

The Ghost of Waters leaped forth, its weapons aimed at Adam's heart.

Adam stood his ground. He'd contemplated three separate plans for defending himself – and needed precisely none of them. Before he could so much as summon his Ink, Tenver was already there, swinging his blade to parry the Ghost's strike.

Their clash was brief. It had only been a prodding offense, it seemed, as the Ghost retreated with dark, amused laughter, no worse for the wear. In contrast, Tenver was sent sprawling from the blow's impact, Adam forced to catch the knight to prevent him from falling backwards.

"This might turn into a bit of an unruly brawl, my dear lord." Tenver thoughtfully rubbed his chin, speaking in an overly polite manner, as if he was casually leaning against a wall – instead of laying diagonally, supported by his dear lord's grip. "Do you have a plan?"

"Three," Adam grunted back.

"Why, that's fantastic." Tenver sounded of breath. Somehow, that was almost more eerie to Adam than the monster standing unmoving in front of them. "How many of them are good?"

"I'll get back to you on that."

As Tenver chuckled, picking himself up, Adam stopped to examine the situation. Although he liked to consider himself a calm, reasonable person, at the moment, he just felt...frustrated. Until now, he'd managed to keep his Stained Ink a secret. Only the Ghost of Flames knew of it, and currently, they weren't in a position to tell anyone.

However, Adam couldn't see a path forward where his Talent wasn't outed. He would need every advantage in his toolset merely to survive the next few minutes. A quick glance at his tablet confirmed what he'd suspected; the Ghost of Waters was a Duke. *If the Ghost of Flames wasn't lying*, he thought, *then that should mean its brother is virtually impervious to our abilities. We might not be able to hurt him at all.*

It was unfortunate, really. Adam held little trust for the people in this room, and most of them were Puppets – beings *created* to fight the monster he'd tamed inside his heart. He couldn't predict how they would react to learning that he wielded the powers of a Stained abomination.

A measure of frustration was only logical.

Yet while he was frustrated with them, and with the situation as a whole...he was mostly frustrated with himself. Because just below the surface, beneath the mantle of a pragmatic Lord, a part of him was *thrilled* at having the perfect justification to use his Talent. To let loose. To pit his abilities against an unstoppable foe.

To win.

*I don't think I'll ever get used to fighting*, Adam lied to himself, a smirk creeping across his face. Underneath his clothes, Stained Ink began to wrap around his arms. *So be it. If I can't keep this a secret any longer, then I may as well focus on surviving.*

There might be political repercussions afterwards, but he could worry about those if he lived. If he didn't have a choice in the matter...then there was no reason to feel guilty, right?

"Ready yourselves," Ferrero said, stepping up first. "This monster is only standing still because he's playing with us. That creature has killed dozens of people."

"Hundreds," Valeria corrected, while taking a step back nonetheless. "The Ghost is likely guilty of more crimes outside this ship, whether Baltsar knew it or not. I *have* been looking into the case for some time, remember?"

A sense of thrill blazed inside Adam, slowly burning away the calm, reasonable man he aspired to be. It only served to heighten his frustration. *Deep down, I think I'm less like Eric than I wish I was.*

"Heed my words," he declared, in an overly-pompous, thunderous tone, as if channeling the spirit of Asprey. "As Lord of Penumbria and acting Captain of this ship, it is my noble duty to welcome you to my domain."

Adam raised his arms. "I hope you find this to be an appropriate greeting."

With that, he unfurled his Stained Ink at the Ghost. There was a distant sound of surprise, perhaps cries of disbelief from either the Puppets or Tenver – Adam didn't care. His eyes were fixated on the monster before him, and his focus was intense enough that he cared little for the rest of the room.

The tall gentleman spread his arms wide, as if to welcome a crowd into his theater. His legs were frozen in place, and he made no pretense of dodging. A loud crashing sound announced the meeting of attack and target.

Yet when all was said and done, it was like the two had never met. Adam's sharpened Ink bounced off the creature's chest without leaving so much as a scratch. As if the very *momentum* of his attack had failed to even grace the gentleman's stately form.

"Law makes us above beasts – and it is law that the lower class cannot harm their betters."

Thus spoke Auricio, the Ghost of Waters.

His voice was nearly human, but there was a faint, humid touch about it, making Adam feel like his ears were being sprayed with water at every sound.

"That is how it should be," Auricio cheerfully said. Suddenly, he bowed, turning his head upwards in an unnatural motion that would have broken the neck of any normal person. "Do you disagree, my lord?"

"I do." Adam recalled the Stained Ink, allowing it to spin around his arm to retain some momentum, glaring at the Ghost all the while. *He didn't try to eat the Ink like the Ghost of Flames did. Does that mean he has different characteristics? Or is it that he's just not starving as badly as his 'brother' was?* "People's circumstances change depending on where they are born – and under whose 'generous' rule they serve under. Even so, they always have the right to revolt."

"My dear lord, having the right to revolt does not guarantee you the right to safety, much less the hope of success." The Ghost's voice echoed throughout the ship. "In this way...it isn't too different from your world, is it not?"

Adam's focus broke. In truth, the Painted World had dominated his thoughts lately, so much that at times he forgot Earth entirely. Now the Ghost had both reminded him of his former home, *and* implied to everyone else in the room that the odd Lord of Penumbria came from another world entirely. All of that combined into a singularly disconcerting moment. Just a single, fleeting moment where his attention wavered.

It was enough and too much.

When his focus returned to the duel, the Ghost of Waters had disappeared from his vision. He looked around in a hurry, only to find everyone else also turning their necks to search for the creature. Where the monster had been, there was merely empty space.

**"Much as I would like to play – I need you to die, Painter."**

Adam felt a ferocious slash cut through his back. The wound was deep enough that had his blood been red, he might have bled out in no time at all. Ink was his lifeblood now, however, and it stopped the bleeding, although not the pain.

Yet it wasn't the pain Adam was thinking of. It wasn't even that the strike had left him open and vulnerable to another deadly attack.

Instead, what his mind immediately focused on was: *the Ghost's voice sounded different just now*. It hadn't been humid anymore. Now it was echoing, as it had before the monster unveiled himself.

His instincts demanded he remember that detail.

"ADAM!"

When he looked over his shoulder, Adam saw Tenver at his back. Once again, the knight swung his sword at the monster, and once again, he struck at nothing. Ghostly laughter echoed around them as the creature's form vanished into the darkness. Grimacing, Tenver turned to face his Lord. "Adam, are you—"

Out of nowhere, the Ghost reappeared before them, its long fingers stretching into inhuman claws and seeking Adam's throat. Tenver's warding blow was effortlessly knocked aside. For a moment, it genuinely felt like the end.

Everything happened at once. Tenver placed his back in-between the claws and Adam. Piercing claws tore a deep gouge down his flesh. The Ghost swiftly retreated back into the darkness, seeming to realize something. And Adam was left dumbfounded, halfway through taking a step that would have finished the fight then and there.

*Why didn't the Ghost stay and – TENVER!* The knight was strong, and he was tall, but he didn't have Ink for blood. Blood was already draining out of him into a growing pool on the floor. If not for the armor he wore beneath his clothes, the wound might have been fatal. *Even accounting for that, suppose it would have been fatal if he wasn't–*

"Everyone, make a circle!" Tenver shouted. "He wants to kill Adam first! He's afraid of the Lord Talent!"

"That's why he ran," Adam huffed, his breath weak. Even if the bleeding had stopped, the wound on his back still hurt terribly. "He knows that I can use my Domain if I step on his shadow."

Adam paused. "But how *does* he know that? Tenver, how did *you* know—"

His question was cut off by the disjointed, desperate flurry of motion that followed. Before he knew it, Adam found himself surrounded by a group of Solara, Ferrero, Valeria, and Tenver. All of them had their backs to him, weapons in hand, keeping the Ghost from approaching. They weren't as interested in the 'whys' and 'hows' of the monster's actions, preferring to focus on their immediate survival.

"Where's Serena?" Adam managed to ask.

"She's communicating with the Puppet Mines," Valeria said, in a tone between annoyance and amusement. "Suppose that means she trusts you to have a handle on this matter, my lord."

Did it? To Adam, it just seemed like she was calling for backup – which was just fine with him. While he wanted to overcome the Ghost by his own strength, victory here wasn't at all guaranteed. It would be disappointing to need the Puppet Grandmaster's assistance, but he would swallow his pride if it meant living to see another day.

*Oh, how things change*, he mused. Still, if possible, he'd rather settle things before they reached the Mines. Doing so would strengthen his starting position in the coming negotiations. Adam would rather be the Lord who did the Puppets a massive favor than the Lord who needed their saving.

**"Banding together? Good move, that."**

In the blink of an eye, the Ghost had reappeared and struck Ferrero. It was a quick, almost business-like slash that the duelist endured stoically, despite the blood pouring from his deep wound. He couldn't survive many more of those.

**"Yet it changes nothing."** The Ghost was already gone by the time anyone could react, its voice echoing from the darkness. **"You only delay the inevitable."**

*He's too quick – he attacks and disappears before I can step on his shadow. If I don't know where he's coming from, I..*

Adam shook his head. There was no point in getting desperate. *What the hell even counts as his shadow, anyway? If it's a small shadow and I can't see it, does it still count? Does it need to be visible? Who the hell is judging?*

Although Adam likened his thoughts more to whining than to questions, they *were* legitimate points to consider. This was a world of Talents defined by arbitrary rules. Thus, there had to be definitions and judges of some sort.

Or at least one.

‘*What color,*’ that voice had once asked, ‘*is your soul?*’

It was a faded memory. One that, even now, Adam was unsure if it had been a dream or not. What if—

"Not this time!" Ferrero cried out, as he parried. His Talent hadn't manifested yet, but the attack was mightier than Tenver's, enough to force the monster to back away. "Puppets can sense the Rot, you know. Keep doing that and the next strike is going down your throat!"

"What about *your* sword, Puppet?" Solara demanded of Valeria. "Adam's deductions should have increased its strength, correct? Wasn't your plan to use it to kill this abomination?"

"Good question, Heiress of Gama." Valeria made herself sound theatrical even as she gasped for air, the tension exhausting her faster than any fight. "Alas, I am afraid you misunderstood. That was never the plan."

"Excuse me?" Solara's bafflement neared the sound of a threat. The anger in her voice and eyes was such that she almost moved her knife away from the darkness and toward the Puppet. "Then what was the point of that grand performance of his?"

"To get rid of Baltsar," Adam muttered. "It would've been a lot trickier to fight the Ghost if Baltsar was on his side."

Which wasn't entirely true. Adam had *hoped* the Bloody Truth would be enough to harm the Ghost. That way, their side would have two separate moves capable of affecting the creature, rather than relying solely on his untested Lord Talent.

Still, he hadn't counted on it. A lower-ranked Talent would need a dramatic boost of power to even trouble the Ghost. Adam was never convinced that just solving one murder spree would be sufficient. There *was* another mystery he had hoped to empower Valeria's sword with, but—

**"Perish, Puppets and Painter."**

Another wave of strikes descended upon them. This time, the Ghost seemed to feel that confident Adam couldn't reach him while being guarded. It moved about striking each and every single one of them, their screams of pain coming one after the other, in such even intervals that it sounded almost musical.

Solara laughed, quietly, bitterly, and weakly. "I'm neither a Puppet nor a painter," she managed to utter. Out of their group, she had gotten the worst of the last attack. Her wounds were deeper, her bleeding more severe. Adam nearly panicked until he remembered her Talent. "Come as many times as you want, monster!" she yelled. "I survived your pathetic brother – I'm not about to die to your parents' older mistake!"

It was likely bravado, yet it sounded brave enough to give even Valeria cause to speak in a respectful tone. "You have the worst wounds out of us all. Take a step back. We can sense when he's coming and avoid the worst of it."

"I'll die before I let someone else die for me," Solara barked back. There was more emotion in the elf's voice than Adam had heard before, a sort of visceral cry emerging from deep within her gut. Fury was abundant in her eyes now, more so than ever. "If another corpse falls on me so that I can survive – I'll rip my own throat out, you understand?"

Adam could only faintly think, *Greenisle...I forgot*, before Ferrero spoke up, ignoring the previous conversation. "We can't keep this up," the duelist said. "If we could at least try actually *fighting* it, we might have a chance. But if he keeps being invisible—"

"He's hiding in the water," Solara bitterly stated. "Just like the Ghost of Flames was hiding inside torches."

"Not like we can get rid of the water sources," Adam remarked, breathing heavily. *Shit. I had so much more adrenaline flowing through me against the Ghost of Flames – am I not healed from that yet? Just one wound and I'm this tired?* "We're undersea now, and judging from the humidity, there's water coming into the ship here and there. Not a lot, but it's enough. Only reason we're not sinking or being destroyed by ocean pressure is the ship's magic. Just enough water for the monster to move through."

"If you ask me," Tenver added, "I think several sprays of water came in when we sank. Not much has been getting through since." His voice was on the cavalier side of things. "Even just a few drops on the floor should be enough. Too few and too small for us to dry them with a cloth, convenient as that would be."

Solara grit her teeth. "Then what?" she shouted. "Are we just supposed to wait here until he kills us? Or should Adam just take a blind guess at where he's going to appear, then try to use his Talent there?"

"Oh, elf of little faith," Tenver tutted. "Didn't you hear him earlier? Our valiant lord has at least three plans. Everything will be perfectly fine."

He briefly turned to meet Adam's eyes. "Do you have any good ones yet?"

In spite of himself, Adam smirked back. "Just one." He forced himself to stand up. "I'm not sure that you'll agree it's good, though. Has pretty decent odds of killing us. Think you can keep everyone alive while I go do something *astoundingly* stupid?"

"I couldn't and shouldn't promise that." Tenver laughed anyway. "Yet you are my lord. An order from you surpasses my most sacred of promises."

"Then keep everyone alive for a moment." Adam paused. "Although even if you succeed, I can't promise we'll survive what I've got planned."

"I'll take those odds."

"I...didn't give you a number."

"Did my lord mishear me?"

Adam laughed, then winced. Goddamn it, even laughing felt like it was stretching his open wounds. Maybe he really *wasn't* meant for fighting.

Still...he did have one idea in mind. It was something of a backup after his original plans got derailed.

Much like the Ghost of Flames could teleport between fire, he'd expected the Ghost of Water to teleport between water. He'd also expected that Captain Baltsar might try to send the ship underwater when his plot was exposed, thereby granting Auricio an advantage in their fight. It was enough of an alarming possibility that at one point, Adam had half a mind to steal Baltsar's Captain Talent early on to prevent that from happening.

The problem was that they needed to go underwater to find the Mines, and if Adam sent the ship off course, they might not be able to reach their destination so easily. Thus, he elected to proceed as normal. The culprit would be exposed, and the murderer would be brought to justice. Everything would be fine as long as Adam finished his painting before the captain did anything drastic.

Or so he'd assumed. Baltsar redirecting the ship while his soul was *in the middle* of being sealed had been...unexpected. It must have taken incredible willpower; the kind born from a potent cocktail of love and desperation, stemming from his overwhelming desire to protect his son. Despite that tiny wrinkle, Adam's revised plan should be able to account for there being more water on the ship than he anticipated.

It just wasn't going to be pleasant. For him, or anyone. And he couldn't promise there wouldn't be any casualties.

Resolving himself, Adam activated the Captain's Talent, forming a mental map of the ship. "Let's see...ah...so there it is," he muttered to himself. "Baltsar *did* blow out the candles here, but – oh! Interesting. He was smuggling Dragonforged steel to...well, I suppose that makes sense, what with the Mines business."

"Are you looking for the Ghost?" Valeria asked. "Can you sense its Ink too?"

Adam shook his head. "That's not it. I'm looking for—"

Found you. There was a splash of water coming inside the cabin from outside. Not enough to damage the ship, let alone damage it – but enough to transport a cursed being. Adam knew, instantly, that the

brief moisture brought into the room would be enough to allow the creature to show up. Or perhaps it was only using the splashes of water from earlier, as Tenver had theorized.

It didn't matter either way.

**"LET THE CURTAINS FALL ON YOUR TALE, PAINTER! YOU—"**

"I'm out, guys," Adam said, with a casual wave. "I'll be right back. Just hold the fort for a bit. Valeria, you are under strict orders not to swing your sword. We need to stack more power onto it before using it."

Solara glared at him. "What the hell do you—"

Adam disappeared.

And reappeared elsewhere on the ship. After gathering his bearings, he noted with some degree of surprise that he was still aware of what was happening inside the room he'd just departed from. *Is this an ability of Baltsar's Captain Talent?* he wondered. *Or a result of the combination of Talents inside of me?*

He gave a mental shrug. *Ah, well.* Couldn't worry about that right now – there was too much to do. Adam went on with his task, half setting his mind to it, half watching the blurred developments that were taking place after he'd left.

Back there, everyone seemed baffled over his sudden departure, including the Ghost. For a frozen second, none dared speak, let alone move. Their truce of shared puzzlement lasted a short while. Adam couldn't tell for exactly how long, as his attention and mind were split.

And then, in one brutal instant, the carnage resumed.

The Ghost was a Duke. He bore a rank that most outside the Imperial capital would never see in-person. The difference in strength between him and the others, even if combined, was the difference

between the seas and the skies. Until now, he had only been restraining himself in fear of Adam's Lord Talent.

Now that he was gone, the Ghost of Waters was truly unleashed upon them.

Solara was his first victim.

One moment, she was there. The next, her head was separated from her corpse, a spurt of blood jetting out of her neck like a geyser.

Ferrero cried out in shock as Valeria cried out in revenge, the Detective raising her sword and ignoring Adam's order. "DAMN—YOU—TO—THE—ROT!" She leaped forward. "GRANDMASTER IF ONLY YOU—"

But though her legs touched the ground safely, her final strike never came. Valeria was so overcome by her burst of passion that she didn't realize what had happened until she was face to face with the monster, staring at him in disbelief. For some reason, her arms were refusing to swing.

Then she looked down in horror. Her face shifted from shock, to fear, to a guilty acceptance, as if she deserved this outcome.

Her arm was gone.

"Ah..." Valeria mumbled, closing her eyes. "I really shouldn't lose my head that easily."

"I wouldn't recommend it."

Just then, Solara launched herself at the detective, pushing Valeria out of the way. Her head was attached to her body again, and all her wounds were healed, as if they'd never happened. "It's rather unpleasant," she remarked. "Wouldn't you know it too, Puppet?"

Valeria stared in abject disbelief. "Elf! How—what are—"

There was no time to speak any longer. The Ghost struck again, and would have taken more than Valeria's arm if Solara hadn't desperately pulled the detective away, partially shielding the blow with her own body. The two tumbled towards a wall, bleeding and weakened.

Auricio wordlessly gave chase. There were no more taunts, predictions, or declarations of evil. It was as if murdering them was strictly business, while attacking Adam was pleasure.

Tenver moved to bar the Ghost's path, bringing out his sword in defense of the women. "Afraid I can't let you do that—"

His warning went ignored as Auricio lunged forth. It was like trying to parry a wave. The Ghost's blade danced around Tenver's defense, severing his arm down the elbow and pushing the knight back in one clean motion.

There was a cry of anguish – from who? – that anticipated a death that never came. The knight roared forward like an armless beast, punching forward with his bloody stump, using his free hand to grapple the monster. "Adam told us to hold the fort," he whispered, in an almost singing voice. "You're not finishing this...so...easily..."

Auricio grinned, his skin and teeth stretching far wider than his own face. "I know you are of Imperial blood, but you should know that there are some things too expensive for even your purse." The monster reached its claws into Tenver's back, sinking through his flesh and gripping at his spine as if it were the collar of a shirt. "My time is too precious to waste on those not from the World of Ink."

He violently tossed Tenver at Solara. She half-caught him, sent stumbling back, forced to hit herself against the wall to absorb momentum. Solara fell to the ground, clutching the nearly-unconscious Tenver with one hand, and reaching out with her other arm to bring Valeria closer. None of them moved much after that.

From the moment since Adam left, the entire sequence of events couldn't have taken longer than a minute. Closer to half. Yet it was enough to cripple two of them – and would have killed Solara if not for her Talent.

This was the power of a Duke.

*I can't imagine myself matching that power, Adam thought, from afar. Is that what a Hangman would be like? Or are they even stronger?* A chill raced down his spine, spurring him to hurry along as fast as he could, fully aware that everyone's lives depended on him. His task was taking longer to complete than he anticipated, and far longer than they could afford. *HURRY!* he told himself. *HURRY!*

*THERE'S NO TIME!*

"Now, then." Auricio stalked towards the unmoving pile of Tenver, Solara, and Valeria. "I shall rid myself of you. Unless you wish to tell me where the Painter went...?"

Stubborn silence answered him.

"No? No turncoats? How very loyal." The Ghost struck again. "And how very, very foolish."

Once again he displayed the power of a Duke.

And yet this time, the Ghost's claws were parried away.

"I couldn't tell for sure just from watching," Ferrero said, knees bent and rapier stretched towards Auricio's front shoulder. "But now that I've had a chance to test you myself, I must say...your form is detestable."

He was standing in an odd stance Adam wasn't familiar with. The duelist's right foot was placed forward, almost in line with his blade arm, and his left foot was pointing sideways, lined up with his left shoulder. "You rely on nothing but your Talent, it seems," Ferrero continued. "Probably haven't spent a day honing your abilities. Never woke up early to get in more hours of training before a long day at work. Always relied on your Talent to carry you through."

Then, as if three people weren't bleeding out behind him, as if he wasn't facing a monster, he sighed. "I really hate trash like you."

The Ghost of Waters hadn't been listening. It was studying its claws in disbelief, as if searching for something wrong with itself – rather than considering that the one responsible might be standing in front of him. Finding nothing, the tall gentleman angrily launched himself forward one more time, its claws bared.

"This isn't a puzzle," Ferrero said, "so don't give me hints!" He stepped back and extended his arm straight out, almost as if his sword could stretch. "Whenever you use your claws, you also bring your opposite arm back to wind yourself up. With the kind of speed you possess, it's a useless motion, and it lets me counter you easily."

Far too easily, it seemed. Ferrero's sword had been extended like a trap. He didn't try to parry the Ghost's claws, and as such, Auricio didn't bother pushing the blade away as he advanced. At that moment, Ferrero managed, with either swift movement of his feet or clever use of his fingers – Adam could not tell which – to angle his sword so that the Ghost stabbed *himself* in the arm while rushing in.

"Don't give openings like that," Ferrero lectured. "It's a terrible idea. Have you never even considered learning proper fighting technique? Have you truly been living your approximation of a life relying on nothing but Talent?"

The duelist lowered his voice, narrowed his eyes, and smirked. "Allow me to show the limits of your approach, monster."

"You..." The Ghost looked up in both anger and confusion. "You are the *weakest* of this group. I saw you blown away earlier. A man of your meager Talent can't keep up with anyone. How—"

Ferrero lunged forward, his blade piercing through the Ghost's shoulder. Auricio was too slow, only attempting to dodge after the blade already struck true. It was just as the duelist said; the monster had spent far too long relying on his Talent, and his reflexes suffered as a result. Subconsciously, or perhaps even consciously, he may have thought there was no need to dodge the attack.

No one was more surprised than Auricio when he winced in pain and leaped backwards. He glanced down, eyes widening with belated comprehension. Adam came to the same realization a moment later.

The Ghost was bleeding.

And that meant the duelist could kill it.

"I missed," Ferrero lamented. "Got your shoulder. Meant to catch your throat. Shame."

"You – what are you?" the Ghost cried out. "What dark sorcery is this? You weren't this strong a moment ago! "

Again the Ghost attacked, and again Ferrero parried it with the same move. "How many times must we do this?" the duelist said, with a sigh. "Show me something new, will you? Because, if not..."

His voice dropped lower. "You are really going to die, you know?"

A dizzying flurry of attacks happened in the span of seconds. The Ghost delivered a barrage of strikes with each of his claws, alternating between his left and right arms, each move feeling faster than the last.

And yet Ferrero parried, countered, or deflected them all, lecturing him all the while.

"No matter how fast you are, there's a moment when your muscles freeze – there, right after the impact! You're wide open at that point!"

"If you miss your attack, you'll be unable to move in the opposite direction for a short while. Think of how your body moves!"

"Your aim is all wrong! Put your arm out first, *then* move your legs. If not, you're never going to reach me!"

It almost seemed like the duelist was toying with him, but Adam could tell otherwise. He knew Ferrero cared for Valeria, who – after losing her arm – was at severe risk of bleeding out. If Ferrero could have finished this quickly, he would have. The reason he hadn't was that, despite his taunts, he was still trying to find the right timing for a killing strike.

"Monster!" the Ghost screamed. Its gentlemanly facade crumbled more with each failed attack. "How *dare* you! An inferior Puppet such as yourself isn't fit to fuel the wood in my fireplace!"

Auricio retreated into the darkness once more. Ferrero's expression hardened. He repeatedly shifted his eyes back and forth, not dropping his stance for an instant.

**"What's wrong, duelist?"** the Ghost's voice echoed. **"Have you forgotten about my Talent? I can strike at you from the darkness. There is water everywhere, don't you know."**

A heavy silence was the prelude to their next exchange. Ferrero drew a deep breath and bent his knees once more to deepen his stance. The silence stretched on and on, lasting until the final remnants of echoing, ghostly laughter faded into nothingness.

**"I'M HERE, PUPPE–"**

"I know," Ferrero replied, stabbing Auricio through the eye, "my kind can sense yours. Have *you* forgotten?"

Adam almost allowed himself to feel relief when seeing the Ghost impaled through its skull – but then it leaped away, as if the wound was a mere inconvenience. It twitched, it ached, yet it was still standing. Blood dripped out of his eye as it growled, like a mad beast mindlessly drooling at its targets.

And then it smiled. "Ah," the Ghost said, after a pause. "So that's your secret, isn't it?"

"What the devil do you speak of?"

"You are a duelist." The Ghost flashed a grin that went wider than its jaw. Even from afar, Adam was unnerved to see its stretching lips and the shifting teeth. "You are considerably strong at *one on one duels*. Before now, any time you seemed weak was during a fight involving more than one person. Could it be that your Talent only triggers in individual duels?"

Silence fell upon the room.

"I have no idea what you speak of," Ferrero said, coldly.

"Let's test it out then, shall we?"

"Wait! STOP!"

Once more the Ghost attacked – yet this time, it was not at Ferrero. The creature was aiming for Solara, Tenver, and Valeria, who were up against the wall, defenseless and nearly unconscious.

At that point, everything became a blur. It was hard to make out what happened. There were shouts, cries, and the sound of much blood being spilled.

In any case, the final outcome was clear enough.

Ferrero stood before the fallen group, on his knees, numerous wounds having sliced through his torso. "If I may correct you in one regard," Ferrero said, with a note of defiance, "you were slightly wrong. My Talent does not trigger only in duels."

"Oh?" the Ghost asked, amused. It stepped forward. "How so? You seem rather defeated at the moment."

"My Talent is always active. Only...when more than one person gets involved, my normal strength plummets exponentially." He spat on the floor. "What I mean is – you did not win this bout fairly. My strength was divided."

The Ghost's neck elongated, allowing its head to be thrown far back as it laughed. The very sound seemed to scrape at everyone's eardrums, like nails on a chalkboard. "You have won *nothing*, Puppet. There is no solace for you. All your foolishness accomplished was—"

At that, Tenver coughed. "He did everything he needed to," the knight said, with a smirk. "Isn't that right...my lord?"

The door to the lower deck swung open.

With it came two things. First, there was a burning inferno. A wave of flames appeared to invade the room, crackling and twinkling like a hundred roaring campfires. Second, there was a man, standing at the forefront of the flames.

Adam.

"For a moment there, I wasn't sure if I was going to be needed," he said. Adam rubbed the back of his head, sighing as he stepped forward. "Honestly, Ferrero, you really might be onto something about swordsmanship being art. I could sense your passion and dedication there. Consider me moved."

He cracked his neck and glared at the Ghost. "But as it stands...it looks like it's my responsibility to finish this monster off."

"What are you...what is all of this?" the Ghost asked, gesturing incoherently at the flames.

"Your brother has come back to haunt you," Adam said, in a somber tone. "Do you not understand, you murderous imbecile?"

### **Stained Flames**

*The Talented may travel through open flames within 10m of each other, and hide their entire self within the very flames, for as long as twelve hours. This Talent is given to those Haunted by the Ghost of Flames. The Ghost of Flames will not haunt someone possessing a higher ranked Talent.*

### **Ship Captain**

*The Talented may navigate a ship toward its destination by only touching the wheel, without any more manual control. They are also aware of this ship's damages, capabilities, and the like. The Talented may also move this ship towards their Captain's Badge.*

"The Captain Talent gives me information on what's inside this ship. So I used your brother's Talent to escape, grabbed the key, grabbed some materials, went downstairs...and started a fire." Adam shrugged, his lips curling into a maniacal smile. "Do you know why?"

"What the hell?" The Ghost's indignant cry almost made him sound human. "How does that help you? If this ship burns down, you'll die! You'll drown in the ocean – no, we're so far down below that the pressure will crush you!"

Adam laughed. "Well, there was just too much water around here. Too many places for you to hide; it's not like we could find every last puddle. And if I can't find all your hiding spots...if I can't keep you from retreating into the darkness..."

He lifted two fingers as if wielding a gun, then fired it at him. "Then I'll burn *EVERYTHING* around us."

"You – you insane fool! If you do that, *you will die!* I can simply escape into the water outside!"

"Oh?" Adam hated how amused he felt at the moment. "Are you sure about that?"

### **The 'Azul Brillante'**

— Captain: Lord Adam of Penumbria

Unless allowed by its captain, no living being may enter or leave the ship while it is in motion. The surrounding barrier is nearly as strong as Lord's Domain. The corpse of a creature that entered the ship while alive is subjected to the same rules.

"Until we reach our destination, you can't leave the ship." The Ghost was a monster, but it had a soul – many, even. Which meant it couldn't escape the ship's barriers any more than they could. "Now, I wonder...when does the barrier stop working? Do you think it might still go on for a while, even if the entire ship burns to ashes? Is it a barrier around the ship *components*, or just a ship-shaped field? I don't really know. Do you?"

He thought back to when he'd fought the Ghost of Flames.

*Adam's Stained Ink had wrapped itself around the Ghost before violently pulling sideways, tearing the candelabrum and the ceiling – their floor – off with it.*

*The monster screamed in terror as it fell, the sudden destruction leaving behind a cloud of dust where the floor had been a moment ago.*

*Adam fell too, but his throat let out no screams – only a manic laughter. "If my Talent can't hurt you, how about gravity?" Adam shouted in midair, as they both fell.*

"You're immune to weaker Talents, true. But environmental causes...well, if your brother was damaged by a sudden fall, there's no reason to think that you'd be immune to fire."

Adam perked up. "Oh!" he added, as if remembering something. "Don't worry. I spoke with Serena briefly, and we set up a protected area for the commoners downstairs. They won't die from the fire. Unless it consumes the whole ship, at any rate."

He extended his arm toward the monster. His palm was open, but facing down, all fingers outstretched. "Now, I wonder...your best bet is probably to kill me and then salvage the ship. But easier said than done, right? With this much heat, even tiny droplets might evaporate. I just have to make sure there's no water behind me."

Even he could feel the blazing fire, its intensity searing at his back. Stained Ink provided some protection from heat, but not enough. The Haunting of Flames provided the best protection of all, but something about it felt *unstable*. This couldn't go on for long.

The thought excited him, fueling his competitive edge like kindling to a roaring inferno.

*I wonder...have I always been like this?*

"As long as I'm right next to the flames," he explained, "I'm safe from your teleporting bullshit. And if you don't kill me quickly, who knows? I might just use your brother's skill to run away, and then we'll both burn to ashes. Pity."

"You're insane!" the Ghost shrieked. "Your friends—your subjects—the commoners—they will all perish!"

Adam laughed. "Ah, see—that's only if I don't kill you first."

He flipped his hand over, then beckoned the monster forward with two fingers. "So get over here. Let's dance."