

“Why did you call us down here?” I asked. In the early hours of the morning, Centhus called Kaoru and I down to the grand hall without explanation, other than to bring our weapons with us. It put me on edge from the outset.

“I have a request for the both of you. An errand, if you will. In order to asses your capabilities as warriors.”

“Unpaid labour, my favourite.”

“Aw come on Ren, it’ll be fun!” First name basis already?

“You will be properly compensated for the effort, and besides, the place I’m asking you to go will have valuables inside that you are free to take.”

“Fine. What do you want us to do?”

He smiled, “Thank you. The task is simple! The cathedral is usually a very safe place, it’s built on the coast and in the depths of a populous city, so attacks from monsters are very rare.”

“I’m sensing a but.”

“But, that control does not extend to the catacombs under the city, a combination of sewerage, old castle foundations and deep rocky caverns. The cathedral is too high to worry about the status of those tunnels normally, but the High-Magister has become increasingly insistent that we dispatch men and women to clear them out properly. The roots of our holy tree run through there, after all.”

“So we go in and beat the hell out of everything?” Kaoru giggled, “That sounds fun!”

“Why? Why is it so important to protect the roots?”

Centhus was hesitant to give me that information, “Our purpose is to protect the tree, above all else.”

“Don’t be such a worry-wart Ren, come on, let’s go!”

“You can find the entrance at the foot of the stairs out back. Before you dash off, take this.” He handed us a pair of bags that hung over the shoulder. It was filled with various supplies like a lantern, rope and some medical supplies. “It shouldn’t be a struggle. Like I said, very few dangerous monsters come close to the city. But do be careful, if it is too much for you to handle please retreat and inform me of the danger.”

I took my bag and sighed, “Okay. We’ll go roll around in the shitty sewers for you.”

## Contract Accepted!

### Protecting the Roots

Explore the underside of Fort Gramsy and report back to Centhus

Reward: 50 Red Pieces, 25 Soul Points

Currency and half of another level. Kaoru tried to rub the window out of her eyes, having not seen one before. Another thing of note was the name Fort Gramsy, the first time I'd seen the name of the city mentioned. Centhus had mentioned old castle foundations, the city used to be the location of an important fort and that was where the name came from.

"Ren, what happened to your eyes?"

Centhus collared me one more time before I could leave to do the job. I turned back to him and shrugged, "I don't know. Have you seen my arm?"

"I have."

"Whatever this sword put into me, it isn't done messing with me yet."

"...I see."

I didn't like the tone Centhus was taking. Hikaru had warned me about this. I didn't know if Centhus was being taken along for the ride, he seemed critical of the High-Magister when we discussed the messy reasoning behind our summoning. I wasn't going to sit back and let him act like it was my fault that I was being corrupted by it.

"Is that a problem? This is one of your sacred swords isn't it? Do you even know what it does?"

My triple header of obvious questions made Centhus bow out of the conversation, "I do not know the full extent of Stigma's power. My apologies if you felt that I was insinuating something."

I had nothing else to say on the matter, "Let's go Kaoru."

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We descended the long steps, down onto the beachfront. It was a beautiful spot. Between some of the rocks by the cliff face behind us was a doorway built from brick and stone, guarded by an iron gate. It was already unlocked for us. I pulled out the lantern and lit it, holding it up to reveal a long, empty corridor that led into nothing but darkness.

“This is kinda’ scary.”

“What happened to all that confidence?”

“I haven’t fought anything here yet! The other guys were going crazy about getting soul points.”

“I doubt they managed to get any,” I explained, “It took me a full day just to level up once. Do you mind if I scan you?”

“Uh, go ahead!”

## **Kaoru Akihito**

*Flame-bearer, Swordsman of Fire*

**Level 1 - 0/10 SP**

Strength: 6

Agility: 8

Intelligence: 4

Perception: 5

Weaponry: 0

Art-Magic: 0

“Your stats are pretty good already,” I observed, “You’ve got great agility and good strength, perfect for fighting.” Kaoru flexed an arm, revealing a noticeable lump of muscle hiding underneath.

“I was top of the team back at school!”

One of the things I was worried about was using Stigma in such an enclosed space. The tight confines of the tunnels would make such a huge weapon very difficult to use. I couldn’t support it on my shoulders and use wide swings, it was a test of pure strength. I needed to thrust it like a spear.

“Kaoru, you should handle the fighting down here. Stigma is too big. Getting enough SP for your first level would be good too.”

“Alright. I’ll take the lead.”

We stepped over the loose stones and began our descent into the underground tunnel system. For several feet there was no sign of the tunnels branching off, but soon we came upon a larger room that split off into three different paths. A small channel of flowing water ran through the middle, embedded into the floor. I did not want to find out how clean it was by stepping in it.

“This place is really creepy.”

“I’m sure it won’t be that bad. People must have been down here recently. Just try not to step in the shit stream.”

“Shit stream?” Kaoru looked down, “Ew! Why did you have to tell me?”

“You’d have gone crazy if I didn’t and you stepped in that! Just pick a way and get walking.”

Kaoru chose the path that led straight ahead. I began to notice small rooms and alcoves that indicated this was part of the old castle foundations, places for soldiers to hide and rest during combat, or maybe as a way to escape should things go wrong.

“Hey Kaoru, what is your sword like?”

“Hm, what do you mean?”

“Udo told me that his sword talks to him, mine does too. I was wondering what kind of personality your sword has.”

“He’s very excitable, I guess. He keeps pushing me to do my best. What about you?”

I balked. “She’s... interesting.”

“Hm, what does that mean?”

“She’s possessive. Otherwise I can’t get much of a read on her. Helpful at least, sometimes.”

Stigma spoke into my ear, “I’m wounded, Master.” I ignored her for the time being. I really couldn’t place her. Sometimes she came off like a concerned girlfriend, other times she gave me a cold glare.

“I was really worried when they carried you away. You were tossing and turning in your sleep.”

“I wasn’t asleep. I was knocked out by the pain.”

“Why was your sword the only one that did that?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. They haven’t told us half the story about these things. Just go with it, nothing to worry about besides dying.”

We emerged into a larger chamber. Stone steps led down into a central basin. The sound of running water had grown louder and louder the further we went. I looked up, compounded dirt and stone brick could barely hold back the twisted roots of the plants above. These must have been the roots that Centhus was so concerned with.

“Looks like there’s nothing to worry about down here.”

“Wait, what’s that?” Kaoru pointed into the dark – where a pair of beady yellow eyes stared at us with intent. I held up my lantern. The light spread further, revealing a rugged and messy looking dog creature. It was only high enough to reach our waists, but it was clear from the way that it bared its teeth that it was not friendly.

A level 3 Kobold, with 20HP.

“I don’t think that thing is friendly.”

It screeched and clambered over the rubble with speed. Kaoru stepped back, “W-wah! I don’t know how to fight!”

“Just hit it with the sharp end!”

Kaoru fumbled with her sword, before finally drawing it moments before the Kobold could reach her. Kaoru didn’t have time to worry about it now. She stabbed the creature with her sword, piercing it through the stomach and ending it with no hesitation. The creature was slain in one blow, which was not a surprise given that we were using incredibly powerful, politics defining holy relics for what was essentially a menial errand. A small rusty dagger fell from its paw and onto the ground.

“That was super scary!” Kaoru moaned, “I want to go back already!” I patted her on the back with a sympathetic smile.

“At least you levelled up.”

It turned out that there was something down here. Centhus had told us to come back if the job was too tough for the both of us, but Kaoru and I had this covered. What could a few Kobolds do against the warriors of prophecy anyway?

A lot, as I would soon discover for myself.