

CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD

Chapter 91 - 90 - The Stolen Egg

As the sandstorm swallowed everything around them, shouts came from every direction, muffled by the roaring wind. Their shields scraped against dust and sand particles, slowly grinding them down. Men stumbled blindly, trying to hold the formation while sand whipped against their faces like shards of glass, cutting up their skin.

Then the ground rose between them.

Walls of jagged stone erupted throughout the chamber, cutting through the expedition and splitting them into smaller groups.

"Watch out!" Cassian shouted.

Before anyone could react, ruby spikes burst from inside the newly formed enclosures, shooting out of the ground like crimson spears. One guard screamed as a spike pierced through his shield and shoulder. Another barely avoided being impaled as Milo dragged him backward.

Derrick cursed and grew larger.

Stone wrapped over his body in thicker layers, forming a heavier golem shell around him. He slammed into one of the walls shoulder-first, breaking through it with a thunderous crack.

Cassian moved at the same time as well.

His sword flashed with light mana, carving clean arcs through the stone barriers before they could fully seal the groups apart.

"Wind mages, clear the sandstorm and restore visibility!" Cassian ordered, his voice cutting through the howling sandstorm. "Vanguards, form a shield wall around the mages and healers! Knights with me! Derrick, protect the group! Black Hounds, hold the line!"

He lifted his sword and released a blinding light, bright as a beacon in the storm.

His orders gave them something to hold on to.

Wind mages raised their hands and forced streams of air outward, carving temporary tunnels through the sandstorm. The vanguard gathered around the mages and healers, shields raised in a broken circle. Anyone with a useful attribute helped hold the sand back, while the mages tried hurling spells toward the cave.

But most of their attacks never reached it.

Each spell was met by a perfectly timed spike of orichalcum that shot from the ground, intercepting the magic before it could come anywhere close.

The beast still did not reveal itself.

It simply bombarded them from afar.

Rock spikes tore through the storm. The ground softened into sand and swallowed their legs. Ruby shards erupted from every direction. The variety of attacks slowly increased, one by one, as if the creature was toying with them, testing how long these humans could last.

At first, the vanguard suffered the most.

A shieldman was crushed beneath falling stone.

A spearman was impaled by spikes shooting up from the ground.

Then the deaths began to pile up.

And once the front line started to crack, the rest of the expedition suffered too.

An archer was blasted by a wall of sand and dragged screaming into the storm, only for the ground to split open and swallow him whole. A healer was skewered by a ruby spike before she could reach the wounded. A mage screamed as a boulder smashed through the shield wall and erased half his body.

Derrick saw it all.

And his grin was long gone.

"Damn it..."

He gathered even more earth mana, thickening the golem skin around him until he looked less like a man and more like a walking siege weapon.

Then he lowered his shoulder and charged into the storm with a war cry.

"Derrick!" Pete shouted.

But he was already among the howling storm and could not hear him anymore.

He barreled forward, smashing through stone spikes and half-formed walls, forcing his way toward the pressure at the center of the storm. He did not know exactly what the beast was. Some kind of ancient guardian, maybe. A dungeon-born monster. Something close to a dragon.

Then he broke through the sand.

And saw it.

An earth dragon.

Its body was a mismatch of black, brown, and gray scales, arranged in strange, natural patterns like layers of mountain stone. Ruby eyes burned in its skull, cold and ancient. Its neck was long, its tail thick enough to sweep through a building, and its body was slim for its size, yet still enormous.

It was at least eight meters tall, and its presence was overwhelming.

Derrick felt it in his bones that he was outmatched.

But he still charged and rushed forward. With a roar, he jumped at its face and swung the boulders he had for arms at its head like a gorilla.

The dragon just looked down at him and scoffed at his attempt of an attack.

The sound was like stone grinding against stone, but it was unmistakably a scoff. Even its lizard-like facial features somehow formed an annoyed look.

Then it simply lifted one of its massive paws and swatted him aside like a fly.

The force was so strong that Derrick vanished from his spot.

His golem shell took the hit, but even that cracked as he was blasted across the chamber and smashed into the ground several hundred meters away. The stone ground shattered on impact. Dust and sand swallowed his body.

Knocked unconscious, he did not get back up.

The others did not know what had happened.

The others still did not know what had happened, as the storm was obscuring their vision.

And the beast was still attacking.

—

Meanwhile, Cassian and a small group of knights moved along the edge of the chamber.

Each of them wore a shining necklace beneath their armor, the gems glowing with a faint blue light. The dragon's gaze never turned toward them, its perception blocked, sliding past them as if they were nothing more than stone and dust.

They reached the inside of the cave safely while the expedition fought for its life outside.

Inside, the air was hotter than anywhere else in the dungeon.

It was also quiet.

Some kind of warding had been placed here, preventing the chaos outside from reaching them. The screams, explosions, and roaring sandstorm all faded the moment they crossed the threshold.

The cave walls, like everywhere else, were covered in veins. But here, they were a mixture of ruby and orichalcum, pulsing faintly with mana. They all spread through the stone like living roots before gathering toward the center of the chamber.

And there, half-buried in a nest of black and golden ore, rested an egg.

It was larger than a barrel, oval in shape and impossibly heavy-looking. Its shell seemed to be made of layered stone plates, dark brown and gray scales covering most of its surface. Between those plates ran the same ruby veins that stretched throughout the dungeon, glowing softly like a heartbeat beneath the shell.

Every few seconds, the egg pulsed.

And whenever it did, the ground beneath Cassian's boots trembled in response.

This whole dungeon had been built for the egg, it seemed.

And that egg was of unfathomable value.

Cassian's eyes gleamed in wonder.

"There you are..."

For a moment, even he grew greedy and imagined what it would be like to take it away from his lord and get rich himself.

Then his expression hardened again, deciding against a death wish.

"All right. Let's leave. We got what we came here for."

The knights moved quickly.

They unfurled a thick enchanted tarp, wrapped it around the egg, and lifted it together with care.

Outside, the men and women were still dying, but it did not concern Cassian, as he did not even look back.

With the egg secured, he and his knights slipped deeper through the side passage, abandoning the rest of the expedition to the dragon.

—

At the base camp outside, a guard fell to his knees.

His eyes were wide open, filled with despair, as blood spilled from the open line across his throat.

Standing above him, Teclos slashed his sword forcefully to the side, expelling the blood from its blade in a sharp arc.

"That should be the last of them," he said.

Falcon looked over the camp and nodded.

The place was a bloodbath. Guards lay between the wagons, beside the horses, and near the supply crates. Some had died with their weapons still half-drawn as they noticed the disturbance too late. Others had not even known death was right behind them and died without ever knowing what hit them.

No alarm had been sounded throughout the entire attack, and no one escaped the bloodbath.

"Let's head inside now," Falcon said.

Dusk was slowly settling over the camp as they left the corpses behind and entered the dungeon.

The moment they stepped inside, Teclos spread his senses through the shadows.

He easily felt the dead monsters and where the expedition had carved a path through them. There were still plenty of monsters left, but with Teclos's senses, no surprises were waiting for them.

They walked through the dungeon without encountering much of a problem, and the monsters that did attack them were swiftly cut down.

Then he felt something else.

A small group moving through the dungeon from battle to battle, carving the monsters up just like he and Falcon did. Calm, organized, and unhurried.

His eyes narrowed.

"Huh... either they left our guys to die or they killed them," Teclos said quietly.

Falcon looked at him in question. "What are you talking about?"

"Some fairly strong knights are pushing through the dungeon. They are a small group, and they are carrying something on one of the knights' backs... They are alone."

For a moment, rage started to build up, hot and violent, stirring in Teclos's chest.

A nasty memory flashed through his mind, as it reminded him of someone.

Axel.

The feeling of being abandoned while death closed in around him.

His fingers tightened around his sword, and darkness suddenly started covering his eyes.

Falcon noticed the sudden bloodlust and killing intent, along with the sudden spike in aura.

"Kid!" he said, slapping his shoulder.

Teclos did not react, although the rage did halt.

"Anger won't solve anything. You'll just give our position away," Falcon said quietly. "We need to be silent if we want those bastards to pay."

Teclos breathed once through his nose and tried to clear his mind. More often than not, when his anger, apathy, or bloodlust spiked, he tended to lose himself in it lately.

After a second or two, he nodded with a clear mind again.

"I'm fine again... let's go."

And they moved.

The cave was perfect for him. Dark, uneven stone to hide behind, cracks, corners, and shadows everywhere. His mana spread thinly around him, hiding his presence as he and Falcon started walking toward the distant group.

Soon, the voices from those knights reached them.

Cassian and six knights moved through the side passage, carrying something wrapped inside a thick enchanted tarp. Around each of their necks hung a faintly glowing necklace, silver-white and clean, pulsing softly with blue radiant mana.

"Lord Renwick will reward us well for this," one knight said.

"Reward us?" another laughed. "This is an earth dragon egg. This guarantees us promotions, titles, and maybe even land... basically whatever we ask for."

Cassian walked at the front, his expression stoic and calm.

"Careful with it. The egg is worth more than all of you combined."

One of the knights glanced back toward where they came from with a grimace. He was the youngest among them.

"What about the expedition?" he asked.

Cassian did not look back and answered him in a cold voice.

"They are doing exactly what they were brought here to do."

Another knight chuckled.

"Bait, then."

"Useful bait. By the time that lizard notices its egg is gone, we'll be back in Lupos, hailed as heroes, and our lord will finally be granted a title of his own... not through a lousy marriage," Cassian said.

The others laughed quietly in anticipation of the reward.

In the shadows, Teclos's face went cold.

He leaned close to Falcon and whispered everything he had heard.

Falcon's expression did not change, but his hand moved to his blade.

"So Zamas was right," Falcon murmured.

"It's worse than we thought," Teclos said. "The dungeon was never their goal. The egg was, and they somehow knew about it..."

Falcon looked ahead.

"Six knights and Cassian..."

"Seven targets," Teclos confirmed.

Falcon gave him a brief glance.

Then nodded. "We should be able to kill them."

They waited until the passage narrowed and for them to pass through.

When the last knight stepped beneath a low arch, Teclos moved.

Dark hands rose from the ground, clamping over the man's mouth, wrists, and throat. Before he could make a sound, Teclos appeared behind him and drove his blade through the gap beneath his helmet.

At the same moment, Falcon's wind blade cut across the second knight's throat.

Two bodies dropped instantly, but their armor clanked against the stone, and the third knight turned toward the noise.

Before he fully turned around, Teclos's shadows wrapped around his legs and dragged him sideways into the wall with a loud boom. Teclos broke all of the knight's ribs, but before he could finish him, light exploded through the passage, illuminating them.

White-gold mana flooded the corridor.

Teclos's shadows recoiled slightly, thinning beneath the brightness.

Cassian stood ahead, sword drawn, his pleasant smile gone.

"Who are you?" he said. "You aren't part of the expedition."

Falcon and Teclos remained silent, both of them hooded.

The remaining knights spread out quickly, protecting the wrapped egg behind them.

Falcon clicked his tongue.

"That light is going to be annoying for you, kid."

"I know."

Teclos felt the shadows around him weaken, but they did not disappear.

He tightened his grip on his sword. This was a miscalculation on their part.

Cassian raised his blade, light gathering along its edge.

"So," he said calmly, "you aren't going to answer me..."

Teclos's eyes coated themselves with darkness, and he prepared for an attack.

Meanwhile, Falcon gathered wind around himself and prepared to slash at them.

"Renwick sent cowards, it seems," Teclos spat.

Cassian scowled, and the knights charged instantly, reacting to the provocation.

Chapter 92 - 91 - A Deadly Game of Cat and Mouse

As the knights charged, Teclos raised several dark hands from the ground, trying to bind and slow them down.

Then he gathered darkness beneath his feet and dashed sideways onto a dark square that formed in midair. His body shot upward, avoiding the first fire-coated sword slash that carved through the place where his chest had been a heartbeat earlier.

The second knight followed him immediately, propelled by a jet stream from his feet, his blade sweeping upward in a blazing arc.

Teclos reacted in time and kicked off another shadow step, twisted above the slash, and released a shadow slash of his own toward the knight.

A wide pitch-black arc flew down toward the knight's neck.

The man raised his blade in defense, with blazing fire bursting from the sword's edge, swallowing the attack before it could do any harm.

"Careful," the second knight said midair. "This cockroaches moves are strange."

Teclos landed on the wall for half a second, darkness gathering beneath his boots, then pushed off again.

Behind him, Falcon clashed with Cassian and the third knight.

Falcon stretched out his hand, and wind burst forward, throwing dust and loose stones toward them, creating brief cover while simultaneously shooting himself backward.

He hovered just above the ground, then snapped his sword upward.

A wind slash howled toward the third knight and Cassian.

Cassian dodged, vanishing in a flash of light before reappearing on Falcon's left side. His sword cut across in a diagonal slash coated with light.

Falcon bent backward midair, and the blade grazed his chin as it passed. He countered by thrusting his sword toward Cassian's chest, but Cassian dodged by turning his torso sideways.

Cassian lifted his sword and tried to split Falcon in half, but in the next second, he was blown away by a blast of wind from Falcon's other hand, sending him skidding back.

The water knight appeared on Falcon's right and released a wave from his hand before Falcon could escape.

Water mana wrapped around Falcon's legs in a spiraling current and tried to pull him in.

Falcon released a massive burst of wind pressure from his feet and shot upward, trying to escape.

But Cassian had already appeared beneath him.

"Disappear."

A dense stream of light gathered in Cassian's palm.

Falcon's eyes widened.

In the next second, a beam of white-gold mana tore toward him.

He barely shifted aside.

The blast tore through his coat and armor, lightly burning his skin before exploding against the ceiling.

The explosion sent chunks of stone raining back down toward him.

Falcon cursed, threw a dagger at Cassian, then stretched out both hands.

Wind gathered in his palms and began spinning into a violent vortex, shielding him from most of the falling rubble.

—

On the other side of the corridor, Teclos was being pushed back by both knights.

They were weaker than Cassian, but they were still knights. Their footwork was steady, their timing clean, and every time Teclos tried to disappear into the darkness or counter them, they blocked him.

A fireball exploded against the wall beside him, and Teclos used the opportunity to blend into the smoke.

Darkness wrapped around him like a cloak, swallowing his outline as he slipped behind a broken stone pillar.

The knights lost him for a second, and an opportunity presented itself.

Barbed hands of darkness shot out from the shadows beneath them.

Both knights were momentarily caught in a bind, and some of the barbs scraped through the gaps in their armor, drawing blood.

Teclos then appeared behind one of them, silent as the night, his sword coated in darkness, and thrust toward the back of his neck.

But the second knight saw him and reacted just in time.

A wall of fire burst between them, forcing Teclos to back off.

Teclos clicked his tongue and shadow stepped backward as the flames washed past his face.

"Annoying," he muttered.

The first knight ripped free from the barbed hand, blood running down his greave.

"Hah! Says the running and hiding cockroach."

Teclos raised his left hand.

Dark spikes erupted from the ground, aiming for the still-bound knight.

But in that same moment, the knight broke free. Fire mana burst from behind him, ripping him out of the bind and propelling him straight toward Teclos.

His blade came down with enough force to cut Teclos in half.

Teclos jumped back, but the knight redirected the slash from vertical to horizontal mid-swing. The sword scraped across Teclos's breastplate, leaving a black, scorched scar across both armor and skin.

Teclos clicked his tongue and disengaged, throwing up a black curtain between them as more barbed hands of darkness burst from the ground to slow the knight's pursuit.

Then he thought of the perfect distraction.

His gaze flicked past the knights, toward the egg wrapped in the tarp behind them.

The knights were guarding it carefully, but not carefully enough.

Teclos raised one hand.

A thin tendril rose from the floor and reached toward the egg, intending to wrap around it.

One of the knights noticed it too late and shouted.

"The egg!"

The tendril coiled around the tarp and yanked, trying to pull it away.

Cassian's head snapped toward the egg.

With one hand, he released a flash of light that blinded Falcon for a moment. With the other, he fired two thin rays from his fingers.

They cut through the tendril instantly.

Teclos felt the connection burn away and frowned.

'Damn.'

Cassian had not moved from Falcon's side, yet he had still countered him perfectly.

Once Falcon's vision cleared, he looked toward Teclos, then toward the egg.

Teclos might not have succeeded, but he had made that blond bastard nervous.

Falcon then dove toward the egg from above, using a sudden wind burst to close the distance.

The water knight moved to intercept, summoning a wave of water to flush him out of the air, but Falcon opened his hand and, with a pulling motion, dragged the air away from the man's face.

The knight choked, and his steps faltered.

He tried to gasp for air, but there was no air to take in.

Falcon kept his hand clenched, maintaining the vacuum, and flew inward toward the egg.

But before he reached it or knocked out the knight, Cassian flashed in front of him with his sword raised high above his head.

Falcon was forced to release the vacuum and block.

Their swords clashed.

Light and wind mana cracked against each other, sending a shockwave through the corridor.

The water knight dropped to one knee, coughing and gasping for breath.

Falcon, meanwhile, was thrown down to the ground and skidded across it.

"Kghh!"

He clenched his teeth and forced himself to stop, his arms aching from the clash.

Before Cassian could press his attack further, Teclos slipped past the knights and made another attempt for the egg.

This time, when another explosion obscured him, he sent a shadow in one direction with a trace of his mana inside it as a decoy. At the same time, he erased his presence and rushed toward the egg.

The knights attacked the decoy and destroyed it in a second.

But that second was all Teclos needed.

He reached for the egg, intending to snatch it and run.

Then Cassian appeared behind him.

Teclos turned quickly, and their blades clashed.

Light burst from Cassian's sword, tearing apart the darkness around Teclos. The force also blew back his hood.

For the first time, Cassian saw his face clearly.

A young man with pitch-black eyes and a cold expression.

Cassian's brows furrowed slightly.

"A kid?"

As Teclos was blown away, he could not stop himself against the force. He rolled across the ground before being brought to a hard stop by a rock.

The air was knocked out of his lungs.

Cassian wondered how a kid was causing them so much trouble.

And the way he used mana...

It was like watching a veteran fighter.

The two fire knights finally joined back in.

"For gods' sake, can you two knuckleheads keep him away from the egg already?"

The knights grunted in embarrassment and trapped Teclos between a wall of flames.

He summoned six dark limbs from his back, spider-like and sharp, and used them to launch himself onto the ceiling. The limbs dug into the stone, carrying him across it as he rushed away.

Against all three of them at once, he had no chance.

The two knights froze for a second, stunned by the sight. The way he moved looked wrong, like something that should not belong to a human body.

Cassian snapped them out of it.

"Go after him!"

Then he looked to the side, only to see Falcon use the distraction Teclos had created to behead the water knight.

Everything had gone wrong the moment those two assassins appeared.

And one of them was a damn kid.

Cassian's rage exploded, and he rushed Falcon with a war cry.

Another battle of speed began on that side of the corridor, with Cassian trying to catch Falcon with everything he had, while Falcon exploited that rage, forcing him to waste mana with every missed strike.

Teclos, meanwhile, had his own problem.

One of the fire knights thrust his sword toward Teclos's stomach, but Teclos opened his pocket dimension directly in front of the blade.

The sword and the knight's hand vanished inside.

Then Teclos closed it, and the knight's hand tore off.

"Aaaarghh!"

Teclos immediately stabbed toward his eyes, trying to finish him, but the other knight swooped in and knocked his blade aside.

Teclos ducked beneath another slash and rolled away. Dark spikes shot up from the ground, forcing the knight to stop his pursuit.

Then Teclos summoned his spider-like limbs again and quickly latched onto the ceiling.

The knight propelled himself straight at him.

Their swords clashed.

The impact cracked the ceiling above them, and both of them fell along with several heavy chunks of stone.

The knight quickly propelled himself away with fire.

Teclos, on the other hand, summoned a dark platform in the air and dashed sideways. At the same time, he opened his pocket dimension above himself, swallowing a falling boulder before it could crush his head.

The knight below was not so lucky.

He was still clutching the stump where his hand had been torn off when he looked up.

A boulder crushed his face and skull in.

He died instantly.

Things were starting to even out.

Now it was two against two.

Across the corridor, Falcon was still fighting Cassian. His movements remained sharp, but they were slower than before. A burn marked one arm, and blood ran down his cheek.

He released another wind slash toward the egg, trying to pull Cassian's attention away from himself.

Even with his tactic of running, dodging, and slowly draining the enemy's mana, Cassian did not look like he would tire anytime soon.

Falcon smiled grimly.

'Of course I get the hard part while the kid takes it easy again... I should demand a round of ale from him once we get back to the tavern.'

Cassian's eyes flicked toward the wind slash. With a single gesture, he cut the attack apart and stopped it cold.

Falcon had gained maybe half a second.

It was not much, but at this point, he would take anything that went his way.

Then he had a bold idea.

He threw his sword.

Wind spiraled around the blade as it flew like a silver streak toward the egg.

Cassian's eyes widened.

He could not reach both the sword and Falcon.

So he chose the sword.

With a flash step, he appeared beside Falcon's blade and struck it with all his might, blasting it upward and lodging it into the ceiling.

When he looked back, he saw Falcon behind the remaining knight, trying to approach him quickly and silently.

"Watch out!"

The knight turned around and, on instinct, released flames all around himself.

The attack caught both of them.

Teclos opened his pocket dimension, swallowing the flames in front of him, while Falcon spun a vortex around himself and redirected the fire away.

But the surprise was gone.

And Cassian was already charging at them.

They all tangled in that deadly dance of cat and mouse for a few moments longer when disaster happened.

As Falcon flew close to the ceiling and prepared to launch yet another wind slash, a spike suddenly rose out of the ceiling and impaled him through the abdomen.

The knocked-out knight from the start had regained his consciousness.

Chapter 93 - 92 -The Hounds Return

Falcon dropped from the ceiling as the spike tore through his abdomen.

Blood spilled from his mouth before he crashed hard against the ground.

"Falcon!"

Teclos's head snapped toward him.

The knight who had regained consciousness lowered his hand, breathing heavily, earth mana still crawling around his fingers. His face was pale, but his eyes burned with hatred.

Falcon tried to push himself up.

His arm trembled beneath his weight.

Or slightly more intense:

Falcon dropped from the ceiling as the spike ripped through his abdomen.

Blood spilled from his mouth before he crashed hard against the stone floor.

"Falcon!"

Teclos's head snapped toward him.

The knight who had regained consciousness lowered his hand, breathing heavily, earth mana still crawling around his fingers. His face was pale, but his eyes burned with hatred.

Falcon tried to push himself up.

His arm shook once.

Then almost gave out.

The wound was bad.

Not instantly fatal, but bad enough that every movement was strained and full of pain, even with adrenaline rushing through him. Falcon quickly downed a potion, then gathered wind around the wound to stabilize it as best as he could.

The fire knight was already on him.

Falcon dodged the incoming slash with a burst of wind, using the current to keep himself upright, but his control looked unstable now.

Cassian noticed immediately as he rushed toward them.

"Finish him before the potion takes effect! This is our chance!"

The fire knight did not need to be told twice.

Falcon forced himself sideways with another burst of wind, narrowly avoiding the blade that would have split him in half. The movement tore his wound open again, and he clenched his teeth hard enough to make them creak from the pain.

Teclos tried to rush toward him, but Cassian appeared in front of him in a flash of light.

Their swords clashed.

Light burst outward, forcing Teclos's shadows to shrink back.

"You are not going anywhere, scum," Cassian said.

Teclos's eyes darkened.

Dark hands rose from the floor and lunged for Cassian's legs, but he cut through them with a clean slash of light before stepping in and driving his knee into Teclos's stomach.

The air rushed from Teclos's lungs.

Cassian followed with a diagonal cut.

Teclos barely blocked it, but the force sent him skidding backward, his boots carving lines through the dust.

He spat out blood and then dodged the next slash.

—

Across the corridor, Falcon was being pushed hard.

The fire knight attacked from the front while the earth knight raised jagged stone spikes from behind, forcing Falcon to dodge in awkward, painful bursts. His wind was still fast, still sharp, but every movement now came with a delay.

And pain.

With each delay, more wounds piled up from blows he could no longer fully dodge. A flame-coated sword grazed his side. A stone spike tore through his thigh.

Falcon stumbled.

The fire knight grinned and readied himself to strike again.

"Not so quick anymore, are you?"

Falcon spat blood onto the ground.

"Better than having almost lost a two agains seven."

The knight's smile vanished.

And he rushed in.

Falcon lifted one hand, trying to form a wind burst, but the earth knight slammed his palm up with a stone platform. Then he wrapped rocks around Falcon's ankle, locking him in place.

Before Falcon could break free, the fire knight struck his other hand aside and drove a blazing kick into his chest. Fire mana exploded on impact, scorching him and sending him flying across the corridor.

—

At the same time, Cassian pressed Teclos back.

Light gathered along his sword, as bright as he could make it and weakened the shadows as much as possible.

Teclos threw up a black curtain and dashed backward, trying to vanish and give himself some space, but Cassian's light erased the darkness like dawn erasing the night. He slashed Teclos across the shoulder and chest, burning through armor and skin.

Teclos was blown away, hitting the wall behind him with a loud boom.

Cassian raised his sword for the next strike, while Teclos summoned spikes from beneath him.

Then both of them paused.

Footsteps.

A lot of them.

From deeper in the passage, five figures came running, panic clear on their faces.

Garren, Vera, Pete, Milo, and Wallace.

Milo and Wallace were carrying Derrick between them, unconscious, his golem armor cracked and crumbling in pieces behind them.

Cassian's eyes widened.

"Help!" he shouted instantly, pointing toward Teclos and Falcon. "Two assassins attacked us! They tried to steal the loot!"

Teclos barely contained his laughter.

But Garren did not even glance at them and just ran through.

"What are you doing?" Cassian snapped.

Pete looked back only once, eyes wide with fear.

"Run, you idiots!"

Teclos stared after them, stunned.

Cassian looked just as dismayed.

Then the ground began to tremble.

Teclos felt it then.

A vast pressure moving through the dungeon.

Massive.

Furious.

His blood ran cold.

"Oh shit..."

Cassian's face also paled once he felt that familiar pressure.

The dragon was coming.

Teclos disengaged from Cassian immediately, shadow stepping backward and wrapping himself in darkness.

Falcon tore his ankle free from the stone with a burst of wind and stumbled back, one hand pressed against his bleeding abdomen before he ran as well.

But Cassian hesitated.

His gaze flicked toward the egg.

Then toward the tunnel.

The dragon finally arrived, tearing through the rocks that barred its way. The fury of its aura crashed down on them like a mountain.

Cassian's face paled, but his eyes still shot toward the wrapped egg.

With a grimace, he moved toward it.

It was simply too valuable to leave behind.

He flash-stepped toward the egg, light bursting beneath his feet as he reached out with one hand.

Teclos stared at him in disbelief.

'He wants to die, I guess.'

The dragon would not let Cassian escape twice and began to collapse the tunnel.

Stone cracked, twisted, and folded inward from every side. The ceiling split apart, the walls crushed together, and massive slabs of black rock dropped one after another, sealing the passage piece by piece.

Cassian grabbed the tarp around the egg and turned to run.

But in that exact moment, dark hands shot out from beneath him.

They wrapped around his ankles.

Cassian's head snapped down, then toward Teclos.

Teclos stood there, blood running down his face, one hand raised.

He smiled.

Then, calmly, he showed Cassian the middle finger.

Cassian's expression twisted in anger.

"You little—"

Then the tunnel slammed shut.

A wall of stone crashed down between them, sealing Cassian on the other side with the egg.

With the dragon.

"Hah, dumbass," Teclos muttered with a smile, then jogged away while pulling a potion from his dark dimension.

For a second, there was no sound on the other side.

Then light suddenly flashed through the cracks.

Cassian's scream followed.

The wall trembled violently as something massive struck him.

Once.

Twice.

A burst of white-gold mana exploded from the other side, followed by the sound of stone breaking and bones cracking beneath impossible weight.

Cassian tried to fight desperately.

But his light was slowly being extinguished by the creature.

Before it ended, a deep voice rolled through the sealed passage, ancient and cold.

"A puny existence should never challenge the natural order. You will die because of your greed."

For the last time, Cassian's blinding flash shone through the cracks in the wall, accompanied by his final scream.

Then the dragon stomped once.

And the light vanished.

After that, the dragon disappeared, taking its egg back to its cave.

—

The two knights, Falcon, and the Black Hounds were outside, panting and catching their breath when Teclos came jogging out leisurely.

For a moment, no one moved.

Falcon, still bleeding from his abdomen, leaned against the cave entrance and let out a rough sigh.

"Well..." he muttered. "That solved one problem."

Teclos looked at him and sighed as well. He pulled one more potion from his dark dimension and threw it to him.

"You almost died."

Falcon pressed one hand against the wound and grimaced as he drank it. "I said one problem, not all of them."

Before Teclos could answer, two sets of footsteps came closer.

Cassian's knight friends.

They were pale, shocked, and furious as they looked at the two of them.

Because they had seen what Teclos and Falcon had done to their comrades in the camp outside.

Bodies.

Blood.

Carnage all around the camp.

Their dead comrades were scattered across the ground.

The Black Hounds also stared at them with their own expressions of disbelief and awe.

Teclos and Falcon looked at the knights, then at each other, and shrugged.

As if saying, 'So what are you going to do about it?'

They had killed off all the guards, then fought seven knights.

And somehow came out on top.

They were lucky.

But that did not take away from the achievement.

For a few awkward seconds, no one said anything.

Then one of the knights swallowed.

"Where is Cassian?" he asked.

Falcon pointed lazily toward the sealed wall.

"Dragon."

The knight's face went even paler.

The other knight clenched his jaw, glanced toward the Black Hounds behind him, and pleaded for help.

"We need to get out. Help us kill those two, and we can all survive this."

Teclos and Falcon blinked.

They almost burst out laughing again.

Then Garren slowly nodded.

"Sure."

The two knights visibly relaxed and turned their attention back to Falcon and Teclos.

That was their mistake.

Garren and Wallace casually walked up to them and stabbed them in the back.

The knights' eyes widened in betrayal.

They collapsed where they stood, eyes now pleading for mercy.

Falcon walked closer, looked down at them, and smiled.

"Assistance provided."

Teclos stared at him for a second, in disbelief at the dark humor. Then he chuckled.

"Professional service, eh?"

Falcon pressed his hand tighter against his wound and winced. It was slowly healing.

"Yeah, but shut up now and help me walk."

Teclos grabbed him under the arm and pulled him toward one of the expedition's wagons, where he sat him down on a crate before going to search for valuables.

The Black Hounds were already searching through the camp as well.

Milo and Wallace had simply left Derrick on the ground nearby.

After an hour of searching, each of them carrying a full sack of goods over their shoulders, they gathered back where Falcon sat.

Surprisingly, Derrick was there too, barely conscious, but awake.

"Did... did we win?" he asked, still dazed.

"Sort of," Falcon said.

Derrick groaned and nodded. "Damn. My head is still ringing."

Garren smirked. "Yeah, no shit. You literally faced off against a dragon. Be happy you're alive."

Teclos threw his sack on the ground and opened his dark dimension, storing it inside before beckoning the others to do the same.

Pete looked at Falcon's wound and whistled.

"That's a nasty wound as well."

Falcon glared at him. "Thank you. I hadn't noticed."

"What happened on your side?" Wallace asked.

Teclos explained everything, and Derrick slowly started smiling.

"Hah... pretty boy got eaten?"

"Stomped, probably," Teclos said.

Derrick's smile only widened before turning into a bellowing laugh. He stopped soon after, though, because laughing still hurt.

Vera looked at Teclos and asked, "And the egg?"

"Dragon."

Another roar shook the cave, as if on cue.

Then Derrick looked at the camp again and gave Teclos and Falcon a nod.

"Anyway... Zamas sent two damn nightmares after a whole camp. Well done, lads."

They all nodded at that.

Vera then stepped closer to Falcon and glanced at his wound, already preparing her first aid kit.

"You look terrible."

Falcon nodded. "Yeah..."

She took off his armor and started bandaging him.

Derrick tried to sit up and complain. "Oi! How come he gets the premium treatment?"

She just rolled her eyes and focused back on Falcon.

"Are you jealous?" Garren laughed.

Derrick glared at him. "I'll rip your head off for laughing, old man."

Pete crouched near one of the dead guards and picked up a half-full flask of wine. He sniffed it, shrugged, and took a sip.

Everyone stopped arguing and just stared at him.

"What?" Pete asked. "He's not using it anymore."

Vera rubbed her forehead. "We survived a goddamn dragon just so I could die from secondhand stupidity."

Teclos actually smiled faintly.

After a few more minutes of chatting, drinking potions, and eating something from the supplies, they were ready to head back home.

"Alright, enough fooling around. Grab the horses, and let's get back to Lupos before that lizard decides we smell like its egg again," Derrick said.

The road back to Lupos was quiet.

Falcon leaned back against Vera, who blushed slightly. He was pale, but alive, while Teclos rode beside them, watching the road ahead with a blank and tired expression.

The job was over.

And the end result was quite good.

Chapter 94 - 93 - To the Black Hounds!

The road back to Lupos felt shorter than the road toward the dungeon, probably because everyone was relaxed and merrily chatting among themselves.

Once the Black Hounds reached the eastern gate, they looked like survivors crawling out of a battlefield, with their torn clothes and dried blood.

The guards at the gate straightened the moment they saw them.

One of them lowered his spear and spoke.

"Halt! Identify yourselves."

Derrick lifted his head weakly from the wagon.

"Your mother."

The guard blinked, shocked.

Garren stepped forward quickly before the situation got worse.

"We were part of the dungeon expedition sent out this morning," he said, his voice tired but steady. "It failed."

The guard's expression changed at once.

He looked past Garren toward the wagon and the lack of people. Those who did return all appeared to be wounded as well, and more than half of the cargo from the morning was gone too.

"What happened?"

Milo spat to the side, then wiped dust from his mouth.

"A fucking dragon."

The guard stared at him in disbelief.

"What?"

"You know, a giant lizard that usually spits out fire... only this one crushed us with earth," Pete repeated helpfully. "Big one. Angry and very unfriendly."

The guard looked between them, clearly unsure whether this was some drunken joke.

Wallace sighed and stepped forward. Of all of them, he looked the least like a criminal, which helped.

"The dungeon was far beyond the report. The expedition broke apart inside. The commander, Cassian Fyr, is dead. Most of his knights are dead. The city guards who stayed at the camp were killed as well."

The guard's face hardened.

"Killed by what?"

For a moment, no one answered.

Then Garren said, "The dungeon was overrun when the dragon's attack reached the upper levels. We barely escaped with our lives. If it weren't for the horses, we'd be dead too..."

The guard narrowed his eyes. "And you survived?"

Derrick raised one hand from the wagon. "Because we're better than the shitty knights."

Vera slapped him on the back of the head. "Because our pride and loot didn't stop us from running."

"That too," Derrick muttered, caressing his head.

The guard ignored him and turned toward Wallace again.

"You understand I have to report this further up. House Renwick had men in that expedition. So did the city. If their commander is dead, the nobles involved will want answers."

Wallace nodded.

"Then give them this answer. The dungeon had an earth dragon inside. Everyone who stayed died. And anyone who wants more details can go ask the dragon himself."

Pete raised his flask slightly. "I recommend knocking first. He's very irritable, that fella."

The guard gave him a flat look, and after mulling it over for a few seconds, he said,

"Go. But this will be reported. When the nobles call for witnesses, you'll be summoned, so don't leave the city."

Derrick gave a weak thumbs-up.

"Tell them I fought the dragon head-on."

The guard shook his head.

The horses pulled the wagon forward, and Wallace laughed at Derrick.

"More like got slapped unconscious by it."

"Sure, talk more if you want to get beaten up later."

The guards let them pass.

The Black Hounds entered Lupos battered, bloody, and carrying enough hidden loot to make the pain almost worthwhile.

—

Falcon and Teclos reached the gate nearly an hour later.

They had tidied themselves up as best they could, mending their clothes enough to look somewhat presentable.

The same guards stopped them.

"Halt! Where did you two come from?"

Falcon acted confused, as if he didn't understand why the guard was asking them this. "Huh? Why does that matter?"

The guard looked him over. "Just answer the question."

"We were clearing the northern forest of pests, if you must know."

Teclos coughed into his fist to hide a smile.

The guard looked skeptical.

"Without bringing any loot back?"

Falcon exhaled slowly, as if even speaking was too much work.

"Haaah," he sighed. "Kid, take it out. They are suddenly way more nosy than usual."

Teclos rolled his eyes and scowled, as if the guard had offended him. Then he summoned his dark dimension and took out the hide of a dire wolf.

"Here. Can we go inside now?"

The guard looked between them for a moment, then stepped aside.

"You can go..."

Falcon nodded and walked past him.

Teclos followed.

Only once they were deeper into the city did Falcon mutter, "That went better than expected."

Teclos kept his voice low and smiled. "Great acting skills, good sir."

"It got us through."

That was true.

The streets were dim by then, lanterns glowing along the corners and taverns slowly filling with noise.

By the time they reached the Broken Crown, the noise inside could already be heard from the street.

Singing.

Laughter.

The heavy slam of mugs against wooden tables.

Falcon stopped outside the door and sighed.

"Looks like there won't be any rest for us today."

Teclos pushed the door open, and the pub exploded with cheering and shouting once they saw them.

"THERE THEY ARE!"

Someone shouted from a table. Several people raised their mugs. Several men banged their fists against the wood until the whole place shook.

The Broken Crown was a drunken storm.

Mercenaries sang off-key near the counter. A group in the corner gambled over a pile of coins, knives, and what looked like some sort of key. Marek moved behind the bar with the tired expression of a man who had given up on controlling these

damn lunatics. Kira stood near the back with folded arms, looking like she would rather be anywhere else.

And in the middle of it all sat Zamas.

The fat blob himself lounged in his chair with a cup in one hand, cheeks red from ale and eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

The moment he saw them, he spread his arms wide.

"My boys!"

Falcon grimaced. "I already hate this night..."

"Come here, come here!" Zamas beckoned them closer. "The heroes of the night finally arrive!"

Teclos and Falcon walked forward through the crowd.

Hands clapped Teclos on the back from every side.

"Good work, kid!"

"Damn nightmare!"

"Heard you cleaned out a whole camp!"

"Someone give him ale!"

Before Teclos could refuse, a mug was shoved into his hand.

Then another.

Then someone wrapped an arm around his shoulders and nearly spilled half a drink down his chest.

Falcon was treated slightly more carefully because of his wound, though not by much. Vera glared at anyone who got too close to him, which helped.

Zamas raised his cup.

"I heard everything from the others," he said, his voice carrying through the room. "House Renwick tried to rob me. Tried to use my people as bait. Tried to walk away with a dragon egg and leave my men buried in a dungeon."

The pub quieted slightly.

Zamas smiled.

"And what happened instead?"

Derrick, from somewhere near the counter, lifted his mug.

"Pretty boy got stomped!"

The room erupted.

Laughter shook the walls.

Zamas laughed so hard his belly bounced.

"Exactly! Renwick lost his precious knight, his guards, his supplies, and his reputation. And my Hounds came back alive with their pockets full."

He turned his gaze toward Teclos and Falcon.

"And you two..." His smile sharpened. "You two made sure no one at that camp brought word back before us."

Teclos and Falcon lifted their cups slightly.

Zamas also raised his drink high and toasted.

"To the Black Hounds!"

The whole pub roared back.

"To the Black Hounds!"

Ale splashed across tables. Cups clanked. Someone started singing again, even louder and worse than before.

Teclos barely had time to drink before Derrick appeared behind him like a drunk mountain.

"There he is!"

Teclos was too late to react.

Derrick hooked an arm around his neck and dragged him away from Falcon.

"Come here, you slippery little demon. You're drinking with me."

"Oh no... not again..."

"Do I hear complaining?"

"...No."

"All right then!"

Derrick shoved another mug into his hand.

Teclos tried to protest, but Derrick had already raised his own cup.

"To Teclos!"

A few mercenaries nearby cheered.

Teclos blinked.

Derrick downed the ale and looked at him.

"This man right here! Saved us, killed all witnesses, and brought back all the loot in his spooky little black hole."

Teclos stared at him for a second and gave up on escaping. He smiled and started laughing with them.

'If you can't beat them, join them.'

"To a job well done," he said.

That earned another round of cheering.

The ale was cheap, bitter, and strong. And with it, the night promised to be long.

No one looked at him like a poor slum kid here.

No one looked at him like a monster.

Or maybe they did.

But here, that was a compliment.

Someone slapped his back again. Someone else shoved roasted meat into his hand. Pete tried to explain how he had bravely "fought the dragon and carried Derrick out from the dungeon," while Vera called him a lying drunkard. Garren and Wallace argued about what they would say as witnesses. Derrick loudly claimed he had "nearly won the brawl with the beast" until Milo calmly reminded him that he had been unconscious for most of the return trip.

The whole pub laughed.

Teclos laughed too.

Genuinely.

At some point, Derrick kidnapped him again and dragged him into another drinking circle.

"No, no, no," Teclos said, already swaying slightly. "I need to breathe."

"You can breathe after the next cup."

"I think that is how people die."

"Only weak people. Besides, your liver is young and fresh."

That made no sense, but everyone cheered like Derrick had said something wise.

Teclos drank more, and the hours passed.

At some point, Zamas gave another speech. Teclos missed most of it because Pete had fallen asleep face-first into a bowl of stew, and everyone was betting on whether he would drown in it.

He did not.

Later that night, Teclos finally escaped the worst of the drinking and stumbled toward the corner where Falcon sat.

Falcon had claimed a quiet table near the wall, away from the loudest part of the pub. Vera had apparently forced him to stay seated and had wrapped his wound again at some point. He looked tired and mildly annoyed.

Teclos dropped into the chair across from him.

"I need a break from those drunkards," he muttered. "Or I'll sleep here."

Falcon looked at him for a moment.

Then laughed.

"You are one of those drunkards now."

Teclos frowned. "I am not."

Falcon shook his head and lifted his cup.

Teclos raised his own, although he almost spilled it while lifting it.

Their cups clinked, and Falcon nodded faintly.

"To a job well done."

Teclos looked at him and nodded back.

"To surviving."

"Couldn't agree more." Falcon drank.

The noise of the Broken Crown rolled around them, wild and rough and alive.

Teclos let himself enjoy it.

The warmth.

The laughter.

The feeling of belonging somewhere, even if that somewhere was a pub full of criminals, killers, drunkards, and broken people.

—

By the time Teclos left the Broken Crown, the night was almost over.

The streets of the slums were quiet, and Teclos slowly stumbled through them.

The world tilted slightly with every step, almost like he was on a ship in the middle of a storm, and he had to occasionally touch a wall to keep from falling over.

Still, he smiled faintly.

The job was done, and they had all survived. With how much loot they brought back, Zamas would surely give them a hefty bonus pay tomorrow.

Teclos speculated on how pleased Zamas was.

He passed through narrow alleys and broken paths that led to his home. The cold night air helped him clear his head a little.

He was almost home when he turned the last corner and saw something strange.

The door was open.

The smile vanished from his face, and a gut-wrenching feeling of dread washed over him.

That door was never left open by Saldia. She would make damn sure it was locked all the time, even if she was at home.

Teclos took one step forward, and without realizing it, reached the house in a flash.

His fingers moved toward his sword.

"Mom?"

There was no answer. He slowly pried the door open and stepped inside.

The first thing he noticed was the blood on the table and near it.

Then the broken furniture.

Then the herbs scattered across the damp and icy floor, crushed beneath boots.

Teclos's breathing slowed to a halt, and he unfurled all of his senses, searching for any sign that she was still in the vicinity.

The alcohol vanished from his mind like it had never been there.

Mana surged through his body with violent, sharp pressure. The ale in his blood was expelled until his thoughts became painfully clear.

"Mom?!" he shouted, even though he could not feel any presence nearby.

Teclos stood in the ruined kitchen, staring at the blood on the floor.

One second the night was perfectly peaceful.

And the next second...Mana so sinister erupted from him that it cracked the very space around him with a pressure so heavy that anyone nearby would have fainted from the sheer bloodlust and fury.

Chapter 95 - 94 - A Desperate Search

Teclos examined every millimeter of his house for any kind of clue: boot marks, blood, stolen items, drag marks... anything he found useful.

He followed the boot tracks outside, along with two lines carved into the soil, no doubt from Saldia being dragged away by one of them.

The trail was messy, broken by dirt, stone, and the slush gathered between the houses, but it was there. And now that it was so late into the night, it would stay fresh and undisturbed by other people for some time still. He also found a crushed bundle of herbs that must have fallen from her pocket while following that trail.

Teclos picked it up with trembling hands.

He followed every small sign he could find, sometimes losing the trail completely, only to find it again several streets later. A faint drop of blood on a stone. A scratch against a wall. Footprints leading through alleys.

Like a bloodhound, focused and determined, his senses stretched out again and again, searching for any sign they might have left behind.

He searched areas of the slums faster than any normal person could have managed. Yet still, he had the nagging feeling that his time window was slowly closing, that he wasn't fast enough.

After combing through the slums, the trail clearly led him toward the inner city gate.

Teclos stopped in front of it, breathing raggedly from running nonstop.

The gates were illuminated by lantern light, separating the slums from the cleaner streets beyond. Two guards stood there, leaning on their spears, while a third sat near the gatehouse with his helmet pushed back.

One of them looked up as Teclos approached.

"Gate's closed for the night."

Teclos stepped closer, forcing himself to speak clearly and urgently.

"My mother was taken. She might have been brought through here. Her name is Saldia. Red hair, middle-aged, herbalist, usually wears a blue shawl these days. Did you see anyone bring a woman through here tonight?"

The guard stared at him for a second, then shrugged.

"No."

Teclos looked at the other guard. "Really?"

"We didn't see anything, boy."

The third guard near the gatehouse gave a lazy yawn. "Lots of people pass through before closing time. Could've missed her."

Teclos clenched his jaw.

"Then open the gate, please. I need to search inside."

The first guard straightened slightly, his eyes flicking over Teclos's clothes, his face, and the desperation he was failing to hide.

"Entry after hours costs two silver."

Teclos stared at him.

"What?"

"Two silver," the guard repeated. "Late entry toll."

"There was never anything like a late entry toll..."

"Tonight there is." The guard smirked.

Teclos's eyes narrowed. "You're making that up."

The guard shrugged and smiled faintly. "You want in or not?"

Teclos looked at the gate behind them, then back at the guards.

He had enough money, but it was all at home... he would lose precious time. A bitter laugh almost escaped him. Of all the things to stop him now.

Asshole guards and two silver coins.

"My mother was kidnapped," he said slowly. "I don't have time for this."

The guards just smiled at him, and all of them shrugged. "Well, come back tomorrow then." It made Teclos understand what kind of people they were.

"No coin, no entry."

Teclos took one step forward regardless, and his shadow stirred faintly beneath him.

The second guard lowered his spear.

"Careful there, boy. You wouldn't want to rot in prison because of two measly coins."

For a moment, Teclos almost tore through them and the gate both.

But if he fought right now, the trail could vanish completely. The inner city would lock down and more guards would come. Hell, even Inquisitors might be called, and he would lose whatever small chance he still had.

His fingers curled until his nails drew blood from his palm.

Then he turned around and rushed home as fast as he was capable.

The guards laughed behind him.

"Run fast, boy! Maybe she'll still be waiting!"

Their laughter followed him down the street, and he wanted to rip their heads off, but now was not the time.

Teclos moved like a blur.

He reached the door in less than a minute, rushed inside, and went straight to his bedroom. He instantly summoned multiple dark hands and tore through the wooden floor.

The wood cracked and splintered everywhere.

Until he saw and pulled out three small sacks of coins from a hidden compartment.

He tossed all three sacks into his dark dimension, closed it, and vanished from his spot, rushing back toward the gate.

A minute later, he was back near the inner gate.

Before stepping into the lantern light, he opened his dark dimension to take out one sack. His fingers moved quickly through the coins. He counted exactly two silver pieces and no more, then threw the sack back into the darkness and closed it.

Once that was done, he walked forward.

The guards saw him and grinned.

"Back already?"

Teclos held out the two silver coins.

"Open the gate now."

The first guard took the coins and rolled them between his fingers as he looked at the others.

The guards smiled among themselves again and added another absurd condition.

"Actually, the fee just increased to three more silver coins."

Teclos froze in place.

The first guard chuckled. "Late-night trouble costs extra."

For a second, there was only silence between them.

Then Teclos looked up and laughed. "Hah! I can't believe this shit... My mother was kidnapped tonight, and you have the audacity to play games with me?"

The last part of his sentence ended in a low growl.

It was so chilling and full of bloodlust that all three guards got goosebumps on their skin.

Dark mana erupted from beneath Teclos, and the guards had no time to react before black hands shot out from the ground. They wrapped around their throats and slammed them violently against the stone wall beside the gate.

All three choked at once, gasping for air.

Their spears clattered to the ground as they tried to pry the dark hands open.

Teclos continued and simply demanded entry.

"You either let me in now," he said, his voice hollow, "or you die."

The guards clawed at the hands around their necks, feet kicking against the stone. Their faces turned red, then pale, their eyes bulging in panic.

Then the door to the guard station opened.

A man stepped out, older than the others, with short gray hair, a trimmed beard, and a sword at his hip. His shadow was a lot deeper than theirs. Stronger.

The captain looked at the three guards pinned to the wall.

Then at Teclos and the dark hands crushing their throats.

He sighed.

"There is no need for violence."

Teclos slowly turned his eyes toward him.

The captain raised both hands slightly.

"You can go through. My boys just played a nasty prank on you. A stupid one."

Teclos did not release them.

The captain's gaze sharpened slightly, but he still did not reach for his sword.

"Open the gate," Teclos demanded.

The captain leisurely walked toward the gate and took his keys from his pocket. The gate groaned open, and he stepped aside, gesturing for Teclos to leave.

Teclos did just that, but without taking his eyes off the captain as he passed.

Only after he crossed the gate did the darkness around the guards vanish.

All three dropped to the ground, coughing and gasping for air.

Teclos wrapped himself in shadows the next instant and disappeared into the inner city.

Behind him, one of the guards wheezed, "We should... sound the alarm. That bastard has to... pay."

The captain looked down at them.

"No."

"But captain! He attacked city guards!"

The captain smiled without warmth.

"You just extorted the wrong desperate man. Be happy you're alive."

The guard's face twisted.

"He threatened to kill us..."

"Yes," the captain said. "And if I hadn't stepped out, he would have."

Then he looked toward the open gate, where Teclos had already vanished.

"Besides, you heard his story. He will not find her."

The guards slowly looked up, and their captain's smile faded.

"And if he does get close, he will die by that person's hand anyway."

The three guards exchanged uneasy looks, as they clearly knew something, but none of them said another word.

The captain glanced at the two silver coins still clutched in one guard's hand.

"Oh, and since I saved your asses, those two silver will be split into four equal parts."

"Captain..."

"Shut it."

The guard shut his mouth.

—

Inside the inner city, Teclos searched everything.

Every street.

Every alley.

Every side path between the houses and villas.

He moved over rooftops, under balconies, behind walls, and across gardens. He questioned beggars, servants returning late, drunk young nobles stumbling home, stable boys, and anyone else unlucky enough to cross his path.

Most knew nothing, and the longer he searched, the tighter his chest became.

Every passing minute felt like a door closing.

Every empty street felt like he would lose her forever.

He searched until the first pale hints of sunlight began touching the roofs. Teclos was tired, but he did not slow down.

Then, near a quiet street lined with large estates, he found a clue.

A small torn piece of cloth caught on the iron edge of a fence.

The cloth was blue.

Teclos rushed over and took it carefully between his fingers.

It was Saldia's shawl.

His breath stopped for a moment.

Then his gaze slowly lifted.

The cloth had been caught near the outer wall of a large villa. The estate beyond it was dark, elegant, and heavily guarded. Lanterns burned near the gates. Men patrolled the grounds in sets of two.

Teclos unfurled his senses and searched through the courtyard, the guards, and the servants' quarters. Lastly, he tried to look inside the villa.

But he couldn't see anything. His senses were being blocked.

The same kind of dead space he had felt at Morholt's estate.

His hand closed around the torn cloth. There was no other choice... he had to get inside and check.

He began mapping the guards' movements immediately. Two near the main gate. Two walking near the left wall. Another pair crossing the rear every thirty seconds.

There was a blind spot near the stable roof if he used Shadow Steps carefully. He could slip in from above, reach the second-floor balcony, and search from there.

He was already preparing to move when a voice came from behind him.

"What are you doing spying on my house, good sir?"

Teclos went cold.

The voice was somehow familiar.

It was calm, with a hint of a sinister undertone.

He turned around slowly.

A man stood several steps behind him, dressed neatly despite the hour, black hair with bits of gray neatly combed back, his trimmed beard catching the faint lantern light. His posture was relaxed, almost lazy, but everything about him felt like a blade hidden beneath a pleasant exterior.

It was Axel.

For a heartbeat, Teclos simply stared in disbelief.

Then his face twisted into a scowl.

"Huh," Axel said, tilting his head. "Well... the world sure is small."

"Axel," Teclos spat.

Axel smiled faintly. "Still a brat who can't greet his elders, I see."

Teclos's fingers twitched near his sword.

Axel's eyes flicked down once, then back to his face.

"So," he said lightly, "what are you doing here at my home, spying on me?"

Teclos did not answer immediately.

His mind raced.

Could he trust him?

No.

Could he afford not to ask?

Also no.

The situation was urgent. And if Axel had anything to do with Saldia's disappearance, maybe his face would give something away.

"I'm looking for my mom," Teclos said. His voice came out rougher than he wanted. "She was kidnapped tonight. Have you seen anything?"

For the first time, Axel's expression changed slightly.

"Your mother?"

He frowned and scratched his beard, looking genuinely thoughtful.

"No. I haven't seen anyone... well, besides you snooping around."

Teclos watched him closely.

Axel did not look nervous. He did not glance toward the villa. His breathing did not change. His tone stayed calm and almost bored.

Nothing.

He looked back toward the estate once, then nodded.

"Fine."

Axel's smile returned.

"Fine? That is all? You can come inside if you want... have some tea with your old master."

Teclos turned and walked away. "You are not my master," he spat.

Axel watched him go for a few seconds before turning back toward his estate.

A guard near the gate stiffened in surprise as Axel approached from the street.

"Sir? Were you on an outing?"

"A minor inconvenience," Axel said. "Do carry on. I am going to bed now."

"Yes, sir!"

The guard saluted and bowed.

Teclos kept walking until Axel's estate was out of sight.

Then he searched the entire area again.

Every wall.

Every street.

Every gutter.

And like he expected, he found nothing else.

Eventually, he passed back through the gate. The captain was still there, leaning near the station with a cup in hand.

He looked Teclos over and smiled.

"Haven't found her?"

Teclos said nothing.

The captain lifted his cup slightly.

"Want us to search for her? It's going to cost you, though."

Teclos slowly turned his head.

His eyes were empty and malicious enough that the captain's smile stiffened for a second.

Then Teclos continued walking.

The captain watched him leave and let out a low whistle.

"Sheesh... the boy sure has a nasty stare."

Then he went back inside the guard post.

—

Teclos returned home and sat on his bed.

For a while, he did nothing.

He simply lay down and stared at the ceiling as if defeated.

Morning came.

Then afternoon.

Then night.

For the next few days, he continued his routine like a corpse pretending to search for her.

He told Zamas what had happened. Surprisingly, the fat man cursed, questioned a few people, and sent some Black Hounds to help. Derrick, Falcon, Vera, Wallace, and even Garren searched with him at different times.

They found nothing.

No ransom note.

No witness.

The city seemed to have swallowed her whole somehow. But Teclos did not stop watching.

On the fourth night, while lying in bed with his eyes closed, he felt it.

A shadow, jumping down from the city wall and moving away toward the inner parts of the city.

Teclos's eyes opened.

He lay on his bed for a moment and stayed perfectly still.

Then he quickly stood up and walked straight to the nearest smithy.

It was closed, but that did not stop him.

He pressed one hand to the lock and shaped his darkness into a thin key that perfectly matched the keyhole. The lock clicked softly, and he stepped inside.

He took every throwing knife the blacksmith had.

Then a well-made claymore.

Then a plated tunic, shin guards, and wrist guards.

He stored everything inside his dark dimension and walked back into the night.

Axel had not let anything slip when he talked to him that day.

But Teclos knew he was hiding something, and more than that, he had been following Teclos for days.

Watching him search and fail.

The problem now was simple.

Axel's senses were sharp, and his combat power was an insurmountable wall. So Teclos could not fight him head-on.

He needed Axel to leave his estate.

And when he did, Teclos would go inside.

This time, he would not leave without answers.

Chapter 96 - 95 - Chasing Shadows

Teclos could not sleep.

For the next week, every time he lay on his bed at night, his eyes would just stay open, staring at the ceiling until the first light of morning crept through the cracks of the shutters. Whenever his body came close to giving in, the image of the open door, the blood, and the broken kitchen returned.

It instantly woke him up again, like a never-ending nightmare.

He could not storm Axel's estate blindly. That much he knew.

Axel was not someone to be messed with. He was a monster wearing an old man's skin. His senses, his combat experience, and his strength were too overwhelming.

So Teclos had no choice but to wait.

And watch.

Day by day, he gathered small pieces of information he needed to infiltrate the estate, carefully enough that he didn't look suspicious or get noticed by anyone. He used his patrols with the Black Hounds as cover, taking routes that passed near Axel's estate for brief moments before moving on.

He interchanged with different people from the Black Hounds, never telling them the real reason for that route.

When they searched for Saldia, he pretended to search with them. When they asked people questions, he pretended to listen while he was actually scouting Axel's villa through his senses. When they moved through the streets, he let them believe he was simply checking alleys and asking around like before.

But every time they passed Axel's estate, his dark sense brushed against the walls.

He counted guards and noted their patrol routes.

He noted who entered and who left the estate, and when.

Axel rarely showed himself.

When he did, it was always brief. A glimpse near the gate. A shadow behind a second-floor window. He never left his estate at all... which was a problem.

It halted his entire plan. The only thing he could do was carry on and observe silently.

To his surprise, Zamas was quite supportive and allowed the search.

The fat man helped more than Teclos expected. He sent word through his underground contacts, questioned informants, had drunkards bribed, had beggars watched, and had debtors threatened.

And still, no news of Saldia ever came back.

It was fine though, Teclos thought. Surely, once Axel left his estate, he would get his answers.

After a week, Zamas called Teclos into the back room.

Zamas sat behind his desk, fingers folded over his stomach, his usual smug smile nowhere to be seen.

Teclos stepped in front of him and greeted him.

Then Zamas sighed.

"Kid."

Teclos already knew he would not like what came next.

Zamas leaned back in his chair, the wood creaking beneath him.

"I'll be honest with you... your mother might already be dead."

Teclos's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

Zamas didn't sugarcoat his words at all and continued.

"Or sold off. Or moved out of the city. Or locked somewhere none of my people can reach. I've asked around. I've even spent a lot of coin to find her. I've had men lose sleep over this. Yet still nothing came up. This tells me that these guys were either really good at kidnapping... or worse, the big fish of the city, those that could easily wipe the floor with us."

His fingers tapped once against the desk.

"I can't keep suspending work for you. And I can't keep sending my people to chase a trail that might already be cold."

The words should have angered him, but they did not.

The next second, Teclos lowered his head.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Zamas blinked in surprise, as he didn't expect that kind of reaction.

Teclos looked up at him, his expression tired but sincere.

"For helping me."

For once, Zamas seemed slightly uncomfortable.

"Khhmm."

"But I have to continue searching," Teclos said. "If you don't mind."

Zamas studied him for a long moment, then waved one thick hand.

"Search if you want. I won't stop you."

Teclos gave a small nod.

Zamas continued, "I'll give you small jobs near the areas you want to check. Patrols, collections, messages. Things that won't take much of your time."

Teclos bowed his head again.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me too much," Zamas muttered. "I still expect work done."

"I know. I will get it done."

Teclos then turned to leave, and just as his hand touched the door, Zamas spoke again.

"Kid."

Teclos paused.

"Don't get yourself killed chasing a ghost. This might be more dangerous than we think."

He nodded again and then left.

The next day, his chance finally came.

Through his shadow sense, he overheard that Axel was leaving the estate that evening.

He made sure Axel was leaving by patrolling the area again. Teclos watched a carriage leave his estate with Axel on it and a few escorting knights by his side.

He followed them at the edge of his senses to make sure where the old man was heading, and sure enough, the carriage went through the gates and left the city.

It was now or never.

Teclos cloaked himself in darkness and vanished into the alleys.

He went straight to the Broken Crown.

The pub was as rowdy as ever. Falcon sat near the back with one boot on a chair and a cup of ale beside him, sharpening a knife with slow, careful strokes.

He looked up before Teclos reached him.

"Any news about your mother?"

Teclos stopped beside the table.

"I need a favor."

Falcon studied his face and immediately set the knife down.

"What kind?"

"I need a map of a villa in the city. Right now."

Falcon's eyes narrowed slightly.

"That is a very specific favor."

"I also need no one to know about it. Not Zamas. Not Derrick. No one. Just you and me."

Falcon leaned back and exhaled through his nose. He stared at Teclos for a few more seconds, then said,

"All right... but you owe me a favor in return now."

"No problem."

Falcon nodded and stood up. He went into the back room.

"Wait here."

Teclos remained by the table, nervous and twitchy at the same time, as he didn't have any time to waste right now.

After a while, Falcon returned with a folded map.

"It's an old layout," he said quietly. "So it might not be perfect. Rich bastards love changing things."

Teclos took it and immediately slipped it into his dark dimension.

"Thank you."

He turned to leave.

"Teclos."

Falcon's expression was calm but serious.

"Don't overdo it. If you need help, ask us."

Teclos nodded and thanked him once again. Then he rushed toward his home, where he prepared everything he had gathered throughout the week.

The ranger armor he stole from the smithy came first. High-grade, enchanted, and light enough not to make much noise when he moved around. It hugged his body beneath the cloak, reinforced in the right places without slowing him down too much.

Throwing knives, all stored in neat rows on his belt.

Smoke bombs.

A few small explosives.

The stealth cloak from the mercenary stash.

Finally, the claymore.

It was a well-made weapon, with runes etched along the blade that were the reason he had taken it. They could help mana flow more smoothly through the steel, sharpening the edge of any aura poured into it.

He strapped it to his back and unfolded the map.

Axel's villa had two underground rooms marked beneath the main structure.

One storage hall.

One sealed chamber.

Teclos stared at that second room for a long time.

If Saldia was anywhere, it would be there.

Outside, daylight was already dying. The last traces of the sun bled across the roofs, and night started to creep in between the streets.

Teclos checked everything one final time and wrapped himself in darkness.

His entire presence sank into the shadows, erasing him completely.

He reached the gate but did not reveal himself or approach the guards.

He moved through blind spots, across the wall, and slipped past the lantern light. Not even the guard captain noticed him or anything strange.

Axel's estate waited in the dark once he passed the gate.

Teclos reached the outer wall and crouched, watching the patrols. The security in Axel's estate was way more potent than the Morholt estate, with more guards, runes, and better patrols.

But it was not perfect.

He crossed the street and leapt, landing silently on top of the wall before dropping inside the garden. It was quiet.

Teclos kept his head low and moved fast through the shadows. Even when guards passed close enough that he could hear the leather creak around their armor, none noticed him.

He reached the main door and lockpicked it with a darkness key replica.

The lock opened and he slipped inside. Avoiding the servants, he beelined toward the underground rooms.

The first underground room was far from ordinary.

Chains hung from the walls. Iron tools lay neatly arranged on a long table. There were chairs with straps, hooks in the ceiling, and old stains scrubbed so often they had become part of the room.

Teclos's face hardened.

Axel had sick secrets. That did not surprise him, but to think that he wanted Axel to be his master back in the day.

He searched this shitty room anyway because it could hold clues to Saldia's kidnapping.

There were books on pain, poison, anatomy, and interrogation. Small jars lined one shelf, each labeled carefully. Hair. Teeth. Nails. Preserved eyes floating in a cloudy liquid.

Teclos stared at them for a moment, then moved on.

Other than that bastard's sick hobby, he found nothing.

He went upstairs.

The villa upstairs was, in contrast, elegant. It felt almost peaceful.

Expensively decorated carpets covered the floors everywhere. Polished floors. Paintings of landscapes. Servants' quarters arranged neatly near the back. The guest rooms seemed... untouched. The dining hall was clean.

Teclos left everything exactly as he found it.

But room after room, he came up with nothing.

A terrible thought began to creep in.

What if Axel was innocent?

What if Teclos had wasted a week chasing the wrong trail?

What if Saldia had been moved somewhere else while he watched this house like a fool?

His jaw tightened.

No...

He continued.

He checked walls, wardrobes, portraits, under beds, inside couches, behind shelves, beneath carpets. He looked for secret doors, hidden compartments, anything.

But the house felt clean, besides the torture chamber down below.

Now only one room remained, and that was Axel's study.

Teclos summoned his dimension and took out the rune dissolver, but then he changed his mind, as it would leave a trace that someone had been there. He then took out an enchanted lockpick that could silence the alarm and entered carefully once he opened it.

The room smelled faintly of ink, old paper, and expensive tobacco. Shelves covered nearly every wall, filled with rolled-up parchments bound in dark leather. A massive desk sat near the corner, carved from black wood and polished until it reflected the dim light from the window.

Behind a glass vitrine stood a collection of skulls.

Human.

Orc.

Elf.

Lizardman.

Even a few smaller ones Teclos could not identify.

Each skull had a tiny plaque beneath it, written in neat handwriting.

Names.

Dates.

Locations.

Presumably, people and monsters that Axel had killed himself.

Teclos stared at them with disgust, then turned toward the desk.

Papers were spread across it in ordered stacks.

Contracts.

Reports.

Names.

Targets.

He searched the drawers.

He checked the bookshelves next, pulling each book slightly, feeling for mechanisms, hollow spaces, hidden latches.

He pressed against sections of the walls.

"How?"

He couldn't believe it. How could there be nothing at all?

Was his intuition truly that garbage?

Had Axel been playing with him just because he could?

Teclos stood in the middle of the study, fists clenched, then his eyes drifted back to the papers on the desk.

He read them again, for the last time, to see if he had missed something.

Names of people.

Assassination contracts.

And finally, a clue appeared before Teclos as he saw the seal stamped on one of the letters.

His blood went cold.

The Count?

Axel was working under the Count himself.

Teclos carefully lifted the document and scanned the contents. His eyes read the parchment and widened.

Axel was not just some hired killer fulfilling contracts in the inner city.

He was working directly for the Count.

Teclos searched the rest of the papers with renewed focus.

Most had nothing to do with Saldia.

Then he found an inventory addressed to the Count. He had previously just skimmed over it.

At first glance, it seemed useless. Wines. Poisons. Weapons. Rare books. Stored materials. Medical supplies. Preserved specimens.

Then one entry stopped him.

It was an herb, a very specific herb.

The same herb Saldia had clutched when she was dragged from the house.

Not only that... the entry seemed fresh.

Teclos stared at the name of the herb, and his fingers slowly tightened around the paper.

'I knew it.'

It was not exactly proof, but it was enough for him.

Axel was, in fact, connected to his mother's disappearance. And what was worse, she seemed to have been kidnapped by the Count himself, seeing as she was not here...

Teclos folded the list and placed it inside his dark dimension.

Then he looked toward the window, where the city stretched beneath the darkening sky.

He finally had a direction to go off of, and chances were, she was alive, seeing as the Count was the culprit, or at least seemed to be the culprit.

He had a good reputation. He was regarded as an honest and upright man... so surely he wouldn't have killed her or sold her off, Teclos hoped.

There had to be a reason as to why he took her.

Chapter 97 - 96 - All Doors Shut

Teclos went to the Broken Crown.

Part of him already knew what the answer would be before he even reached the door, but desperation had a way of crushing pride beneath its heel. If there was even a small chance they would help, he had to ask.

The pub was quieter than usual when he entered. It was late afternoon, before the worst of the drinking began, and only a few mercenaries lingered around the tables. Zamas sat in his usual place in the back room, surrounded by smoke, ledgers, and half-empty cups. Falcon leaned against the wall nearby with his arms crossed, while Derrick sat on a chair too small for him, eating something from a wooden bowl.

All three looked up when Teclos approached.

Zamas took one look at his face and sighed.

"What is it, boy?"

Teclos stopped in front of the table.

"I have found a lead."

Falcon's and Derrick's attention shifted, and they both focused on Teclos.

Teclos pulled the folded inventory list from his coat and placed it on the table.

"I broke into Axel's estate."

The room went still with shock.

Derrick slowly set the bowl down.

"You did what?"

Teclos ignored him and pointed toward the paper.

"I found this in his study. It was addressed to the Count. One of the herbs listed there was the same herb Saldia had in her hand when she was dragged from the house."

Zamas stared at the paper, shaking his head. Then he reached out, unfolded it, and read silently.

Falcon stepped closer and looked over his shoulder.

Then, after a while, Zamas leaned back and sighed.

"No."

Teclos's jaw tightened. "I haven't asked yet."

"You don't need to, boy."

"I need help getting into the castle."

"No."

The word came colder this time.

Teclos looked at Falcon.

Falcon shook his head once.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not walking into the Count's castle."

Derrick scratched the back of his neck and looked away.

"Same. I'm sorry, kid."

Their answers hit Teclos harder than he expected, even though he had already prepared for it.

"You all know what this means."

Zamas slapped one thick hand against the table.

"No, you know what it might mean. Might. You found an herb, not solid proof."

Teclos stepped forward. "It's not just the herb."

"Oh... but it is!" Zamas said, his voice rising slightly. "A torn cloth near Axel's estate and an herb on an inventory list. That is what you have. You do not have a witness either. You have a faint trail that points toward the most powerful man in Lupos."

Falcon crossed his arms tighter.

"The Count may be benevolent," he said, "but he is no fool. Gambling districts, illegal trades, black markets, slave rings... he personally burned them out when they thought they were hidden enough. People forget that because he smiles in public and funds orphanages."

Derrick nodded grimly.

"And the castle is not some fat baron's estate. It has real knights patrolling inside."

Falcon looked at Teclos and nodded.

"True knights. Not the half-wits you fought before. A good example is Cassian. He came close to that level. The rest of his group was trash compared to what the Count keeps around him."

Teclos's hands curled.

"That is why I am asking for help."

"And I'm telling you no," Zamas said. "If we get caught, it's over. Forget about bribery or trying to escape. We will hang by next morning."

Derrick grimaced. "Or worse..."

Zamas tossed the paper back onto the table.

"You are useful to me, kid. I like you. But I am not declaring war on the ruler of this city."

Teclos's breathing grew slow and heavy.

"She is there."

"You don't know that."

"I know..."

Zamas stared at him for a long time. He sighed again and clutched his head in his palm.

"No. You want her to be there because then all this madness and grief has somewhere to go."

The words he said had some truth to them, though Teclos didn't want to admit it.

Falcon's expression softened slightly, but his voice remained firm.

"Teclos. Slow down. Find more proof. I am saying this for your own good, but even when you find proof, don't expect everything to be resolved."

"There is just no time for me to leisurely amass proof."

Teclos looked between them.

Zamas, Falcon, and Derrick. The closest things he had to allies in Lupos.

And all of them were refusing.

"I'm not going to sit still," he said quietly. "Not when I know she might be there."

Derrick exhaled.

"No one's asking you to sit still. We're asking you not to throw yourself into danger and die."

Teclos picked up the paper and folded it again.

"I'll find another way."

Zamas stood up and took one bottle of whiskey from a cupboard before pouring himself some.

"Kid, if you get caught... we don't know you. Just remember that."

Teclos turned around and nodded. Then he left, the door of the Broken Crown closing behind him.

For a moment, Teclos stood on the street, breathing through his nose and trying to calm himself down.

If the Broken Crown would not help, then maybe someone else would.

—

The church looked almost picturesque beneath the late afternoon sun.

Its white stone walls gleamed so brightly that they were nearly painful to look at, polished surfaces catching the golden light with unnatural purity. Priests moved through the courtyard in quiet order, while temple guards stood near the entrance in clean, shining armor. Citizens came and went with lowered heads, offering coins, whispering prayers, and begging for blessings.

Teclos had not been there since the day they threw him out just because he was a slum rat.

He had not seen the old priest in a long time, but some part of him still believed Pella would help if he knew. The man had helped him before, after all. Surely he would not turn a blind eye to his situation.

Teclos approached the stairs.

Two temple guards crossed their spears before him.

"State your business."

"I need to see Father Pella."

One guard looked him over.

"Father Pella is not receiving visitors."

"This is urgent."

"...What part of 'no' didn't you understand?"

Teclos clenched his jaw. "Tell him it's Teclos. From Kolma. He knows me."

The second guard shook his head.

"High-ranking officials cannot be disturbed for every street rat with a story."

Teclos frowned, and the first guard spoke more firmly, ordering him again.

"Leave."

"I said tell him my name." Teclos wouldn't back down.

"And I said leave before we make you leave."

Teclos looked past them toward the church doors.

"Pella!"

The guards' faces went stiff from shock.

"Pella!"

Several people in the courtyard turned their heads, and the temple guards finally stepped forward.

"Enough."

But Teclos did not stop.

"My mother was kidnapped! I need to speak with Father Pella!"

One guard grabbed his shoulder but quickly came to regret it.

Teclos twisted, caught the man's wrist, and drove him down into the stone steps. The second guard swung his spear, but a dark hand snapped out from beneath Teclos and knocked the shaft aside before slamming the guard into a pillar.

The courtyard erupted with screams from the people.

A third temple guard rushed him from the side. But Teclos just ducked under the blow and drove his elbow into the man's stomach, then swept his legs out from under him.

Three guards were down.

Teclos turned toward the church doors again.

"Pella!"

But the next second, the air around him grew heavy.

That was the only warning he got before a man suddenly stood in front of his face.

A paladin.

The man simply spun Teclos around and slammed him to the ground, hard enough to crack the stone and knock the air out of him.

The paladin looked down at him with a calm but cold expression.

"Enough."

Teclos tried to rise and ignore his warning, but the paladin just broke his arms and punched his skull against the pavement, knocking him out... almost killing him.

The last thing he saw was the white stone of the church steps beneath his face.

Then darkness swallowed him.

—

He woke up in pain, chained up in an underground cell.

It was damp and cold. There was even a collar around his neck that made his mana feel... heavy and unresponsive.

Teclos tried to move and immediately hissed through his teeth. His ribs burned, he had a head-splitting headache, his hand seemed to still be broken, and the chains ground against his skin.

Hours passed.

And he was not given any food.

Only dirty water, and even that only once, shoved through a gap in the bars.

Teclos sat there for two days, although for him, it almost felt like an eternity.

By the end of the second day, hunger gnawed at his stomach and he was getting delirious.

Finally, toward the end of the second day, he heard footsteps approaching from the hallway.

A lantern glow spilled into the corridor.

Teclos lifted his head and saw Father Pella standing outside his cell.

For one foolish second, warmth rose in Teclos's chest, and a glimmer of hope showed on his face.

Then he looked at the old priest's face.

It was without the gentle smile he was used to, and instead of relief and open arms, only disappointment showed on it.

The guard beside him unlocked the cell.

Pella stepped inside and looked down at him.

"You look terrible, kid."

Teclos swallowed.

"Father—"

"No."

The word was quiet, but it silenced him instantly.

Pella crouched and touched the chains. Light mana pulsed from his fingers, and the locks opened one after another.

"I do not want to hear what you have to say for yourself."

Teclos stared at him.

Pella's voice remained calm, but there was an iron will beneath it.

"You attacked temple guards in front of the church and caused panic in the courtyard. You shouted like a madman and forced a paladin to subdue you..."

"My mother—"

"I said I do not want to hear it."

Teclos's mouth shut.

Pella stood up after healing him enough for Teclos to walk out on his own.

"I barely pulled enough strings to have you released. Barely. Do not mistake this for forgiveness."

Teclos slowly pushed himself up, and Pella looked at him for a long moment.

"If you ever do something like that again, I will not be able to help you. And you will not see the light of day for a very long time."

Teclos wanted to argue.

Wanted to tell him everything.

But Pella's cold eyes gave him nothing.

So he lowered his head.

The guards dragged him out of the cell and through the corridors. A side door opened behind the church, and Teclos was shoved into the alley outside.

He stumbled, caught himself against the wall, and turned back.

The door closed.

Just like that.

—

By the time Teclos reached the Silver Griffins' guild, he was running on nothing but stubbornness.

His stomach was empty. His pride had been ground into dust and kicked across the street.

But he still had one person left to try... although unlikely.

Ralph.

The Silver Griffins' guild hall was clean and well-maintained, with a warm, welcoming feeling to it, a stark difference from the Broken Crown. Its sign hung proudly above the entrance, polished and well-kept. Laughter drifted from inside when Teclos pushed the door open.

Several young hunters and mercenaries looked over, and their smiles faded when they saw him.

Teclos approached the counter nonetheless and asked,

"I need to speak with Ralph."

The clerk looked at him, then toward the back.

"Wait there."

Teclos stood near the wall as minutes passed.

Then Ralph came out from a hallway with several guildmates around him, laughing at something one of them had said. He somehow looked stronger than the last time Teclos had seen him.

Then Ralph spotted Teclos, and his smile died.

No.

It didn't just die. It twisted into a scowl.

Ralph walked toward him slowly and spat on the floor a step away from his boots.

"What do you want?"

Teclos took the insult without reacting.

"Can we talk in private? It's urgent."

Ralph barked a humorless laugh.

"Why can't you say it here, huh? Is it related to some petty crime that finally bit you back?"

A few of Ralph's guildmates snickered.

Teclos grimaced, but swallowed his pride.

"It's Mom."

The snickering from Ralph instantly stopped, and his expression changed.

"What?"

"It's about Mom."

For a long moment, Ralph simply stared at him.

Then he glanced back at his guildmates.

"This might be a long one. Sorry."

A tall guy with brown hair nodded, waved his hand dismissively, and led the others away.

"It's fine. Seems urgent, so take your time."

"Thanks."

Teclos looked around the hall.

"We need absolute silence. Nobody should be able to overhear us. I don't know who to trust anymore."

Ralph stared at him for another second, then nodded toward the back door.

"Come on."

They walked down a long hallway and entered a small interrogation room near the rear of the guild. Runes lined the walls, and when Ralph closed the door, the noise from outside vanished completely.

They sat across from each other at a plain wooden desk.

Ralph gestured with one hand.

"All right... go on. What about her?"

Teclos glanced at the runes.

"Is this safe?"

Ralph rolled his eyes.

"Just say it already."

Teclos exhaled, and for the first time since entering, the cracks in him showed. His face looked pale, tense, close to breaking.

"First off, Mom was kidnapped."

Ralph's eyes widened, but before he could say something, Teclos continued.

"I turned over every stone and searched every hole for her the same night she disappeared. I haven't stopped looking, and it's been two weeks already. The problem is... I have a hunch."

The silence stretched between them, and Ralph leaned back slightly.

"I guess this is the part you didn't want to say out loud, seeing as you're suddenly silent."

"Yeah." Teclos looked down at his hands and continued. "Remember Axel?"

Ralph's brow furrowed.

"Your master?"

"He is not my master." Teclos's voice sharpened for a second, then settled. "But yes. Him."

Ralph watched him carefully.

"I found Mom's torn clothing near his estate," Teclos said. "But before I could enter, he noticed me and stopped me."

"You're suspecting your ma... Axel, based off one torn cloth?"

"No." Teclos shook his head. "I'm basing it off his reaction when I told him what happened. And after that, he watched me for a whole week."

Ralph couldn't believe that a figure like Axel got noticed. "You noticed him?"

"Yes, but I pretended not to."

Teclos continued.

"I finally got into his estate when he left. I searched everything. Basement, rooms, study, all of it. I found an inventory parchment for cargo. There was a rare herb listed there. The same herb Mom held in her hands before she got dragged away."

Ralph did not interrupt him anymore and listened attentively, his earlier scorn fading piece by piece.

Teclos's throat tightened.

"Now the big problem..."

Ralph's eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean? Your master isn't the big problem?"

"No."

Teclos looked up.

"The inventory was addressed to the Count."

The words landed like a stone dropped into still water, and Ralph visibly recoiled.

"You don't mean..."

"Yeah," Teclos said quietly. "It's just a 'hunch' for now." His fingers curled against the table. "But I'm fairly certain."

Chapter 98 - 97 - The Castle Awaits

Ralph did not answer him immediately.

He only stared at Teclos from across the table, then rubbed his face in frustration, tapping his fingers against the wood.

"The Count," he repeated quietly.

Teclos nodded.

Ralph leaned back in his chair and let out a slow breath through his nose.

"You do understand what you're saying, right?"

"I do."

"No, I mean really understand." Ralph looked Teclos in the eyes with a piercing stare. "This isn't some merchant or a gang boss. This isn't even some idiot noble. We're talking about the Count."

Teclos stayed silent.

Ralph continued, his voice laced with concern.

"It's the ruler of this whole city. The man has a good reputation, and people like him. Hell, I've done work under his supervision before with the mercenaries, and even our captain adores the man."

"That doesn't mean he's innocent."

"No," Ralph admitted. "But it means accusing him without proof... is dangerous."

Teclos's hands tightened on the edge of the table.

"I'm not asking you for much."

"You're asking me to help you sneak into his castle."

Teclos looked down.

For a few seconds, only the faint hum of the runes filled the room.

Then he lifted his gaze again.

"I know how it sounds. I know the risk. I know I could be wrong." His voice roughened slightly. "But it's my mother we are talking about here, Ralph."

Ralph's expression shifted, but he said nothing.

Teclos leaned forward.

"I can get equipment from our stash. I can go in alone. I only need help with the infiltration. You won't be in any real danger. I just need a distraction, even if it's only for a second. Just long enough for the guards to look at you instead of where I'm moving."

Ralph scratched the back of his head and looked toward the wall.

"It's still really... really risky."

"I know," Teclos simply said.

"You're insane."

"Hah! I know that too."

Ralph stared at him, and the silence stretched between them for a long moment. Then Ralph violently scratched his hair and slammed his hands on the table.

"Fine."

Teclos blinked, surprised.

Ralph pointed at him immediately.

"For old times' sake. That's it. Don't make that face."

"Really?"

"Don't make me regret it before I even start."

Teclos's shoulders loosened for the first time in days.

"Thanks, man. I mean it. Really, thank you. Even if, you know..." He hesitated.
"We aren't really friends anymore."

Ralph let out a dry laugh.

"Hah. That's your own fault."

Teclos lowered his gaze slightly.

"But," Ralph continued, "if you get caught, you're dead. You know that, right?"

"It's my mom we're talking about," Teclos said. "I'm willing to take any risk."

"Well, at least that's admirable, unlike what you usually do now."

"..." He couldn't argue with that.

Ralph shook his head and stood.

"All right then. Come here when you have everything ready, and we can go do your stupid plan."

Teclos stood as well.

"Thank you."

"You already said that."

"And I'll say it again."

Ralph looked at him for a second, then waved him away.

"Go before I change my mind."

Teclos nodded and rushed toward the door.

Behind him, Ralph stayed in the room for a few moments longer, staring at the closed door.

Then he scratched his head again.

"I sure hope I don't regret this decision..."

With a sigh, he left the guild and headed toward the bar across the street.

—

Teclos rushed toward the Broken Crown next.

The moment he entered, the smell of ale, smoke, sweat, and loud noise hit him like usual. The pub was louder than the Silver Griffins' guild, rougher too, but it felt more familiar and more like home to him than that polished Griffins guild.

Marek stood behind the counter, wiping a cup with a cloth, when he looked up and saw Teclos enter the pub.

He stared at Teclos as he passed.

"You look like you're about to do something stupid."

Teclos stopped for half a second.

"I need to go to the back room."

Marek shook his head and slammed the cup down on the counter.

"Now, I know you won't stop until you find her, so..." He sighed and looked away.
"Just be careful."

"I'll try."

Teclos almost smiled at Marek's concern, but continued walking toward the back door.

Something was odd, though.

Now that he was inside, the pub did not feel as rowdy as it usually did. As he walked past the many mercenaries, their conversations suddenly lowered, then died down completely. Several of them watched him pass.

It was not mockery.

At least, Teclos did not think so. And then finally, after a few seconds of silence, comforting words came from them. One lifted his cup slightly.

"Take care, kid."

Another grunted from a table.

"Hope you find her."

A woman near the wall nodded once.

"Come back alive."

"Good luck," someone else muttered.

Teclos slowed.

For a moment, he did not know what to do with that. These were drug dealers, killers, drunkards, thieves, and criminals.

But somehow, they were being supportive. A faint smirk pulled at his mouth at the irony.

"Thanks."

He stepped through the back room door, and the noise finally died down. But the moment he opened the door to the weapons room, three shadows shifted in the corner.

Teclos stopped and then sighed.

"Guys, you do know I saw your shadows already, right?"

There was a pause.

Then Derrick stepped out with both hands raised.

"Oooh, hey! It's our hero!"

Zamas, who sat behind his desk, immediately facepalmed.

Falcon leaned against the wall and shook his head.

"You really are dumb sometimes," Falcon muttered.

Derrick frowned. "What?"

Zamas slapped the desk once.

"Enough."

Zamas's face was red, though whether from ale, embarrassment, or irritation was hard to tell. Falcon looked calm as usual, but his eyes avoided Teclos's for a second longer than normal.

That alone told Teclos something was off, and Zamas cleared his throat.

"Listen, kid... although we won't be coming with you, we'll at least gear you up."

Teclos stared at him, surprised and stunned.

Meanwhile, Zamas gained another shade of red and scratched his neck again.

Derrick's grin widened.

"Hahaha! Boss is being shy!"

Zamas's face darkened.

"Shut up!"

"You are! Look at you, all red and concerned."

Zamas stood and slapped Derrick across the back several times with his heavy hand.

Derrick immediately hunched forward.

"Aahh, stop! That hurts!"

"Then stop talking."

Falcon stepped forward before they could start properly fighting. He held out a small ring.

Teclos looked at it.

"What is this?"

"A spatial ring," Falcon said. "Not as convenient as your dark dimension, but useful if you need to keep certain things separate."

Teclos slowly took it.

Falcon nodded toward it.

"It has items inside that you'll need. Smoke bombs, flash bombs, rope, climbing hooks, a few lockpicks, two healing potions, one mana potion, and a small rune dissolver. Use that sparingly. You have enough of it to melt maybe three or four runes."

Teclos looked down at the ring in his palm, and his throat tightened.

Zamas leaned back in his chair, trying very hard to look casual.

"We all put something inside that we thought could be useful to you... this is our farewell gift to you, should you find your mother and run away."

Derrick crossed his arms.

"Good luck, kid. And hopefully we won't see you for the last time."

Teclos looked up sharply when he heard that they had guessed his plans so obviously.

Derrick smirked.

"What? You think we didn't notice? Kid, you have it written all over your face."

For a few seconds, Teclos did not know what to say.

He had come here expecting that he would have to steal the stuff from the weapons room, not have it handed over so readily.

It was enough to help him survive most situations.

He closed his fingers around the ring and tried to hold back a tear.

"Thank you."

Derrick waved it off.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't get all sentimental now. It's weird."

Falcon's expression turned serious, and he gave him some advice.

"Listen carefully. The castle has outer patrols, inner patrols, and warded sections. You'll have to use a distraction just to get in. I would recommend throwing a flash bomb outside the walls... I could maybe help you with that, 'accidentally' drop it as I drunkenly play around. After that, you are alone."

"Yeah, I know, but don't worry. I already have some help prepared."

"Oh, well then it's fine, I guess. Also, try to avoid killing anyone," Falcon said. "Those knights inside are strong enough to notice and thwart your assassination attempt on them, meaning it's going to be a loud fight... and help will be on the way for them."

Teclos nodded.

Zamas pointed at him.

"Again, if you get caught, you were never here... but I do hope you won't, boy..."

"I know."

Derrick stepped closer and placed his hand on Teclos's shoulder.

"Good luck, kid. I, for one, hope you'll return to us."

Before Teclos left, he looked at them again. "If it's possible, I will definitely return," he said.

—

Teclos returned to his broken home and prepared himself.

He cleaned up the kitchen until it was spotless, and no traces remained. But even then, even if it was clean now, it couldn't replace the void of warmth left by Saldia.

He did not look at it for long and walked to his room, laying everything out.

He still had the ranger armor.

It was dark, fitted, and flexible, reinforced with thin plates over the chest, shoulders, forearms, and thighs. Enchantment runes had been etched into the material, softening the sound of every movement he made. It was the perfect armor for him—silent, yet sturdy.

It would not stop the full force of a knight's strike, but it might keep him alive through one mistake.

One mistake was more than he could usually afford.

He put it on piece by piece, tightening each strap with careful precision. With every plate he fastened and every buckle he drew tight, his expression shifted. The softness left his face, replaced by something colder and more focused.

He looked as if he were preparing for war, even though his only intention was to slip inside silently and, if possible, kill no one.

Throwing knives went onto his belt in neatly arranged rows. The knives that didn't fit went into the dark dimension.

In a way, he was preparing for war with all of the gear he was throwing into the dark dimension.

Smoke bombs.

Flash bombs.

A coil of rope.

Climbing hooks.

Lockpicks.

Healing potions.

Mana potion.

Rune dissolver.

Lastly, he threw the stealth cloak over himself.

It wrapped around his shoulders and was fastened at his collar. The fabric blended with his own shadows until his outline blurred at the edges naturally.

Instead of the claymore he had, he fitted himself with a short sword from the weapons room. The claymore was too large to move around with in tight spaces.

He still had it in his dark dimension. If things went wrong, he could just pull it out if the need arose for something that could cut through armor.

Then he stood in the center of the room and closed his eyes.

He breathed slowly, letting the noise in his mind settle until only one image remained.

Saldia.

He saw her smiling tiredly over a pot of stew, scolding him for coming home late, pressing herbs into his hand the way she always did when she was worried. He heard her voice, soft but firm, calling him her son.

When his eyes opened, something in them had changed.

The room around him darkened.

Shadows crawled up from the floor and wrapped around his boots, his legs, his arms, his cloak. His presence sank deeper and deeper until the air itself seemed to forget he was there.

He looked once toward the kitchen.

Then he walked outside.

Tonight, he would enter the Count's castle.

And if Saldia was there, he would bring her home at all costs.

If someone stood in his way...

Then they would learn what happened when a desperate son ran out of options.

Chapter 99 - 98 -The Iron Door

The castle wall rose before Teclos like a massive black cliff, barring his entry.

Lanterns burned along the battlements, their golden light cutting through the night in slow, sweeping arcs. Knights moved above in organized patrols, fully armored with spears in hand and alert eyes. There was not even one lazy guard here. Everyone maintained full order and attention, which made Teclos grimace.

It made him realize that this would be a long, arduous night of constantly being on his toes, with his guard and stealth up.

Teclos crouched in the shadow of a narrow alley across from the outer wall. He pulled the darkness over himself like a second cloak, hiding him even more. The darkness spread throughout his body like ink, and wherever it passed, his presence dimmed until it was nonexistent.

Across the street, Ralph staggered into view.

He was laughing loudly, with one arm around the shoulders of another random man who looked like he would fall over any second with how drunk he was. They stumbled near the gate road, arguing about some debt, then Ralph suddenly shoved him, hard enough to make him crash into a stack of empty crates.

The loud crash split the night, and multiple guards on the wall turned their heads.

"Hey!" a knight called from above. "Move away from there!"

Ralph spread his arms wide and looked up with the most offended expression Teclos had ever seen.

"Oi! The road is free for anyone!"

"Tell those money-grubbing bastards..." the other man slurred as he lay upside down in the crates, fighting the urge to just sleep there.

Ralph looked ahead and saw two guards walking closer toward them.

Then he looked to the side and saw the man already snoring.

Within seconds, Ralph started walking away, not wanting to actually be caught, while mentally apologizing to the man who would probably be thrown into a dungeon now.

But the distraction worked nonetheless, and Teclos took his chance.

The climbing hook flew upward, wrapped in his mana until it wasn't noticeable anymore. It caught the edge of the wall with a soft scrape that was swallowed by the noise beneath. Teclos pulled once to test it, then ran.

He overcame the wall quickly with the help of the rope, but a guard was already walking toward him.

Teclos froze.

'Shit.'

The guard walked toward the edge, and Teclos pressed himself flat against the wall. Just in case, he poured more mana into his stealth and around the rope and hook. His presence was nonexistent, but if the guard by chance looked closer, he would have to stab him to death already.

The knight stopped just above him and looked around.

For one terrible second, Teclos thought he would look down. His hand shifted toward the short sword and he readied himself.

The guard luckily turned away and patrolled onward without noticing him.

Teclos hauled himself over the battlement, rolled silently behind a stack of covered crates, and pulled the hook free. The rope vanished into his dark dimension a heartbeat later.

He slipped across the battlements, moving only when the patrols turned their backs or when the lantern light shifted away from him. Twice, he had to hang from the outer side of the wall while knights passed close enough above him that dust fell onto his hood. Once, he nearly ran into a guard coming around a corner too quickly... he couldn't even sense him, even though he always had his senses unfurled.

Teclos's hand snapped up, dark fingers forming silently behind the man's neck.

Teclos sank back into the shadows, across from his previous position before the man looked again.

The knight stared at the empty corner for a moment longer, then shook his head and continued on.

Teclos waited until his footsteps faded. Only then did he let himself breathe again.

Past the outer defenses, the main structure stood broad and pale in the moonlight, all towers, narrow windows, and carved stone. It was beautiful in the same way a drawn sword was beautiful. Cold. Sharp. Made to impress and dominate with authority.

Teclos crossed the courtyard across the wall with dark, spiderlike legs, and then hid under a carriage.

He moved with the black spaces between the lanterns, timing each step with patrol movements and distant sounds. No one saw him. No one even looked close enough to wonder.

Still, finding a way inside took longer than he liked.

For nearly half an hour, he circled the castle's lower walls, searching for weak spots in their defenses. The front entrance was impossible. The side doors were guarded. The windows were narrow, many of them warded with faintly glowing runes.

Then he found the servants' entrance.

It was tucked near the rear, beside a narrow kitchen yard where baskets, crates, and water barrels were stacked in neat rows. The door opened every few minutes as servants moved in and out, carrying trays, linens, coal, or baskets of vegetables. There were no knights standing directly beside it, only two patrolling nearby.

That made it the best option.

Teclos waited near the shadow of a storage shed.

A maid approached the door with a folded bundle of cloth in her arms. She walked quickly, her head lowered and her shoulders tense from a long day. Teclos studied the rhythm of her steps.

The moment she opened the door and slipped inside, Teclos followed half a breath behind her, matching the sound of her footsteps so perfectly that his own vanished beneath them. The door closed behind him with a creak.

Warm air hit his face.

The smell of cooked meat, soap, wax, and polished stone filled the corridor.

Teclos pressed himself against the wall as the maid continued forward, unaware that death had followed her inside, had she turned around.

He waited until she turned the corner, then exhaled and immediately realized he had another problem.

He had no map of the castle.

Falcon's map had only marked old outer structures and possible guard routes. Nothing inside matched cleanly. Corridors split in places that should not have existed. Doors led to pantries, laundry rooms, storage closets, and servant passages that twisted like veins beneath the castle's skin.

Within minutes, Teclos was lost.

Still, he did not panic and tried to keep a calm and collected thought process. Logically speaking, where would she be? The dungeon. So now all he needed to do was find a staircase leading to the lower floors.

He moved carefully, listening before every turn, feeling for footsteps through the floor, brushing his senses against the walls where he could. Servants were everywhere at first. Maids carrying folded linen. Kitchen boys with baskets. Older women whispering complaints to each other. A man pushing a cart full of firewood.

Teclos slipped around them all.

Sometimes he pressed himself flat against the ceiling beams, cloak hanging still beneath him while servants passed below. Sometimes he ducked into side rooms seconds before patrols turned corners. Once, two knights walked down the corridor ahead, forcing him into a narrow alcove behind a suit of ceremonial armor.

One knight stopped directly beside him.

"Did you hear something?"

Teclos's breath hitched, and he instantly placed a hand on his sword.

The other knight sighed. "I didn't hear anything besides the servants and rabid rats."

"My armor does not squeak."

"It does."

"It is enchanted."

"Then it squeaks expensively."

The first knight muttered something and walked on.

Teclos waited until their voices faded before stepping out.

The stealth itself came easier than he expected.

That almost made it worse.

Because sneaking past people was not enough. He needed to find where they kept prisoners. He needed a dungeon, a lower level, a staircase heading somewhere no servant wanted to go.

For a long while, he found nothing.

Only luxury.

Carpets soft enough to swallow footsteps. Painted ceilings. Silver lamps. Carved doors. Warm halls that smelled of flowers and wax.

Every beautiful room made his stomach twist.

Somewhere beneath all of this, Saldia might be bleeding.

Or worse.

He kept moving.

At last, near the western side of the castle, he found a corridor that felt different.

The servants avoided it.

The light was dimmer.

The air was colder.

Two knights stood at the far end, guarding a narrow stairway descending underground.

Teclos stopped in the shadow of a pillar.

There it was.

The way down.

But the path was not open.

Runes glowed faintly along the corners of the corridor, small and discreet, carved into the stone where careless eyes would miss them. Detection wards. Alarm wards. Something else he could not immediately recognize. Farther down, beyond the first two guards, the stairs turned and vanished into darkness.

Teclos pulled the small vial of rune dissolver from Falcon's ring.

"Three or four runes," Falcon had said.

There were more than three or four.

Teclos cursed silently.

Then he climbed.

Dark hands carried him up the wall and onto the ceiling, where the shadows gathered thickest between the beams. He moved above the first pair of knights, slow and silent, every muscle locked under control. One drop of sweat slid down his jaw and fell.

He caught it with a thread of darkness before it hit the floor.

The first rune blocked the ceiling path just above the stairwell.

Teclos uncorked the vial and let one drop fall onto the carved mark.

The rune hissed softly.

The glow faded.

He moved on.

Down the stairway, the security only grew worse.

Knights stood at checkpoints along the path, never many at once, but always enough to make a fight dangerous. Runes marked the walls. Some were hidden beneath decorative iron plates. Some were carved beneath the lip of steps. Some crossed the ceiling itself, forcing him to stop, dissolve them, and move before the patrols shifted.

By the third checkpoint, the vial was half-empty.

By the fourth, almost gone.

Teclos clung to the ceiling above two knights speaking quietly below.

"Shift changes soon?"

"Another hour."

"Feels longer down here."

"It always does."

Teclos held the vial near the rune blocking his path and watched the last few drops cling to the glass.

If there was another checkpoint after this, he would have to kill.

Silently.

Quickly.

One knight first, throat cut before a sound left him. The second with a dark hand over the mouth and a knife beneath the ribs. Drag both bodies into shadow. Hope no one noticed the missing patrol before he found Saldia.

He hated how easily the plan formed in his mind.

The last drop of dissolver touched the rune.

The glow died.

Teclos moved on.

The stairs curved again.

No more checkpoints.

For once, luck did not spit in his face.

At the bottom stood an iron door.

It was massive, dark, and covered in runes so densely carved that the whole surface seemed to breathe with quiet light. Teclos stared at it, then at the empty vial in his hand.

No dissolver left.

He stored the vial and took out the enchanted lockpicks.

The lock itself was old, heavy, and cruelly complicated. The runes around it pulsed faintly when he touched the first pick to the keyhole. The enchantment inside the tool flared, interrupting the ward.

Thirty seconds.

Maybe less.

Teclos worked fast.

The first pick snapped after twelve.

He threw it into his dark dimension before the broken magic could flare and pulled out another.

The second jammed.

He twisted, felt the rune begin to wake, and yanked it free just before it cracked. Into the darkness it went.

Third.

Fourth.

His breathing stayed steady, but his heart beat like a war drum in his chest.

Then he heard footsteps.

Slow.

Coming down the staircase.

Teclos's hands moved faster.

The fifth lockpick slid into place, glowing hot between his fingers.

The footsteps continued.

Closer.

Closer.

A turn in the stairs.

Metal shifting.

A quiet sigh.

The lock clicked.

Teclos opened the door just wide enough to slip through, stepped inside, and pulled it shut behind him without a sound.

He pressed his back to the inside of the iron door, knife already in hand.

The footsteps reached the other side.

Stopped.

Teclos did not breathe.

Someone stood there for several seconds.

Then the footsteps turned.

Slowly, they moved back up the stairs.

It was just a patrol a and nothing more.

Teclos waited until the sound faded completely before lowering the knife.

Then he turned around.

And froze.

His stomach lurched so violently he almost vomited.

Whatever he had expected to find beneath the Count's castle, it was nothing like this.