

THE APPRENTICE

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The great hall was eerily silent. The two lone figures that occupied it were a far cry from the loyal advisors that had once crowded the halls in times of peril and prosper. The man seated on the ornate throne could not have been more different from the kings and rulers of old. Where previous rulers had taken great pride in their appearance, armour lovingly polished and sword adorned with fancy jewels, this man did not. His armour was practical with every strap, buckle and individual plate tightened and joined to specifically fit him. The dark grey titanium caused his skin to glow, drawing more attention to his ruggedly handsome face. A thin scar line stretched from his left temple down to his left shoulder blade. He regarded the man kneeling before him with contempt, magical energy swirling around in his palm.

The prisoner was dressed in bloodied rags. His head was shaven and his face bruised and covered in dried blood. Dark purple constructs had been driven through his forearms, tethering him to the ground. A rune of the same colour had been burned into his chest, a mirror image of the symbol engraved into the pommel of the warrior's sword. The warrior grabbed his sword resting on his lap and pressed the flat of the blade under the man's chin. The sword-point pressed lightly against his throat, the cold steel forcing his head up.

'That's better. Now, before I deliver my verdict, would you like to beg for your life? It sometimes helps, but not often.' His captive remained silent. 'Very well. You have been found guilty of your crimes... the sentence is death.'

He pressed his sword harder against the man's throat, drawing a light trickle of blood. As the prisoner closed his eyes, the doors to the great hall were obliterated in an explosion of green mystical energy. Splinters and jagged shards of metal were thrown across the room, embedding themselves in the stone walls. As the dust settled, a lone swordsman strode into the room. Like the warrior on the throne, his armour showed the scars from various battles. His armour and face were splattered with blood, as was the sword he held in his left hand. His right arm was bare up to his shoulder and was covered with glowing green runes. As he strode down the long hall, the warrior slowly stood and clapped as he approached.

'Welcome, old friend. Like what I've done with the place? I've tried to give it my own unique flair.'

The swordsman stopped short of the throne.

'So, this is how far the savior of Eshye has fallen.' The swordsman seemed unimpressed.

'That Saviour of Eshye business was such a long time ago,' the warrior said. 'I feel I've really grown since then.'

'Cullen, this is madness!' The swordsman stepped towards the throne. 'Stop this before more people die.' Cullen waved his hand dismissively, sending a wave of purple energy that knocked the figure down.

'People die all the time. I'm merely speeding the process along.' The swordsman scrambled to his feet, raised his sword and let out a low growl.

'I can't let you do that.'

Cullen was silent. The symbol on his pommel glowed deep purple and the prisoners' shackles dissolved. The prisoner eyed the two men warily as he rose to his feet. Cullen lowered himself onto the throne and motioned towards the swordsman.

'Fight him.' he said. The prisoner grew pale.

'What?'

'Fight. Him.'

'But he'll kill me!' Cullen raised an eyebrow.

'I'd be disappointed if he didn't,' The prisoner did not move. Cullen's eyes grew cold. 'If you don't fight him, I will kill you. I will make it as slow and painful as possible.' He clenched his fist. The prisoner's rune glowed deep purple, bringing him to his knees. He screamed in pain as the rune melted his flesh. He dragged himself away from Cullen, holding a hand up in a vain attempt to stop the pain.

'No more, please no more.' He was breathing heavily, barely moving. 'I'll do it. I'll do it.' Cullen relaxed his fist and watched as the prisoner struggled to his feet.

'That's what I like to hear. Now, fight him.' The prisoner charged desperately at the swordsman. The swordsman reluctantly levelled his sword and stood his ground. As the prisoner rushed past him, he stepped out of the way and slashed sideways in one fluid motion. The prisoner's momentum carried him forward as he tried to staunch the blood flowing from his wound before slumping to the ground.

Cullen watched with grim amusement as the swordsman knelt next to the dead body, murmuring a silent prayer.

'Don't feel too bad for him, old friend. He slaughtered twenty people during the Serkci riots. He skinned them alive and left them in the streets for their families to find. He doesn't deserve any compassion.'

The swordsman howled in anger and thrust his right arm out. The runes on his arm glowed as a beam of green energy burst from his palm. Cullen's sword pommel glowed as he sprang to his feet holding the sword point down, like a mage's staff. Dark purple energy surged forward stopping the beam. The dark purple energy crept forward until the two beams were an equal distance from the two fighters. Cullen smirked.

'Temper, temper Origen. One of your first lessons; never let my emotions control me.' He wagged a finger at his former master.

The two fighters struggled as the beams surged back and forth. Origen fell to one knee as Cullen's magic beam surged towards him. Origen drew a dagger from a sheath and threw it underhanded. The knife spun end over end and hit Cullen's shoulder. Cullen stumbled and dropped his sword as he reached for the dagger. Origen rose to his feet and fired another energy blast at Cullen, sending him flying. Cullen landed and slid along the ground, his head slamming into the base of his throne. Origen ran over to the throne and thrust his sword downwards. Cullen rolled to his left as the sword glanced off the floor next to him. He pulled the dagger free from his shoulder and slashed at his opponent's ankle. Origen's sword clattered to the floor as he collapsed, grasping his ankle in pain. As he reached for his sword, Cullen strode forward and kicked it away. Retrieving his own sword, Cullen covered his shoulder with his hand. He winced as purple light encased his wound. After a few moments he removed his hand and rotated his shoulder, testing the joint. Cullen shook his head as Origen tried to rise to his feet.

'How many times do I have to teach you a lesson, old man?' he said, as Origen managed to sit up and lean against the throne.

'I only want to know why,' he looked up at the figure towering above him. 'Why did you betray me? You swore the oath, you said the words. You spoke them from your heart!'

'You blind fool,' Cullen sneered at him. 'I vomited them up because I couldn't stomach them. Because I knew it was what you wanted to hear.'

'Liar!' Origen sprang forward. Cullen expected this and pushed him away with an energy pulse. Origen flew backwards through the air landing heavily on his back. Cullen advanced towards him.

'I took my family to your healers after they were struck down by an unknown plague. They could have cured them, *should* have cured them,' He stared into the middle distance. 'They told me I was lucky to be alive and threw me out. My family rotted away in their sleep while I watched.' Origen shook his head.

'Spare me the dramatics. I taught-' Cullen slapped him across the face.

'Remember the second lesson: Don't interrupt. As I was saying, you told me you could help me. Teach me how I could stop others suffering like I had. But that was a lie wasn't it?' In the end, I realised the truth. You couldn't help me.'

Without warning, he kicked Origen, rolling him onto his stomach in the process.

'There was nothing left for me to lose when the war rolled around. I knew I could take what you taught me. I could stop people like you taking advantage of others that couldn't fight back.' He kicked him again.

'You taught me to fight, that's all. I took what I needed from you.'

His third kick caught Origen in the ribs.

'You certainly taught me well.'

Origen coughed, blood dripping from his mouth. Cullen rubbed the pommel of his sword and raised his arm. Deep purple light encased Origen as he was lifted into the air. He struggled in vain as Cullen walked down the great hall, heading for the exit. Origen was dragged along behind him, floating just above the ground. He hurled insults at Cullen's back as he followed him.

'You hypocrite. You forced a man to his death yet talk about not wanting people to suffer.'

'I don't want *innocent* people to suffer. That monster was far from innocent.' Cullen strode out the hall and continued down the adjoining corridor.

Bodies of the palace guards were strewn down the entire length of the corridor. Some of their throats were slit, some had been hacked to death, one had a gaping hole scorched through his chest. Their blood was splattered across the walls and covered the once pristine carpet.

'Interesting that you call me a hypocrite for executing a cold-blooded murderer. Yet you murdered innocent men who were only doing their job without a second thought. Hypocrite indeed.' They came to a steel door that was set in the wall itself. Cullen opened it and stepped inside, Origen was dragged through. His blood froze as he realized where he was.

The light from the hallway flooded into the room. Racks lined the entire left wall, hanging vertically from the rafters above to allow access from all sides. The occupants were all men. Each one was haggard and filthy, covered in their own mess. They were doused with water to try combat the overpowering smell. Two machines sat either side of the racks, humming away quietly. Tubes trailed from both machines, one tube connecting into the prisoner's lower arm and another two tubes inserted into their hip bones. Bright red and pale-yellow liquids flowed through these tubes.

The prisoners didn't react to Cullen's presence. They didn't even seem to register that they were hooked up to the machines. The right wall was bare, as was the ceiling and floor. It was the back wall that Origen was focused on. A steel tub had been welded to the wall and filled with a black liquid. Huge fires underneath the tub heated the liquid, bringing it to a boil. Origen recoiled as the sickly sweet odour assaulted his nostrils. *Tar.* Cullen turned to face his captive and spread his arms wide.

'This is how I help people. All those hooked up to those machines are criminals. Murderers. Rapists. Robbers. Kidnappers. Traitors. They hurt people for their own perverse pleasure and warped sense of fun. I hunt them down, hook them up to these machines and syphon their blood and bone marrow. That's all when they're alive, mind you. When the torture or lack of food kills them, I harvest their organs. I help people. Something you failed to do.'

He smiled at Origen and pulled him closer to him.

'Don't worry, I've got a spot for you as well, old friend. But first...' He thrust his hand forward and Origen was pushed through the air, stopping just above the steel tub. He could feel the heat rising from the tar as he floated above it. Cullen watched as he began to sweat. 'I still remember that first lesson you taught me; *we are but vessels for the runes we carry with us.*'

He flicked a finger and Origen's right arm was forced out to his side.

'Carving the runes into your arms always puzzled me.'

Cullen rotated his hand and Origen rotated until his arm was pointing straight down.

'Sure, you don't risk losing the runes... but it does mean I only need to do this'

Without another word, Cullen dropped his outstretched arm and Origen's arm was submerged in the boiling tar. He screamed as the tar coated his arm, covering his runes. Cullen listened to the screams before raising him from the tar and drawing him close until they were face to face.

'- and just like that, no more magic for you.'

He brushed his fingers against Origen's armour.

'You know, titanium was originally used by the ancients to travel to the stars. Now we use it to serve only ourselves. Such a waste.'

With a flick of his wrist, Origen was slammed into the empty rack with a crack as his head lolled to the side. The straps automatically locked him in. Cullen drove the needles into his arm and hips. The machines whirred to life and within seconds, they began extracting precious fluids. Without another word, Cullen turned his back on his former master and left the room. The door shut and darkness enveloped the room, now silent but for the quiet hum of the machines.

THE END