

I re-covered my infected arm and sat down on the bed. The way that Stigma had sat on the bed looked real. The bed creased under her when she did. But now that she was gone, it was how I'd left it. Messy and covered in sweat. I wondered if the others were having similar problems with their own weapons. They were contained within that altar for a reason. They must be dangerous.

I grabbed the coat and slipped it on. The thing was heavy and well insulated. I was worried that it'd be the dream of every boy like my brother – but now that I was wearing it, I could see that it was a lot less “cool” than I expected. I looked like a detective out of a cheap mystery novel.

The door was still unlocked. I exited out of the dark room without windows into a hallway almost entirely made of them. Huge, multipaned windows that were twice or three times my height on one side. They looked out onto a coast that reminded me of images of Spain. But the geography did not match the weather – the skies were grey and overcast. Violent waves crashed against the sun touched rocks.

The cathedral sat perched atop a cove. There was a long winding set of stairs that ran down from an unseen exit to a small beach at the bottom. The town must be on the other side. The hallways of the cathedral were well kept, free of dust and grime. They were built from shining white marble slabs, that on a sunny day must have looked amazing.

It was not a sunny day.

I turned to my left and started walking. To where I didn't know. I just wanted to get out of that room and hopefully find some of my fellow captives in the process. I didn't see many people in the long hallways, and if I did, they would quickly avert their eyes or dip into the nearest room to avoid me.

After several minutes of wandering I came across a large staircase. It looked out over a familiar area. This was where we woke up and drew the swords. It looked bare now that the statue had receded into the ground. The magic circle that had been drawn on the floor was gone. I slowly descended the steps one by one until I reached the ground floor. There was a balcony that ran around the second level of this huge atrium. On the floor below, dozens of wooden benches arranged to face the centre of the room.

What they were looking at was a tree. A real, living tree, somehow captured within the marble of this man-made building. It was very old and very tall, enough to nearly touch the top of the ceiling and reach out to brush against each side of the room. Aside from its location and unusual size, there was nothing else amiss with it.

“Oh, you're alive.”

The tall man emerged from behind me. He was wearing a normal jacket and jeans when I saw him last, but he had also changed clothes. I could best describe it as tribal. A fusion between African and middle-eastern style. A bright blue slash ran across his chest, and baggy pants made him look even larger than he was already.

“I managed.”

He held out his hand and shook my own, "I am Udo. I assume you are from Japan as well?"

"I'm Ren. Have we met before?"

Udo scratched the back of his head, "I get the feeling that we have," he concluded. If I knew him personally, I would have remembered him clearly. I didn't know any other foreigners. But even saying that much would be presumptuous and stereotypical. He had a strong accent, but it made me consider that we might not have been speaking Japanese anymore – somehow.

He smirked, "People always say that I am easy to spot - because I am big and black." I couldn't argue with that. But I felt like his joke was tinged with a touch of reality. Japan could be an unwelcoming place.

"Well I don't remember you. I feel like I should."

"I saw some of the others who came with us, and it is driving me mad trying to think of where we've met before," he explained, "They have said a similar thing to me. I was hoping we could get together and try to work things out, but I haven't seen all of the others."

"I only woke up half-an-hour ago," I said, "Maybe they're busy too."

You never realize how reliant you are on easy and instant communication until it's taken away from you. "Say, you drew one of those swords, didn't you? Did they tell you anything about them?"

Udo reached around his back and pulled out a thick sheath, the tip of the blade was wider than the base. A blue tassel was attached to the bottom of the hilt. It was a Chinese broadsword. Something that a normal person might have a reasonable chance of using without intense training.

"No, they did not. Where is yours?"

"In my room."

"Are you sure it's okay to leave it alone? The priest, he told me to never part ways with this." He put the sword back around his waist.

"Don't worry. I don't think anybody wants to try touching that damn thing." I leaned in and whispered, "Did it... talk to you?"

He cast a conspiratorial glance to the stairs behind us. When he was confident that no eavesdroppers were listening in, he confirmed my suspicions, "Yes. It scared the life out of me."

"I know right? I nearly crapped myself!"

He couldn't stop himself from laughing at me. Our conversation was brought to an abrupt end as Centus emerged from around a nearby corner. "Ah! It seems that two of our guests feel well enough to be up and about."

“Why? Is something wrong with the others?” I asked. I was worried about their safety. If they had an adverse reaction like I had, I could only imagine how they were dealing with it. Each of these swords must have a catch, or I’m trying to rationalize and create equity where there is none. *You* just picked the worst option possible on complete accident.

Centhus waved my question away, “No. No. They’re all in fine health – even you! Surely they will come to with time.”

Come to. A suspect choice of words given that we were being forced into service for a place and nation we were unfamiliar with. *Come to* giving up their freedom. *Come to* forgiving us for taking them away from their families and friends. There was no positive application of the term in my mind. Udo’s own unease was written on his face. No amount of free clothes would win our good graces that easily.

“You must be starving, come with me and I’ll see that you’re fed.” Not waiting for our consent, he strolled away from us and down the way he came. Udo and I shared a weary look before following him.