

Kaoru seemed a little shaken up by killing something for the first time, so we swapped places for the time being. I grabbed the Kobold's small dagger for myself as a backup weapon. It only had a damage value of 2, a far cry from Stigma's 50. It would take multiple strikes to whittle down the Kobold's health. It really put into perspective just how powerful Stigma was. There were still abilities and mysteries about her that I didn't know that could make her even more powerful than she was at the moment.

To describe the sights and sounds of the underground tunnels would be a challenge in redundancy. They were all the same. We ran across a few more Kobold's during our exploration, which I struck down with careful strikes from Stigma. Harder than it sounds when a rabid dog monster is charging at you in a tight enclosed space.

I needed 50 Soul Points to level up again. The Kobolds were worth ten each, so with two kills I was already close to halfway, combined with the points I'd receive for fulfilling our contract - it'd be easy to hit level three before the day was out. Then I could put another point into strength and get closer to my goal of becoming the strongest man in the universe. And then maybe I could use Stigma properly.

"You're like an open book sometimes," she sighed.

"Pretty easy to read me when you're inside my head."

"It's very interesting in here, all those thoughts about little old me. You'll make me blush Master!"

"Did you come up with that look yourself? Or am I projecting?"

"I look the same to everyone. That's who I am."

"And the nudity? Is that just how is it too?"

"No. I like to make my *cute* masters hot under the collar."

I should have known. "Who are you talking to?" Kaoru asked. I didn't realize that I was speaking out loud.

We hopped over a stream that crossed through the corridor and hooked a left, "Stigma. She's very chatty."

Kaoru looked at her own sword with a frown, "Hm. Flint is usually so quiet."

"Flint?"

"That's his name." Stigma sounded like a fantasy weapon. Flint sounded like a character from an American TV show. I couldn't help but be incredulous. I'd started to think that the spirits inhabiting these weapons weren't just spirits, but real people. Stigma had a strong personality and had hinted that there was more to this than nobody but them knew about.

"Hold up, there's something ahead."

The chamber beyond was a mess. Light spilled in through a hole in the ceiling, it cast harsh rays of sunlight down into the usually dark sewers. I peered over a pile of rubble. At the bottom of the steps was a small camp. Stolen fabric and wood stuck together to form a place for the Kobolds to sleep and gather their loot. Several of the miserable creatures were making themselves comfortable, as comfortable as you could be in a damp, wet, underground tunnel.

They looked more dangerous than the others, with crude metal armour made from stolen scrap metal. One of them was wearing a cooking pan as a helmet. They were slightly larger than the others we'd come across too. "More Kobolds, this must be the main group."

"What are we going to do?"

"Hm. There's enough room for me to let loose with Stigma here. But there are too many of them, we'll be swarmed. Maybe we should just head back and let Centhus know."

"No way," Kaoru shook her head, "I want to finish this for ourselves!"

I could understand her desire to come off as dependable, but for that guy's sake? If we made ourselves too helpful he'd be asking for more and more. A moment later her eyes widened, "Flint has an idea."

"What is it?"

"Flint can ignite himself, if we can set fire to their camp – the disorder will allow us to fight them on even footing."

"We need to take away their numbers advantage, if we can confuse them like that and take them on one at a time..."

"Exactly."

"Let's try it. Sneak up on them and set that tent alight," I pointed to the tent nearest to us. There was enough cover that Kaoru could convincingly sneak down there without being spotted. Kaoru kept close to the ground and slipped down the stairs. The Kobolds were all too distracted picking through the garbage they'd collected or resting on shoddily made beds.

I almost felt bad for them. Almost.

Flint spontaneously burst into vibrant yellow flame. One of the Kobolds turned to see where the light was coming from, but by then it was too late to stop her. Kaoru held flint against the damp tarp, and despite the waterlogged surroundings the fire quickly spread through the camp. The Kobold screeched and tried to alert its packmates to the danger, but even still three were caught directly in the fire and scorched to death in short order.

Kaoru fled back up the stairs and the remaining Kobolds rallied, or tried to, as their possessions and weapons were now caught in a field of flame. The Kobolds that could find their knives and clubs quickly began to ascend the stairs to try and reach us. As one leapt at me I batted it away with the blunt side of Stigma, smashing it against the wall in gruesome fashion.

Kaoru showed off some good instincts during the fight. As two of the Kobolds attempted to stab at her shins, she stepped back out of range and blasted them with another spurt of fire from her sword. She slashed away at another that got too close, upping her body count by several in the process.

Stigma proved to be as unwieldy as I originally expected. My strength had increase noticeably, but trying to use her against fast moving monsters who were smarter than simple animals was a foolish endeavour. I was quickly put onto the defensive as three of them attacked me at once. I lodged her between the stones at me feet and kicked the others away to try and keep myself safe. Like pushing water uphill, every moment I spent on defence was a moment spent losing ground to them and putting myself in further danger.

“I’m so sick of these guys!”

“Tell me about it!”

I drew my dagger and slashed at one of the Kobolds, pinning it to the wall by its neck and leaving it to bleed to death. I fell backwards as another jumped into my chest. I quickly grabbed one of the stone bricks from behind me and caved in its skull with a single well-placed blow. The brick was not a proper weapon, and after taking a moment to gather itself it came back at me again.

I rolled to the side and grabbed the dagger from the hanging corpse. I gutted the bloodied monster from chest to crotch and left it as its intestines spilled out like rotten worms. The last Kobold jumped onto my back and tried to savage my throat with its teeth. I reached back over my shoulder and grabbed it by the scruff of its neck, with a mighty swing I bisected it clean in two with the still wedged Stigma. An unconventional way to use a sword to be sure.

I was still ready to kill even more, but as the ringing faded from my ears I was pleased to discover that we had slaughtered the lot. The camp was still, burning embers joining the natural light from above. I fell back onto my ass and took a moment to catch my breath. “That was terrifying.”

Kaoru shook as she approached me, some of the blood had gotten onto her during the fight, “This is... gross.”

“Let’s loot the camp for anything valuable and get the hell out of here. I’ve seen enough sewerage for one lifetime already.”

We picked through the remains of the camp, finding various pieces of metalwork stolen from the people of the city. Finders keepers and all. Watches, jewellery, cutlery and more. The Kobolds were too simple to wield weapons and armour worth our attention. They had stolen some money, but I didn’t know how the system worked. We split the coinage between the two of us.

“How are we getting out?” Kaoru asked.

If I was being honest, I didn’t really remember the way out of the sewers anymore. Thankfully the Kobolds had done the hard work for us. The tree roots that broke through the collapsed

ceiling looked climbable to me. It must have been where they entered the underground. “Let’s try to get out through there. Beats wading through more of this.”

I clambered up onto the bottom of the root and nearly slipped back off again, it was deceptively slippery. I helped Kaoru up behind me. It was a tricky task to find the footholds needed to climb up properly, but if a short Kobold could do it, so could we. We crested the hole and came out at the base of a large, thick tree that had shed its leaves. We had travelled a significant distance from the city. We were now at the top of a small hill, surrounded by destroyed stone walls. I was familiar with this terrain, I’d passed this tree when hunting down the Razorback for Redd.

“A job well done, I suppose.”

“Yeah. Thanks!”

We began the long walk back to the city. Centhus would hopefully pay up for the work we did. Contracts seemed to have some kind of power behind them, informal or not. My mind drifted back to Redd, and a thought came to me.

“Say, Kaoru. If you want to learn how to use your sword properly, I can put you in touch with a guy. He owes me one.”

“Really? Wow. You’re really ahead of the game huh?”

“I got lucky, that’s all. He can teach you the basics.”

“I don’t think it was luck, if you’re nice to people they’ll help you back.”

Naïve. Not to be mean, but it was way too naïve. The world is an unfair place, fundamentally. Me and Kaoru were blessed to be born in a country like Japan, but even so... a history of violence that etched deep scars in the public consciousness. Stabbings, terror attacks. Sometimes people did bad things for reasons that we couldn’t possibly comprehend, so much so that there may as well have been no reason at all.

Nice won’t stop a criminal from robbing you. You aren’t playing the same game as them.

Nice works best on a *level* playing field.