

We followed the sound of hammering until we came across a small alcove near the courtyard. Inside was a large black iron forge that spilt molten sparks across the ground. A short, muscular man sat beside an anvil, inspecting a piece of well-made metal plate with an expert eye. This must be Titus.

“Are you busy?” I asked, catching his attention.

“I’m always busy!” he yelled.

“Centhus sent us.”

“Course he did. Come on then, get in here.”

The room was not large enough for three people to stand in, yet we managed somehow. Udo had to duck to keep his head from striking the ceiling. I removed Stigma and put her against the wall. Titus’ eyes widened.

“Ah hells, is that what I think it is?”

His soot covered hand shot out and grabbed my forearm without warning. His grip was fierce. I couldn’t stop him from rolling up my coat sleeve and spying the damage caused. The blacksmith eyed the sword wearily. “Aye, I’d recognize that shape anywhere. You’re the latest poor soul to get dragged into this game of theirs?” He released my arm and allowed me to step away. “You’re a dead bloody man walking,” the stocky blacksmith mused.

“You’re familiar with this?”

“Aye. All too well. They called it the Iron Plague... or black blood. It didn’t bloody matter – anyone who started to look like that kicked the bucket within weeks.”

I wasn’t certain that we were speaking of the same affliction. Stigma was a legendary, mythical sword. The thought of it giving me a disease that afflicted iron miners was out of character with everything else I knew. I wasn’t going to argue with the man. I wanted his help.

“I don’t suppose it’ll stop me from learning the trade?”

“The trade?” he scoffed, “Unless the ‘trade’ is how to be a pretty corpse, it’d be wasted on you.”

“I’m not one foot in the grave yet. Centhus said you’d do me a favour.”

He laid down his hammer and grumbled, “And why do you want to be a blacksmith, Mister Sword-bearer? To humour this old man?”

“Do you want the real answer? Or the nice answer?”

“The real one.”

“I’m weak as hell, and I need a way to get stronger.”

“Well, that’s one thing smithing can do for ‘ya.”

“I’m also in the market for some armour – how long would it take to craft some of my own?”

He stroked his coal black beard, “If you’re a good learner, a day. I’ll give you the crash course since you’re going to be fix feet under if I don’t. It won’t be much good, but it’ll save you buying it from the market. It’ll fit nicer too. Will your friend be joining us?”

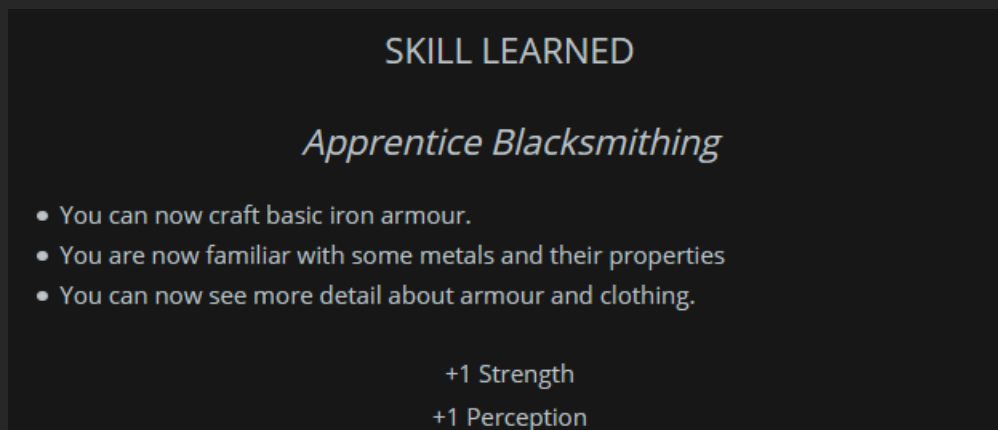
Udo looked like he wanted to turn it down, but I waved him over, “Come on Udo, it won’t kill you to try.”

“Okay.”

“Now, you two better listen bloody close! This’d cost you a pretty bloody penny if you weren’t Centhus’ boys, you hear?”

For the next two hours Titus taught us everything he knew about the basics of blacksmithing. It really was a crash course. It was difficult to wrap my head around all of the concepts on display, and even harder to put them into practice. But eventually we had a few good pieces of iron, which I then hammered into shape and attached leather straps to. I have to say, it felt really good when I was done.

My celebration was interrupted by another popup. Udo nearly leapt out of his chair in shock when it happened to him too.



A dark-themed popup window with a title bar that reads "SKILL LEARNED". Below the title, the skill name "Apprentice Blacksmithing" is displayed in a stylized, italicized font. Underneath, there is a bulleted list of three items: "You can now craft basic iron armour.", "You are now familiar with some metals and their properties", and "You can now see more detail about armour and clothing.". At the bottom of the popup, two stat bonuses are listed: "+1 Strength" and "+1 Perception".

“That scared me!” he gasped.

The skill bumped my strength to 3, and my perception to a very respectable 6. I now had a set of four metal pieces with basic leather straps attached to them. Perfect for putting on my arms and getting some rudimentary protection. I cast my scanning spell on the result to see what it meant by “more information.”

Ren's Iron Rerebrace

A basic set of iron plates, provides some protection from sharp weapons.

Quality: Common

Defence Value - 8

Sharp - +2

Blunt - 0

Projectile - +2

Magic - 0

Now I could also see the specific defence values for each type of attack. I could also sense that my knowledge of its material was not just because I'd made it. Since I was an apprentice blacksmith, I now had an eye for what metal it was using, and the quality of the workmanship involved.

It was incredibly strange to have this new knowledge just pop into my head the moment the window appeared. I felt like I could make a mostly complete set of iron armour if I really wanted to. For the people who lived here it was normal. No need to hit the books and learn everything there is to know, just be tutored by someone and have it beamed into your mind.

"If it's that easy to learn a trade, why doesn't everyone do it?"

Titus looked at me as if I had grown a second head, "Silly boy. Why would they? A city full of blacksmiths isn't much good! Too much competition and not enough return on investment. Experienced blacksmiths expect their students to work under them to pay off their debt, and the guilds control how many can be trained at once. The same for any job."

"And you?"

"I'm lucky enough to be independent at my age. Don't scorn working for the Tree – they have a lot of clout." I assumed 'tree' was his shorthand for the church. Getting bombarded with new terminology and not having the nerve to ask what it meant was a difficult situation.

Udo strapped his own metal armour to his arms and flexed to make sure that they didn't inhibit his movement. "Thank you."

"Yeah, just don't go putting me out of business, or I'll smash you with my hammer."

"I thought I was a dead man walking?"

Titus chuckled, "You seem to have your head on straight – so I'm extending your life expectancy to a few months."

"Nice to know that you care."

I grabbed Stigma and could immediately feel the difference that the extra strength point made. If 10 points was 100% of a human's power, I'd gained an extra 10% just from two hours of effort. It still wasn't enough to swing the thing around like I needed to, but it was a start. And with

some of the other methods Centhus told me about, it seemed likely that I could do so within the week at latest.

But even with incredible strength I didn't know how to use a sword. I needed to talk to an expert on the subject. "Udo, how do you feel about touring the town?"

As we walked down the corridors of the cathedral to try and find the exit, Udo finally decided to put me to task. "You seem to be enjoying yourself."

I was genuinely upset at the accusation, "Enjoying myself? What part of this has been fun exactly?"

"That's not what I mean. I don't trust that priest. I'm not going to do anything he wants."

"I'm not either. But call it momentum or something. If I just lay down and take what comes, I won't feel any better about things. So while we're here, for however long that is, we may as well scope things out."

Udo was discontent, "Hm. I know people like him, they smile at your face and stab you in the back."

"I know. Why would we be obligated to do anything for these assholes? They don't even know what they want us to do. A prophecy, really?"

"Too many people making decisions. It's called bureaucracy. A waste of time and effort for no benefit. A few days from now we'll be the most wanted men in the country. Everyone will want a piece of us."

"All the people who matter."

"Exactly."

We finally found the double doors that led to the outside. The sunlight had broken through the morning clouds, a sunny but wet day. Udo was impressed, "Wow, that's pretty." I had to concur with his opinion. Tightly wound rows of two-story houses covered the hilly coast. To the East was a huge dock, with dozens of ships coming and going, all of different sizes and purposes. Coloured banners hung from windows and across streets. The vegetation was scarce, with a few trees and shrubs covering dirty ground outside the city. It really did remind me of Spain, not that I'd ever been there myself.

The cathedral sat above it all on a huge rock formation, giving an amazing view of the people below. Several other sightseers were lounging around on the walls and some benches that had been placed outside.

"I don't know how long it'll take us to get back home, but you and me, let's do it."

Udo smiled, "Now you're speaking my language."