pale skin, eyes glaring balefully from sunken sockets. As Theron stared, the man lunged forward, teeth snapping at him and trying to bite his exposed skin, spittle showering over his neck.

Horror and outrage lent Theron strength, and he tore his knife hand free from the savage's grip, driving the blade into the side of the man's torso in the same movement. As his adversary howled like a dog, Theron stabled again and again, brutally cutting into the meat, and feeling his body warm from the blood gushing over him.

Finally, the man stopped struggling and was still. His fate joined that of the tall bandit, life fled from both bodies in a wet stain on the floor.

Coughing up spit and gasping for air, a breathless Theron struggled to rise to his feet. Slowly he staggered to the stairwell, leaning over to look at the second thug. Past broken wooden slats he lay at the bottom, body twisted at an unnatural angle. His broken neck looked strange and inhuman in the light, a strange expression forever etched over his features.

Theron grimaced, staring around him.

The world he had fought so hard to surround himself with, one without the violence and carnage of the wars had been destroyed. This bloody encounter had reminded him once more of what he had been, and still was, as much as he tried to hide it. Fighting the bandits had been practiced and automatic, too easy to have truly been born of desperate survival. Theron knew better than to lie to himself.

He looked at the last man, the ghoulish figure who had tried to sink his teeth into Theron, one flank now reduced to a bloody pulp. Theron felt as much a monster as his assailant. In the end, he was just the same as all of the others on the roads, those figures he so despised, and denied fraternity with.

It was for the best that Athena had left. He couldn't have stood her seeing him this way.

His breathing now calm, Theron walked to the doorway. Outside, the night was quiet and still, the ascendant moon bathing the land in a ghostly hue. Perhaps out somewhere beyond the fringes of man was the peace which he had lost in this place.

That would be the next path he walked.

Before he left the bloody scene behind him, Theron looked back at the corpses. They had been cowards, unfit to prey upon the strong, and no brothers to him. He found he couldn't help offering them a feral grin as he crossed the threshold, and stepped into the wilderness once more.