

II: What Might Makes

I have never relished the sight of blood, but I did respect its value once. Yet defending the totality of life in this world from armageddon has exacted a heavy price. Blood has become like the rain or the wind. It is nothing to me.

Ferry was barely aware of himself as he smashed his fist into the bandit's face over and over again.

As a riolu, he had spent many mornings laying in the grass as his elders hunted. He'd stared up at the sky, absently transfixed by the shapes of the clouds and their steady passage across the pale blue sky. Now he was similarly entranced by the play of the light through the oak canopy overhead on the bandit's glassy, hazel-rimmed eyes—the way they seemed to look without seeing, just barely hanging onto the last muddy inches of consciousness—and the sharp whipping of his head back and forth with each blow, the neck muscles strained, the teeth and lips slick with blood.

He heard someone calling his name, but it sounded distant, like he was hearing it through a dream. It wasn't until his fist was intercepted mid-swing that he came back to himself.

"Ferry!" Prim shouted. "Ferry, that's enough!"

He blinked hard, suddenly aware of the way his chest was heaving and his tongue was hanging slack as he panted. He wiped his mouth on his wrist and noticed that the blue fur on his knuckles was streaked with glistening red.

The bandit squeezed his eyes shut and let out a small, raspy groan. Ferry pulled himself off of him, disgusted now by the swollen, bloody face.

"Sorry," he mumbled. He inhaled deeply through his nose, feeling his heartbeats in his face.

His eyes meandered to the bandit Prim had dispatched. He almost seemed to be sleeping peacefully. The only sign of a struggle was a tear in his shirt and the welt on his forehead.

"Show some restraint next time," she replied. Her gaze was a little disturbed, but mostly concerned. "The point was to protect this man, not to punish a criminal."

Ferry nodded, feeling dazed and a little ashamed. He couldn't suppress the part of him that craved her approval. But what had he done wrong, anyway? Harmed a criminal who would have killed them?

The merchant they'd saved stepped forward from his wagon and bowed weakly. His wiry limbs didn't seem to match his portly frame. "I thank you from the depths of my heart," he said. Ferry's ears twitched; the man's voice was high and he spoke in a drawn-out, irritating way. "I owe you my life. If there is any way I can repay you..."

“Not necessary,” Prim said, waving a hand. “But for your own sake, you might think to hire some protection next time you’re traveling so close to the frontier. It might not stumble upon you by chance next time.”

“Of course, my lady wandersword,” the merchant said. His smile was strained. Ferry squinted at him and probed his aura, sensing anxiety. Residual stress from the fight, perhaps?

The tauros tied to his wagon snorted and pawed at a patch of grass sticking from the packed-dirt road, tripe tails whipping about wildly like willow limbs in a tempest. The merchant turned his attention to soothing the tauros and securing his wagon.

“No payment?” Ferry whispered.

“Always the material one,” Prim chided. She nudged Ferry out of her way and got on her knees and placed a pair of fingers on his wrist. “Still breathing,” she muttered, and she began to pat the body down. A few rings slid off the knobby fingers and a coin pouch with a heavy sound came from the trousers. The other bandit had similar boons to offer: coins, rings, a necklace, a finely-crafted dagger.

“It’s not right to demand a reward for a rescue,” Prim explained in a low voice, “especially not when there are rewards to be found elsewhere.” She counted the coins under her breath as she poured them into her purse.

“Not bad,” she remarked as the last one tumbled into her purse with a clink. “This should be enough to buy you your own steed. We can finally give poor Scout’s back a break before you break his back.” She chuckled at her own joke.

“Wait, really?” Ferry said, his tail wagging low to the ground and kicking dirt onto his heels. His own steed... That was a luxury he’d never even thought to hope for. He’d be like a real knight of his own accord. “Aren’t you trying to save your money so you can hang your sword up?”

Prim shrugged. “I’m not done training you yet. Especially not if that was any indication.” She gestured at the bruised mess of a bandit. Ferry’s ears lay flat. “Besides, you helped me earn this. And if you break my goat’s back it’ll cost me twice as much.”

There was a strange timbre to Prim’s aura right now—something like joy, something like sorrow, mostly unlike either. He had sensed it a few times before, usually when they spoke about the future. It was almost wistful.

He couldn’t help but feel like that emotion was bigger than him, but he dared to hope a little. It was plain that Prim was weary of the hard life of a wandersword—she’d said as much when they first met. But the thought of her retirement was worrying to him. When she hung up her sword, he would be transferred to some other wandersword, and there were no guarantees that they wouldn’t abuse and degrade him however they saw fit. That seemed to be the default

treatment of mon, by his assessment. Her retirement could turn his life into a living hell, subject to the whims of a cruel and arbitrary master—and unlike his life at the manor, he would not have his family to support him. He wouldn't admit it to her, but privately he wanted nothing more than to stay, for his sake.

"Thank you," he said, perhaps a little too intensely. Prim looked taken aback.

"It's not a big deal." She turned her attention away to the merchant, and just like that her aura changed, replaced with her usual stony resolve.

The merchant was climbing into his wagon now, reins in hand. "You," Prim barked at him. "Are you heading to Lumiose?"

"Yes, my lady wandersword."

"So are we. We'll escort you there."

Anxiety pulsed from the merchant, but he nodded. "Very much appreciated."

Prim clapped Ferry on the shoulder. "We're already behind schedule," she said, gathering Scout's reins. "Let's go." They climbed onto the gogoat's back together and followed the wagon down the road, away from the fallen bandits.

Ferry fell into his thoughts, strangely soothed by the rhythmic rise and fall of Scout's haunches with each step. It was silly for him to wish for Prim to stay with him, he realized, and impractical. Their time together was a single step on his quest, a means to an end. He was here to become strong, to learn what he could from Prim, and there was only so much she could teach him. She was not a part of his greater plans, could not be by his side when he shaped the world to his will.

One way or another, they were always going to part ways. Perhaps it was easier if she left him of her own accord.

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Ferry was tiring of failure. He looked at his hands with frustration, imagined them engulfed in blue flame. Had that night really happened?

Scout hopped over a puddle, jerking Ferry a few inches into the air. His backside hit the gogoat's backside hard and a lump formed in his throat.

He took another deep breath in, tuning into his aura but distancing himself enough from it that he didn't spiral as he had on that night with the zoroark. He pushed the memory out of his mind and radiated his aura out from his core to each part of him, standing his hairs on end and

tingling his ears and his fingers and his toes. He could feel each heartbeat, every muscle, even the flow of his blood. He drew another deep breath, focusing all his aura into his right fist, and when his lungs were at capacity he thrust his arm out, willing the aura out with it.

He cracked one eye open. Again, nothing.

The sun was approaching its zenith now, but the mossy, intertwined limbs of the oak canopy hanging over the road protected them from the worst of its rays. The merchant's wagon was rolling onward a fair ways ahead. Perhaps his aura sense was overloaded and blurry from the meditation, but Ferry thought he sensed something strange about the auras around the wagon.

"Still at it back there?" Prim asked, voice lilted with amusement.

"I can't just give up on it," Ferry said, rotating back around so he faced forward. Fortunately, he'd become accustomed enough to riding on Scout's back that he didn't need to hug Prim from behind anymore to stay aboard.

"It'll come to you on its own time," Prim said. "You just have to be patient. It didn't come to you that night because you willed it to, did it? It just came."

"What do you know about it?" Ferry snapped.

"Nothing," Prim said, shrugging. "You're right. Keep at it, I guess."

Ferry grunted. They rode in silence for a minute, and then Prim spoke up again: "Your fighting has come a really long way, you know. When I met you, that bandit would have taken you down easily. It's not trivial to take down an armed opponent without a weapon of your own."

He looked down at his hands and coiled them into fists. He had little trouble picking objects up, but they had learned quickly that there was a reason lucario didn't wield human weapons. His hands just weren't built for it. It put him at a frequent disadvantage, but he had trained all the harder to make up for it.

"It's not enough," he said, almost a whisper. "I need to be stronger."

"Why?" Prim asked. The question caught him off guard, pushed his brain into a different awareness. His mother's words flashed across his mind, her instructions, her fury.

His mind scrambled to find the right words. Instead, they found a story.

"When I was a riolu, I and the others in my litter were sent out into the woods to hunt pichu, to train us for the day we would have to hunt pikachu instead. The riolu that brought back the most pichu got extra food that night, and the ones that brought back none at all went to bed hungry. Out in the woods, where the master couldn't see, the bigger riolu would steal from the smaller

ones like me, leaving them with nothing. When we banded together, the bigger, stronger riolu banded together too, and we never stood a chance. When we told the master what was happening, he called us liars and beat us. Even though it was unfair, even though it was wrong, we learned to keep our heads down.” He clenched his fists, wishing he could force them to obey. “I never want to be too weak to do what’s right again. If I can just figure this out, I never will be.”

Prim turned around and looked at him with her brows knit, her aura like a stone. “Is that what you think, Ferry?” she asked him, voice gentle. “That if you learn this magic the whole world is going to open up for you?”

“Yes,” Ferry said, trying to ignore her patronizing tone. “This magic is what held my people together. When we had it, we stood against the empire even as the other mon kingdoms fell, and when we lost it, we were conquered. If I can recover it...” He trailed off, feeling he had said too much.

Prim just shook her head. “I hope that for your sake you’re right,” she said. “I don’t know what it is you want, or what you expect, but take it from an old knight like me—strength isn’t everything. One way or another, everyone learns that lesson.”

Not your emperor, Ferry thought. Not my old master. Not the men who conquered my people. But he didn’t say anything, and neither did Prim. The rest of the ride went on in silence. He rolled the same words over and over in his head.

She was wrong.

The people with the strength to dominate others got what they wanted. That was the way of the world. If it could be true for others, it could be true for him.

He didn’t want to rule the world. He only wanted to free his people. His mother had urged him that this was the path to that reality, and even Greyscar had agreed. Such things had been done before—the humans had done it before, long ago. Even he knew that.

She was wrong. She didn’t understand what he wanted, and she never could. Strength would be enough for him.

It had to be.

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The pen they stood in was a disaster area—just looking at it was making Ferry’s head spin even more than it already was from the city’s concentrated inundation of auras, and the smell certainly didn’t help either.

“Well, take your pick,” Prim said. She stood at his side, arms akimbo, seemingly unbothered by the stench. Ferry supposed she had spent the last decade or two in proximity to a goat. “Whichever one you want, I’ll buy it.”

Ferry hadn’t exactly envisioned himself riding a mighty warhorse into battle, but he hadn’t expected this, either. He rubbed his temples as he looked at his choices. A pair of mudbray chased each other around the pen, braying playfully and tackling one another into the mud. A lilac-maned ponyta looked on in disgust from the corner, cautious to stand on the straw so as to keep the shaggy purple hair around its hoofs clean. A juvenile tauros lay napping peacefully in a sunbeam.

He assessed his options, placing a paw on his chin thoughtfully. The tauros would rapidly grow too large and ornery for him to handle. He recalled from his time at the manor that mudbray were strong working animals and receptive to training, but they were slow and could be irritable. Ponyta were blazing fast and fiercely protective of their owners, but inferior pack animals and often prideful. He thought he might prefer the reliability of a mudbray, but they were dreadfully dirty, too, and ponyta were meticulously clean... That could go a long way on the road.

“Got a favorite?” Prim asked.

“Not yet,” Ferry said. “I’m thinking a mudbray might be best, but at the same time—”

As he spoke, the playing mudbray tumbled into the napping tauros. The bull stood abruptly, snorting and shaking its head with irritation, and chased the mudbray off. A mon that had been laying behind the tauros was revealed. It was a ponyta, its mane a striking indigo, but this one was cowering in the corner of the pen. When it noticed Ferry’s gaze, it scooted further into the corner frantically, hiding its face against a fence post.

“Oh, that’s the one,” Ferry said breathlessly. He approached it with a smirk, relishing in the way it recoiled with each step. Yes, it was a timid thing now, but that fear could be used to mold it into the most obedient horse in the country. It would grow into a formidable—

“Pardon,” came the voice of the stablekeeper. “There’s another option for your consideration, if you like. She’s a bit high energy, so we keep her separated, but she’s a fine—”

Before the stablekeeper could finish her sentence, the mon came bounding from between her legs and bolted into the pen. She was a green blur of a skiddo, hopping and rolling joyfully in the dust, sprinting about the area, and butting her head into every mon she could. Ferry didn’t have time to react before she bowled through his legs from behind and knocked him into the muck as she made her way to the cowering ponyta. Not one to be tormented, the ponyta let out a whinny of protest and jabbed the skiddo with its horn, a shower of white sparks flying from it. The skiddo let out a bleat of surprise but continued prancing around the pen at lightning speed, undeterred.

“Fuck,” Ferry said, picking himself up and brushing what he hoped was mud off his knees. “Definitely not that one.”

“My god,” Prim said, a huge smile splitting her face. Ferry didn’t think he’d ever seen her grin so widely; it was a little unsettling. “She’s perfect. We’ll take her.”

“What?” Ferry said. “No! I want this ponyta!”

“Sorry,” Prim said, still grinning wildly as she shrugged.

“You said I could have my choice!”

“That was fine when the choices were boring.”

“I...,” Ferry sputtered. His jaw hung slack as the stablekeeper attempted with great effort and little success to wrangle the skiddo into a harness.

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” Prim insisted. “She’ll never tire out! And she’ll be fast friends with Scout. It’s going to be great.”

Ferry could only shoot his nastiest, most smoldering look of contempt at Prim as she counted at the coins and passed them to the stablekeeper.

“Thank you very much,” she said as she plucked the leash from the stablekeeper’s hands.

“No, thank you,” the stablekeeper said. Ferry wasn’t sure if he was imagining things or if the stablekeeper actually looked relieved to be rid of the thing.

Prim dragged more than led the thing out of the pen. Ferry followed listlessly, sparing one last look at the quaking ponyta in the corner and wondering what might have been.

“Got a name for her in mind?” Prim asked.

Ferry peered down at the skiddo and gave it a look of utmost loathing. The skiddo’s eyes glimmered in response, ears flapping. “How about Idiot,” Ferry suggested, scowling.

“Don’t be a jerk,” Prim said. “Let’s call her... Princess.”

Ferry had to admit it fit, somehow. Before he could say as much, they exited the stable. Princess’s eyes lit up at the wide new world she’d entered and she bolted forward, jerking Prim’s arm and almost knocking her onto the cobbles. Legs flailing, she slid to a halt in front of a dandelion poking out from between the cobblestones. Her nostrils flared twice before she peeled her lips back, revealing oblong teeth, and ripped the weed from the ground, chewing gleefully.

"Here you go," Prim said, shoving the leash into Ferry's hands. "I have some supplies to pick up while we're here. Why don't you head to the temple and see if you can find a job for us to do?"

"What? Alone?" Ferry asked. He'd never done that on his own before. Dread tugged at his heart at the thought of it. "With this thing?"

She was still smiling, but Ferry could tell she was completely serious about this. "It'll be good for you to learn to do that on your own," she said. Strangely, that strange wistful emotion pulsed from her as she said it. "And it'll be a great time to bond with Princess here."

"I'll meet you at the temple when I'm done," she said, and she gave him some brief directions. "You can do it."

Ferry nodded glumly as she mounted Scout and disappeared into the sea of people. His head throbbed as Princess pulled on the leash furiously, sending a jolt through his shoulder. This was going to be a long few hours... and a long, long journey ahead, if this blasted goat had anything to say about it.

He stared down at the leash in his hand, then to Princess. She was staring up at him with her head cocked, little leafy tail wiggling. "So I guess I'm supposed to ride you," Ferry said. Princess hopped in place. He sighed, not trusting this little goat as far as he could throw her. Cautiously, he swung one leg around the skiddo and pulled himself over her back. To his surprise, she didn't buck or bolt but rather stayed in place. Though she had no saddle, Ferry found her leafy pelt surprisingly soft and plush, and she seemed to carry his weight well. He tenderly grabbed hold of her horns and pressed forward slightly. She trotted ahead responsively, chirping happily. This wasn't half as bad as he expected.

Ferry steered her toward the promenade that wrapped around the castle. She bleated and broke into a gallop. "Whoa!" Ferry shouted, urging her to slow down, but she ignored him and dashed over the cobblestones ahead, hopping more than running. He sucked in a breath as she darted out of the way of a pedestrian just in time. While Scout's hops had caused Ferry to come crashing down on his muscled haunches, here he bounced on Princess's soft, leafy pelt instead. It would have been fun if he weren't so afraid she would crash into someone at any moment and send him sprawling across the road.

Amazingly, she didn't. Ferry's heart was pounding, now from excitement more than fear. He tilted her horns to the left and let out a laugh as she veered across the road and into an alleyway. Princess let out a cry of delight as she hopped into a puddle, splashing brisk water up around them. A ratatta scurried out of their way as they raced down the alley. Clothes hanging on lines overhead swayed from the force of their passage, groups of pidove alighting from the disturbance. She scampered around the corner, hooves slipping on the slick stones. Ferry let out a whoop as she leaped over a low wall, his aura feelers streaming behind him.

It felt like they were running through back alleys for hours before Ferry remembered he had a job to do. He was sorry to end the fun... He couldn't remember the last time he'd enjoyed himself so much. Princess's gallop was reduced to a trot as Ferry pulled back on her horns. "Don't tell Prim, I said this," Ferry said, tousling the skiddo's head from behind, "but you're not so bad after all."

Princess bleated in response, and Ferry pretended it was a promise.

They walked leisurely down the alleyway, picking their way back to the promenade. It helped that the city was wheel-shaped—the alleys all eventually met spoke-like boulevards jutting out from the city center. Ferry's headache had retreated a little for now; the adrenaline rush from Princess's sprinting had done him wonders. He was daydreaming about racing with Scout later on when he heard a familiar voice. He pulled back on Princess's horns, pulling her to a halt, and he perked up his ears, concentrating on the sound.

"... as quickly as I could. I was followed by a wandersword, so I was very careful, you understand..."

It was that same shrill, grating voice.

The merchant.

Ferry knew there had been something amiss about the man. What did he have to fear from a wandersword? The words vindicated him.

"Mmmmm," came a second voice. It was scratchy and androgynous. "Careful. Yes. This thing must be done. It is forgiven."

Ferry tried to make out the aura of the speaker. It was unlike any aura he'd seen before—strange, inscrutable, and remarkably heavy. He felt like if he were close enough, he'd be able to physically pluck it out of the air.

There were other auras, too. Several. Most of them were undulating softly... sleeping? And there was a sullen one, one that Ferry thought he recognized somehow.

There was a sinister quality to the auras, a grave edge. They were alert, almost paranoid. This was no routine trade operation.

Ferry wondered what he was getting into.

"You are free to examine the... wares," the merchant said. "Ensure they are to your satisfaction."

"Mm. Examine." Clothing rustled and wood creaked. "Good. Very good. The master will be pleased. We shall take them all. Yes."

“Ah...,” the merchant said. “I would like to keep this one. Just the one.” A pause. “I have reason to believe it is... uniquely valuable.”

“Hm. So be it.”

Quietly, Ferry dismounted Princess, gesturing silently at the skiddo to stay put and remain quiet. She cocked her head at him, tail wiggling slowly. Ferry crept forward a little, toward the alley corner, hoping he might be able to get a better read on the strange aura with some proximity and wondering whether he dared to steal a glimpse. The merchant had been a small man, out of shape, certainly no fighter. If the others appeared unarmed and untrained, too, there was a real chance Ferry could take them all. He didn't know what this thing was that he'd stumbled into, but he knew in his bones that it was wrong.

He could intervene—he had the chance to do what was right, and the ability. If he walked away, what kind of person did that make him?

And then Princess came bounding up behind him, hooves clopping loudly on the stone. Ferry's eyes widened.

“A sound,” came a new, heavily-accented voice. “Something is near.”

Ferry gestured violently at Princess to stay in place, but she seemed to take his movement for play and hopped toward him, bleating. They collided, and Ferry rolled backward past the alley corner and came face to face with the group.

He only saw them for a moment. The merchant stood by his wagon, staring down at Ferry in shock. At his side, a grotesque purple creature stood waist-tall, one eye of silver and one of blue.

The purple mon grinned widely at him, revealing white, pointed teeth. “Tread carefully, son of Lucar,” it said. Then it snapped its spindly fingers, and they all seemed to melt into their shadows, gone in a blink. Even the wagon vanished. Ferry stared blankly at the suddenly empty alleyway, not understanding. Princess stood over him and licked his head with abandon.

“Damn it!” Ferry cried, shoving Princess off of him and scrambling to his feet. He searched the alley desperately, flaring his aura sense. How in the world had they disappeared like that? And the purple creature had seen him, spoken to him. He probed outward in search of the merchant's aura, but he was too panicked to concentrate.

Exasperated, he whirled around to Princess, scowling fiercely. “Look what you did! Fucking idiot! I was on the verge of figuring something out and you... You...” He trailed off and slouched a little. Princess looked at him curiously. What had he planned on doing? Was he going to barge in and take them all on? They would have just disappeared anyway.

He buried his head in his hands, groaning. The headache was returning. He recoiled in surprise as Princess pressed her face against his, nuzzling him softly. He found himself melting into the embrace, wrapping his arms around her neck and patting her softly on the back.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you, Princess. There's nothing we could have done anyway." She bleated softly. He felt a little better. "Come on. Let's go to the temple." He stood up with a grunt and swung his leg over her back.

He thought about what he had seen as they walked. The strange purple mon and its twinkling eyes, one silver and one blue. He thought of its peculiar aura, so alien and tangible, like nothing he had ever seen. Its words replayed in his mind, its smile burned into his memory.

He shivered, couldn't help but feel that he had made a grave mistake. They had seen him. Spoken to him. Warned him. What did it mean? The memory of their strange disappearance, the way they melted into shadow like a trick of the light, haunted him. It must have been strange magic. He could think of no other explanation.

That disturbed him. His heart sunk at the reminder that although his people had forgotten their magic, many in the world had not. It frightened him, made him feel small, but it hardened his resolve, too.

He had to master his magic. Until he did, how could he think to stand against others that had?

For the first time, a seed of doubt took root in his mind. What if he couldn't? How could Prim, or any other human for that matter, teach him this? Why had Greyscar gladly sent him away from the only ones who could?

He clenched his fists as he rode, wishing he could understand, and that he could be understood.

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The temple was an impressive building despite its poor maintenance. Tall arched windows were carved into the stony side, the vaulted ceiling crowned by an angular steeple. The white standard flag of the Church of Man flapped proudly at the top. Ferry tied Princess to a post outside, instructed her to wait, and approached the temple's broad wooden door. He swallowed hard. The church was generally unfriendly to mon—it was not called the Church of Man by mistake. They'd stopped in smaller temples in the past, and everything went fine when Prim was there to do the talking, but... this time, she wasn't. He tried to suppress his dread as he passed through the door.

The temple's interior was musty and mostly dark, except at the back where dust-filled rays of light from the windows illuminated the finely-crafted pulpit. The ceiling seemed to have been

painted at some point, but it had peeled to the point that the image could no longer be made out. The central aisle was lined on either side by rickety pews. A huge replica of the prophet's sword was mounted on the back wall, its hilt trimmed with gold.

Ferry proceeded down the aisle. The clerics could usually be found at the back. He poked his head into a doorway at the back and found one sitting in the study there, scratching something onto a piece of parchment with a large white quill. The cleric slowly pried his eyes off his parchment and assessed Ferry with a frown. He said nothing but eventually raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"I'm a wandersword," Ferry said. "I'm interested in any jobs you may have."

"Ah," the cleric said. He narrowed his eyes and wrote another few words on his parchment, smacking his lips. "A thrall. I would gladly speak to your master about potential jobs."

Clerics loved to use the word "thrall" for mon like him that aided wanderswords. It made him feel sick.

"My partner," he emphasized, "is buying supplies. She'll be here shortly. She asked me to seek a job for her."

The cleric made a straight face and gave Ferry a half-lidded stare. "The church is happy to aid wanderswords in any way it can. I am less enthused to service their... equipment," he sneered.

Hot anger roiled in Ferry's gut. He clenched his fists and pulled his lips up in a snarl. "You—"

"Is there a problem?" Ferry turned around to find Prim occupying the doorframe just behind him. He hadn't heard her approach through the rush of blood in his ears. She wore a stern look.

"You must be this one's master," the cleric said, dipping his quill into its ink well.

Ferry gave Prim an indignant look, urging her to say something, but she gave him a look of her own, and its message was clear: Leave it alone.

"That's right," she said, pushing past Ferry and placing a hand on the cleric's desk. "Got any work for us?"

"Yes," the cleric said. He set his quill in its well and pulled a scroll from below the desk, squinting at the words on it and tracing them with a knobby finger. "Ah. We have several, but I can see plainly that you are an experienced knight." The cleric's eyes strayed to the scars on Prim's face. "There's one job in particular we'd prefer for a wandersword of your caliber to complete, if it interests you. The younger knights have turned it away."

Ferry sensed discomfort in Prim's aura, but she didn't show it. "Let me hear it," she said.

“There is an old farmstead a few miles outside the city. I shall provide directions to you, should you accept the job. It was abandoned due to persistent wild mon attacks, and has become the territory of an aggressive nidoking. The former tenant left an heirloom there in a chest below the bed that he wishes recovered.”

Ferry retreated behind Prim, relieved to remove himself from the situation and let her do the talking but furious that it was necessary.

Prim nodded thoughtfully. “Nidoking? Fine. I can do that. What’s the reward?”

“Twenty shillings.”

Prim cleared her throat. “Goodness.”

“Yes,” the cleric said. “It has been some time since a veteran wandersword has visited this area, and the old man is growing restless, so he has been raising the job’s reward out of his own pocket to expedite its completion. It is my hope you can be the one to finally do so.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Prim said.

“Very good. As for the directions...”

The cleric retrieved a map and began sketching directions onto it. Ferry tuned him out, finding himself focusing on the man’s movements—the way he moved his fingers, the way the droopy skin on his face wiggled when he spoke, the way he blinked slowly and multiple times in succession. He wondered how many other mon had been through here, how many others the cleric had made to feel like property, like dirt. Nothing Ferry could possibly say would ever make the man feel that way. That enraged him. The only thing he could think of was crawling across the desk and smashing a fist into his brittle, saggy face.

Prim clapped him on the shoulder, pulling him out of his reverie. He noticed that his hands were shaking and that his face was twisted with anger; the cleric was giving him a strange look.

“Come along, Ferry,” she said, turning to leave. “I think we can do this before dusk if we’re quick.”

Ferry took a deep breath and trailed her out of the study silently, waiting until they were out of the temple to speak the words that were burning on his tongue.

“Why did you do that?” he demanded as they stepped outside. He squinted against the sunlight.

“Do what?” Prim said, untying Scout from the post. He’d been tied to the same post as Princess—she was having the time of her life scampering around his legs.

"You knew he was going to treat me like that, didn't you?"

Prim shrugged. "Suspected it."

"And you sent me in there anyway?"

"Should I only task you with things that are easy?" she asked, giving him that infernally penetrating maternal gaze of hers. "Or things that work your muscles, but never your mind?"

"No," Ferry said, chest swelling, "but that's not the same as giving me an impossible task, a painful task."

"It wasn't an impossible task, Ferry," Prim said. "My task for you was to do your best, and you did."

"And what did that achieve? Did you just want to demean me?" he asked. "Is this punishment for what I did to the bandit earlier?" He was speaking loudly enough now that passersby could probably hear him clearly, but he couldn't find it within himself to care. Let them think what they would.

"I'm not your mother," Prim said. Ferry furrowed his brow, not understanding. "It is not my role to dote on you, to protect you, to shelter you from the evils of this world. You asked me to train you, and that's what I'm doing." She pitched her voice upward, speaking more quickly and more intensely. "I am preparing you for a time when I am not with you, preparing you to stand on your own." She shoved him and he stumbled backward, gritting his teeth and staring back up at her with smoldering rage. "Can you stand on your own, Ferry? What are you without me? What would you have done just now if I wasn't there?"

He wanted to lash out, retort with some scathing truth, but he retreated into himself instead, wilting and turning his head away. She towered over him, her gaze intense, and he felt very small in her shadow. "I don't know," he said, just above a whisper.

"You don't know," Prim repeated. "Don't you think you should find out before it's too late? You say you want strength. Well, this is what strength is: getting the things you want from people who hate you without having to raise your hand against them."

"That isn't strength," Ferry said. "That's... something else. That's power. I don't want that."

"Then what do you want?"

"To protect myself and the people I care about," he said, surprised by the truth of it. But he left the second part unsaid: that sometimes to protect, you had to strike first.

Prim's gaze softened. Ferry found himself strangely indignant at that. He didn't want her pity. He wanted her to understand.

"Let me put it another way," she said. "It's hard to say this, but Ferry, you are a person with no home to return to. For the rest of your life, you will be an outlander everywhere you go. The most important thing I can teach you is how to deal with people who look down on you for who you are." She pursed her lips. "You have to understand. I'm only thinking of you."

Revelation took hold of him, her words clicking. She was preparing him for a time when she was gone, when he might serve a crueler master who did not advocate for him. She was teaching him how to live in a world that hated him.

He couldn't meet her eyes. She sounded like Greyscar, preaching the path of assimilation and patient adaptation. What could he say? How could he communicate the depths of her wrongness, make her understand that he would rather die than turn into someone who had accepted an existence of otherness, of enthrallment?

He would not assimilate or adapt. He would create a home to return to. That's what this was all about, that's what she didn't understand.

But he looked back up at Prim and took in the hard lines of her face, the tender look in her eye, the knot in her brow, the look of concern and sincere care, and he wondered the price of the path he had chosen.

No, he couldn't tell her any of this. Instead he said: "I understand." And: "Thank you."

She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Buck up, kid. We've still got a fun day ahead."

Ferry nodded and untied Princess from the post. As they rode down the street and toward the city walls, he tried to think of that immediate future—fighting side by side with his friend—and not the distant one of blood and ash.

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