

The Pacifist

Staring out into the scattered fires of my burning city, I felt like an open hand had clenched into a fist somewhere between my heart and my stomach, and yanked. The men and women I had known my entire life were now strangers around me, even the ones who were still alive. The dead and soon to be dead lay in stinking heaps of crimson, and the living who stood in line beside me shivered in silence, wishing themselves out of existence. I had never wanted more fervently to be older than at that moment, wondering what I could have done with more than just fifteen years. I had seen distant visions of a trade, maybe even a husband and children, before this chilled winter night. But now trying to recall those visions was like searching for my reflection in a mirror, and failing to find it.

With bleary eyes I watched as the marauders dragged yet another from the line, an old man in priestly garb. He was a head taller than any of these small, beaten down men that detained us, but they had bows, spears, shields, and the will to use them, and he did not. He pled with them, trying uselessly to dig his sandals into the ground, but the men would only yell at him in their strange tongue, likely saying something along the lines of “shut the hell up,” and strike him. He looked a lot like a friend of my mother’s, a good, upright man who taught us all that violence was the greatest of all sins, that our ancestors were right to flee a world where violence reigned, but the distance was too far and his face too beaten to tell for sure.

He cried out for the men to listen, but they didn’t understand, continuing to hit him in a haphazard rhythm. Soon he had slumped over like all the rest.

I cried at the first few executions I saw, especially when they brought out my little brother. His had been quick, but a scream caught in my throat when I first saw him, looking up at

the men with fear but no true knowledge of what they would do. I wish I had called to him, reassuring him despite everything, but a desire to live just a little longer stopped me. He had died alone, and I felt numb.

Just a week before, he had cheered me on as I danced at the new year's festival, twirling to the beat of a massive drum with others my age. I wasn't the best dancer, but I was pretty good; definitely in the top ten or twenty. Any mistakes I made, I don't think anyone noticed, and I could keep up right up until the end of the procession. I remember seeing my brother clapping his hands together and cheering me on at the last song. It was honestly a bit distracting, and I nearly tripped, but I kept on going and finished the dance, flushed and my head buzzing, with a slow bow that I hoped would appear somewhat graceful. I held onto that memory, trying to forget the corpse.

Now I watched yet another man attempt to fight back against our captors, despite the teachings of our priestly order. It was usually men. My mother had said men were the more dangerous sex, unsatisfied and filled with want, and the hardest thing for our city to accomplish had been channeling that energy toward building, hunting, politics, and a few bloodless sports. A few remembered how to fight during this crisis from somewhere in their bones, but they would only get up the nerve when their lives were already forfeit, and these rebels were put down the fastest, littered with arrows if they lasted too long against the warriors. That had been the most terrifying thing, to see these wielders of weapons and be able to put words to them that had only survived through myth and legend: *warriors, marauders, captors, invaders*.

I thought about trying to take them by surprise, somehow. My manacles weren't very tight, since there had been so many of us to subdue and the invaders couldn't take the time to

give all of us more than cursory attention, and I could move quickly in my nightdress. I figured, if we could just surprise them, like hunters do with deer, maybe we could overwhelm them with sheer numbers. I whispered to my neighbors, a concussed musician clutching his lute and priestess with an arrow in her arm, but they didn't respond. I was close enough to smell their soiled garments, so I knew they could hear me, but I guess I couldn't blame them for not having the nerve.

But then I asked myself, absurdly, whether it would even be the right thing to do. My mother was a lore master, so I had heard enough stories to see that the past ran in cycles, that violence always begot more violence. Our little community had been the sole exception, as far as we knew, and I was afraid that resorting to violence would taint us, not only spiritually, but as a people. Could we ever come back from this, to the way things were?

That, along with fear and isolation, kept me from getting out of line.

But, gods above, I had to do something. And after one more rebellion from one of my brethren, a former sports star, something clicked. He had been dodging the warrior's movements on pure instinct, which kept him alive for a while, but the warrior had sets of movements designed to entrap, to foil instinct and cut down those who relied on it. But I could learn those movements, and exploit them.

So I watched their fighting, listened to their language, and when dawn had nearly clambered over the horizon, I shed my manacles and stepped forward.

"Stop!" I shouted. It was a rough approximation of the invader's tongue, but it got their attention. A dozen guards bristled and surrounded me as I walked forward.

“Stop!” I called again, more confidently. They looked at each other, confused to hear one of the prisoners speak their language, especially a lone woman. One of the dozen, a tattooed man with pale skin and crazed blue eyes, stepped toward me, clutching a spear. He was a head shorter than me, but he looked more vicious than the others. He gave a lopsided smile and growled something that I didn’t catch, but made some of the others chuckle.

“You no want! It bad!” I gestured to the line of prisoners, hoping they would get it.

They blinked for a beat, then started laughing. I couldn’t tell whether it was my poor grammar or the absurdity of the idea behind my declaration. Maybe both.

The blue-eyed one answered in a mocking tone, but this time I understood. “We take. You no have choice.” His friends cackled again at this, but I kept my expression flat.

“You get more good, no take.”

“What?”

I closed my eyes and tried to enunciate. “We give, more good. You take, less good.”

This was the key to my ploy. If I could get them to realize that keeping our city intact would mean more resources for them in the long run, we just barely had a chance of surviving this. But when I opened my eyes, I saw Blue Eyes seemed to have had his fill of impertinence from me. He raised the butt of his spear to give me a poke in the stomach.

I was frightened, despite all my planning. Words and deeds were stacking rapidly together, and I felt like I was gliding faster and faster toward my particular fate. It was exhilarating, the knowledge I might die. I imagine this feeling is what it’s like to be an eagle, diving through a forest with the knowledge that at any moment you might slam into a tree.

Even so, I braced myself, and dodged, pushing his spear away from me. Then I stood with my feet shoulder-width apart, facing Blue Eyes. “Please,” I said, hoping I had their form of polite request right.

He poked again, and I dodged again, but he turned the motion into a swing, and I had to make a jump backward to keep from getting knocked down. Blue Eyes glared at me, and I knew I had him: I was challenging his skill as a warrior, his very masculinity. If he couldn’t hit a 15-year-old girl, what would his comrades think of him? He turned the point of the spear toward me, and started attacking for real.

Each time he stabbed at me, I knocked the spear away. Each time he chopped, I would contort my body so the weapon would fly harmlessly past. He got faster. He would mix it up. But every move he had, I had a dance move that would counter it. Every few seconds I would repeat the request. *Please. Please. Please.* But it only served to enrage him. I really did want him to stop, but the more I repeated my plea, the more erratic his movements got, expending more energy than he could afford. I was used to dancing quickly and for hours on end; as I anticipated, he was getting tired faster than I was, and I probably had just a little more sleep than he had. But he kept attacking faster, huffing and coughing as he went now, and his movements were becoming more difficult to predict. Fearing he would pull something I couldn’t counter, I caught his spear on the next thrust and spun, throwing him to the ground and peeling the weapon from his hands. But before anyone could react to my disarming, I threw the spear to the ground next to him and stood there, watching.

There was a stunned silence. They all knew I could have stabbed him in the gut right then, and it didn’t take knowledge of our language to figure out that I had deliberately chosen not

to. I just hoped they would take it as something other than an insult. I did my best to keep my face a mask of solemnity.

Blue Eyes clutched his spear and stood up, breathing hard. If his eyes had been fiery before, they were an inferno now, but he didn't attack yet. He looked around at his friends, gauging their reactions. I couldn't afford to keep my eyes off of him, but his expression took on a twinge of shame, even doubt, as he gazed around at the circle. Then his eyes locked with mine, and I realized I should have kept mine down. He roared.

But before he could charge at me yet again, a hand grabbed his forearm, yanking him backward. A quiet voice muttered something complex that I couldn't understand, and Blue Eyes turned. "She _____ me," he spat. "I _____ kill her."

I turned to see the owner of the staying hand, a taller man with a long black beard and eyes that sparked with calculation. This had to be their leader. His gaze brushed past my own and back to Blue Eyes. "This girl _____ trouble?"

"Please," I said. The leader looked at me again, cocking his head slightly.

He asked me a question, but while I didn't understand it, I could guess.

"Not, uhh... more?" I replied.

He frowned. "Not much."

It took me a second to realize he was correcting me. I tried to use a word he had used in his question. "I no speak much."

"You don't speak much."

"I don't speak much."

The man sighed. He muttered something to Blue Eyes, and the wounded warrior stepped back into the circle. The leader eyed me suspiciously. He asked me what I wanted, slowly, as if speaking to a child.

“I... don’t... want you to kill.”

He asked if I thought I could defeat his friend, and I told him no.

I thought about complimenting Blue Eyes, but I knew it would sound patronizing in any language. “I want... no fighting?” I gesticulated vaguely, half shrugging and half waving my hand.

“Peace?” This one I knew. It sounded quite similar to our word for it.

“Peace.”

“But you are ours to take.”

I swallowed. “We can give, if we have peace. You can be...” I searched for a word. “King?”

It was an old word my mother had used, but it seemed to register. The man shook his head. “I don’t want to be a king. We trade people. You are weak. So we will take you.”

“We can give more from our city in peace. Ahhh...” I looked back at my musician neighbor, and I realized that he was looking at me with astonishment, along with the rest of my people. It was difficult, but I ignored them and gestured to his lute. “We do music and...” I grabbed a strap of my night dress, an intricate cotton weave that was now seeped with sweat. “And clothes. We give for...”

“You would trade us goods for your freedom?”

I nodded. I could tell he finally understood my meaning. Now all I could do was wait for his answer. Whether he would choose to gamble on lucrative long-term trade with a city that, by all rights, would want revenge on him, or whether he would take the safer bet and make slaves of us for a short-term gain, it all rode on this moment. I held his gaze, trying to convey without words that we were different, that while revenge was natural, we would overcome it and swallow our pride if it meant the survival of our livelihood. Hurt, sadness, determination, I tried to give all of those emotions, knowing that any perceived deceit would spell my end. And I saw in his eyes more than I expected: anger, hopelessness, paranoia, self-hatred long hardened into a cynical numbness. He knew our pain, but he had long since suppressed his sympathy for all that weren't his family. All he knew was strength. And so I poured my strength into my gaze, all that it had taken to step forward, to speak, to survive this night, despite my own pain, my despair, the fatigue that threatened to bring me to my knees even now.

And he broke.