

Redd introduced us to all of the kids that he looked after. There were seven in total, but Cass was old enough to look after herself soon – making her something of a big sister for the rest of them. Redd had taken them in when they had nowhere else to go. He also handed out food to the people living on the streets when he had it to spare. His generosity was limited by the extent of his own wealth, he sometimes struggled to look after just the kids in his care.

The meal was good, but we couldn't stick around. We said our goodbyes and headed back to the cathedral.

“Do you think they were lying to us?” Udo pondered.

“The result is the same if they believe it or not, they're going to end up killing a bunch of innocent people for no good reason.”

“Ignorance is deadly. But what can we do about it? The Count seems resolved to do it anyway, with or without our support.”

“Is he though? Why did he wait until we showed up to suddenly get this idea in his head? I'm starting to think that he doesn't have this situation under control. If every person in this ward are members of the Commons, that's nearly half of the city.”

“And any action against them would create a negative reaction.”

“If half the city revolts, it doesn't matter how many guards you have. The Count thinks that we can handle the problem for him, because we have the sacred swords. But we're still just normal people. We couldn't handle an army on our own.”

Stigma cut in, “You could – but it would kill you.” Noted. Not sure if that would ever be useful, unless I wanted to be overly dramatic.

“They accepted that mission because they think it's a simple job, a fun little quest like killing five boars.”

“Except they will be cutting down real people.”

“I wonder if they see it that way. This might just be the dying gasps of my brain and I'm half-dead on the roadside right now, but I'm not going to start acting like this is just a game.”

It was something that had been on my mind the moment the first window appeared in the back of my eye. Everything in this world has some kind of video game mechanic attached to it, you could become a powerful warrior just by killing pigs and pumping up your strength. You could contract people into quests that gave them rewards.

Had the others noticed? Everything felt real. There was a logical consistency to everything that was happening. This wasn't a dream. Did they know that? Or did they start treating this like an RPG, killing and looting without a care in the world? Me and Redd had built a friendly rapport since we met, I couldn't imagine killing him for XP and loot.

“We'll see where the cards fall.”

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“Centhus.”

The Low-Magister looked up from the book he was reading, “Oh. Ren. It is rare for you to seek me willingly.” I slipped the Common’s tome from my jacket and put it onto the table. Centhus tilted his head to read the title, “Ah. Wherever did you find this?”

“I got in touch with a friend,” I sat down across from him and crossed my arms, “None of what the Count said felt right. So, I decided to go out and do some of my own research.”

“I see,” Centhus peeled open the red book and read through the first page, “Hm. This is an original print.”

“You mean it’s untampered with?”

“I cannot say from reading only one page,” he chuckled, closing it again. “But there is always a touch of truth to the holy books. Just try to not take everything they state as fact. People’s memories are malleable, they misremember or speak with ill intentions.”

“Would you say that about the Church’s books?”

“Yes. The scholarly among us have had many vivid debates about the origins of these passages and their meaning. We follow their teachings and defend the branch trees – but we are not all of the same mind on everything within. The Book of the Tree and the Book of the Beast observe many of the same events from different perspectives.”

That didn’t line up with what I’d seen, “So what’s got the Count in such a mood?”

Centhus sighed, “It’s true that many members of the Commons have been taking violent action in the city. Although to blame that tension on matters of religion is a foolish endeavour. They live in squalor, and face persecution from the guard for the slightest of offences. They can proclaim their desire to dye the roots of the tree red with blood, but the real reasons are closer to home.”

“When you put the boot onto their necks, they’re bound to fight back.”

“Quite. The Count is one such fool. He must rise to the occasion, no matter the cost. Even if it descends his dear city into total anarchy.”

“But why did you let some of us go with him?”

“I’m sure you know that answer yourself – this is not a matter that can be resolved by the force of four people and their weapons. I fully expect the Count to return post-haste and berate us for offering him such weak fighters.”

I exhaled and closed my eyes. I was worried about them getting killed, not them succeeding.

“How did such a man become the Count?”

“He fell into it. The previous family who ruled over the city died out without an heir. A cabal of influential merchants put his name forth to replace them.”

“And that’s unusual?”

“No. It’s commonplace for businessmen and nobles to take the place of deceased families, as rare as that may be. He is particularly unfit for his place, a habitual seeker of conflict. A man of gigantic ego who only considers the public’s perception of him.”

A normal politician.

Centhus slid the book back to me, “I do think reading the books would be worth your time,” he stood from his seat and walked to a nearby bookshelf, pulling down a white covered book and placing it on top of the red one. “This is the church’s own scripture. If you wish to fit in amongst common society, knowing this will be essential.”

“You’re a lot more... amenable to this than I was expecting.”

“What do you mean?”

“Where we come from religious conflict is a big deal – it shaped much of the history of the world.”

“I won’t lie and say that we have not fought ourselves. But the church has always approached the Commons with an open mind. We are of the same mind on many things. We are mere branches on the tree of history. If you have questions for me, do not be afraid to ask. I cannot know what it is like to know nothing of the world you find yourself in.”

“Wasn’t it your boss’ idea?”

“As I said, I disagreed with his intent at the time. But I cannot defy the prophecy or the truth that I’ve seen with my own two eyes. The swords chose you – no one man could hope to take the blades for themselves without the blessings of fate.”

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“Hiring those branch mages was *very* expensive,” he whispered.

“Right, got you.” I scooped up the books and slid them into my pocket. They were fairly large, a good few hours of reading were ahead of me. “I’ll see you later.”

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I retreated to my room and laid the books out on my desk. I didn’t really know when I’d find the time to read through these things, but like Centhus said, if I wanted to fit in I needed to start educating myself on how things were. Stigma appeared next to the table and took one of the books in our hand.

“Hm. You could just ask me if you wanted to know about the past, Master.”

“You’ve been acting like I don’t have the right to know for days Stigma.”

“I was there when it all happened.”

“Real impressive.” I sat down on the bed and tried to rest my aching feet. The sun was starting to set over the city, and soon the others would return after a day of harassing random people about this cult situation.

“I am surprised to see that the Commons still exists, I would have thought that those light lovers would have stamped them out centuries ago.”

“I thought that you never get out?”

“Only once or twice. The prophet that your friend spoke of, he was the last man to wield my power for longer than a day. Desperate men take me up in arms, but find that it is too much for their bodies to handle.”

“So, you knew him well?”

“I didn’t say he lasted *that* much longer.” Of course. Nothing is ever simple with Stigma. It was like trying to squeeze blood from a stone. Everything she said was hidden behind five qualifiers and half-truths, that forced me to play a game of twenty questions to get to the point.

“And?”

“That time period was very eventful.”

“What kind of eventful?” I snapped back.

“He said it himself – the exodus of the Beastkin, the last great conflict between the two churches. It was a dire time. He led the Beastkin to a new home and set forth the next century of politics and conflict.”

“Maybe we should be glad that nothing much is happening then. If you dumped me into the middle of that I wouldn’t last very long.”

“Appearances can be deceiving Master. The pristine fields may hide rot underneath.”