

After an uneventful return to my room at the church, I thought on how I would possibly slay five Razorback and get them back to town. This was my first real quest, and I did feel indebted to Redd for teaching me how to fight properly. I wanted to do this right. I stared at the ceiling from my cot with a sigh.

“Hm. Master, you’re getting so much *stronger* already.” My thoughts were interrupted by the familiar purr of Stigma’s spirit. I blinked, and she was suddenly lying on top of me on the bed. I could feel her body weight against me, I knew that she was somehow manipulating my eyes and senses to see and feel her. She slipped a hand under my shirt and felt my stomach, “Don’t grow up too fast. I want to admire that cute body of yours for just a little longer.”

“Are you just here to tell me that? Or is it something else?”

Stigma pursed her lips, “You’re so naïve sometimes. For a knight of Darkness, you always go along with what other people want.”

“Is there anything in the rules about me being an asshole?”

“No, but they’ll take advantage of you.”

“Redd isn’t taking advantage of me – he helped me out. I’m going to pay him back.”

Stigma looked frustrated, I could tell from the tone of her voice too. “Your ignorance, your innocence, they won’t help you. You’re surrounded on all sides by sharks and they smell your blood.”

I held up my arm, “And what does that make you?”

“It’s simple. I’m your only ally.” She pulled me into a kiss. Her lips were plump and welcoming, but also cool to the touch. I tried to push her away but my hands only met empty air. She’d disappeared as quickly as she’d arrived. What a strange way of getting someone to rely on you. Did Stigma only think of me as a tool? Was this the routine she’d played out with dozens of swordsmen before me who were consumed by her?

I did not sleep easily that night.

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At the crack of dawn, I slipped into my clothes and newly forged armour, and retrieved the cart that Redd had left for me outside his house. It was pretty heavy already, which caused some alarm in my mind – pulling this with five dead animals on it would be tough. I might have to ask someone else for a favour to get it back.

None of the other swordsmen were present when I left. I wasn’t sure what Udo was doing, but I wasn’t going to ask him to help me for no reason. I was worried about the other five. I didn’t know what kind of trouble they were going to get into. And I got a bad vibe from the man in white during the meeting.

I manoeuvred the large wooden contraption through the narrow streets, aiming to get to the nearest exit in the wall. The outer ring of the city wasn't as busy as the inside. Armed guards wearing black and blue tabards watched from the walls, both inwardly and outwardly. The gate was large and made of steel, enough to hold off a band of unorganized troublemakers but not much else.

"Halt. What is your business?"

"Hunting."

The guard looked at me and my clothes with a suspicious eye, "You don't much look like a hunter to me."

"I'm not. I'm doing a favour for somebody."

The guard accepted my answer rather quickly, "Very well. We're just making sure that people are aware that the outside is dangerous at the moment. We've had reports of attacks on people and trading caravans in the past few weeks."

"I'll be careful."

The guard waved me through, and I finally got my first look at the outside of the city. It wasn't plain open fields and lush forests like I expected at first. In fact, the outside of the city was still a place where people lived. There were rolling fields of crops being grown, guarded by wooden fences, small farmhouses and barns dotted around the landscape.

"Now, where do I find a Razorback?"

I wandered for nearly an hour without results. I wanted to keep the city within eyesight because I didn't trust myself to find the way back should I get lost. The frustration was building to a boiling point, not only had I not seen a single Razorback during my whole journey, but I hadn't seen any animals at all!

"If you'd like my help, you need only ask Master."

I turned back to see Stigma lounging on the cart, naked, obviously.

"I didn't realize you were an expert hunter."

She scoffed, "Razorback are easy to kill. The real challenge for most is finding them."

"I don't see how you can help me with that."

Stigma hopped off the cart and rounded me, leaning down as if to show off as much of her body as possible, "Have you seen yourself lately?"

"No. I haven't seen a mirror since I arrived."

"Do you remember what I said?"

"That this is your body too?"

She smiled, “My cute little Master is listening! That makes me a *happy* sword. There’s a pond to the south here. We can kill two birds with one stone there.”

I blew air out of my nose, “Fine. Let’s do it your way.”

Stigma’s pointed directions eventually led me to a small watery pond in the middle of a clearing. The tree cover had gotten thick enough that nobody would see me from the outside looking in. The water was clear and still, which meant it worked as a mirror. I left the cart behind and leant over to look into the crystal waters, and find what Stigma was talking about.

“What the hell?” My eyes had turned yellow, like they did when someone cast a scanning spell. The colour was so strong that even I could see it through the refracted surface of the water.

“Just because you won’t use my power, doesn’t mean that your body will stay the same,” Stigma explained. She gripped my head and turned my head to face her, she ran a smooth hand through my hair like a doting girlfriend. But the words she spoke were dripping with menace, “You’re mine.”

I was understandably a little freaked out about my appearance changing without my knowledge, apparently overnight too. I took a moment to keep my composure before asking the billion-yen question, “And how does this help us?”

“Those are *my* eyes, and they are very, very special.”

“You seem to have a thing for springing hidden powers on people...”

She winked at me. “Like I said, every woman has her secrets. And isn’t it fun? I rarely ever get to use these powers anymore! You should be excited, it’s like a mystery gift from an attractive woman.”

“I’m not excited because they kill you! Are we seriously using your forbidden cursed powers to hunt down some wild animals? These aren’t exactly dragons we’re talking about – Redd was confident that even I could deal with them.”

“I don’t mean to be rude Master, but you lack the skill to track and hunt an animal right now. If you found one you would prevail in combat, but the mere act of finding them is a challenge in itself.”

“Let me guess, I need to find a talented hunter and ask for their help.”

She nodded, “Or, you could do things my way and use my eyes. You can sense the life force of living beings from an incredible distance.”

“Magic?”

Stigma seemed offended by the suggestion, “Pah. It is not magic! This was once common place for those with demon blood! Although those ungrateful wretches have since forgotten their true nature.”

“I’m sensing a long story here. If you’re going to help, let’s get to the point. I don’t want to be stuck out here when night comes.”

“If you are truly worried for your safety, I will tell you this much. A Master of this blade, many have claimed to be, but none have harnessed my true power. A man without morals but capable of restraint is an impossible thing to ask.”

“And?”

“I did not make it so. I did not set the rules. My nature as a cursed blade is just that. Cursed to doom whoever wields me, to be cast back into the darkness after mere seconds of seeing the light once more. You have already shown me more than I expected. I want this journey to continue.”

“So, you’re being honest with me.”

“Yes. Yet there are mysteries that even I cannot answer about myself. You will have to seek those answers with your own power. Survive as long as you can, and perhaps the both of us will see this tale to its end.” Stigma reached out to me with her hand, “Come. I will make your veins burn.”

Restraint. Was I being restrained by being taken along with her story? I wanted to go home, to seem my family again. I put my hand on top of hers and nearly buckled. Stigma was not speaking in metaphor when she said that my veins would burn. One side of my body was struck with a sudden bout of pain.

Thankfully it only lasted for a moment. As Stigma released me the world’s colours inverted into dark tones. Through the grey trees and grey ground, I could see dozens of small pink spirits all around me. Are these living creatures?

“You can judge the intelligence of the being by the complexity of their light,” Stigma explained, “An animal is a mere coloured mass. While a fully-fledged human or Beastskin has a vibrant spectrum of structures and shades. The size of the spirit is a rough estimate of their physical form.”

Curious, I pulled Stigma down from my back and unwrapped one of the edges, but there was no spirit inside of the sword. “I’m inside of you, our spirits are bonded together,” Stigma explained. “Not that anyone can use this technique anymore, but they’d be rather confused at the sight. Two souls stitched together like this.”

“I assume I could see it if you went back inside?”

“Yes. I love that you’re interested Master,” she teased, “But unfortunately my spirit is nothing special. Given my capacity for thought, it will look like any other.”

“Do you know the other sword spirits?” I asked.

“No. They’re all so boring – trying to keep themselves apart from their Masters...”

“Can you even be sure that there are spirits inside of them?”

“Hm. An interesting theory. Using this power, you can see for yourself.”

“And what is it called?”

“Wolf’s Eye. The magic words are Lupus Astarus.”

Latin?

“You know the real problem with all this?”

Stigma stepped away from me and dipped a toe into the water, “What?”

“If my eyes are always yellow, aren’t people going to think that I’m scanning them?”

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Stigma shrugged. I was in for one hell of a time, I could tell.