

I was awoken by a frantic knocking on my door. I hopped out of bed and quickly dressed myself with a spare set of clothes from the wardrobe, “Give me a second!”

“I’m afraid it cannot wait, Mr. Kageyama!”

That was odd. I grabbed Stigma and opened the door, revealing a flustered looking Low-Magister Centhus. “To what do I owe this early morning pleasure?”

He ushered me out of the room and pushed me down the corridor to the main atrium, “All hell has broken loose! The count and the commander of the garrison stormed into the cathedral and are demanding to see all of the swordsmen.”

“And you’re taking us all there?”

“We aren’t warriors, Ren. Fighting on this front would be a wasted effort. We must occupy their attention for the moment.”

“This seems like a bad idea.”

Bad idea or not. We were already in the hall before I could object any further. There were several dozen soldiers loitering around the place, spears drawn and ready for trouble. At the front of the crowd was a rotund man with a long bushy beard, and next to him a tower of a person wearing heavy armour. Everyone else had already been alerted to the disturbance. It was a losing battle for us, we were severely outnumbered by experienced fighters.

I lined up besides Udo, “What the hell is going on down here?”

“These men forced their way into the church, and are demanding that we all be present.”

The fat man, who I could only assume was the count, looked us over with barely restrained contempt. “These are the leeches that were brought through the portal...”

The commander was a lot more diplomatic, “Sire, even the weakest steel can be reformed into a strong edge. We cannot expect all of the outworlders to be experienced soldiers.”

“Pah! Why not be rid of them and give the swords to someone else?”

The commander rolled his eyes, “They are bound to their masters until death, not to mention that the High-Magister would surely have us banished to the farthest corner of the continent.”

Was the commander having to babysit this fully-grown man? Centhus pushed me aside and approached the pair with shaking hands. “Gentlemen, as requested I have assembled the swordsmen. Surely there is no need for such a show of force.”

“My apologies Magister, the Count insisted for his own safety. There have been a spate of Beastkin attacks in the past months.”

The Count nodded, “Aye! This great evil... surely it is those contemptible Beastkin. I say we put them all to the sword and be done with it!”

He was not having any of that, “Lest you wish to be hung from the nearest wooden beam by the neck, I would strongly advise against such a course of action. And surely killing nearly half of the city’s population would negatively impact our tax revenue?”

The Count did not respond to the Commander’s reasonable points and instead steamed ahead with bluster, “Magister, why are these men and women not yet in our custody? Surely a matter of the defence of the kingdom should be left to us?”

“Short of word from the High-Magister, or the King himself, I do not feel confident in granting these people to you. These are our church’s most sacred relics. They wield incredible power, it is important that we guide them towards the path of righteousness.”

The Count rudely walked past the Magister and approached me. His breath stunk of nicotine. I leant back as he got up in my face. “This fellow. He has the eyes of a beast himself. Yellow as the waning moon.”

Centhus tried to peel him away, “Stigma is a mysterious blade. The man is human. I have seen it with my own eyes. Nor is there any reason to doubt that he is of sound character.”

The Count shuffled over to Udo, “And this man, where is he from?”

Udo grunted, “Nigeria.” He was not enjoying the third degree that the Count was giving him.

“Nigeria? I have never heard of such a place.”

“He is an outworlder Sire,” the Commander reminded him.

There was a sense of discomfort emanating from the assembled troops. They looked downright bored having to witness yet another circus being performed by the Count of the city. I decided to provide them with some entertainment.

“And who would this man be? Will the Count be here soon?” I looked to Centhus with all of the fake bright-eyed enthusiasm I could.

The Count, Lurrus Black, who I had accurately identified using my sight, swivelled on his heel and stomped back in my direction. His stats were nothing to write home about. He was a lowly level three, and had a few skills related to politics among his repertoire. A few of the soldiers tried to stop themselves from laughing.

“Do you think you’re funny young man?”

“No.”

“You should learn your place and know your betters. Considering that soon, I’ll be the man who decides whether you live or die.”

“Does the Duke know that you’re here?” Centhus interrupted, “He would be outraged if you tried to take charge of things without his permission.”

“I have the authority needed to make decisions about what happens in my city, Magister.”

Centhus snapped back, "I'm sure the Duke would find that idea interesting. You only enrich yourself off the labour of others with his grace."

The Count's face reddened even further. The two squared up as if they were about to throw hands at each other. "His grace is what granted me that authority, that right! When the ruling line dies out, it is the responsibility of private citizens to stand up and ensure the smooth running of things!"

"Do you call this smooth running? Bringing a battalion of armed men onto our holy ground? You are as foolish as you are fat!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please!" The Commander swooped in and pushed the pair apart.

"While I prefer a mere war of words, this matter requires cool heads."

"These guys are totally whacked," Ken snickered. The other swordsmen were growing restless.

"Hey, don't we get a say in all this?" Hikaru queried, "Do you even know what you want to use us for?"

The Commander sighed, "The issue is that you are both wielding the property of the church, and also present a significant military force within our borders. The High-Magister and the King are at odds over the matter."

"So why is the Count here?" Kaoru asked.

"I demand that all of you do something for me!"

Here we go.

"The Blood Tree. These Beastkin traitors have been besmirching the good name of both my church, and my city!"

"Blood Tree?"

The Commander explained, "A radical wing of the church, or that is to say, a cult masquerading as one. They want to soil the branch trees using the blood of demons."

Kaoru was on top of it again, "What are the branch trees?"

Centhus smiled, "Thousands of years ago, a great priest planted the branch trees in the major settlements of every Kingdom on the continent. They bring fortune, and protect us from evil spirits. They are the central pillar upon which our church is built."

And the means in which the church expanded its influence. A tangled web of international alliances and political traps built over hundreds of years. Stigma appeared behind the Count and shook her head, "You shouldn't believe everything you hear, Master."

*"I should only listen to you?"*

She pointed to the tree in the middle of the atrium, "They have an interest in deceiving you, intentionally or not. This thing behind me, this isn't even a real branch tree..."

If I was a native, maybe I'd find that revelation shocking. But this was something I'd only just learned about moments ago. That being said – where would the real branch tree be? This one had prime placement in the middle of the most expansive cathedral I'd ever seen.

The Commander was quick to assign blame, “Unfortunately, what started as an alternate church has rapidly turned into something more dangerous. Now there are regular attacks against our institutions, public speakers spreading the foul word of their leaders. It's not just reserved for the Beastkin who descend from the original church and its teachings, but even many humans in the city have adopted their ideology.”

“What did the High-Magister summon you for? If not for doing what we ask of you! We have granted you a once in a lifetime opportunity, to be hailed as heroes amongst men! To wield the most powerful weapons in our fine nation!” The Count declared, “And the path to the rewards you so richly deserve begins here, with you destroying the heretics and driving them from my city!”

Udo shook his head, “I have heard this story a thousand times before, and I want no part of it.”

Kaoru shrugged, “Sounds kinda' scary to me.”

The biggest surprise of the meeting came a second later, as Sakura, the wall-flower woman who hadn't spoken a word since it started, stepped forward and held out her hand. “I'll do it.” She didn't say it with much confidence, but it was enough to make the Count smile like a pig in mud.

“At least one of you has the nerve to do what needs to be done!”

The floodgates opened. Ken was the next to agree to the sordid task, “Sure. I'll join in.”

Then came Yuji, “Sorry guys – I'm here for adventure. I'm in too.”

And finally, Hikaru. “If they truly are a threat, then it is only right that we do something about them.” The swordsmen, split clean down the middle in moments. The battle lines had been drawn. Me, Kaoru and Udo versus Ken, Sakura, Yuji and Hikaru.

Centhus harrumphed and crossed his arms, “Four legendary swordsmen should suffice, I assume?”

The Count sneered back, “For now. But you three, consider your positions under review.”

I turned away and started to ascend the stairs, “Big words from a big man, but let's see you back them up first.” Udo was quick to follow me away from the unfolding drama. I didn't want to hear any more of this politicking, and I didn't. None of the guards tried to keep us there. Udo became more upset the further away we got.

“Udo, what's up?”

“It is always the same, no matter where you go. Even on another world there are people like him. So blind in their prejudice, so assured in their ignorance! That is the one type of person I cannot abide by, and I am a patient man.”

“He’s a blowhard, and blowhards get attracted to positions of power. That entire job sounds fishy – just trust the word of god and stop asking questions.”

“Exactly. I have half a mind to go investigate this ‘cult’ for myself.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the flyer that we collected when out on the town, “Say Udo, that sounds like a wonderful idea. Let’s go make some of our own judgements first.”

He smiled, pearly white teeth on full display, “Ah! I like it. Don’t trust the man, trust yourself.”

The first step was finding a member of the cult, and considering how loud and proud they were – it wouldn’t pose us much of a challenge.