

No more deaths were forced on them for the remainder of the trip. Yet as Adam soon learned, one more might come regardless – and this time by choice.

It shouldn't have even been a surprise. Far too late, Adam recalled his last conversation with the Ghost of Waters. After all the things he'd predicted, all the mysteries solved...in the heat of the moment, he'd missed something told straight to his face.

*"Because if you did think of him as your father..." Adam had taunted. "My, my, you must be rather pissed at me for stealing his soul, eh?"*

*"No matter," the Ghost seethed. "Your canvas will shatter upon death."*

Adam grit his teeth at the memory. *Damn it all to hell, how could I have missed that?* After a moment to calm down, he sighed internally. *No...it's unreasonable to expect myself to notice absolutely everything. I should be proud of having caught as much as I did, really. And it's not like my choices would've been different if I knew about this ahead of time.*

Even so, he still wished he'd known about this. Maybe the extra time to prepare would've changed something. Maybe he just needed more time to get used to things like this.

Maybe he never would.

"My lord," Tenver asked, with a curt bow, "your orders." He paused without lifting his head, then said, "Your permission, rather."

A few hours after the killing of the Ghost of Waters, they'd put out every fire and seen to the ship's damage. Thankfully, it wasn't so bad. In spite of what he'd told the Ghost, Adam had truly set only the hallway separating both decks ablaze. While Serena had claimed that she could protect the commoners down there, he'd wanted to avoid relying on her too much.

Everyone's injuries were treated quickly and efficiently. Puppets needed far less care to keep alive, and the commoners below hadn't been hurt. Aside from the Ghost of Waters, there wasn't a single casualty,

and soon enough, everyone was on their feet. The issue, however, was exactly that – not *everyone* should have been up on their feet.

A few hours after the duel, Captain Baltsar stood up.

The man had been groggy, feverish, and on the verge of death, but his soul had returned to his body all the same. Adam cursed the revelation for several reasons. First, it meant that he'd wasted resources. He could have developed a more elegant – and less expensive – plan if he knew that Solara's soul would return to her body upon his death. Then again, although Baltsar's soul had returned to him, his *Talent* hadn't.

Second, and more pressingly, Baltsar had committed a terrible crime...and the commoners were begging for justice.

"Milord, please. My cousin was just a kid." A young man, no older than eighteen, fell on both knees and crumbled his crummy green hat in his hands. He tried to avoid meeting Adam's eyes, occasionally glancing up before lowering his head again as if apologizing for some unspoken crime. "We're simple folk, milord, destined for nothin' but misery. I know that. But...but we had a *chance* milord! A chance to become something else – something *better* in the Mines!"

He shot a glare at the sickly Baltsar, sitting to the side of the room. "Until that fucking monster fed him to a..."

The young man's voice trailed off as he teared up, anger fighting with grief over the right to be heard.

Anger won out. "Milord – please! Give us justice! *Kill him!*"

It had now been just over a day since Adam's duel against the Ghost of Waters. As soon as the situation had been explained to the commoners below, they all asked for the same thing: for Baltsar to be executed. Adam didn't know who'd told them, but he couldn't resent the guilty party very much. Those people deserved to know the truth of what had happened.

*And now...I have to kill someone.*

Adam knew the thought shouldn't have bothered him. He'd killed plenty of people since coming to the Painted World. Asprey might not have died, but he *did* lose his soul, which was close enough. Belmordo...was different than this situation. After hearing everything the man had done to Solara and Vasco, making the decision felt easy. And even then, it had only been an indirect killing. Much as Adam hated to admit it, taking lives was less onerous when he could do it with just a drawing.

This, on the other hand...would be a lot messier. And a lot more personal.

*I am the Lord of Penumbria*, he reminded himself. *I have to make a decision.*

"Milord! Please!"

"Milord, give us justice!"

"Off with the captain's head!"

Adam hadn't gotten much time to discuss the matter with Solara or Tenver. In between the cleanup and recovering from injuries, he'd only managed to briefly speak in private with each of them. That turned out to be more than enough; it didn't take long for them to make their positions exceedingly clear.

"Kill him," Solara had plainly stated. "His crimes are treasonous to both the Emperor and yourself. Some of his victims must have come from your domain, Adam. You simply cannot forgive him – you'd appear weak."

"I don't *want* to forgive him," Adam had protested.

"Then kill him." Solara's voice was firm, almost cold. "Had I my way, we would make those people citizens of Penumbria or Gama. Yet neither of us has the Orbs to support more hungry mouths as winter nears, and...you've mentioned Penumbria's need to strike a trade agreement with the Puppets. You shouldn't offend their Grandmaster by taking prospective citizens away from them. And if you can't give these people a chance to live as humans, then give them justice, at the very least."

Tenver's opinion had been kinder, and at the same time, more ruthless.

"I owe much to Captain Baltzar," the knight had said, looking down. "I'd rather he didn't die, but my opinions don't matter. Your standing with the Emperor is uncertain – letting a criminal such as he live would harm your negotiating position. Moreover..."

Tenver shrugged awkwardly. "The commoners may be human, but the Grandmaster likely sees them as Puppets already. If you fail to give them their justice, the Grandmaster would see it as an indication of weakness."

"You're very knowledgeable about Puppets," Adam had replied. "I could use your advice moving forward."

"We'll talk soon. I promise." Tenver sounded sincere this time. It reminded Adam of the times they'd spent in Asprey's tower. "There's a lot to catch you up on. But for now..."

"I know. There's things that need to be done.."

Their advice was forthright, and their reasoning was solid. Worst of all, Adam didn't disagree with it in the slightest. The only thing staying his hand was fear, plain and simple. Even if he wanted to fashion himself as a cold medieval lord who favored pragmatism above all else, watching someone die on his orders felt *wrong*. Would he be any different from Asprey and the others if he was happily ordering people's executions?

*Or am I just using that moral superiority as an excuse for cowardice?*

His silence stretched on, and a sense of disquiet spread through the kneeling commoners. It was becoming apparent to them that Adam didn't intend to make a decision, and it wouldn't be long before they started voicing their displeasure. While their protests could be silenced with either authority or power, neither option appeared particularly tasteful.

Yet...Baltzar hadn't even fully recovered from having had his soul stolen. The memory of him desperately begging for his son, as if the boy was still alive, remained fresh in Adam's mind.

Tenver knelt by his side. "My lord," he whispered, "we will reach the Mines in an hour or two. You need to do something before the Right to Rule is no longer yours."

Adam stayed silent.

His knight said nothing for quite some time. "May I?" he eventually asked.

There was no other option. Adam knew that. It still hurt him to nod, wordlessly granting Tenver permission to carry on with the act.

A moment later, he looked up at the sound of commoners cheering. Tenver was holding the delirious captain by his neck, dragging him to the middle of the room. The knight easily tossed Baltsar onto a chair turned sideways to prop up the man's head. Despite attaching his head easily enough, Tenver had yet to reattach his arm – and it did little to distract from the imposing figure he projected onto the room now.

For just a moment, there was a flicker of paleness in his face, a twitching of his lips. Then all of those signs were gone, and he'd put on the same smile Adam had seen so many times before.

When *was* the first time he'd seen that odd, almost mischievous smirk? Tenver hadn't really shown it during those hellish six months in Aspreay's tower. Had it been...

Ah.

*When he first brought me the heads of the nobles who'd meant to revolt.*

Adam lost himself in deep thought as he watched Tenver raise his sword. He looked around at the cheering commoners who were trying to crowd around Baltsar, at the solemn Puppets who were grouped up on one side, and at Solara, who was watching it all from the other end of the room. Just as Tenver gripped his sword hilt tighter, an overwhelming thought invaded Adam's mind.

*This is wrong. It's not how it should be.*

"Stop!" Adam cried out. Many heads turned to him, but it was only Tenver's that Adam faced. "You can't kill him."

As the crowd watched, their eyes demanding an explanation, Adam drew a deep breath. When he exhaled, the Lord of Penumbria stood in his place. *I shouldn't choose a road based on how easy it is to walk.*

"Give me your sword." Adam stared harder into his knight's eyes. "I'll do it myself."

Tenver stared back. "Are you certain, my lord?" he slowly said.

"These people ask justice of me. I should be the one to deliver it." Adam grabbed Tenver's sword with one hand. It was heavy, but his long sleeves allowed for the Stained Ink to swirl onto the hilt without anyone's notice. "What kind of lord would ask his knight to execute a man he owed so much to?"

"Aspreay would."

"I'm not Aspreay." Adam repeated the words in his mind like a mantra. *I'm not Aspreay.* They gave him strength. "And I will not ask that of you." He drew another deep breath, readying his grip. "Captain Balstar, do you have any last words?"

The Captain stirred weakly, feverishly. "My son...must save...my son...."

*How many innocent people did you kill for that one thought?* "Very well."

Adam brought the sword down in one clean gesture.

There was a loud cheering, but Adam paid it no mind. It all sounded distant, as if the thunderous sound from the crowd came from a different ship rather than a few feet away from him. Adam watched Balstar's decapitated head roll around once, then twice, before Tenver quickly collected it and wrapped it inside a leather bag.

After daring to look at the headless body, and freezing at the sight of the corpse's bleeding throat, Adam decided that he'd had enough. He passed his knight the sword, gave the cheering commoners a firm nod, then retreated to his room.

Tenver quickly caught up to him. He knew not to say a word until he'd closed the door behind him. "First kill?" he asked.

The lord sighed. "With my own hands? Yes."

"Do you feel...distracted from it? Almost scared of yourself, that you'd do such a thing?"

Adam glanced down at his hand and saw it tremble. "It appears so," he remarked, his voice surprisingly calm despite the unsteady arm.

Tenver smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "That's reassuring."

"Why?"

"Because if it means you didn't enjoy it." Tenver's voice lowered. "And the world is made a worse place by those whose core heals from drinking venom."

He waited a moment for the words to sink in, then drew back. "Well, we have about an hour before arriving." A friendly smile graced his features. "What do you say to a drink?"

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They shared only a light drink and lighter conversation. Adam wasn't sure if he could trust Tenver yet, but was beginning to feel like he could – or maybe *should*. Yet there was little time, and they both needed to remain sober for when they arrived at the Mines. Instead, the two men spoke of food, drinks, and some sightseeing they'd love to do together when all other duties were done.

"—Silver waterfalls, absolutely breathtaking. You *must* come."

"I suppose that would be nice to paint."

"—I will place a limit, 'my lord,' on how much time you'll spend painting."

Everything felt just as it had before Adam became lord. The laughter, the talking, the friendship...*Is...is it fine to trust him again? Was it ever?* Knowing about the man being a Puppet explained a lot, but there was still the lingering doubt that this amiability was merely another form of manipulation. Inside his mind, Adam shouted at himself to shut up, to just *trust* Tenver – but another voice shouted louder.

*Remember Eric?*

He allowed himself to enjoy the conversation, if nothing else. It was a joyful hour that Adam wished could've lasted longer. Yet time is a merciless reaper, and there was work to do.

Adam missed the resurfacing of the ship – according to Solara, it was quite an amazing sight – but he was happy to have traded it for the short period he spent with Tenver. Thankfully, he didn't need to do anything to resurface or dock the trip; his Talent took care of it automatically.

He *was* present when the barriers came down, though. Adam stopped to look around at their destination. "This is among the most ominous things I've ever seen in my life," he said, without exaggeration.

The entrance to the Puppet Mines was located through an underwater cave. Their airship had dived deep in the ocean, traveled for hours, then resurfaced like a submarine. Adam had expected many different things from the Mines, but not how *tall* the cave was. It was so absurdly tall that his entire manor from Penumbria probably wouldn't have touched the sharp stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

Most striking of it all, however, was how he couldn't see the Puppet Mines proper.

Despite that gargantuan height, every inch of it had been covered in wooden walls hastily built onto each other. Some appeared so old they were nearly archeological finds, while other planks appeared so new they might as well have been placed the morning before. It was less of a gate and more of an



enormous, comically large wall, intended to block off the Mines from any visitors who'd managed to reach this point.

There were only two actual doors Adam could see, both clearly marked.

— *INTO THE MINES*

— *GRANDMASTER'S WORKSHOP*

Serena spoke up first. "As thanks for solving our issue with the Ghost, I would like to formally introduce you to the Grandmaster. Would you allow me the chance to put in a good word for you, Lord Adam?"

"It would be my honor." Understanding the unspoken implication, he looked back at the rest of the group. "Go ahead into the Mines. I'll meet up with you after seeing the Grandmaster."

Solara shook uneasily. "Adam, I..."

He couldn't tell whether she was unsure about letting him speak with the Grandmaster alone, or whether she simply felt uncomfortable in Puppet territory. Either way, Adam felt sorry for her, but he had no choice. "I must go," he insisted. "It's for the sake of our goal, remember?"

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Solara was pissed at the Painter.

He *knew* how much Puppets unnerved her, yet he still went out of his way to leave her alone with them. Sure, speaking with the Grandmaster was more important – she wouldn't argue against that. But would it have killed him to at least *try* to argue for her presence there? At least appear like you give a shit, fucking Painter. If he kept acting like this, it would make her plans of projecting her importance via association that much harder.

And, well, she also didn't want to be left alone with Tenver.

Not that she was sorry about the things she'd said, but, maybe she wouldn't have said them in front of the man if he'd bothered to let her know he was a Puppet. And...it was his fault anyhow. Still, it was the proper thing to express her regret at her choice of words, and if she was feeling charitable, even acknowledge – with some degree of honesty – that maybe she'd started to feel differently after this trip.

*That's going to be awkward, though. I don't want to do it. Not one bit. She had to. Ah, burn it all to the blue hell! All of it! Every single–*

"Lady Solara," Valeria said, with a bow. "I fear our disagreements aboard the ship seem rather meaningless now. Would you allow me to show you around as an apology?"

There was some edge to her tone, but Solara could detect no malice in it. She glanced at the detective, then at the rest of the group – which included Tenver – and quickly thought over everything she knew.

*The detective and I have been openly disagreeing about things since we spoke to each other. We've both been open with our distaste of the other's kind, and I'm not entirely convinced she isn't gonna kill me the first chance she gets. Going alone with her might be tantamount to suicide.*

*Tenver and I have had mild disagreements, but he seems loyal to Adam, and hasn't really done anything wrong. Going alone with him would mean apologizing.*

"I would be glad to go with you, Detective." She wasted little time in following Valeria to the other side, sparing no glance behind.

There was a brief pause before being allowed in. Solara felt a chill down her spine as a blue light touched her from head to toe, the door opened itself right after. To her surprise, the door didn't lead to the entirety of the Mines, but rather a long and *dark* hallway.

"Oh, my apologies. I forgot!" Valeria spoke with the glee of someone who hadn't, in fact, forgotten anything at all. "You can't see in the dark, can you? We illuminate the entrance for the sake of traders, and illuminate most inner caves for the sake of new Puppets who aren't used to it yet. The First Tunnel is different. It's kept dark – for the sake of defense, you see?"

"I *don't* see! That's the problem!" Solara snapped back. More calmly, she asked, "The main hallway, you say? From what I've heard, the Mines are a network of tunnels."

"A labyrinth would be more accurate. The First Tunnel has side doors leading into many caves, most of which are large enough to fit several houses – not unlike a human city. And the only thing connecting them all is the First Tunnel."

Valeria laughed amusedly, extending her hand. "You wouldn't want to get lost here. Hold my hand."

Solara nearly tripped trying to keep up with her. By the forest, neither her shoes nor her dress were meant for *hiking*. While she'd packed a few other sets of clothes, her hobbies had admittedly taken up most of the luggage space. "You *cannot* be serious."

"The last person who refused a guide was found thirteen days later, trampled and stepped on. We know not if they perished due to the stomping or the hunger." She laughed again and flicked her hand. "Are you certain you'll decline?"

"Burn in hell, Puppet," Solara cried out, bringing her hand down like a slap. She grabbed onto the detective's palm anyway. "What are you trying to show me, exactly?"

Valeria squeezed tightly, pulling Solara forward as if dancing. "Forgive me for not putting a hand on your hip, yet I lack an arm to do so. It will be remedied soon."

"You damned—"

"Ah, my dear tree lover—your kind likes trees, yes?—I understand your frustration, but remember that I have only one arm. So long as you hold my hand, I cannot bring any harm to you."

Solara exhaled, begrudgingly accepting her logic. "Just walk already, Pup—"

She cut herself off. *It probably wouldn't be wise to keep calling her 'Puppet' in the Mines.* By now, Solara knew that she and the detective had a sort of...agreement. There was an accepted and implied

permission that they could be less appropriate with their choices of words towards one another. Other Puppets, however, might take offense to it.

*It's time I started speaking properly, she thought. Remember that you represent Gama. Don't forget everything you've practiced.* Solara forced a smile. "Most kind of you, Valeria, to show an outsider like me the sights of your land, so shrouded in legend. Gama will not forget this courtesy."

To her surprise, Valeria sighed with more annoyance than she'd expressed thus far. "It's not fun when you speak like that," she grunted, then marched forward, dragging Solara by the hand.

The two walked in silence for a few minutes, the all-enshrouding darkness their only companion. They must have walked for quite a while, as Solara felt her thighs protest, but not *too* long, for her legs did not give out entirely. The Puppet certainly would've said exactly how long it took if asked, but Solara was just as certain it wouldn't be worth giving her the satisfaction. Why, if *she* had her way, they'd—

"We're here," Valeria announced. She opened a door, bright lights shooting out into the First Tunnel. "Here lies the Eleventh Cave. It's the community I belong to. And...well, take a look."

Solara's eyes needed time to adjust to the light. While the Puppets hadn't replicated sunlight, there were a number of green stones placed upon tall wooden poles, evenly illuminating their surroundings and banishing any last semblance of darkness. It was an especially impressive sight considering the sheer size of the area. The Eleventh Cave might not have been as tall as the entrance, but it was far wider, and inhabited by many broad structures that took Solara a moment to identify.

*Those are...houses.* Valeria wasn't exaggerating when she compared it to a regular city street. There were a number of buildings around, and though Solara couldn't see precisely how many due to the curved nature of the cave, she was sure there were at least thirty houses just in her immediate field of vision. *They're so large, too. How many people can they hold?*

And speaking of people – there were plenty of them as well. Solara stared in wonderment at the crowded streets. She saw children at play, young men and women jogging, and older folk entertaining others with stories of their youth. It was all so...normal.

For some reason, the thought struck her like a bolt of lightning. If she hadn't known they were inside the Mines, she wouldn't have even considered the possibility that these people were Puppets. They looked just like anyone back home in Gama.

*No, Solara thought with a frown. Not like Gama. But what am I...*

Suddenly, it dawned on her. The children, the men and women, the older folk...they were...their *ears*...

"They're elves," she muttered. "They're—they're all elves!"

"Puppets, my lady," Valeria politely corrected. "But they used to be elves. I suppose you could consider them both, if you wanted. The Eleventh Cave is populated by former elves."

"Former." Solara spoke the word slowly, letting herself process it. "Were they taken here against their will?"

"No. Some came here in ships like Baltsar's, thinking the Mines were kinder to them than the Emperor. I'm sure you of all people cannot blame them."

Solara trembled at the thought. "Heavens no. After Greenisle, I could not blame anyone who..." She paused. "What of the others?"

"The others came here as corpses," Valeria stated. "A person's soul doesn't always leave their body immediately after death. In fact, it often takes a few days or weeks. Some of our archives indicate the longest record was nearly seventeen months, but that was a hundred years ago."

Numerous questions battled within Solara's mind for the right to be spoken aloud. In the midst of that turmoil, a new thought formed and snuck its way to her lips before the others could protest. "You said that this is the Eleventh Cave. Where former elves live."

"Yes."

"You also said...that this is your community." Solara widened her eyes. "Valeria, your ears—!"

The detective laughed. "They look human enough. Or rather, they'd *better*. It cost me quite a bundle to have them done this way."

Solara's shock caught up before her understanding did. "Valeria, are you implying...are you *saying* that you're an elf?"

"Mayhap if you choose to view me that way. As I see it, the elf in me died fifteen years ago." The detective looked Solara dead in the eyes. "Fifteen years...you understand what that implies, right? People are murdered every day, aye, yet..."

A mad idea came to her, and she could not stop it from leaving her mouth. "*Greenisle?!?*" she cried out. "You were from Greenisle?!"

Valeria shrugged. "That is just the question, isn't it?" Her tone was calm and thoughtful. "I told you earlier that my memories of life before Puppetry are vague at best. See, my wounds matched the weapons used to butcher your – our – kind. Spears from your very own City of Gama, my dear elf. But don't you find that strange? That my corpse was brought from Greenisle all the way to the Mines?"

"How?" Solara demanded. "How did...how did your body get moved here? I was with Father the entire time, no corpses were – they helped us bury and burn our dead!"

At that, the detective held up her arm, gesturing to the clear prosthetic. It brought forth a memory of something she'd mentioned before on Baltsar's ship.

*"This is a replacement of my original arm," Valeria had said. "A thin layer of skin over simple wood, strung together into my nerves. It is the only real prosthetic we can manage on a living person. The rest of my body is not too dissimilar from your own, my lady elf. However, the method that gave me my new body only works when a Puppet is first reborn, so I cannot bet my arm again."*

Solara's eyes widened at her recollection. First, because of the realization the Puppet had been hinting at her true nature since the beginning. Second... "You lost your arm trying to rationalize something with the Bloody Truth?"

"Aye," Valeria nodded. An imperceptible emotion flashed within her eyes. "Rather mysterious, my death. And I'm willing to risk much to uncover more."

"Why are you telling me this?" Solara snapped, almost defensively. "Do you suspect Gama – do you suspect *father* of having dealt with your corpses?"

"No." Again, she raised her prosthetic. "I made sure of that much."

Solara winced. *So that's the Bloody Truth guess that cost her an arm.* Uncomfortably, she glanced at the stump where the Puppet – blue hells, the *elf* – had lost her arm fighting against the Ghost. "I suppose you can't get that back, either?"

"This one might be fine." Valeria sounded neither certain nor worried. "They may be able to reattach it, although my speed of movement could end up lesser than before. Losing a limb in battle is different from losing it to the Bloody Truth. Might even be able to avoid a prosthetic. I'd rather keep my sensation of touch, but..." She let out a theatrical sigh. "Oh, the sacrifices we make for the truth."

"Your ears," Solara insisted. "Why did you do that? Why try to hide your identity?"

"Because my plan was to infiltrate and investigate human cities." She winced at some hidden memory. "The Grandmaster, ah, didn't let me get that far."

*Adam has no idea what he offered when he gave her citizenship, Solara thought. Of all the Puppets to make that offer to...* "I ask again," she repeated. "Why tell me all of this?"

"Because my main suspect is the same man who ordered the slaying of your village. The same man who killed Tenver's father."

Valeria's gaze sharpened. "The same man who wishes to murder Lord Adam."

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Serena had been leading Adam down a path for nearly thirty minutes now.

Adam spent that time wondering what kind of person the Puppet Grandmaster was like. He'd heard too many rumors about the man to have a realistically informed opinion; the man's legend was simply too big for any words of his character to be trustworthy. All Adam knew for certain was that the Grandmaster had salvaged whatever Puppets remained alive, keeping them so well-guarded that the Emperor dared not attack the Mines, despite his clear distaste of their kind.

*What kind of person are you, Grandmaster?* Adam pondered, as Serena led him through the darkened hallway. *Are you paranoid? Vengeful? Cold and calculating?* He could be any and all of those. It wasn't worth speculating right now; there just wasn't enough information to go on. Then again, he *did* have Valeria's account. From that, he could estimate at the very least that—

"I'm surprised you can see in the dark," Serena said, from just ahead of him. "Most humans can't. Is this part of your Painter Talent, by any chance?"

Adam kept his face blank and lifted his tablet's flashlight to point at her eyes. The woman didn't even blink. "I have my ways." *Looks like it's not just that they can't see my tablet – the light it projects doesn't affect them, either.*

"We've been walking for a while," he continued. "Is this normally how long it takes to see the Grandmaster?" Adam hardened his voice. "Or could it be that you lead visitors down a confusing route to safeguard the Grandmaster?"

"The labyrinthian nature of these caves is just how this area is built. Blame the Gods, not us." Serena chuckled from beneath her cloak. "Aside from that, we have no need to go through such lengths to defend him."

"You don't?" Adam questioned. "What if a Hangman comes to fight him? What's there to stop the Grandmaster from being killed?"

"Himself." Serena's voice was firm. "No other safeguard is needed."



Adam bit his lip. *Interesting*. So the Grandmaster could defeat a Hangman? But...one Hangman annihilated a Puppet City, had he not? Solara told him as much back when she explained her past. How could both those facts be true? Was this merely a boast, or was there more to it?

He had to know more. "If I may ask—"

An abrupt change in scenery stopped him short. While his next step felt like any other, all of a sudden, the tunnels had widened, and the ceiling stretched so high upwards that it felt impossible to see the top. The walls also were far enough away now that Adam could just barely make them out under his dim flashlight.

But he *couldn't* make out the figures standing by the walls. There were dozens of them, standing in perfect orderly lines. Waiting. They could've been statues, soldiers, or even shadows.

The sight sent a shiver running down Adam's spine. He turned to face Serena, masking his unease as best he could. "Where are we? Is the Grandmaster ready to meet with us?"

She turned towards him as well. The motion gave Adam pause. At first, he couldn't quite tell what was off about it. Then, a second later, it came to him: although her neck turned, the remainder of her body did not. It wasn't so stiff as to be impossible, but it was knocking on the door of the uncanny valley.

Silently, the rest of her turned to face him, doing so one limb at a time. Her shoulders went first, followed quickly by a snapping motion as her upper torso rotated. Everything after was faster than the movement that came before: her hips, her knees, her feet.

And then, at the end of that unnatural display, she dared to speak naturally. "Yes. It is time for you to meet with the Grandmaster, Painter of the World of Ink."

Serena collapsed.

"Wait – no!" Adam rushed to her and immediately checked for a pulse. There was none. Did Puppets live without one? No...her heart had also stopped. Was that normal or...was Serena dead? *What life signs are even there for me to check?*

A large part of his mind screamed that the effort was pointless. Puppet or not, there were no signs of life in the woman anymore. Her limbs offered no resistance to being moved, as though her muscles had died many days before. This was different from the body of someone who was merely asleep. "But how...why did you—"

"*WELCOME, PAINTER!*" Adam turned to the right. One of the figures he'd thought to be a statue stood up from a raised platform, then began stalking towards him. It was an older man, but tall and well-built, with hair and beard that circled into the shape of a lion's mane. "*WELCOME, TO MY WORKSHOP!*"

Without thinking, Adam summoned his Stained Ink.

The whirling of the Ink around his arms felt as instinctive as an animal's growl when encountering a predator. Something deep inside him, something primal, told him that he was in grave danger. *Don't let him get any closer. Not even one more step. Think – think how to escape!*

Every step the man took forward felt as though death itself was drawing near. *I can't escape him*, Adam realized. *He's too fast. Too strong. If I try anything, he'll catch me. What do I do?* The man wasn't giving him time to think. He just kept approaching, only a few steps away now...

...And then fell to the ground, collapsing like Serena had.

"Where are you?" Adam cried out. There was no relief in the man having collapsed. "I came here to meet with you, goddamn it!"

Another one of the supposed statues moved. This time it was a young woman, older than Adam, but not by much. She too started moving towards him. "I am here, Painter."

Then she too collapsed.

"Forgive me," said another one of the figures. Now, it looked no older than a child. "This is quite troublesome."

Once more, the figure collapsed.

Adam clenched his fist. *I can't let myself be intimidated. Not going to give them any satisfaction.* "I am Lord Adam of Penumbria!" He thought of how to make the declaration sound more official, then remembered the lie he'd settled on. "The bastard son of Lord Aspreay, and descendant of a long line of nobles! I came here for a meeting, not a mockery!"

"Ah, but how could someone who is not from this world be a son of Aspreay?" said yet another voice. Adam couldn't immediately trace the source of this one. It wasn't coming from either of the walls.

Suddenly, a mass of giant candles alighted at the opposite end of the cave. They lit up one-by-one, as if following a melody, each spawning a wave of heat throughout the air, and each sweltering breeze feeling like an attack.

There was enough light now that even without his tablet, Adam could make out the throne that lay at the center of the room. It was elevated far above the ground, as if specifically crafted to look down on whoever dared petition its master. The throne seemed egregiously tall, so much that anyone who fell from it wouldn't escape without injury. This was a throne devised for someone of gravitas and importance; who knew their power and could back it up if they so chose.

And there was a single figure seated upon it.

*I don't have to check my tablet to know,* Adam thought. *This...this person has an Emperor ranked Talent.*

"Forgive me, Painter," said the Grandmaster. "Changing bodies is sometimes less of a science and more of an art form, I'm afraid. Regardless, it pleases me that I can finally thank you for your services in my own body. You may address me as Serena if you'd like, but I have many other names, if you prefer."