

The Razorback was an ugly thing. It was a swine that reached up to the stomach of an adult male. Its name was earned from the prickly and tough spikes that jutted from its back, designed to ward-off predators. To Ren, it looked like the unholy combination of a hedgehog and pig. He peered through a gap in the bushes, Stigma watching over his shoulder.

“Okay, so how can we kill this thing?”

“Razorback are aggressive creatures, confronting one will not turn into a test of stamina.”

Ren pulled Stigma’s blade over his shoulder and held the weight in his hands. If he could time his swing right, he might be able to kill it. But if he missed trouble would follow. He didn’t have the strength to perform a quick follow up strike. He needed to hit his first shot, and hit it well.

“I could give you some of my power.”

“I’m not using your secret, forbidden, deadly power to kill a single pig. Maybe if my life is in danger, but not now.”

I scanned the Razorback using my new demon eyes.

RAZORBACK
Level 2 Swine
10/10 HP

“A weak creature,” Stigma giggled, “A single blow would surely cleave it in two.”

I was concerned about damaging the carcass too much, “Hm. What happens if I hit it with the blunt side?”

“I have an attack value of fifty when used correctly. A conservative guess would be that you would do at least twenty damage.”

“And without the mess too.”

This was the kind of time that I jumped in without thinking too hard about it. What was the worst that could happen? Aside from dying to a level 2 enemy in my first real battle. I walked through the bushes and hefted Stigma up over my head, the blade facing outwards. My arms quaked as the pig turned to face me with an angry squeal.

Its little legs had a surprising amount of speed. I was nearly caught off-guard by the attack. When the time was right I let the hammer fall. Stigma fell through the air without my input and landed square on its head. The pig came to an immediate stop as the impact pushed it into the ground, ass end first.

I let out a whoop of joy and pulled the sword away, revealing a very mashed pig head attached to a mostly intact body. A small popup informed me that I had earned 2xp for the kill. If I got all of the pigs that Redd wanted, I could level up at the same time. I hustled back to where I parked

the cart and pulled it to the corpse. I hefted up the very heavy spoils and planted them on the back.

“It’s a start, I suppose,” Stigma murmured.

“Now we just need to do this five more times. Easy right?”

It was categorically and objectively *not* easy.

I was muddy, tired, injured, and a long list of other adjectives to describe an overall state of total misery. The rest of the Razorback had put up a tough fight, knocking me down, winding me, stabbing me with their spines...

Not to mention that the cart got heavier with every kill. Meaning that the effort needed to find and kill the next one increased with my exhaustion. My suffering was only interrupted by another popup after the fifth kill.

Level 2 Attained
+2 HP
You earned 1 stat point.

I’d finally hit level 2. And with it came another stat point and a HP boost. I felt a little less beat up after levelling. I immediately dumped the stat point into strength, pushing it up to five. “You levelled up Master!” Having my own personal cheerleader in the form of a naked ghost was something to be happy with too.

When the last pig was slain after several hours of chasing signals using my messed-up eyes, I wanted to go back to the room and collapse. But I still needed to actually deliver the darn things before I could do that. Tied down with rope and covered with tarp, I wheeled them back down the long road back to the city. I distracted myself from my aching feet by admiring the surroundings. It was a really pretty place now that the sun was shining.

When I finally reached the gate, it was nearly sundown. The guards halted me at the gate, inspected my cart for anything dangerous, and then allowed me through without issue. I waved it through the narrow streets and back to Redd’s home. The place sounded rowdy as usual, and not just because of all the children inside. Out front was a pair of unwelcome faces, it was the two men who me and Udo had fought earlier the day before, and they were kicking up a fuss with an angry looking Redd.

“This den of rats needs cleaning out!”

“You’re all talk, you blowhard fool!” Redd snapped back, “Make yourself sparse before I decorate the gutters with your blood.”

“That little cat-whore is coming with us! The little thieving sub-human!”

Redd’s hand touched the hilt of his sword, “Do I have to call the guard?”

“They’ll side with us,” the other man screeched, red faced. “They know that this place is just a hovel for all those thieving Beastkin!”

I’d heard enough. I parked the cart and rounded the corner, getting up in his face. “You again? Wasn’t the last trashing my buddy gave you enough?”

He sputtered, “Y-You! I knew you were working with ‘em. Knew it from the start?”

“Them?”

“T-The thieves, they live in this house. Scamming and robbin’ innocent folk like me!”

“Innocent folk? What’s all this talk about ‘cat-whores’ and ‘sub-humans’?”

The man backed away, long finger pointed like a bloated sausage, “You’re not getting away with this! We’ll be back. We’ll burn this house to the ground with all of you in it!”

Redd struck like lightning. The man’s fingers were severed by a precise strike from Redd’s short sword. He clutched it and fell to the ground, yelling until his voice grew strained. “I don’t think you’ll be burning anything down with your hand like that.”

The other man scrambled and picked up his partner. “The next time it won’t be your fingers, it’ll be your head.” It was a truly gruesome sight, the gore from the man’s bleeding stump, or the vicious way that the situation had played out. The two men fled down the streets, screaming and hollering all the way.

I felt ill.

Redd didn’t seem to notice. He approached me and patted me on the back, “I didn’t expect you to come back, to be honest.”

“Yeah... well. Is that going to be okay?” I asked. What if the guards came by and arrested him for assault? I didn’t even know if they had a justice system in this world.

Redd sighed, “We get dozens of these folks coming by all the damn time. I don’t have the patience for some fat asshole to go running his mouth about murdering me and the kids.” Redd appraised the Razorback on the cart, “I’ll be damned. You even got them back in one piece.”

“It wasn’t easy.”

“You didn’t have to go that far, but I appreciate it all the same. You ever need another starter lesson for a weapon, come see me and I’ll show you the ropes. I dabble in a few too many of them. This’ll keep us fed for a week or so.”

“I don’t think she’d like that...”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just talking to myself. If you ever have anything else that needs doing, I’d be happy to give you a hand. For the kids, right?”

Redd smiled, “For the kids.”

The door at the side of the house opened, and out stepped another familiar face. It was the feline girl who the two men were harassing the day before. They must have followed her back here. She recognized me too. “Ah! It’s you!”

“Hello again.”

She pouted and pushed the much larger and older Redd back, “Brother! I thought I told you to stop spying on me!”

Redd held up his hands, “Hey, I didn’t even know that you two had met!”

“I don’t need a bodyguard following me everywhere. I’m the oldest girl in the house.” She sniffed the air, skipping over to the cart and pulling up the corner of the tarp, “Woah! We’re having Razorback again?”

“It’s a special occasion, and the opportunity just passed by me – so I took it.”

“This is all just a co-incidence,” I explained to the young girl, “I was out of town all day getting these guys.”

“Wow! You must be pretty strong!”

“Not as strong as I’d like to be...”

Redd patted me on the shoulder again, “Well, if you’re in the ward this time of night, feel free to come down and have a meal with us. But I’ll have to butcher these boars before they go off.”

“I should probably be getting back to the cathedral, the Magister told me that everyone was going crazy for some reason. I don’t want to get dragged back by force.”

“I didn’t need you to tell me that,” he nodded, harkening back to the conversation we had the day before. “But it means more to hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

“I feel like I got dropped into the middle of it. Don’t be shocked if you see me hanging from the damn gallows a week from now.”

“I’ll cut you down buddy, after everyone’s tired of throwing stones at your body.”

“Thanks. Appreciate it.”

When I returned to the cathedral (and may I say, the stairs were difficult,) one of the other swordsmen was waiting for me at the top of the stairs. He walked in front of me to block my

path, "Wait just a moment. Kageyama." I tried to step past him, but he moved to the left to stop me again.

I didn't have the energy to put up any further resistance, "Do we have to do this? I'm tired. And isn't it rude to call me out when I don't even know your name?"

He bowed his head, "Ah. My apologies. I am Sato Hikaru. I am the swordsman of light." That explained the white outfit and the heroic looking weapon. "And you are Ren Kageyama, the swordsman of shadow. A fitting name, don't you think?"

I had to admit, it was perhaps too coincidental that Kageyama and Hikaru ended up with the swords of dark and light respectively. "So? Are you saying that we're meant to be rivals or something? I'm not feeling particularly evil at the moment."

He smirked, "No. Of course not. You are a logical, and reasonable person. But a touch too influenced by other people's emotions."

"What do you want me for?"

He glanced behind him, the paranoia of what was happening had gotten to everyone I'd seen. Something bad was afoot and we were all flying blind. "I don't mean to come off as confrontational. I wanted to talk to you about something, yesterday the Magister pulled me aside and confided something with me."

"And it affects me?"

"Yes. The subject he spoke of was you." My eyes narrowed, "He had... unkind words to say – based on his impressions of the sword that you wield. People are whispering things into his ear, and they are working."

"I never expected him to be rational, he only tried to come off as reasonable when he wanted something from us. He was playing the good cop."

"It's all prophecies and rumours and ancient history," he continued, "Nothing we can verify ourselves. Whatever happened, he is convinced that you will betray the cause in the near future."

"I don't even know what the fucking cause is."

Hikaru shrugged, "Despite this, he has not shared that information with me either. I have become the designated teacher's pet, it seems."

"Attracted to the sword of light."

"Yes. They fear the power of your blade, for what reason, I do not know." I feared my own blade easily enough, I shouldn't have been surprised that the guys who worshipped the sanctity of trees would be worried about corruptive forces in their church.

"We're just passengers on this journey right now," I concluded, "If I have reason to think that they'll stab me in the back, I'll be gone by sunrise."

“I wonder about that.”

I walked past him, “Thanks for telling me though. I’m surprised at how friendly everybody’s been.”

“We’re all modern people, aren’t we?” he smiled, “Why would we harm each other so flippantly, we share something in common that nobody else does.” His optimistic words were tinged with something again, a feeling I couldn’t place, “But I do worry that not all of us are on the same page. The other two seem to have no intent of trying to find a way home.”

Hikaru went with the other strangers. What kind of impression did he get from them during their time together? “Screw ‘em. If they want to stick around here and play this stupid game – I won’t stop them. I have a family to get back to, and I won’t be dazzled by some RPG popup text boxes.”

“I do miss my shower... and my kotatsu.”

I hadn’t even thought of that! My legs were freezing!