

I grunted as I swung the blade down at the dummy, my arms crying out for rest as they attempted to manage the huge weight of Stigma. What kind of mad man could wield a sword like this? It was unwieldy to an extreme degree. Stigma's spirit watched with a smug smile, legs swinging in the breeze like a schoolgirl.

"Don't insinuate things about my weight Master."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking it though. Don't you like girls with a little meat on their bones?" She gripped her breasts between her hands and squeezed the life out of them. It was more vicious than sexy.

"Meat, maybe. Steel, no."

"You talking to yourself again?" Redd asked as he walked back onto the field.

"You know exactly who I'm talking to."

Redd's face lit up with recognition, "Ah. I see, so that part of the legend is true?"

"Apparently. All of them have a spirit within, and mine has a bad habit of talking to me in public."

"Did you just call me out here to tell me the bad news? Because every housewife in the ward was gossiping about those mercenaries moving into town."

"I actually wanted to see if you knew any other ways of increasing my strength. I still can't use Stigma properly. Do you know any other stances that could boost my strength?"

"That's a tough one. Stances that use bigger weapons are the ones that increase your strength, looking at anything smaller than what you've already used won't cut it. I don't have any experience with warhammers or heavy lances."

"So I'm out of luck then? I guess I'll have to keep on hunting and learning blacksmithing instead."

"Blacksmithing is perfect for it, as long as you can find someone willing to deflate the market by training a stranger. You mind if I ask you for some work doing?"

"I don't have my own forge Redd, I'm just scalping off of the blacksmith at the church."

"He's nice enough. He helps out some of the ward hunters with their gear."

Having rested my arms for a few minutes I went back to my routine, running through the stance that Redd had taught me again. I could handle it a little better now, without losing my balance as easily. Redd has said that stone was a stance without much history, or a guidebook to how it should be done.

"I heard some wild stories about those guys that just came into the city."

"Really?" I grunted.

“Yeah. They’re called the Sutil Band. Real expensive types too. They’ve got the men and the weapons to give most cities a run for their money.”

“What’s so wild about them?”

“They’re a bunch of dirty bastards, that’s for sure. Poisoning water supplies, embedding spies in towns and cities, putting pressure on their own employers. Every trick in the book. They keep getting work somehow.”

“I don’t rate the Count’s judgement highly. Sounds like exactly the kind of immoral scoundrels he needs to run this city into the dirt.”

Redd bit his lip, “Too right. They’ll be causing havoc in the ward before long. The boys will have to take care of ‘em.”

“...The boys?”

“It’s what everyone calls the local tough lads. They’re not all men, but they are a bunch of hard asses. They’re not going to let any mercs cause trouble in our neighbourhood, that’s for sure.”

“Trouble is what the Count wants.”

“We all know that. When they’re extorting people, causing a ruckus, you have to enforce the rules even if it has consequences later.”

I let Stigma touch the ground again and rubbed my aching muscles. Redd wandered to the dummy next to me and checked the condition it was in. “I don’t know if I’m up to this hero thing Redd. There’s nothing special about me. I don’t have any causes to fight for other than protecting my own morality.”

He patted me on the shoulder, “There was nothing special about the last guy that used that sword, but you know what? He changed the whole world. You’re a good guy, and that’s what really counts. You keep working at it, and I’m sure that you’ll find a damn good reason to keep fighting.”

“Nobody else can take Stigma now, and I don’t plan on dying anytime soon.”

“See? That’s something.”

Our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a few newcomers to the practice field. Ten men and women rounded the corner, and from their armour and heraldry I could tell that they were the same mercenaries that I’d seen on the road the day before. The man at the head of the group preened like a peacock, stepping high and slicking back his blonde hair. They piled onto the open field, and I sensed an argument incoming as he noticed that me and Redd were the only ones on it.

“And what do we have here? Two gentlemen of the blade, honing their minds and bodies... I thought that everyone in this city were a pack of lazy hicks.”

That was an opener to remember.

“Oh heavens, here come the tourists.”

“Is this field open to all?” he asked.

“Yeah. Usually.” Redd approached the man, “But it’s a community project. Try to treat it with a little respect or it won’t just be dummies that you’re sparring with.”

The merc quirked a brow, “Is that a threat?”

“No. But there’s always someone hungry for a fight around here. Fists only, by the way.” Redd turned back to me, “Are you done for the day?”

“Yep, I have a bunch of money burning a hole in my pocket. Going to see if there’s anything interesting on the market today.”

“Sounds good, I’ll see you later.”

Redd made a hasty exit with his head down, he wanted nothing to do with these guys and I didn’t blame him. The Peacock, as I’d come to call him, had the face of a man who lived off a steady diet of his own hot air. He looked at my sword, his eyes widening, “What a barbaric looking thing.”

Stigma wouldn’t be happy about that one. Her spirit was currently slapping him on the back of the head and phasing right through. I prayed that she wouldn’t take control of my own body to do so in real life too.

“It does the job,” I countered, “Is there room for elegance and aesthetics on a battlefield?”

“Of course there is! Battle is a beautiful thing.”

I wrapped Stigma back up and hiked her over my shoulder, “I don’t think that your average soldier is thinking about how his hair looks while he’s running another man through with a pointed instrument.”

“An amateur wouldn’t.”

I wanted to slap the smug look right off his face, but I knew that it was more trouble than it was worth. I gave him a nod and walked past without looking back. I had better things to do than argue with random people. Was the entire company filled with egomaniacs like him?

I navigated my way through the narrow streets, which was made harder by carrying Stigma on my back. My goal was the market, a large trading hub where people of all types sold and hawked goods like weapons, armour and food. I didn’t know how far my paltry purse would go. The cash from two jobs and looting some dead Kobolds was unlikely to cover the down payment of a house in the city.

Despite all the trouble the market was just as busy as ever. Business as usual to most, but I’m sure that the people in the ward were having more than a few sleepless nights right now. I window shopped some of the stalls, but I had little use for food at the moment while the church was still putting up with me.

Eventually I came across an interesting storefront. There were a pair of bookshelves flanking the wooden stalls. There were even more on the stall itself. The woman on the other side was nearly buried under the sheer volume of the books, having to peek over the top of the pile. She had vibrant orange hair and cat ears like Cass.

“Hello! Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“Just browsing.”

I decided to look at the bookshelves first, as the absolute mayhem unfolding on the main table was not attractive to me. There were books on every subject I could think. Stories, fables, poetry. Plenty of copies of the two Holy books of the churches in various shapes and sizes. The first thing to really catch my eye was a book entitled “survival for beginners.” I pulled the green bound tome out of its hiding place and flipped through a couple of pages.

The foreword tried to give you reader a hard sell, even though it was likely that they’d already bought the book. “Survive in the wilderness, away from the grind of daily life with these incredible tips and tricks. Hunt your own food, make your own medicine and build a place to rest your head.”

Stigma peered over my shoulder, “A skill book.”

“A what?”

“A book that can teach you a skill. They only cover the basics, and practical experience is also needed to earn them. Back in the day they were rather... controversial.”

“And by that you mean?”

“Angry union members would take copies of them and burn them.”

“Wonderful,” I said sardonically.

“A book of this quality is unlikely to draw much ire. And you can seldom make much profit off those skills anyway.”

“Well it sounds like the perfect thing for us, if we ever need to flee the country.”

I checked some more of the pages to ensure that the guy knew what he was talking about. Despite the hard sell opening the rest of the book was well written and had detailed illustrations. I hustled over to the young woman at the table and slid the book over to her, “How much for this?” She checked the cover and hummed.

“Forty pieces.”

That was most of the money I’d earned from clearing the sewers. But it was an appealing idea to be able to sustain myself out on my grand adventure. I took the money out of my pocket and forked it over, “Thank you very much!”

I moved on from the book store to another nearby stand that was covered with pieces of well-crafted armour. They were all very expensive, I'd have to do several of Centhus' jobs to earn enough for even the smallest pieces on offer. At the foot of the store was a small basket filled with bent and scratched metal.

"What's this?" I asked.

The man behind the table leant forwards and grunted, "That's the surplus armour, scrap metal. You can't wear it, but sometimes blacksmiths like to pick out a few pieces to melt down and reuse."

I picked out an armguard. The plate has been bent inwards by a blow from a weapon. I couldn't help but imagine some poor kid running around a battlefield and stripping dead soldiers of their valuables. Given the age it wouldn't be a shock to me if that was the case. "How much?" It could be useful for training myself.

"For that? Seventy."

I put the piece back, "Bit pricey for me right now. I'll come back when I have the cash."

He waved me off, "Don't be a stranger."

I was happy with my single purchase for the moment. I walked back through the town and to the long winding steps of the cathedral. When I got to the top of the hill I sat down on one of the benches and pulled out my book. Stigma appeared next to me and watched the boats come in and out of the harbour.

"Everything can look so peaceful, but you know that everything is rotting away under your feet."

My eyes drifted from the calm waters splashing on the rocks, to the red banners and tents that surrounded the outer wall of the city. The mercenaries had set up firm camp outside. They weren't planning on leaving any time soon. "You don't have to tell me. I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. It'll be a sword in my back or a noose around my neck."

Not much I could do about that, aside from make my own luck and make my own friends. Redd seemed like a reliable guy and he knew a lot of people. He could put in a good word for me if I really needed help. Udo had my back, and we had the same idea about trying to get home as soon as possible.

"I can tell you how this is going to go," Stigma frowned. "Despite what I said, I do not want you to die."

"Because then you'd be back in the dark again."

"Partly. You're one of the few people to wield me who haven't destroyed themselves within moments of putting their hands on me. You've shown me more than I have seen in hundreds of years."

"Just don't take me for a fool Stigma. Everyone back home gets a world class education."

She pinched my cheek between her well-kept fingernails, “You’re still a boy to me.”

“You didn’t seem to mind when you were all over me.”

Stigma’s eyes glinted with a dangerous flash, she closed in and pulled me into another deep kiss. Her tongue invaded my mouth and filled it with the taste of blood and charcoal. I knew that it was an illusion, the tendrils of her infection stimulating the nerves in my brain. She pulled away as my cheeks flushed with accidental excitement.

“Everyone. They are mere specs of dust between my toes.”

My eyes narrowed as her grip finally loosened.

“Except you.”

I blinked and she was gone. She always had to have the last word.