

CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD

Chapter 11 - 10 - Herbal Mischief and Heroic Achievement

Whistling happily in the kitchen, Saldia was making dinner – the usual for Teclos and herself, but a special herb-spiced and healthy meal for Talmir.

One week had already passed since Talmir returned from his mission.

She wouldn't admit it, but she kind of liked that Talmir was injured – not badly, of course, but just enough that he had to stay at home. Usually, he came back late at night from scouting or hunts, so now that he was home, she was happy she could spend time with him.

"Hmmm, I could prolong his stay here and mix a rather unhealthy herb mixture," she whispered.

By instinct, she grabbed a bottle of spineblight ivy – a toxic herb with red thorns and black veins. Although toxic, it had its use in medical treatments if mixed with the right ingredients and diluted. When applied properly, it could reduce high fever, inflammation, or even purge small infections.

But if used for its toxic traits, it could have the opposite effect. Its thorns could induce high fever or hallucinations, and in bigger doses it could even be lethal.

She suddenly wanted to put a small dose into Talmir's pot so he would get a fever and be sick just a bit longer.

"No, no, no, Saldia... this is a dangerous line of thought," she told herself.

Just then Teclos walked into the kitchen.

"Mom, can I eat later—"

"Aaaah! Teclos! Don't startle me like that!"

Before he could finish, Saldia screamed and dropped the bottle on the floor.

Looking down, Teclos recognized the herb and wondered.

"Mom, I don't think Father has any inflammations... why were you using that herb?"

She answered with a forced smile.

"It can calm fever as well, so I thought I'd brew it just in case. Anyway, why did you want to eat later again?" she quickly changed the subject.

"Gillard made a new short sword, so me and Ralph are going to check it out. He's right outside — so can I please go?"

"Yes, you may go, but don't be back too late," she said. And as Teclos walked out the door, her smile disappeared and cold sweat appeared on her forehead.

"Phew, that was close." Looking at the ivy scattered across the floor, she sighed. "I'd better clean this up and finish dinner."

She carefully picked up the herbs and placed them in another jar, then finished the meal and brought Talmir a plate of bitterroot gruel.

He smelled it.

"Oh no... not again..." Talmir thought.

Bitterroot gruel was a torture device — at least Talmir thought so. The ingredients were simple: boiled bitterroot, which tasted like mud or hard tree bark; thin broth; and ground marrowweed, which supposedly helped blood flow but tasted horrible.

It had a watery, sour, earthy taste with no real flavor — but despite that, it was exceptionally good medicine, so he had to eat it. Now that he was at his wife's mercy, he didn't dare complain lest she brewed something even worse out of anger.

For Talmir, two weeks seemed impossible to survive. After the first two days, he already felt like he'd had enough. Just lying there and eating healthy food... Well, being pampered by his beautiful wife helped, but he could only take so much of the food she brought.

She was by no means a bad cook — she even managed to make that godawful food taste not so bad.

"What I wouldn't give for a nice steak right now..." he whispered to himself.

Then there was the other problem: Talmir was naturally an outgoing man — not a social butterfly, but a nature-loving, camping type. He loved solo trips to the mountains, fishing, and hunting. Being chained to a bed felt like another form of torture.

Then Saldia walked in with the food, interrupting his thoughts.

"Honey, i made you dinner,"

She said lovingly with a smile. Talmir felt lucky and unlucky at the same time, but atleast he didn't know that he was almost poisoned by this beauty.

While Talmir wallowed in self-pity while Saldia spoon fed him, Teclos was making his way toward the smithy with Ralph.

"How much do you think he's improved?" Teclos asked.

"What do you mean? Of course he's improved a lot! After all, his teacher and master is his father, Iron Hammer Drada – one of the best blacksmiths in this kingdom!"

"He's that famous?" Teclos wondered.

"Dude, you live under a rock... how could you not know this? He's literally the pride of our village," mocked Ralph.

"Maybe I live under a rock, but at least it's not the same one you use as a brain," shot back Teclos.

"Whatever, you recluse. You just don't get it. Your mom should get you a book on how to be social — maybe then you'll realize people exist outside your rock collection at home," Ralph retorted.

"If by people you mean yourself, I think I can safely say I've already got the full experience."

"Yeah, you are right — but you waste this premium experience, instead of interacting with other humans you are talking to no one else. Stop being such a loner man, sooner or later you'll gonna need human interaction or you'll forget how to talk."

"Ugh." Teclos grunted.

It was a sad truth that, besides his parents, Ralph, and Gillard, he had no one else. It wouldn't have bothered him much under normal circumstances, but the village was a tight-knit community—so not fitting in could spell problems later.

Ralph smirked. "What? No more comebacks?"

As their banter finished in Teclos's defeat, they arrived at the smithy, where a steady hammering echoed. Unless there was a special event in the village, that hammer never stopped – from early morning, before even the roosters woke, until nightfall.

There was a reason Drada, the head blacksmith, was called a genius and one of the kingdom's best.

Going to the back door, they bypassed the hunters and customers and went up the stairs to the second floor, straight to Gillard's room.

Opening the door, Ralph announced himself with a grin.

"Hey man, we came to see the new sword!"

"Yeah, Ralph said it was a short sword. Did you engrave something cool on it by chance?" Teclos asked curiously.

Welcoming them in, Gillard sat in his room holding a beautiful sword in his hands.

The sword was a simple arming sword – single-handed, straight, double-edged. The metal had an unusual dark blue tint, catching the light subtly without gleaming. The hilt was plain but sturdy, wrapped in worn leather, practical and comfortable, hinting at quiet strength and balance.

Smiling, Gillard held the blade like a father would hold his child.

"This – this is the best work I've done so far, guys. Father even praised it. You can't imagine how strict his criteria for a good sword are!" he laughed, overflowing with happiness.

It was the first time they'd seen him like that, and soon they both laughed with him.

"Can I hold it?" Teclos asked.

"Sure – and while you look at it, I'll explain the details." After handing him the sword, Gillard began excitedly,

"First, I used a rare metal Father gave me – orichalcum. It's basically two grades under mithril in mana conductivity, but sturdier. Perfect for beginner squires and aspiring knights. It took me eight days to make – that's why I was always here instead of with you guys. The hammering was brutal. I'm pretty strong for my age, but this metal barely moved. I hammered, shaped, folded, quenched – i was relentless. It was as stubborn as a mule, i tell you! Once the shape was done, I

made a hilt from star-willow wood Father prepared — it's a flexible wood that won't break or splinter so easily — and wrapped it in wolf leather as a finish. And here it is, my best work!"

While Ralph was surprised Gillard could even talk that much, Teclos swung the sword and it released a sharp ringing noise. It felt sturdy in his hands.

"Once we come of age, you have to make three swords for all of us, Gillard," said Teclos eyes sparkling.

A second later Ralph chimed in,

"Yes! And with swords like that, we can go on our first hunt together! Just imagine people's faces when we bring back a lightning wolf or a fire bear — with those blades it's possible, I tell you!"

"Pfff, you'd piss your pants encountering a stone boar, let alone a bear," laughed Teclos, as did Gillard.

"Yeah, I bet Ralph wouldn't even bring a horned hare."

Ralph leaned back, grinning wickedly.

"Oh, a horned hare? Please. I'd catch it blindfolded, roast it for lunch, and still get back in time to laugh at you two whining that you didn't catch anything. You two, a recluse and rock for brains, can keep dreaming — I'll be the one making legends while you're still arguing over petty small game."

Gillard laughed.

"Sure you will, like i will be a king some day. But seriously, guys, I doubt I can make the same kind of swords again. The material cost is huge — and three of them? Father would work me to the bone to pay it off. I'll forge us weapons, don't worry — just not from the same material."

Ralph patted his shoulder.

"Don't sweat it, buddy. We're not gonna mooch off you. I can bring leather armor from my pops and tasty jerky. Teclos can bring poisons and healing potions. You bring the swords, Gillard — then we'll be ready for anything on our coming-of-age hunt!"

"For once I agree with Ralph," said Teclos, patting both of them on the shoulders.

Gillard just smiled at first and then replied, "i know this is cheesy, but i'm glad to have awesome friends like you two. It's a deal! We will be the best hunters around here!" He stated full of energy, lifting his sword.

Later that evening, when Teclos returned home, he didn't go inside immediately. Instead, he sat under the apple trees again – lotus position, channeling mana, and breathing again.

"Who knows... maybe we'll be the most famous hunters in the world. Maybe I'll name us the Three Musketeers," he thought with a smile on his face.

Refocusing on his training, he directed mana from his lungs upward again. He made another attempt at forming the mind circle.

Something unexpected happened and he was caught off guard for a second.

The mana spun wildly – faster, and faster still. His senses expanded, becoming sharper. It made him dizzy, but it also meant he was getting closer to completion.

His sensory perception opened up.

He could sense every bug around him, the grass, the trees – even Talmir sleeping and Saldia sipping tea – everything in a fifteen to twenty-meter radius, even

beneath the soil. His eyes shot open involuntarily; he could see through the darkness, glimpse at its patterns, a clue on how he could shape and mould it more easily. It was like an epiphany – like his brain was receiving an update on how to use beginner darkness magic.

The mana spun faster, merging with his mind. Darkness lifted him off the ground; his eyes turned pitch-black like a demon's – emotionless and cold.

It was frightening. He could smell better, see better, think faster, remember more, sense mana more clearly, feel more – so many enhancements he couldn't explain yet overwhelming him. He was dizzy – so very dizzy. He pushed through with all of his will power, forcing the mana just that little faster and then –

It clicked.

The circle finally formed and merged with his being.

His eyes returned to normal, and he fell to the ground, immediately vomiting his last meal.

This was strange. Talmir never mentioned such a strong reaction to forming a first mind circle. If he had to describe it, it was like forming three circles at once. His core was normal enough but heart circle had already seen a major change from the standart, but this... this was an entirely new level.

"Wow... I didn't expect that," he said, pleasantly surprised. Wiping his mouth, he wondered, "Did they lie about the pain or dizziness? No... Father might be tough, but he wouldn't lie."

Unable to explain it, he decided to get up, that's when a foul smell hit him.

"Ugh, I smell really bad..."

He went inside to soak in the bath. After a while he remembered the time, after looking out the window.

"Yeah, I should hurry... otherwise I'll be dead meat if Mom finds out how late I am."

It hadn't fully sunk in yet – but at the tender age of eleven, he had formed his third circle. A record for the village, and possibly even for the entire county.

Tomorrow a shock awaited his parents, and a new day.

Chapter 12 - 11 - The price of power

After a miserable year for Teclos, since he gained his third circle, things were finally looking up again.

At first he was excited—so excited he didn't sleep a wink that first night. He told his parents and friends all about how much of a genius he was. Although he bragged a lot, being a nuisance, he was also getting complimented by everyone.

The village chief, Brahm, personally congratulated him on his achievement; it was that big of a deal. Talmir and Saldia were ecstatic, and his friends Gillard and Ralph pushed themselves to compete with him. Both boys soon achieved two circles and were on their way to their third.

But that was besides the point, because after three days of praise, he wasn't excited anymore. Not because he suddenly had enough of the attention—but because of the panic building up inside him.

After three days, he realized that what kept him up at night, what made him sleepless—

Was the third circle, not excitement.

His sensory perception had enhanced so much that he couldn't sleep anymore. The bugs, animals, wind, the ground, even Saldia's and Talmir's breathing at night—he

could feel everything in a ten meter radius. During the day it was less pronounced. Not by much, but for him it was the difference between heaven and hell.

For the first half of the year, he basically slept during the daytime, and whenever night came around he would wake up with a curse.

"God dammit! Am I a vampire or what?! When will i get used to tji shit?"

Talmir tried to teach him a hyper-focus mana technique with a very small success—meaning Teclos could at least sleep during the day, but at night nothing changed.

The technique was simple in theory: now that he had the third circle in his mind, he could push his mana and mind to focus on one thing, basicly entering a state of Ascendance—or so Talmir thought. A false hope that his son was a miracle genius, as doing such a thing took years of practice and a high level of mana control. Even Talmir couldn't do it.

Although limited, Teclos could at least blot out some of his perception. That in itself was already a huge achievement.

But of course that wasn't enough. So Talmir reluctantly went over to Father Pella to ask for help.

Talmir and Pella had a long history; one could even say they were teacher and student. Naturally, Talmir was a little afraid of Father Pella, even though that man was kind and loved by the whole village.

Teclos asked,

"Why do you look so worried? Do you think he'll be mad?"

Talmir replied, nervously.

"No, atleast not at you... probably... maybe try not to joke around in his presence."

After they arrived at the church and tried to explain the situation, the old priest didn't even let Talmir finish before sighing heavily.

"Bring the boy here," Pella said, rubbing his temples. "Before his brain implodes into madness."

A little later, Teclos stood awkwardly in the small prayer hall, arms crossed and eyes half-sunken from exhaustion. Pella eyed him like he was inspecting a cracked pot.

"So," Pella grunted, "you gained a third circle... and instead of enlightenment, you gained sleepless nights. Well, fine. This old priest will help you, since your father is useless."

"I'm standing right here, teacher..." Talmir muttered.

He threw a sharp glare toward Talmir.

"Yes. Unfortunately."

Teclos groaned. "Father Pella, I can hear the worms in the ground moving at night. The worms. I didn't even know worms made noise. I can literally feel everything."

"That's why I brought him," Talmir added. "He's... uh... struggling."

"Struggling?" Pella snorted. "He looks worse than a raccoon without sleep. Why would you wait so long to bring him here? It's been half a year since he reached the mind circle... If this were the old times I'd have slapped you, boy."

Talmir recoiled and cleared his throat. "Khm—Father... what can we do to help him? I already tried the hyper-focus method."

"I can hear raccoons too..." Teclos muttered deliriously.

Pella rubbed his temples again and gave him a flat stare. "Child, it's going to be all right. See, Talmir, that's the problem with you—you're stupid like a rock. You seriously taught him a long-term method that only swordmasters or archmages can learn? And you thought this would help?"

Shrinking back, Talmir shut up.

"You will get used to your senses eventually, lad," Pella continued. "But for now I will treat this with my life mana. After that, every day you must reduce your mana to zero through training and slinging spells around. You'll collapse from exhaustion, but at least you'll sleep normally again."

Talmir tried to hide his smile now that he saw a way out, but failed, earning another sharp glare from Pella.

"And you," Pella pointed at him, "I take my eyes off you for a few years and you somehow raise a son who jumps into the third circle like he's tripping over a tree root. What were you thinking? You should have told him to wait."

"I—I wasn't thinking anything, master. It just happened."

"Oh, I know you weren't thinking," Pella grumbled. "But now I have to deal with your problems. Again."

Although they were teacher and student, their relationship was closer to father and son.

He turned back to Teclos.

"Sit."

Teclos sat.

Pella crouched in front of him, placing two fingers against Teclos's temples, infusing mana into him and calming him.

"Now listen, boy. When we make three circles we usually go for the body twice first and leave the mind for later. Because once the circles connect, they give off a stronger reaction than before. You should have felt it when you made the second or third circle, right?"

Teclos hesitated. "...Maybe? I did, yes?"

"You definitely did. Your useless father failed to mention the consequences, but yes basically the connection reinforces your circles and makes them stronger. Usually that's good—except we match circles at level three at the earliest, not level one, so the body has time to adapt."

"So... I broke myself by accident?"

"Yes," Pella replied almost proudly. "Impressively so."

"Please stop scaring him," Talmir said.

"I'm not scaring him," Pella scoffed. "I'm informing him. You know—basic parenthood?"

"I told you he'd help," Talmir muttered to Teclos.

Pella shot him another withering look.

"I am helping you by preventing your son from going insane. You owe me a jug of that blackberry wine you hide under your house."

Talmir stiffened. "...Not the blackberry one. That's the expensive one. You know that's for special occasions."

"Yes," Pella replied. "Exactly."

Then he placed both palms on Teclos's temples again.

"All right, lesson is over for now. I'll purge your mana so you can finally sleep. Remember what we talked about, and come see me again tomorrow evening."

Teclos nodded.

Pella's palms shone with a golden hue, purging the excess mana from Teclos. The boy collapsed instantly, asleep before he could even hit Pella's robes.

"...Light preserve me. He sleeps like a stunned goat."

Turning to Talmir, Pella shook his head and beckoned him toward his office.

"Come, boy. Let's talk."

Cold sweat ran down Talmir's back as he silently obeyed.

Once inside, Pella gestured for him to sit, then sighed. "Your son is quite the talented young lad. Far from my least promising student—you, my foolish-son."

The look he gave Talmir said 'where did I go wrong with you', making Talmir scratch his head in discomfort.

"Teacher, may I ask something?" Pella raised an eyebrow. "You examined his body again—can you tell me if he's all right? How much strain was he under? Please tell me bluntly."

"He's fine," Pella said. "Luckily he purged some mana daily by instinct. If it had built up, he could have suffered mana reflux—reverse flow—damaging his body, possibly killing him. That's why I scolded you so much."

Silence hung in the air.

"And he just needs to release mana daily until he collapses from exhaustion? Meaning... he'll be fine?"

"Yes. Don't worry. Matching circles is originally a good thing; it was just too early for his body. With training and spell practice, by the time he reaches the third circle properly, he may match them again without side effects."

"Phew..." Talmir leaned back in relief. "That boy is going to be the death of me."

Pella burst into laughter. "Hahaha! Now you know how I felt raising a stubborn fool like you."

"Come on, Father, I wasn't that bad, was I?"

"Bah! You brought the whole thieves' guild from Lupos to my church's door! I had to cave their faces in for being violent on my sacred ground!"

One could easily believe this old man was just a friendly priest. But he had once been a paladin of the Dawn Church. His life magic wasn't used to harm people—his fists and morning star handled that.

"You were a troublesome boy until you met Saldia. Anyway, pick up the lad and carry him home. Tomorrow morning you two will start the brutal regimen I gave you when you were fourteen."

Talmir's eyes widened. "Is that really all right? He's only eleven."

"Those are great years for that training! His body will adapt as he grows." There was no dissuading the old priest. "And bring him to me every night for a year so I can purge his mana, if he has any and let him sleep. By the end of that year he should adapt, and I can stop. Now don't forget the wine. Off you go—I'm tired of seeing your face today."

The next day started early. Talmir woke just as the sun crested the horizon and changed into hunting gear. He was planning on taking Teclos's mana and spells, so caution was necessary.

After gearing up, he went into Teclos's room and gently shook him awake.

"All right, let's get this day started. Also, don't tell your mother what Pella said. We don't want to worry her now that everything will be all right."

Yawning, Teclos stood. "Okay, Dad... but why are we starting so early?"

"It's Father Pella's instructions. And you'll need to focus—this training will be harder than anything you've done before."

Teclos suddenly had a very bad feeling. He almost wanted to run away—even though he was known as a training addict by his friends.

After drinking some tea and eating a quick breakfast with eggs, they stepped outside for their first training. Talmir carried pity in his gaze; Teclos wore a determined expression.

The sun had barely begun to burn a pale line over the horizon when Talmir led Teclos toward the riverbank. Dawn clung to the world in a cold mist, and each step through the wet grass sent a chill up Teclos's legs.

"Dad... why are we walking to the river?" Teclos asked warily.

Talmir didn't answer. He only sighed—the kind of sigh that told Teclos something terrible was about to happen.

They reached the water's edge. It looked like liquid frost.

"All right, strip down to your underpants," Talmir said.

Teclos's jaw dropped. "W-What?!"

"For the start of today's training we will shock your body awake."

"Pella wants me to freeze to death?"

"No," Talmir replied, though he didn't sound convinced. "He wants you to jump in."

Before Teclos could protest, Talmir gave him a firm shove.

He hit the water with a splash and a scream.

"AAAAH—WHAT IN THE LIVING HELL?! IT'S FREEZING!"

"That's the point!" Talmir called. "Stay in for sixty seconds!"

"I CAN'T FEEL MY ARMS AND LEGS!"

"That means it's working!"

By the time Teclos staggered out of the river, he was shaking uncontrollably and muttering curses under his breath, but he was awake—sharply, painfully awake. Talmir handed him a towel.

"All right, now do ten push-ups and go back in. Once you come out, do twenty push-ups."

Teclos was flabbergasted but couldn't complain at the very start already. After he finished—in about an hour of this torture—Talmir pointed toward the forest path.

"You're going to run now. Toward that hill."

Teclos looked down the narrow trail twisting between the pines. "How long is it?"

"...Long."

"Dad."

"Ten kilometers."

"But I'm eleven!"

"You're also a third-circle mage."

"That doesn't cancel out the eleven!"

Talmir patted him on the back. "Keep your Breathing steady. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. On every exhale push mana through your feet for a small boost. If your mana runs out, just run normally."

They began to jog. Cold air stabbed Teclos's lungs, and with every stride his senses exploded with noise—the scuttle of insects under bark, the distant rustle of a fox, even the steady thump of his father's heartbeat. But as he forced himself to keep the breathing rhythm and push his mana out, the noise dulled. It wasn't gone, but it was at least somewhat quieter now. Almost bearable.

Just when he felt a flicker of confidence, they reached the hill. It rose steep and cruel above them.

Talmir dragged a heavy cloth sack from behind a stump and dropped it at Teclos's feet.

A dull, awful thud followed.

"...It's full of rocks," Teclos said flatly.

"Mostly sand," Talmir corrected. "Up you go."

"Haha... I'm going to die, aren't I?"

Teclos hoisted the sandbag with a strangled groan and began the climb. Every step burned. Every grain inside the bag scraped against his sharpened senses. Sweat stung his eyes, and the hill seemed endless.

But he kept going.

And finally—breathing raggedly, with trembling legs—Teclos dragged himself over the crest.

As he finally climbed the hill, Talmir was already waiting for him there and had the next exercise ready for him.

That's when he realized it's going to be a long day ahead of him.

Chapter 13 - 12 - The first trial

A beautiful and lush forest stretched in all directions, full of life and natural magic. Even though fall had settled over the land, the forest still burned with vibrant colors—deep greens, cerulean moss, crimson leaf-clusters that clung to the branches like living lanterns. Horned hares darted through brush, vine does wandered delicately through patches of glowing mushrooms, and the wind sang through the canopy in long, gentle breaths. Birds trilled lazily from their perches, as if the forest itself were dozing through the season.

Peaceful. Serene. Almost sacred.

Except, of course, for the loud, dying wheezes of an eleven-year-old boy sprinting for his life.

"I'M GOING TO DIE AT THIS RATE, DAD!"

Teclos stumbled between roots and ferns, sweat pouring down his face like he'd sprung a leak. A small sandbag—small in theory, monstrous in practice—bounced on his shoulders. He was convinced it weighed at least twenty kilos, if not thirty. His legs felt like two sticks glued to sacks of pain.

"You're going to be fine," Talmir called from above, gliding silently through the branches. "Especially since you still have the energy to scream like that."

"That's—huff—because—huff—I'm terrified of what is—to come!"

"Good. Fear builds character."

"YOU SAID THIS WOULD BE GOOD FOR MANA CONTROL!"

"It is!"

"HOW?!"

"...The body is the foundation for everything, even for mana."

"You just made that up right now, didn't you?"

Teclos would have argued more, but his lungs were too busy writing their final will and testament.

He barreled downhill toward the riverbank—again—and felt his knees wobble as he splashed across the shallow water. Cold water wrapped around his ankles as he reached the other side and turned around, forcing himself to push back toward the forest path. Branches clawed at his clothes; mud smeared up his calves; the bag threatened to throw him off balance with every awkward step.

"Faster," Talmir called as he landed lightly beside him, running backwards with the ease of someone who was not, apparently, human. "If you have a third circle, you can run up a hill."

"I—huff—DID—huff—RUN!"

"And now you're running it again. It's progress!"

Teclos wanted to cry. Or scream. Or lie down face-first and dissolve into the soil like a compostable regret.

Instead, he staggered to the riverbank once more—his third run—where Talmir raised a hand.

"Stop and cool down now."

Teclos didn't wait a second. He threw the sandbag off his back like it had personally attempted to assassinate him and dove into the river with a splash. He surfaced with a gasp, hair plastered to his forehead.

"Five minutes tops," Talmir said. "No more."

"Five minutes is too little."

"Five minutes is very generous."

"For who?!"

"For me."

Teclos sank until the water reached his chin, glaring with the exhaustion of a child whose soul had been personally offended.

After the timer—or Talmir's internal clock, which was even worse—ran out, the man clapped his hands.

"Time's up. We're starting mana exercises."

Teclos groaned, dragging himself from the river like an undead goblin that had been fished up from the bottom.

Talmir handed him a towel, then pointed at a wide flat stone by the riverbank.

"Now sit and focus. We're going to burn your mana fast."

"Didn't I—already—burn all of it?!"

"No, you burned stamina mostly. Mana's still half-full. Now we'll let your stamina regenerate and burn mana instead."

Teclos stared up at him, betrayed.

"Can't we... maybe... leave it half-full? Just this once? For the sake of my sanity?"

"No."

"Can't I just rest for ten minutes, to replenish my stamina and mana together?"

"No. Now take the lotus position."

Teclos frowned, dropped onto the rock beneath him, crossed his legs, and took a deep breath.

Talmir clapped once. "Alright, let's begin."

He guided Teclos through the drills.

First was mana compression.

Teclos gathered the energy around him into his hands, turning it into a pitch-black ball until it buzzed and vibrated with power. Then he released it back in a steady flow, controlling the mana every step of the way.

After half an hour, they continued with mana threading.

Teclos had to build thin threads of mana—thin but sturdy—splitting the flow into several lines and trying to hold them evenly. His hands trembled.

"Try to evenly spread your mana between the threads. For now, try to make three even, sturdy threads, after you succeed you can try to make more." Talmir instructed.

After another hour, they switched to mana bursts.

"Like with compression, gather the mana in your hands, then push it out as quickly as you can towards that tree." He pointed at an oak tree in front of Teclos.

Short, sharp bursts of energy followed, each one popping against the nearby tree, leaving small dents and scratches.

Finally came mana shaping.

Talmir placed leaves, stones, and sticks before him.

"Darkness is highly malleable and diverse. Make your mana sharp enough to slice the leaf. Make it hard enough to push the stone. And make it firm but springy enough to bend or break the stick."

Teclos inhaled sharply and obeyed. After a few tries, a thin, nearly invisible blade of mana almost cut the leaf in half. A hard pulse nudged the stone a few inches. A firm blob lifted a stick and bent it—barely—before collapsing.

Disappointed in his own performance, he frowned, but Talmir placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry. This is already good for your first attempt. By the end of this training you'll gather mana faster, release it quicker, shape it as you need, and control it like you want. Now do it again."

Teclos repeated the cycle. Again. And again. His breath grew shaky. His eyes burned. His temples throbbed—with the same results or worse.

"Alright, stop. Let's eat something and rest for half an hour."

Teclos practically collapsed. His head throbbed from the mana usage.

Talmir brought a basket full of bread, dried meat, honey, and an azureberry tonic.

Hungry and grateful for this meal his mother prepared, Teclos started devouring everything.

After they finished eating, Talmir stood up.

"Good. Time for sparring."

Teclos stiffened.

"What? Time for what?"

"You heard me."

"But I—that's not fair!"

"And?"

"And I'm not ready to spar someone like you yet!"

Talmir patted his shoulder. "Nothing is fair in life, you'll never be ready with that attitude." A slight smirk escaped his lips.

He stepped back into the clearing, cracked his knuckles, then drew two wooden practice swords. He handed one to Teclos.

"First rule: no holding back."

Teclos started sweating instantly. "I'm pretty sure this is abuse."

"Bah! It's character development. Nobody will wait for you to be ready."

He tapped the ground. "Now stand up."

Teclos stood up, reluctantly but still obedient. Mana flickered faintly around him—unstable and unfocused, showing both exhaustion and unease from Teclos at this new challenge.

They raised their wooden swords.

"Attack." Ordered Talmir.

Teclos lunged like on comand.

Talmir lifted his sword, and Teclos barely had time to inhale before the strike came down.

Instinct flared—mana snapped to Teclos's skin in a thin layer, a half-formed shield. He tried to catch Talmir's strike diagonally with his sword—but the wooden blade ignored his guard and smashed against his forearm, sending a stinging tremor up to his shoulder.

"Good reaction, but sloppy execution." Talmir said. "Again."

He swung. Teclos dodged, nearly slipping in damp leaves. Mana surged, expanding his awareness—trees behind him, insects under moss, shifting air, vibrations.

He reacted slower because of that.

He barely ducked another strike, rolled to the side, and fired a mana burst at Talmir's feet.

It hit the ground an inch from the man's boot.

"Not bad."

Talmir grinned — then vanished.

Teclos spun, senses screaming. A shadow flickered behind him—he raised both arms and his sword. Talmir's wooden blade struck his guard, sending him stumbling backward.

"Focus," Talmir said. "Don't only feel where I am. Predict me."

"HOW CAN I PREDICT YOU WHEN I CAN'T EVEN SEE YOU!"

"Use your senses! You can feel worms move, but not your father?"

"Worms aren't nearly as fast!"

On and on the spar went. Talmir circled him like a predator. Teclos pushed mana into his feet, moving faster. He focused on his senses more and the world blurred — he felt everything shadow around him.

He ducked another strike.

And another.

And one more — barely.

He was slowly getting accustomed to this sensation.

"Better," Talmir said. "Your mana should almost be depleted now."

After a few more minutes of this hellish training Teclos fell to his knees. "NO MORE."

Talmir only smiled. "Get up. One last push."

Sweat, grime, and mud dripped from Teclos. He was exhausted.

"I CAN'T!"

"Yes, you can."

"Dad —"

Talmir's tone softened—not by much, but enough to show that he genuinely meant well for Teclos.

"This training is going to save your life now and in the future. Stand, son."

Teclos swallowed, then forced himself upright. His whole body shook. His mana flickered like a dying candle.

Talmir smiled proudly, then placed three wooden targets on the other side of the clearing.

"Last task. Destroy these targets."

Teclos gritted his teeth. "Fine," he said, breath ragged.

"Pull the remaining mana inside you in to your hands, then push it outward. Make it sharp and hard, and coat these three arrows with it," Talmir said, handing him a bow and planting three arrows into the ground.

Teclos inhaled, drawing what little mana remained. His head buzzed painfully, but he still managed to force the energy outward.

"First target."

He drew the bow, the arrow flew. Sloppily coated and unstable — but powerful enough to crack the wooden plank.

"Next."

The second arrow flew. Even wobblier, but it struck true, splitting the second target.

"Last."

Teclos squeezed out every remaining drop. Mana sputtered, then exploded outward in a messy burst that slathered the arrow unevenly.

Altho it was slopy, it had the most power behund it and the last target shattered.

Teclos collapsed face-first into the dirt.

His mana was gone.

Talmir smiled. "Good. Rest for twenty minutes."

Teclos raised his head an inch. "What?"

"Afterward, physical conditioning."

"No, that's not—"

"Yes." Talmir clapped. "Push-ups, sit-ups, squats. One hour. After that, we go to the church and you can rest."

"I literally pushed myself as much as i am capable, dad...i am barely alive."

"Then this will be easy. Corpses don't feel pain."

"THAT'S NOT HOW ANYTHING WORKS!"

"Twenty minutes," Talmir said, pointing.

"I hate you..."

Teclos whimpered but obeyed.

After resting and drinking water, Talmir clapped to begin.

Thirty minutes in, his arms trembled violently.

Forty minutes in, he couldn't tell if he was sweating or crying.

Fifty minutes in, he tried to crawl away—Talmir nudged him back with a boot.

Sixty minutes in, Teclos lay sprawled out, eyes glassy.

"Done," Talmir said. "Good work."

"You... are... a demon," Teclos wheezed.

Talmir shrugged. "I've been called worse."

He lifted the boy—Teclos too tired to even move a finger—slung him over his shoulder, and walked toward the village.

"We're visiting Father Pella now."

"No... let me rest..."

"He'd scold me if I did that. You'll be fine."

The sun dipped low by the time they reached the village. Lanterns flickered along cobbled paths. The old stone church glowed warmly.

Inside, Father Pella sat at his desk, sipping tea like a man finally at peace—until he saw them.

Without looking up, he said,

"Talmir, put the boy down. And close the door. You're letting the cold in."

Talmir set Teclos on a bench.

Pella finally looked—and sighed deeply.

"He looks like one of the dead beasts you bring back from your hunts. Perfect. I'd say you trained him well enough."

Teclos wheezed in protest.

Pella stood up and placed two fingers on Teclos's temples again. Life mana seeped into him—cool, calming, replenishing. Pain and exhaustion faded into relief.

Teclos exhaled weakly. "Thank you..."

"Yes, yes. Don't thank me yet. You'll be back tomorrow."

'I am surrounded by demons.' Teclos thought.

Pella turned to Talmir. "How much mana did he burn?"

"All of it."

"Good. And physical training?"

"Endurance, strength, and focus."

"Excellent you finally did your job for once. He should sleep normally tonight. Bring him back tomorrow at sunset."

Teclos blinked and his face soured. "God dammit..."

Pella paused—then smiled gently.

"You're doing better than most adults I've trained. You'll adapt, don't worry. Even if your father is an idiot. But you should complain less, boy. This is for your survival."

"Hey..." Talmir muttered.

Pella ignored him. "Take him home. Feed him. Put him to bed."

Talmir slung Teclos over his shoulder again.

"And Talmir," Pella added, "don't think I forgot the blackberry wine."

Talmir flinched.

Teclos, exhausted, smiled faintly and thought.

'Serves you right you demon.'

As they stepped into the cool night air, one thing was certain:

Day one was finished.

Months or years just like these, remained.

This was only the start. His body and mind would be tested beyond their limits.

But Teclos—despite everything—looked ahead with stubborn optimism.

'Might aswell become the strongest in the world.'

First, though... he would have to survive this hell.

Chapter 14 - 13 - The Hunter and the Hunted

Three weeks of grueling training after that first day, Teclos was finally getting used to it. He was past the muscle spasms, stamina issues, and the complete lack of mana recovery he suffered in the beginning.

After the first week, the difficulty ramped up proportionate to Teclos's growth. He gathered mana faster and denser, released it with more force and destructive power, shaped it into a more stable and stronger form, and had overall better control.

Now, sitting in a lotus position as usual, he could gather a dense sphere between his hands in about two minutes, as opposed to the small superficial ball that used to take him five.

Because of that, he could blast mana faster and stronger; now the tree actually had small holes in it instead of shallow dents or scratches in the bark.

The shapes he could make were firmer and stronger. With basic darkness tendrils he could break a branch instead of just bending it, turn them into hands, badly mimic others' shadows, and even lift himself off the ground with ten shadow hands.

His control was still lacking—at times he used too much force, at others too little, showing that his fine control over mana still needed a lot of work.

It was early morning, and Teclos finally managed to get up earlier than Talmir. Yawning, he got out of bed and put on his boots, pants, shirt, and the leather jacket he'd received from Saldia.

He stepped into the kitchen, picked up a few of Saldia's herbs she'd prepared, and tossed them into two cups. Then he fetched water from the barrel outside on the porch and poured it into the teapot that was already warming on the stove.

Just as he poured himself a cup, he glanced toward the bedroom and smiled.

"Hah! I'm actually first. This reminds me of Earth somehow—being first on shift in the waiting room. Haha... I can't believe those were the good times."

The smile faded as he remembered his training regime.

He sat at the table. Halfway through his tea, Talmir appeared, already in full gear.

"Hmmm, you're up early..."

"Yeah, I'm starting to get more energy, I think. So I sleep less now," he replied.

Talmir poured his tea. After a sip he said, bluntly, "Today we have a sparring day, a hunt, and waterfall meditation."

"Ugh," Teclos recoiled. "Come on, Dad, it's winter. Can't we do something else than sitting under a waterfall?"

"No. It gets the blood pumping, helps our focus, and when we coat ourselves in mana it helps improve control."

"Ugh..." He frowned and swallowed his opinion. Once his father decided something, nothing moved him.

When negotiation failed, they finished their tea in silence and left for another day of hard work.

"Let's start with the waterfall and end there as well."

"What?! Are you mad? You want to go there twice today?"

"Like I said, it's ultimately good for us. And didn't Father Pella say not to whine so much?"

"I mean, if you explained things properly or at least warn me a day or two earlier, I wouldn't whine so much."

He knew Talmir explained things properly—he just wanted to annoy him somehow. After these past weeks he could barely speak during or after training.

As they walked, a chilly breeze cut through the forest. It was a harsh winter—far colder than autumn. Everything was freezing; the first meter of snow had already fallen. Luckily for Talmir, and unluckily for Teclos, the waterfall was still roaring and very much unfrozen.

The waterfall was a landmark near Kolma—thirteen meters wide, loud enough to be heard from five hundred meters away.

Many animals came here, as well as beasts, but this place was a truce zone. Beasts and animals normally wouldn't attack anyone drinking or even resting near the water. A peaceful haven, and perfect for observing creatures in their natural habitat. One reason Talmir had no worries bringing Teclos here. And also the place where Teclos, on his first visit, had been scared shitless—something Talmir still enjoyed laughing about.

As they walked the winter path, Talmir chuckled at the memory. "You remember, this is the place you—"

"Dad! Stop..."

"I haven't laughed that hard since—"

"DAD!"

They finally reached the waterfall. Everything was quiet except the water—it was still very early.

"All right, let's get this over with," Talmir said. He stripped to his pants, and so did Teclos, and they walked into the freezing water.

"Ugh! This is the one thing that never gets easier..." Teclos complained.

"In about five years you should be used to it. Don't worry, son," Talmir reassured—failing to notice he'd only deepened Teclos's despair.

They reached two boulders beneath the waterfall, placed long ago by hunters.

They sat simultaneously, legs crossed, backs straight, eyes closed.

As they meditated, the difference in their skill appeared immediately. Talmir's pressure surged like a ferocious predator guarding its cub. Water curved away from him; a thick white aura surrounded him. Wind swirled around like a barrier ready to tear apart anyone who approached.

Meanwhile Teclos was wrapped in a tiny dark aura sheet—quiet and small, but full of arrogance and a slowly building strength. Opposite of the flashy aura beside him, Teclos radiated a small but chilling presence.

The air grew colder around him; the daylight dimmed; the waterfall darkened to a deeper blue. Onlookers would probably avoid him first rather than Talmir—despite the massive power difference—because of the sinister aura he gave off.

If one were an aura master, the emotions were clear: one aura was angry—directed at a parent—and the other calm, serene, yet highly alert for danger.

After two hours of this, animals and beasts began approaching for water.

Teclos started shivering uncontrollably.

"Looks like two hours is your limit now. That's good progress."

"T-t-thanks... I-I really l-like this training, Dad."

"Oh! Good."

"T-that was s-sarcasm..."

After drying off and gearing back up, they walked toward the village. Talmir explained the next phase.

"This will be your first time doing this. We're doing a hunt like training. I'm the hunter, and you're the prey."

Teclos paled, cold sweat forming on his skin—though that just might have been the lingering chill from the waterfall. Talmir continued:

"There will be opponents you cannot defeat. When that happens, you run with all your might. We'll be practicing that now."

Teclos gulped. Talmir was never gentle with his training—he suspected that once he was found, Talmir would attack without hesitation, unleashing full-force wind blasts.

"The key to escaping is erasing your presence. Everyone does it differently, but the basics are the same: suppress your mana, a steady and shallow breath, and find a good hiding spot. Remember that when I track you."

"Yes, Dad."

At the village, Kosak and Darnel were waiting.

"Oh look who it is—my long-lost partner," Kosak called.

Darnel laughed.

"Yeah yeah, it'll probably take at least two months before I join again," Talmir said.

"Hmmm, is the boy that talented?" Darnel asked.

"Are you kidding?" Kosak laughed. "He's on par with the fourteen-year-olds if not better when it comes to mana."

"Huh. Blessed with a gorgeous wife and a talented kid... I kinda want to smack you," Darnel joked.

"Good luck with that. I won't visit your funeral."

Ignoring them, Talmir instructed Teclos, "I'll lean on this gate for five minutes talking to these two idiots, and you start running."

Teclos gave a thumbs-up and sprinted off at full speed.

"Wow, he's a speedy kid," Kosak said.

Teclos had named his running technique Shadow Steps—because it was cool. When he stepped down, he released mana into the ground; the mana sprang up beneath him in a platform that launched him forward. Bouncy underneath, hard on top—the rest depended on his mana control.

He ran like his life depended on it, choosing a relatively safe route toward a nearby village. He'd trained there with Talmir before; risky, but the best option. He could follow the river for a long stretch, hiding his tracks. His hiding spot was a cave with a narrow entrance near the village. He needed at least twenty-five minutes to reach it—and avoiding Talmir for twenty minutes was no small task.

Along the way he saw harmless animals—good. That meant no predators nearby.

Reassured, he sped up to reach the riverbank quickly.

Meanwhile, Talmir chatted casually.

"You're not worried at all? The kid's fast," Kosak asked.

"He is," Talmir admitted. "But I can track him easily."

Darnel smirked. "I wouldn't be so sure. Unlike you, the boy is smart."

"Since when do you know my son better than me?"

"I don't—but he has Saldia's blood in him, so he isn't as retarded as you," Darnel teased.

Kosak burst out laughing. "Hah! He's right! He may be your son, but at least he got his brains from his mother!"

"Oh shut up. Maybe I am an idiot—but at least I can count to ten without taking off my boots, unlike you two."

After more banter, Talmir pushed off the gate.

"Want to bet I find him before sunset?"

Kosak shook his head, but Darnel jumped at it. "You're on! Free beer for the winner."

"Deal."

Then Talmir launched into the sky, a miniature tornado swirling around him. He vanished from sight in less than a second, truly Kolma's fastest hunter.

Teclos reached the river but stayed hidden beneath the treeline, running toward Ragla along the riverbank. Enough foliage hid him from Talmir's aerial view.

"He should've started the chase now. I need my first hiding spot."

He spotted a moss-covered fallen tree. "Good enough." He dug a small hole beneath it, slipped inside, and covered himself with moss.

His plan: wait for Talmir to pass overhead twice, then move.

At the same time, Talmir reached the river.

"Hmmm, where is that brat? He shouldn't be far anymore... Safe route or dangerous?" Talmir was pondering where Teclos could have gone.

After a moment, he flew toward Ragla. Deciding between hiding among deadly beasts or within Ragla's crowd, Ragla was the obvious choice.

Just as Teclos predicted, the trees bent suddenly and the roar of wind blasted above him like a giant beast.

"Damn, Dad can be scary when he's chasing you... All right, let's wait a bit more now."

A few minutes later, Talmir stopped in mid-air.

As he didn't find anything he asked himself.

"He couldn't have—right? He wouldn't go into the mountains alone after all the stories i told him...right?"

Worry surged.

He spun around and darted toward them.

"I hope he's by the waterfall and not in the mountains."

Again the sky roared, the trees bent, and Talmir passed overhead.

A smirk was plastered on Teclos' face.

"So easy... That should give me a few minutes to reach Ragla."

Teclos burst out from beneath the fallen tree the moment his father's aura vanished toward the mountains. He wasted no time—he sprinted along the riverbank with every ounce of mana he could muster.

Shadow Steps flared beneath his feet, each landing exploding into a springy push that hurled him forward. His breath steamed in the winter air, but excitement thrummed through him. "I can make it. If he wastes even a minute searching those cliffs, I can reach Ragla."

The terrain shifted as he approached the village. The trees grew thinner, replaced by frozen bushes and patches of brittle grass peeking through the snow. He kept to the shadows where he could, slipping between frost-covered roots, avoiding open stretches as if they were poisonous. His mana pulsed steadily—half full still—and though fatigue ate at his legs, he pushed on.

When the wooden palisades of Ragla finally appeared between the trees, he nearly cheered. Smoke rose lazily from a few chimneys; the bells hadn't rung for noon yet, and the village lay half asleep in the pale dawn. Perfect.

He slowed down as he neared the outskirts. Speed wasn't his ally anymore—silence was. He pressed himself against the cold earth and slid behind a cluster of stacked firewood.

Beyond it, he spotted what he was looking for: a narrow path leading behind the blacksmith's shed and down to a small hollow at the cliffside near the river. The entrance to the cave was little more than a jagged crack between two boulders—barely big enough for a child.

Teclos crouched low, checked the sky, and dashed for it. No gust of wind followed. No sudden pressure. No predator-like aura.

"He fell for it."

He dropped to his hands and knees and squeezed himself inside the crack. The stone scraped his shoulders, and the cold bit through his jacket, but the interior widened just enough for him to lie flat. From here, he could hear the faint roar of the waterfall in the distance—and, more importantly, nothing else. He had enough food till evening, so he started training his mana in the quiet small cave.

—

Meanwhile, far above the valley, Talmir shot across the sky like a spear wrapped in storm winds. His expression had changed from cocky amusement to tight-jawed concern.

"That idiot boy of mine... what were you thinking?"

He scanned the treeline once more, but there were no bent branches, no disturbed snow, no lingering mana traces. Only the mountains loomed ahead—steep, merciless, and riddled with dens.

Talmir cursed under his breath.

"I swear... if he climbed toward that cave..."

He hated it—truly hated it—but he angled himself toward the highest ridge, toward the cave hunters avoided unless absolutely necessary.

His stomach churned.

His heartbeat quickened.

And for the first time in years, the fastest hunter of Kolma felt fear creeping in.

And so the hunt continued—soon ending in an unexpected defeat for Talmir. Both a proud moment for a father, and a shameful stain for a hunter.

Chapter 15 - 14 - A Fisherman's Fear

Joe was a normal fisher from Ragla, and like every morning he woke up, poured himself some ale from his barrel at home, and drank it on his porch.

Being unhappy with his life, he grumbled about everything—his wife, his kids, his work. His dream was once to be the captain of a big galley out on the sea, battling sea monsters and pirates.

Now? Now he was just a lowly fisher on a small boat, blaming the world for his failure.

First his wife had stopped him from going, and then she had the audacity to refuse living on a ship with him. He thought he could still talk her into it, but then the darn kids happened... two of them, at the same time at that. Now she had lost her beauty as well.

He drank a big gulp of ale thinking of all that.

"To hell with this shit... why does my life have to be so shit?"

Then there was the village chief taking all of his fish and distributing them throughout the village. Almost nothing was left for him.

"Damn village chief, bah! I caught the damn fish, so why should I share it?"

Drinking the whole cup of ale, he poured himself another round and slowly got ready to fish again. Stumbling about, he put on his fishing gear—long insulated boots, jacket, gloves—and prepared a bucket full of fishing lines, bait, a net, and hooks.

All the while he worked, a bottle of ale was filling up under the barrel. One for the road, he would say.

Packing some food and his ale into the rucksack, he went outside and walked toward the gate.

As a guard noticed him approaching, the man frowned and rolled his eyes.

"Hey, Captain Fish-Ale! I can see you grumbling from here! How about you smile for once, you old bastard?"

The other guard laughed, but Joe—already in a foul mood—didn't like that one bit.

"Shut up! And do your job instead of harassing me."

Now the second guard stepped up aggressively.

"What did you say, you old fossil?"

Although he claimed his dream was fighting pirates and sea monsters, Joe was a coward, so instead of talking back, he just hurried his steps and kept his head down, not looking up at the guard.

When Joe passed them, the second guard kicked him in the butt for good measure and snickered.

He trudged down the familiar path toward the river, muttering to himself as his breath fogged the cold morning air.

"I swear, one day I'll kill you all and leave this wretched place..."

His boots crunched through the snow with the same rhythm they always had—but then he slowed.

Something was wrong.

Terribly wrong.

At first, he thought it was just the winter shadows playing tricks on him. But the deeper he walked, the more the world changed around him. The snow under his feet no longer glimmered white. Instead, it had taken on a blue-black tint, as though frostbite itself had spread across the forest floor.

What should have been soft powder crunched like thin ice ready to shatter.

He frowned and looked ahead.

The trees that lined the river path—trees he had passed a thousand times—seemed... different. Their bark appeared darkened, almost burned, as if a long shadow had crawled up their trunks and drained the color from them. Branches twisted unnaturally, bowing away from the river as though something downstream frightened them.

A cold shiver crawled up his back.

"What in the...?"

He took another step.

The air grew heavier. Thicker. Each breath tasted metallic and cold, like inhaling smoke without the smell of fire. A faint, oppressive pressure pushed against his chest—not enough to hurt, but enough to warn him.

The world had gone quiet.

No birds.

No rustling animals.

Not even the distant hum of the river.

Just a low, barely perceptible vibration—like the forest was holding its breath.

The river finally came into view, and his stomach dropped.

The water—normally crystal clear and lively—had dulled to a deep, lightless blue, swirling with shadows that had no right to be there. Ripples moved across its surface even though the wind was still, and the mist above it had darkened into a drifting grey veil.

"Spirits above..." he whispered.

He felt watched.

Not by eyes... but by the forest itself.

A surge of dread settled in his gut.

This wasn't natural.

This wasn't weather nor was it a beast.

This was mana—heavy, cold, suffocating mana.

And something was leaking it...

His pulse quickened as he scanned the treeline. He saw nothing, but the weight of the aura tugged his gaze toward the rocky slope nearby... toward the caves.

He swallowed.

"...What the hell is out here?"

Joe immediately remembered the stories his father used to tell him. A similar change would always happen out at sea whenever an undead ghost ship drew near, or when a high-ranking death knight—an undead captain—was close.

Full of fear, he dropped his bucket and gear on the ground and ran back toward the village to inform the chief and guards.

—

Meanwhile, in the sky above the Leonia mountain range, Talmir was closing in on the top cave.

"Phew, I guess she's in a good mood today, seeing that I'm not a pincushion of earth spears yet."

Inside the cave, two golden, cat-like eyes suddenly opened. The stone entrance—adorned with beautiful flowers—slid apart. An arrow pointing inside appeared on the stone tiles just in front of the doorway.

"Great... just great. She's inviting me in... hope I don't get eaten, hah!" Cold sweat ran down his back and a nervous chuckle escaped him as he landed on the platform outside the cave, about to meet the queen and ruler of this mountain range.

Walking down the paved hallway, he noted the beautifully laid mosaics depicting a huge lion-like figure standing atop dragons, wyverns, trolls, and so on.

Talmir kept his mouth shut about the decorations. In this place, the stone walls did have ears, and offending the queen was the last thing he wanted.

At the end of the hallway stood another stone door, again adorned with beautiful flowers made of obsidian, ruby, and labradorite—clearly the queen's taste.

He approached and knocked with the stone handles.

"You may enter," a female voice said.

The door opened immediately.

"Greetings, Your Highness," Talmir said, bowing—an action most would never dare take before such a beast.

"You may look upon me and tell me the reason for your visit."

As he raised his head, he saw the queen in her full glory: a manticore, a mythical beast rivaling dragons. Her face mixed human and lion features; her body was that of a lion, with a scorpion tail and bat-like wings.

She prided herself on her immaculate fur coat, which was always clean and soft. She wore a ruby ring on her ear and obsidian wrappings on her claws—fashion trends she had adopted from humans years ago. No queen would be without her jewelry.

An immense aura radiated from her, one that would have crushed even Talmir, but she restrained it for her guest. Licking her paw, she beckoned him to hurry so she could return to her nap.

Addressing her, Talmir took on a respectful tone. "Your Majesty, have you perhaps noticed a small boy trotting about the mountains? He has darkness mana and is fairly young. He's my boy."

"A living human with darkness mana?" She perked her ears and stopped cleaning herself in surprise. "Fascinating. That is my first time hearing such a thing in my three hundred years on Caelterra. And he is your cub, you say?"

"Yes. So... have you sensed anything of the sort?"

"No, I have not. At least he was fortunate not to wander into my range. Had I mistaken him for an undead, he would have been erased."

"And you are positive he didn't wander here, Your Majesty?"

The queen frowned, her pupils narrowing like a hunting cat.

"Listen, human. I know everything that happens on this mountain. Do not lecture me in my territory. Now leave, since you have your answer. And perhaps bring that cub of yours to me—so I may inspect him. A human specimen like that sounds truly fascinating."

She released her killing intent for just a brief moment—but for Talmir, that moment felt like an eternity. Like prey before a predator, he could only excuse himself and retreat, tail metaphorically tucked between his legs.

As soon as he stepped out, the door shut itself and the stone arrow on the floor vanished. One last glance back, and he took flight toward Ragla.

"I shouldn't have made that pact with the human king all those years ago... protecting feeble humans doesn't suit me at all." She continued grooming herself. "But at least they leave me in peace, so I suppose it's fine."

While the queen settled in for another nap, Talmir flew back. Knowing Teclos was nowhere near the mountain range, he assumed the boy had hidden himself too well for even him to sense. He trusted the queen's instincts fully.

—

Back in Ragla, the chief closed off the village and prepared an extermination squad. Even though Joe was hated, he wasn't a liar—and hearing about the scale of the contamination, the chief assembled twelve hunters and five guards.

"And you're sure about this, Joe?" the chief asked.

"Yes, chief! I saw it with my own eyes, you have to believe me."

One hunter scoffed. "I bet he saw a dire bat and shot himself... do we really have to do this, chief?"

"Yes. Even if it is a dire bat, we must know. Preparing for the worst is our duty," Chief Thomas said.

The extermination team marched out with grim faces and sharpened blades, boots thudding like war drums. Their breaths fogged the air as they followed Joe's trail.

They expected carnage.

Or corruption.

Or the stench of undeath.

What they found instead was... strange.

The first tendrils of warped mana brushed against them—thin wisps of cold, pale-blue distortion curling around trees and snow. The hunters slowed, weapons raised.

"By the spirits..." one whispered. "The fool wasn't lying."

A hunter knelt and touched the blue-stained ice. No rot. No burn. No dead mana. Just... cold.

"This isn't undead corruption," the chief muttered. "It's off... but it's not killing the land."

"It's not spreading either," a guard noted. "It's all coming from one point."

"That cave up ahead," Thomas said. "Move." He ordered.

The aura stabilized into a faint pulse, like something sleeping. Or meditating.

—

Inside the cave, Teclos exhaled slowly. Hours of meditating in, he finally opened his eyes. Confused he looked around at his surroundings, it seemed that his aura was seeping out and the forest reacted.

He was happy as this was proof his mana grew stronger.

He was about to resume when footsteps echoed outside.

Multiple people. And they appeared to be heavily armed.

Teclos froze, looking around him, with all this dark mana.

A thought about the discrimination of people to the unknown seeped in to his mind.

Then panic set in.

He extinguished his mana instantly, the pressure dissolving like mist. Heart pounding, he squeezed into a narrow crevice only a child could fit into.

"Please don't see me... please..."

The extermination team entered moments later, weapons raised.

The cave looked empty.

"Search it," the chief ordered.

Mana residue flickered weakly along the walls.

"Definitely not undead," a hunter muttered. "There is no malice."

"It still feels wrong," another added. "Also it somehow feels... weak."

A young hunter crouched near Teclos's hiding place.

"Chief. Something's—"

Teclos flinched, bumped his elbow, and let out the tiniest hiss.

Every head turned.

"Come out!" the hunter barked, stabbing his spear into the crevice.

Teclos whimpered and crawled out, trembling.

"...It's a kid," someone said.

"A human kid," another added. "What the hell is he doing here?"

Chief Thomas knelt down. "Boy... explain. What's with this mana?"

Before Teclos could speak, a wind gust swept through the cave and a figure descended from outside.

"Talmir!" the chief exclaimed.

He noticed the change in the environment and hurried here.

The hunters relaxed at once.

Talmir stepped forward. "Stand down. The boy isn't a threat."

"He's the source," Thomas replied worried.

"Yes. He was training. His mana is rare and strange. I failed to notice him wander off, but he is under my supervision, you have my word."

That was enough.

Everyone knew about Talmir, his reputation and accepted it.

Except Joe—panting behind them like a dog.

When they reached the village, the mocking started immediately.

"Told you it wasn't the undead, Joe."

"You piss yourself again old fart?"

"Should've known it was just a kid's magic—coward."

Joe clenched his teeth, hands shaking.

"Say it again," he warned quietly.

"Oh look, the drunk is gonna cry—"

Something snapped.

Joe drew his gutting knife and lunged with a scream. The blade plunged into the guard's eye before anyone understood what was happening.

Blood sprayed across the snow.

Chaos.

"Grab him!"

"Drop the knife!"

Two guards tackled him. Another kicked the blade away. Joe thrashed, screaming profanities, until a fist silenced him.

Chief Thomas stared at the corpse, then at Joe.

"...Throw him into the guildhall cell," he said coldly. "We deal with him after sundown."

Joe glared at every face that looked down on him.

"Of course... of course this is how it ends," he snarled.

"I warn you people, I save your damned hides, and you throw me in a cage."

He gave a humorless laugh.

"This rotten village deserves every curse it gets."

He was dragged away as villagers whispered in horror.

Teclos watched from behind Talmir's cloak, eyes wide—not with fear of Joe, but fear of the world around him.

And the world's fear of him.

Chapter 16 - 15 - Bound by Chains

After the whole incident in Ragla, Thomas invited them to the guild so that Talmir could clear things up.

The guildhall felt colder than usual.

Not because of Teclos's mana — his father kept a tight hand on his shoulder, keeping him calm — but because of the mood hanging in the air like a storm cloud.

The torches flickered along the stone walls, casting long, trembling shadows across grim faces.

At the long central table sat Chief Thomas, wrapped in his fur-lined cloak he'd hauled on in haste. To his right were the four most respected hunters of Ragla: Irven, Darnel, Rollo, and Tonka. Their expressions were stony, suspicious — some haunted, some angry, some curious.

Behind them stood Talmir with a protective hand on Teclos, the now trembling twelve-year-old boy. Teclos's eyes flickered like a hunted deer's as he tried not to meet their gazes.

They all hate me... all because I messed up...

Chief Thomas cleared his throat.

"Talmir," he said quietly, "explain it from the start. What happened... what we saw."

Talmir stepped forward, composed.

"Teclos was training under my supervision – meditation, mana control. He lost focus and his darkness mana leaked outward. It was an accident. Not malicious in any way. I assure you he meant no harm."

Silence stretched. Then Tonka shifted in his seat, brows furrowed.

"Accident or not," he said carefully, "I felt that cold like ice itself froze the forest. It made me sluggish, even through my clothes."

Rollo nodded, voice low.

"Aye. I won't lie – I'm frightened. But I don't think this boy is evil." He glanced at Teclos, who flinched. "Maybe... he needs help."

Irven snorted.

"Help? Help won't save us when that boy decides to lash out in anger. Training or no training – this kind of power is a knife without a sheath, not to mention sinister."

Darnel slammed his gauntleted fist on the table.

"A knife is good. A knife keeps wolves away. Maybe we can bind him with a slave mark or brainwash him before he becomes a monster, no?"

Teclos squeezed his eyes shut. His heart thudded in his chest.

They want to make me a slave? Really? Because of one mistake?

Fear rose like bile in his throat.

Talmir didn't flinch. He met Darnel's glare evenly.

"A slave mark? So the boy sits in chains because you're scared of what you don't understand?"

Rollo's chair scraped as he stood between Talmir and Darnel.

"Enough. Darnel — do you truly believe that enslaving a twelve-year-old is the right way to go about this?"

Darnel stared him down.

"I believe in protecting the village."

Talmir raised his hand, voice firm.

"If you don't know enough, Pella can examine him in front of you. Clearly magic like this needs proper oversight so that you people can be satisfied."

At the name Pella, the tension between the hunters and Talmir shifted subtly. The room grew lighter with fear receding a bit – but caution was still ever-present.

Chief Thomas nodded slowly.

"Talmir is right. I've known Father Pella for a long time. He's a wise and just member of the Dawn Church. If he says this is just the mana of a learning child, I will trust him."

Irven spat.

"And if Pella misses something? Or lies? He is from your village; for all we know he's in cahoots with you! We'll be crippled waiting for an answer while that mana spreads."

"I already told you Father Pella isn't like that," said Thomas angrily.

"Still better than blood of an innocent child in the snow," Rollo muttered, backing Thomas and refuting Irven, while also glancing at Teclos's pale face.

Thomas rested his hand on the table, thinking.

"All right, we will send a letter to the Dawn Church directly. Requesting an inquisitor – an experienced agent to assess the boy's mana firsthand. That should clarify everything."

Silence swallowed the room.

Darnel chuckled bitterly.

"An inquisitor? That'll cost blood or coin, maybe both. Hopefully you're not thinking of ours."

Irven clasped his hands on the table.

"It's necessary. That inquisitor should help us get rid of that pest." He said this looking directly at Teclos.

Talmir stiffened. His face remained neutral, but Teclos felt the tension in his father's arm — a trembling anger he rarely showed.

Dad's angry... he never gets like this unless something is really wrong...

"Chief," Talmir said quietly, "an inquisitor is... extreme."

Thomas nodded slowly.

"Perhaps. But necessary."

"They evaluate curses, corruption, undeath. Teclos has none of that."

Talmir's voice wavered with a hint of desperation.

"He's simply... different."

"And difference can be dangerous," Darnel muttered.

Talmir ignored him.

"Thomas. You know me. You know Saldia. You know he's our son."

"I do," Thomas said gently. "And that is the only reason this discussion is even happening, instead of panic spreading through the village already."

Teclos's heartbeat felt like a hammer against his ribs. His breaths were sharp and uneven.

He finally whispered,

"Dad... are they going to take me away?"

Talmir knelt before him.

"No. I won't let that happen."

He exhaled slowly and muttered silently so only Teclos heard him:

"I will send word to Pella immediately. He'll arrive soon once he knows."

Teclos trembled against his father's cloak, not really reassured.

What if Father Pella is late...? What if they decide before he comes?

The hunters scoffed, but Thomas silenced them with a glare.

"We are not deciding anything yet," the chief said firmly. "We are simply requesting an evaluation. The Church must assess him. That's all."

But Talmir heard the unspoken meaning:

Assess him... and decide his fate.

Chief Thomas rose. The hunters watched him, guarded.

"Until that agent comes, you and the boy remain under supervision. No forest trips. No solo travel. And no — and I mean no — training, lest concern and fear spread again."

The room murmured with agreement, guarded relief, and silent grumbles from the distrustful hunters.

Thomas looked at each man.

"That is all."

The hunters went out slowly. Irven and Darnel last, leaving cold stares in Teclos's direction. The torchlight flickered as they passed, shadows trembling like whispers in a graveyard.

Once the footsteps faded and the door closed, Talmir pulled Teclos into a tight hug.

"Don't worry, son," he murmured. "I will write to Pella and send word right away. He'll come... and we'll prove to them that you're just a boy."

Teclos nodded. Against the cloak, in the hush, he let soft tears slip. Not only because he was sad that nobody believed him – but because he was tired.

Tired of fear.

Tired of suspicion.

Across the hall, Tonka lingered by the doorway. He turned to Rollo, voice quiet but firm:

"Fear is not hatred. Hope the boy doesn't take it to heart too much. Let's just hope the Church sees it too."

Rollo nodded once.

"That would be for the best."

Outside, snow drifted silently in the courtyard. After a few minutes the wooden door shut with a dull thud.

Inside, only the warm glow of torches and the steady breath of a son in panic remained as Talmir left to write a letter to Pella.

Meanwhile.

Below the Guildhall, directly under Teclos... chains rattled.

The sound echoed through the stone belly of the guildhall like a weak, metallic cry.

Deep below the main floor lay the holding chambers — a set of four cramped, windowless cells carved into the cold earth centuries ago. They were built for one purpose: containment. The air smelled of iron, mildew, and old regrets, heavy enough to taste.

The walls were lined with obsidian-black mana-suppression bricks, each etched with faint runic grooves that glimmered dull blue in the torchlight. The ceiling and floors were paved with the same stone, draining mana from any unlucky soul forced to stand upon them.

Even the bars were crafted from Nullsteel, a rare alloy forged to deaden magic like a damp cloth smothering a flame.

This place was meant to cage monsters.

Tonight, it held Joe.

He lay slumped against the back wall, one leg twisted at a wrong angle, the shin swollen grotesquely beneath his filthy trouser cloth. His skin was a canvas of black-blue blotches, purple pools of swelling, and strips of torn flesh where rings and boots had caught him during the beating.

Blood — not fresh red, but sluggish, dark, sticky — trickled from his nose and from a split across his brow. The dried streaks on his arms were smeared by the trembling of his hands.

The cold was merciless. With no windows, no sunlight, and stones that leached warmth like predators, the cell felt less like a room and more like the inside of a tomb.

Joe's breaths rattled, fogging faintly in the frigid air.

"Hah... hah... ahh — damn... bastards..." he croaked, voice cracking. A violent shiver wracked his body, making the chains bolted to the wall tremble.

He tugged weakly at the shackles around his wrists. They scraped the stone with a hollow metal whisper.

"I'll kill you... all of you..." he hissed. His voice was low, hoarse, half-mad. "Leave me in here to rot... like I'm filth... like I'm nothing..."

He laughed, a wet, broken sound that echoed off the stone.

"Nothing... that's what they called me, wasn't it...?"

His head slumped forward. Memories slipped through the cracks in his mind like unwelcome ghosts.

Memories of a Broken Life.

He saw his father lying still on the bed – thin, pale, barely breathing as the sickness claimed him. The hunters stood by, not helping, not even looking at Joe when it happened.

After the burial, they whispered:

"That boy's trouble."

"The father's debts... they'll fall on him."

"Bad luck follows that family."

He was twelve when the first shove came.

Fourteen when the first punch landed.

Fifteen when even the adults crossed the street to avoid him.

Sixteen when his apprenticeship fell through because "someone like him" couldn't be trusted near tools or coin.

Joe's jaw clenched, cracking fresh blood on his lip.

"They all hated me... all of 'em... even when I tried..."

He remembered the nights he spent trying to win the village over – fishing for extra meat, offering to fix fences, trying to help in hopes someone would smile at him.

But the smiles never came.

Eventually, the drinks did.

And with them... ruin.

Remembering the Day He Lost His Family

"They all look at me... like a monster..." he whispered, staring at his shaking hands. "Even Lira... even little Ren..."

He remembered coming home reeking of liquor, thinking he was being funny as he stumbled through the doorway.

He remembered shouting about nothing, throwing a cup, slamming a hand against the table so hard the wood cracked.

Not hitting them.

But scaring them.

Terrifying them.

His wife had cried that night. His son hid behind her skirt.

Joe remembered reaching toward them – not to hurt them, but to hold them, explain, apologize.

But drunken hands are clumsy, and drunken shouting feels like rage.

The fear in their eyes burned him even now.

"Maybe I wasn't the best husband... or friend..." he muttered, voice trembling.
"But I don't deserve this..."

Then he remembered the fire.

His one friend — Rogan — had taken him in when he'd been too drunk to walk home.

Joe remembered waking up in Rogan's house, cold and miserable, the taste of cheap liquor still clinging to his tongue. He remembered stumbling toward the table, knocking into a candle.

He remembered the flame catching a curtain.

Rogan had screamed for water. Neighbors had rushed in.

And Joe had stood there, frozen, while the house burned.

Rogan never looked at him again.

The village decided that was enough reason to shun him entirely.

The Present — And the Breaking Point.

Joe pressed his forehead to the freezing stone. His breath quickened into a manic rhythm.

"And now..." he laughed bitterly, "...now they beat me... leave me here... after all I did..."

His eyes went wild.

"This is all that brat's fault. That cursed child..."

He spat blood on the floor.

"Teclos... Teclos ... you ruined everything..."

He laughed again – high, sharp, unhinged.

"They'll see... they'll all see... who the real monster is..."

His voice faded into a rasping whisper.

The chains rattled softly as he curled tighter into himself, shivering violently.

Above him, faint footsteps echoed from the upper floor.

Warm voices murmured through stone.

Joe stared up at the ceiling with wide, glassy eyes.

"...laugh while you can..."

His teeth chattered.

"...you won't laugh for long..."

And although the dungeon swallowed his words whole,

He took action.

He remembered the Ritual.

Forbidden, sinister, and full of hatred.

Joe bit his finger for fresh blood and started drawing a magic pentagram.

Giving his remaining life force and what mana he had left away. It was a summoning ritual of an evil spirit or banshee he learned from a Necronomicon his father kept for a while until he sold it for booze.

Mana spiked and flared even in this environment. Hatred and life force were the basis for necromancy he'd read from the book, so he poured every ounce of his being into summoning the monster and sacrificing himself in the process.

Once the pentagram was finished, the whole dungeon lit up in red.

The runic signs started turning in a counterclockwise way around the pentagram, and a dark fog rose from the middle of the magic symbol.

Teclos felt a sinister aura — so sinister it froze him in place out of fear.

"What... what is this? This isn't me... this isn't my mana?"

The air trembled.

The torches in the dungeon flickered violently.

And then—

Joe's life faded; in return, unlife was born anew.

The pentagram formed a black gateway that roared open with a blast of crimson light—

And something unspeakable crawled out.

Chapter 17 - 16 - The Banshee

Joe lay curled on the cold stone, breath rasping, vision blurring.

The dungeon no longer felt real—not the chains biting into his wrists, not the blood crusted against his skin, not even the pain screaming from his twisted leg. Pain had become background noise. Familiar. Almost comforting.

What mattered was the memory.

The words from the Necronomicon.

His father's book.

He laughed softly, a wet, broken sound.

Funny... Of all the things his father had owned—tools, debts, half-empty bottles—that book was the only thing Joe had ever loved.

He remembered it clearly.

Bound in cracked black leather that smelled faintly of rot and old incense. The pages yellowed, edges frayed, ink written in cramped, spidery script that hurt the eyes if stared at too long. His father had kept it hidden beneath loose floorboards, wrapped in cloth like a shameful secret.

He remembered sitting alone in the dim light of a candle, heart racing as he turned the pages. Most of it had been nonsense to him at the time—diagrams, symbols, warnings written in red ink.

But one section had fascinated him.

Spirits of Lament.

Voices of Death.

The Banshee.

Joe's breath hitched as the memory sharpened.

The book had described it in loving, horrifying detail.

A creature born not from mana alone—but from agony.

A banshee was not summoned like other spirits.

It was raised.

The text had been clear.

A banshee requires a living sacrifice.

The vessel must be broken, beaten, and abandoned.

It must know rage.

It must know grief.

It must want the world to suffer.

Joe's lips twitched.

That was why it was my favorite, he thought dimly.

It wasn't born evil... it was made.

The ritual demanded despair—pure, undiluted anguish. The victim had to be alive, heart still beating, soul still clinging desperately to the body while the transformation began.

The book had been explicit:

A willing sacrifice weakens the spirit.

A hopeful sacrifice fails.

But one who curses the world with their final breath...

That one will scream loud enough to tear the veil.

Joe swallowed thickly.

Distress. Rage. Hatred.

He had all three.

The dungeon was perfect too—damp, buried deep beneath stone, soaked in old suffering. Not a cemetery, but close enough. Close enough for a spirit that fed on despair.

And the blood...

Joe looked down at his hands. They trembled violently, slick and red. His own blood smeared the floor beneath him, soaked into the grooves he'd carved earlier with shaking fingers.

The pentagram was crude—uneven lines, symbols warped by pain and haste—but it was complete.

His blood had been enough.

It had to be.

Please... Joe thought, heart hammering.

Just don't let a guard come down here.'

If someone interrupted the ritual now, it would fail. Worse—it would leave him alive, broken, and still hated.

He couldn't endure that again.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

Let it work. Let it kill them. Let it scream.

The stone beneath him was slick, cold, and humming faintly—the mana-suppression bricks protesting what he was about to do.

He collapsed onto his back.

The chains clinked weakly as he spread his arms, forcing himself into position. His blood smeared beneath his shoulders, soaking into the central sigil.

He stared at the ceiling.

This is it, he thought.

No more begging. No more trying to be nice.

Joe drew in a ragged breath and began pulling mana toward himself.

The pain was instant.

White-hot.

It felt as if something had reached into his veins and yanked—as if invisible hooks were tearing through his blood, dragging energy through passages never meant to carry it.

He screamed.

The sound tore itself from his throat, raw and animal like.

It felt like his veins were splitting open, bursting one by one. Pressure built behind his eyes until his vision blurred, then darkened. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, each pulse a hammer blow.

Keep going, he thought desperately.

Don't stop. Don't stop.

Mana flooded into him—not gently, not naturally—but violently, forced through sheer will and hatred. His body convulsed as the energy tore through muscle and bone alike.

He began to chant.

"Vael thren kor'ash..."

"Morr senkai, morr senkai."

"Keth'ra om velis."

"Nax ul-thren."

The words clawed their way out of his throat, ancient and harsh, syllables that tasted like rust and ash. He didn't fully understand them—but the book had said understanding was unnecessary.

Intent mattered.

And Joe had intent.

His eyes burned.

Pressure built and built until—

Something wet slid down his face.

His vision went red.

He realized distantly that his eyes had burst, blood pouring freely from their ruined sockets. The pain was overwhelming, blinding—and then strangely distant, as if his mind were already slipping away.

His fingers twitched.

Then snapped.

Bones cracked loudly, grotesquely, stretching and reshaping beneath skin that split and bled. His hands elongated unnaturally, fingers lengthening into thin, claw-like shapes that scraped against the stone.

Joe screamed again—but it wasn't entirely pain anymore.

There was something else.

Something answering him.

He felt it before he sensed it—a presence pressing down on him like a suffocating weight. Cold. Hungry. Curious.

Yes... he thought weakly.

That's it...

His ribs cracked one by one, chest arching as if pulled upward by invisible strings. His spine twisted, vertebrae grinding as his body was forced into a shape no human should take.

His soul burned.

He felt something touch it.

Not gently.

The presence wrapped around him, invasive and intimate, sinking into him like claws into soft flesh. It began to feed—tearing at his essence, devouring memories, pain, rage.

Joe's thoughts scattered.

Faces flashed through his mind—the hunters, the villagers, his wife, his sons, Teclos.

Hatred surged.

Kill them, he begged silently.

Kill all of them. Make them scream like I did.

The spirit answered with hunger.

Joe's mouth twisted into a smile.

Blood bubbled from his lips as his consciousness began to fracture. His body no longer felt like his own—it was just a vessel now, breaking apart to make room for something far worse.

As the last of his strength faded, Joe felt strangely... peaceful.

I won't be alone anymore, he thought dimly.

And they won't forget me.

The darkness closed in.

And for the last time in a long, long while—

Joe smiled.

The black smoke did not rise gently.

It tore itself free.

It poured upward from the blood-soaked pentagram in thick, writhing coils, as if the stone itself had begun to rot and exhale its corruption. The runes carved in Joe's blood screamed silently as the smoke devoured their glow, swallowing the red light until only a pulsing darkness remained.

Joe's body convulsed once.

Then it stopped being his.

The smoke wrapped around him like a burial shroud, seeping into his mouth, his eyes, the torn veins in his arms. Bones cracked—not loudly, but wetly—reshaping under invisible pressure. His spine stretched, vertebrae popping one by one as his

body lengthened unnaturally, limbs growing too long, joints bending at angles that made flesh scream in protest.

His skin peeled and hardened, thinning into something like old leather stretched too tight over bone.

Joe's face twisted.

His jaw unhinged, teeth grinding as they sharpened, lengthened, curved inward—row after row of jagged, shark-like fangs forming behind split lips. His eyes burst fully then, not in gore but in collapse—popping inward as if crushed from within—only to be replaced by smooth, milky-white orbs that glowed faintly in the red-lit chamber.

White hair spilled from his scalp in tangled waves, drifting upward as though submerged in water.

The chains rattled violently now, pulled taut by an unseen force as the thing forming at the center of the pentagram rose.

Not stood.

Rose.

Its feet did not touch the ground.

The smoke condensed, thickening, shaping itself into long, clawed hands and taloned feet. Fingers ended in curved, blackened claws that scraped lightly against the air itself, leaving faint ripples where matter resisted its presence.

Joe's final expression—frozen between bliss and agony—lingered for a heartbeat longer.

Then the soul was taken.

The banshee inhaled.

The sound was wrong.

It was not air moving into lungs—it was mana, despair, lingering hatred being dragged screaming into something vast and hungry. The suppression runes embedded in the walls flickered, cracked, and dimmed, as if suddenly unsure whether they still had authority here.

The banshee's head tilted slowly.

Awareness bloomed.

It remembered the summoning circle—not as symbols, but as intent.

It remembered the offering—not as flesh, but as promise.

It remembered Joe—not as a man, but as fuel.

A thin, crooked smile spread across its ruined mouth.

Intelligent eyes—white and lightless—focused.

Its first scream did not explode outward.

It pressed inward.

A pressure wave rippled through the dungeon, invisible but devastating. Stone groaned. Mortar cracked. Somewhere above, a torch fluttered out, plunging a hallway into darkness.

Joe's chains disintegrated into rust and dust.

The banshee drifted forward, phasing halfway through the cell wall before pulling itself fully into the chamber again, as if testing reality—testing how much it was allowed to break.

Satisfied.

It opened its mouth again.

This scream was different.

Not loud—but precise.

A harmonic shriek laced with necromantic resonance tore through the guildhall's foundations. Searching for other spirits that could be used.

Above, Teclos staggered.

The boy gasped as if struck, clutching his chest as a wave of cold terror slammed into him—nothing like his own mana, nothing he recognized. This was ancient. Hungry.

"No... no no no...holy...i have to run." Panic filled his mind.

The banshee hovered fully upright now, tall and lanky, its elongated limbs hanging loosely at its sides. Its claws flexed once.

Then it laughed.

The sound was layered—Joe's broken voice woven beneath something far older, far colder.

"Ahhh..." it whispered, voice echoing in multiple directions at once.

"So much grief... packed so tightly around me."

Its head turned slowly—toward the ceiling.

Toward the living.

"Shall we sing after a long time?"

Mana surged outward again, stronger this time, rolling through stone and iron alike.

The Queen of Wraiths took her first breath.

Another torch above the cell flickered once.

Then it went out.

The guard close to it, frowned.

He was leaning against the stone wall of the lower corridor, half-asleep, spear resting loosely in one hand. The sudden darkness tugged him out of his daze, and

he squinted down the hallway where the flame had been burning only moments ago.

"Huh..." he muttered.

No cold rush followed. No pressure. No warning in the gut. If there was something wrong, he couldn't feel it. The mana-suppression stones hummed as they always had—steady, dull, reassuring.

Probably a draft, he decided.

Grumbling, he pushed himself upright and trudged toward the torch bracket, boots scraping lazily over the stone. He lifted the torch, inspecting the wick.

"Cheap oil," he scoffed. "Chief's always cutting—"

He never finished the sentence.

Teclos ran before this even happened.

He didn't think. He didn't question it. The moment the pressure hit—sharp, alien, crushing—his body reacted on instinct alone. Fear surged through him like lightning, and his legs moved before his mind caught up.

He burst out of the guildhall doors, breath tearing from his chest in ragged gasps, boots slipping on packed snow as he sprinted toward the main gate. His heart pounded so hard it hurt, each beat echoing with a single screaming thought:

Run. Run. Run!

At the gates, Talmir stood with Chief Thomas, speaking to two bundled travelers—peddlers by the look of them, a mule tethered nearby, packs heavy with letters and sealed parcels. Their voices drifted casually through the cold air.

Teclos screamed.

"DAD!"

Talmir spun instantly.

Teclos barreled into him, clutching at his coat, eyes wide and unfocused, breath coming in sharp, panicked sobs.

"Something's wrong!" Teclos cried. "Something's down there—it's not me, I swear, it's not me this time—!"

Thomas stepped forward, alarmed. "Teclos, slow down—what are you talking about?"

"I—I can feel it," Teclos gasped, clutching his chest. "It hurts just being here. It's angry—so angry—"

The peddlers exchanged uneasy looks.

Talmir knelt, gripping Teclos's shoulders firmly. "Son. Breathe. Look at me."

Teclos tried.

He really did.

But the feeling didn't fade.

It pulsed.

Just as Teclos ran outside of the guild, deep beneath Ragla, something laughed.

The banshee felt the child flee.

A faint flicker—fast, frightened, bright in a way that amused her.

Let him run, she thought, her awareness unfurling through stone and shadow. Fear spreads fast when it has legs but there was no escape from her.

Her presence thickened, pressing outward. The suppression stones around her began to scream—not audibly, but spiritually—hairline fractures crawling across their runic faces like veins beneath dying skin.

Such a clever cage, she mused.

Such effort... for nothing.

She extended one claw.

Mana recoiled and the stone exploded.

Every suppression brick in the chamber shattered at once, bursting apart in a cascade of black shards and dead runes. The dungeon groaned, then gave way.

She rose.

Phasing through space itself.

The banshee surged upward through solid rock as if it were mist, her form slipping between matter and void, moving faster than sound, faster than thought.

She emerged behind the guard.

The man who had just bent to relight the torch complaining.

A claw punched through his chest.

Not ripping—piercing—sliding cleanly between ribs and straight through his heart. His body stiffened, breath catching silently as his eyes went wide in confusion rather than pain.

The banshee leaned in close and bit.

His head came away with a wet snap, blood spraying across the stone wall in a dark arc. His body crumpled lifelessly to the floor, heart still twitching around her claw.

She swallowed it.

Warmth.

Life.

Fear.

Delicious.

She smiled and looked up.

And for the first time—

She truly screamed.

The sound was not just noise.

It was annihilation.

The scream tore outward in a visible shockwave, warping air and stone alike. Windows across Ragla shattered simultaneously. People dropped where they stood, clutching ears, blood pouring from eyes and noses. Some screamed. Others never got the chance.

The guildhall exploded.

Stone walls blew outward as if struck by a siege spell, timbers snapping, debris hurled into the night. The ground buckled. The gates rattled violently.

Teclos collapsed to his knees, hands clamped over his ears, vision blurry as the scream crushed through him like a physical force.

Talmir staggered, eyes wide in horror.

Thomas shouted something—orders, warnings—but his voice was swallowed whole in white noise.

Above the ruined guildhall, a pale figure rose into the snow-filled night.

White hair flowing.

Claws gleaming.

Eyes empty and vast.

The Queen of Wraiths had announced her presence.

Chapter 18 - 17 - A Village Claimed by Death

After the scream, there was silence.

Not a peaceful one.

Panic was on the villagers' faces, they appeared to be screaming.

But nothing was heard.

Just the absence of sound—thick, oppressive, a ringing in the skull that refused to be released.

Across Ragla, people staggered where they stood. Hands clamped over ears. Mouths open in silent cries. Blood streamed freely from their orifices, splattering onto snow and stone alike. Some of those closer to the blast dropped to their knees, retching, their vision reduced to blinding white noise.

Others farther away swayed, eyes unfocused, disbelief frozen across their faces.

Those closest to the blast never rose at all.

They lay sprawled in the streets and homes nearest the guildhall—unconscious, bleeding from eyes, ears, and nose. Some twitched weakly.

Among them, many did not breathe.

They were the unlucky ones.

They were already dead.

A woman's scream cut through the quiet—high and broken—as she shook her husband's shoulders, her hands coming away slick and red.

A child sobbed, tugging at his father's coat, not understanding why he wouldn't wake.

Above them all, hovering amid drifting snow and settling dust, the banshee lifted her arms like a harbinger—a god of death.

The whole village felt it.

A pressure—silent, final—settled over Ragla like a shroud. The air grew heavy, the cold biting deeper than winter ever had. Mist thickened. Shadows stretched unnaturally long.

The banshee's mouth opened.

She began to chant.

The words were not meant for living ears.

They were old—older than religion, older than kingdoms—syllables shaped for graves and bone. Each phrase echoed faintly from all sides, as if spoken from beneath the earth itself.

"Velis nax-morr, thra'ka unvel."

"Keth nax-ethra vel senkai."

"Oh... Threx Morr'kael, Vaelor Supreme."

"Granteth ul-morr vel nax-chor."

Death mana bled outward from her like ink in water.

It seeped into stone. Into soil. Into splintered wood and shattered walls. The air filled with a faint, sickly haze—a miasma that clung to skin and lungs.

Cold.

Wrong.

The ground answered.

Fingers clawed up through snow-packed earth.

A hand burst through the floor of a collapsed house, nails blackened, flesh sloughing from bone. Another followed. Then a face—jaw hanging loose, eyes clouded and empty—dragged itself free with a wet, sucking sound.

A hord of zombies rose.

From shallow graves. From forgotten corners. From the very streets where villagers had fallen moments ago. Bodies twisted upright with broken motions, joints popping, limbs dragging. Some still wore familiar clothes. Aprons. Boots. Wedding bands.

They began to move.

Not fast—but relentless.

Certain.

Inevitable.

The miasma thickened around them, a sour stench of rot and old death permeating the air. Their mouths opened in silent moans as they shambled forward, arms reaching, feet crunching over snow and debris.

Then something else emerged.

From the shadows between ruined buildings, shapes detached themselves from the darkness—possessing dead pets and animals.

Those animals twisted instantly, growing larger, unrecognizable. Any semblance of a lovable form vanished, replaced by something sinister.

Dangerous.

They turned in to ghouls.

Roughly the height of an adolescent boy, they moved low and fast, bodies hunched, muscles coiled. Their forms were lean and bestial, jaws splitting wide to reveal rows of fangs. Claws scraped against stone as they sprinted, snow spraying beneath their feet.

One leapt—vaulting onto a rooftop with terrifying ease—then dropped into a fleeing villager.

The carnage began.

A man shoved his wife behind him, raising a woodcutting axe with shaking hands. He swung once—twice—splitting a zombie's skull, only to be dragged down as another clamped rotting teeth into his shoulder. He screamed as black veins crawled outward from the bite wound.

Nearby, a woman stabbed frantically with a kitchen knife while clutching her child to her chest—until a ghoul tore through her back in a spray of blood, its claws ripping flesh as if it weren't there at all. The child's scream cut off abruptly as its head was severed as well.

Fathers fought.

Mothers fought.

Neighbors fought.

The whole village fought.

And it was all in vain.

Zombies pulled people down beneath sheer numbers, their scratches burning with necrotic poison. Those who fell beneath the miasma felt their strength bleed away, their final breaths stolen before their souls could escape.

Ghouls were worse.

They ripped through barricades, scaled walls, burst through windows. One dragged a screaming man up a tree, only to tear him apart limb by limb as his family watched below.

Those who ran first—those who fled at the first sign of wrongness—made it to the safe zone Thomas had managed to form. Hunters and guards rallied, shields raised, torches burning bright against the dark.

Spears, arrows, and swords ready to defend the people behind them.

But Ragla burned before their eyes, and morale was at an all-time low.

Above all the carnage, the banshee watched.

Once again, with the same motion, she raised the newly dead adding them to her army—and watched some more.

A moment later—

Satisfied, she drifted backward, descending once more into the shattered depths beneath the guildhall. Her mission—and death—were not finished here. She had more to raise.

At her command, four ghouls remained behind.

They prowled near the broken dungeon entrance, pacing like guard dogs amid rubble and scorched stone.

Anyone who came close—scarred, bloodied, survivors of this onslaught—would be dealt with.

They hissed softly at the darkness, waiting for their master to return.

Talmir didn't hesitate.

The moment his ears stopped ringing—when the world staggered back into motion—he grabbed Teclos by the arm and ran toward the village gates.

Snow crunched beneath their boots as they burst away from the gates, away from the screams rising behind them. Teclos stumbled, breath hitching, terror still clawing at his chest.

"Dad—what—?"

"Listen to me, son," Talmir snapped, hauling him forward. His voice was commanding now. Focused. Afraid—but controlled.

They reached the outer path when Talmir stopped suddenly.

"You are going to run away—toward our village. No objections."

Teclos shook his head violently. "I'm not leaving you!"

"You are," Talmir said, harsh. Necessary. "You slow me down, and you're a liability."

The words hurt.

Both of them.

He knew they would.

Teclos stared at him, eyes shining, jaw trembling.

Talmir forced himself to continue.

"I'm giving you your first hunter mission. You're going to bring all the hunters..."
He paused briefly. "With the full force of the Dawn Church—and Pella. You tell them what you felt and saw here. You tell them everything."

Teclos nodded.

Just then, one of the peddlers sprinted past them toward the barn near the gate, eyes wild, panic driving him blindly away from the village.

Steel flashed.

Talmir's sword stopped an inch from the man's throat.

"Don't move," Talmir said calmly.

The peddler froze.

Talmir turned to him. "You're running to Lupos, right? Then do it as fast as you can. Bring the church and the inquisitors. If the count sends knights, even better."

He paused, looking between them both.

"Wait..."

"Go together until Kolma," Talmir said, blade still steady. "I saw that you have a pegasus—you'll be faster than anything on the road. Once you reach Kolma, leave my son there. Then continue to Lupos."

The man nodded frantically.

Both of them did.

Talmir pushed Teclos toward the peddler, and they ran.

Snow sprayed behind them as they fled into the night.

Talmir turned back alone.

From the gates, he could already see Thomas—shouting orders, rallying hunters and guards, pulling survivors behind makeshift barricades. Torches flared. Steel rang.

Good, Talmir thought grimly. At least they established a barricade.

He broke into a sprint, wind gathering at his feet.

If Ragla was going to fall—

It wouldn't fall quietly.

Talmir jumped into the sky and slammed into the undead line like a mad man, reckless but heroic.

He spun wildly, releasing wind blades into the horde of undead, slicing them apart.

Thomas saw him through the smoke and torchlight and let out something between a laugh and a shout of relief. "You stubborn bastard," he barked, even as he drove a spear into a lunging corpse. "I thought you'd run."

"Not a chance," Talmir replied, ready to draw more unclean blood.

Irven and Tonka were there—bloodied, breathing hard, eyes sharp with exhaustion. Of the experienced hunters, they were all that remained. The rest lay scattered through the streets in front of them—or worse.

The guards held the flanks, shields braced, spears thrusting into the slow press of zombies. Ghouls skittered at the edges of torchlight, darting back whenever fire flared too close.

No area magic was used, as there were survivors still about.

Thomas was everywhere at once—shouting orders, striking down the dead, dragging wounded villagers behind barricades built from carts and splintered doors. He fought like a man who knew this place would not survive the night—only the people might.

"You're in charge of the retreat," Thomas said sharply as Talmir reached him. "I can't leave the front line."

Talmir nodded once.

No argument.

No wasted words.

He turned immediately, scanning the chaos with a keen eye.

People were shivering—not from cold, but from terror. Standing still. Screaming. Watching loved ones fall.

"Move!" Talmir roared, his voice cutting through the chaos like a blade. "If you can walk, you help the wounded. If you're hurt but still breathing, get to the carts. Don't just stand there!"

Two young hunters stood nearby, pale and shaking, weapons hanging uselessly in their hands. Their eyes tracked movement but without the resolve to strike.

Talmir grabbed them both.

"You," he said, gripping their collars. "Focus! And look at me."

They did.

"Calm down and help me get people to safety. You don't have to fight the monsters but at least help me out—less guilt for later."

His voice started to awaken them somewhat.

He shoved one toward a wounded man clutching his leg. "Carry him."

The other toward a woman slumped against a wall, blood matting her hair. "You carry her."

Their mouths opened.

"Now!" Talmir snapped.

Something in his tone broke through their brain fog and shock.

Their eyes cleared of confusion, and they began to move.

"Everyone else," he shouted, turning to the cluster of villagers huddled behind a barricade, "you know how to tie rope? Tear doors apart? Then make stretchers. Blankets, poles, cloaks—anything. Don't leave your neighbors on the ground."

Hands began to move.

Slowly at first.

Then faster.

Fear gave way to purpose.

Talmir moved constantly—hauling the wounded back beyond the gates, pointing escape routes, redirecting panicked runners away from dead ends already overrun. More than once, he dragged someones body away from a ghoul's charge just before their claws struck where villager stood.

Above them, the night echoed with screams.

And in the center of all this, deeper underground—

Something laughed.

—

Teclos reached Kolma just before dawn.

His heart burned. His throat felt raw. The world had narrowed to shallow breaths, snow, and the pounding of his heart long before the village lights finally appeared through the trees.

Ronn the peddler slowed the pegasus as they landed in the outer fields.

"You're safe here," he said quietly.

Teclos slid down stiffly, nearly collapsing when his feet hit the ground. Ronn caught him by the arm, steadying him.

They stood there for a moment, the cold air biting, the night suddenly too quiet.

"I'm sorry," Ronn said after a pause.

Teclos looked up, confused.

"For your father," the peddler continued. "Men don't stay behind unless they have to protect something."

Teclos swallowed hard. "He told me to run," he said, looking toward the ground.

"That's what all good men say," Ronn replied. "It isn't easy being brave, but your father has what it takes to be a hero."

Teclos stared back toward the road they'd come from, jaw tight. "He said it was my first mission."

Ronn managed a small, sad smile. "Then don't fail it."

He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Run to the gates and alarm your village. I'll ride to Lupos now."

Teclos nodded.

He didn't trust his voice anymore. Would the village even listen to him?

—

Deep in the dungeon, the air twisted with miasma.

The shattered dungeon lay steeped in death mana now—thick, heavy, pulsing like a slow heartbeat. Broken stone floated in the air; reality was twisted in on itself.

At the center of a new magic circle, adorned with many runes and death mana, something stirred.

A familiar soul screamed, back to... unlife.

Not with pain—

But with confusion.

It remembered dying.

It remembered agony.

It remembered being torn apart.

So why did it still think... thoughts?

The form that rose from the circle was wrong—thin and stretched, edges blurred like smoke trying to remember flesh. Its face was a mockery of what it had been, features warped, eyes hollow pits glowing faintly with cold light.

A wraith.

Joe looked down at himself—at the absence of a body, the way his hands passed slightly through the air—and terror bloomed anew.

'I'm still here. Why am I still here?'

The banshee hovered before him, her presence crushing, vast, insurmountable. She studied him the way a craftsman studied his work of art.

Curious.

Amused.

"You persist," she murmured, voice layered and echoing from all sides. "Most can not."

Joe tried to speak.

No sound came out.

Panic surged.

The banshee tilted her head, white hair drifting as though underwater.

"I liked your sacrifice, full of malice, full of vengeance," she said softly.

Her claws brushed against his essence—not unkindly anymore.

"So I'm going to give you a chance." A grotesque smile formed on her face, ready to unleash the first wraith upon the villagers.

Chapter 19 - 18 - Born of Hatred

Joe drifted in the air.

He wasn't breathing. His heart wasn't beating. But who needed either when you were immortal?

He felt no pain, and that alone made him feel invincible.

And yet—he still remembered dying. He remembered the moment, the surroundings.

That thought should have terrified him. But it didn't.

'I died', he thought. The realization came easily, without panic. Like it wasn't him that died.

'But I remember it.'

The dungeon was still there, though unrecognizable now—walls destroyed, life leached away—the stone was reduced to rubble of cold and darkness. He could see the sigils beneath him faintly, his blood long since dried into something dull and meaningless.

Joe tried to swallow.

Nothing happened.

He raised a hand—and watched it pass slightly through the dust in the air, edges unraveling into mist before knitting back together again.

Confusion surged.

'I shouldn't be here.'

'Why am I still here?'

A presence pressed against him just then, heavy and unavoidable, like standing before a vast void.

Joe recoiled instinctively—but could not move.

She hovered before him.

The banshee's form filled the chamber with her sinister pressure, white hair drifting as though suspended in deep water. Her eyes—vast, pale, and endless—regarded him with a love that was worse than the cruelest torture.

Joe understood, suddenly and completely, that he could not disobey her.

That knowledge wasn't spoken.

It was imprinted.

"You persist," the banshee said, her voice layered—Joe's own tone buried somewhere beneath it, stretched and hollow. "Most do not."

Joe tried to speak.

The effort scraped through him like broken glass.

"I—"

Nothing. No sound.

Confusion flickered.

The banshee tilted her head. "Ah. Yes. You have not been shaped yet."

Understanding followed quickly—too quickly. He wasn't finished. He wasn't complete. He was something half-made, held together by will and her influence.

"You called me," she continued calmly. "With blood. With despair. With hatred ripe enough to tear the veil."

Images bloomed in his mind—his body on the stone, the pentagram, the screaming pain.

"You opened the door," she said. "And because of that, Ragla screams."

Her gaze sharpened as if searching something inside him.

"Does that please you?"

Joe didn't hesitate.

The confusion cracked.

And something inside him broke—he laughed.

A soundless, hysterical laughter tore through his thoughts as realization settled fully into place. The village. The people. The hunters. The ones who had watched and done nothing.

They're suffering.

The banshee watched closely, now amused.

She let Joe's awareness expand—upward, outward. He felt it then: distant panic, terror like static, lives snuffed out one by one. Each death sent a faint, delicious tremor through him.

"Yes," Joe thought fervently. Yes, it pleases me.

He bowed—or tried to. His form wavered, instinctive submission overriding pride.

"Thank you," he managed at last, his voice scraping out as a whisper of cold air and malice. "Thank you for letting them understand."

The banshee's smile widened.

"You are suitable, to join us, it seems," she said.

Relief flooded him.

She drifted closer, her presence tightening around him like chains made of will. "Listen well, wraith. What you have begun is small—but useful."

She gestured, and Joe saw.

The village above. The dead rising. The ghouls tearing through flesh. The foundations cracking beneath the weight of death mana pooling like a tide.

"This place will become a foothold," she said. "A wound that does not close. From here, I will call more of my kind."

Her voice lowered.

"And when enough souls have been harvested—when despair has fermented properly—my master will answer."

The word master struck Joe like a brand. How could such a supreme being have a master? he thought.

"What... are they?" he asked.

"A lich," she replied simply. "An architect of endings. A sovereign of unlife."

Joe trembled—not in fear.

In awe.

"To serve such a being," she continued, "one must prove valuable."

Her eyes locked onto his. "Tell me, wraith. What do you desire now?"

The answer spilled out of him, raw and eager.

"Let me join them," he pleaded. "Let me kill them. There are faces I want to see break. Names I want to end."

His thoughts spiraled, hungry. "I will serve. I will obey. I'll give you loyalty that will never vanish."

Silence stretched.

Then the banshee laughed—softly, approving.

"So eager," she murmured. "I'm going to give you a chance."

She reached into the darkness beside her, and a body fell.

It hit the stone with a wet thud—a villager, broken and pale, eyes glassy with recent death. The banshee gestured, and the corpse rose, jerking upright like a puppet hauled by invisible strings.

"This will suffice," she said. "You will wear it."

Joe recoiled instinctively—then leaned forward.

The body was pulled toward him, flesh unraveling as his essence was forced inside. Cold slammed into him. Weight. Shape. Limbs locking into place.

Then the flesh began its transformation.

The body lengthened, stretching thin and wrong.

Like the banshee, his bones elongated, his skin stretching, becoming hard and old like leather.

His hair started rising upward, whitening itself.

His eyes lost their color and were pure white now.

There were no dark claws or sharp teeth, however.

As the process finished and his spirit possessed the body, he gasped—actually gasped—as unlife settled fully into him.

Joe stood.

Lanky. Pale. Familiar in silhouette to the banshee, yet not complete.

For now.

The banshee regarded him once more and commanded, "Go."

And Joe smiled.

Talmir, meanwhile, finished the retreat with clenched teeth and bloodied hands.

The wounded were moving now—staggering, carried, half-dragged beyond the gates under the cover of torchlight. He left a handful of able-bodied men behind for protection. They would buy time. Some of them would die doing it, but the escape of the villagers had started.

He did not look back.

Instead, he turned toward the barricade inside.

Only then did he truly take in the battlefield.

Too many corpses.

Too many still moving.

Zombies pressed forward in a slow, unending tide—arms outstretched, legs dragging, bodies already broken and re-broken. They were relentless and innumerable. But the ghouls—

Talmir's jaw tightened.

Only half a dozen lay dead.

And that was the problem.

The ghouls did not charge blindly. They darted, tested, withdrew. They circled the torchlight like wolves, eyes gleaming with hunger. They waited for mistakes. They struck when backs were turned, when formations broke, when someone panicked.

They can think, Talmir realized grimly.

That made them far more dangerous.

Zombies could be managed.

Immobilized.

As his eyes tracked the battlefield, his mind shifted into the cold, efficient rhythm of a hunter.

Legs and arms first. Head only if necessary.

A zombie without legs was no threat. A zombie without arms was manageable. Decapitation was harder to pull off.

He turned sharply to the two young hunters who had followed him, their faces pale beneath smeared blood and ash.

"You," he snapped. "Flanks." He pointed to where the guards held their ground.

They stiffened.

"You stay together. You listen to the guards. Don't chase, and don't swing wildly. That's how you survive."

They nodded quickly and ran, relief and fear warring in their eyes as they took positions beside seasoned guards.

Talmir didn't watch them go.

His attention was already fixed on the front line.

Thomas.

Tonka.

Irven.

They were barely holding.

Thomas stood at the center like a living bulwark, coat torn, armor dented, blood streaking his face—some of it not his own. He wielded two swords now, blades flashing in wide arcs as the dead surged toward him.

A corpse lunged from the right.

Another from the left.

Thomas crossed his arms behind his back, blades sweeping outward in a brutal diagonal slash. Steel bit deep—two heads spun free, bodies collapsing into the snow at his feet.

For a heartbeat, the line held.

Then a ghoul suddenly struck.

It launched itself from the edge of the torchlight, low and fast, jaws spread wide, claws reaching for Thomas's throat.

Thomas turned—too slow.

This is it, I guess, he thought.

But behind him—wind gathered.

The world blurred.

Talmir vanished.

And reappeared.

His blade already drawn and aimed at its throat. The creature's eyes widened—intelligent enough to understand what had happened, just barely.

Then the head came free.

The body hit the ground a heartbeat later.

Silence—a brief one.

Thomas was stunned, and then he laughed.

A raw, barking sound torn from his chest as he shoved another zombie back with a boot and hacked it down.

"Well, I'll be damned," he grinned, eyes alight like a warrior reborn. "Welcome to the front line, boy."

Talmir didn't smile.

He raised his blade and stepped into formation.

"Let's hold it," he said.

The undead didn't wait.

Strange, Joe thought.

I can feel everything—and nothing at the same time.

No pain.

No smell.

No touch.

His awareness existed without sensation, like thought untethered from flesh. He drifted through the stone floor as if it weren't there, experimenting at first—phasing through walls, through shattered pillars, through packed earth itself. Each movement came easier than the last, instinct settling in quickly.

When the banshee gave the order, Joe did not hesitate.

He ascended.

Straight through the dungeon ceiling.

The night opened around him, cold and vast, snow drifting through his incorporeal form. He hovered high above Ragla, weightless, free. Flight came naturally—levitation responding to thought alone.

Below him—

Beauty.

A battlefield bathed in fire and blood.

Bodies littered the streets—torn apart, crushed, half-devoured. Children who had mocked him once lay broken in the snow, their laughter long silenced. Elders who had scowled at his mere presence stared skyward with hollow eyes, heads severed, throats ruined.

Villagers staggered even in death—rotting corpses still moving, faces caved in, stomachs split open and empty, flesh sloughing from bone as they obeyed a will no longer their own.

Joe watched it all.

A grotesque smile spread across his face.

"Ah... what a beautiful sight," he whispered.

Then his smile widened.

"But worry not. Your suffering doesn't end here, you wretched people. My time has come—to wreak havoc and annihilation upon you."

His gaze sharpened.

"And I know exactly where to start."

He spotted him near the rear line—a guard fighting desperately against the press of zombies. The man who had kicked him. Beaten him. Left him bleeding on stone when accusations were thrown and truth meant nothing.

A friend of that same guard.

The one Joe had stabbed to death.

How fitting, he thought.

Joe felt knowledge settle into him—not learned, but given. The banshee's imprint guided his understanding of death. He knew what he was now. What he could do.

He was no front-line butcher.

But a backline caster.

Death magic pulsed within him—bone shaping, weakening curses, spells meant to slow, to stagger, to cripple. And beneath it all, something he never knew existed.

Sound magic.

He descended.

His form sank into the earth like mist into soil, hiding beneath the battlefield itself. Earth mages stood above him, unaware—unable to sense him as he phased through dirt and stone.

Convenient, Joe thought.

He positioned himself directly behind the guards.

Mana gathered.

Then his head emerged from the ground.

And he screamed.

The sound tore free from him—not a voice, but devastation. A layered howl of death and sound entwined, vibrating through flesh and bone alike.

A shockwave exploded outward.

The guards screamed as the force slammed into them from behind—ears rupturing instantly, balance lost, formation shattered. Blood poured from noses and mouths as internal organs burst under the pressure.

Even without the undead, they would not have lived long in that state.

The battlefield shifted.

The push Talmir had forced forward stalled abruptly.

Momentum reversed.

The ghouls noticed immediately.

Their claws tore through broken ranks, fangs found exposed throats. The guards on that flank were ripped apart—and with them, the two young hunters who had only just arrived.

Screams ended in wet sounds.

Less than twenty able-bodied fighters remained now.

Thomas saw it.

And understood.

His jaw tightened as he gave the order—heavy-hearted, final.

"Area magic. Now!"

Flames ignited along his swords, roaring to life as he carved wide arcs through the undead. Zombies burned where they stood; ghouls shrieked as fire consumed flesh and bone alike.

Talmir turned.

Wind gathered along his blade.

He struck.

A slicing gust tore toward Joe's position—

But Joe was already gone.

He sank back into the earth, drifting deeper, relocating further behind the lines.

Stone walls erupted. Water slashes cut through the dead. Spears of flame and stone rained down as wind screamed through the streets.

With that order, any survivors still present in the village would end up dead. Magic did not discriminate between friend or foe.

But they also held because of it.

Joe watched from below, grinning.

Thomas and Talmir knew it too.

Mana was being spent.

And exhaustion would come.

As the battle dragged on for hours.

Exhaustion seeped into everyone's bones—arms heavy, lungs burning, mana stretched thin. Steel rang duller now. Screams grew hoarse. Even the undead seemed slower beneath fire, wind, earth, and water combined.

And then—

It happened again.

Joe hovered unseen above the battlefield, drifting through smoke and ash, watching with cold delight. He studied the flow of the fight, searching for weakness, for the perfect moment to strike. Every corner of the defense was anchored by veterans now—Talmir, Thomas, Irvn, Tonka.

Joe's gaze lingered on Talmir.

Then Thomas.

"No."

Not yet.

He knew better than to challenge them directly. He was powerful—but not foolish.

So his attention shifted.

Tonka and Irven.

Irven fought carefully, measured, conserving strength and mana. Always thinking of survival. Always planning an escape.

Typical Irven, Joe thought bitterly.

Tonka, on the other hand, was bleeding.

Slower.

Still fighting like a hero—shield raised for others, body placed between villagers and claws.

Helping them.

That made him predictable.

And easier.

Joe descended again.

Meanwhile, Tonka roared as he swung his mace, caving in skulls and sending bodies flying. Shield in one hand, mace in the other, earth magic reinforcing both armor and allies. He was a wall of flesh and will—a pillar of the defense.

Then a ghoul lunged from his right.

Strange, Tonka thought distantly. Ghouls rarely attacked him alone.

He met it head-on, smashing its jaw apart with a brutal swing, teeth scattering across the snow. The creature reeled—

And then a familiar face suddenly rose from the ground in front of him.

Pale.

Smiling.

A bone dagger phased effortlessly through Tonka's shield and drove straight into his heart.

"Joe?"

The word barely left his lips.

Blood poured from his mouth as his knees buckled. The mace slipped from his grasp. Tonka collapsed into the snow, eyes glassy, breath shuddering once—

Then never again.

The tide shifted again.

Chapter 20 - 19 - A Voice Can Move Mountains

Hearing distant hoofbeats galloping away in a hurry.

Hearing wings unfurl and then come crashing down with force.

Ronn took flight.

Leaving behind a freezing, worried, and guilty boy.

"This world hates me, apparently... why did I have to be reincarnated as a damn darkness mage?!"

He felt sorry for himself. He also knew that it was at least partly his fault—if not everything.

"T-that thing down there..." he shuddered. "I felt its gaze aimed right at me..."

Walking toward the gates, his mind was in turmoil. On one hand, he wanted to stay with Talmir. On the other, he was glad that he was away from this monster. And now, of all times, he would have to explain and convince people of what was happening—unsure of himself, unsure if the people of Kolma were the same as the people of Ragla.

Doubt lingered in his mind, and with that doubt, every step he took became heavier and harder to take.

"What if I'm blamed for what happened there? What will happen to me then?"

He was nearing the gate when the guard, Tom, noticed him.

"Ey, buddy! Aren't you a little lightly clothed?" he said, inquiring.

Teclos wanted to tell him to bring him to the chief, but a big lump in his throat seemed to form suddenly, stopping him from speaking.

Tom tilted his head. "What? Cat got your tongue? What's wrong, boy?"

Timidly, he gathered the courage to speak to another human being again. "H-hello, Mr. Tom. I-I need to go to the chief in a hurry. Everyone is in d-danger."

Oh hell, now I can't even speak anymore? What the hell is wrong with me? he thought, ashamed of himself and disappointed. How many times do I have to remind myself that I'm over forty years old by now?!

As the inner turmoil grabbed hold of Teclos, Tom became serious, sensing that something was wrong.

"What happened? Where is Talmir?"

"We need to h-hurry! Ragla is under attack. I need to s-speak to the chief and Father Pella. Please!"

Tom nodded once, the easy humor gone from his face.

"Alright," he said shortly. "Let's hurry inside."

Before Teclos could protest, Tom bent down, scooped him up under one arm, and broke into a run. The sudden motion stole the breath from Teclos's lungs as the gates of Kolma rushed toward them. The other guard shouted in confusion as Tom barreled past without stopping.

"Where are you going?!"

Tom barked back, "Chief's business!"

The gates parted just long enough for them to slip through, then slammed shut again behind them with a heavy thud.

They ran through torchlit streets, boots pounding against stone, Teclos clinging weakly to Tom's shoulder as his thoughts spiraled. Faces blurred past—merchants closing shutters, villagers staring in confusion, someone shouting after them—but none of it felt real.

Everything felt distant.

Wrong.

Tom slowed only when they reached the chief's house, already lit from within. He kicked the door open and carried Teclos straight inside.

"Chief!" Tom called. "Something's wrong. Really wrong."

Chief Brahm was on his feet instantly, eyes sharp despite the late hour. He took one look at Teclos—pale, shaking, eyes wide with fear—and his expression hardened.

"Put him down," Brahm ordered.

Tom did, gently this time.

Teclos stumbled as his feet touched the floor, his legs threatening to give out beneath him. Brahm was already moving, snapping orders.

"Blankets and tea. If you could hurry, honey?"

His wife rushed off to get them.

Teclos tried to speak, but the words tangled in his throat again. He hated it—hated the weakness, the shaking, the way his body refused to obey him when it mattered most.

It was like he was shell shocked.

Brahm crouched slightly to meet his eyes.

"Easy, boy," the chief said, voice steady. "You're safe here. Take a breath."

Safe.

The word almost made Teclos laugh.

"I... I need to speak to Father Pella too," Teclos managed at last. "P-please."

Brahm studied him for a moment longer, then nodded.

"Tom," he said. "Go. Bring him. Now!"

Tom didn't argue. He was already moving.

While they waited, Elira pressed a steaming cup into Teclos's hands and wrapped a thick blanket around his shoulders. The heat seeped slowly into his fingers, but the trembling didn't stop.

Brahm sat across from him, patient, watching without pressing.

"What happened?" the chief asked quietly.

Teclos swallowed.

"Ragla..." he began, then stopped himself.

Not yet.

"I'll explain," he said instead, forcing the words out. "When Father Pella gets here."

Brahm nodded again. He didn't look offended that Teclos didn't trust him—only concerned.

They waited.

It felt like hours, though it couldn't have been more than minutes before hurried footsteps echoed outside and the door opened again.

Father Pella entered, breathless, his robes hastily thrown on, eyes immediately locking onto Teclos.

"My child," he said softly. "What is wrong?"

That was all it took.

The dam broke.

Teclos told them everything.

About the training.

About the meeting with the hunters.

About Joe—his rage, his lies, his death.

About the dungeon.

The pressure.

The gaze that had locked onto him like a blade against his soul.

"T-that thing down there..." Teclos whispered again, hands tightening around the cup. "I felt it looking at me."

He told them what he'd seen before fleeing—the scream, the dead rising, the ghouls tearing into the village.

He told them what Talmir had said.

That he was to run.

That he was to bring everyone.

That Ragla wouldn't hold without help.

And finally—

"There's more help coming," Teclos finished, voice raw. "From Lupos. Ronn said he'd get them to open the portal. Bringing Inquisitors, Knights—everyone with him."

Silence filled the room.

Chief Brahm leaned back slowly, face grim.

Father Pella closed his eyes.

Undead.

A banshee.

A lich's servant.

And a village drowning in blood.

Pella exhaled shakily and looked at Teclos again—not as a child now, but as a messenger who had carried horror on his back and lived.

"You did well, boy," he said quietly.

Teclos flinched.

"But I-I ran," he whispered.

"And because you ran," Pella replied gently, "others may yet live."

The weight of that settled heavily in the room.

Teclos felt a tiny bit reassured from that.

Meanwhile, flying as fast as he dared, Ronn urged the pegasus onward.

Lupos was still far—too far for his liking—and he could feel every wasted heartbeat clawing at him. He had already lost precious minutes delivering the boy to Kolma, minutes that now screamed in his mind like an accusation.

His thoughts were grim and bitter.

'The moment I could, I ran.' Was one of the thoughts he had.

The pegasus responding to his emotions beat its wings harder, muscles trembling beneath him as cold air tore past. Ronn leaned low against its neck, breath ragged and teeth clenched.

Coward, a voice whispered inside him.

You left men to die.

"No," he muttered aloud, his voice snatched away by the wind. "No... I'm not done yet."

He tightened his grip.

I'll make it right. I swear it.

The cold was brutal at this speed. It cut through his gloves, numbing his fingers until pain bloomed sharp and white. Frost crept along his knuckles, skin stiffening, burning. His face felt like cracked stone. Every breath scraped his lungs raw.

The pegasus screamed in protest, wings faltering for a heartbeat before surging again.

Three hours.

Three merciless hours from Kolma to Lupos, pushing both rider and beast to their limits. By the time the city's lights finally burned through the darkness ahead, Ronn's vision swam and his hands shook violently.

He barely felt the landing.

The moment they hit the ground near the outer guard station, he slid from the saddle and staggered, nearly collapsing before forcing himself upright.

"No time," he rasped. "No time..."

Ignoring the pain, he half-ran, half-stumbled straight toward the guard captain's post.

This wasn't a matter for common guards. He needed authority. Power.

And the Church.

The guard captain stiffened the moment Ronn spoke—soot-covered, frostbitten, eyes wild—and within minutes the grim news had been relayed upward. Count Aweq's lands were threatened. A banshee had manifested. An entire village was under siege.

That alone was enough.

The stamped seal of the Dawn Church was pressed into Ronn's trembling hand by a priest present at the gate—official permission to enter the inner sanctum and speak directly to the Arch Bishop of Lupos.

Without it, they would never have let him through.

He left the pegasus in the barn beside the guard station, pressing his forehead briefly against its warm neck.

"Rest," he whispered. "You did enough."

At the main gates of the Dawn Church, two guards barred his path, halberds crossing before him.

"No entry without sanction," one said flatly, eyes already sliding away.

Ronn held up the stamp.

The reaction was immediate.

The guards straightened, weapons lowering as if by instinct.

"You may enter," the second said quickly.

Ronn didn't thank them.

So this is how it is, he thought grimly as he passed beneath the towering archways. A man bleeding in the street is nothing—but ink and wax open every door.

Inside, a paladin met him at a run.

The man was clad head to toe in gleaming silver-white armor, runes etched deep into every plate, magic humming softly beneath the metal. A greatsword rested across his back, its presence alone heavy with power.

"This way," the paladin said, voice deep and steady. "The Arch Bishop's office is this way."

They moved quickly through marble halls and candlelit corridors until they reached massive wooden doors reinforced with gold inlay.

The paladin knocked once. "A messenger bears urgent news, Your Eminence," he said in a grim tone.

"Enter," came a smooth voice from within.

The office beyond was lavish.

The Arch Bishop sat behind a massive wooden desk, robes of deep crimson and white draped elegantly over his form, gold embroidery catching the candlelight. A chest filled with gold sat neatly beside the desk. Papers were stacked everywhere—reports, edicts, correspondence. A dining table, two plush sofas, and towering shelves of books filled the room.

He toyed idly with a gold coin in one hand while writing with the other.

His eyes flicked to Ronn—and dismissed him.

"A peddler," he said mildly. "You may speak. Briefly."

Ronn swallowed and spoke.

And as the words banshee, death mana, and Ragla left his mouth, the coin stopped spinning.

The bishop's expression hardened.

Frivolity vanished.

"Regulus," he commanded.

The paladin straightened instantly.

"Prepare the inquisitors. Summon the paladin order. Alert the priests."

His gaze cut back to Ronn, sharp and cold. "A monster manifesting on my lands will not be tolerated," he declared arrogantly.

Orders followed swiftly—precise, ruthless.

A full detachment of knights and paladins. Inquisitors armed for subjugation. Priests to contain corruption and sanctify ground.

"Go," the bishop said to Ronn, already turning back to his papers. "Use your stamp. Prepare the portal so we can leave immediately."

Ronn bowed once and hurried out.

At the portal site, two knights stood guard before a colossal structure.

The gate floated above the ground—a massive ring of mythril and adamantium engraved with golden runes and sigils so dense they glowed faintly even at rest. A massive staircase connected upward toward its center, leading into empty air.

It wasn't just a doorway.

It was a threshold—wide enough for an army.

Ronn showed the stamp and spoke quickly.

The knights nodded and moved to panels embedded on either side of the structure, placing their hands upon them. Mana surged outward, blue-white light racing along the runes as the gate began to hum.

The air trembled.

Space itself seemed to bend.

Ronn watched, breath held.

Hold on, he thought desperately.

All of you... just hold on a little longer.

Back at Kolma, the hunters were ready to set out before Ronn even made it to Lupos.

Almost every able-bodied fighter from Kolma had been mustered, all twenty-five of the active hunters standing with their gear ready, weapons at their backs or waists, prepared to be drawn.

Ten of the twelve village guards flanked them, shields braced, faces set with grim determination.

Pella arrived last, clad once more in his old silver armor etched with protective runes—an earlier version of paladin armor. His great double-bladed battle axe

hung easily on his back, its weight alone capable of crushing skulls. Two priests followed him, chanting prayers and blessings under their breath as they moved to join the group.

They fell into formation with the others.

There was no hesitation. No delay.

Every step toward Ragla would be a march into death and chaos—but they were prepared to face it.

The streets of Kolma grew silent behind them as the group moved out, torches flickering, weapons ready, hearts steeled.

And somewhere beyond the horizon—just past the edges of Kolma’s sight—

Ragla still burned.

Lives were still at stake.