

My palms broke out into a sweat as the weight of my crime landed squarely on my shoulders. What a rank hypocrite I was, chastising Yuji for getting involved in some dirty business, and then killing the first man that tried to get one over on me. Stigma appeared and kneeled over the body with a wicked smile, "I didn't know you had it in you Master."

The chaos had drawn away any attention that could be put on me. I shook my head in abject denial, "No, no way."

Stigma closed her eyes and sighed, "If you want to survive in this world, your heart must be one of stone. Deaden that feeling – there will surely be more sins to come." I looked away from the body. The militiamen and the mercenaries were in all out war. Screams and cries of pain rose from the square and the streets beyond as they clashed steel and spell.

"What the hell, how did it get bad this quickly?"

"This is what they were waiting for," Stigma explained, "Behind the scenes. They'd been waiting for this, sharpening their swords."

"The entire city's gone to hell."

Redd. Where was Redd? I scoured the battlefield for him. Eventually I spotted him fighting off a mercenary swordsman. Redd was weak with exertion. I charged over as he motioned to split his brow in two with an overhead strike and tackled him to the ground. He fell down into the mud with a heavy thud, before being silenced by a precise stab from Redd's sword.

"Ren..."

I climbed back up to my feet, "What did I tell you Redd?"

He nodded, "Right. Get the kids. What about you?"

"I'm going back to the cathedral. I made my bed, I'm going to lie in it."

He put his hand on my shoulder, "Don't die."

"I'll try not to. Now hurry up before they block all the streets."

Redd turned and fled down one of the streets. I went the opposite direction. I needed to get back up to the Cathedral and see what was happening with the others. I made a straight run through the middle of the fight and clambered over one of the makeshift barriers that blocked my way. The guards who were manning it had abandoned their posts to join the battle. The streets were alive. People were banging pots, throwing things out of windows and ringing the town bells. I could see plumes of smoke rising from between the houses where something had been set alight.

Dead bodies lay discarded in the gutters, their blood running through the waste channels. This was so much worse than I was expecting, and it had happened so suddenly without my knowledge. I thought I had more time to do... something.

But what could I do?

I wasn't a hero. I wasn't the protagonist of this story. I was just a stupid teenager from another planet who knew nothing. So comforted in his ignorance that just for a second he thought that this new world was any different to his old one. How could it be so when they shared so many commonalities! I wasn't a good fighter, I couldn't turn the tide of this fight for the side I considered righteous. Were they even righteous? Or had I just been swept along with the first group of people that noticed me?

I tried to keep myself out of trouble on the way back. The violence was spontaneous, but it hadn't spread to every corner of the city just yet. The cathedral cut a much more intimidating figure now that it was surrounded by the Count's soldiers. They let me through, parting with practiced discipline. I took a moment to catch my breath before ascending any further. I had just run through half of the city to get here.

When I finally got to the atrium, that gnawing feeling in my gut only got worse. There were at least a hundred soldiers camping out. Sleeping on benches, sharpening weapons, and at the centre of it all were Yuji, Sakura and Jaccard. Just as I entered, Centhus and the rest of the gang hurried down the stairs. Centhus was furious.

"How dare you bring your bloodletting onto our holy ground!" He pointed an accusatory finger at the Peacock, who shrugged it off.

"The Count said that we could hold up in here."

"That isn't his decision to make!"

I snuck up to the ground and tapped Udo's shoulder, "When did they show up?"

"I do not know. An hour ago, maybe."

The squabble continued unabated for several minutes, until he finally noticed me trying to sink into the furniture. "You! You were one of the people who attacked our execution!"

"Attacked? I didn't even touch you."

"The intent was the same – how dare you release those criminals!"

"I didn't realize being a child was illegal these days. How do you sleep at night?"

Centhus recoiled, "Ghastly. You attempted to murder *children*!?" Yuji was as disquieted by the reaction as he should have been. Any rational person would have been disgusted. The other swordsmen whispered words of distrust to each other.

The situation decided to go from bad to worse, as the Count barged through the front door like a rolling boulder. "What in God's name is happening in the city?"

"Thanks to the fine work of your hired goons, everyone is killing each other," Udo responded sardonically. "Was that not your intention from the start?"

The red-faced noble huffed to himself, "I hired you to ensure that peace was kept!"

Jaccard approached with a salesman's grin, "And we will! They are no match for our trained fighters. Once the militia is dealt with, the rest will scatter like the craven fools they are."

"I want to talk to your Commander."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible. He put me in charge of this job, and he can't get inside the city now. It's far too dangerous."

Centhus stormed over to the count, finger wagging and robe fluttering. "Take your damned mercenaries out of my sight, you tremendous buffoon!" He yelled, "The nerve of you to occupy our fair cathedral like this, the High-Magister will have your head on a silver plate!"

"I am acting under the authority of the crown!" The Count, knowing that he was on the back foot of that argument, rotated to face us, "Why aren't the swordsmen doing anything? You're meant to be the saviours of our Kingdom!"

I rolled my eyes, "Really? You seem to be a bigger danger to the people than whatever dark forces you've whipped up in your head. Outside those doors is a vision of a city pushed off a cliff, and it's all your fault. If you could have buried your pride none of this would have happened."

Jaccard glanced at me from the corner of his eye, "Silence. I have witnessed first-hand where your loyalties lie. You have been indoctrinated by the Commons, that much is evident."

"I think you need your *fucking* eyes testing."

The atrium was nearly full to bursting. The balconies were manned by dozens of the knights I had seen guarding the building since I arrived. They tended to stay out of the way in their own section of the complex, but now there was a clear and present threat to the safety of the people inside. I had a very bad feeling. Even worse than the one I had at the gallows.

"If you think that you can snap your fingers and summon seven skilled warriors, you thought wrong. None of us are fighters, none of us are knights. You think we can go out there and fight that battle for you? Centhus already warned you – you light the fuse, and we aren't going to save your ass when it's on the line."

"What's happening out there?" Kaoru asked.

"They're fighting," Udo answered, "The Count has been trying to execute people from the wards. He's pushed them too far."

"Hikaru?" The Count pleaded.

"You already know my answer," Hikaru stated, "You told me that I was the most righteous out of all the swordsmen, but what's righteous about this? There isn't a great evil threatening this city, this is a story that's played out a million times in a million places. You jumped at the shadows, and now you're paying for it."

Sakura adjusted her glasses, “Tsk. If I can’t have all of you, Ken and Yuji will suffice.” Yuji looked like a deer in the headlights. He’d gotten himself into a really big mess now. Ken wasn’t even paying attention to the conversation. With a hand on the hilt, Sakura was ready to fight.

“What’s it going to be?” I asked with finality.

In the blink of an eye she drew. Sakura charged at me with a bloodlust that caught me off-guard just as much as her sudden assault. Acting quickly, I assigned my blood-point into Strength and swung Stigma into position in front of me, causing her first blow to land shallow and sending sparks across the floor.

“Ah. You aren’t stupid after all.”

“What?”

She glared at me, her eyes turning yellow. She sighed and returned her holy blade to its resting place. “You aren’t even worth the effort. You’re the strongest of everyone here, except me – but even so... you’d barely be worth a fiftieth of a level. So inefficient, not my style.” I didn’t know where this vicious personality had come from, it was so against my first impression of her. You can’t judge a book by its cover.

She slipped behind the guardsmen who were surrounding the Count, “You can kill him easily. In fact, all of them are *totally weak*.”

The Count nodded, “We will retrieve the swords, as they are rightfully the crown’s property.” The guardsmen drew their own weapons and surrounded us. Yuji and Ken quickly swapped sides and stood next to Sakura. It looked like those battle lines were now set in stone. I had no idea what he’d offered them, or if they were just following the herd. Either way we were seriously outnumbered.

“Over my dead body,” Centhus waved the knights down from the balcony, “Protect the chosen with your lives!”

“Treachery most foul!” Jaccard squealed, “Rout these swine, quickly now!”

“What should we do?” Kaoru panicked next to me.

“We’re screwed, really screwed.”

“I’m not going down like this,” Udo drew Mizun and pointed the sharp end at the enemy, “And you three aren’t either.”

“Correct,” Hikaru summarised, “The good guys always win in the end, right?”

Sorry Centhus, it looks like your Cathedral is getting bloody after all.