

I woke up to pandemonium.

We were in some kind of cathedral building – stained glass cast the space into a deep multicoloured glow. There was a group of us, all lying inside of a grand circle filled with intricate detail. The glowing rune faded slightly. There was electricity in the air that made the hair on my arms stand on end. We hurried to our feet but were met only with the pointed tip of sharpened spears. I looked over my shoulder, there were six others with me.

A sense of recognition tickled my brain. I'd seen all of these people somewhere before. A girl from my school, a tall African man, an American, two other boys my age, and an older woman wearing thick glasses... it was on the tip of my tongue the entire time. But when I tried to home in on where I'd met them, the fog only grew stronger.

They spoke out, yelled, cried, screamed. The soldiers had us surrounded on all sides, weapons pointed in preparation to kill the whole lot of us on command. A wilted priest in a long white robe waved his arms in panic to try and calm the situation, "Gentlemen, there is no need for violence here!"

The commander ignored his pleas, "You need only place your hands on the hilts of those swords. Nothing more, nothing less."

I glanced behind me. An ornate statue dominated the centre of the room. It depicted several armoured knights, wielding swords of different shapes and sizes. The statue was made of the whitest, most pristine marble and detailed with splashes of gold and silver.

"Commander, these men and women have no magical aptitude nor a taste for combat. Surely a wiser course of action would be to find talented warriors to fulfil the prophecy," the man pleaded, getting in front of the wall of spikes himself.

"You know not of what you speak, priest. The Magister was very clear about what he wanted. These outworlders, their fate will be decided by the Gods."

The priest's face grew flustered. The screams died down for a moment. Sensing his opportunity to speak he closed in on us and whispered under his breath, "Please do as he says, bloodshed in our house is a grave sin!"

"What the hell is going on?" the tall man asked. "Where are we?"

"There will be time for answers later. Now, if you'd please. You need to put your hands onto each of the swords behind you. May the great tree guide you." He evaded the question with a practiced grace. It gave the impression that his reasonable act was just that, an act. An illusion of rationality versus the threat of violence. There was no choice to be made here.

I hung back, but the rest of the group were not in any mood to test their luck. I spun around as they deserted me and hurried over to the statue. Around the base were various handles. The tall man hesitated, before wrapping his large fingers around one of them. He jolted as if struck by a static charge but was otherwise unharmed. The others quickly followed, taking a handle of their own one by one.

"I don't suppose we have a choice in this..."

The priest shook his head, "If the Magister demands it, then it will be so." His face twisted in an unsettling way – like he was trying to stop himself from saying something to me. Was it something about this Magister that was unfitting for a man of his station, or something more sinister that lay in wait for

me. My two options were to play along or die by a spear to the gut. I backed up and walked around until I reached the back side of the statue, where the final hilt remained. I knew that I had drawn the short straw when I realized the sheer size of the thing.

For my young, uneducated hands it was disproportionately large. This was a broadsword, designed to slice through armour and dismount calvary. It demanded a tremendous amount of strength that I did not possess. If they wanted me to fight with this thing, maybe taking a spear to the stomach was just easier and faster than trying.

“Do it,” the sour commander demanded. The priest was muttering something under his breath.

I reached out with both hands and the moment I touched the blackened leather, I screamed in agony. I screamed until my lungs were wretched and torn. A thousand needles were being injected into my arms. I managed to pull one free, but the other was paralyzed. From pain or some other force I did not know.

My vision cleared and I saw first-hand the damage that the sword was causing to me. My veins glowed a sickly purple-black. My skin paled as the flesh was drained of life. The others had touched theirs with no such pain.

I pulled back and the sword came loose. I fell onto the floor and writhed in agony as the corruption spread up my arm and nearly to my shoulder. The others, now fearful for their own safety, withdrew their own blades with a flash of coloured light. The statue rumbled as a great mechanism activated. The stone floor of the cathedral swallowed the statue into darkness. Leaving us with our spoils.

The American was over me, dirty blonde hair soaked with sweat, “Woah! Are you okay?”

I heard the metal clatter of something hitting the ground. “What do you think?” The tall man pushed him aside, “There must have been something on that sword. Look at his arm!”

More faces looked down on me, the glasses wearing woman, the girl from my school. But the one that stuck in my memory was hovering above me with a malicious smirk on her face. She had hair that was such a deep purple that it bordered on black and ruby red eyes that gazed deep into my own. She was naked, and she reached out with her hands. They touched my cheeks, passing through the others like they weren't there.

“What an unfortunate boy I've captured in my web.”

Strangled by fear. I closed my eyes and hoped to awaken in a better place.