

I found my way back to the room after some searching and sat down on the bed. Centhus had ordered us all to gather within the main hall promptly, before going to find the rest of the swordsmen to tell them the same. I tried to gather my thoughts on the day, but they were scattered in five different directions. The weird RPG mechanics, the sudden introduction to a new fantasy world, and all the implications brought forth by our “recruitment.”

I looked over at Stigma. An outside observer would see the rope, chains and cloth and assume that they were trying to tie down a rogue animal. A wild beast that rattled the outside of its cage. Stigma was all of those things. A sword that posed a greater danger to its user than anyone on the pointy end. Mizun had a gentle temperament, I could tell. It didn't pose any threat to Udo's health directly.

“Master.”

Stigma's voice rang in my eardrums. But I hadn't unwrapped her.

“Master?”

I carefully undid the bindings and revealed the rune covered blade to the light once more. A hand reached out and touched my shoulder, “You cheated on me.”

“Cheated on you?”

“Is the real thing not good enough?” she whimpered, fluttering her eyebrows in an attempt to seduce my sympathy.

“How did you even know?”

Her eyes grew dark. She grabbed me by collar and pushed me back against the wall, “I know a lot of things. You and me, we're the same. In heart and mind. Your eyes are my eyes, your arms are my arms, your tongue is my tongue.”

I held out my infected arm, “This is your handiwork?”

“I already told you that it was. I'm the *only weapon* you'll ever need.”

“...Noted.”

It satisfied her enough to make her let go of me. Her long midnight purple hair flowed down to her buttocks, and strategically covered her nipples and crotch. The previous time she appeared she was rather blasé with her own body, but the novelty had worn off. She knew that I wasn't going to be pulled into doing something stupid by a sexy ghost. It was an ambitious opening gambit.

I couldn't put my finger on her personality. She bounded between obsession and caution at the drop of a hat. She was clearly infatuated with me in some way, but off-put by the cold shoulder I'd given her. Again, this was a tale as old as time. A sword that promises great power but shreds away your life in return. A trap for the greedy and malicious. This relationship was a tightrope. And I was always one step away from doing something stupid and dying for it.

“I need to get stronger to use you.”

“Hm. You seem strong enough already. My previous masters, they were always in such a rush...” she trailed off, allowing the implication to hang heavy in the air like a guillotine.

“Physically.”

She huffed. As I blinked, she was behind me again and holding onto my shoulder, “My poor little Master. Ever the fish out of water. I can offer you strength, but in return, I will demand your soul.”

“I’m attached to my soul, sorry.”

“If selling your mortal soul to me isn’t to your liking, might I suggest learning a skill that increases your strength? There are no shortage of fools in this accursed cathedral that would happily waste their time for nothing in return.”

“Maybe.” I didn’t know what kinds of skills were available, or how many it was possible for one person to learn. I needed to think it through or squeeze it out of Centhus after the meeting was over. Speaking of which.

“I guess that wrapping you up isn’t a good way to keep my privacy.”

“No. My blood flows through you. But given the desperate lengths mortals will go to - to wield my power for themselves, it is safer for you to keep me hidden. If you ever have need of me, call for me and I shall appear.”

She was sounding positively helpful, what a change of pace.

The cursed blade dominated the small wooden table, “If I touch this with my bare hands, will I get injected with your blood again?”

“It is safe for you and you alone to touch me – for anyone else... I’d advise against it. If you like them. People you hate? Allow them to feel all they like!” she giggled.

I tapped the flat edge with my finger, and then wrapped them around the handle with no sudden influx of pain like before. She was right. I’d been chosen as the master of Stigma, so it had no reason to poison me again. “Every woman has her secrets master,” she continued from up against the doorframe, “In time, maybe you will come to learn of them too.”

I folded the last edge of cloth back into place and tied the knots as well as I could. I wrapped both my arms under it and heaved it up with all of my strength. It was an embarrassing display of clumsiness and weakness as I worked the rope around my chest and hung Stigma from my back. I could feel my spine screaming as I took the first step.

But if I never took her with me, I’d never learn to carry her properly.

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I could already see a crowd forming at the bottom of the stairs when I finally arrived at the meeting. Udo, Kaoru, and Kenneth had gone straight there after the “training” session. But there were still three other people who I hadn’t seen since that first day. I (carefully) walked down the stairs, trying not to get knocked off balanced by the weight on my back. Kaoru gave me a cheery wave and a smile as she saw me approaching.

“Hello again.”

“Always a ray of sunshine, aren’t you?”

The three strangers were just that, strangers. There was a shy looking woman in a green waistcoat, frilly skirt, and thick glasses. By her side was a sword that looked like a tree branch grasping a very sharp triangular blade. It was the shortest of the swords of display, and if it were a contest of who had the biggest sword I’d *definitely* win.

Not compensating.

The other two were people around my age.

The first was the older looking of the two. His sword was the second largest of them all, it was a classic fantasy sword – the kind you’d see in a video game. Shining silver wings around a large blue gem, and a blade that was separated in the middle, leaving a long channel between two smaller shards. This was a hero’s weapon through and through. His clothes were made to match. A smart white jacket gilded with gold details and frills, a dress shirt like mine, and long black pants.

The other guy had a young-looking face, but he was taller than me. His sword’s blade was split into two like the previous one, but one point was much shorter than the other. This tuning-fork style continued down to the hilt, which seemed much thicker than all of the others. The blades were a shining silver and covered with runes like Stigma. He was wearing a green half-cape on one shoulder, a frilly shirt that made him look like a pirate, and black trousers.

Centhus did not wait for introductions, he clapped his hands to get the attention of the gathered hostages, “Please follow me.” The group was silent for the entire walk. He eventually led us into a small, quiet room away from the main avenues of the cathedral. It had a table big enough for all of us to sit down and a few extra. “I apologize for the delay, I had to ensure that we’d have some privacy for this meeting.”

Everyone took their seats. I left Stigma against the wall behind me for my own comfort. Kaoru was sat directly across from me, and Udo took the seat to my left. The shy woman took the spot to my right.

“Are you finally going to tell us why we’re even here?” I asked.

Centhus had a look of dread on his face, “To be truthful... the thing is. Nobody really knows.”

“What?” Outrage spread around the table like wildfire. Me, Udo and Kaoru were up on our feet. Kenneth didn’t seem to give much of a shit, but the stranger in green was with us.

“Don’t get angry with me!” he stated firmly, “I was one of the few people arguing against the High-Magister on this matter. The unfortunate fact of the affair is that there was only so much I could do to stall the process.”

“You told us that we were chosen by a prophecy.”

“That was true. The prophecy, written into the branches of the great tree at Black River, stated that seven outworlders would retrieve the sacred swords and save the kingdom from a grave threat. But there was no time specified and the threat is only mentioned briefly. Unfortunately, for a brief moment – the interests of the church and the guard aligned. The High-Magister’s paranoia that the end times were coming got the better of him. He rallied supporters from the local contingent and paid for top class branch mages from across the kingdom, to come here and summon all of you.”

Udo sat back down, “And that’s not the end of it?”

“While the church and the guard have been at the end of their tethers for years, your arrival has only made matters worse. That temporary alliance has gone down in flames mere days after it was forged. The guard want you all under their watchful gaze for military training and deployment. The church is insisting that the swords, and by extension all of you, stay under our care. To part with seven holy relics at once is unfathomable; that is something that I and the High-Magister agree on.”

“So you don’t even know what you want to do with us?” I confirmed.

Centhus was clearly paranoid about his opinion getting out of this room, “I must ask for your silence for the moment. We live in trying times. The last thing I want is to instigate further conflict between the different parts of our city.”

“So what the hell do you want us to do?”

Centhus sat back down, “I would not feel comfortable asking you all to save our kingdom, even if you were in a state to do so. But the sacred swords are bound until death. I can only offer you the opportunity to find your own way until the dust has settled. You will need to become stronger to fight the battles to come.”

“What if I want to become a baker instead?” I suggested, just to see his reaction.

“I will not judge your choices. I trust in the great tree’s wisdom. Those who wield the swords will become heroes. How they do so is not my place to say.”

So according to this magic tree, we’re going to end up doing it whether we like it or not. Assuming that the predictions made by a magic tree could be trusted. The significance of the tree was not lost on me during my time in the cathedral. They were everywhere. On the windows in stained glass, on the uniforms of the monks and nuns, and in round emblems on the ground.

“Sounds cool to me,” the white clad boy smirked, “I’m going to go slay some monsters.”

“U-Uh, could I come with you!” the woman whispered next to me. Her volume control was poor.

“If you want.”

“Can I come with?”

The third unknown was quick to jump into the team as well, leaving the room divided clean down the middle. Cliques had already started forming in this supposed united front.

Centhus spoke up before they left and went on a murder spree, “If you’re going to fight - some of the warrior monks can lend you some armour to protect yourselves with. As fetching as the seamstress’ work is, it is no substitute for steel plate. Oh! And if you’re interested in earning some money, try looking for a contract. People like to pin them to the boards at the town gates.”

They had little regard for his advice. They stormed out of the room without another word said. “Ah well, I’m sure they’ll figure it out.”

“Say, Centhus – if I wanted to quickly build up my strength, what skills would you suggest?”

Centhus considered it for a moment, “Strength? I’d say that you should speak with Titus, the blacksmith – you can find him near the courtyard. Just listen for the sound of the hammer. I gave you the run of the place, so tell him that I sent you and he should help you.”

I grabbed Stigma from her resting spot and slipped her on over my shoulder. Udo and Kaoru stood with me and filtered out of the room. Kaoru kicked an idle leg, “Soooo... we can just do what we want?”

“It seems that way,” Udo nodded. “I’m interested in this Titus character, may I come with you?”

“Sure. The more the merrier.”

“I’ll pass,” Kaoru grinned, “I’m going to find some trouble.”