

The scene we came to was one of madness. There were hundreds of people crammed into the narrow streets of the city. There was no room to move. They pushed and shoved back against the mercenaries and guards that were attempting to take control of the situation. I was battered and shoved to and fro as the crowd rippled like a wave. “How the hell are we going to get through?” I asked, afraid of losing touch with Redd. The crowd was a churning mass of angry people, Beastkin and not.

Redd had to raise his voice to be heard over the protesters, “This looks bad. They weren’t this energized when I was on the chopping block...”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about why.”

We did our best to push our way through to the front, some of the people stood aside when they noticed that Redd was with me. When we finally broke out to the front the guards were pushed back and away from the chokepoint that they were trying to hold. The human wave poured out into the plaza. The guards backed away before they were run over by the stampede.

The Elders were already at the foot of the stage. They were surrounded by men wearing red clothes and rags, armed with weapons. “The militia is here!” One of the people shouted into my ear.

“Damn it, they’re here already?”

“Redd, look at the stage!” He followed my finger. On top of the stage were several Beastkin, young and old. The youngest couldn’t have been any older than ten years of age. The oldest was clearly undergoing a lot of stress. These weren’t able bodied men anymore, and it’d pushed the people in the ward over the edge. If they were willing to do this in public, what did they do when nobody was looking?

But that wasn’t where my eyes landed. Atop the stage, next to the cocky smirk of the Peacock, was Yuji Masato, the swordsman of wind. His eyes met mine for a brief moment, the look of panic of his face becoming more severe by the second.

Things were getting rowdy. Planks and stones were being thrown at any person of authority. I ducked as a rock flew past my head and nearly split my brow. Redd pulled me away and towards the elders who were arguing with the men guarding the gallows.

Darius was giving the man an earful, “What right do you have to snatch people from the streets like this! You’re a pack of wild animals! Savages!”

“Not the diplomatic type, is he?”

“He never was.”

I wouldn’t be able to keep my cool if they were people that I really cared about – I’d been in the same position just the other day when Redd was in trouble. Redd finally managed to reach the trio, with me just behind him. “They’ve got one of the other swordsmen up there, what the fuck is he doing?”

“Can you talk with him?” Redd asked.

“I’ll try. Hey!” I shouted to one of the guards, “Get Yuji down here! I want to talk with him!” The guard shook his head. “Bastard.”

“Screw it,” Redd declared. He got down on one knee and cupped his hands together, “Up and over!” With a short runup, Redd lifted the weight of my body and Stigma up with a mighty heave. I gripped the edge of the stage with my fingers and pulled myself up using my enhanced strength. The crowd cheered as I mounted the platform, expecting some serious heroics from me to kill several experienced warriors and free the people under threat.

The guard ascended the stairs and got up in my face, “H-Hey! You can’t come up here!”

I pushed him back and stomped towards my target, “Shove it, asshole. I want to talk with Yuji.”

“I can’t let you past here!”

The Peacock slicked back his greasy blonde hair and pushed the man aside, “What business do you have up here friend?” Yuji hid behind him like a meek child. I could feel myself getting angrier with him by the second.

“I want to talk with Yuji, failing that – you. What the hell is this?”

He smirked, “The Count has finally decided to do what needs to be done. To send a message to all of the anarchists that are trying to destroy his fair city.”

“By killing the young and elderly? He’s just going to make the problem worse.” That didn’t seem to be an issue in the Peacock’s mind. I scanned him using my wolf’s eye, he was level 12 and had some worryingly high stats.

Jaccard Balder III

The Younger, Third Captain of the Sutil Band

Level 14 - 4575/51200 SP

Strength: 16

Agility: 14

Intelligence: 6

Perception: 18

Weaponry: 24

Art-Magic: 5

I did some quick math in my head. At level fourteen he needed over fifty-thousand SP to level up again, which meant that the requirement doubled every time you stepped up a level. This exponential increase put a pretty hard limit on how much you could gain by fighting and killing. That is unless he had killed a lot of other highly levelled people in the process. It hadn't gone unnoticed by me that the higher-level Kobolds had given me more SP after defeating them.

He was extremely strong. Too strong for me to take on in a straight fight. He'd beat me down without much effort if I tried. I needed to find out just what those numbers meant, and how far I could punch above my weight during a fight if I had the advantage. Would stabbing a highly levelled man while he sleeps provide the same benefit? Or would he wake up and kill you for scratching him with a dagger?

Jaccard turned back to Yuji and beckoned him over. Yuji looked like he didn't want to be here; but was that just because I was there to see him? "The Count is very eager to make sure that our newest warriors have a little hair on their chests!" He patted Yuji on the shoulder and smiled, "A summary execution is as good a place as any."

"What?"

"SP doesn't gather itself. These helpful little worker bees have been gathering their strength for us for years. Now it's time to gather the harvest."

I scowled, "You're sick. Yuji, are you seriously going along with this?"

I didn't know him that well, but I wasn't going to let this pass unchallenged. Yuji looked uncertain.

"If the count declares it, it shall be so," Jaccard insisted.

"The Count can jump down a well for all I care."

"You should know your betters swordsmen, they are the ones who define your enemy."

"I'm happy choosing my own battles, thank you. Half the damn city is watching right now. The Count should know that if he pushes people too far that a few cultists are going to be the least of his problems."

He spread out his arms and turned to the angry mob, "Yet if we allow these subversive heretics go free, they will go on the cause even greater damage!" The crowd booed as he tried to win their support. The square was filled with Beastkin and other ward residents now. He wasn't going to find any popular support here.

"I-It was Sakura's idea!" Yuji yelled, "She was the one who came up with this." The shy looking woman? I knew nothing about her, but for obvious reasons I wasn't about to take his word just like that.

The stage shook as the people at the base of it began to push up against its wooden legs. The Peacock, despite his false sense of confidence, was starting to look a little bit nervous about being pulled into a crowd of angry protestors. He turned to the guards and mercenaries and barked a

command for them to form up on the gallows. Thinking quickly, I drew my spare dagger and dashed over to the children being tied up. I cut away their bindings and hurriedly pushed them down into the open arms of the crowd below, who cheered at the act. Before I could move onto the older prisoner, I felt the tip of a steel boot connect with my back.

The wind was knocked out of me. I tumbled over and into the crowd, who caught me and set me back down on my feet. Some of them praised me, but I was too focused on the angry look on the Peacock's face, "Traitor!" he cried, "The Count will have your head for that!"

"If that fat slob can catch up with me, he's free to try!"

Enraged, Jaccard drew his thin sword and held it against the neck of one of the elderly hostages. The crowd only grew unrulier by the second, and his escalations weren't going to help him get out of this one. Before anything more could be done, he drew the sword across the poor man's neck. Blood spurted from the wound and onto the wooden planks, dribbling down to the ravenous crowd below.

The man clutched at the wound and struggled to escape his rope bindings, but the fight left his body as his brain function came to an end. He slumped down, covered top to bottom in his own blood and viscera. An execution not even worthy of a pig. My stomach leapt in revulsion. Not just at his act of object cowardice, but at the scene of a real person being killed right in front of me.

There was a moment of disbelief from the assembled mob. Such a brazen act of criminality from a man claiming to work for the Count, was it any wonder that things went from bad to worse? Almost a minute after the murder was committed, the militia men in the crowd drew their own weapons and stormed the stage.

The guards, caught by surprise, were no match for the Commons troops. They cut them down with little remorse or regard for the consequence. Through the panicked shifting of the people in the square, I could see the Elders being ushered away by those who stayed behind. The Peacock, despite his strength, saw the writing on the wall. He was a trained warrior up against many other trained warriors, and all the stats in the world couldn't overturn a numbers disadvantage like that.

He looked around for an escape route. The closest street behind him had been barricaded using furniture and wooden plank. Atop the wall was a team of three mercenaries who were beckoning him over. Sword still in hand, he jumped from the stage down into the muddy plaza and dashed his way through the crowd, swinging his sword wildly to deter people from grabbing him. Yuji ran after him.

"Bastard!"

I tried to round the gallows and make my own pursuit, but it had descended into all out war between the two sides. The civilians screamed and emptied the area at a rapid pace, leaving only the militia and the Sutil Band to cross swords. A mercenary rounded the corner and pointed the tip of his spear at me. I skidded to a halt before I skewered myself on it.

“Master. May I suggest drawing me, and doing away with this trash?”

My shaking hand reached back and wrapped around the hilt. The man made my decision for me. He charged with the intent to kill. I swung Stigma over my shoulder and blocked his attack with her flat side. My shoulder checked it, knocking him off balance and deflecting his spear. Now past the point of danger and with no time for him to reposition, I swung again and knocked the man out cold. The sound of the impact, cracking bone and sloshing blood sent a shiver down my spine.

His bleeding nose and the odd angle of his neck told me what I needed to know. The blow had killed him outright. I almost wanted to scream when the level up notification appeared. Now was really, really not the time.