

*Migrante*¹: We are the nameless dead

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“The brotherhood of man is not a hollow phrase, it is a reality, and the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their work-worn figures.”

- Marx, 1844

In his Foreword, author Joe Henley emphatically stated, “This is not my story.” Indeed, our author is not a migrant worker, he is relatively well, ably protected by his background and his station in life and perhaps by his ancestry and the color of his skin. Despite all these privileges, superior right, protection and comfort, why did he throw his energy, selfless devotion, passion, and genuine solidarity on the side of oppressed migrant working people, the exploited, the deprived, those poor migrantes — those nameless dead (Henley, 2020, p. 78, 107, 289)?

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In writing about these people, in my view, the author has joined their plight. His writing is an act of compassion and solidarity and in doing so, he has merged and enmeshed himself with the struggle of these desperate and exploited people.

Our author did not only sympathize and empathize with the horrible and horrendous plight of the migrantes, but wholeheartedly assumed their lives, entered their souls, used their very own voices and spoke for them in a manner both distinctive and utterly remarkable for they are now the combination of the humanistic voice from the middle and the raging, wailing, struggling and defiant voices from below.

Hence, how could he say, it is not his story; when he is already one with them?

That specific moment that the author began to hold the pen to tell the stories of our migrantes through the eyes of our main character Rizal; he already lost his individuality and incontestably became part of the whole. And what is the best way of doing in practice, not merely in rhetoric but by writing graphically and accurately narrating migrants' constantly exploited and dehumanized lives and depict them with authenticity.

This undeniably our author did so with such sharp objectivity and indefatigable passion worthy of respect, love, and admiration!

Through his writings and work, the author demonstrated that there is hope for humanity; for despite all the exploitation of man by man, the degradation, the deprivation, inhumanity and the reign of the existence of injustices, greed and evil; this world is still a beautiful place to live in and to fight for.

This novel is no ordinary book. It is not merely a collection of words and letters, but an irrefutable proof of the evils and nefarious characteristic of the prevailing neo-liberal and capitalist global order that exploits millions and millions of people all over the world.

This is a story about Rizal, a young man from the Navotas City Cemetery. He lives with his mother in a mausoleum in abject poverty and utter deprivation. He dreams that one day, he can leave their place, get his daughter, reunite with his estranged partner and live a good life.

All he wants is a better life. But how?

Rizal's yearning for a better tomorrow in pursuit of his dream led him to apply for a job overseas as a fisherman in Taiwan. The dream quickly turns into a nightmarish experience. Rizal learns the hard way that his simple dream of having a better life is not easy to achieve. He and his crew mates suffered innumerable and despicable human rights violations from the captain of the ship. This led Rizal to abandon his job, seek refuge in a pub as an undocumented foreign worker. Said place was raided by the National Immigration Agency. Hence, from detention, Rizal after narrating everything that he went through was transferred to a shelter. This is a place for people like him who was abused and exploited by their former employers. Here, Rizal lodged a complaint to the Labor Ministry. His victory prevented his deportation and allowed him to look for a new job. With the help from the good people from the shelter, Rizal found a new job as a factory worker.

Unfortunately, the changed in his employment and the environment did not stop the hardship and the exploitation that he suffered. This sad realization led Rizal to experienced alienation and dehumanization. It is like, he is losing himself and his sense of humanity in him. Later, an industrial accident happened in the workshop which was blamed on Rizal which led to his deportation.

In the end, back in Manila, he saw Rizal in confrontation with the mother of his daughter. He tried to explain everything to her. That he tried his best to fulfill his dreams for them, yet his failed and that woman shut the door to his face. Towards the end of the novel, we saw Rizal going back to his recruiter demanding that he be sent back to Taiwan to have another try. He is not giving up the fight for a better life and he still believes in his dreams.

“Migrante, the story of a Filipino fishermen, one of thousands in the Taiwan fleet, paints a stark picture of the reality facing the migrant workers of the world – people who exist outside the public eye.” (Henley, 2020, Back cover)

See for instance Chapter 10, when Rizal and his crew were abandoned by their captain to brace the storm alone. They clung to each other. When Rizal was thrown into the sea, his co-workers helped him. They even gave him the most comfortable part of the ship for him to recuperate. The goodness shown by Jasmine, she is the good Filipina waitress first met by Rizal and his crew mates in a pub name Manila North, to Rizal when he escaped from his abusive boss. The kindness and solidarity extended to Rizal by an NGO worker when he is in the shelter. All of these in my view are irrefutable proof of the natural goodness of man in the grimmest of circumstances. There is hope for humanity.

This work is a stern indictment and a grave condemnation not only of the corrupt, exploitative, and failed systems of government in the Philippines and Taiwan, but also of an entire global order that is based on modern slavery.

The novel

The author began by providing a background of the harsh life of Rizal, the principal character of the book. He told us that that Rizal barely knew his father and that he grew up in extreme poverty in the cemetery in Navotas. Besides Rizal’s mother, the only people close to him are his best friend, Kidlat and for a brief time, the mother of his daughter. Just like his father, he also lost her child, Liezel² due to the dire circumstances they are in.

In order to escape poverty and to get his daughter back, Rizal contemplated on working in Taiwan. Rizal met Tiyo Benjie, the agent who sends people to Taiwan. He initially appeared to be compassionate to people like Rizal, yet later it was surfaced how this Janus-face recruiter was part and parcel of the elaborate system and cycle of exploitation.

Rizal had a farewell talk with his friend Kidlat, and Kidlat's parting words seemed both prophetic and profound:

One day when you're far from here, making all the money, chasing the putas all over the place, you'll stop and realize you actually miss the place. We might be poor, but we're like a big family here, you know. Everybody looks out for each other. You'll be back one day, and you'll be happy to come back. Mark my word. (Henley, 2020, p. 42)

Back in their house, his mother was vehemently opposed to his plan but when she saw his determination and that he had already made up his mind, she reluctantly consented to his decision.

Upon reaching Taiwan and delivering Rizal and the rest of the migrants to Mr. Chen, the equally nefarious foreign agent, Tiyo Benjie gave his last instructions and left them. While on their journey to the place where they will work, Rizal was in a state of restlessness. He thought of his loved ones, their place, "a world he shared with Mama and Kidlat, and for a short time with Liezel, his little girl, and her mother. These were the people he suddenly thought of and missed more than he had ever missed anything or anyone before." (Henley, 2020, p. 63)

Still on the road and while dreaming, Rizal remembered his mother, and the first time they went to their new home which is a cemetery. He didn't know it at the time. Thus, when he asked his mother what is that place, his mother replied that:

"This too is a resting place, Rizal, but here, the graves have no names. This is where the poor are put into the ground when their time comes. They are buried here, many at a time, all sharing the same small place, nameless. I want you to see it, Rizal. I want you to learn from it." (Henley, 2020, p. 66)

The relevance of this recollection in my view is the fact that Rizal, despite now being in a foreign land will always remember his family, his home and where he came from. No matter what he does or where he is, he will always be connected to his native ground.

Arriving from their place of work, Mr. Chen introduced Rizal and the rest to Mr. Li, the utterly heartless captain of the ship, their employer or to quote Chen, their *lao ban*, the boss or *chuanzhang*. After the agent gave his final instructions, he left and took the workers' passports. Thereupon, Rizal and his coworkers, namely Amado, Arvin and Datu were brought to the sea to begin their work. Immediately they were forced to work longer hours, and subjected to physical and coarse verbal abuse by the *chuanzhang*. While they experienced all these inhumane acts, the voice in Rizal's head repeated the words: "*We are the nameless dead now.*"

I would like to invite the attention of the reader to focus on that scene at the market place (Henley, 2020, pp. 82-84), wherein the author uses such a powerful metaphor to highlight an irony. There, one had to ask, who or what is being bragged about by the abusive ship captain into the public as a catch: is it the big fish or is it his poor and desperate, brutally tired and beaten, foul-smelling, thirsty, sleepy and hungry foreign fishermen?

Our author continued where he left on the previous chapter wherein he narrated and listed the abuses and the inhumane acts committed by the abusive ship captain to Rizal and his other crew members. They were given expired food and a limited supply of water. Further, they were not provided with a decent place to rest; in fact they were not allowed to rest. Worst of all; they were not given a suitable place to relieve themselves. Hence, they were forced to urinate on an empty plastic bottle. One horrible scene is when one of the crew members, Datu asked for a cigarette from the ship captain and he paid dearly for it for he was brutally abused.

The vicious cycle of abuse, humiliation and physical torture continued. Nonetheless, the crew survived all of these for a month. Besides being fishermen, Rizal and company were also forced by their boss to engage

in smuggling. When pay day came, to the shock and horror of the crew, they were only paid 1, 600 New Taiwan dollars each³. This is a violation of the contract and what they were promised for as their salary.

One of the highlights of story is how the merciless ship captain left Rizal, Amado, Arvin and Datu at the boat by themselves to face the wrath of a storm. It seems to me that Rizal, by virtue of his “ancestral strength” and determination which he imbibed and learned throughout his life, had all the skills to face the said storm. He had already faced many storms or typhoons back home and this storm was no different from all those past storms that he encountered in his life. Probably, the only difference was that he had to face it with his countrymen in foreign seas.

We shall also see that the abusive ship captain had bought a Vietnamese woman for a wife. One may ask, is there a difference in the situation or station in life between Rizal and his crew from that of the Vietnamese woman?

Rizal and his crew mates were treated not as humans but merely as property or slaves, in my view that Vietnamese woman’s station in life is the same as the fishermen because that woman by virtue of her desperation and the same dream of a better life for her family back home was forced by the circumstances to sell herself as a property. Rizal, his co-workers and that woman are all the same in their misery. They are mere chattels in the eyes of the employers. Albeit that woman is in a slightly “better” condition?

When their boss got married, the crew were given a day off the only day off given to them! Hence immediately, the boys grabbed this opportunity to go to Zhongli for their rest, recreation, and amusement. The place was undeniably the Filipino Community in Taiwan. After buying a couple of new clothes, they decided to stay and drink at a pub called Manila North.

There, while happily drinking, talking, and bonding it seemed that they recovered a sense of their identity, humanity and happiness — after months of exploitation, deprivation, humiliation, abuses, physical violation

and other inhumane acts of brutality by their notorious boss. On the same pub, Rizal befriended one of the waitresses, Jasmine.

I particularly liked a scene wherein while Rizal's buddies were inside drinking, he and Jasmine had a heart-to-heart talk just outside the pub. While they had just met, it was as if they already knew each other for quite some time. In my view, what immediately bridged them were their common experiences and their similar situation as fellow migrantes, since Jasmine also formerly worked as a caregiver. Both experienced the same tragedy, the same vicious cycle of abuses and exploitation by their respective bosses.

Hence, Jasmine decided to run away and she ended up in Manila North as a waitress, while our Rizal is still new and still learning all the rules, so to speak.

After the happy momentary escape from agony the men eventually had to return. Unfortunately, on their way back to their workplace, they failed to catch the train that will allow them to return to work on time. This is because they overstayed at the Manila North pub. They arrived late at *Su'ao* and when they got there, their paranoid boss was already with the police.

It was then the turn of the police to violate their humanity. They were treated as if they were criminals, shouted upon, physically attacked and shove to the ground. When the police ascertained that they are legally documented foreign workers, only then that the beatings stop. After that beatings, it was the turn once again of their boss. Then, after another round of foul words and abuse, they were ordered back to work.

This is something that I cannot understand. It was the boss who gave the workers a day-off. In fact, that is the only day off that they got in their entire stay there, hence why call the police to harass and physically abuse the workers? Knowing for a fact that as your workers, they have their papers with you?

Does the boss derived pleasure in wielding his brutal display of power? It is happiness for him to see the workers beaten and harassed for something they are not guilty of? Is this a normal psychological state?

Why is it that the police immediately subjected the workers to physical abuse instead of investigating their background? What kind of training do they receive from their institution?

Again, the whole event, the beatings, the harassments and even the false report lodged by the boss to the police is a violation of the worker's humanity and so as the provision of their contract.

Rizal maintained a steady correspondence with Jasmine, after their first meeting. Through Rizal's letter to Jasmine, It seems to me that Rizal was already losing his sense of humanity but tries to hold on to it by sharing it and reaching out to another human being. Rizal's letter to Jasmine, in my view is not only a cry for help but a desperate wounded soul reaching out to another human being. To quote some portions of the letter:

"In those times I felt death nearest, those were the moments I was least afraid."

"It sounds so much better to say I was sent to prison than what actually happened."

"Don't worry about me. Navotas people are strong⁴. We live with the dead and the tombs are our homes and our playgrounds. I hope you are well." (Henley, 2020, pp. 164-165)

These excerpts are relevant in my view because in this words, Rizal has shown his courage, resilience and the will to go on, despite the horrible circumstances he is in. He is not afraid of death, perhaps this is due to the fact that h is used with the dead for he lives with them back home and though he felt that he is in prison, he is strong.

In a later chapter, the author narrated how Rizal's boss punished him by throwing him off board, because Rizal's eyes lingered too long on the face of his bride. Rizal nearly drowned and almost got killed. Because of what happened, we saw the human social solidarity of Rizal's compatriots in taking good care of him. His co-workers extended kindness by "letting him have the shelter of the cabin to himself" in order to protect him from the elements.

It was also at this point that Rizal decided to leave. He tried to convince his co-workers to run away from their abusive boss, but no one acceded to his request, because they were afraid, reluctant of the idea, and they badly needed the job. Before leaving, Rizal had a trade with Datu. The latter gave him a set of dried clothes, while he gave him a knife and a fork. These cutleries, Rizal took from Jasmine's bar when they went there, perhaps due to his drunkenness or by thinking of a necessity or an unconscious intention of a future mutiny. Later, we shall see that the said "mutiny" did happen, even if Rizal was no longer a member of the crew.

Rizal took the train to Zhongli, to Manila North. Jasmine immediately helped him by taking him in. It was in this place that he had his first rest and good night sleep in months. There Rizal met the owner of Manila North, Ms. Rosie. Jasmine described Ms. Rosie as tough, but with a good heart. She was a compatriot married to a Taiwanese. From her, Rizal learned the "principle" of *guanxi*, which is the system of bribery.

So, it seemed that everything was fine. Rizal became an honest to goodness worker, hardworking and easy to adapt.

During a break from work, Jasmine and Rizal discussed the latter's intention of lodging his complaint for maltreatment and violation of the contract in connection to his previous job as a fisherman. Jasmine advised him that he had to stay at the pub until he filed his case.

There, Rizal also met Isko, another Filipino migrant worker who suffered maltreatment, but who ironically unlike Jasmine was pessimistic

and apprehensive about filing or lodging any case. He also shared his story and his bad experience in getting in touch with the Labor Ministry. Isko's character represents the apathetic and the defeatist tendency.

While Rizal was about to throw garbage outside the pub, he saw law enforcers from the Foreign Affairs Police about to conduct a raid on their place. Because Rizal and other migrants could not show valid overseas contracts and other relevant documents, they were taken into custody and brought to Taoyuan City. On the way there, Rizal and Ms. Rosie had a conversation. He admitted that he stole some cutlery from her shop a couple of months back and that he didn't hate her for the raid that happened. It was because Rizal relied on Ms Rosie's protection, for "he remembered her words of her husband's connections. His *guanxi*, she called it. How they would be warned before anyone would come poking their nose around her restaurant." (Henley, 2020, p. 219)

During Rizal's interview before an officer from the Ministry of Labor, Ms. Rosie helped Rizal and served as his interpreter/translator. Asked why he ran away from his job, Rizal told Officer Lin:

"... of Captain Li's tyranny on the boat. Of how they were made to spend most every minute of their lives on the decrepit tub, forbidden even from entering town. He heard the story of being tossed into the sea pass his lips as though he were speaking of someone else. Someone he didn't know. The man called Fisherman. He told Lin about the near starvation. Being forced to eat expired food. Weeks and months spent in the daze of hunger and dehydration. As he spoke, Rosie repeated his words, an unintelligible hum in the periphery of Rizal's consciousness. As he came to the end of his story his voice gained volume in his own ears, the temperature gradually returning to his body. And as he finished, he felt himself rejoin the world of humanity." (Henley, 2020, p. 224)

Because of what happened, Rizal was placed in a shelter. It was at this shelter that he met the kind couple Tala and Paul who ran an organization that helped migrant workers like Rizal “who have had... difficulties in Taiwan.” (Henley, 2020, p. 229)

According to Fermin, he is another Filipino migrant worker who Rizal met at the shelter:

“Paul and Tala, they’re trying to change things. They tell us how they’re trying to get our governments to get rid of the brokers, the fees that fuck us in the ass. Unions will come, they say. We just have to be patient and keep fighting the good fight. They’re good people. They fight with us and when we bleed they bleed too.” (Henley, 2020, p. 237)

There he also met other migrants; all victims of exploitation, abuse, and dehumanization by their respective employers. At the shelter, Rizal’s feelings ranged from that of hopelessness, fear, boredom, and the will to go on. He constantly thought of his mother, his daughter, home, and the unforeseen future. While there, Rizal learned of the actions undertaken by various organizations or the migrantes themselves to fight back the oppressive system.

One day, Rizal received news about the favorable resolution to his complaint. Hence, for the second time it seemed that “it’s going to be all right.” (Henley, 2020, p. 246) This was not meant to be, however. The couple Tala and Paul even accompanied Rizal and Makisig, is another migrant Filipino worker that Rizal met at the shelter; to their new job site. From being a fisherman, Rizal became a factory worker. Later, we shall see that the harsh condition from the sea is not different from that of the land or the factory.

While there were no day offs at the sea, at the factory there seemed to be. However, the employers had a way of coaxing the employees to render work, even on a Sunday. Mr. Su, the factory supervisor, tempting the workers to let go of their Sunday rest, would say: “You want day off tomorrow, or you want to make more money?” (Henley, 2020, p. 262)

Nearing the end of the novel, an unfortunate event happened at the factory, because Rizal allowed Tiyo Mak, a Filipino migrant worker, Rizal's co-workers at the said factory; to take advantage of a boy who had a mental disability. Tiyo Mak ordered the mentally challenged lad to do a dangerous and hazardous job. This led to the factory to catch fire. That mindless act led to the industrial accident that resulted to Rizal being deported back to the Philippines. He became the fall guy.

I would like to refer to the exploitative conditions as narrated by the victims themselves especially those horrible testimonies that Rizal learned at the shelter. Besides his harrowing experiences from the cursed ship from his previous employer also learned the same horrible experiences suffered by his fellow workers. Rubylyn and Mira, two Filipina migrant workers who were both sexually assaulted and raped multiple times by their employers.

Though, I condemn the Filipino, the Taiwanese and all the exploitative and evil governments of the world for their barbaric and inhumane acts against the workers, the migrantes of the world; it is also necessary to highlight and condemn the inhumane and abusive act of Tiyo Mak committed against a mentally challenged Taiwanese lad.

All unjust acts must be condemned regardless of who committed them, or where these were committed. If the workers will also abuse and exploit their fellow worker — regardless of their nationality, status and condition (both physical and mental) — then what is the difference between us and those evil employers and inhumane governments?

This is a shame! No matter how difficult the situation is, we, the workers of the world must always maintain the moral ascendancy and the ethical principle.

They can abuse us, but we shall never ever abuse a fellow worker. The solution is not to abuse and take advantage of each other but to unite our ranks, to solidify our strength and to form a universal workers association that will take on the evil global economic capitalist world order.

On Alienation

Karl Marx (1844) maintained that alienation always arises as a result of something unjust and abnormal (for him, it is not a 'natural human condition') and it is always alienation or estrangement *from* "something". Marx claimed that those who perform these alienated work, *i.e.*, forced labor, which is founded in capitalism, has different aspects. Man is alienated from the products of his productive activity, which belong to another. Remember the big fish that Rizal and his co-workers caught on their first day? They labored to catch the said fish, but it does not belong to them.

Man is alienated from his productive activity itself (example, the workers merely work because of repetition, not because of love and the need; it is enforced) which is not an affirmation but rather a negation of his essential nature (Colletti, 1992). Towards the end of a discussion between Rizal and Tiyo Mak, Rizal felt that "thing" that had "seeped into his body. Infected him with something dark and mean. That thing was slowly eating his soul, stealing away all those things he once was. Before long, he knew, everything he had been would be gone. He would just another man. Not a man." (Henley, 2020, p. 270)

Man is also alienated from his own essential nature, his humanity. It is because of the exploitative, fast-paced and competitive nature of the capitalist system that man is being corrupted to become selfish and individualistic. Man by nature is a social animal. Yet, the evil system that produced exploitation and alienation tries to destroy or at least delimit that natural human bond (Marx, 1844).

Finally, people are alienated from their fellows, from the community, or from society as a whole. Remember the no day-offs at the sea and even at the factory? Without resting, man will slowly disintegrate and lose his sense of justice and humanity (Marx, 1867; Geras, 1983).

The Philippines as one of the Leading Exporter of Human Labor to the World

Professor Neferti M. Tadiar (1997) stated that:

Exporting human labor risks our homes, the very core of our Filipino society. It also threatens the fabric of our labor force, draining it of its brains and brawn, elements vital to our progress. Filipino OCWs are not dregs of our society... Pushed to leave instead of encouraged to stay by the government, this means the downgrading of our work force at home, lessening our own capability to perform competitively with other countries and pauperizing ourselves of our own people and of their physical, intellectual and spiritual contributions. And if they come home dead, crazed, raped, or broken in spirit, we are faced with a segment of a populace that further drains and destitutes us. (p. 282)

This observation by Professor Tadiar is in conformity to the horrible experiences suffered by the migrants in the novel. It is a reaffirmation of the devotion, heroism, and the sacrifices of our migrant workers all over the world in search of a better life for themselves and their families. In so doing, they also help the local economy through their remittances; yet sadly, a great score of them got raped, abused, assaulted and debased. (Tadiar, 1997, pp. 285-86)

Gary Granada in one of his songs, "Dahil sa Hirap ng Buhay" (1998) wrote about the new heroes who left the country to work overseas in order for them to help their families. They braved foreign seas and lands just to earn a living. In the process some of them suffered abuse, exploitation and misery.

Granada talks about "mga sari-saring hugis ng kahihyan" that our migrant workers must undergo and endure. He pointed out the necessity for them to adopt, to change their nature and to remain determined amidst all of

the physical hardship and mental anguish they are going through. For all the family back home and the local economy.

The singer also poignantly depicted those wasted lives, broken hearts and shattered dreams of our migrant workers. All for what ends?

This definitive piercing song is utterly material to the discussion of the novel because it pertains precisely to the feeling of alienation being experienced by the migrant workers.

Back in the Philippines, Rizal ended up in Tiyo Benjie's office. Yes, the recruiter that sent him to Taiwan. It seemed that Rizal had learned the "rules of the game." In the end, despite all the misfortunes and harrowing experiences that he suffered, he contemplated going back to Taiwan to give it another try. After Tiyo Benjie complained against Rizal's behavior in Taiwan, Rizal demanded that he send him back to Taiwan by virtue of the provision of the contract. Rizal was able to negotiate a return to Taiwan. Hence, the cycle of slavery, inhumanity and exploitation continues, albeit with a glimmer of hope.

Though this novel is based on the exploitation of man by man, it has also shown the best in us as human beings. Even if has shown the dark side of some, it has also depicted our better nature. That in the grimmest of the circumstances, there is always the glimmer of hope. This is still a beautiful world that we need to fight for — for our children and the coming generation.

As the author lucidly stated in the Foreword:

I was touched by their bravery and moved by their revolutionary spirit. And when the feature based on their recollections broke in February, it was viewed tens of thousands of times. Yes, this was a beginning. A humble one, but a first step nonetheless. A step toward changing something at best deeply flawed and at worst innately sinister—the laws, or lack thereof, put in place to ensure that the migrant workers of Taiwan, the migrants,

remained as little more than second-class citizens, faceless, nameless, shunted far out of sight, further out of mind.” (Henley, 2020, p. xviii)

In conclusion, let it be recorded that I fully concur with the arguments advanced by the author and the stand that he has taken. I agree that the migrant’s “numbers gave them strength, and in being there together to support one another, they were certain that this was the beginning – a means of finally wrestling the power from a system explicitly tooled to render them powerless against it. This was the start of their personal revolution, and they wanted me to chronicle it. (Henley, 2020, p. xvii)

ENDNOTES

¹ This is a review of/commentary on Mr. Joe Henley’s book “Migrante” (2020) published in Taiwan by Camphor Press. The commentator reviewed the manuscript. See p. xii of said book.

² Liezel’s mother decided to leave the cemetery and brought Liezel with her to live at Bagong Silangan.

³ Equivalent to PHP 2,920.70.

⁴ Here our Rizal once again invoked the ancestral strength of his forefathers.

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