

Udo and I shared a meal brought from the kitchen. Centhus watched the two of us like a hawk. I tried to scan the food to see if that also had stats, but it only came up with a basic name, which I could figure out on my own without magic powers.

“Centhus, what kind of things can you find by using astarus?” I asked.

“Ah. That depends on what you target. Simple foodstuff like this will not trigger much information. Clothing and weapons have a magical imprint that allows us to see their stories and their abilities, if any. The longer something exists, the more of those imprints it will gather. An older object could have a very long and colourful history to look into.”

“Why?”

“To put it simply, we are always casting spells – whether we realize it or not. Will and word can change the world; that’s a saying taught to every aspiring mage in the country. Every action we take is accompanied by an expulsion of our magical energy. It can be absorbed by inanimate objects and used to see into it’s past by others.”

“And if you use it on a person?”

“That would be rather rude. Should you be given permission though, you can find their occupation, any skills they’ve learned, and how well they measure in several life metrics.”

“You used it on me though.”

“Only because you cannot do it yourself. You’ve already practiced using astarus, so why not try using ortarus again?”

“Okay.”

I internalized what I heard from him again and pictured it in my mind. A similar window to the others that explored who I was and what I could do. When I had a firm image of it in my mind, I said the words under my breath.

“Seek ortarus.”

Ren Kageyama

Blackvein, Swordsman of Shadow

Level 1

Strength: 2

Agility: 3

Intelligence: 7

Perception: 5

Weaponry: 0

Art-Magic: 1

Damn, my stats sucked. It was no mystery as to why I couldn't hold my own sword. My strength was pathetic, and I had no experience with using weapons or magic. I had high intelligence, but I had a feeling that my knowledge of contemporary science and technology would be of little help in another world.

I flipped over to the next page. "Skills." But it was completely blank.

"How do these numbers work?" I couldn't reconcile the game-like presentation of these numbers with the reality of breathing and walking around. If I lifted weights would my strength get higher? Or did I have to go native and kill a few dozen slimes and goblins to earn an extra point?

"They represent your aptitude in a general sense. Strength, your speed and endurance, your wisdom and intelligence, your ability to see and react to sudden stimulation, and your skill with weapons and magic. These are the core blocks of every person in this world."

"And how do I improve them?"

"There are three ways. They will grow naturally with time and training, or you can gather spirit points by slaying foes. The last method is to learn a *skill*. A skill can be something as simple as learning to cook, or something difficult like blacksmithing or enhancement. Not only do skills allow you to do certain things, but they also increase your points. Enchanters are very skilled with magic, for example."

"That seems... rather easy."

Centhus shook his head, "The barrier to entry for many of those avenues is incredibly high. Most cannot afford the equipment needed to begin slaying animals and monsters. Those who can gain a large benefit from doing so. Skills are often only taught to apprentices or to those attending the guild colleges in the city. Natural training is open to all – but it takes a long time, and you can plateau when you reach ten or so."

Plateau. That word stuck out to me. Ten points in one of those stats seemed to be the natural human limit, but if learning skills or slaying monsters could push you above, there must be some very powerful people walking around. Udo remained silent throughout the discussion until he finished off his large plate of food. He was a big eater.

"What a strange place we've come to," he commented, wiping his mouth off with a napkin.

"It's like a game."

The doors to the hall swung open, and a new face charged through them with boundless energy. It was the girl from my school. She sprinted down the row until she reached where we were seated. She had also received a new outfit. A vibrant red dress with orange accents, that flowed and coiled around her, but was cut in such a way to not restrict the movement of her legs. I was beginning to see a corny pattern developing with what clothes they had given us.

"Hi!" she shouted, trying to catch her breath.

"Did you run all the way here?" I asked.

“Yeah! I heard that you woke up and wanted to see you!”

“There’s not much to see,” I shrugged.

“But you’re from my school.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m that interesting.”

I could see the cogs turning in her head, “Whatever. My name is Kaoru, nice to meet’cha.” Kaoru was tall for a schoolgirl, matching my own height and then some.

“Ren.”

“Udo.”

With introductions completed, Centhus clapped his hands together. “Wonderful! We have three sword wielders awake and ready for action.”

I objected, “Uh, ready for action? I can barely lift the thing.”

“Ah. Stigma is... rather large. Well, there’s a simple answer to your problem. And that’s to increase your strength.”

“You know, in a normal place you’d find someone who’s actually capable of fighting...”

“That won’t do,” he sighed, “The swords can only be removed by a select few, and once taken they are bound to you until death.”

“How convenient.”

“This is pretty awesome,” Kaoru gushed, “There’s loads of free food, and I get to practice with a big sword, and have you seen the town? It’s amazing!” I was glad that at least one of us was enjoying the ordeal. But would it stay awesome when your life was at risk? I had to question her dedication to the idea, or alternatively, how lightly she was taking things.

For all the stats and titles and high fantasy, there was no indication that this was a mere dream. The pain I felt when Stigma injected her blood into me was all too real. For the moment we were being treated as honoured guests. For a purpose or cause that we weren’t being told. I had no intentioned of getting gutted like a fish, and Udo seemed to share my opinion.

“What are we here for?” he asked, “I have asked many of the people here, but they will not answer me.”

Centhus smiled pleasantly as he fed us another line of freshly served bullshit, “To defeat a great evil.”

“I do not recall agreeing to do such a thing,” Udo chuckled, “Do you?”

“I do not,” I concurred. Centhus sensed that the tide of this argument would simply not go in his favour. And Kaoru elected to not pick a side at the time. “In fact, this seems like a terrible idea. None of us have any experience in sword combat, I’m willing to bet.”

“That is why we will train you,” Centhus countered, “Some of the most talented warriors in the city are eager to assist you.”

“Out of the goodness of their hearts, I’m sure.” There was a tense silence as Udo and me stared down the stubborn priest.

“...Do you truly scorn our hospitality?”

I stood up from my chair and slammed my hand on the table, “You have a weird damn concept of hospitality, that’s for sure. Was that before we were held at spearpoint, or after I nearly died pulling out that sword of yours?” The sleeve slipped upwards revealing my damaged arm. Udo winced at it, and I didn’t blame him.

“Woah, your arm looks super gnarly. Mine didn’t do that...”

The argument ended abruptly as a fourth player entered the room. I turned to face the intruder. A man with dirty blonde hair and a lackadaisical expression. He was wearing an orange robe held together with a leather chest piece. There were ornate, jagged patterns that ran up and down the fabric gilded in shiny yellow material. It reminded me of a kimono, but it still had a somewhat modern edge to its design and making.

“Kenneth,” Centhus bowed, “I see you’ve yet to meet your fellow swordsmen.” He stood from his seat and slipped away. “If you wish to test your strength, follow me to the courtyard.” He walked away without waiting for us. Kaoru and Kenneth were quick to follow, but me and Udo knew that we were just going to get pulled further into this if we went with them.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Fuck.” I slammed the table again, “We really are fucked.”