Thwak!

Thwak!

Thwak!

“I can’t take any more of this!” Gray Ash, an adolescent 14 year old boy, groaned, throwing the rest of his carved wooden knives to the ground. “I’ve been at it for more than an hour…”

He had dark brown hair that reached his shoulders at the back, and wore a white headband around his forehead. His eyes were a gray-blue color, and his ears were pointed, signifying that he had Elven blood in him.

“Come on, Gray Ash, one more try.” Blue Fire, was Gray Ash’s teacher on how to survive on your own, and how to provide for the village.

Nueka, a village in eastern Nithran, was in a prospering state, with a large population and with many artisans to trade to other Human villages.

Blue Fire was tall, with black hair, and brilliant blue eyes. He had been raised in the village from birth, by Yellow Flower, Gray Ash’s grandmother, for his mother had died in an Elven raid a few years after Blue Fire’s birth. Blue Fire’s father had been sent into deep depression by his wife’s death, and eventually agreed to banishment to another village for lack of work and contribution to the village. Blue Fire had taken up a job as a teacher, to make sure no one was ever ill-prepared for battle, such as his mother.

“Why should I? I’ll just miss…” Gray Ash mumbled as he threw the throwing knife to the ground and grabbed it back up.

“You don’t know if you’ll miss if you don’t try.” Blue Fire said, grabbing one of the knives from the pouch on his hip.

Blue Fire held the knife with one hand, and put the other on the blade. His eyes focused on the blade, and a transparent veil of flames started to form around the blade. Blue Fire took his hand off the blade, pulled back his arm, and threw it at a tree with a target on it. The blade’s flames intensified as it flew through the air, and it struck the tree, burying itself in up to the handle.

“That’s what you’ll be able to do once you master this training.” Blue Fire said.

Gray Ash frowned.

“So why am I not allowed to do that right now?” He asked.

“Well, first of all, you don’t know how to control your Reau too well yet; you’d probably make the knife explode before you could throw it,” Blue Fire said.

Gray Ash pouted and looked over at another tree with a target on it.

“And second of all, you have to perfect your throw the hard way before you can take the easy route and just use your Reau for everything.”

“But why?” Gray Ash started.

“Because it is Nueka’s tradition!” Blue Fire said, looking down at Gray Ash.

An empty silence fell, filled with bird’s songs and squirrel’s chatter. Gray Ash reached down and plucked the knife out of the ground, and stood up.

“Tradition…” He said, putting his hand to the blade.

“It’s not just your knowledge in Reau; it’s your experience in-“Blue Fire was cut off by Gray Ash throwing the knife at a tree, the transparent flames around it blazing, opaque. “Gray Ash!”

An explosion shook the forest, causing branches and leaves to fall down, and initiating an equally loud burst of animal screeches and squawks, as the animal life fled the area. Blue Fire put up his arm in front of his eyes to shield himself from the falling foliage. When he put his arm back down, he saw the tree that Gray Ash had thrown the knife at was untouched. His eyes widened as he realized Gray Ash had missed completely, and the knife, powered up with way too much Reau, blasted through the forest, and must have blown into another far away tree.

“Gray Ash? Are you okay?” Blue Fire asked, looking around.

Blue Fire turned around at the sound of rustling bushes, and saw Gray Ash running back towards the village through the undergrowth.

Blue Fire chuckled to himself, and started walking back towards the village too.

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“Grandmother,” Gray Ash asked when he arrived at his house. “Are you there?”

“Yes, Gray Ash, I’m over in the kitchen.” Yellow Flower called from around the corner. “What are you doing home so soon from training? It’s barely midday.”

“Ah…Well…Oh! I’ve got to go work on my sword! I just wanted to check in on you.” Gray Ash said, and ran off to the back of the village.

“Gray Ash!” Yellow Flower came around the corner and looked out the door. “What an energetic kid…”

Suddenly, Blue Fire ran up to the house.

“Yellow Flower? Has Gray Ash come by here?” He asked, out of breath.

“Yes, he just left.” Yellow Flower said calmly, washing off a clay bowl with water.

“Gray Ash!!” Blue Fire yelled, dashing off again after the runaway boy. Yellow Flower smiled to herself. This is what she encountered every day, Gray Ash doing something wrong, and Blue Fire chasing him down to lecture him on how to improve.

“Gray Ash! Stop right there!” Blue Fire yelled, tackling Gray Ash.

“Gah!” Gray Ash grunted as he fell to the ground.

“I told you not to use your Reau yet…” Blue Fire said, standing up.

Gray Ash sat up and folded his arms.

“You broke my concentration.” He pouted.

Before Blue Fire could retort, a villager came up to them holding a stack of papers.

“Have you heard?” The villager said, handing each of them a paper. “This was sent out all across the land by troops in black helmets and armor.”

Gray Ash and Blue Fire looked at the papers. The handwriting on each was exactly the same, slightly scrawled, with red ink.

“Attention, people of Nithran. A new enactment will be in effect from this moment on. Every full moon, we will expect a payment equal to five hundred silver coins from each village. You are free to substitute the payment with food, armor, weapons, or anything else. If you do not pay, you will be eradicated.” The pamphlet was signed with a flame in the shape of a hand, which looked like it had been scorched onto the paper.

“What is this? A threat?” Blue Fire asked, chuckling a bit to himself.

“The man in black armor looked pretty serious.” The villager said.

“They have to be kidding, five hundred silver coins? We don’t even have a hundred here,” Gray Ash said. “We do all our trading by bartering.”

“If this is a real threat, we need to prepare for ‘eradication’.” Blue Fire said, giving the paper back to the villager.  
The villager walked off through the village, giving the papers to other people.

“Gray Ash, get back to your grandmother, tell her what’s happened.” Blue Fire said. “I have to tell the Elders.”

“Right!” Gray Ash said, and started to jog back to Yellow Flower’s house.

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After Gray Ash arrived back at his house and related the news to Yellow Flower, she told him after a bit of thought that she would train him to become well-equipped for any conflicts that were bound to happen with an invading foreign force. Yellow Flower brought him out to a grove in the back of the village that afternoon.

The sun was slowly falling in the west, and the scene was tinted red. A warm breeze blew from the east, rustling the leaves of the oaks and maples that grew there. There were patches of the ground that were covered in fallen leaves, such as the time of year called for; but where no leaves held dominance, small flowers grew amongst the ankle-high grass.

Yellow Flower and Gray Ash stood across from each other in the grove, Yellow Flower’s robe flapping gently in the wind, and Gray Ash’s neck-long hair constantly blowing into his face, making him always brush it back over and over again.

“Now,” Yellow Flower said. “We’ll start your training with a simple way to manipulate Reau.”

Gray Ash looked shocked.

“Manipulating Reau?! But Blue Fire said…”

“That was your laid back training from before, Gray Ash. Now we have the danger of an attack looming. You must learn everything you can as quick as you can.”

With this, Yellow Flower lifted her hand, and slapped the ground, drifts of energy flowing from her palm. Leaves and twigs started to form right in front of where her hand was touching the ground, and meshed together into a mixture of debris. More and more leaves and sticks flowed into the pile, and it eventually took the shape of a man, who had no face and whose skin was pure white. He was clad in black armor and held a black katana at the ready. Gray Ash took a step back in amazement.

“J...Just what is that?!” He asked, slightly scared of the new being.

“It is a way to manipulate Reau to create a nonliving being who you can control with your Reau. You can change the way they look just by forming your Reau in that way.” Yellow Flower answered, wiping her hands off. “You know of how to form Reau outside of your body, and also how to filter it into objects, correct?”

“Y…Yeah, I do.” Gray Ash said, not taking his eyes off the figure.

“Just think of this as a more advanced form of that skill.”

“Hm…” Gray Ash thought to himself about just how to manipulate his Aura to achieve that. “So are you going to teach me that now?”

“No,” Yellow Flower said, chuckling a bit to herself. “You’re far too inexperienced with Reau to achieve anything like that, yet.”

“Oh…” Gray Ash said, looking at the ground.

“What we’re going to train,” Yellow Flower readied herself into an attack position, and the figure copied her movements. “Is how to fight against an armed soldier.”

“Huh?!” Gray Ash exclaimed. “B-b-But…How am I supposed to fight that?!”

Suddenly the figure lunged forward, raising the sword above its head. Gray Ash yelled and jumped to the side, letting the figure careen into the fence behind him.

“Use its momentum and weight against it!” Yellow Flower called over to him as the figure dislodged the katana from the fence. The figure dashed back at him, in the same fashion. Gray Ash noticed a stone sticking out of the leaves on the ground to his right, and got an idea. He jumped to the right, so that the stone was in front of him. The figure changed its course and mindlessly ran towards the rock. Gray Ash kicked out at the figure’s left foot, making it slam into the rock, making an audible crack.

The figure fell to the ground, and Gray Ash jumped away.

“Hah! I did it!” Gray Ash said proudly.

“Don’t lose focus on your enemy until they can’t move a muscle, Gray Ash!”

Suddenly the figure sharply stood up, and swung at the off-guard Gray Ash with the katana. Gray Ash yelped and ducked, getting a few hairs cut off his head by the slicing sword. Clutching at the back of his head, Gray Ash gritted his teeth. Seeing the opening in the figure’s defense as it swung over him, Gray Ash jumped upwards and dealt an uppercut to the figure, knocking it off its feet. Yellow Flower’s eyes narrowed, and she smiled to herself. Perhaps Gray Ash was more prepared for battle than she had expected. Again, the figure lurched back, and swung downwards with the katana at Gray Ash. This time, though, Gray Ash was expecting the sudden backlash. He sidestepped out of the way, let the figure slice the sword into the ground, and then slammed both of his hands down onto the figure’s elbows, snapping them backwards.

“Don’t lose focus, Gray Ash!” Yellow Flower yelled out as Gray Ash paused. His eyes flitted to Yellow Flower, then back to the figure. He raised his arms from the faltering figure, which was trying to wrench its katana free of the ground, but making little headway with his arms unusable. Gray Ash, lacking a better idea, punched the figure full in the face, dragging it backwards a bit. After the initial shock, the figure just snapped back and continued trying to pull. Gray Ash tried again, but apparently the figure could not be stopped unless its ‘bones’ were broken.

Gray Ash decided that attacking the figure with physical attacks alone could not defeat it, so he resorted to Reau tactics. He filtered Reau to his right hand, which was clenched into a fist. A light veil of transparent flames grew around his fist, and his stance sank into one of the fighting style of Nueka. Left leg forward, right leg crouched and back, left hand out, right hand back and clenched. Once there was sufficient Reau in his hand, Gray Ash threw himself forward, and hit the figure in the middle of its chest, curving downwards slightly. The strike hit with an audible thump, then with a sharp crack and the sound of blowing air, the figure’s arms snapped off, reverting back into sticks and leaves as they became dismembered from the actual body. The figure was blasted downwards and crashed into the ground, sending leaves and debris everywhere as it also reverted back into the matter it was created from. Gray Ash stood panting in the middle of the swirling leaves and broken twigs. He raised his bloodied fist and cheered.

“Well done, Gray Ash,” Yellow Flower said with a wide smile. “I honestly didn’t expect you to defeat him that fast.”

Gray Ash grimaced as he realized his knuckles were bashed from the final attack.

“I think that’s enough for today, let’s go back to the house and I’ll fix up your hand.” Yellow Flower said, taking Gray Ash’s arm over her shoulder and leading him back to the house.

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The next day Gray Ash woke to yelling and commotion outside the house. He popped up out of bed, dressed and ran outside, with Yellow Flower trailing behind in her apron. It was a warm morning, with a strong westerly wind blowing. A few lazy clouds moved slowly overhead, but to the northwest came dark storm clouds. A crowd had formed in the middle of the road leading between houses, and much chatter and even some sobbing were emanating from it. Gray Ash tried to look over the shoulders of those in front of him, but could only see a stray paw of what appeared to be a wolf or canine of some sort. He saw it was tainted red with blood, and winced at the sight. Some people in front of Gray Ash shifted, and he got a closer look, but only for a moment as Yellow Flower covered his eyes. But he had seen enough.

A young girl, no older than four, was laying on the ground, torn open at the stomach and half of her face clawed and scratched disfiguringly. Beside the bloodstained corpse lay another; a wolf. But it was no ordinary wolf, for ordinary wolves were no more than half the size of this creature. It was bloated, with patches of its hair and even skin missing where it had been bludgeoned and stabbed. Its teeth were exaggeratedly long for even its large head, and the snout was shorter than it should’ve been on a wolf of that size. It too was bloodied very badly and blackish-red blood poured from its wounds as it lay on the ground, its teeth still grasping the small girl’s neck.

Gray Ash jerked away from the horrifying sight, and could not stop the tears flowing from his eyes. Suddenly a voice rose over the quiet murmurs and loud sobs of the crowd. It was one of the Elders of the village, who had come from the temple to the sight to calm the crowds.

“My people hear me now! This is no random act of a deformed wolf on our village; rather, a direct attack by the man named Black Fire! This monster was created by him as a means of scaring our village into complying with their impossible taxes and threats.”

At this point Yellow Flower pulled Gray Ash away from the crowd, and led him back to the training area where they had trained the day before. Gray Ash’s breath was still coming in bursts and he had to keep wiping tears away from his eyes.

“Y…Yellow Flower…Why would that man…Black Fire…Attack us in such a way?” Gray Ash asked in between cuts in his breath.

Yellow Flower sighed and thought for a moment, and then spoke to Gray Ash.

“Black Fire was a man of this village, once. He became too power-hungry though, and wanted to maximize the potential of his Reau once he mastered it in his training. He was caught performing forbidden rituals, trying to summon demons to tell him the secrets of Reau; and was banished from the village.”

Gray Ash wiped his eyes again, and said, “But why would he come here and attack us again? It can’t just be from hard feelings…”

Yellow Flower looked at the ground for a long time, and then finally looked at Gray Ash.

“Black Fire’s parting words from the village were ‘If you ever hear of my name again, expect Rasath to be close…’”

“Who’s Rasath? And why would he be close to Black Fire?”

Gray Ash thought he saw a tear drop from Yellow Flower’s eye as she stared at the ground, lost in memories. She took a deep breath, and then started.

“Rasath was a man who came from a land far, far to the East; beyond the oceans. He came here saying he wanted to take over this land on behalf of the United West Nithrandirian Lands. When the small villages that dotted the area would not comply with his request to take over, he sent his vast armies at us. Your mother and father, Black Water and White Fire, rose out of a small village that has since been abandoned a bit north of here. They brought together an army of villagers that were eventually trained to be great soldiers. This army, led by your parents, attacked Rasath’s head on, but eventually was defeated. In the end, Rasath was lost in a large explosion that killed nearly all of both armies…Including your parents.”

Gray Ash looked at the ground as well, lost in thoughts. Eventually he asked a question.

“Did…This man, Rasath, die?”

“His body was never found, but he was assumed deceased. But those armored soldiers that came by…They remind me too much of Rasath’s.”

“But there’s no way! There are only a few villages in all of Nithran! How are we supposed to stop a full-on attack from another land?”

“Gray Ash. You are the son of the two bravest and most powerful people this land has ever seen. With a bit of training, you could follow in their footsteps and fight off this man, Rasath, once and for all.”

Gray Ash was silent for a while, but finally raised his head and said,

“Fight him…? No…I refuse to kill him…All I want to do is try and change him for the better. To change his mind about morals and how the world works!”

“Are you sure you can manage that?” Yellow Flower asked, though it was not a question, more of an assuring statement.

Gray Ash needed no words, for he only looked past Yellow Flower to the East with such fire in his eyes that Yellow Flower was reminded of his parents’ determination. She clapped her hands together, and said with renewed energy,

“Right then! Let us commence your training, Gray Ash!”

She then slammed both palms to the ground and brought up another figure created from the surrounding debris. Gray Ash took a fighting pose, and crouched.

This time, the figure was unarmed, and took a similar fighting pose to Gray Ash’s, but it stood tall and jumped quickly from one foot to the other.

Gray Ash took no chances, and immediately dashed towards the figure, extending one arm as an aim and pulling the other one back, preparing to punch. The figure suddenly bent to the right, his clenched fist almost touching the ground as he swayed his weight forward and up. Gray Ash saw the hit coming and dodged farther to the right. The figure caught itself before it let its weight get away from it, but was caught beneath the chin by an uppercut from Gray Ash. Gray Ash backed away a few feet and stood in his fighting pose, legs spread shoulder length apart. The figure snapped downwards again, quickly, nearly inhumanly quickly, and immediately threw another punch, which Gray Ash blocked out of pure instinct. They blocked and parried hits for a time, but when Gray Ash knocked a right hook by the figure to the left, he saw an opening, dashed forward and landed a solid blow in the figure’s stomach. The figure hesitated with the blow, giving Gray Ash a chance to build up Reau into his right fist. Instead of just wildly throwing the Reau-packed punch, Gray Ash instead held his hand open, palm facing the figure, and centered the Reau in a small spike in the center of his palm. With a yell, he took a powerful step forward and slammed the flat of his palm into the figure’s chest. There was a moment’s pause, then suddenly the concentrated Reau in Gray Ash’s palm burst forth and stabbed clear through the figure.

Gray Ash stood there for a moment, as the figure was pushed backwards and slightly up into the air, and its body broke down into sticks and leaves. The sunlight shone down on the grove, and as Gray Ash stood there in the powerful pose, Yellow Flower was suddenly reminded of his father, White Fire. Gray Ash took a step backwards, and grasped his right hand with his left.

“My…hand hurts…” Gray Ash said with gritted teeth. Yellow Flower rushed over and put herself underneath Gray Ash’s arm to hold him up.

“You’ve overexerted yourself.” She said, smiling a bit. “Your body isn’t trained to handle that amount of Reau.”

Gray Ash said nothing, but smiled to himself silently. Yellow Flower helped him walk home as the sun set in the west. Clouds covered the northwestern sky, and the darkness of the night arrived early.

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Over the course of the next week, Gray Ash repeated this training with Yellow Flower each afternoon. When he was not training with her, he was out gathering food with the other villagers who were preparing for the coming battle. Blue Fire was directing the training of a militia for the village, while the village’s four Elders, who were proficient with Reau, taught the soldiers how to protect and heal with Reau.

Gray Ash began to work on a sword made of wood. The sword would be in a curved style, and have no hand guard. He carefully chipped away at the oaken branch over the course of many days. Yellow Flower had told him he’d need a weapon. Fists were not good enough for war.

So Gray Ash began to train in the art of swordplay. The doppelgangers Yellow Flower created became more proficient at sword fighting as Gray Ash progressed, and soon he barely had to think about how to counter whatever move the figure was attempting. Blue Fire also aided in Gray Ash’s sword training. Blue Fire was already trained in short swords, so he helped Gray Ash form more advanced attack patterns, while Yellow Flower’s training switched to Reau-Sword combined combat.

By the time black smoke could be seen rising in the east, Nueka had a relatively large militia for the village’s size. Gray Ash had grown much in just a couple of weeks, and now had good defense. His training continued however, as he still was a bit clumsy and tended to get distracted. Every day the smoke drew closer, but Yellow Flower still decided to train Gray Ash.

“Say hello to Zeno, Gray Ash.” Yellow Flower said one day during training, motioning to a boy around Gray Ash’s age with spikey black hair, pale skin, and dark brown eyes.