

“Shock and awe, let’s try to get the first swing.”

Udo and I crept through the grass, stopping when we thought that one of them was looking directly at us. The Kobolds were taking their time to enjoy the water. Swimming and drinking, and fighting with each other. When I could count the individual hairs on the back of the Kobold in front of me, I knew it was time to strike.

“Go!”

Udo quickly slashed the Kobold shoulder to waist, splitting the feral creature in two. I swung my own shot at the Kobold in front of me and smashed it’s head like a melon using Stigma’s blunt side. The other Kobolds screeched, and stripped of their makeshift weapons by our ambush, charged us bare pawed in an attempt to avenge their fallen packmates.

Udo delivered an impressive twirl of Mizun, killing another as it attempted to leap onto him and sink its fangs into his flesh. I clobbered two more with a wide swing, leaving only two remaining. Despite the immediate momentum of the fight going in our favour, they continued anyway – not having the decision-making power to disengage and flee.

Udo’s long legs and longer reach meant that the Kobolds had a hell of a time getting close enough to him to attack. They bit at his ankles, but his feet were too quick, as he held one back with the tip of his boot he slashed the other lazily like he was cutting down a small tree. I walked up behind the other and batted it away as he let up with his leg and released it.

The fight was already over. I looked at the carnage with a wary eye, “That wasn’t much of a challenge.”

“They are too small and weak to take us down like this. What is this ‘level’ I earned?”

“When you kill things, you get stronger, and you can put a point into one of your stats.” I was halfway to reaching my next level. I received another notification that we had completed the conditions of the contract, and should now seek out the man who dispensed it. “It’d be great if we could gather some stuff while we’re out here, sell it on for cash.”

“Hm. But where would we learn the skills needed?”

“That’s the question. I got a local to teach me some sword techniques in return for a favour, but I don’t think herbalists or the like will be eager to let people cut into their business that easily.”

I needed to put in some more time with the blacksmith. Strengthening my ability to make armour and shape metal would make using Stigma easier. I picked through the corpses of the dead Kobolds and found nothing of interest. Udo cleaned off his face and sword in the pond’s water.

“I hope nobody uses this to drink from,” he laughed, “The dogs were bathing in it.”

“It’s survival of the fittest out here, I bet only the rich get running water. It’s a luxury.”

We finished up and head back the way we came. We walked down the dusty roads, hearts still beating with adrenaline from the fight. The walk was mostly uneventful, until we came upon something big. “A caravan?” Udo wondered aloud.

Red banners waved high and proud in the seaside air. Armed men and women of all shapes and sizes manned several dozen wagons dragged by horses. The scale of the operation was beyond anything I’d seen since I arrived. “Who are these guys?” We walked past the static caravan, attracting a few curious glances on the way. When we came to the head of the convoy we discovered why they’d stopped, rocks had tumbled out off a nearby cliff and blocked the road.

The man at the head of the parade was very angry. He yelled and wailed, as several of the soldiers tried to move the obstruction. A single person could easily walk around the pile of tumbling rocks with little trouble, but for a caravan or wagon it would pose a much bigger problem. The ground next to the road was rough and treacherous – an easy place to lose a wheel or get stuck.

“Having trouble there?” Udo stated. The man turned and took a moment from his sputtering outrage to address the both of us.

“Aye. We have the hands to clear this! If they’d got of their lazy arses and got to it!”

The man had a thick brown moustache, long flowing hair, and a wide brimmed hat topped with a white feather. He had a rapier at his side and what looked like a flintlock pistol on his other hip. Did firearms exist in this world? Were they too rare or expensive for most? He had a bombastic and loud voice that cut through the noise like a knife.

“Are you heading into the city?”

“Outside it, we’re setting up shop at the request of the Count. Busy times for men like us.”

“Mercenaries,” Udo muttered to me under his breath. The Count was calling in the cavalry for some reason, even when he had the ear of the city’s commander. I was concerned to say the least. He was trying to turn the city into a pressure cooker and give someone else the detonator. It couldn’t be his fault is someone else struck first.

“That’s a mighty impressive thing you’ve got there,” he smirked, pointing the Stigma, “What’s wrong, elegance too good for you?”

“You know, sometimes I feel like slicing, other times smashing.”

He laughed, “I like it. Never seen a man in the business try to use a sword like that, but I like it. Are you two looking for work?”

I shook my head, “We’re tied down to this city right now. Sorry, can’t join your travelling circus just yet. Not that you want us, we’re useless.”

He took no offense to my joke. “There’s no such thing as a useless man, it’s all about the ways that you apply yourself,” he countered, “A month in training will have you ready for the big leagues.”

“We’ll pass,” Udo affirmed, “Have a good evening.”

“You too!” he tipped his hat and immediately went back to screaming his lungs out. We hopped over the rocks and continued on our way.

“He was... interesting.”

“I’m seriously starting to worry about what the Count is planning to do. Inviting a bunch of sell swords into the city is asking for trouble, and maybe that’s what he wants.”

“As bait?”

“Half and half. Use them to rile up the local Commons members, and then slap them down with force when they starting fighting back.”

“How efficient - and immoral.”

“Hope they don’t bite.”

“If they aren’t organized like Redd implied, somebody will break ranks and do something stupid.”

I didn’t really want to think about that. Battle lines would be drawn very quickly, and me, Udo, and all of the other swordsmen would be expected to pick a side too. The others had all jumped at the chance already. Would we really be thrust into the middle of an unknown war just like that?

I had to wait and see.