

CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD

Chapter 81 - 80 - Errands for the Black Hounds

Teclos woke up.

He didn't know where he was for a second, and he had a brutally painful headache. After a brief moment of gathering his bearings, he remembered that he had stayed in the tavern last night, bought Derrick and his friends drinks, and given Derrick the money for the coat.

After that, he had wanted to leave, but they refused to let him go, and he had to drink with those alcoholics the whole night.

The later parts were hazy, but all in all, they had welcomed him quite spectacularly into the mercenary company. Even Zamas joined them to drink, although not directly. He stayed on the second floor, where he could oversee the pub. Zamas was the name of his new boss, and apparently, the information Teclos had brought would earn them a hefty payout from the church if they played their cards right.

So, of course, they had to celebrate that wonderful news.

Teclos was sitting in a chair... well, technically, he was lying on the ground together with the chair, and there was also a boot in his face from a man who was still sleeping on the floor. It was one of Derrick's friends, though Teclos couldn't quite remember his name. Something like Pete or Patt.

Moving his leg away, Teclos tried to get up and was greeted with back pain and shoulder pain.

"Oh, you're awake, kiddo... Zamas wants to see you." Marek was cleaning last night's mess.

"Ugh..." Teclos almost vomited as he righted himself and asked, "Why? Did I do something stupid last night?"

"Hah! I don't know, kid, just hurry," Marek chuckled, then continued to mop the floor.

As he stepped through the back door and walked along the corridor, he arrived at the last door at the end, where Zamas was staying. He took a deep breath and opened it.

"Oh! Our new recruit is here!" Zamas exclaimed happily. "Come, I have a friend to introduce you to."

He gestured sideways toward a man standing in the corner.

As Teclos looked at him, he noticed that the man had long brown hair and an intense, stoic look on his face. His build was lean and tall. He gave off a dangerous feeling, a familiar feeling. Teclos did not remember why that familiar vibe struck him so unpleasantly, but it did.

His face was scar-free, a novelty among these mercenaries. Those thugs had even competed over who had the most scars last night.

"This friend's name is Falcon," Zamas suddenly interrupted his thoughts. "And he is going to guide you today for a few simple errands. Just help him out and bring back good results."

"Yes, sir."

Falcon nodded to Teclos and beckoned him to follow along.

Once outside, Falcon handed him an envelope.

"Our 'errands' for today."

Teclos read through it and was quite surprised. The first errand was handing money to a priest of the church.

Huh? I thought these guys hated the church? he thought, as he had literally robbed them last night.

They walked through the fresh morning, where the slums were already awake, full of barking dogs, arguing people, and crying children. Falcon moved through it without hurry, but people still shifted away from him.

Teclos walked beside him, the envelope tucked beneath his coat.

After several streets of silence, he finally asked, "You have a priest working for you?"

"Yes."

"And what does he do?"

"He heals our injured."

"Huh... I thought they were rich already..."

"They are..."

Teclos looked ahead, thinking of the men in the tavern. The bruises. The broken noses. The knife scars.

"He doesn't do a very good job at it, from what I have seen."

Falcon did not answer him.

Not a very talkative guy... Teclos noted.

As they neared the church, Teclos chuckled at the irony. He was literally back at the crime scene from yesterday.

The one he had committed.

Multiple guards stood at the front door of the small chapel and barred their entry.

"Halt! Identify yourselves!"

Falcon stepped toward the guard and smiled.

"Falcon... a member of the Black Hounds."

The guard recoiled at the name. Even with four guards present, their confidence suddenly sank to rock bottom.

Teclos chuckled from behind. They looked like they were about to piss themselves.

Then a priest came to the entrance and beckoned for Falcon to enter.

"It's okay. They have an appointment with me. Stand down."

It was Merrith, the corrupt priest.

Priest Merrith guided them into a side chamber.

He was a skinny man with soft, small hands. He had very nervous eyes, as if he expected to be stabbed or something. His robes were plain but clean, too good for someone who spent his days among the poor.

"You should not come during morning service... I could get exposed."

Falcon just stared at him.

Merrith swallowed, nervous in his presence.

Teclos then handed him the envelope.

"For you."

The priest took it without looking, but his fingers hesitated at the enchanted seal.

"Just hold your end of the deal, and you'll be safe," Falcon said.

"I know..."

Merrith tucked the envelope into his robes.

"That is all?"

"For now."

The priest's lips pressed into a thin line. "Tell Derrick I will do everything asked of me."

Teclos watched quietly from the sidelines.

A priest so afraid of a mercenary whose base was in a tavern... in the slums.

As they left through the side door, Teclos asked Falcon why he had to intimidate him. Wasn't the church way more powerful than them?

Only when the chapel was behind them did Falcon speak.

"This has nothing to do with the church because they don't know about it. It's easy to pressure a lone individual once you have dirt on him, and he will keep quiet on his own because of that." He paused for a second. "That is the power of information, so those ledgers you stole made our boss very happy."

That was the longest thing Falcon had said all day.

Teclos absorbed the knowledge slowly as he looked back toward the chapel.

The mighty church wasn't so airtight and mighty after all...

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A week passed like that.

Zamas did not give Teclos any grand missions like assassinations or stealing from the Count's vault or something.

Instead, he gave him small jobs to do.

He carried messages across districts, watched and guarded certain shops, and so on. He stood beside Falcon while merchants paid "street fees" with smiles that looked like they had just swallowed poison. He learned which stalls and roads belonged to Zamas, which alleys belonged to rivals, and which city guards took their bribes.

He was slowly getting used to the pub and its crowd.

They were a rowdy bunch, always smoking and drinking. More than once, a bar fight broke out where Teclos suddenly had to be a part of it. He also discovered the "other rooms," where they made drugs, along with the torture rooms.

Falcon showed him everything. Most of the time, he was a silent and brooding kind of guy. But underneath all that, he was very capable.

Once, after Teclos was used to breaking up fights between common folk and the occasional tough guy, he nearly stepped in between two fighting mercenaries. Falcon caught his shoulder and pulled him back.

He shook his head. "Never stand between dogs unless you want to get bit."

By the end of the week, Teclos had earned more copper and silver than he had working with Saldia for a month.

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On the eighth day, Zamas gave him a second important job.

This time, Falcon was already waiting for him by the door.

Derrick was leaning against the counter while a slum rat mopped dried blood from the floor with one swollen eye half-closed and a bleeding mouth.

"Goddammit, clean faster!" he yelled as he kicked him in the ribs. "Oh, kiddo! Looks like Falcon is already waiting for you."

He pointed his index finger toward Falcon.

Falcon just beckoned him to follow, and they sat down in a corner.

"There is trouble... a city guard," Falcon said. "Name's Roban Vey, and he bought drugs on a loan... he hasn't paid yet."

Teclos looked at him.

"A guard?"

Falcon nodded.

Teclos lowered his voice. "Can we even mess with a city guard?"

"Hah... you tell me, kid."

He was shocked that Falcon was capable of smiling, but after he got over it and thought for a second, Teclos sounded out his worries. "If nobles cared enough or if we stepped on their toes, they could wipe our place out."

Falcon nodded once.

The agreement surprised him.

"True, but corruption," Falcon said, "is one hell of a thing."

Falcon continued, "If it becomes known that a guard buys drugs from 'slum rats' like us, he loses his post. Maybe his hand. Maybe his life, depending on who wants to make an example out of him."

It was the same lesson as with the priest, and Teclos understood it.

Falcon pushed a folded note across the counter. "He owes nine silver. Take twelve for being late."

Teclos's eyes bulged.

"Twelve?"

"He can afford it," Falcon said. "And if he cannot, he should have bought less."

The walk to Roban Vey's house took them from the slums, through the lower gate, and into the city.

Roban's house sat near the inner wall, a modest but solid little house. A guard's pay seemed to be quite high, Teclos guessed.

Falcon knocked on the door.

Once.

The door opened after a long moment.

The man inside was broad-shouldered and had tired eyes. He was still in his sleepwear. His gaze flicked to Falcon, then to Teclos.

His mouth twisted into a smirk.

"This a joke?"

Falcon said nothing.

Teclos felt Roban's shadow beneath him.

The man was trained. His stance was balanced and poised to strike even while pretending to be relaxed.

He was almost like a hunter from Kolma.

But he didn't know that Falcon was way more dangerous.

"You owe us twelve silver," Teclos said.

Roban stared at him, and then he laughed.

"They sent a kid to shake me down?"

Teclos warned him.

"Zamas wants his money."

"Zamas can come kiss my ass."

Just then, Roban's eyes hardened.

"I'm done paying slum filth for drugs that barely work."

Then Roban lunged at them, and he was fast.

He grabbed Teclos by the collar and yanked him inside the house, probably hoping to drag him off balance and use him as a shield against Falcon.

It almost worked.

Teclos didn't resist the pull and instead drove his knee into Roban's ribs, making him stagger for a second before Teclos got elbowed in the face. Roban grunted, but

did not let go. His skin hardened like rock, and he struck Teclos across the face with enough force to send him flying.

Then Falcon entered.

Roban turned around just in time to block Falcon's first strike. The blow still drove him back into a chair, splintering one of its legs beneath his weight. Roban cursed, grabbed the broken chair, and swung it like a club.

Falcon moved beside him and struck him twice with lightning speed.

It was short, efficient, and brutal.

Air burst from Roban's lungs as he was blown back into the wall.

Roban stumbled back onto his feet just in time for Falcon's fist to crash into his jaw.

The guard was thrown against the table, knocking cups and plates to the floor.

But he was still standing, probably because he had hardened his skin at the last second. This guard was stronger than Teclos expected.

Falcon drew his sword halfway.

And the sound of it froze the room.

Roban hesitated for the first time.

That gave Teclos the opportunity to step in and strike him across the temple with a heavy leg kick.

The guard dropped to one knee.

Falcon then kicked him in the chest, hard enough to send him onto his back.

But then a scream suddenly came from the next room.

And a boy rushed out, perhaps eight or nine years old, barefoot and crying.

"Stop! Stop hurting him!"

He ran at Falcon, small fists striking uselessly against his coat.

Teclos stopped, but Falcon didn't.

He kicked the boy aside.

Hard enough to send him crashing into the table. The child hit the floor, sobbed, and curled himself into a ball.

Teclos stared in disbelief, and his stomach twisted with guilt.

Falcon looked down at the boy with no emotion in his eyes.

Roban groaned, trying to rise.

Teclos's thoughts raced. If that stupid dumbass of a guard moved more, Falcon could kill the kid and him.

So he grabbed the guard by the hair and shoved his face against the floor.

"Where is the money?!" he demanded, trying to force an answer and get Falcon's attention back to the guard.

Roban spat out blood, and Falcon walked closer. Then he crouched beside him.

"Your son is watching," he said quietly. "He will see you die first..."

Roban went still.

After a long silence, his eyes shifted toward the hearth.

Falcon searched there and found a loose stone behind the ash bucket. Behind it sat a small leather pouch and a wooden box. Inside were coins, two rings, and three folded paper packets of drugs.

He counted the silver.

"Hmmm... seventeen."

Teclos looked back at Roban.

"He had it."

"No surprise there..."

Falcon took twelve silver, then paused and took the drugs too.

Roban laughed weakly from the floor.

"I hope you rot in hell."

Falcon just left without another word.

Teclos looked at the boy once before he also left.

The child stared back through his tears, hatred already forming in his young eyes.

Neither spoke on the walk back.

By the time they returned to the pub, the crowd was as loud as usual.

Teclos wanted to hand over the money and leave, but a hand caught the back of his collar.

Derrick pulled him back with ease.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"No." Derrick pushed a cup into his hand. "You did a nice job again, and that deserves a drink."

"I don't want one."

The nearby mercenaries laughed, and Derrick leaned in closer.

"That was not a question, boy."

Teclos looked at Falcon.

Falcon was already sitting near the wall with a cup of his own, shrugging at Teclos.

No help there.

So Teclos drank again.

The ale was bitter, warm, and stronger than it had any right to be. The first cup burned his throat. The second made the room loosen at the edges. By the third, the songs sounded less terrible. By the fourth, Derrick was laughing with one arm around his shoulders, telling the others how the "Kolma boy" had cracked a guard's head.

Teclos did not remember agreeing to the fifth cup.

By the time he returned home, Saldia was already gone, off to work again.

He fell over a chair at the kitchen table, and the coin flew out of his pockets.

Copper and silver spilled across the wood.

He stood back up, only to fall down into his bed again, fully clothed and asleep in a second.

Chapter 82 - 81 - Dirty Silver

When Teclos woke up, he had a blindingly painful headache again.

At least he had made it to his bed this time, though some of his clothes pressed uncomfortably against his skin, leaving sore spots where the fabric had rubbed against him all night.

He sat up slowly, one hand gripping the edge of the bed. His clothes still smelled of smoke, sweat, and tavern ale.

It felt like déjà vu.

This whole week had been nothing but jobs, drinking with the mercenaries, and waking up feeling half-dead.

"Ugh... my head..."

Then he remembered the kid again, and his mood sank to rock bottom.

The hatred in the boy's eyes at the end had been jarring. It reminded Teclos of himself. If he ever had the chance to stab that orc in the neck, he knew he would do it instantly, even if he died in the process.

He got up, washed himself with water that was not exactly clean, and stretched the soreness out of his body.

Then he threw all his clothes into a basket and put on a fresh set. Lastly, he picked up his coat from the ground, ready to leave.

That was when he remembered.

The pouch.

The pouch full of coins.

His hand searched the coat once.

Then again.

Nothing.

The pouch was gone.

Panic instantly flooded his mind, and his headache suddenly became ten times worse.

He checked the pockets one last time, just to be sure. Then he looked under the bed, beneath the blanket, and searched through his other clothes in the basket.

Nothing.

"Fuck!"

He swore as a cold feeling crawled up his spine.

No.

No, no, no.

That coin could have helped them immensely. Saldia could have gotten new furniture with it. They would not have had to starve, and the existing walls could have been replaced with real ones that shielded them from the heat and cold.

"Idiot," he whispered.

He forced himself to stand again and nearly stumbled into the wall. For a second, he remained there, breathing through the nausea. After a few moments of fighting it back, he straightened himself as best he could and stepped out of his room.

The house was quiet.

She had probably left to work again.

But when he entered the kitchen, he saw that was not the case.

She was sitting right there at the table.

After a brief moment of confusion, his eyes drifted toward the coins arranged in front of her in neat little rows.

Copper on one side.

Silver on the other.

Teclos was sweating bullets as she looked at him, her face so calm it felt eerie. His mouth went dry, and he swallowed audibly.

"Morning..." he said.

Saldia looked at the coins, then back at him.

"Where did this come from?"

Teclos rubbed at his face, buying himself a heartbeat to think.

"I have work now."

"What work?"

"Just... work."

He cursed his brain for not functioning properly because of the hangover.

Her expression did not change, but her eyes were stone cold.

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

Teclos leaned against the doorway. His head hurt too much for this shit. His stomach was still turning, his throat was dry like the desert, and every part of him only wanted water and peace right now.

Instead, there was silver on the table, and Saldia was staring at him like she had already judged him guilty.

"I earned it," he said, still hopelessly trying to deflect the situation.

"Earned it how?"

"With my hands..."

Her gaze moved to the bruise along his jaw, then to the dried scrape near his knuckles.

"With your hands," she repeated quietly.

Teclos looked away, and Saldia stood. The chair scraped against the floor.

"You come home drunk every day for the past week, bruised, stinking of smoke, and with more silver than we make in months. And you want me to believe this is honest work?"

He only looked away and stayed silent, although the nervous tapping of his leg betrayed him.

Saldia's face hardened.

"No," she said. "Of course not."

He looked at her. "I... I'm not doing anything wrong."

He lied.

"I said don't take me for a fool!" Her voice rose for the first time. "I know. Gods, stop lying to me and tell me where you got this from. Then return it this instant."

Teclos clenched his jaw.

Saldia stepped closer to the table and placed one finger against a silver coin.

"Who gave this to you?"

He kept his mouth shut.

"Teclos!"

He swallowed, anger stirring beneath the shame.

"I think you should be happy we can finally buy more than stale bread and stop freezing every winter."

Saldia stared at him as if he had struck her.

"Dirty money isn't going to solve our problems," she said. "It will only create more of them."

The room felt colder.

Teclos's hands curled into fists.

"You are standing in my kitchen with dirty silver on the table and lies in your mouth."

The words hit their mark.

For a moment, Teclos tried to calm himself. His head pounded, but anger was burning through the hangover now.

"You know... I did this for us," he said. "So we could live better."

Saldia's expression twisted.

"No. Do not dare dress this useless pride of yours up as sacrifice."

"It is just money!" Teclos snapped.

His fist struck the wall hard enough to punch a hole through it.

Saldia fell silent from shock.

But Teclos continued.

Because once the words came out, he could not stop them.

"It is money for food. Money for repairs. Money so you do not have to work yourself sick at that stall every day, praying no guard or some godforsaken drunk decides to touch you. Money so we do not have to live like beggars and pretend not to be hungry."

Saldia's face paled, but he pressed on.

"I am tired of scraping by. I am tired of watching people spit on us and laugh. I am tired of being careful, and polite, and fucking poor. You think your honest work saves people here? It does not. It just keeps them taking advantage of us."

"Teclos—"

"No." His voice cracked, but he did not lower it. "I will not be a bottom feeder anymore. I will not spend my life waiting for good times to come along. If there is a way to make things easier, then I will take it."

Saldia looked at him with something worse than anger.

Disappointment.

Then shame rushed in, and because he could not bear that shame, he walked to the table, swept the coins into his hand, and left.

Saldia did not stop him, which somehow made it worse.

"I am going out," he said.

But there was no reply.

The morning air hit him cold, foul, and damp. He walked quickly, trying to get away from this situation.

When he gathered his bearings slightly, he was already near the edge of the slums, where the road dipped toward a drainage ditch that could kill a man with the smell alone.

He looked around and saw a beggar huddled beneath a torn blanket.

At first, he thought it was just another old drunk sleeping off the cold.

Then the man coughed.

He sounded sick and ruined from the inside. His skin had a grey-yellow tint, stretched thin over sharp bones. He had dark spots everywhere. One hand trembled around a wooden bowl with three copper pieces in it.

Other people just stepped around him without even looking.

The beggar lifted his head slightly as Teclos passed.

His eyes were cloudy and lifeless.

"Spare coin?" he rasped.

Teclos stopped.

And for one moment, he did not see a stranger, but a possible future.

Just a half-dead beggar, abandoned by the world.

His hand moved toward his pocket instinctively.

The silver that could save this man was there.

But Saldia's voice echoed in his mind.

Dirty silver.

Teclos stared at the man's shaking hand and smirked.

This was what "honest" work led to. This was what happened when people worked until their bodies broke, borrowed coin, swallowed drugs, and owed everyone coin.

He turned away, intending to just walk on, but as he saw the already lifeless eyes turn even more hopeless, he stopped... and gave the man one copper.

The beggar clutched it like treasure.

Teclos frowned and walked on.

"I'll never become like that," he whispered to himself, like a promise.

By the time he reached the tavern, the promise had hardened into something sharp.

Derrick was sitting by the counter, eating bread with one hand and counting coins with the other. He looked up as Teclos entered, then grinned.

"Oh! Kolma boy, you look like you had a rough night."

"I feel worse than I look. Also, stop calling me Kolma boy."

"Haha! But it suits you."

Teclos ignored that and approached the counter.

"Got work?"

Derrick's brows rose slightly.

Behind him, Marek also looked surprised as he wiped the glasses.

"You are eager today, kid," Derrick said.

"Do you have work or not?"

"Not in the mood, I see..." The grin faded, and a thoughtful look appeared.

Derrick wiped his fingers on a cloth, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a few folded scraps of paper.

"Small collections," he said. "Nothing grand, just some people late on loans."

Teclos took the first paper and walked to a corner, where Falcon was already sitting.

They went over the list and made a plan on who to visit first.

The first debtor was a tanner with cracked hands and red, pleading eyes. He owed three silver from a winter loan and had only one.

Falcon did not beat him immediately and instead let Teclos talk.

The man begged, explaining that his wife had been sick, that the hides had spoiled in damp weather, and that he needed another week.

As Teclos listened, he tried to feel sympathy and did feel some.

But behind the man's words, he saw the beggar by the ditch. He saw Saldia's stall overturned by one bad day. He saw hunger and begging waiting patiently outside his door.

"Two days," Teclos said.

Falcon looked at him and shook his head.

He was still too soft.

The tanner sagged in relief.

"Thank you. Thank you, I swear—"

"If you run," Teclos continued, "we will find you and take everything away then. Not just what you owe right now."

The tanner's relief vanished, and Falcon gave a small approving nod.

Teclos felt strange threatening him. He did not feel guilty... but he did not feel good either.

The second debtor was easier to shake down.

A gambler who tried to slam the door in their faces.

Falcon kicked it open before it closed fully and rushed inside. As Falcon was beating the man, Teclos asked where the money was. And when the gambler tried to spit at him, Teclos kicked him in the face.

After a while of this "interrogation," they found the money under a loose floorboard.

Five whole silver.

The gambler, spitting blood, cursed them out as they left.

The third was... harder to extort.

A woman with sunken cheeks and drug-stained fingers owed them two silver. Her room had a foul smell to it, like decay. Two children sat in the corner, keeping silent.

She had no money.

Nothing worth taking either.

Falcon searched the shed anyway.

It was hard to watch for Teclos as he imagined her to be Saldia.

The woman cried quietly, saying she only needed it to sleep. That the hunger was too strong. That she would pay when work came.

Everyone was always waiting for work or a miracle, it seemed.

After a few minutes of searching, Falcon found a small silver ring hidden inside a cracked cup.

The woman reached for it.

"No," she whispered. "That was my mother's."

Falcon tossed it to Teclos.

"Think this is enough?"

Teclos looked at the ring in his palm.

It was small and worn. Worth maybe one silver if sold to the right person.

The woman stared at him.

"It's not enough," he said.

Falcon watched him carefully.

The woman began to sob.

Teclos hated the sound.

He took pity on her and her children, placing the ring back on the table.

"You have two days," he said. "Then someone crueller than me comes to pay you a visit."

Falcon said nothing until they were outside. Then he looked at Teclos.

"You're too soft on them, kid."

Teclos's anger flared.

"She had nothing."

"A lot of people who owe us have nothing, kid." Falcon's expression remained calm as he explained further. "Besides, she did have 'something,' and I'm not talking about the ring. We could use her as unpaid labor and her children too, until she pays the debt off."

Teclos looked at Falcon, stunned, then back at the building.

The children were still watching through the cracked window, and for a moment, his resolve wavered.

Then he thought of the beggar again.

The diseased skin. The dead eyes. Begging for mercy.

Anything but that.

Anything.

By evening, Teclos's pockets carried way more coin than they had that morning. Not all of it was his, but a lot of it would be once he reported to the boss and took his share.

The tavern was loud when they returned.

Smoke clung to the ceiling in thick layers. Men shouted over dice games. The counter was full of thirsty mercenaries who laughed and occasionally fought.

Falcon and Teclos went to the back room, where Zamas counted the money, asked a few questions, and smiled when Falcon gave his report.

"Not bad," he said to Teclos. "You are still soft in some places, but not bad, kiddo."

Teclos should have hated the praise, but instead felt proud as warmth spread through his chest.

Zamas gave him and Falcon each two silver and some change.

"Your cut."

Teclos stared at the money.

And the guilt from the morning, after Saldia's anger, disappeared. Forget about being a beggar like that old man near the ditch. That would not happen to him—

As the beautiful silver in his hands would prevent that.

After they stepped out from the back room, Derrick pushed a cup into his hand.

"Hey, kid! Drink with me. We have to think of a new nickname for you, since you didn't like the last one, haha."

Teclos hesitated.

"It better be a good one this time."

Then the mercenaries nearby began calling his name, laughing and making room at their table. One clapped him on the shoulder. Someone else shoved a plate of greasy meat toward him.

At home, he had been a liar and scum.

But here... he felt welcome.

Useful.

Chapter 83 - 82 - Work For The hounds

Six months passed after the fight with Saldia.

And they were still not exactly on good terms, but it was slowly getting better.

Teclos was gone from home most of the time now, leaving early in the morning and only returning late at night to sleep.

Other than that, his life had suddenly become easy.

He always had coin to spare.

He always had a full belly.

And after completing plenty of jobs successfully, his standing within the mercenary company improved as well.

He improved their living conditions by bringing fresh food home. At first, Saldia refused to eat it, but with time, and with hunger gnawing at her, Teclos started finding leftovers in the trash. And the few times he did see her, she looked healthier.

Then he replaced the thin walls of their home with a sturdy stone foundation and logs stacked on top of it. Derrick and his friends helped him build it—of course, for some coin, but it was help nonetheless.

Their house became noticeable from far away among the rubble and patched huts around it, and that filled Teclos with pride.

It reassured him that even if the money was "dirty," he had made their lives better.

Not more miserable, like Saldia had said.

Saldia also asked fewer questions with time, but that did not mean she stopped caring. Teclos noticed her staring at his bruises with worry, so over time, he started hiding his scars better, hoping she would worry less.

The dissent that had brewed between them slowly began to fade.

They at least greeted each other now, and occasionally, they even held small conversations, checking up on one another in awkward, careful ways.

It was a painfully slow process, one that had taken six months just to reach this point.

She calmed down somewhat when she finally saw the mercenaries for the first time. At Teclos's plea, Derrick arranged it carefully. He brought a few of the men by during the repair and renovation work and ordered them to be on their best behavior.

No crude jokes near Saldia.

No fighting.

And no alcohol.

They were rough around the edges, certainly. Scarred all over their bodies, loud, and far too blunt. But they helped lift stones, fixed the wall, and worked tirelessly. One even repaired a broken shelf without being asked.

Saldia watched them constantly, like a hawk. But even when she told them how she wanted something placed, they only smiled and did their work.

She was baffled.

"They are still dangerous," she told Teclos later.

"I know," Teclos said. "But that does not mean they are all monsters."

That was the moment Saldia let go of some of her anger.

That had been one month ago.

Now, Saldia had even gotten a better place in the market to sell her herbs.

Teclos had arranged that too.

He hated that she still wanted to stand behind that stall every day, but if it gave her peace of mind, then he supposed it was not such a bad idea.

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One day, as he made his way toward the pub, he noticed something strange in the people around him.

He could not quite put his finger on it, but they seemed to be making way for him.

Like they were afraid.

It felt strange. He had not really killed anyone yet, and he had only shaken down people who, in his opinion, deserved a beating.

Then it clicked in his mind.

It must have been the company mark he wore openly now—a dark metal insignia hanging around his neck. He had it made yesterday and wore it for the first time because he was no longer ashamed to be part of them.

He had also bought better armor: a dark leather tunic and vambraces, along with matching shin guards and a neat short sword at his waist. He carried himself differently now, radiating confidence, with an upright posture.

Most people simply lowered their eyes and stepped aside.

But some even scurried away.

He liked that more than he should have.

As he turned the final corner before the pub in a good mood, he bumped into another person, and they both fell flat on their asses.

It was Ralph.

Teclos had not seen him since their fight over two years ago, and it was not a welcome surprise either.

Ralph was clad in polished silver armor that caught the light with every movement. A fitted plated tunic covered his torso, reinforced by pauldrons over his shoulders and vambraces along his forearms. Steel gloves protected his hands, and layered guards covered his shoulders and upper arms, making him look less like a common mercenary and almost more like a knight.

In contrast, Teclos felt almost bare beside him.

His dark leather armor, which had made him feel proud only moments ago, suddenly seemed cheap and thin. It looked like the Silver Griffins were treating their members very well.

His mercenary company was one of the top five in the city. The kind that merchants flocked to and nobles hired for protection.

Ralph did not scowl at first when he saw who he had bumped into.

But once his gaze dropped to the insignia around Teclos's neck, his expression hardened.

"Hah! Really now?" Ralph said. "You refused my offers to join my company, and instead joined a criminal one? You chose to work for that pig Zamas?"

It was one thing that Ralph was better off than him, but another thing entirely that he nagged at him for choosing differently, as well as throwing shade at his company.

"Ah... I see. All those gold coins and silver rotted your brains out. I was in no way stable enough to choose anything back then, and don't insult my company. They may be a rowdy bunch, but at least they've got my back."

Ralph's mouth tightened.

Teclos felt his own expression harden in response.

For a brief moment, Teclos got ready to counter him, anticipating a fight. But Ralph only dusted himself off and turned around.

He did not say another word and only shook his head as he walked away.

Teclos just watched him go, feeling a little conflicted.

Then he also left that spot and walked the final stretch toward the pub.

The moment he entered, Falcon came looking for him.

Teclos knew something was different the moment he dragged him away to the back door.

"Zamas wants to see you upstairs."

"Now?"

Falcon just nodded, and Teclos followed him quietly.

Derrick was already sitting on the sofa beside Zamas, drinking ale.

"Do you really have to drink already?" Zamas asked, irritated.

"I'm thirsty, boss! Besides, it's just one cup..."

As they walked closer, Teclos saw a new face standing by the window, a man armed to the teeth. He had rows of throwing knives on belts strapped to his body, a long scar across his face, and red eyes. He looked intimidating, even though he was only about 1.70 meters tall and bald.

"Oh! Kiddo, finally. Sit, you two. We have business to discuss. Oh, and this lovely fella is Zaxx. He's going to be part of the job."

After they sat down and were offered refreshments by Kira, which they declined, Zamas started explaining what had happened.

"I was crossed and insulted yesterday at a party."

Teclos felt the air suddenly grow heavier.

"By who?" Falcon asked.

"A bastard," Zamas said. "He is a lower noble residing in Lupos for the season. His name is Hadrian Morholt, and he's a baron."

Teclos frowned.

A noble?

That one word changed the shape of the entire conversation.

Zamas continued, "The baron thought coin and bloodline meant he could insult me openly and walk away alive."

Zaxx snorted.

He continued. "Now, you know me... I am patient and benevolent, and I let it slide. But it just so happened that later that same day, we crossed paths again in a gambling den."

"What happened?" Teclos asked.

"Well, let's just say I want him dead now." He seemed to be embarrassed by something as he dodged the question.

Derrick then leaned back on the sofa and voiced his concerns. "A noble is not a debtor hiding behind a broken and moldy house. Even a lower noble is dangerous."

"I know."

Derrick's eyes became emotionless as he heard the answer. It seemed that Zamas would not back away from this one.

Zaxx and Falcon were the same as Derrick, already preparing themselves mentally. Only Teclos worried that this might be too much of a risk.

"Get it done..." Zamas ordered them for a final time.

Derrick stood up first, nodding to the boss, and left. The others followed shortly after, with Teclos right behind them.

They moved to the weapons room, where Derrick pulled out a map from a stash they had. It showed a detailed layout of the mansion the baron lived in.

"Alright, since the boss is dead set on killing a noble, listen carefully," Derrick said. "We have no room for error here. A baron can stir a lot of trouble should he live to tell the tale. We have to do a clean job on this one so it doesn't come back to bite us."

Derrick pointed at the gate.

"The first problem is the gate. Falcon and Teclos will infiltrate the mansion silently. Once the gate is opened, Zaxx and I will charge in." He scratched his beard for a second. "Now, the second problem. Even a baron usually has one or two knights. These guys could make or break our mission. Since me and Zaxx will charge in, we will draw their attention, giving you two time to kill the baron... You have to do it quickly and return to us. Even we won't stand a chance against knights."

Later, he pointed out where the easiest breach was and gave each of them additional gear from the stash, like cloaks, smoke bombs, and so on.

Once they were all set, Zaxx grinned. "Finally, some action."

"No," Derrick said sharply. "We won't be repeating last time's fiasco, where you blew up the whole caravan... You're going to stick with me so I can keep an eye on you."

"Haha, come on, man, that was just an accident."

He looked him dead in the eyes and just said, "This is a stealth job."

Zaxx looked offended, like a kid who had been banned from using his toys.

Derrick ignored him and continued.

"Alright, we'll infiltrate at night and rendezvous here at the pub. Get some rest now so you'll be wide awake when night falls."

They nodded, and each headed home, except for Derrick, who ordered another cup of ale from Marek at the counter.

Zaxx looked personally insulted again and instantly joined him, shouting that Derrick couldn't have all the fun to himself.

Teclos just shook his head and, for the first time in a long time, went home to meditate.

He had stagnated since... the incident... he thought, so it was time to pick himself up again with training.

Once home, he took the lotus position beside his bed and circulated his mana through his body.

Since his room was nice and dark, the mana easily responded to his call.

But he found something strange.

Huh... my mana is awfully strong? I don't remember it being that potent.

He checked his mana veins, his core, his heart, and his mind, and found something shocking.

His mind had gone up by one circle. His mana had not duplicated or anything like that, but his fine control over it had improved vastly.

Not only that, his senses were sharpened, and as he looked through the shadows and darkness once again, the radius he could perceive was enormous compared to before.

He could almost see the pub, and he could feel the guards on top of the wall.

The damage from the black veins seemed to have healed, and in turn, it also made the walls of his veins thicker—stronger.

He was stunned, and he explored the boundary of his capabilities now.

And he lost track of time. When Saldia came home in the evening, she noticed that he was in his room, meditating.

She suddenly shed tears of joy, thinking that her son had finally gotten his act together again and returned to his old ways... but then a much more foul thought entered her mind, and she suddenly grew worried.

"Teclos...?" she interrupted him.

"Huh?... What time is it? Mom! I had a breakthrough!" He ran to her and hugged her, which shocked her to her core. "I have a third circle in my mind, and it almost feels like I could reach the fourth one as well."

She hugged him back suddenly. Her worry was unfounded, it seemed, as she cried happy tears and congratulated him.

They had a merry chat in the kitchen.

—

As midnight struck, Teclos jumped out of the window and into the night, running toward the pub.

It was time for the mission.

Chapter 84 - 83 - Silent Entry

Teclos stepped through the door of the pub and saw three men armed to the teeth. Plated tunics, shin guards, and weapons strapped to their backs or waists.

All three of them gave him a stare that made his skin crawl.

"Oh, it's you, kid," Derrick said absentmindedly while strapping on his utility belt. Then he looked Teclos over more thoroughly and stepped toward him, shaking his head.

"Take that off, kid."

He grabbed the company insignia and pulled it off him, then handed it back.

It made Teclos embarrassed by how stupid he had been for wearing that during a silent mission like this one.

Zaxx spoke up. "Just relax, my friend. No need to be so nervous. The plan may be simple, but we are all capable people here—"

He wanted to continue, but Derrick slapped the back of his head.

"Don't talk to him about capable people. You lunatic should be the last one to say such things."

Zaxx pulled out two of his knives in anger, but immediately retreated upon seeing Derrick's face. If he had even insinuated stabbing him, Derrick would have broken his arms.

In a frontal clash, there was no one above Derrick in this mercenary company, and all three of them knew that.

"Phew... alright already," Zaxx said, waving his hands in a placating motion, like one would with an angry beast.

Teclos noticed that everyone was on edge. Even Falcon gave off a bloodlust unlike anything Teclos had ever sensed from him before.

Well, except for Zaxx, maybe.

He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Let's go already. We are wasting precious time," Falcon said.

"Sure. It should take us about half an hour to get there," Derrick nodded.

As they walked toward the gate to enter the city, they split into teams of two, since four armed men were far more suspicious than two. They would rendezvous at an inn inside.

Teclos walked in with Falcon first and instantly got worried about how the other two would get in... they were not exactly subtle or harmless people.

"Don't worry about them," Falcon reassured him. "They will take care of it somehow."

They waited at the inn for more than half an hour after that.

"Are you sure they are coming?"

Falcon grew nervous for a second and seemed ready to go back to the gate to check.

But then they heard loud yelling.

It was unmistakably Derrick.

"Alright, if you want to be such a fucking hothead today, I'll spar with you right after this is done and beat the shit out of you!"

"Calm down, man. I said I'm sorry already..." Zaxx said as they turned the corner and saw Teclos and Falcon. "Oh, look, there they are..." he tried to deflect.

"No. This is happening."

It was a promise set in stone, and Zaxx was sweating bullets now.

"What happened?" Teclos asked.

"This knucklehead almost messed up the whole job by arguing with the guard..."

"He wanted to take my knives! And nobody takes my knives away from me!" Zaxx growled.

They all just shook their heads.

"I need a cup of ale after this shit..." Derrick muttered, rubbing his face violently.

"Let's just concentrate on the job and go," Falcon added.

They quickly arrived at the baron's mansion and kept low behind the stone fence surrounding it.

Derrick wanted to go over the plan again, but Teclos quickly shushed him as he sensed a guard on the other side of the wall.

"What ki—"

"Shhh!"

He signaled with his hands that a guard was on the other side.

After a second of concentrating, Falcon looked at Derrick and nodded.

"Ohhh... okay."

They waited a few more moments until Teclos gave the signal after saying it was clear.

"Alright," Derrick started. "You two infiltrate whenever you're ready and give us the signal. Try not to kill unnecessarily, unless they see your face. If that happens, don't hesitate. Kill them. Remember, if we get exposed, it's over for us. The whole city will be after us."

"Even the servants?" Teclos asked.

"Everyone, kid..." Derrick did not sugarcoat his words, and Teclos's stomach twisted uncomfortably.

He prayed no one would discover them.

Derrick and Zaxx both waited across the street.

Falcon and Teclos scouted the perimeter, and for once, Teclos took charge. One flank had three dogs near the servants' quarters, so that was a no-go. Another had a dangerous presence nearby, disguised as an ordinary old man. He seemed to be one of the knights, and his shadow felt far stronger than even Derrick's. The remaining choices were the front entrance, heavily enchanted and guarded, or a flank with a guardhouse nearby.

"Guardhouse?" Falcon asked.

"I'm actually leaning toward the dogs..."

"How? They will instantly sniff you out," Falcon asked, slightly shocked.

"I could get past them, I'm fairly certain... I tricked wolves before, so what can a few dogs do?"

"Haha, I like how confident you are, but no. Guardhouse is safer. We have no time for a hero right now."

Teclos nodded, disappointed that he did not get the chance to see what result his new control over the darkness could yield. The dogs would have provided a similar opponent as the wolves had back in Kolma.

They went to the wall near the guardhouse and silently jumped onto it. What surprised Falcon the most was that Teclos was even quieter than him. Not only that, but his presence suddenly dimmed until it disappeared completely.

Falcon opened his eyes wide and looked beside him, where Teclos stood. A dark sheen of pitch-black mana wrapped around him like a thin veil of night.

Even when Falcon looked directly at him, Teclos appeared blurry, blending perfectly into the darkness.

"Hah! Damn, this is better than I thought!"

Falcon suddenly jumped high into the air and disappeared.

A guard from the guardhouse looked in their direction. "Huh?"

He walked closer and closer, but did not see anything besides the wall.

Then, after looking around for a few moments longer, even glancing directly at Teclos, he turned around and returned to the station.

Just then, Falcon landed back on top of the wall, slapped Teclos on the back of the head, and whispered, "Are you out of your mind?!"

Teclos apologized to Falcon, but the fact that the guard had looked directly at him and still failed to notice him was cause for celebration.

At least in his mind.

Falcon clearly disagreed.

"Celebrate later," he whispered. "Move."

They dropped from the wall onto the inner side of the estate, landing behind a row of trimmed bushes. Falcon's feet touched the ground without a sound, but Teclos was even quieter.

Six segmented limbs of darkness unfolded from his back like strands of living ink, bending into spider-like legs beneath him. His real feet never touched the ground. Instead, the dark limbs carried him forward, placing each step with unnatural precision, silent as a shadow crawling across stone.

Falcon shuddered at the sight, as Teclos looked like half a monster, but he could not deny the usefulness of his powers.

The garden beyond the wall was too clean. There were hardly any trees to hide behind, and the grass was fully trimmed. Lanterns hung from iron posts along the paths, casting golden circles across the grass. Servants moved near the side entrance, carrying trays and empty bottles, while two guards patrolled near the fountain with bored expressions.

Teclos closed his eyes for a heartbeat, and his senses spread outward.

"Follow me," he whispered.

Falcon followed his gaze and looked confused as Teclos pointed toward the guardhouse.

They moved along the garden wall, never crossing the lanternlight directly. When two patrolling guards turned down the path ahead of them, Teclos raised one hand slightly and broke a stick from one of the trees remotely, somewhere behind those guards, drawing both men's attention.

Teclos and Falcon slipped behind a stone statue.

One guard paused.

"Did you hear that?"

The other lifted his lantern and turned.

For a second, the light swept dangerously close.

Teclos held his breath as his six arms of darkness unfolded from his back and lifted him silently off the ground, pressing him flat against the shadowed side of the statue and hiding him completely. Falcon, on the other hand, simply flew up again.

The guards stared for a moment longer.

Then one of them scoffed.

"Damn wind."

They moved on.

Only when their footsteps faded did Falcon drop back down beside Teclos.

"That's a useful power," he whispered.

Teclos almost smiled.

Then his expression stiffened again.

Another presence had entered the edge of his senses.

A smaller and weaker shadow, moving from the direction of the servants' quarters toward the guardhouse.

Teclos raised one hand.

Falcon stopped.

A maid.

And she was carrying something.

A moment later, she came into view beneath the lanternlight, young and tired-looking, her hair tied back messily beneath a plain cloth cap. On the tray were two clay cups, a small pitcher, and a covered plate.

Refreshments for the guards.

Teclos cursed inwardly.

Of course she had to do it now of all times.

She was walking directly toward them, and Falcon's hand moved toward his blade.

Teclos caught his wrist before he could draw it.

Falcon looked at him.

Teclos shook his head once, trying to stop him.

The maid was not a threat. And if she screamed, the whole estate would go on high alert. Either way, they could try to avoid her first.

Falcon's eyes narrowed, clearly disagreeing, but he did not argue.

Instead, he lifted two fingers, gathered a thin thread of wind at their tips, and flicked it toward the bushes.

The leaves rustled sharply.

The maid stopped instantly, her shoulders tightening.

"Hello?"

No answer came.

She looked toward the sound, then back toward the guardhouse. She hurried along with a scared expression.

The guard in the station stirred. "What is it?"

"I thought I heard something," the maid said.

The guard sighed, annoyed. "Probably rats."

"In the garden?"

"It's a garden, for gods' sake. Just bring the wine."

The maid hesitated for another second. "Can one of you accompany me back to my quarters?" she asked.

One of the guards rolled his eyes and nodded. "Don't you dare drink all the wine while I'm gone!" he yelled.

Teclos held his breath.

But just as they wanted to continue, a dog barked from somewhere near the servants' quarters.

Once.

Then again.

Teclos's blood ran cold.

One of the dogs had been brought out.

Holy shit! Can my luck get any worse?

A servant boy stepped into view, half-dragged by a lean hound on a leash. The animal's nose was low to the ground, sniffing eagerly as it pulled toward the path. Toward the same area Teclos and Falcon had crossed moments ago.

Falcon's expression darkened.

The maid turned toward the boy. "Why are you walking him now?"

"He wouldn't stop whining," the boy complained. "Cook said if he pissed inside again, I'd be cleaning it."

The hound sniffed the air.

Then its head snapped toward them.

Teclos felt every muscle in his body stiffen as the dog growled softly.

Falcon used a faint current that blew through the garden, barely strong enough to stir leaves. The current redirected their scents so that they came from the bushes on the dog's right.

The hound's ears perked.

Its nose followed the false trail.

Then it lunged toward the opposite hedge, barking loudly.

The servant boy yelped as he was dragged after it. "Hey! Stop! Damn beast!"

The maid flinched so hard that one of the cups nearly tipped from her tray.

The dog kept barking at the hedge as the boy struggled to pull it back.

The maid suddenly hurried forward, clearly afraid as well, and pulled the guard by his hand.

"Oi! Stop pulling..."

Teclos waited until they passed and until the boy finally dragged the dog away, still muttering curses beneath his breath. The hound looked back once, nose twitching, but Falcon sent another thin breath of wind across the path, and the animal lost the trail again.

The remaining guard had taken the pitcher and was drinking straight from it, his attention fully on the wine now. Better yet, he had set his spear against the wall beside him.

A small opening.

Possibly the only one they would get.

Teclos let the darkness gather behind the guard.

Multiple tendrils curled around the guard suddenly, blocking his mouth as well as stopping him from moving.

Falcon instantly appeared behind him, and with a sharp strike to the temple, the guard dropped instantly.

Together, they lowered the body down slowly.

Then Teclos grabbed the lever and pulled.

The gates opened.

Chapter 85 - 84 - Morholt's Estate

Once the gate opened, Zaxx and Derrick rushed in.

Teclos and Falcon, meanwhile, slipped back into the shadows. Teclos summoned a black curtain over them as they hurried away from the gate, trying not to be seen while they waited for the right opportunity to assassinate the baron.

"Oi! Why the hell are you opening the gate?!" one guard in the station shouted.

He stepped closer to see what was going on, since his friend wasn't answering him.

In the next second, a massive golem smashed through.

Derrick hadn't waited for the gate to fully open. He simply stormed in.

The gate flew into the servants' quarters, destroying half the wall of the building and injuring a few servants in the process.

The guard's eyes widened, and he sounded the alarm, but in the very next second, a fireball erupted in his face and exploded.

He died in a heartbeat.

"Hell yeah! Right on target! Hahaha!" Zaxx smiled like a madman and started slinging fireballs left and right at anything that moved.

Proper chaos began.

The guards scrambled out of the station to defend against the ambush. There were five guards remaining who could still fight. One had been knocked out, and the other was already dead.

Derrick smashed into the guard station and tried to trample one of the remaining guards beneath his foot, but the guard managed to dodge at the last second by summoning a jet stream beneath his feet, sliding away and avoiding being ground into mush.

Sadly, his little victory was short-lived.

In the next second, Derrick simply picked up a boulder from the ground and threw it directly at his head.

The guard screamed for only a moment before impact.

Then his scream was brutally cut off.

Zaxx, in the meantime, took on two guards simultaneously by propelling himself forward, fire blazing from his feet. He appeared between them in a heartbeat and spun around with two maces in hand, trying to knock their heads clean off their bodies.

One summoned an earth wall, while the other ducked.

Both came out unscathed, but they were still on the back foot, as Zaxx seemed to have the upper hand in close combat. His movements were erratic, his strikes quick, and with flame propulsion behind each swing, they landed even heavier.

He was a proper little demon.

Teclos watched it all happen with his new senses, and he had to admit they were more brutal than necessary. But then again, once the knights came into the picture, both of them could very well die if Teclos and Falcon weren't quick enough in killing the baron.

Of course, this commotion managed exactly what they intended: a diversion, with both knights rushing in to kill the attackers.

Although locating the baron was proving to be an issue.

"They have the house warded off... I can't see anything inside," Teclos said.

"Alright, let's break through the balcony where his bedchamber is and work from there."

Teclos nodded, and they were off.

—

Zaxx was slowly pressuring both guards, pushing one guard back with a wall of fire and swinging his mace at the other.

The wind user flew backward and avoided being burned, then sent out two wind blades after Zaxx in rapid succession. The earth user raised a wall in front of him again and deflected his mace upward, then spikes erupted from the wall.

Zaxx casually stepped forward and sideways. The wind blades missed by a hair's width, then he used one of the spikes as leverage to somersault over the wall, throwing his mace into the guard's face.

The mace was scorching hot and melted half his face off. The guard screamed in agony and was momentarily out of the fight.

Using that opportunity, Zaxx dodged two more wind blades and blasted a massive jet of fire from his feet. With a sonic boom, he appeared before the wind-attributed guard, surprising him. He swung his remaining mace at his face, but the guard was agile enough to dodge the strike and counterattack with another wind blade.

Zaxx spun midair with the help of his flames and easily dodged it again. Then he latched onto the guard.

"Ugh! Let go, you bastard!"

Zaxx just smiled and opened his mouth, breathing flames directly into the guard's face.

"Arrggghhhh!"

The scream continued for one more second before his voice was forever extinguished.

Just then, a massive boulder flew toward him, threatening to squash him like a fly, but he tossed the dead guard aside and propelled himself out of the way. Then he built up a massive fireball and threw it at the guard, who in turn answered with another rock wall, blocking his fire completely.

But as he did that, he lost sight of Zaxx, and when he looked up, a smiling Zaxx was waving his hand at him as if he were greeting him.

The guard tried to shield himself, but it was already too late, and a stream of fire engulfed him completely.

"Phew... this was fun after a long time."

He wiped the sweat off his forehead and looked in Derrick's direction, only to see him turning the last guard into paste between his golem hands. He waved at him, and Derrick just shook his head.

In the next moment, he pointed at the entrance of the mansion, where a knight was walking toward them.

Clad from head to toe in silver armor, he wore a helmet crowned with a crimson horsehair plume. A T-shaped visor concealed most of his face, leaving only his icy blue eyes visible through the narrow slit.

The armor had runes carved into it, much like the blue, menacing-looking bastard sword hanging at his waist.

"Well shit..." Zaxx grimaced.

The first knight already promised to be a big headache.

Derrick picked up two massive boulders and threw them at him, not waiting for an introduction from the knight.

As the knight took his next step, he moved in an unnatural way, sliding out of one boulder's path with ease.

Then he unsheathed his sword and, in a single motion, sliced the other cleanly in half.

Thick white ice bloomed where he had cut it, and before the two pieces even fell to the ground, they shattered harmlessly in the air.

Zaxx threw a fireball at him, but it was blocked by a dome of ice the knight summoned in front of himself.

As they saw that the knight was easily blocking or dodging their attacks, they resorted to teamwork. Derrick started using pitfalls and earth spikes, while Zaxx took to the sky and bombarded the knight with fireballs and streams of fire. They kept their distance after seeing that sword cut through the boulder.

Finally, as they worked together, the knight seemed to have trouble dodging and defending against every attack. He sent out counters in the form of ice blades and ice needles while skating along the ground unnaturally, making himself harder to hit.

But the counters were dodged or blocked by them, and even with his unnatural way of moving, he still wasn't the fastest, so he had to take some of the hits with his armor.

They thought they could finally start grinding the knight down slowly with that method, but then an old man appeared behind him, and the tide of battle turned against them.

He was dressed like a butler, wearing a sharp black tuxedo that made him look strangely out of place on the battlefield. Gray-white hair framed his aged face, and a neatly trimmed beard gave him an air of quiet sophistication.

If not for the longsword in his hand, he might have looked like a servant waiting to pour tea.

He looked at Zaxx, making his blood run cold. As his foot sank into the ground slightly, he suddenly appeared before Zaxx's face with an extended hand coated in magma, ready to melt his face off like the old man had seen him do to one of the guards.

Zaxx reacted quickly by dropping back to the ground, then rolled sideways as a flood of magma dropped right behind him and hardened a second later.

Meanwhile, Derrick had to fend the ice knight off. If he hadn't been in full gear, Derrick might have succeeded in holding him at bay, but that sword and armor were a big problem.

The armor could take all the punishment he dished out, while the sword could cut through anything he threw at him.

They fought in a retreating motion, trying to stay alive against them until Teclos and Falcon came to help.

—

Teclos and Falcon arrived on the balcony at the back of the house while Derrick and Zaxx were still killing the guards.

They remained silent, but it seemed the bedchamber was empty, as there was no light or noise coming from it. They were cautious just in case the baron was hiding and chose the more silent option.

Teclos summoned his pocket dimension and pulled out the gray liquid in a vial. The rune dissolver. He poured it onto the door handle, and it melted through the runes carved into the door and handle pretty quickly.

Once inside, Teclos could feel everything again through his shadow sense, and he knew exactly where the baron was.

In an emergency room in the cellar.

The problem was that another knight seemed to be guarding him. He was definitely weaker than the old man, but not by that much.

"Shit, there's a knight down in the cellar where the baron is..."

Falcon smirked and shook his head in disbelief. "Hah... you amaze me every time with that ability. Can we sneak in, or do we have to fight him frontally?"

"There is only one door that leads to the baron, so a frontal clash..."

"Hmmm. I'll lure him while you hide your presence and wait for the perfect moment to strike," Falcon proposed.

"Alright," Teclos nodded. "But holy hell, three knights... this baron has quite a lot of money."

"Just focus on the job," Falcon said as they moved through the corridors.

Now that there was a huge commotion outside, the halls were empty, as the people seemed to be hiding, making it perfect for Teclos and Falcon to rush along.

Once they were in front of the steel door with the baron behind it, they stopped.

Falcon signaled for Teclos to move to the shadows and hide while he knocked on the door.

"Come out, you bastard. I know you are in here."

He slashed the door with wind, but nothing happened. It seemed this would take a while to break through. They tried to think of a way in, as time could be running out for Derrick and Zaxx.

Then Teclos beckoned Falcon out into the corridor.

"What?" Falcon whispered.

"Let's break in through a wall. I know where the baron sits, so we can take advantage of this situation."

The plan seemed plausible, so they went back into the corridor and into an adjacent room.

Falcon gathered wind into his blade and condensed it as much as possible. It took him around thirty seconds of gathering his mana, but when he was ready, he sliced through the wall with ease.

The baron was directly in the path of the wind blades, but a pendant around his neck instantly summoned a dome of solid blue light, protecting him for a brief moment.

He screamed like a girl when the ambush happened, but even if he was an incompetent coward, his knight was not.

The man drew his blade, and fire blazed from its edge. The strike would have cut Falcon almost in half if he had not been yanked back by the collar by a dark hand.

Teclos got a nod of thanks from Falcon, but the knight charged him again immediately. Now, Falcon was a skilled fighter, but against this knight, he was like a kid going up against their parents in close quarters combat.

The knight had a similar fighting style to Zaxx.

Teclos, meanwhile, just waited, cloaked in a dark corner of the corridor, waiting for the perfect chance to end the knight's life or at least make Falcon do it.

The odds of them coming out of this job unscathed were slim.

And the night promised to be long.

Chapter 86 - 85 - A Demon in the Dark

An explosion rattled the mansion.

The blast tore through the corridor and blew a hole through the wall, sending stone fragments, dust, and splinters of wood scattering across the floor.

From the smoke, Falcon emerged.

His coat was torn in several places, and a shallow cut ran across his cheek from the flying debris, but he was still standing. Barely a second later, his eyes sharpened, and he dropped low.

A wide horizontal slash tore out of the smoke above him.

Fire followed the blade in a blazing arc, melting the stone wall behind Falcon and carving a deep, searing line through it. Heat washed over him, scorching a few strands of his hair as he slipped beneath the attack by less than an inch.

He escaped unscathed.

Mostly.

Falcon twisted his body from the low position and countered immediately, swinging his arm upward.

A compressed wind slash flew from his hand, sharp and almost invisible as it cut through the smoke. He timed it perfectly. The moment the knight stepped out of the dust, the attack was already in front of his face.

But the knight did not dodge.

He swung a blazing fist.

Flame and wind collided between them, and Falcon's slash burst apart in a small explosion that scattered the remaining smoke around the corridor.

The knight walked through it calmly, sword in one hand, fire crawling along the edge like something alive.

Falcon clicked his tongue.

In the next moment, the knight propelled himself forward, appearing in front of Falcon with a downward slash ready to cut him in half.

Falcon shifted his weight aside and released a vortex from his hands. The burst pushed him back while deflecting the knight's attack, letting the burning blade pass only a few centimeters beside his shoulder.

The knight rushed after him and feinted with his sword, telegraphing that he was aiming to take Falcon's head.

But the blade was only a distraction.

As soon as Falcon reacted to the slash, a blazing kick slammed into his ribs instead. It scorched through the side of his armor and sent him flying into the wall. Stone cracked from the impact, and for a brief second, Falcon's vision blurred.

Not giving him any time to recover, the knight threw a fireball at him a moment later.

Wind burst from Falcon's hand at the last second, but it was not aimed at the fireball.

It was aimed at the ground.

The blast lifted him off the floor just before the fireball struck, but since he had done it in a rush, he did not have the luxury of control. He slammed back-first into the ceiling, and the impact knocked the air out of his lungs.

Meanwhile, the fireball detonated against the wall and blasted a massive crater into it.

Falcon barely blocked the debris with a sphere of wind around himself.

But as he was falling, the knight was already there.

A blazing side kick followed, connecting with Falcon's forearms as he blocked at the last second. His vambraces melted on impact, and he was sent flying again.

He summoned a wind cushion behind his back just before he slammed into the wall, saving himself from a few broken ribs.

Falcon barely avoided a heavy injury from the onslaught, but he was still battered and bruised from all those exchanges. What was worse, he had almost no room to counter. The fight had become completely one-sided, with him being pummeled again and again.

The baron watched from the doorway, cheering for the knight while laughing at Falcon's helpless state.

"Hah! Serves you right, you bitch! Get him, Sir Tris!"

Falcon's head snapped toward him.

Not because of the insult.

Because that idiot had just presented the perfect target.

Sir Tris also noticed it and panicked, stepping between them just in time to block a powerful wind slash. The force still knocked him back a step.

"Lord Morholt, please step back. It is dangerous here."

Teclos watched him from the shadows.

And by the gods, Baron Morholt was exactly what he had imagined a spoiled noble to look like. Triple chin, swollen belly showing beneath clothes far too expensive for a man with such a rotten face, and an attitude that made Teclos want to carve the arrogance out of him.

But right now, he was also grateful.

Because this idiot had shoved himself into the open and handed them a golden opportunity.

Falcon now fully focused on killing the baron, forcing Sir Tris onto the defensive for the first time.

The noble, however, seemed to have lost his mind and refused to return to the room.

Teclos wondered if the baron had brain damage, or if he truly believed his knight could handle Falcon just as easily as before, even while protecting him at the same time.

In this situation, of all situations, Baron Morholt actually started arguing with his own knight.

His attitude was rotten beyond belief.

He insulted Sir Tris, demanding that he finish faster so he could go back to bed.

'I guess being fed with a golden spoon and spoiled your whole life really does turn you into... that,' Teclos thought, shaking his head.

The opportunity to strike came quickly.

"For gods' sake, Sir Tris, end him already," Morholt said, standing in the doorway.

Tris looked back for only a fraction of a second, visibly annoyed that his lord still refused to listen while he was literally being targeted by an assassin.

Falcon did not miss that fraction of a second.

From a crouched position, he spun with one leg extended. A strong gust of wind swept Tris's legs off balance, and Falcon jumped into the air, preparing a wind slash with his sword while pulling the baron toward him with a vacuum from his other hand.

The baron screamed, suddenly remembering that his life was, in fact, in danger.

Tris, on the other hand, steadied himself and threw a small, weak fireball at Falcon, intending to interrupt him.

But like snakes coiling around their prey, shadow hands rose from the ground the moment he completed the throwing motion.

They wrapped around Sir Tris, and a scraping sound filled the corridor.

The hands had barbs on them.

A new addition born from Teclos's better control.

They locked him firmly in place.

Of course, Tris only needed to burn them off, and he did. It took him just a second.

But that second was fatal.

A pitch-black, blurry figure suddenly appeared before his eyes and drove a blade up beneath his helmet, through his jaw and into his skull.

Ending his life.

Morholt truly panicked then and tried to scramble away, but Falcon did not let him.

After dodging the small fireball, he hung from the ceiling and completed the vacuum pull.

The baron was going nowhere.

A heartbeat later, Falcon pushed off the ceiling with incredible speed, flying toward the baron like a hawk. He landed to Morholt's left, blade extended.

The wind pressure burst from his landing, clearing the heat, dust, and debris around them.

Then, after Falcon stood up, the baron's head slid down.

And Morholt collapsed.

Dead.

"All right, let's go help Derrick and Zaxx now. Take the head with you..." Falcon said.

There was no answer.

He looked back and saw Teclos frozen in place, standing over the knight's corpse, his body trembling slightly.

"Kid?"

"...Yeah. J-just give me a moment."

"Hah. This your first kill? With movements like that, I thought you'd already be used to this."

"My movements?" Teclos asked, clinging to the conversation so the sensation in his hand would fade from his mind.

Technically, it was not his first kill.

He had killed plenty.

But those had been beasts and monsters, not people. And this knight had only been doing his duty. Granted, he had a shit boss, but he did not really deserve death for that.

Falcon watched him for a moment.

"...All right, listen. I'm going to help the others finish off the knights. Do remember that if the city guards storm in, we'll be hanged for killing a noble, so don't take too long."

And with that, he disappeared, rushing off to help them.

Now Teclos had no choice but to face his demons alone.

Without company.

His thoughts drifted to how he had preached to Saldia that they were not bad people. How he had justified his actions before by telling himself he only beat down people who owed money, people who had clearly borrowed more than they should have and wasted it on drugs anyway.

And all of that had led him here.

To taking an innocent life.

What if Sir Tris had family?

What if Teclos had just robbed a little boy or girl of their father?

And for what?

Yes, the noble was clearly a rotten dumbass who was rude and arrogant.

But this had only happened because Zamas's pride was hurt.

What would Talmir think of him if he knew what Teclos had done for money and pride?

He was certain his father would have been disappointed.

"Shit... I... I'm sorry. May you rest in peace in a better place than this hell."

He bowed his head, took off the knight's helmet, and closed his eyes.

Then he walked toward the baron's severed head and stored it in his pocket dimension before rushing off to help Falcon, Derrick, and Zaxx.

He was certain he had just lost another part of himself, just like he had lost one in that dreadful tunnel.

But his will to live overpowered everything else.

He was even more afraid of losing his one and only family. If anyone found out he was behind the assassination, Saldia could very well end up hanging too.

—

Loud explosions rippled through the night, and both Derrick and Zaxx were at their limit.

Bloody and battered, they were being pushed around like dolls ready to break at any moment.

Derrick was holding the ice knight back, but only barely.

His golem arms crashed down again and again, breaking the courtyard stones beneath each strike, yet the knight slid between them with unnatural grace. Ice formed beneath his boots like a silver thread, carrying him around Derrick's blows while his blue sword carved through stone fists as if they were wet clay.

Derrick grunted as one slash tore through the golem and across his shoulder guard, with frost rapidly spreading over the cut.

On the other side, Zaxx was doing even worse.

The old butler stepped through his flames without panic, magma crawling over his blade and hands like liquid iron. Zaxx blasted himself backward with fire from his feet, spun in midair, and hurled three knives wrapped in flame.

The old man cut two down.

And just dodged the third.

A wave of magma erupted and blanketed over Zaxx, swallowing him and the ground where he intended to land. He cursed and launched himself sideways explosively, but the butler predicted this, and a molten spear crashed into him, burning his torso badly as well as fully destroying the plated tunic.

Then, finally, relief came when the two knights were certain of victory and wind howled from behind the ice knight.

Falcon appeared behind him. His blade flashed once, wrapped in layers of compressed air, and cut through the knight's shoulder plate.

"Urgghh!"

The knight twisted and disengaged just in time to avoid losing his arm completely. But it was still rendered useless now.

Derrick did not waste the opening.

He slammed both fists together, throwing the knight into a wall with a loud boom.

Then Falcon rushed to help Zaxx a heartbeat later, sending a crescent of wind into the old butler's second magma wave, blocking it just enough so Zaxx could escape.

Zaxx grinned through bloody teeth.

"Took you long enough, my friend!"

Falcon did not look at him.

"Just concentrate on the fight."

The old man stepped out from the steam and dust that the clash had made, calm as ever.

The ice knight raised his sword with one hand.

The fight had become somewhat even now.

With Zaxx's uncanny battle sense and Falcon's support, they managed to hold the butler back. Their counters were brushed aside as easily as breathing, but his attacks were no longer landing either, so he began looking for a lapse in focus.

"Pest..." he said, eyes shifting to Falcon as he realized he had come from the mansion after ambushing his ally. "What happened to the lord?"

Falcon gave him no reaction.

"An assassin, huh..." the old man deduced. "Those two knuckleheads you call friends are different from a coward like you... so not an assassin organization." He probed.

"Stop yapping, old man, and fight! Hahaha, it's just getting fun now!" Zaxx interrupted.

"Barking dogs should stay silent," the butler said.

Then he released another massive wave of magma toward them.

The whole mansion had become a battlefield. Multiple molten hands rose from the ground and walls, trying to catch Falcon, while the old man dashed after Zaxx and engaged him in close-quarters combat.

Derrick, on the other hand, had reached a stalemate against the ice knight. Both were injured, and both had shifted into long-range combat rather than trying to slash or smash each other directly.

Derrick even abandoned his golem shell for extra speed.

—

Zaxx was a genius when it came to close-quarters fights, but the old man was a monster.

Anything he did got blocked. And every time he tried to block, he got thrown around. Truly, this old man was far above him in battle prowess and experience.

It almost made him feel dejected.

And while he was thinking those useless thoughts—

A sword slammed into his mace and pushed it aside. The blade lodged itself into his shoulder, as he had not braced for the strike well enough.

Zaxx grimaced and retaliated with his other hand, trying to force the old man away and gain some distance.

But the old man knocked the mace out of his hand, then drove the wind out of his lungs with a rapid kick followed by a knee to the stomach.

"Zaxx!" Falcon screamed, releasing three wind blades toward the butler to buy time.

But they were easily blocked by a wall of magma.

The old man grabbed Zaxx by the throat with a molten hand, burning his neck severely. Then he poised his sword to pierce his skull with a final attack.

Through the grimace and the pain, Zaxx managed to say one word.

"Shit..."

Then the sword came rushing forward.

But in the next second, another blade drove through the old man's back and out through his chest, coated in pitch-black mana.

The man's eyes widened in shock.

So did Zaxx's.

So did Falcon's.

Blood spilled from the old man's mouth before he slowly turned his head and saw something that looked less like a boy and more like a demon.

Teclos stood behind him, shrouded in black mana, his presence almost erased from existence. His eyes were pitch black, his face stone cold.

When the old man tried to move, Teclos simply pulled the sword from his chest and, in one quick and smooth motion, swung it again and decapitated him.

The old man's head dropped to the floor.

Right at Zaxx's feet.

Chapter 87 - 86 - No Loose Ends

There had been no sign.

Both Falcon and Zaxx had been fully concentrated on the fight, keeping the old man in their sight at all times.

But one second, he was preparing to finish Zaxx off, and the next, his heart had been pierced.

It left them both stunned as Teclos casually beheaded him like some demon's spawn, ruthless and sinister, shrouded in that dark mana of his.

Zaxx fell on his ass when he saw him.

Those pitch-black, emotionless eyes...

They scared even Zaxx, and he was known as a lunatic within their organization.

Then, just as he had appeared, Teclos disappeared again, fully veiled in darkness and moving without making a sound.

Falcon landed near Zaxx and quickly gave him a potion, then turned toward Derrick and the ice knight.

"What the hell kind of kid did Derrick bring to us?" Zaxx asked nervously.

"Just be glad he's on our side..."

—

As Derrick slammed his hands together, two massive plates of rock lifted themselves around the ice knight and slammed shut, intending to splatter him like a fly. But the knight moved back in time, avoiding it completely, then prepared multiple ice needles that hovered above his head.

Just as he was about to release them, his vision split in half.

The upper part of his sight started sliding to the left.

For a brief moment, he was confused.

When the pain finally registered, it was already too late.

The knight collapsed, his helmet and skull cut cleanly in half.

"Woah... holy shit, kid." Derrick recoiled when he saw Teclos. "You scared me."

Teclos pressed his guilt down and said, "Let's leave quickly. The city guard is probably already on their way."

He tossed a potion to Derrick, who smiled and downed it in one go.

"Aaaah, that hits the spot. But seriously, kid, you're incredible."

Derrick pulled him into a headlock under his arm and ruffled his hair.

"You looked like a demon for a second there, lad."

Teclos only smirked at that.

A demon.

How fitting.

They rushed off quickly now that the job was done and returned to their pub.

—

The city guard arrived at the scene with a few knights and templars.

A noble was still a noble, and if the city could not guarantee their safety, others might simply leave, taking their assets and money with them. The city administration wanted to prevent that at all costs.

Once they stepped inside, they found proper carnage.

The bodies of guards and knights lay dead across the ground.

Skallos, a templar captain, grimaced.

It was not looking good with this amount of bloodshed. He could only hope some people were still alive.

And that the baron was among them.

"Move quickly and search for survivors. Bring me a damage report!"

They found several servants in the destroyed servants quarters, most of them had minor injuries with a few heavily injured but not life threatening, after the templars got to healing the knights searched onwards and combed through the whole mansion.

And when the half hour mark passed a knight came running towards Skallos.

"Sir! We have found the headless body of the baron." He yelled.

To wit the servants wimpered and got scared, it wasn't that they liked their employer that much but more that they won't find another job like this with a death of their boss resume.

"Daam!" Skallos stomped his leg in frustration, but then more bad news followed.

"What?! They took out 3 knights?..." he asked again in disbelief.

"Yes, and it was done by the same person, judging by the killing blow, it was a highly skilled assassin..."

"Bring me an echo rune, i want to see the residue mana of our killer." He ordered.

The investigation was on the way and it promised to be a long one.

—

Meanwhile, the four of them reached the pub.

They entered through the front door, and the rowdy commotion suddenly stopped as every eye turned toward them.

Marek put down the cup he had been cleaning and told them that Zamas was waiting in the back room.

Derrick nodded and beckoned for them to go.

As they walked on, Teclos had a bad premonition. There were too many people in the pub. And not all of them were mercenaries, which meant those drunks could rat them out.

But then Falcon patted him on the shoulder and reassured him.

"Don't worry. Nobody will squeal."

Teclos did not know how Falcon could be so sure, but he would still make preparations tonight for a quick escape from the city if things got dicey.

He would drag Saldia away if he had to.

They entered the back room and arrived in front of Zamas, who greeted them expectantly.

"So... is it done?" he asked.

Derrick nodded and replied, "Yes. The baron is dead."

"Excellent. Well done, boys! What about witnesses? Did someone see you and get left alive?"

Falcon shook his head.

"No."

"Hahaha! A clean job, then! This is cause for celebration. Kira, bring me my best wine. I shall join them for a drink tonight!"

"As you wish," she replied curtly.

Teclos thought this was also a bad idea.

A celebration on the same day the baron died? The same baron who had insulted Zamas?

He did not know if he was becoming too paranoid, but he still thought they should lay low for a while.

Zamas then turned toward them again and asked how the baron had died, but Teclos just summoned his pocket dimension and showed him the head.

"Ugh! An ugly bastard, even in death. But on another note, boy, how much stuff can you fit in there?" he asked, eyes gleaming.

Teclos put the head back inside and scratched his head. "I don't know... I have never tried to fill it fully. Not that I had a lot of stuff to fill it with anyway."

Zamas scratched his beard, then raised his hand as if he had an idea.

"Well then, find out. That ability is way cheaper than a dimension pouch that the tower wizards sell. It will come in handy with our business."

Teclos just nodded.

"Alright, now that that is done, you can go and have some fun. But first, go to Merrith and let him heal you."

Teclos rolled his eyes.

It was like he wanted them to get caught.

But he left anyway.

Zaxx, who was the most injured, strangely stayed behind, and they all looked at him as he stood still.

"Go on, lads. I have something to say to the boss." He smiled and made a shooining motion toward them.

They just shrugged and left. Who knew what that lunatic had in mind?

"Come. I'll buy you ale today. You deserve that for saving my ass this time around, Teclos," Derrick said, putting an arm around his shoulder and making it impossible to refuse.

Teclos just looked at him and smirked.

This was the first time Derrick had called him by his name since he had joined the company.

A few cups of ale would do him good right now, to numb his emotions.

As they closed the door and left, Zamas spoke.

"So, what is it?"

"Boss..." Zaxx started as he turned around. "That kid, he is dangerous..."

"Bahahah! I was wondering what you had to say to me, but this? Nonsense, bahahah!"

Zamas leaned forward from laughing so hard, but Zaxx did not laugh with him.

He was dead serious.

"You haven't seen him... he was a literal demon! T-those black eyes and that dead stare... it was like I was looking at an undead!"

Zamas shook his head and stopped laughing.

"I don't get it... Don't tell me you're afraid of a kid?"

"His power is dangerous... the one who killed all three knights was him... boss..."

That made Zamas's eyes widen.

"What? Really?"

Zaxx nodded.

Zamas thought it over for a few seconds.

Then he smiled.

"So you are telling me we have a potential gem among us that can help us eradicate the other gangs?"

All color drained from Zaxx's face when he heard that.

It meant the boss would not throw Teclos away so easily.

Once he started imagining Teclos in his head again, that aura and those eyes, he got the shivers.

But he could not defy Zamas.

The only thing he could do now was hope that Teclos would stay loyal to them.

At the counter, Teclos grimaced.

He had overheard the conversation through the shadows, and he was immensely disappointed.

One wanted to use him.

The other wanted to throw him away.

Zamas was a problem on his own, but Zaxx? Teclos had literally saved his life, for gods' sake.

"Four cups of ale, Marek! They're all on me," Derrick said, slamming a few copper coins down on the counter.

"Did something good happen?" Marek asked.

Derrick put an arm around Teclos and started yelling.

"Haha! This little hero saved our lives today! He literally kil—"

Just as he was about to say it, Falcon put a hand over his mouth and shut him up.

"Could you not scream this across the whole pub? We'll tell you later when we're among ourselves."

Derrick looked offended and almost bashed Falcon's head in for making him shut up, but since he had not drunk much today yet, he still had enough clarity to refrain from attacking him.

Besides, Marek would surely throw him out if he broke the counter again, and that would leave him without ale.

Internally, Teclos thanked the gods that Falcon was there.

He had not anticipated Derrick being that stupid.

Then Zaxx walked in with a smile on his face.

"Heyy! Do you have ale for me as well?" he asked in a cheery voice.

Falcon shook his head.

"What about Merrith?" he asked.

Derrick and Zaxx were not in the best condition, and Falcon also had bruises all over his body.

"Bah!" both Zaxx and Derrick said simultaneously.

Then Zaxx continued. "We can go after a few cups of ale. The potions healed us up enough."

Teclos, meanwhile, was in a sour mood now.

'Hah... look at him smiling like he didn't just stab me in the back.'

"We should let our hero of the night decide," Zaxx said with a smile.

It ground Teclos's gears, but he composed himself again and kept a poker face.

"Let's drink first."

"That's the spirit!" Derrick yelled, slapping Teclos on the back so hard he had to cough a few times.

Marek then poured their drinks, and they clanked their cups together in a toast to a job well done.

With the help of alcohol, Teclos numbed some of his mind like he had set out to do at the beginning.

Somewhere around five in the morning, Derrick stumbled out of the pub and fell into a mud puddle. Falcon and Teclos had not drunk that much and were not even tipsy. Zaxx, on the other hand, was much like Derrick, stumbling and falling.

"I'll bring the knuckleheads home. You can go," Falcon offered.

Teclos just nodded and disappeared into the alleys, heading back toward home.

Falcon walked down the stairs and picked Derrick back up, but by the time he turned around, Zaxx was also gone.

"Huh?...oh what ever." He had enough of today's shit and just dragged Derrick away to his home.

—

Zaxx rushed through the alleys, heading toward the city gates.

If Zamas would not help him get rid of that demon spawn, then the guards surely would.

He approached the gates, and one of the guards noticed him.

"Halt! What are you doing here so late?" the guard asked, clearly annoyed by the slum rat.

Zaxx swallowed his annoyance and approached him.

"I have some news about the culprit behind the explosions and fire that happened today," he said.

The guard suddenly perked up.

"...Alright. I'll go get the captain. Wait here."

"Sure," Zaxx said.

As the guard disappeared to get his captain, Zaxx leaned against the wall.

Then a hand suddenly covered his mouth and a blade coated in darkness slit his throat.

"I didn't expect this..." Teclos said, holding him still as Zaxx squirmed in his arms. "I really don't get it... I saved you, and you stab me in the back like this?"

Zaxx tried to break free, but the blood loss was too severe, sapping his strength with every passing second.

Blood gushed from his throat, bubbling and gurgling through the cut. He struggled and struggled, terrified of Teclos, but the blood was suffocating him now, and his eyes slowly rolled upward.

The next second, Teclos released him and Zaxx collapsed.

Dead.

"Nobody will threaten me and my family..." Teclos whispered. "I won't repeat the same mistakes again. I'll kill every last one of you."

He summoned his pocket dimension and widened its entrance. The strain made his mana disappear at a rapid pace, but it was fine.

He only needed a moment.

He tossed Zaxx inside and closed it again.

Then he wrapped himself in darkness once more and disappeared.

Chapter 88 - 87 - Gone Before Dawn.

In the morning, when Teclos woke up, he heard a loud commotion in front of his house.

Saldia was also talking to someone at the door.

He quickly got dressed and washed himself before leaving his room to see what was going on.

"Are you sure you haven't seen anyone suspicious walking through the slums last night, ma'am?" a gruff-looking man asked.

"No, we were at home last night. What exactly happened, sir?" she asked.

"A terror attack on a noble's estate, ma'am. They destroyed the estate, killed the guards, and murdered the baron. So if you see anyone suspicious, tell the nearest guard."

Teclos walked out and saw an inquisitor standing at the door. He recognized him by the church insignia on his chest, along with the typical white and silver armor they wore.

The inquisitor nodded toward him, and Teclos nodded back.

He asked Saldia what was going on, and she told him about the estate. Teclos kept a calm poker face and only shrugged, saying it had nothing to do with him. They had their own problems.

Saldia reprimanded him for that apathetic look, and the inquisitor grimaced as well.

"Don't cross the line, boy. And by the way... where do you people work? You have an awfully well-built house for the slums."

Saldia wanted to answer, fearing Teclos would escalate the situation, but he beat her to it.

"I work at a mercenary company, not that it's any of your business..." Teclos scowled.

The inquisitor looked shocked for a second before he smirked.

"Hah! A brave boy, I see. You shouldn't talk to adults like that, much less officials of the church... unless you want to be tortured that is."

He said it with a sinister smirk.

'So much for the church of light and life being friendly,' Teclos scoffed inwardly.

The man turned around and left, and as soon as he did, Saldia slapped Teclos on the back of his head.

"Ouch! What did you do that for?" he said, rubbing his head.

"Because you could have gotten us in serious trouble! How could you mouth off to an inquisitor like that?" Saldia was fuming.

But Teclos just waved his hand and went back into his room.

"What am I going to do with you..."

She shook her head and then began preparing the merchandise to sell at the stall later.

While she was still preparing, Teclos headed out half an hour later after putting on his mercenary gear.

And once outside, he noticed a lot of comotion.

The whole city seemed to be in an uproar about the Morholt incident. People were talking everywhere, but he was relieved to hear that nobody was talking about their mercenary company.

The most prevalent rumor going around the streets was that a rival lord had hired professional assassins to kill Lord Morholt.

He just shook his head, but a smirk formed on his face unconsciously.

They got away with it.

As he entered the pub in the morning, only their mercenaries were there for a change. The drunks had not arrived yet. It was still just as rowdy, with gambling and drinking, but he was already used to it.

"Oi, Marek! Can I get a cup of ale?" Teclos asked, and Marek nodded.

As Teclos walked through the rows of tables to get to the counter, he was being greeted by everyone in the pub, either by a nodd, a lifting of their cup or verbally.

When he took the cup from Marek, he sat down in the corner and waited for an assignment, leisurely drinking his cheap ale.

Falcon entered the pub just as Teclos took his second sip.

And when He saw teclos he walked closer and sat down at the same table.

"You look like a dead fish with those bags under your eyes," Falcon mocked.

Teclos was surprised that Falcon even knew how to joke around, then smirked.

"Likewise."

They chatted for a bit, and both mentioned that they had been visited by an inquisitor. Both agreed it had been highly unpleasant.

"I swear, those church assholes think they are so high above everyone else..."
Teclos voiced his displeasure.

"Don't say that opinion too loudly. Some of our guys here go to the church religiously. It could get you in trouble."

"Haha! What? You mean our guys are let in? They think of us as criminals. The whole city does, I mean."

"I was surprised too. Apparently, if you are a devout believer, they let you in..."

"No way. I was rejected from seeing Father Pella from my village. Those assholes don't just let anyone in there, and even then, only with coin."

"True."

After fifteen minutes of throwing shade at the church, Derrick showed up.

Now, if Teclos and Falcon looked bad, Derrick was on a whole other level.

"Oi, look!" said one of Derrick's friends at the counter. "Bahahaha, what happened to you?"

The whole pub started laughing once they saw him.

Derrick was slumped against the doorframe of the pub, entering like a corpse someone had forgotten to bury.

His hair was a mess, his shirt was half untucked and put on the wrong way, and he had massive bags under his eyes.

"Shut up..." he groaned toward them, then stumbled over a chair.

Naturally, everyone started laughing even louder.

Even Teclos and Falcon laughed loudly.

That continued until Derrick threw a chair at the guys sitting behind the counter and started beating people up.

Then everyone scrambled like cockroaches.

"Oi, kid... you laughed too, didn't you?" he asked menacingly.

Teclos dodged his gaze and shook his head which didnt work, but just when he was about to become the next victim, Marek called out.

"Falcon, Teclos, and Derrick! Zamas wants to see you!"

Derrick looked at Teclos once more, then at Marek.

"Tch... you're lucky, kid."

'Phew.'

Teclos wiped the cold sweat from his brow and stood up, following Derrick into the back room.

"Looks like you'll live," Falcon said, smiling beside him.

This really was a change in attitude.

Had they fully accepted him during the last job?

He wondered what their reactions would be when they found out that Zaxx was missing.

As they entered into the room Zamas greeted them and they greeted him back.

"I have a problem, boys," Zamas said. "We have a job to do. Strangely enough, it's one of the few jobs we take that could actually pass for honest mercenary work."

'What? Already?' Teclos was confused, they had just stirred the hornets nest and now he wanted more trouble?

Zamas smiled pleasantly.

"A friend of mine needs manpower. He wants us to escort his men and women into a dungeon and help clear the place out."

"So what's the problem?" Falcon asked.

"That friend of mine plans to stab me in the back, take our share of the spoils, and kill my men once they are inside the dungeon."

That pleasant smile suddenly twisted into an angry frown.

"The bastard used my money to build himself up. We did dirty jobs for him that he was too 'clean' to touch. And worst of all, I helped him wed a noble's daughter..." Zamas's voice darkened. "And this is how he repays me?"

His mana suddenly flared.

The veins on his forehead bulged, surprising Teclos. That fat blob was actually quite strong.

The handles of his chair exploded beneath his grip as he stood up.

"I was going to send others at first..." he said, his voice low now. "But after yesterday, I changed my mind."

They all looked at each other, wondering why he wanted to send them when they were still tired and bruised from the last job, instead of someone else.

Then Zamas sat back down and asked Kira to hand them a parchment he had prepared in advance.

"This is the list of his men for the job," Zamas said. "Their names and known abilities. He is fairly high-ranking now, so he has knights and even a mage under his payroll."

He leaned back in his chair.

"Here is what I want you to do. Derrick and Zaxx will go in as helping hands, along with maybe three others, as the front. Though I haven't figured out who to send yet."

His eyes then shifted toward Teclos and Falcon.

"Anyway, Teclos, Falcon. Your job will be to tail them silently. And when the time is ripe... kill them all."

Then he looked at Derrick again and asked, "Where is Zaxx exactly? He hasn't shown up today."

Derrick shrugged, as he did not exactly remember much of last night.

But then Falcon answered, "He left to go home yesterday... he was pretty drunk."

Zamas facepalmed and asked Kira to send someone to fetch him.

Teclos just remained calm, his face perfectly straight.

"Anyway, this job starts tomorrow at dawn. Gather at the gates and leave with them. Dismissed."

They headed out, and as soon as they entered the pub, Derrick turned around and asked the two if they were up for a round of ale.

"No. Go rest for tomorrow, man," Teclos said.

"Bah! One or two cups won't hurt."

"He is right, Derrick," Falcon said.

With a grimace, Derrick ignored them and went to the counter anyway.

"Isn't this a bit too fast to take on another big job?" Teclos asked, watching Derrick order another cup before shaking his head.

"Well, he doesn't really have a choice but to send us," Falcon said. "We're the most capable of this ragtag bunch he has."

Teclos looked around.

While the others looked intimidating on the outside, their shadows were anything but. Sure some of them had similar or a bit more mana than teclos but...they were atleast fourty to fifty years old.

It really was a stark fall in powere like he knew from Kolma, that village really was speciall.

So he had to agree with Falcon.

The only problem now was...

Zaxx was dead.

Which meant this job would be that much harder.

But what could he do?

Zaxx would have ratted them out, putting both him and Saldia in danger.

"Let's meet up in the evening. We'll go over the plan once Zaxx joins us, then gear up. Now go rest at home."

Teclos just nodded, and they separated.

Once he was home, he sat down and started gathering mana. It had a nice, strong, and smooth flow.

He gathered all the mana toward his heart, aiming for the final third circle to match the stages again.

It was refreshing to train again, and it cleared his mind.

—

Saldia returned home in the evening, sweaty and tired, but with a smile on her face. She went to change and wash herself in her room when she noticed Teclos meditating again.

"Teclos, it's evening already," she said out of habit.

He stood up and quickly rushed out, grabbing a piece of bread on the way.

He had spaced out again, but seeing himself get stronger was a feeling he just could not resist.

It had been a very fruitful training session.

When he stepped through the door of the pub, the mood was suddenly solemn.

All of the mercenaries sat in neatly organized rows, listening to Zamas.

"Great timing, kid. We have a major problem. Zaxx is gone," Zamas said.

Teclos pretended to be shocked and asked, "What do you mean, gone?"

"He disappeared last night. Seeing as you were one of the last people to see him, do you remember anything?"

"No? We drank together and went our own ways. Well, Falcon helped Derrick get home."

Zamas grimaced and scratched his chin.

"This is a disaster. Just before the mission, we lose one of our best fighters."

"Maybe the noble kidnapped him?" Teclos deflected. "Knowing that you would likely send him on the job?"

"Hmmm, you think?" Zamas muttered. "It could be... It's like he just disappeared."

That threw a solid wrench into his plan, and now he had to find a backup team.

Zamas stayed silent for a long moment, tapping one thick finger against the railing of the second floor.

Then he clicked his tongue.

"Fine. Since he's gone for now, we will replace him."

Derrick's jaw tightened, unsure about this. "With who?"

Zamas looked down toward the others.

"Wallace, Pete, Garren, Milo, and Vera."

Wallace was a quiet man with a longsword at his hip, a calm demeanor, and a water affinity.

Pete sat at the table, not fully registering what was happening, as he was already drunk and smelling faintly of ale even this early in the morning. Still, he was a master of the spear and had a fire attribute.

Garren was leaning against the wall in the corner, with a crossbow slung over one shoulder. He also wielded fire mana.

Milo was built broad, though his height was lacking. He carried a heavy shield and mace, and his earth mana was as steady as stone.

Last came Vera, silent and narrow-eyed, with twin daggers at her waist and a faint, bitter scent clinging to the blades.

Poison.

With the team selected, it was time to gear up and prepare for tomorrow.

Chapter 89 - 88 - Dungeon

When the next morning came, Teclos reached the pub to find the others already gathered.

Derrick stood near the counter, rubbing at his neck while Marek handed him a waterskin that smelled more like ale than water.

Wallace was quiet as always, checking the edge of his longsword with a satisfied expression and practiced ease.

Milo adjusted the straps of his shield, his broad frame making it look almost small on his back.

Garren leaned against the wall with his crossbow across his shoulder, half-asleep.

And Vera stood apart from the rest, silent, hidden in the corner of the room, and already fully prepared.

Pete was sitting at a table with his spear across his lap, looking like he had either just woken up or had never gone to sleep.

Falcon looked him over and sighed.

"Try not to vomit in the dungeon or on anyone."

Pete raised one thumb and burped. "No promises."

Teclos shook his head.

'Ah yes, Zamas's "elites" in action.'

Unlike the others, neither Falcon nor Teclos wore anything that marked them as part of the group.

He had learned that lesson multiple times already when he drank with Derrick, who always made fun of him for it.

Kira stood at the entrance of the back room instead of Zamas, ready to send them off.

"Derrick, you and the others go first. Meet the expedition at the eastern gate and act like proper hired help for once."

Derrick snorted. "I'm always proper."

They all chuckled at that, but when Derrick turned his head, they quickly looked away.

Kira's gaze shifted toward Teclos and Falcon.

"You two wait half an hour, then follow from a distance. And stay hidden."

Falcon and Teclos nodded.

A short while later, Derrick led the others out.

"Alright, you knuckleheads, follow me!" he yelled with a smile.

Shaking their heads, they all followed him out, except for Pete, who started napping for a second before Marek slapped him on the back of the head.

He nearly forgot his spear as he scrambled after them.

Once they were gone, the pub felt strangely quiet.

Teclos and Falcon looked at Kira, and Teclos tried initiating small talk with her.

"So... how is it, working so close to the boss?"

She just rolled her eyes and left.

"Oi!... Did you see that? She just ignored me..."

Falcon only shrugged, then asked Marek for a word about a private matter.

Now all alone, Teclos sat down at a table near the entrance and waited.

Half an hour passed slowly.

Then Falcon appeared from the back room.

"It's time."

They left through the back and slipped into the morning streets.

The city was starting to wake up. Merchants rolled open their stalls, and guards stood at every main corner because of Morholt's death.

Teclos kept his hood low and his presence dimmed, letting his darkness mana cloak him in a thin sheet that made him unnoticeable among the crowd, while Falcon casually walked beside him like any other mercenary passing through.

"Stop showing off, kid, and just act normally. You're going to get noticed quicker that way," Falcon said, shaking his head.

Teclos scratched the back of his head and released the darkness.

After that, they simply blended in.

By the time they reached the eastern gate, Derrick's group was already gone.

A few rows of deeply carved lines were accompanied by a lot of footprints. It looked like they had many wagons with them.

"This way," Falcon beckoned.

"They seem to be heavily loaded," Teclos said, looking at the tracks. "The ground isn't even that damp, and the wheels already carved this deeply."

"Probably just supplies, but now that you mention it... once the job is done, it might be worth seeing what's inside." Falcon rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

—

Derrick yawned and noticed a mage looking at him.

"What?!" he said aggressively.

The mage was startled and quickly walked forward.

"Damn brutes have no manners," he whispered under his breath.

"How about you behave, Derrick?" Garren said, tapping him on the shoulder as he walked closer. "Kira and Zamas will be mad if you screw this up."

"Bah! I'm just an authentic mercenary. A brute with no brain, as those assholes would say."

He glared at the guards listening in on the conversation, and they all quickened their pace, getting as far away from this lunatic as possible.

Except for one.

He stepped closer.

"We're not like the nobles you think of or pampered mages, so don't lump us in together. I actually think you'll be quite useful for clearing this dungeon," the man said.

He was tall, blond, and annoyingly good-looking. Broad shoulders filled out his polished gear, and a short beard framed his face neatly. A small scar crossed his forehead, but instead of making him look rough, it somehow added to his charm.

Derrick instantly hated him and wanted to rip his head off, but Garren stopped him.

The man had the kind of presence that made people listen before he even raised his voice.

The appointed commander of the expedition.

And judging by the way the others treated him, he was clearly close to Zamas's so-called friend. Close enough that Derrick and the others would have to be careful around him.

"My name is Cassian Fyr, and I am a sworn knight of House Renwick."

He bowed slightly.

But Derrick just scoffed.

"Hah... I know our bosses are friends, but don't act so chummy around me. I don't like you."

"I will keep that in mind," Cassian said with a smile. "But please do listen to my commands. Teamwork is still important if this expedition is going to go well."

Then he left.

"He's dangerous..." Vera said.

They all turned around and looked at her, stunned.

"You can speak?!" Derrick asked, seriously surprised.

She rolled her eyes. "I recognize a snake when I see one."

And with that warning, she fell back to the end of the formation.

She did not want to catch the dumbass disease from these knuckleheads.

After half a day of travel, the expedition finally reached the dungeon entrance.

It sat at the base of a rocky hill, half-buried beneath roots, moss, and old stone. The entrance itself was wide enough for three men to walk through side by side, but the darkness beyond it looked like it was hiding all kinds of dangers from prying eyes. Sunlight simply died the moment it crossed a certain threshold.

Cassian ordered the convoy to stop before anyone wandered too close.

The camp was set up quickly after that.

To Derrick's slight annoyance, it was done with proper discipline. Wagons were circled near the back, horses were tied and watered, supply crates were stacked beneath canvas covers, and guards marked out a clear perimeter with practiced ease. A few men placed lantern posts around the camp, while others checked weapons, counted arrows, and prepared spare shields.

Most of the city guards remained outside.

Their job was to watch the camp, protect the wagons, and make sure nothing came out of the dungeon behind the main group.

Once everything was in place, Cassian gathered the expedition near the entrance.

He stood on a flat stone where everyone could see him.

"Listen carefully," he said, his voice carrying cleanly over the camp. "Once we enter, we will move in formation. No one wanders or rushes ahead. Keep the line at all costs."

He pointed toward Derrick and the other front-line fighters.

"The vanguard will consist of the mercenaries and knights. We will brace for the monsters with a shield wall formation, and hack them to pieces with two-handed weapons or spears right behind the wall. Your job is to take the first impact and keep anything from reaching the center of our formation."

Derrick only cracked his neck.

He liked the sound of this plan.

Cassian continued.

"In the middle line, we will have our archers, rangers, and mages. You will support the vanguard and focus your fire on big targets or pinned-down enemies. Also... no reckless spells in narrow passages."

His gaze briefly moved toward the mages, making it clear that was not a suggestion.

"The rear will be healers, support staff, and a small guard squad. Your job is simple. Heal the wounded, carry supplies, and make sure to gather valuable materials from the dungeon and monsters."

He turned slightly, looking over the whole group.

"Never split up or go alone, even if you find branching pathways. Always report it to me, and we will mark it and come back later. Watch out for traps, and if someone should fall, don't risk the formation by hastily helping them. Instead, clear the threat, and then recover them."

For a moment, everyone was impressed.

So much so that no one spoke.

Even Derrick looked mildly impressed, though he would never admit it.

Cassian rested one hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Remember, this is not a joke. It is a dangerous dungeon, so treat it like one, or it will simply bury you."

Then he smiled and said, "Let's all return alive and have a feast after it's done."

Then he turned toward the dark entrance and ordered.

"Vanguard, forward."

—

The first real fight came when the tunnel widened into a moss-lit cavern.

It was quite a beautiful sight, and most of them were in awe.

But once the moss started moving, the awe was gone.

Glowmoss Crawlers dropped from the ceiling first, their needle-like legs pointed downward and ready to pierce flesh. A sickly green fungus glowed across their bloated bodies.

"Shields up!" Cassian ordered.

The vanguard moved as one.

The crawlers struck shields instead of flesh. Milo held firm, and Derrick smashed one into paste with his bare hands. Wallace also managed to pierce another cleanly through, water mana flowing along the shaft and tip of his spear.

A few crawlers slipped through the gaps, but they barely made it past the front line before arrows and bolts struck them down.

Once they cleared them out, they started looting the room dry. Anything that looked remotely valuable was taken.

They moved forward.

After a while of walking, they reached another cave.

It was filled with Stonejaw Salamanders, their rock-like scales scraping against the ground. Once they noticed the expedition, their orange throats started glowing faintly before they spat heated stones toward the formation.

Cassian stepped forward.

His sword flashed with light mana, splitting one burning stone before it reached the line. Then he stretched out his left arm, and a massive flow of condensed light mana gathered in his palm. The first salamander tried to charge, but before it made even two steps, a blast tore free from Cassian's hand and eradicated the salamander, along with a few others.

The monsters collapsed, steam spilling from their lifeless bodies, or what was left of them.

"Keep formation, and move forward," he said calmly.

The line held.

Spears pierced their eyes. The mages, with the tower mage at their helm, wreaked havoc on the Stonejaws. Healers moved quickly behind the vanguard whenever someone was burned, injured, or poisoned.

But the most annoying and persistent monsters were the Rootbound Stalkers.

Their roots tore from cracks in the floor, wrapping around boots and shields. Their carnivorous flower cores opened between the twisting vines, wet red petals as sharp as knives snapping at their victims like iron hunting traps.

"Stems!" Cassian shouted. "Cut the flowers there!"

His blade flared again, and a clean arc of light severed three roots before piercing the flower at their center.

The stalker simply went limp.

After that, the others followed his lead.

The dungeon should have been dangerous, but so far, the formation made it almost effortless. The vanguard stopped everything. The archers and mages killed whatever slipped through while supporting the vanguard. The healers patched up the few unlucky ones.

By the time the cavern fell silent, the ground was covered in crushed insects, cracked scales, and severed roots.

Derrick glanced at Cassian.

"Tch. Not bad, pretty boy."

Cassian flicked blood from his sword.

"I will take that as praise."

Chapter 90 - 89 - The Heart Below

The deeper they went, the more humid it became. At some point, geysers appeared, spewing scorching hot water into the air.

It was starting to feel like a sauna in there, and the ones with water attributes began cooling the entire party with sheets of ice.

Other than that, the expedition handled everything the dungeon threw at them.

Glowmoss Crawlers, no matter how many there were, broke against the shield wall. Stonejaw Salamanders that spat heated stones were blocked by the mages and split apart by Cassian's light-coated slashes. Rootbound Stalkers that tried to drag people away had their cores splattered by the knights and mercenaries.

The formation worked almost flawlessly.

The vanguard held the line and hacked everything that got close to pieces.

Archers and mages punished anything that moved.

Healers kept burns, poison, and cuts from becoming serious.

And the man who made this cohesion possible was Cassian, calling out orders at the appropriate times and reacting to any bigger threat by stepping in himself.

Even Derrick seemed to enjoy himself, breaking the monsters apart. At first, he stayed in line like a good mercenary, shoulder to shoulder with the others. After a while of the same thing over and over, though, he got bored, clicking his tongue and stepping out of formation, going mad like a berserker and smiling like a lunatic.

Earth mana wrapped around his body like a second skin.

Stone climbed over his arms, shoulders, and chest, forming a golem shell around him. It was not like the massive one he had used at Morholt's estate, but it was denser and faster.

He stomped the life out of the monsters like a brutal battering ram.

"Derrick!" Cassian snapped when he noticed him breaking the line.

Derrick drove through a big pile of stalkers, right into the middle of them, and started grinding them down into ribbon-sized confetti, crushing them into pulp.

The stalkers soon all died.

Derrick looked back at Cassian with a grin. "See? Easy."

"Stay in formation," Cassian said sharply.

"Sure, sure."

He did not.

After the third time, Cassian seemed to accept that talking sense into a madman was a waste of time. Instead, he adjusted the formation around him.

"When that lunatic breaks the line again, I want the vanguard to close the gap and cover him when he returns. Mages and archers, support him so he doesn't get overwhelmed."

Derrick laughed. "I like this plan! Nice one, blondie."

Cassian ignored him.

Eventually, after fighting through heaps of low-ranking monsters, they reached the first boundary of the dungeon.

A massive stone gateway blocked the tunnel ahead, arched and wide enough for several wagons to pass through side by side. Its surface was covered in old roots and faint runes, half-buried beneath age and dust. Above it, carved into the worn stone in an ancient language, was a single phrase made of faded, weathered letters.

"What is that?" Garren asked, pointing toward the writing.

"Oooh! A verse from the Forgotten Age!" the tower mage suddenly exclaimed, his eyes lighting up.

"Can you decipher it?" Cassian asked.

"Of course. Just give me a few minutes..."

He did not even need to be told twice. A parchment and quill were already in his hands.

After a few minutes, just as he had promised, the mage exclaimed loudly in joy.

"I got it! It's a riddle!"

"A riddle?" Derrick scoffed.

The mage ignored him and continued, "It is likely used as a password. This is amazing! A new discovery!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah... just give it here."

Derrick pulled the parchment out of his hands, grabbed him by the head, and pushed him away like a rag doll.

Then he read it out loud.

"I drink without a mouth.

I grow without a seed.

I bind flesh, bone, and breath.

What am I?"

He stared at the parchment for a second.

"...This is nonsense."

Then he threw it to the ground.

The tower mage quickly stepped forward, grabbed the parchment like it was gold, and scowled at Derrick.

"Goddamn brainless brutes! This is old wardwork. If you answer wrong, then something unpleasant will happen."

Cassian studied the carving for a moment.

Then he looked at the roots crawling through the stone and saw a handprint carved next to the gateway.

He placed his hand on it and said,

"Life."

The arch trembled, and the symbols glowed to life.

Then the roots turned to ash. The runes on the stone and the riddle carved above it changed their shape and looked new again, and the passage opened.

Beyond it, the dungeon's fauna and temperature changed.

The air grew hotter.

The moss along the walls turned into a darker, almost red shade, and the stone beneath their feet felt faintly heated.

The monsters changed too.

Large, three-meter Magma Salamanders crawled around and fought for territory. Their scales were black like onyx stone and split by glowing orange lines, and when they fought, molten slime flew from their mouths, melting even this heat-resistant rock.

When a few of the salamanders noticed them, they charged.

"Shields forward! Angle them down!" Cassian ordered.

The first wave splashed against their shields and spread across the formation.

The slime started to melt their shields, but the mages answered with water and frost, cooling it to harmless temperatures.

Spears and swords pierced the salamanders' throats when they charged.

Derrick broke the line again.

His golem shell had turned a dark, almost black shade, mimicking the rock around them as steaming molten spit splashed across his body.

He slammed into one of the salamanders, grabbed it by the jaws, and tore its mouth open.

Cassian cut another one in half with a single flash, his light mana carving a clean, bright arc through the air.

They pushed through them, with the two cornerstones of the formation holding strong and everyone else supporting them.

The second boundary waited deeper in.

This time, the door was made of black stone, with dragon-like claws carved along its sides. The riddle glowed faintly as they approached.

I sleep beneath mountains.

I wear the earth as armor.

I do not fly, yet kingdoms tremble when I wake.

What am I?

No one spoke for a moment.

The carvings were not subtle, but something about them made the group uneasy.

"An earth dragon," Vera said quietly.

This time, Derrick pushed Cassian aside and placed his palm on the handprint, wanting to try it.

Everyone just shook their heads at his antics, but with his overall value in combat, nobody voiced their complaints.

The door opened.

Derrick looked at her. "You were right, Vera! And it's still strange to hear you speak."

"I wish I was deaf so I couldn't hear you, though."

The passage beyond sloped downward, and stairs were carved out from the rock.

The heat became even worse. The walls pulsed faintly with bright red mana, like crystal veins running through the stone all around them.

The monsters were even more problematic than the salamanders.

They were huge Acid Vipers, probably around six meters long.

Thick, ash-colored serpents moved through the whole floor, their fangs dripping some kind of green liquid that hissed whenever it fell onto the ground.

Unlike the salamanders, they waited in ambush, struck from blind spots, and spat acid venom from afar.

The expedition finally slowed down.

"Raise earth walls in sections and move from cover to cover. Keep the shields high until we are face to face with them," Cassian ordered.

Although large, the vipers could launch themselves like arrows.

One viper launched itself and struck a guard's calf with its venom. The venom burned through his armor like it was not even there and almost burned through his leg completely.

Another lunged from the ceiling toward Cassian.

He turned without panic, extended an arm, and blasted it with an eradicating light beam.

Then he raised his sword and flash-stepped to the next one, beheading it.

The tunnel became a killing ground.

By the time they reached the third boundary, the expedition was exhausted from the heat and the monsters. Everyone was running low on mana.

The final arch was huge, larger than the others. Its stone was darker, older, and covered in claw marks that erased some of the runes.

The riddle was written across the top.

I am hunger beneath the hill.

I am fire in stone.

I am root, scale, fang, and throne.

What waits below?

Even Cassian did not answer immediately.

They all thought about it for a while and talked among themselves, and the most likely answer was the heart.

Then Cassian placed his palm on the print and said, "The heart of the dungeon."

The arch opened, and everyone was relieved that it was the right answer.

But that relief quickly faded as a stream of hot, ancient air rolled over them.

It was suffocating.

—

The next section of the dungeon was almost barren.

No fauna.

No greenery.

Only black stone, cracked ground, and veins of dull red magma running through the floor like dying blood vessels. The air was dry and heavy, tasting of ash and heated metal.

After the richness of the previous chambers, the place felt strangely empty.

A few members of the expedition began to groan.

"Seriously? This is it?" one of the guards muttered.

"Maybe someone cleared it already," another said.

These thoughts spread quickly.

Derrick kicked a loose rock down the path. "We are screwed if someone took the loot already."

Cassian, on the other hand, remained serious.

"Stay alert," he said, taking the lead again. "We are still inside a dungeon. Don't let your guard down, and move in formation like before."

His voice carried through them, and they tightened the formation again before moving forward.

Step by step, the passage widened. The walls rose higher, the ceiling disappeared into darkness, and the veins of magma grew thinner until even they vanished beneath dry, pale stone.

—

After a long stretch of walking, they finally saw something.

A cave in the distance.

It was very large and immersed in darkness.

No signs of life.

No monster stood at its entrance.

But after everyone moved closer, when they were somewhere around two hundred meters away from it, they suddenly felt pressure.

Heavy and ancient, pressing down on their shoulders and crawling beneath their skin. It was not like the mana of any normal being.

It was simply massive and intimidating.

As if the mountain itself had opened one of its eyes as it noticed them.

Cassian stopped walking, his face going white with shock.

Everyone else stopped as well.

Even Derrick's grin slowly faded.

"What the hell is that...?"

They were afraid of the truth and the answer.

Then the ground trembled.

A low rumble rolled out from the cave, and the barren chamber suddenly exploded into motion.

Sand burst from the cave and engulfed everything.

It rose in a violent storm, swallowing the entire area in seconds. Visibility was reduced to almost zero in an instant.

"Raise your shields now! Earth mages, erect walls around us, and everyone gather closer together!"

A shrill edge escaped Cassian's voice.

He knew what the beast was now.

The men shouted and lifted their shields.

Even the horses outside screamed and went berserk behind them.

The order barely left his mouth before the first attack came.

Two massive spikes tore out of the sandstorm.

They were called spikes only because of their pointed tips. In truth, they were closer to boulders launched like spears, each one thick enough to crush three men at once.

"Brace!"

The vanguard raised their shields.

Cassian stepped forward, light gathering along his sword.

Derrick cursed and slammed both hands into the ground, earth mana surging from him as a stone wall rose in front of the formation.

The first spike hit.

The wall shattered instantly.

The impact erased the men in its path, shields cracking and being flung away.

Cassian met the second spike with his blade.

With a flash of light, he split the stone in two.

But it was clearly not enough.

Both halves still tore past him and smashed into the side of the formation, sending more guards flying like broken rag dolls.

For the first time since they had entered the dungeon, the formation broke down like a sand castle.

And from inside the storm, something enormous shifted forward.

Watching those puny beings struggle before it even showed itself.