

Centhus was rightly worried about the opening when we later told him about it. In his own words, there was nothing to be done about it. The maintenance of the underground was not the church's job, nor their jurisdiction. It had to be left to the city's mayor. On the bright side, he did pay me what he promised for the job.

I hit level 3, the Kobolds had pushed me to forty of the fifty SP I needed, and the extra SP I earned from fulfilling the contract pushed me over the edge. There was a significant jump in the SP required for the next level once again. Now I needed 100. I had 15. I could see how difficult earning the later levels would become if they doubled like this every time from now on. The average joe didn't have the skills or the equipment to go monster hunting.

True to form I put my new stat point into strength, pushing me to a burly 6. I was at Udo's level now, assuming he hadn't gone out and killed some things on his own to level up himself. The contrast between our sizes and our comparative strength was just another strange aspect of this world that I could never hope to understand.

I grabbed something from the kitchen and headed upstairs to crash in my room. Udo had aired an anxiety that I felt from the moment that we became aware of where we were. Becoming too complacent. Getting too used to things, getting attached. When it came time to go back home I didn't want anything to hold me back.

Someone was waiting for me outside of the room. It was the man in green, with the two-pronged sword. I hadn't heard his name, since nobody decided to make proper introductions during the meeting, much to my annoyance. He was leaning up against the wall, out of eyeshot of people coming down without paying attention.

"Yo."

"It's Ren, by the way."

He smirked, "Yuji." He took a moment to admire me, "Seek astarus." He frowned as his eyes dimmed again. "You gonna' be high strung and hide your stats from me?"

"If you ask nicely I'll show you, didn't Centhus tell you it was rude to do that to a stranger?"

"I'm not going to listen to that asshole," he rolled his eyes.

"You'll listen when some angry guy punches out a few of your teeth. I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"Deal."

He cast the spell again, and this time he could invade my privacy to his liking, "Damn, you're already level 3? And these stats are pretty nuts too." I didn't even need to vocalize the spell to read him anymore. Was this another side effect of Stigma's blood?

Yuji Masato

The Gale, Swordsman of Winds

Level 2 - 6/10 SP

Strength: 4

Agility: 6

Intelligence: 5

Perception: 8

Weaponry: 1

Art-Magic: 1

“You’re not bad. Did you and the rest of the team go hunting?”

“Yeah. That woman, Sakura. She was shy at first – but she got really into it when we started levelling up. She stayed out there in the wild for a few hours after we all turned in for the evening.”

I finally knew the names of every person who had been brought over. It took long enough. “I need to work pretty hard. This sword, you can see the size of it for yourself.”

“Seems I lucked out. This thing is light as a feather.”

“I suppose it is wind themed...”

“I kinda’ wish I got yours though, being a swordsman of shadow sounds way cooler!”

“You really don’t.”

He shrugged, “Whatever man. I would have sucked it up and just rolled with it.” And I hadn’t? This guy was precision bred to get on my nerves. “I think Sakura racked up enough kills to hit level four!”

“No way. You need 100 points, and I don’t think there’s anything around here that gives you that much experience that quickly.” Not to mention the fact that she was allegedly alone that whole time.

“I’m just relaying the good word buddy. I think her sword helps her find monsters to kill. It’s not about strength, it’s about finding as many targets as possible. They call it the sword of wood. Weird nature stuff, you know?”

I did not know.

He tapped the side of his head, “But I have a few tricks of my own! Not that I’m gonna’ tell you what they are just yet.”

“Any reason you’re waiting outside my room like this?” I finally asked.

“Nah’. Not really. I just wanted to get to know my fellow warriors!”

Warriors, pending consent from most of them. “It’s the thought that counts,” I admitted, “Everyone else is being real anti-social. Like they’re on edge.”

“Hikaru said he wanted to talk with you.”

“We did, yesterday.”

“Cool. I haven’t seen much of that tall guy. You two friends?”

“Yeah. I haven’t seen much of him either. I’m kind of worried actually.”

“He’s the oldest guy here, he can look after himself.” I wasn’t so sure of that. This was a foreign place full of foreign people and concepts. I trusted Udo to handle himself for a little while, but when he didn’t turn up for two days when we’d been so chummy earlier, that was when I started to ask questions.

“I’m going to crash, me and Kaoru just went on a whole adventure.” I shuffled past him and pulled open the door.

“Alright, catch you later.”

I slammed it shut behind me. There’s being sociable, and then there’s lounging outside of my room while I’m trying to get some rest. “Fuck,” I swore at nobody and nothing in particular. I unhooked Stigma from my back and laid her out on the table. I was aching all over, and dirty from all of the action we got into. I didn’t know if there was a bath available.

“May I suggest learning a water spell,” Stigma teased, “Much easier than finding clean water in a slum like this.”

“The most affluent cathedral building I’ve ever seen, and you’re calling it a slum?”

“Pah, this is nothing compared to... never mind.”

She nearly let something slip, something she didn’t want me to know, “Compared to what?”

Stigma remained silent.

“Stigma.”

...

“Stigma. Everybody around here has done nothing but lead me on and bullshit me since the start, the least you could do is start explaining some of this stuff to me.” I sat down on the bed and tossed my shoes into the corner with a frustrated grunt. “This is stupid. Fuck this.”

I missed my family.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, pale and slender fingers. “I’m sorry. But to properly explain everything about who I am, and what the swords are, it would take days.”

“I have an abundance of free time.”

“But do you have a surplus of patience?”

“No, not right now.”

“I once lived. And walked amongst the reeds like you do now. The mere mention of my full name would strike fear into the hearts of most.”

“I gathered that much.”

She leant against my shoulder. I tried to ignore the feeling of her breasts against me arm.

“Truthfully, I do not know how much time has passed since then. Moons have come and gone, as have the foolish men who’ve tried to wield the cursed blade and curry my favour. None have lasted so long as to grant me that knowledge.”

“And me?”

Her breath splashed against my cheek. My face grew red as the ethereal woman climbed all over me. “You? Hm. I like *you*. You’re mine.”

“That wasn’t the answer I was looking for.”

“Wasn’t it? Didn’t the mention of other men keeping me company fill you with rage, jealousy?”

“Getting mad over ancient history wouldn’t be cool. That being said, we’re not married.”

Stigma pushed me back onto the bed and climbed over me. Long dark purple tendrils of her hair cast us into privacy. The only thing I could see was her face. She was not amused, “We’re something much closer than that, Master.” She reached out and touched my face again. Her hand drifted down from my cheek to my shoulder. Like a tiger hunting prey, she ripped away my coat and shirt. Upon the mere sight of my infected arm her grin threatened to split her pretty face in two.

“Our souls are bound together. Every time a new Master came along, I lost a piece of myself with them. When they fell to their own arrogance, I was the one who suffered the most. Only death will part you from me, from my gift. Lose yourself to madness, to corruption, and dye this bastard world in your own colour.

“Resist me.”

I blinked, and she was gone. My own left hand halfway through the process of unbuttoning my shirt. A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead. I quickly threw off the rest of my dirty clothes and sunk under the covers.

Sleepless nights were becoming routine.

