

“Did you hear? Those mercenaries beat one of the merchants in the markets black and blue.”

“It’s terrifying. I heard one of those brutes raped a poor girl in the ward.”

“They never... the Commons will have their heads.”

It was hard to ignore what people were talking about on the streets. Truth or not, people had already started to fire up the rumour mill. I wasn’t of the mind that the scale of the problem needed to be exaggerated. The Count had invited a hoard of barely controllable soldiers into the city that didn’t answer to anything but the fattest coin purse.

I walked past the street corner. Three of the soldiers had cornered a young woman and were making unwanted advances. “Hey!” I called out, “Leave her alone!” A few of the people around stopped to observe, some of them voicing their own protest at their foul behaviour. The three men backed away, sharing a nervous glance as the chorus of opposing voices grew louder.

That was all it took. If just one person could raise their voice, other people would join in and try to do the same. They could prevent an injustice like that. The three men were quick to turn tail and flee when the public turned against them. But I knew that not every soldier would be as co-operative, others would only respond with the tip of a blade.

I shouldn’t push it onto other people. Not everyone had a holy blade ripped from the nearest sacred altar. Not everyone had the liberty of being able to train my skills for free, or to be able to live without working. A lot of people had children to look after, they’d keep their heads down when push came to shove.

I got back on track. I was heading to Redd’s home again. He’d invited me to a meeting between the community leaders. He thought it was important that I was there. His face brightened considerably when he saw me approach. “Ren! Good to see you.”

“Why did you want me to come down? You know how ignorant I am to all the politics around here.”

“Don’t worry about it. I filled the elders in already.”

“Elders?”

“The oldest Commoners in the ward, they’re pretty much the only real authority around here. Wise, brave, everything that we should be.”

“How much did you tell them?” I asked, briefly paranoid that he’d spilled too much information.

“Not that much. Just that you’re an outworlder. Telling them the rest is up to you. Knowing them though... they might sniff you out right away. You could leave Stigma in the hallway if you want to keep it a secret.”

“Would you trust them?”

“With my life, and then some.”

“Then I trust them too.” I was filled with uncharacteristic drive for that moment. Maybe it was the high from standing up to the soldiers earlier, or maybe I was simply being moronic for no reason. “Tell them.”

Redd’s brow was raised, “You sure? They’ll probably freak out about it.”

“Let’s just get it over with.”

Redd nodded and slowly opened the door to the living room. Sat around the small table in the centre was a group of three men and one woman. All of them were Beastkin. The woman had long curly horns like that of a ram and curly white hair that betrayed her real age. One man was clean shave and was wearing a nice suit. The other in a comfortable looking sweater. The final man was wearing an apron, having presumably just come to the meeting after work.

The man in the suit spoke first with a deep baritone, “Redd, who is this?”

Before Redd could explain, I carefully placed Stigma onto the floor with the tip pointing downwards and slowly unwrapped the canvas that surrounded it. The confusion of their face was soon replaced with astonishment.

“T-That’s...”

“Stigma!” the woman cried, leaping up from her chair.

“Don’t touch it!” I warned as she stepped a little too close for comfort, “The shock will knock you dead.”

She came to her senses and backed away again. “My apologies. My reason deserted me for a moment.”

“Elders, I don’t suppose you’ve heard the rumours?” Redd aired in an unusually formal tone, “The seven swords have been drawn and amongst them was Stigma. My friend here, is a man of good character and strong conviction. He has been chosen.”

The well-dressed man covered his mouth, “So it’s true. We are all in such great danger?”

“Allow me to introduce you,” Redd pointed to the suited man, “This is Elder Darius, Elder Garran, and Elder Cynthia. They are the leaders of the ward.”

I bowed my head, “It’s an honour to meet you.”

“The honour is ours,” Cynthia smiled, “To meet a man worth of wielding Stigma once more. This is no portent of doom Darius, this is a new beginning for the Commons!” She turned to plead with the man, but he had the face of a stubborn old mule. I had to agree with his pessimistic expression, I was no hero.

“The High-Magister has been driven mad by tales of doom and chaos,” I explained, “He has summoned me and six others from another world – and forced us to take up the blades for ourselves.”

“He was always mad,” Garran chuckled, “Mad as a cave full of bats, that man!”

Darius was concerned, “He believed that the sacred swords would be best wielded by outworlders?”

“Those prophecy weavers act on impulse and deal in magic most foul,” Cynthia sighed, “They are nothing more than the ramblings of the lost.”

“Well those ‘lost’ have the ear of the most powerful man in the country,” Garran responded, “They’ve filled his mind with even more poison than usual.”

Redd pulled out another pair of chairs. The others spread out to give us the space to sit at the table. I left Stigma on Redd’s couch and entered the circle. “Why are we meeting at your home, Redd?”

“We like to change the meeting location every so often, stops the guard from keeping track of us. Harassment is just one of their many tactics.”

Garran addressed him, “Redd, it is most fortuitous that you have earned the friendship of the Blackvein. Is he every bit as noble as you say?”

“I wouldn’t consider myself noble,” I waved him away, “And I’m definitely not in any shape to become a hero to anybody,”

“Becoming a hero is merely a matter of effort,” he countered, “The greatest warriors can come from humble beginnings. But it’s a bit late for an old cow like me. Even so, taking Stigma away from the church is a great achievement in itself.”

“They’re trying to keep us all on a short leash, but the guard are tugging on the other end. They both want to use us to fight their battles. I’m afraid to say that not all of them are as suspicious of them as I am.”

Darius shrugged, “It is of little consequence. Stigma is the strongest of all swords. The weapon that led our people to the new land and defended us when we were at our weakest.”

“I’m not intending to get into any fights with them. None of them are warriors, they’re all weak like me. I don’t think they’ll join in if everyone starts fighting.”

“And you?” Cynthia asked pointedly, “Are you going to stand up for the people?”

I closed my eyes, “What do you think I can do that you can’t? Stigma’s power comes with a high price, and alone I cannot be the one who puts my finger on the scales to tip things in your favour. I’ll stand up for what I think is right, but don’t expect that to make everything go your way.”

The elders shared a look that told me exactly what they thought – that wasn’t what they wanted to hear. Redd cut off the discussion before it could go any further, “I know it’s your job to prepare for the worst but hopefully it won’t come to that. This isn’t a fight we can win right now.”

“We know,” Darius said irritably, “Time and time again, the Count has illustrated that we do not have the means to do what we wish.”

A tense silence settled over the table. I wasn't a hero, I wasn't destined to lead these people to the freedom they desired, to the power they desired. I was a nobody - and it wasn't going to change fast enough for them. I was snapped out of my stupor by the door to the room being slammed open by an exhausted militia man.

“Elders, the mercenaries have raided one of the local houses and dragged the people inside to the gallows!”

“Again?” Redd slammed his hand down on the table. The Elders hurried to their feet.

Darius was quick to bark orders, “Gather as many men as you can find. I will not allow those detestable bastards to take the lives of any of our people.” He nodded and left as quickly as he arrived. “This meeting is over. The time for action is now, they will not wait for us.”

The Elders left too, leaving me and Redd alone. He grabbed a sword from the wall and slid it into his sheathe. I put a hand on his shoulder, “Redd, you know how this is going to end.”

“Badly.”

“You've got those kids to look after. Don't go doing anything stupid.”

“I won't.”

“Listen, I found something down in the sewers. There's a huge hole under the tree on the outskirts of the city.”

Redd understood what I meant implicitly, “Okay. You're right. The moment things get bad, I'll be there. Are you coming with me?”

I didn't want to leave him behind, “Sure, let's try and work our magic again.”