

We eventually decided to follow along for the sake of our curiosity. I wasn't going to get involved, even if Centhus insisted, because I simply couldn't use Stigma at the moment. Not only was she seemingly poisonous to anyone who touched her barehanded, but I did not have the physique to lift her hefty frame and swing her around. While we were walking, I decided to break a taboo and scan Udo's stats for myself.

I stared at his back and whispered the words to myself, "Seek astarus."



Udo was much stronger than me. Which I could believe on the face of it – he was a tall and burly man. His agility was poor as a consequence. He had good intelligence and perception, but no experience with weapons or magic. It seemed that you earned your first point in magic by learning the very basics like I had.

There were still a lot of questions that I had about magic and how it worked, what the limits were, and how you protected yourself from invasive assholes like me from reading your entire life story on command from extreme range. Centhus was no mage – I'd have to find those answers elsewhere.

We eventually came across an open door that led out onto a dull courtyard. The ground was made from tightly packed dirt, beaten down by hundreds of feet over years and years of traffic. It was fully enclosed with the not so welcoming embrace of the main cathedral building. There was an older, smaller tree in one corner, and several targets and dummies that had been used as practice.

"Do you train warriors here?" I asked as we approached Centhus. "Strange for a place of worship."

"Our church serves many purposes for the community. Violence is only forbidden should the blood of the slain water the roots of the sacred tree."

I pretended to understand what that meant. I crossed my arms as Kaoru and Kenneth slashed away at the straw dummies. Kaoru's sword was strange. The blade was made of a matte grey

material, almost like flint. The handle was as well made as all the others. It was still sharp, it cut away the straw man's limbs with little effort. Kenneth, despite being the most aggressively American man I had ever met in my life, had somehow ended up with what could best be described as a katana.

The display of prowess did not strike awe into my heart. Legendary warriors who didn't know the first thing about swinging a sword, what a farce. It was a good thing none of the so-called instructors were there, I'm sure they'd weep at the sight. I winced as Kenneth struck the dummy with the back half of his sword. If that was made like a real katana, he'd need to be more careful with how he used it.

Udo shuffled up beside me, "You were talking with the priest earlier about magic?"

"Yes."

"Did he teach you some?"

"Only the very basics, according to him it's the kind of spell that anyone can cast."

"What does it let you do?"

I explained to Udo the process and function of the two spells. He drew his broadsword and started at it before speaking the words. Once, twice, three times. "It seems that I cannot."

"Aren't you familiar with role-playing games?"

"I'm a little too old for that."

"Right. Then you need to visualize it better. Since you're not used to menus, how about this – I'll look at your sword and describe it to you. And hopefully that'll... warm you up, or something."

Udo nodded, "Good idea. Here." He placed it into my outstretched palms. It was still very heavy, but I could hold it long enough to do this for him at least.

Mizun, the Surging Wave

A blade that controls the tides.

Quality: **Relic**

Attack Value: 20

Balance: +2

Blessing: **Full Moon's Guidance**

The waters of life shall guide the master of this weapon to glory. As the moon wanes, so it does rise again in the following evening. **Any spell casted by the user will grant 25% of its mana back in return.** The master of this weapon shall only be parted by death.

Blessing: **Plentiful Harvest**

The wielder shall grow wise and fat with strength. Skills provide a greater benefit. **+2 points to attributes effected by learned skills.**

What a difference it made to see someone else's sword. Instead of a pair of curses, Udo's sword had a pair of blessings. It didn't evade my notice that the "balance" statistic was therefore a positive two instead of a negative two. What that meant, I didn't know. But it was controlled by whatever blessings or curses were placed on the weapon.

One of the curses on Stigma wasn't a negative effect. It made me immune to traps and curses cast by objects. I could open any chest and step on any trap I wanted, as long as it was magical. Curses and blessings, what was the difference between them?

The attack value was lower than Stigma, but Stigma was much larger and heavier than Mizun. Udo could probably deal more damage than me by swinging faster, assuming I learned how to pick Stigma up without collapsing due to the weight. Maybe she should go on a diet.

Could spirits diet?

I was getting distracted, I handed Mizun back to Udo. "Okay, so from what I can tell it's a relic, just like the others. It has an attack value of twenty, and it comes with two blessings. One that refunds mana when you cast spells, and another that gives you bonus stats when you learn a skill."

He nodded, "Okay. But I don't know how to use magic."

"I'm sure if you ask nicely that asshole'll drag a mage up here to teach us some."

"I'm not planning on sticking around," he whispered back.

“May as well rob him blind while we’re here. We don’t know anything about this place, I don’t want to walk out without knowing where we are or what we have to do,” I responded. He nodded along with my idea. “Try casting the spell again.”

“Seek astarus.” Udo’s eyes glowed yellow as the spell took effect, “Woah.”

“I know right? You can see everything about clothes and weapons with that spell. You can even use it on other people. But don’t do it without their permission, that’s rude. According to our gracious host.”

“He doesn’t know the meaning of the word rude.”

Kaoru and Kenneth had very much tired themselves out by swinging at the straw dummies for five minutes straight. They collapsed onto the ground, stilted up by their swords. Centhus applauded their effort just to be patronizing. He turned to me and Udo, “Would you two like to try?”

“I don’t have Stigma with me,” I pointed out to him. “How am I going to practice.”

“Don’t worry.” Centhus bent over a nearby knee high wall and retrieve a pair of wooden swords that were almost exact replicas of Mizun and Stigma. But instead of steel they were crafted from a dark wood. “They’re not exactly the same as the originals – I’d originally planned to add an increased weight enchantment to them, but since you couldn’t lift Stigma, I decided to keep it as is.”

Stickma, the Imitation

A well made wooden replica of a legendary sword.

Quality: **Rare**

Attack Value - 1

Hilarious.

I snatched it from his hands and immediately regretted agreeing to the sparring session. Even this was a little too heavy for me to use comfortably. Udo took his own replica and swung it to get used to the weight. Stickma was still just too long for me to use like a normal one-handed sword. The surface area of the blade dwarfed any you would see in reality. You could practically use the flat side as a shield.

Udo and I squared up across from each other in the yard, “Are you ready?” he asked me. The size difference between us was almost comical.

“No, but let’s go anyway.”

Udo nodded and held his sword in a loose stance by his waist. He wiggled it between his fingers and palm like a baseball player lining up on the plate. I gripped the handle of Stickma with both

hands and tried to get it into a comfortable position. I eventually heaved it up in the air and balanced it by holding it over my shoulder, pointing the “sharp” end in the general direction of the enemy. This duel was not going to end in my favour. Udo came at me with a measured pace, closing the gap slowly to avoid any stray stabs from my weak position. I remained stationary and tried to focus on his sword arm.

He quickly raised his arm and swung at me from the left, I tilted the sword to its flat side and deflected the blow easily. Not deterred, he attacked again from the same angle. I pushed out against the blow this time, knocking him off-balance briefly. I swung my hips and tried to hit him with Stickma, but the lack of speed cost me dearly as he ducked back and avoided my counter-attack.

“You have an impressive defensive instinct,” Centhus commented, “That will serve you well in battle.”

“Get ‘em, knock him out!” Kenneth cheered from the side lines.

Stickma was now pointing towards the ground, and I was out of position for what came next. Udo charged me again. Instead of getting hit I fell backwards out of reflex and dropped it to the ground. “Disarmed!” Centhus shouted, causing Udo to pull back.

“There’s no way I can do this,” I complained, hitting the dusty ground with a fist. “Why the hell does it have to be so big?”

“There is still much for you to learn,” Centhus assured me. Although his assurances fell flat given that I didn’t trust him. “There are many masters of the long-blade. And all of them had to start somewhere. It is not a weapon for the impatient, building the strength and skill to even hold one properly takes months of training.”

“I get the feeling we don’t have months.”

“...That would be correct.”

I stood up and dusted myself off, “I’m not going to throw myself into training for something I don’t even know about. You owe us all a big explanation.”

Centhus sighed, “Very well. When the seven swordsmen are gathered, I will reveal all. But what I say must never leave this building. Is that clear?”

I agreed just to get him off my back. I wasn’t making any promises to this asshole just yet.