

Pushing our way through the bustling streets was tricky, no thanks to the huge sword hanging off my back. As I looked through shopfronts and businesses, I'd occasionally catch sight of Stigma's spirit, still naked, peering at them through my own body. "They breed like rats, Master. This city used to be nothing more than a worthless backwater..."

I ignored her snide comments for the time being. There was a huge diversity of people around. Not just humans, but people with animal features too – ears and tails and paws alike. As a boy from Japan, I wasn't too shaken by the concept, but Stigma had other ideas. "Beastkin walking the streets? I don't suppose that the Great Tree has withered as well."

There was a story there. I'd have to ask her about it later.

"What are we looking for exactly?" Udo asked, squeezing between a pair of squabbling merchants.

"I don't know."

"The others ran off looking for work."

"They can do what they want."

Trouble soon found us. A fight between a young girl and a pair of men spilled out from a nearby building. One of the men delivered a withering backhand, sending her sprawling into the mud. Udo and I hesitated for a moment. The pair closed in to cause further damage, so he and I stepped forward and pulled them away.

"Is there a problem here?" he demanded, "If you want to fight – I can fill in for her."

The man spun around, mouth full of profanity and fury, but the moment he saw the size of Udo his face softened. "Ah! We were just having a disagreement..."

"Really?" he said, turning the screws tighter.

"You rapist piece of razorback shit!" the girl cried, feline ears flickering.

"Stop running 'yer mouth lass!" the other man warned, fist still clenched. "Or I'll cut that pretty tongue of yours."

"These guys are shady as hell Udo."

He nodded, "Are you gentlemen satisfied, or will me and my friend have to teach you a lesson?"

"Asshole! You see a lady crying fake tears, and you're all over her! Hoping to get your rocks off, are 'ya?"

"We like to call that projection."

The young girl scrambled to her feet and made herself sparse as Udo got up in the first man's face. The second man charged and took a swing, but I acted fast and punted him in the stomach with a full-strength kick. He stumbled back and fell over, swearing and hollering on the way down. The other smartly determined that we weren't fucking around.

“She got away,” he spat, “Let’s go.”

They retreated like a pair of wounded animals. The adrenaline high that I was experiencing wouldn’t wear off for nearly an hour. Udo relaxed quickly, slumping back against a wall and wiping the sweat from his brow. “This place is no paradise.”

We’d attracted quite a crowd thanks to the fight, but none of them were going to intervene. This was just the routine out on the streets. The strong pushed around the weak, and everybody sat back and watched. You just had to hope that the strong were feeling nice that day.

We eventually wandered into what could only be described as a town square. A large clearing in the middle of dense buildings, complete with trees and benches. The grounds here were well maintained, with tile and stone used to cover the muddy floor. The place was packed. My ear was drawn by the yelling of a man atop a wooden pedestal.

“The blood of the beast is a blessing unto us all! Forsake the false promises of the Great Tree and return to our own great tradition!”

He received jeers and cheers in equal proportion. There were a large number of Beastkin in the crowd, and most of them were on his side. He held pieces of parchment in his right hand, which he handed out liberally to passers-by. I slipped into the foot traffic and out the other side, taking one from him and stashing it in my coat. I returned to Udo with my spoils and unfolded it.

“Drench the roots with the demon’s blood?” The rest of the flyer was just as insane. Borderline incomprehensible ramblings about corrupting roots, demon blood, and the natural right of the Beastkin. The man on the pillar wasn’t a Beastkin himself, which aroused further questions in me about his intentions.

“Sounds like a cult to me.”

“You never know. This might be mainstream religion out here.”

Udo shrugged. I pocketed the flyer for later. Centhus would either flip his shit about me having it or explain it to me, either way was a win. We continued our odyssey into the city. As the buildings began to thin out again, we could see a wall peering over the rooftops. That must be the edge of the city. I was using my ears to try and find something in particular. It was difficult with how many voices were around, but my patience paid off in the end.

“A training field” Udo observed. A muddy pit full of targets, dummies and men in cheap armour. There were several people using the facilities, but the one who caught my eye was a man using a large sword. It wasn’t as big as Stigma, I didn’t think I’d find any normal person with the strength to use a sword that large in combat practically.

The broadsword user was talented. He used the entire weight of his body and the momentum of the sword to deliver multiple strikes in a row. In-between attacks he would reset his posture and hold it up to guard from counterattacks. A broadsword of his size might have some utility as a fighting weapon, but Stigma was even bigger.

As he took a moment to rest, I approached him with a curious look on my face. "It's unusual to use a broadsword like that."

He rotated his shoulders in an attempt to warm them down, "Every fighter has his own style." He looked at me and pointed to Stigma, "What in the Magister's name is that supposed to be?"

I pulled out Stigma and showed him the length and thickness of the blade, "This is a sword. Supposedly."

He shook his head, "You'd need to be a titan of a man to use something like that."

"As it happens, I'm trying to become a titan of a man for just that very purpose."

The man was sceptical, "You'd be better off buying a smaller sword. Only once in my life have I seen someone use anything near that size. And no offense, he was much larger than you."

I knew that I was vertically challenged. But this was a world that worked off stats and other strange concepts, not genetics or human limitations. I was sure that if I tried enough to build my strength, I'd be able to use it.

"This sword is rather valuable. So I cannot part with it."

"I can tell, you could buy a house with that much steel. So get on with it. What do you want with me?"

"Say. I'm completely clueless about using a sword. I was hoping that you could do me a favour and show me the basics."

The man crossed his arms, "I don't offer that kind of thing for free. You got any coin?"

I was upfront about my extreme poverty. "No."

He stroked his chin, it seemed like this was what he wanted in the first place. "Okay. So how about this, you do me a favour in return and I'll call it even. You can put those new skills to use outside the city for me."

"And what kind of favour do you want?"

"It's nothing crazy. I want you to go out and kill some Razorbacks for me, five or six should do the job. I'll even lend you a cart so you can bring the meat back here. It's charity work, so I can't pay you for it."

"They're tough enough to give you trouble?"

"They're dangerous to an extent. Sneaky bastards, vicious too. But they're nothing that a trained hunter can't handle. They'll come to you, so just mash 'em with that big sword and don't worry about the details. I don't have time to go out and do it myself at the moment."

But he has time to practice his sword arm.

“Shake on it? Name’s Redd, by the way.”

I reached out and shook his mucky palms. “Ren.”

<b>Contract Accepted!</b>
<u>Food for the Needy</u>
Slay six Razorback boar and bring them back to Redd.
Reward (Advance): <b>Broadsword Stone Stance Level 1</b>

Stone stance? Contract? I didn’t ask. This was another one of those game-like things that people just deal with in this world. Saying anything would make me look like a total idiot. The best I figure was that the same kind of magic that allowed me to inspect items also applied to verbal contracts between people. Centhus mentioned them being stuck to boards at the city walls too.

He pointed to Udo, “Your big pal wanna’ help out too?”

He shook his head, “Not for me. I’m going to find my own way, I will see you back at the Cathedral.”

“Later.”

Out of earshot Redd spoke again, “You two are from the cathedral?”

“They’re putting us up for the moment. The sooner I can get out of there the better.”

He regarded me with no small amount of suspicion. But he eventually just shrugged and handed me the sword, “Use mine. Those wooden things are no good for training. The weight of the sword is everything, especially in Stone.”

“Stone?”

“That’s the name of my stance. It’s pretty obscure, most people don’t learn the broadsword like I have.”

I tried to keep the needless questions to a minimum. I didn’t want to make myself too suspicious to the locals. Redd’s sword was much easier to handle than Stigma. It was thin but long and had a more balanced weight, that was easier on the palm and wrists.

Redd had a very hands-on approach to teaching. He’d kick my legs to get them into the correct position and push and pull me to test my balance. The foundation of the stance was maintaining strong positioning and using your momentum to manoeuvre the sword for rapid attacks. But in Redd’s own words, it was a mostly defensive stance cobbled together from several techniques

passed around by various people. The sun went down as the evening approached. Redd was happy with my progress.

“You’re a fast learner. It took me a week to get this far.”

My arms were aching, my shoulder felt like they were about to pop out of their sockets too.

“One more time.”

I stretched them out and grabbed the sword again. I put my feet into the correct position and began to run through each of the forms he’d drilled into me. My feet shuffled back and forth as I twirled the sword around, crossed over my elbows and used the tension to deliver an opposite strike. Everything just clicked. I was a whirlwind.

I came to a stop.

“What’s up?”

<b>STANCE UNLOCKED</b>
Stone Level 1
Increases defence value against melee attacks by 5 when used.
+1 Strength +2 Weaponry

His eyes lit up, “Ah. I see. You got it down in one go? Impressive. I think I hired the right guy to do this job for me.”

“I’m at four strength now. I’m on my way.”

Redd pulled on Stigma’s handle and lent it from side to side, “I’d reckon you’d need 8 or 9 to use this thing.”

“I’m not so sure. It’s gotten a lot easier to carry already.”

“If you keep carrying such a heavy thing with you everywhere – that’ll increase your strength naturally too.”

His eyes glowed yellow, and for a moment my heart stopped as I feared that he’d see what Stigma really was. My fears were unfounded, “Wow. This is a pretty nice sword! Overkill for a Razorback,” he said as if it were just any other you could buy on the market. “No idea why it’s so big though. Where did you find it?”

I quickly formulated a cover story, “Uh, that’s a long story. It’s a hand-me-down.”

He took my word at face value, “Stances are important to any fighter. They’re like a mage’s spells. The more you know, the more flexible you can be in combat. Some of the higher-level stances come with special forms and attacks that use mana and can do crazy amounts of damage. Stone doesn’t have that luxury, it doesn’t have a history like the others do. So make it your own.”

I was starting to get an idea of how to build yourself. You had skills for practical things like Blacksmithing, leatherworking, alchemy, cooking, that gave you bonus stats in line with what they were all about. These were the skills that the average person would learn in order to hold a job, and for most it’d end there.

But you also had your level, which was increased purely through combat. I didn’t know how many stats points you earned for each level; if you earned any at all. Forms were different ways of using weapons which give you stats and abilities to use in a fight. They were like skills but separated from them, in their own area on my stat sheet.

Redd mentioned mana, which I hadn’t seen on my stat sheet. I wasn’t in a hurry to learn spellcasting on top of everything else. Maybe you gained the ability to see your mana level after learning a specific skill, like how I could now see more information about my armour. And finally, weapons and armour could be enchanted to have specific effects. The potential combinations of which were beyond my comprehension.

Stigma was again easier to lift with my new strength. It was still an effort, but it was getting easier. Redd retrieved his own sword and gave me a cheery smile, “You’re a hard worker, I like it. If you’re heading back to the cathedral, I’ll show you where you can pick up the cart tomorrow.”

“Sure, lead the way.”

I tried to pay close attention to the path we took. The streets were like a maze, but Redd was feeling sociable. “Are you new to town? I haven’t seen you around before.”

“I guess I am. The big guy, Udo, he’s new too.”

“You picked a hell of a time to come down here. Black River’s on the edge of collapse.”

“Really?”

“It looks just fine from the outside, but the church and the guards are at each other’s throats again, and the Duke isn’t going to step in this time.”

“Why not?”

“This is just a rumour, but the High-Magister gave him a stern talking to for his funny business last time.”

“I’m not really familiar with the politics.”

“I can tell, it’s the only thing anyone talks about these days.”

We finally came upon a small two-story house, tucked between a shop and a blacksmith. It was a little run down, and the commotion inside told me that there were too many people living inside

of it. In the small open space to the right of the building was a wooden cart. Redd tapped the top of it, "You can fit so many Razorback into this baby."

"I'll take your word for it. I'll be back first thing tomorrow to get on that job."

He gave me a thumbs up, "Great. The kids will be ecstatic."